

The Suffering God: The Rise of a New Orthodoxy

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Can God suffer? Many contemporary theologians, perhaps the majority, would answer yes. Yet the doctrine of divine impassibility, that God cannot suffer, was widely held to be axiomatic in the early church. Indeed, it figured crucially in the development of Christological and Trinitarian orthodoxy and has remained an essential presupposition in the development of every consequential Christian doctrine since then. This makes it all-the-more remarkable that in the late twentieth century the doctrine of divine impassibility has been quietly, almost universally, abandoned by theologians East and West, with but scant systematic thought given to the collateral effects of such a move on adjacent doctrine. In this seminal article, Goetz became the first theologian in the English-speaking world to recognize that a theological revolution had occurred – the “theopaschite [God suffers] revolution” – with hardly a ripple of resistance. He gives attention to its causes while urging frank recognition that theopaschite commitments can leave no Christian doctrine untouched. On the contrary, he argues, theopaschitism requires a radical re-thinking and re-formulation of the full spectrum of Christian doctrine. Indeed, it precipitates “a drastic theological crisis of thought” – God’s “terrible willingness” to take full responsibility for evil and to atone for it in the death of God’s Son.

Twentieth-century theology has been extremely diverse.¹ Schools and fads have abounded, from neo-orthodoxy to neo-liberalism, from demythologization to the “God is dead” movement, from Christian realism to secular Christianity, from process thought to the various liberation movements. Twentieth-century theology might appear to be so completely at sixes and sevens that it has no distinguishing characteristics save an utterly discordant pluralism.

However, as we near the end of the century, we can begin to make out some of the larger features of the theological landscape. Indeed, despite all the real and intractable differences among theologians, a curious new consensus has arisen. The age-old dogma that God is impassible and immutable, i.e., incapable of suffering, changeless and unchangeable, is for many no longer tenable. The ancient theopaschite heresy that God suffers has, in fact, become the new orthodoxy.

A list of modern theopaschite thinkers would include Barth, Berdyaev, Bonhoeffer, Brunner, Cobb, Cone and liberation theologians generally, Küng, Moltmann, Reinhold Niebuhr, Pannenberg, Ruether and feminist theologians generally, Temple, Teilhard and Unamuno. Just as significant, perhaps, is the fact that even those theologians who have not embraced modern theopaschitism have failed to develop a

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creative restatement of the older dogma (von Hilgel being, perhaps, the lone significant exception).

What is particularly remarkable about the theopaschite mindset has been its development as a kind of open secret. The doctrine of the suffering of God is so fundamental to the very soul of modern Christianity that it has emerged with very few theological shots ever needing to be fired. Indeed, this doctrinal revolution occurred without a widespread awareness that it was happening.

There is, to be sure, a minor literature on the topic. As early as 1959 Daniel Day Williams saw that something of epic importance was taking place. He described the growing belief that God suffers as a “structural shift in the Christian mind” (*What Present-Day Theologians Are Thinking*, Harper & Row, 1959, p. 138). Articles and a few books have been published pointing to the theopaschitism of this theologian or that group of theologians. English theologians especially took an early interest in the topic, and theopaschitism is not infrequently examined in British journals. Nevertheless, no one of whom I am aware has quite said that the rejection of the ancient doctrine of divine impassibility has become a theological commonplace. (Yet when one ventures to make this claim in the presence of theologians, one is invariably met with a slightly surprised expression, followed by an assenting, “Of course.”)

The theological implications of the theopaschite revolution are enormous. Every classical Christian doctrine—the Trinity, the two natures of Christ, creation *ex nihilo*, the atonement theories, sin (original or otherwise), predestination, etc.—was originally formulated by theologians who took divine impassibility to be axiomatic. Mainstream Protestantism inherited the presupposition of God’s impassible sovereignty. Even Luther, who in his theology of the cross affirmed the suffering of God even unto death, seemed to take back much of what he said in his equally foundational doctrines of predestination and the *Deus Absconditus*. When contemplating the purposes of the hidden God, Luther portrayed an inscrutably impassible, divine sovereignty—a portrayal which was even more severe than Calvin’s.

Eighteenth and nineteenth-century liberalism, which generally rejected or radically reinterpreted the orthodox tradition, also adhered, with a few exceptions (Hegel chief among them), to the dogma of divine impassibility. As Karl Barth observed, “The God of Schleiermacher cannot show mercy.” And there can be no suffering love where there can be no mercy.

One would think that every Christian doctrine must be recast in the light of the modern assumption that God’s being is a suffering being; yet it is curious that this revolution in our understanding of God’s very nature has not caused a general refocusing of every theological utterance. Nevertheless, to date, theologians have faced up to the implications of the new situation only on a piecemeal, ad hoc basis. The two

most conspicuous exceptions to this charge are to be found in the otherwise radically incompatible theologies of Karl Barth and the process school. Thus, we have only begun to see where systematic theologies grounded in the suffering God might lead.

The Decline of Christendom

The most drastic form of theopaschitism in modern theology is Christian atheism. Not only can God suffer, but God has suffered—terminally. The “God is dead” movement, though no longer in the headlines, is itself far from dead; it reflects a profoundly felt consciousness among many honest and sensitive Christians that the sovereign God honored through many centuries of Western history has been deflated like a punctured beach ball. God no longer manifests a rule that claims the holy fear of modern men and women.

Though Christian atheism may seem to most theologians an abandonment of the vital center of the faith, the fact remains that belief in the “mighty acts of God” is increasingly difficult to relate to modern experience. The Exodus has often been offered as a paradigm of the acts of God in history. Yet where do we find contemporary paradigms of God’s sovereign acts? Even many biblical critics who believe in the “acts of God” explain the Exodus event in such a way as to show its compatibility with natural events. If God were to re-create the miracle of the crossing of the *Yam Suph* (the Sea of Reeds) , we would in all probability be too skeptical and too critical to recognize it as much more than a freak event.

Since Constantine made Christianity the religion of the Roman Empire, Christian triumphalism has taken many forms. From Augustine’s theocratic hope that the church as the earthly City of God would gradually come to rule the world to the liberal dream that the Kingdom of God would be established on earth through the liberal’s persuasive evangelism, Christians have been united in the conviction that God’s eternal rule is confirmed by world events. In short, Christians have believed that the eventual triumph of God’s earthly purpose is discernible in the facts and trends of history.

To be sure, anti-Constantinian voices were raised from time to time. Both monasticism and the thought of the pacifistic Anabaptists had a strong non-triumphalist component; paradoxically, so too did Luther’s thought, though Luther despised both monasticism and Anabaptism. Nonetheless, until the modern period, those who called into question a genuine progress of the church toward the City of God did not have to witness a manifestly contrary situation—one wherein the City of God seems to be in abject retreat. Thus it once seemed possible to talk simultaneously of the sinfulness and worldliness of the world and the impassible, immutable sovereignty of

God. With the collapse of the earthly City of God, such a balancing act becomes more difficult.

Today, Christian triumphalism has become a rare commodity. The language of *Heilsgeschichte* (history of salvation) theology is still heard, and people still express the conviction that, in Otto Piper's terms, "purely human history" will be "gradually transformed into a history with God." But what evidence convincing to Christians in general can be adduced that demonstrates that the transformation of history, however gradual, is in fact occurring? Could it be that belief in the victory of God's history on earth is but a pious hope based not on perceived events but on a historic reverie? In any case, what many Christians perceive as actually having occurred in our century is forcefully summarized in Bonhoeffer's theopaschite observation, "God is allowing himself to be edged out of the world and onto the cross."

The great majority of Christians continue to affirm the reality of God. But God so rarely seems to accomplish his will in the world. So often God's purpose, if it can be discerned, seems to be defeated. The actual redemptive presence of God in the world is discerned less in God's taking the sovereign lead in events and more in God's picking up the pieces after history has misfired. In any case, without being able to point to clear evidence of the progress of God's holy purpose in human history, the notion that God rules the world through his mighty acts becomes somewhat vacuous.

In the Bible, however, there is no talk of the uniform progress of world history toward God's Kingdom. The God of the Bible does indeed, from time to time, act with free and surprising power. But the direct hand of God in events, if there at all, is often simply lost on people. God does not always raise up prophets to interpret his acts. Even Jesus found himself at a loss as to when God would act. "But of that day or that hour no one knows" (Mark 13:32). In God's occasional acts, no law of historical progress can be discerned. Redemptive history obeys no law; it is in the free hand of God.

Thus, belief in the ultimate victory of the biblical God may indeed be grounded in events in history, but not as part of self-evident progress; they are parabolic moments which point to the eschatological potential of God's power. But these glimpses are as occasional as they are debatable. Jesus' career, which Christians believe to be a supreme movement of God's occasional in-break, has been read by some apparently honest critics as a demonic ministry.

The Rise of Democratic Aspirations

Despite cataclysmic assaults upon democratic ideals from both the right and the left, the ideal of democracy persists, indeed flourishes, not only in Western Europe and

North America but—even if only as an ideal—throughout much of the less-developed world. Even communist states claim to stand for democracy.

These democratic aspirations have contributed to the problem of belief in an impassible, immutable God. For if God is conceived of as an unmoved mover—the unaffected source of the world—God is irrelevant to what free men and women do in the world. And if God’s impassibility is interpreted as being emblematic of an imperious rule that is finally indifferent to the effect it has on the opinion of the governed—as in, for example, the classical doctrine of predestination—God appears as a tyrant who must be resisted in the name of human freedom.

No concept of divine sovereignty can be divorced from a concept of political sovereignty; thus it is understandable, and probably inevitable, that theology should engage in the apologetic task of tailoring its concepts to popular tastes. But unless it can be shown that the theopaschite understanding corresponds to the eternal truth about God, then adroit theological shifts to meet the needs of the moment simply validate the atheist’s charge that theology is nothing but an endless series of ad hoc rationalizations. And God dies the death of a thousand refashionings.

The Problem of Suffering and Evil

One of Charles Darwin’s reasons for his agnosticism-bordering-on-atheism was the problem of suffering. Darwin’s theory of evolution was predicated not only on the law of natural selection and the survival of the fittest, but on the assumption that this law had operated over an enormous period of time. The evolution of humanity had occurred only after eons and eons of “nature red in tooth and claw.”

The traditional calculation of the age of the universe in terms of thousands, not billions, of years—popularized by Bishop James Ussher—had hitherto obscured the sheer immensity of sensate anguish that had been a part of the world—and on which evolution depended. To a circle of early twentieth-century English theologians, the thought of God’s ruling over a universe of pain and yet being untouched by it was unbearable. The English move toward theopaschitism was grounded in such considerations of natural history.

The brutalities of World War I gave further cause for rethinking the doctrine of God. It appeared that humanity could be more brutal than the beasts, that human moral progress was a charade, and that evil and suffering were a fundamental part of human existence. Talk about an impassible, immutable God was for many simply inconceivable. How could God be love and not lie wounded on the battlefields of France? Only a God who suffered with the victims of the war could speak to the disillusionments created by the war.

The Scholarly Reappraisal of the Bible

The higher critical approach to the Bible was an early harbinger of the theopaschite revolution. Indeed, an immutable, impassible God requires an immutable, infallible scriptural witness.

Biblical interpretation is no longer bound by patristic and scholastic presuppositions about the divine aseity, nor is it bound by the deistic assumptions of liberal scholars. Some find the God of the Bible not to their taste, but today few scholars would disagree that the God of the Bible is a personal, passionate, jealous, concerned and suffering God. Increasingly one sees books and articles by biblical critics about the suffering of the God of the Bible. The work of historians inevitably reflects the *Weltgeist* of their time.

If God is conceived as being limited in power, though perhaps unlimited in love, then the defense of God in the light of evil and suffering boils down to the contention that God has created the greatest amount of good that he can, and the evil that remains is beyond his capacity to eliminate. A limited deity of this kind is portrayed in contemporary Whiteheadian process theology, but the doctrine has a distinguished pedigree going back at least as far as Stoicism. A fundamental assumption in this approach is that an imperfect world is better than no world at all. What is unique to the Whiteheadian version of the limited deity is its departure from the classical Western view that God cannot be affected by the pain of an imperfect world. Indeed, as a seal of God's goodness and love, God is, in Whitehead's lovely phrase, "the fellow-sufferer who understands."

The problem of evil has traditionally been formulated this way: How can it be that God is all powerful and all good and yet there still is evil? The doctrine that God is limited in power solves the problem by sacrificing God's omnipotence. However, to my mind, any concept of a limited deity finally entails a denial of the capacity of God to redeem the world and thus, ironically, raises the question of whether God is in the last analysis even love, at least love in the Christian sense of the term.

All assertions of a limited deity must confront the fact that, if the world's imperfections are the inevitable consequences of the limited capacity of God to create a world that is both perfect and free, then inescapably any other realm of being, any eschatological reality, would be similarly flawed. The blessing of eternal life would thus be impossible, for an eternal life flawed by imperfection and suffering would not be redemption, it would be hell. Hell is the prospect of wallowing forever in one's weakness and finitude.

In Whitehead's philosophy, the creation of the world is the result of God's primordial yearning for a concretization of merely abstract possibilities (reminiscent of Plato's "ideas"), which Whitehead calls "eternal objects." Until they are arranged and concretized in the world, these eternal objects are merely abstractions. God's primordial nature is governed by a "yearning after concrete fact—no particular facts, but after *some* actuality."

The other pole of God's bipolar being, his "consequent nature," is characterized by a dependence on the continual emergence of concrete reality or "actual entities" in the world. Actual entities are perpetually perishing and arising. Each successive actual entity is capable of using in its own development the entities that have preceded it. God alone is everlasting. And his being is constituted in the process of his taking into himself all that he is able to save of all actual entities. They thus have a kind of immortality in the memory and in the ongoing self-enrichment of God. But the personal existence of all actual entities perishes. God wills the best for us and is a sympathetic sufferer with us when, in the course of the enrichment of his being, we suffer tragedy; but God alone is the everlasting beneficiary of the creative process.

To modern "protest atheism," the fact that God, though sympathetic with the suffering of humanity, is nonetheless enriched by it, would seem little more impassive than the bathos of the sentimental butcher who weeps after each slaughter. If the purpose of our life and death is finally that we contribute to "the self-creation of God," how, an outraged critic of God might demand, does God's love differ from the love of a famished diner for his meat course?

To my mind, the insistence on the almightiness of God and creation *ex nihilo* are indispensable for an adequate understanding of the Bible's witness, both to God's lordship and to God's capacity to save what he has created. Without the Bible's eschatology, the God of the Bible cannot be understood in terms of *agape*, the radical self-giving love of one who holds nothing back—not the life of his Son, not the sharing of his own being.

But this understanding puts us back on the horns of the dilemma: If God is so powerful in creation and so willing ultimately to deify the creation, why is there now evil? Two lines of defense have become popular among theologians who find themselves, for whatever reasons, unable to speak of God as ontologically limited and yet unable to affirm the predestinarian highhandedness of an impassible, immutable God.

The first is the so-called Irenaean theodicy (after the second-century theologian Irenaeus): God permits suffering and evil in order that by them we might come to sufficient maturity so as to be able to inherit eternal life. The problem with such an argument is that while it offers a very helpful insight into the question of why we suffer

and endure hardship, it says nothing about real evil. For real evil, as we experience it, does not build up and develop its victims; it corrupts, corrodes and destroys them.

The other line of defense can easily incorporate the Irenaean theodicy, and indeed, might even seem to strengthen it. In this view, the statement "God is love" is virtually synonymous with a kenotic (self-emptying) view of the incarnation (Philippians 2:7). God's love is supremely revealed in his self-humbling. God is a fellow sufferer who understands not because God cannot be otherwise, but because God wills to share our lot.

Here, as in the case of a limited doctrine of God's being there is a certain immediate psychological comfort in the notion that God does not require of us a suffering that he himself will not endure. However, if this comfort is to be any more than a psychological prop, it must show how God's suffering mitigates evil. This explanation has been, to date, curiously lacking in the theodicy of divine self-limitation.

To anyone who feels compelled to affirm divine suffering, the fact that God is deeply involved in the anguish and the blood of humanity forces a drastic theological crisis of thought *vis-à-vis* the question of evil. The mere fact of God's suffering doesn't solve the question; it exacerbates it. For there can no longer be a retreat into the hidden decrees of the eternal, all-wise, changeless and unaffected God. The suffering God is with us in the here and now. God must answer in the here and now before one can make any sense of the by and by. God, the fellow sufferer, is inexcusable if all that he can do is suffer. But if God is ultimately redeemer, how dare he hold out on redemption here and now in the face of real evil?

My own view is that the death of God's Christ is in part God's atonement to his creatures for evil. Only on the basis of God's terrible willingness to accept responsibility for evil do we have grounds to trust God's promise to redeem evil. Only in God's daring willingness to risk all in the death of his own Son can we have confidence that God finally has the power to redeem his promise. Others may not agree with this radical rethinking of the atonement, but it seems apparent that comprehensively to affirm the almighty sovereignty of the self-humbled God requires a drastic rethinking of traditional doctrine.

It appears that twentieth-century theology will leave the twenty-first century with a completed revolution, but with the doctrinal consolidation of that revolution far from complete. One can only wonder how the next century will deal with what we have left it.