

The Suffering God: Do We Have To Have Him?

Arguing for a Passible God

There has been a growing belief among some theologians that God suffers. This has even been dubbed "the new orthodoxy". The God of the Bible is a personal, passionate, jealous, concerned and suffering God, and if this is so, a number of theologians believe that God also suffers as his creatures do: God is "passible" – a "theopaschite", or suffering, God. The theological implications of having a God who suffers, are enormous. Every classical Christian doctrine -- the Trinity, the two natures of Christ, creation *ex nihilo*, the atonement theories etc. becomes changed out of recognition, as God is no longer seen as the one who is omnipotent, and who creates and acts in freedom, but is himself tragically affected by it.

A solution to the Problem of Evil?

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? **If he is not all-powerful**, then the evil that remains is beyond his capacity to eliminate. But **if we say he is omnipotent**, then we risk having a view of God who is the Almighty, unaffected source of the world, irrelevant to what free men and women do in the world. God could be thought of as a tyrant who must be resisted in the name of human freedom. The thought of God ruling over a universe of pain, but himself being untouched by it, is not the Biblical God of love and compassion. God is, in Whitehead's lovely phrase, "the fellow-sufferer who understands." This, perhaps, is the solution to the problem of evil: God limits his own power, out of love and compassion for us, and becomes the suffering God. In himself, he is still almighty; but in creation, he is as one of his creatures.

Saving Acts?

Indeed, if we look at the great saving acts of God, eg the exodus, in comparison with world history, such **acts are rare**. Being rare, they are easily questioned, and perhaps better understood as surprising acts of nature, and not the acts of an almighty, transcendent God. It seems that if God does act out of love for people, he does so **in a very limited way**, and this needs to be explained. Surely his acts of power should be more effective in history: but they have **not lead to historical progress** – humanity is as morally backward as it ever was. The brutalities of World War I were more brutal than the cruelty of beasts. The theopaschites say they have a reply to this: it is *because* God's presence among us is not a presence of power, but of **suffering love**, that it seems limited. He must also lie wounded on the battlefields, at one with his creatures. Only a God who suffered with the victims could speak to the pain and sufferings of those wounded by pain and suffering.

Moltmann & the Concentration Camp story

Jurgen Moltmann born into an atheist family and became a German soldier. When, at the end of World War Two, he surrendered, he became a PoW, in a camp where there was little to do. Pictures of Nazi atrocities, committed in concentration camps, were displayed for them to see. He said he would rather have died with the Jews, than now face his shame. An American chaplain gave him a New Testament, and slowly it showed him that he could be free of his guilt, and find freedom: "*With Christ in faith, a wholly new life begins*". He converted to Christianity, and joined the protestant Church. But what continued to bother him was the question: **where was God, in Auschwitz? How should we think about God, after Auschwitz?**

In *The Crucified God*, he used Elie Wiesel's horrific story of a Jewish boy hung by the Nazis in a concentration camp. It took half an hour for the youth to die and, as the men of the camp watched his torment, one asked: "Where is God now?" Wiesel heard a voice within him answer: "*Where is He? He is here. He is hanging there on the gallows.*" While Wiesel interpreted this as his own disbelief in a loving and just God, Moltmann used the story to argue that God suffers in union with those who suffer. If God is a loving and compassionate God, as He surely is, He must not only be aware of human suffering, but He must also Himself be an "active" victim of such suffering. He, too, must suffer.

Moltmann's theology

In the cross, it is not just Jesus, as the God-man, who suffers and dies. God also suffers, in his divine nature (not just as the man Jesus). As Jesus cries out "My God, My God, why have you abandoned me?", so God abandons Jesus. But this means that God is against God: God the father suffers the loss of his son. God allows himself to die. The cross, as a historical, physical event has therefore changed God. Because of the cross, God will never be the same again. There is now "death" in God.

The benefits of this theology include:

In the crucified Jesus, God is no longer shown as being the glorious, powerful God. He is the opposite of all worldly power, rule, glory, beauty, success. The things we boast about in our lives are all shown up as false. In the crucified God, willing to be changed by human suffering, we see that God is really love. In seeing a god who suffers for love, we have been given an example of how to live for others: as sufferers for love. In seeing Jesus crucified, we have hope, because if he, judged as a criminal, was resurrected, so we

too can be free from the powerful and from the fear of God's judgement. God has taken our side, as the suffering God-man.

RESPONSES: Theological Implications

God as omnipotent /creator: How can God be the Creator, if He is "in" creation, and affected by it? (=panentheism). If you make something, but what you makes affects who you are, then it isn't just a product of your making – it is part of you! If God is affected by creation, then he is no greater than creation, and creation decides how God exists, and who he is, within Himself. God is no longer free, over and beyond creation. He is no longer its creator, but part and parcel of it.

God as Saviour: Such a God cannot guarantee or offer us an eternal life, if he does not have the power to address pain in this life. How can God save us, if he is "infected" by the suffering and evil, so that it affects who he is in himself? He would no longer be perfectly good. He would no longer be free of evil himself . He is no longer the one who is over and beyond suffering and death. He is not the one who saves. This contradicts traditional Christian teaching that God's rule will eventually triumph. There would be no guarantee an afterlife free from evil, since He himself cannot escape it.

Redefines the Trinity: Moltmann suggests that world history (Jesus' put to death on the cross) has changed who God is, in himself, as it has brought "death" into God. The Trinity is a unity – one in being – so if Jesus has lost his "being", then God as Trinity has lost God himself. God has been injured by his creatures in who He is in himself. Moltmann's view means the immanent Trinity (God in himself as three persons) is changed. The world now seems to have power over God. Also, it makes God appear as different persons, the Father having to suffer in a different way from the son, which suggests tritheism.

Divinity of Jesus: Jesus is the second, co-equal divine person of the Trinity, so when Jesus suffered, God did suffer. In Jesus' suffering, all humanity's pain was known to God. In Jesus, God took responsibility for evil – he suffered it, and brought the new life of the resurrection out of it, which he now offers to us. This was a real objective help to us. It was done by his own willingness to give up even his own being, as Jesus. God's love is supremely kenotic and self-humbling – how can we demand any more of his compassion? But for Moltmann, this is not good enough. God the Father must suffer in himself, and this view casts doubt on the real divinity of Jesus.

The resurrection no longer matters: If the only thing that matters, is that God suffers as we do, and experiences death, then this suggests the resurrection does not really matter. It did not really change anything, and death and evil were not defeated, because death is now forever in God.

Weinandy – some other points

- What actual good does that do, to know God also suffered? If it only brings psychological comfort, that is a weak sort of help. When we call God our Saviour, it is because we expect a real deliverance from this human condition. If all God can do, is suffer, that helps no-one. God no longer claims the holy fear of modern men and women as the all-powerful Lord over all creation.]
- To find satisfaction in another's suffering on your behalf, is perverse. If someone shows you sympathy and compassion in your grief, their suffering does not make you happy. Also, God's suffering is not like ours, since God is not like us. So even if God did suffer in his divinity, as Moltmann suggests, that would not even mean anything for us, except for the perverse satisfaction we might have in believing that He did (in some mysterious way).
- Moltmann is wrong in thinking, that God has to feel like us, in his divinity, to know our pain. God's knowledge does not have to be physical knowledge. The theopaschites imagine God's compassion in human terms, as a human fellow-feeling, but God's knowledge of his creation is far more intimate and immediate than human awareness can even recognise.

So what does theology gain from suggesting that God is passible? For Moltmann and a number of 20th century theologians, it seems to offer a powerful presentation of the depth of God's love, if God can limit himself to be with his creatures in a way that involves his own suffering. Yet the benefits are an illusion – they lead us to a picture of a God who cannot save, whose presence to humans is conceived of in human terms, and which denies the incarnation, suffering & death of the Second Person of the Trinity as an adequate response for a saviour.

Bibliography:

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