

# Speaking of God in the midst of suffering: critical theodicy and pastoral practice,

by Brian McKinlay

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## I - The problem

The existence of evil is an enigma if we believe that an omnipotent and perfectly good personal being created the world.<sup>1</sup> The *logical* problem for *theodicy*<sup>2</sup> is this: if God is omnipotent, God must be *able* to prevent evil. And if perfectly good, God must be *willing* to prevent evil. But if God is both able and willing to prevent evil, is this not logically inconsistent with the existence of evil?

Stated *epistemologically*, the question is not one of logical inconsistency, but rather that the existence of evil is powerful evidence against the existence of a perfectly good and omnipotent God.

Standard arguments concerning the theodicy problem can be found in textbooks on the philosophy of religion.<sup>3</sup> There is not space to discuss them here. The purpose of this essay is to consider a pastoral approach to theodicy - the challenge of speaking helpfully but truthfully about God in the presence of suffering.

## II - A pastoral approach to theodicy.

*Encountering evil: live options in theodicy*,<sup>4</sup> is a seminar in which noted scholars debate various approaches to the problem of evil. At the end of the discussion, John C. Cobb considers the task of ministry in the face of evil and suffering. "The parishioner, in our day," Cobb says, "does not usually turn to the pastor for healing from the disease ... The parishioner turns to the pastor

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<sup>1</sup> *Encountering evil: live options in theodicy* / edited by Stephen T. Davis. - Atlanta: John Knox Pr, 1981, editor's introduction, p.2.

<sup>2</sup> Theodicy: "A term coined by Leibniz to refer to a theoretical justification of the goodness of God in the face of the presence of evil in the world.", "Glossary of terms" in *Christian theology: an introduction* / Alister E. McGrath. - 2nd ed. - Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1997, p. 576.

<sup>3</sup> For example, *Introduction to religious philosophy* / Geddes MacGregor. - London: Macmillan, 1960, pp.269-310; *Introduction to philosophy: a Christian perspective* / Norman L. Geisler and Paul D. Feinberg. - Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980, pp.321-336.

<sup>4</sup> *Encountering evil: live options in theodicy* / edited by Stephen T. Davis. - Atlanta: John Knox Pr, 1981.

more often with the question, "Why?"<sup>5</sup> Suffering demands not just explanation but justification.<sup>6</sup> As Holloway notes, "the fact of suffering and the mystery of human evil are probably the most powerful factors in undermining human belief".<sup>7</sup> (Jürgen Moltmann once described the question, "Why do I suffer?" as the rock of atheism.<sup>8</sup>)

There have been trenchant criticisms of the value of theoretical theodicy in meeting the needs of those who suffer. Kenneth Surin claims that attempts to answer the problem of evil on a theoretical level not only bring little comfort to the suffering of the world but, in fact, add to the evil of the world.<sup>9</sup>

Plantinga argues similarly:

Confronted with evil ... a believer in God may undergo a crisis of faith. ... Neither a Free Will Defense nor a Free Will Theodicy is designed to be of much help or comfort to one suffering from such a storm in the soul. ... Neither is it to be thought of first of all as a means of pastoral counselling. Probably neither will enable someone to find peace with himself and with God in the face of the evil that the world contains. But then, of course, neither is intended for that purpose.<sup>10</sup>

Taking up this point, Forrest Baird argues that writers on theodicy often do not think clearly about whom they are addressing. The discussion one would have with an atheist differs from conversation with a puzzled believer. Different again are the needs of the sufferer who questions, "Why?"<sup>11</sup> Some theistic explanations are unhelpful and insensitive - suffering and evil are human needs, not just intellectual problems.

In the West, Cobb argues, the legacy of Biblical teaching on the goodness of creation has left a deep-seated persuasion that things should indeed be good. To observe that things are often thoroughly evil arouses outrage and despair.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Cobb, John B. - "The Problem of evil and the task of ministry" in *Encountering evil ...*, p.167.

<sup>6</sup> *Speaking about God in the midst of suffering* / Santiago Sia. - Los Angeles: Loyola Marymount University. - URL <http://www.ul.ie/~philos/vol1/paper2.html>

<sup>7</sup> Holloway, R. - "Why does God allow suffering?" in *Dancing on the edge: faith in a post-Christian age*. - London: Harper Collins, 1997, pp.62-81.

<sup>8</sup> *Hope and planning* / Jürgen Moltmann. - London: SCM, 1971, p.32, quoted by Sia, *op.cit.*

<sup>9</sup> *Theology and the problem of evil* / Kenneth Surin. - New York: Basil Blackwell, 1986, as referred to in *To whom are theodicists talking?* / Forrest E. Baird. - [Resident's Lecture at the Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research at St. John's University, Colleveville, Minnesota.] - URL <http://www.whitworth.edu/classes/phil/ph320w/handout3.htm>

<sup>10</sup> *God, freedom, and evil* / Alvin Plantinga. - Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974, p. 29, quoted by Baird, *op.cit.*

<sup>11</sup> Baird, *op.cit.*

<sup>12</sup> Cobb, *op.cit.*, p174.

Pastors have many approaches available to them, some less helpful than others. They might understand suffering to be punishment. They may agree with Hick that suffering is part of God's plan for soul-making - a necessary product of the freedom that is essential for the good to be achieved.<sup>13</sup> Some, with Roth, will adopt a "theodicy of protest".<sup>14</sup> Others may consider a "process theology" which (to oversimplify) somewhat sidesteps the issue by limiting God's realm of response to the occurrence of suffering and evil.<sup>15</sup> There is no completely satisfactory moral justification for suffering.<sup>16</sup>

The approach that I have found most helpful and persuasive is Jürgen Moltmann's concept of a "suffering God", found particularly in his works, *The Crucified God*<sup>17</sup> and *The Way of Jesus Christ*.<sup>18</sup> For Moltmann, the cross of Christ represents not merely the death of Jesus, but God's identification with the suffering of the world in the suffering of Christ. The crucified Christ calls for a revolution in the concept of God. "God and suffering are no longer contradictions," but, "God's being is in suffering and the suffering is in God's being itself, because God is love."<sup>19</sup>

My reasons for sympathy with Moltmann's concept are explained in what follows. Similar ideas are also found in the work of liberation theologians, whose thinking has influenced Moltmann's more recent work.<sup>20</sup> But to say that God suffers is to take a position in a long-standing theological dispute. Before we can offer pastoral solutions that presuppose that God does suffer with us, we need to consider whether this is theologically reasonable.

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<sup>13</sup> Hick, John. - "An Irenaean theodicy", pp.39ff in *Encountering evil ...*

<sup>14</sup> Roth, John K. - "A Theodicy of protest", pp.7ff in *Encountering evil ...*

<sup>15</sup> See Griffith, David R. - "Creation out of chaos and the problem of evil," p.69ff in *Encountering evil ...* and the discussion which follows it.

<sup>16</sup> Holloway, *op.cit.*, p.65.

<sup>17</sup> *The Crucified God: the cross of Christ and the foundation and criticism of Christian theology* / Jürgen Moltmann. - Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993.

<sup>18</sup> *The Way of Jesus Christ: Christology in Messianic dimensions* / Jürgen Moltmann. - London: SCM, 1993.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p.227.

<sup>20</sup> See Moltmann's "Preface to the Paperback edition" of *The Crucified God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).

### III - Does God Suffer?<sup>21</sup>

#### *The traditional / classical understanding*

Classical Hellenistic understanding of God held that God is immutable and therefore impassible. The perfect being was unchanging, self-sufficient, and neither affected nor changed by anything outside itself. If God were perfect, change would be inconceivable, as any change could only be for the worse.<sup>22</sup> *Patipassianism*<sup>23</sup> and *theopaschitism*<sup>24</sup> were among rejected doctrines, in part because they taught that God suffered.<sup>25</sup>

Gregory of Nazianzus (330-389) insisted that God must be considered to suffer, lest the reality of the incarnation be questioned. But most Patristic and medieval writers including Anselm (c1033-1109) and Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274) took it as axiomatic that God could not suffer.<sup>26</sup> The impassibility of God was enshrined in the 1562 *Articles of Religion* of the Church of England<sup>27</sup> and in the 1646-47 *Westminster Confession of Faith*.<sup>28</sup> Reformed scholar A.A. Hodge says this was essential for consistency with "those infinite and absolute perfections"<sup>29</sup> that are of God's essence.

<sup>21</sup> Unless otherwise noted, this section relies on McGrath, *op.cit.*, pp.248-254.

<sup>22</sup> I find this conclusion incongruous. Could not God have an infinitude of "perfect" states?

<sup>23</sup> *Patipassianism* is a contemporary nickname for a doctrine proposing the incarnation of the Father in an effort to maintain the unity of God and the Divinity of the Son. According to Hippolytus, Noetus taught that if Christ is God, he is surely the Father, or else not God; therefore if Christ suffered, then God suffered. - Mikolaski, Samuel J. "Monarchianism" in *New international dictionary of the Christian Church* / J.D. Douglas (editor). - Exeter: Paternoster, 1974, pp.670f.

<sup>24</sup> See "Theopaschites" in *New international dictionary of the Christian Church* (noted above), p.967.

<sup>25</sup> McWilliams, Warren. - "Divine suffering in contemporary theology." *Scottish journal of theology*, 32(1):35-53, 1980.

<sup>26</sup> In his *Proslogion*, Anselm (c.1033-1109) argued that though we may experience God as compassionate, this does not mean that God *is* compassionate or experiences compassion, for God "is not affected by any sympathy of misery." Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274) wrote that, "Mercy is especially to be attributed to God, provided that it is considered as an effect, not as a feeling of suffering. ... It does not belong to God to sorrow over the feelings of others." - McGrath, *op.cit.*, p250

<sup>27</sup> Article I declares that, "There is but one living and true God, everlasting, without body, part or passions ..." *Articles agreed upon [...] in the convocation holden at London in the year 1562 for the avoiding of diversities of opinions and for the establishment of consent touching true religion.* (Reprinted in most editions of the Book of Common Prayer).

<sup>28</sup> God is, "without body, part or passions, immutable ..." *The Confession of Faith*. - Westminster, 1647, as quoted in *The Confession of Faith: a handbook of Christian doctrine expounding the Westminster Confession* / A.A. Hodge. - Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1958 (First published 1869), p.46.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

The most celebrated protest against such thinking is perhaps Martin Luther's "theology of the cross" (*theologia crucis*).<sup>30</sup> Luther used the phrase *Deus crucifixus*, "a crucified God", to speak of God's sharing in the sufferings of the cross of Christ. Re-publication of Luther's complete works in 1883 (the 400th anniversary of his birth) allowed a rediscovery of his ideas on the suffering God.

*Contemporary arguments that God does suffer*

Rediscovery of Luther was timely, for writers such as Adolf von Harnack in his massive *History of dogma* (1886-9) had been studying the influence of Hellenistic thought in the formation of Christian doctrine. Von Harnack questioned whether Greek metaphysics had distorted the gospel. McGrath mentions three other contemporary influences of note in this debate:<sup>31</sup> (1) Process thought's emphasis on the interrelationship between creation and Creator necessarily makes God one who is an understanding fellow-sufferer. (2) Old Testament studies draw attention to the manner in which it portrays God as sharing in Israel's hurts. (3) There has been renewed consideration of the notion of love, and God's love in particular. How can there be "love" without a sharing of suffering and feelings? Such work has undermined the intuitive plausibility (though not necessarily the intellectual credibility) of the impassible God.<sup>32</sup>

In *The Crucified God*, Jürgen Moltmann, with Luther, contends that the cross is the "test of everything which deserves to be called Christian."<sup>33</sup> For Moltmann, God is revealed in the suffering and death of Jesus and participates in suffering through the historical experience of the cross.

How can Christian faith understand Christ's passion as being the revelation of God, if the deity cannot suffer? Does God simply allow Christ to suffer for us? Or does God himself suffer in Christ on our behalf?<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> In Luther's *Heidelberg disputations* of 1518.

<sup>31</sup> p.252.

<sup>32</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>33</sup> *The Crucified God* ... p.7

<sup>34</sup> *The Trinity and the kingdom of God: the doctrine of God* / Jürgen Moltmann. - London: SCM, 1981, p.21f.

Jesus's cry of dereliction from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mk.15.34, Mt.27.46) is central to Moltmann's understanding of the events of the cross. This cry signifies an event of suffering between the Father and the Son. It is an event within God's self for,

... the Father who abandons him and delivers him up suffers the death of the Son in infinite grief of love. We cannot say here in patripassian terms that the father also suffered and died. The suffering and dying of the Son, forsaken by the Father, is a different kind of suffering from the suffering of the Father in the death of the Son. ... To understand what happened between Jesus and his God and Father on the cross, it is necessary to talk in trinitarian terms. The Son suffers dying, the Father suffers the death of the Son. The grief of the Father here is just as important as the death of the Son.<sup>35</sup>

Moltmann's understanding of the suffering of God at the cross is profoundly trinitarian.

The Son suffers in his love being forsaken by the Father as he dies. The father suffers in his love the grief of the death of the Son. ... It is the unconditioned and therefore boundless love which proceeds from the grief of the Father and the dying of the Son and reaches forsaken men (*sic*) in order to create in them the possibility and force of new life.<sup>36</sup>

This is the love spoken of in John 3.16, in which John sees the very existence of God as love.<sup>37</sup> Suffering is in God because God is love (I John 4.16).

Suffering is not justified, but is embraced in loving solidarity with those who suffer.<sup>38</sup>

James C. Cone takes a similar approach based in a theology of liberation.<sup>39</sup> Because God "was one with divinity and humanity, the pain of the cross was God suffering for and with us so that our humanity can be liberated for freedom in the divine struggle against oppression."<sup>40</sup> Cone takes the suffering servant of Isaiah to refer to Jesus, but also to God's own self. "During Jesus' life, God became the Suffering Servant in Israel's place, and this took upon the divine-self human pain. ... On the cross, God's identity with the suffering of the world was complete."<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> *The Crucified God...* p.243.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p.245.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p.244.

<sup>38</sup> *Moltmann: Messianic theology in the making* / Richard Bauckham. - Basingstoke: Marshall Pickering, 1987, p.85.

<sup>39</sup> James Cone's work particularly relevant to our topic is *The God of the oppressed*. - New York: Seabury, 1975. Here I am relying on the summary in McWilliams, *op.cit.*, pp.39-43.

<sup>40</sup> Cone, *The God of the oppressed*, p.139, cited in McWilliams, *op.cit.*, p.42.

<sup>41</sup> Cone, *The God of the oppressed*, p.74, cited in McWilliams, *op.cit.*, p.42.

Kazoh Kitamori insists that the pain of God is a theme that pervades the Bible, for example citing Jeremiah 31.20<sup>42</sup> and Isaiah 63.15<sup>43</sup> in which the word *hamah* connotes intense love and pain. Agreeing with Luther, Kitamori sees the pain of God making possible a unity between the wrath of God and the love of God. "The 'pain' of God reflects his will to love the object of his wrath."<sup>44</sup>

Kenotic approaches to Christology also tend to affirm the suffering of God. There have been strong objections to kenotic doctrine.<sup>45</sup> However, it can be seen that a suffering God becomes more plausible if God is identified with the self-emptying (*kenosis*) of Christ who,

... emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death - even death on a cross. (Philippians 2.6-8 NRSV)

### *Reservations and responses*

There is debate on the idea of a suffering God. J.K. Mozley proposed topics to be dealt with by those considering the question of God's impassibility,<sup>46</sup> demonstrating that the (im)passibility of God bears on ideas central to Christian doctrine, especially on theodicy and on our understanding of Christ's passion. Lucien Richard also notes that to affirm that God suffers has implications that need to be worked through, concerning God's character, the destiny of God and the nature of God's power.<sup>47</sup> D.G Attfield, writing in

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<sup>42</sup> "Is Ephraim my dear son? Is he the child I delight in? As often as I speak against him, I still remember him. Therefore I am deeply moved [*hamah*] for him; I will surely have mercy on him, says the Lord." (Jer. 31.20 NRSV).

<sup>43</sup> Look down from heaven and see, from your holy and glorious habitation. Where are your zeal and your might? The yearning [*hamah*] of your [i.e God's] heart and your compassion? They are withheld from me. (Isaiah 63.15 NRSV).

<sup>44</sup> *Theology of the pain of God* / Kazoh Kitamori. - Richmond: John Knox Pr., 1965 p.21 cited in McWilliams, *op.cit.*, p.44.

<sup>45</sup> See *The history of Christian doctrines* / Louis Berkhof. - Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1969., p.120f.

<sup>46</sup> The true nature of God; God's relationship to the world; the relation between God's eternal happiness and God's involvement in time (How can God be eternal if affected by human history? How can God suffer if God is ultimately self-sufficiently happy?); the relation between divine feeling and human feeling; the religious value of divine passibility (If God suffers, so what?); and the relation between the cross and God's love. - *The Impassibility of God: a survey of Christian thought* / J.K. Mozley - London: Cambridge UP., 1926, pp. 177-183.

<sup>47</sup> *What are they saying about suffering?* / Lucien Richard. - New York: Paulist, 1992, p.125ff. To avoid understanding God as masochistic, we need in some way to understand suffering not only as human destiny but also as God's destiny. God has chosen to be intimately related to creation with such a love that it is incoherent to regard God as impassible. To say that God does truly suffer also poses a basic question about the nature of God's power. "If suffering is projected in God's eternity", Lucien

1977,<sup>48</sup> found in Moltmann's arguments much that is acceptable. But he mentions problems raised by Moltmann's "striking assertion" that "God himself may be said to have suffered and died on Calvary."<sup>49</sup> Even if God can be changed with God's own consent, Attfield asserts that this is not the same as the human situation, in which suffering happens to us often *without* our consent.<sup>50</sup> Hence Attfield finds that Moltmann's concept of divine suffering does not truly equate with our sufferings.

Bauckham comments:

Criticism of Moltmann's doctrine of God has claimed that, in rejecting the traditional doctrines of divine aseity and impassibility, he compromises the freedom of God and falls into the 'Hegelian' mistake of making world history the process by which God realizes himself. ... He does not dissolve God into world history, but he does intend a real interaction between God and the world. The problem of divine freedom leads him [Moltmann] to deny the reality of the contrast between necessity and freedom of choice in God. Because God's freedom is the freedom of his love, he cannot choose not to love and as love he is intrinsically related to the world."<sup>51</sup>

As McWilliams points out,<sup>52</sup> the language of the Bible is one source of debate over the impassibility of God (and hence the question of whether God suffers). The Scriptures affirm radical differences between the divine and human natures (Isaiah 40.18, 25; Hosea 11.9), yet elsewhere they use anthropomorphic language to describe a God who walks, talks, smells, hears and writes. Anthropopathic language is also used, that is, language attributing apparently human emotions to God, such as anger, hatred, jealousy, love and patience. The paradoxes in such language fuel continuing debate.

*Conclusion - does God suffer?*

To sum up this part of the discussion; we have seen that the classical/traditional view that God is impassible provides some difficult problems. In

asks, "what hope remains of eliminating suffering in this world? Is our God impotent? If not, what is the nature of God's power?"(p.126) God's power as manifest in the paschal mystery works through suffering, love and forgiveness, and when compared to political power, can be seen to be weakness (1 Cor.1.18-25). God's suffering demonstrates a power to renounce power.

<sup>48</sup> Attfield, D.G. "Can God be crucified? A discussion of J. Moltmann." *Scottish journal of theology*, 30(1):47-57, 1977.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p.47.

<sup>50</sup> Jesus, if truly human, could not have come down from the cross. Yet, God, if really Jesus, must have had to consent moment-by-moment to the sufferings of the cross. On the cross, God in Christ could at any moment have asserted impassibility (at whatever cost to God's apparent humanity).

<sup>51</sup> Bauckham, *The Theology of Jürgen Moltmann*, p.24f.

<sup>52</sup> McWilliams, *op.cit.*, p.35f.

disallowing God's intervention as one who suffers, it seems to leave the theodicy problem beyond solution short of the *eschaton*. Some early Christians and Luther, in particular, held a different view, finding God to be more directly feeling, compassionate and affected by human sufferings.

Some contemporary theologians have made it possible, even respectably orthodox, to believe that God does indeed suffer with us and for us. I must acknowledge that I am persuaded partly on intuitive grounds, especially as I find God's agonizing over us, suffering with us and for us, constantly reflected in the Scriptures. With Kitamori<sup>53</sup>, I see the pain (and joy) of God pervading Scripture (Zeph.3.17-18<sup>54</sup>, Jer.9.1,3<sup>55</sup>). This does not seem to be a passionless God, incapable of sharing our delights and our pain. Does God suffer? Yes, I think so.

#### **IV - Talking of God in the presence of suffering**

To say that God suffers with us in Christ does not *solve* the formal theodicy problem. That is, it does not say how is it logically possible that suffering could occur when God is omnipotent and perfectly good. Still less does it say *why* suffering occurs. Brief study soon shows that there is a great diversity of philosophy and theology on the "problem of evil," and that an agreed conclusion is unlikely.

The "Why?" of human suffering echoes the Cry of Dereliction. Thus, Moltmann is able to say that, "When God becomes man in Jesus of Nazareth, he not only enters into the finitude of man, but in his death on the cross also enters into the situation of man's godforsakenness."<sup>56</sup> In this as in all things, though "despised and rejected", Christ has "borne our infirmities" (Is.53.3-4). As Holloway remarks, our understanding of the Incarnation is tragic as well as joyful. The crucifixion "rescues Christianity from moral superficiality and

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<sup>53</sup> See McWilliams, *op.cit.*, p.44.

<sup>54</sup> "The Lord, your God ... will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival." (NRSV)

<sup>55</sup> "O that my head were a spring of water, and my eyes a fountain of tears, so that I might weep day and night for the slain of my poor people! ... says the Lord." (NRSV)

<sup>56</sup> *Op.cit.*, p.276.

naïve optimism, because it identifies God with suffering and links that suffering to human action."<sup>57</sup>

In *The Way of Jesus Christ*,<sup>58</sup> Moltmann considers the sufferings of Christ as an event not exclusive to a narrowly historical Jesus, but as gathering up all the sufferings of the age. Jesus suffers vicariously and in solidarity with the whole creation. Jesus' death is an anticipation of universal and absolute death. There is a great apocalyptic dying of this world, in the natural environment, through poverty and disease, and potentially through nuclear holocaust.<sup>59</sup> Moltmann's aim is to develop a Christology "relevant in the sufferings of our own time".<sup>60</sup> As Jesus' sufferings are not simply his own, the "fellowship of Christ's sufferings" (Phil. 3.10) identifies the whole community of Christ's people with the manifestation of the new creation and confrontation with evil and injustice. Our sufferings, Moltmann says, are end-time sufferings which take possession of the whole creation."<sup>61</sup>

By sharing his life with the oppressed, Jesus showed that God is one who cares for the weak and lowly. God does not validate the *status quo*, but questions it. Salvation relates to the situation in which God places humanity here and now. Mission must therefore advance justice by challenging political and economic structures. The great question, "Why?" should be addressed to the structures of oppression. Liberation theology identifies oppressive structures as the cause of much evil in the world and presents the gospel as a radical critique of oppression and as God's response in Jesus Christ. But this is not an answer to the ultimate question of why God permits oppression and evil in the first place.<sup>62</sup> In response to this ultimate form of the sufferer's question, "Why?", I am inclined to respond that *we simply don't know*.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Holloway, *op.cit.*, p.76.

<sup>58</sup> *The way of Jesus Christ ...* pp.151-196

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p.157.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p.152.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> Indeed, extreme versions of liberation theology reject God (as distinct from Jesus) for just such a reason.

<sup>63</sup> Other than, perhaps, in the case in which suffering is a direct consequence of the deliberate and fully informed action of the sufferer.

Santiago Sia<sup>64</sup> suggests an approach to talking about God amidst suffering which he calls "reflecting on praxis". His aim is "to give due regard to the experiences of many people who continue to believe in God despite suffering, impoverishment and oppression." In this approach, Sia says, we do not begin with a developed concept of God, but with reflection on the experience of suffering and our responses to it, asking what this experience can disclose about God. Though I would personally prefer not to abandon a "developed concept" of God, Sia's liberationist approach is in harmony with the concept of God as co-sufferer that I have been discussing.

As well as suffering with us in the death of Christ, God has obtained for us liberation in the resurrection of Christ.<sup>65</sup> The God who accepts our suffering also desires our liberation. (Indeed, it could be said to be insufficient that God simply accepts our suffering. As Schillebeeckx observed, "A God who only shares our suffering leaves the last and definite word to evil and suffering."<sup>66</sup>) Moltmann speaks of the resurrection of Christ as a history-creating event.<sup>67</sup> The resurrection of Jesus promises that ultimately oppressors will not "triumph over their innocent victims."<sup>68</sup> With his bodily resurrection, "Christ leads human nature into the kingdom of God."<sup>69</sup> "Christ's exodus leads out of the tyranny of history into the freedom of the new creation."<sup>70</sup>

"By raising Jesus from the dead", Thorwald Lorenzen says, "God infused history with a promise. ... Believing that God will be faithful to his promises, believers stake their lives on that promise ... and become instruments of life, justice and liberation."<sup>71</sup>

Often in the pastoral situation we will not be able to give a helpful or even reasonable answer as to the "Why?" of suffering. Yet we can still speak of God

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<sup>64</sup> *Op.cit.*

<sup>65</sup> For a discussion of the interpretation of the resurrection from the perspective of liberation theology, see *Resurrection and discipleship: interpretive models, Biblical reflections, theological consequences* / Thorwald Lorenzen. - Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995, pp.85-111.

<sup>66</sup> For the sake of the Gospel / Edward Schillebeeckx. - London: SCM, 1989, quoted by Sia, *op.cit.*

<sup>67</sup> *The Way of Jesus Christ ...*, p.214.

<sup>68</sup> *The Crucified God...* p.175.

<sup>69</sup> *The Way of Jesus Christ ...* p.257.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p.303.

<sup>71</sup> Lorenzen, *op.cit.*, p.105.

in the presence of suffering. God offers solidarity with the sufferer and the oppressed. In the cross of Jesus Christ, God shares in our pain and suffering. In the resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has achieved liberation and new creation.

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