

The Question of Evil: Theodicy, Moltmann, and Pannenberg

By Jon Kane*

Introduction

In his memoir *Night*, Elie Wiesel describes an execution by hanging. The child, too light to tighten the noose around his neck, struggles long before succumbing. Wiesel's fellow prisoners, forced to watch, weep. "Where is God now?" one of them asks. Wiesel's bitter response: "Where is He? Here He is — He is hanging on the gallows."¹ The evil of the twentieth century tells other tales like this one from a Nazi concentration camp: the destruction of Hiroshima, the purges of Stalin and Pol Pot, the cruelty of My Lai and 9/11. Even at a remove of years, events such as these give us pause, yet they cast only a faint shadow in comparison to the sum total of creation's suffering past and present. Christians cannot ignore the reality of that suffering. We must respond to Wiesel's fellow prisoner and answer the question "Where is God?" in a way that prevents Wiesel's own words from echoing in our hearts and the heart of the world.

This essay will provide such response, however brief. Theodicy is an extensive vein in theology, not one that can be adequately explored in so short a space. So I will take a narrow focus. First, I will set the stage using two authors whose work stands as paradigmatic in theodicy. Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Ivan Karamazov* provides the signature argument for protest atheism in the face of all religions. Albert Camus specifically addresses the Christian response to suffering in his essay *The Rebel* and finds it wanting. After the stage is set, I will turn to two twentieth century theologians — Jurgen Moltmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg. I will explore how each responds to the question of suffering and evaluate their responses in light of *Karamazov* and Camus. Finally, I will conclude with a brief retrospective on how their work influences theology and furthers the life of the church.

Setting the Stage

Traditionally conceived, theodicy is the attempt to reconcile three statements: God is omnipotent, God is omnibenevolent, and evil is real.² Many philosophers and theologians continue to work along these lines, attempting to show that these statements can be held without contradiction.³ A less traditional approach to theodicy, however, simply takes suffering as a given and seeks to understand God within this obvious reality. As Stanley Hauerwas explains it, it is a question of "what kind of God it is Christians worship that makes intelligible our cry of rage against the suffering and death."⁴ Both Moltmann and Pannenberg dwell near the border between these two approaches.

The nontraditional approach to theodicy has developed in large measure as a response to the arguments Dostoyevsky places so eloquently in the

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mouth of Ivan Karamazov. Ivan admits that some suffering might be redemptive or justifiable as punishment, but not all suffering and certainly not the excess of suffering seen in the world. Describing the brutal murder of a young serf, he states that such suffering by a child is surely incomprehensible. Yet even if he could understand it, Ivan proclaims, or knew that it would some day make sense, he would not accept it. He refuses to accept a god who justifies suffering in any way. He finds such a god unacceptable on moral grounds and rebels by declaring himself an atheist.⁵

Ivan defines the position of protest atheism: "In the face of misery, protest atheism says no to any god who would continue to allow such conditions."⁶ According to Richard Bauckham, while Ivan's argument is specifically against an eschatological theodicy (a theodicy which seeks to justify suffering on the basis of some future good), it is also valid against the freewill and pedagogical theodicies. Such theodicies explain some of the suffering in the world, but they cannot explain it all. If correct, Ivan's argument makes the traditional approach to theodicy impossible, Bauckham writes, because the traditional approach to theodicy "can only justify God by justifying the suffering, we can only accept it [the traditional theodicy] by suppressing our moral outrage at the injustice of the suffering. Therefore we *ought* not to accept it."⁷

Albert Camus builds on the position that suffering should not be accepted, developing several arguments aimed directly at Christianity and its interpretation of the Cross. As an atheist, Camus sees Christ's crucifixion as itself a rebellion against God. The human Jesus protested to the end against the suffering he was forced to endure, but in the end he suffered like any other human victim.⁸ However, Camus reasoned, if Christ truly was God as Christianity claims, the Cross would be even more pernicious. The example of a passive Christ on the cross seems to encourage the acceptance of suffering. If God suffered without protest, humans would likewise have no grounds to protest suffering. By Camus' interpretation, the Cross justifies suffering.⁹ As Bauckham summarizes it, "If the cross is invested with deity, it becomes the most effective, but also the most objectionable theodicy, justifying suffering and silencing protest."¹⁰ According to Camus, neither interpretation of the cross — Jesus as human or Jesus as divine — provides a satisfactory theodicy.

To provide a theodicy that is satisfactory, contemporary Christian theologians must respond to the positions of Ivan and Camus. The task before us is twofold. First, involuntary and unredemptive suffering must not be justified for any reason, whether for the purposes of God or the improvement of humanity. Such explanations cannot be completely comprehensible, and they stifle attempts to alleviate suffering. Second, an explanation of suffering must provide a way of overcoming suffering. Only that type of explanation can avoid the trap of justifying suffering; it can also provide motivation to work for the alleviation of suffering.¹¹

Moltmann and Pannenberg

As theologians, Moltmann and Pannenberg often follow similar lines of thought. Both place great emphasis on eschatology and were influential in the development of the theology of hope. Both develop their theology from a trinitarian understanding of God. Both insist on the historical nature of revelation. But their work on theodicy reflects more differences than similarities. Pannenberg, by and large, remains more concerned with theory. Nor does he appear to stray beyond the borders of traditional theodicy. Moltmann, on the other hand, insists on embedding his work in practical realities. He also shows great willingness to ask what the Trinity's experience of suffering tells us about God. Their discussions provide an interesting window into the question of evil, as in many ways the two theologians parallel each other while reaching different conclusions.

One significant similarity should be noted here, as it relates directly to the question of suffering. Both Moltmann and Pannenberg hold to a belief in human freedom. Freedom, as Pannenberg interprets it, is not a formal freedom of choice but a freedom to fulfill human destiny.¹² "The ability to decide among possibilities of conduct is a high form of creaturely independence," he notes, but "it is in fact only a totally inadequate if necessary condition of true freedom, the freedom of the children of God."¹³ Instead, true freedom finds its basis in the Trinity. Pannenberg writes: "[T]he aim of giving creatures independent existence was that they should be able to share in the relation of the Son to the Father and hence in the Trinity's eternal fellowship of love."¹⁴ Moltmann too develops his concept of human freedom out of an understanding of the Trinity, but in his case the whole experience of human freedom is tied to the human experience of the Trinity, rather than the Trinity merely serving as the foundation for freedom.¹⁵ He writes: "The theological concept of freedom is the concept of the trinitarian history of God."¹⁶ Either way, both Moltmann and Pannenberg accept the reality of human freedom, and while this in no way composes the sum total of their theodicies, it does shape them significantly.

The Reality of Suffering

Moltmann and Pannenberg agree on the importance of theodicy in Christian theology, but they reach this conclusion by different routes. Pannenberg conceives the importance of theodicy in the context of a believer's faith. Citing Isaiah 45:9 ("Does the clay say to the one who fashions it, 'What are you making?'"),¹⁷ he posits that a solid faith does not question God's doings in the world. Still, the question does arise as an attack on firm belief in a good Creator. He writes: "On the soil of belief in God the Creator a problem of theodicy . . . cannot seriously arise. Yet this fact does not prevent the question from forcing itself even upon believers as an assault upon their faith."¹⁸ Christians should not question God as Creator for any reason, but the existence of suffering causes them to do so. Therefore it must be answered.

Pannenberg also explores the why of suffering, finding his answer in the fabric of universe itself. By definition, creation is not God, and it experiences a status less than that of God. "Limitation is a necessary part of creaturehood insofar as every creature is different from God and his perfection. God could not give the creature all things without making it itself a god."¹⁹ This limitation is not evil, Pannenberg argues, nor is it the direct cause of suffering. But it carries with it the possibility that free humans will reject their creaturely limits. Such a rejection is the root of evil and suffering in the world.²⁰ Pannenberg summarizes: "If the Creator willed a world of finite creatures and their independence, then he had to accept their corruptibility and suffering, and the possibility of evil as a result of their striving for their own autonomy."²¹ The limitations inherent in the ontology of creation coupled with the gift of freedom allow the possibility of a move away from God.

Moltmann, on the other hand, does not place theodicy in the context of faith. He grounds it in the reality of the world. Suffering asks a question which neither humans nor God can ignore. He writes: "The suffering of a single innocent child is an irrefutable rebuttal of the notion of the almighty and kindly God in heaven. For a God who lets the innocent suffer and who permits senseless death is not worthy to be called God at all."²² But for Moltmann suffering is more than a question. It is "the open wound of life" which theology and faith must address if humanity is to survive and continue living. It needs to lead believers deeper into the experience of creation and God.²³

Moltmann does not attempt an in-depth explanation of why suffering exists. Instead he accepts it as a reality and attempts to understand God through it. This approach undermines the protest atheism of Ivan Karamazov, while, interestingly enough, following the path of Ivan's brother Alyosha, the clear "hero" of Dostoyevsky's novel. Those of Ivan's ilk ground their atheism in protest against suffering, but once God has been abandoned only suffering remains.²⁴ Moltmann writes that while "suffering is the rock of atheism . . . On the rock of suffering the atheism of the godless person who is left to himself ends too."²⁵ As Moltmann understands it, the very protest against suffering points to a reality of which atheism can never conceive, a reality without suffering. He writes: "if suffering calls into question the notion of a just and kindly God, then conversely the longing for justice and goodness calls suffering into question."²⁶ The protest against suffering itself arises out of a sense of love and justice. Only those realities can give voice to protest.²⁷

The Eschaton

But simply undermining protest atheism does not answer the question of suffering. Nor does it address either of the requirements protest atheism places on theodicy. To do so, both Moltmann and Pannenberg turn to the eschatological event. They see the eschaton not as God's justification of suffering but as God's overcoming of the suffering of the world. Pannenberg's eschatology infuses his entire theology. He views the eschaton as nothing less

than the completion of creation. The present, temporal world is connected to the Future Creator God through the work of the Spirit. At the eschaton, the present world will meet the future God and be made new.²⁸ He writes: "With the eschatological future God's eternity comes into time and it is thus creatively present to all the temporal things that precede this future."²⁹ This has important implications for theodicy, because it means that "the kingdom of God will be actualized and the justification of God in the face of the sufferings of the world will be achieved but also universally acknowledged."³⁰ The kingdom of God is the place of peace and justice for which the temporal world can but yearn, but which will be made a reality through the eschatological work of God. History and earthly time will end; God's kingdom will be realized.³¹ In this way the question of evil, according to Pannenberg, will be resolved in God's final eschatological event.

The same is true for Moltmann. He looks to a future time when creation will be redeemed and history integrated into God.³² The present world is one of suffering, unrighteousness, and injustice — but it is not the final world. Historical events, Moltmann argues, "have always at the same time also an unfinished and provisional character that points forwards."³³ The future world, to which the present one only points, the one brought about by God's eschatological event, when time meets eternity, will be a place of life, righteousness, and justice.³⁴ Moltmann bases this belief on his understanding of God's character. God, he writes, is a "God of hope," a God "with future as his essential nature," a God who "confronts us with the promise of something new, with the hope of a future given by God."³⁵ In the eschaton, the sufferings of the present world are not justified by God; they are overcome. God's true purpose is not in the present sufferings but in the coming eschatological future God has promised.³⁶

The two theologians also place absolute importance on the work of Jesus Christ in reference to the coming eschatological event. For both Moltmann and Pannenberg, Jesus represents God's promise of the future.³⁷ More than Moltmann, Pannenberg focuses on the work of God through history. He writes of the love of God being at work in each stage in the history of creation³⁸ This love is especially evident in Jesus' incarnation. He writes: "the coming of divine love into time culminates in the event of the incarnation."³⁹ The death of Jesus points to the coming eschatological end: "This event is in itself already an overcoming of evil, and its effects deliverance from the power of sin and death."⁴⁰ Finally, Christ's resurrection not only confirms Jesus' deity but also offers the promise of the coming eschatological future.⁴¹

Unlike Pannenberg, for whom the resurrection is a continuation of the cross, Moltmann understands the significance of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection in the light of a dialectic between cross and resurrection. The two are opposites, one death and the other life. The cross has its own importance in relation to Moltmann's theodicy, but the resurrection relates directly to

eschatology. If Christ's cross represents this present life, the life-in-history, then Christ's resurrection is the promise of the future resurrection of humanity and of God's new creation.⁴² It is the promise that suffering will be overcome.⁴³ And it is the beginning of the fulfillment of that promise.⁴⁴ According to Moltmann, what happened in Christ "is understood as the dawn and assured promise of the coming glory of God over all, as the victory of life from God over death."⁴⁵

This emphasis on promise underscores Moltmann's more rooted response to the problem of suffering. As he sees it, the coming eschatological event is something that gives hope, and humanity needs to orient their lives around that hope. A believer is to "transform in opposition and creative expectation the face of the world in the midst of which one believes, hopes, and lives."⁴⁶ The eschaton not only promises to overcome suffering at some future moment, it also gives encouragement to daily cross-bearing and the struggle against suffering.

The Cross

In their full understanding of the Cross and its meaning for theodicy, Moltmann and Pannenberg diverge. Pannenberg does not venture beyond the borders of traditional theodicy. Moltmann, on the other hand, willingly goes far a field. While Pannenberg certainly affirms the importance of the Cross and the Trinity⁴⁷ he stops short of exploring the connection between the two. He does mention that God takes responsibility for the evil God has allowed to exist in creation. He writes: "God did not shirk the responsibility but shouldered it by sending and giving up his Son to the cross. In this way, as Creator, he stands by his responsibility for the work that he has made. Evil is thus real and costly enough for God himself as well as for creatures."⁴⁸ But that is all. This formulation does not influence his description of God as a trinitarian God. God retains God's omnipotence⁴⁹ and remains immutable.⁵⁰ One wonders if it is not contradictory to claim that evil cost God if God remains untouched.

If this analysis is correct, Pannenberg's theodicy remains within the boundaries of the traditional approach. He provides an explanation for the origin of evil and suffering, and his theodicy rests on the promise that suffering will be overcome by the eschaton. This is an adequate response to the conditions set by Ivan Karamazov, but it is not a powerful one. Nor does it address the issues raised by Camus. God appears to have little present-day relevance in the world. Pannenberg's "responsible" God lacks the rhetorical force found in Moltmann.

Like Pannenberg, Moltmann's theology of the eschaton responds to Ivan's arguments, providing a way for suffering to be overcome. But Moltmann also conceives of Jesus as providing God's divine protest against suffering. Although Jesus went willingly to the cross, he did not suffer passively.⁵¹ Instead, he cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mk. 15:34). This argument responds to both issues raised by Camus. First, it is God on the cross. Jesus is not just another human victim; he is God. Second, Christ

did not justify suffering or silence protest on the cross. He protested against suffering himself. Moltmann writes: "Hope finds in Christ not only a consolation in suffering, but also the protest of the divine promise *against* suffering."⁵²

More than protest, however, Jesus is God standing in divine solidarity with the suffering.⁵³ Jesus the Son suffered a brutal death in innocence. The Father suffered the pain of watching the Son suffer and die. Moltmann writes: "The Son suffers dying, the Father suffers the death of the Son."⁵⁴ God is not impassible or unmoved. Just as the Father suffered along with the Son, so God suffers along with God's creation, because through Jesus God has identified with creation.⁵⁵ To Wiesel's protest Moltmann responds: "It is true . . . God himself hung on the gallows."⁵⁶ But not in death, as Wiesel believes. God hung in protest and solidarity with the suffering.

Moltmann fully addresses the arguments of Ivan and Camus. He in no way seeks to explain evil and suffering. He provides in the historical resurrection and the future eschaton a promise that suffering will be overcome and the encouragement to continue the present struggle against it. Finally, unlike Pannenberg, Moltmann goes beyond the boundaries of traditional theology and draws a picture of God who is not only transcendent but also immanent, a God who both suffers and protests against suffering. This God promises a good future and provides a present hope.⁵⁷

Conclusion

In terms of Christian theodicy, Moltmann and Pannenberg both contribute the element of hope. By making God's eschatological event the centerpiece of their theodicies, they answer the argument of Ivan Karamazov by claiming not that suffering will be justified, but that it will be overcome. They point toward a future that for atheism is an impossibility: a good future without suffering. This they call the Kingdom of God.

Of course, their arguments, especially those of Moltmann, raise important questions about the future direction of theology. Pannenberg retains a largely traditional understanding of God as omnipotent and omniscient, but Moltmann does not. By not asking the why of suffering and by making God a fellow-sufferer, Moltmann recalibrates the levels of God's power and knowledge. While certainly not a process theologian or open-theist, Moltmann does at least face that direction. This is an issue for theologians, and especially traditional ones, to consider.

Finally, Moltmann and Pannenberg's response to the question of evil and suffering holds practical implications for the life of the church as its members seek to make their way in the face of the world. First, we should not silently accept the suffering we encounter. Christ's cry on the cross makes that clear. Instead, we should offer a similar cry of protest while at the same time working for a better future. Because there is hope for the future. The same

Jesus who suffered on the cross rose again, and his resurrection is the promise and beginning of God's good future. We may never understand our suffering, but at the full realization of God's kingdom we know that it will be overcome. And that is reason enough for hope.

Notes

¹ Elie Wiesel, *The Night Trilogy* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1987), 71-72.

² Tyrone Inbody, *The Transforming God: An Interpretation of Suffering and Evil* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 27.

³ Inbody, 32-33.

⁴ Stanley Hauerwas, *Naming the Silences: God, Medicine, and the Problem of Suffering* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990), 35.

⁵ Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. David McDuff (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 279-283.

⁶ W. Waite Willis, Jr., *Theism, Atheism and the Doctrine of the Trinity: The Trinitarian Theologies of Karl Barth and Jurgen Moltmann in Response to Protestant Atheism* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1987), 79-80.

⁷ Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of Jurgen Moltmann* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 74.

⁸ Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*, trans. Anthony Bower (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), 21.

⁹ Camus, 68

¹⁰ Bauckham, *Theology*, 81.

¹¹ Bauckham, *Theology*, 81-82.

¹² Stanley J. Grenz, *Reason for Hope: The Systematic Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 106.

¹³ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991-1998), 3:643.

¹⁴ Pannenberg, 3:630-631.

¹⁵ Bauckham, *Theology*, 180.

¹⁶ Jurgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God*, trans. Margret Kohl (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, San Francisco, 1981), 218.

¹⁷ All Scripture quotations from New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyrighted, 1989.

¹⁸ Pannenberg, 2:163.

¹⁹ Pannenberg, 2:170.

²⁰ Pannenberg, 2:169-172.

²¹ Pannenberg, 2:173.

²² Moltmann, *Trinity*, 47.

²³ Moltmann, *Trinity*, 49.

²⁴ Willis, 85.

²⁵ Moltmann, *Trinity*, 48-49.

²⁶ Moltmann, *Trinity*, 49.

²⁷ Moltmann, *Trinity*, 48.

²⁸ Grenz, 189-190.

²⁹ Pannenberg, 3:531.

³⁰ Pannenberg, 3:531.

³¹ Grenz, 195.

³² John David Jaeger, "Jurgen Moltmann and the Problem of Evil," *The Asbury Theological Journal* 53.2 (Fall 1998): 10.

³³ Jurgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and Implications of a Christian Eschatology*, trans. James W. Leitch (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 107.

³⁴ Bauckham, *Theology*, 9.

³⁵ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 16.

³⁶ Bauckham, *Theology*, 84.

³⁷ Bauckham, *Theology*, 33; Grenz, 192.

³⁸ Pannenberg, 3:645.

³⁹ Pannenberg, 3:645.

⁴⁰ Pannenberg, 3:637.

⁴¹ Pannenberg, 3:324; Grenz, 112-117.

⁴² Bauckham, *Theology*, 33.

⁴³ Bauckham, *Theology*, 83.

⁴⁴ Jurgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ: Christology in Messianic Dimensions*, trans. Margaret Kohl (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990), 214.

⁴⁵ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 201.

⁴⁶ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 330.

⁴⁷ Grenz, 122-123.

⁴⁸ Pannenberg, 2:169.

⁴⁹ Pannenberg, 1:416.

⁵⁰ Pannenberg, 2:169.

⁵¹ Jurgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, trans. R. A. Wilson and John Bowden (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 51.

⁵² Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 21.

⁵³ Richard Bauckham, "'Only the Suffering God can Help': Divine Passibility in Modern Theology," *Themelios* 9.3 (April 1984): 11.

⁵⁴ Moltmann, *Crucified God*, 243.

⁵⁵ Bauckham, *Theology*, 83.

⁵⁶ Moltmann, *Crucified God*, 278.

⁵⁷ Inbody, 170-172.

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