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**Engaging in Theodicy:
The Goodness of God and Human Suffering**

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Abstract

According to a BBC report of 18th July, 2014 titled “Iraqi Christians flee after Isis issue Mosul ultimatum”, for the first time in the history of Iraq, Mosul has been empty of Christians. This follows *Daesh*’s claim that they have driven the last Christian out of Mosul after declaring Islamic caliphate in Iraq. This is as a result of consistent terror attacks on Christians across the world characterized by violent beheadings and affront slaughtering and shootings and bombings amidst hostage takings, rape and unimaginable tortures and cruelties perceived to have been carried out by the Islamic jihadist group. Aside this, sickness, poverty, hunger, injustice and oppression are rampant in many parts of the world. Thus, even though the affirmation of the goodness of God is fundamental to every theistic religion, we live in an era where affirming the goodness of God seems to be asking how can we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land? In the face of rising global terrorism and extremism and natural disasters, one wonders if we have a God who cares about evil in the world. This paper argues that even though evil is real, God is dealing with the problem of evil in the world.

¹ See cwkbansah@yahoo.com. Key words: Theodicy, God, Evil, Human Welfare, Human Suffering.

Introduction

The presence of evil in the world has always posed serious theological and philosophical questions to the existence of a good, loving, merciful and an all-powerful God. This gave rise to the concept of deism, a philosophical viewpoint that God does not intervene in the affairs of the suffering world. This natural religion of deism flourished during the 17th century scientific revolution and the 18th century Enlightenment in Europe where rational thinking and reasoning drove many intellectuals of the era to aver that God had created the world and established rules of conduct for it and after setting it in motion, he left it to its own fate.

There are two major kinds of evil the world is battling with. These are moral and physical evil. According to the Didache (2:2), moral evil is “wilful” sin committed by human beings including theft, abortion, murder, sorcery, fornication and adultery. However, physical evil is harm and suffering caused through natural disasters or hazards including famine, illness, death, drought and earthquakes, which are not necessarily caused by human activity, negligently or wilfully. The paper critically examines the justification for the existence of an all-powerful, merciful, loving and good God despite the presence of evil in the world.

Definition of Theodicy

The word "theodicy" is a technical term for an attempted solution to the problem of evil. It was originally coined by the philosopher Leibniz. Etymologically, it comes from two ancient Greek words *Theos* (God) and *dike* (Justice or righteousness). Theodicy is a branch of theology that attempts to defend the existence of an omnipotent and benevolent God, given the existence of evil and suffering in the world. In a broader sense, theodicy is a theological effort to reconcile the existence of evil with the existence of a good, loving and merciful God (McKim, 1996).

According to Migliore (2004), traditionally, there are three prominent arguments underscoring theodicy within the framework of traditional doctrines of providence. The first one is the “incomprehensibility of God”. This doctrine simply states that we do not know why there is so

much evil in the world, so, in the face of human suffering, all we need to do is to be patient in trusting God for restoration (Job 38-41). This concurs with the teaching of Calvin that our knowledge of God's ways is limited and that God is unknowable (Institutes, 1.17.7). For Calvin, human beings are limited by their knowledge of God. Hence the need to accept the will of God for us. The second traditional argument with regards to the concept of theodicy is that evil is "divine punishment" or "divine chastisement" for sin. This is largely referred to as Augustinian theodicy. This position interprets suffering and adversity as evidence of divine punishment for wickedness or divine chastisement for waywardness of the people of God. In this regard, Calvin taught that evil is God's punishment for sin (Institutes 1.5.10, cf. Romans 6:23). This viewpoint however contradicts the story of the man born blind in John 9:1-3. This is because, in John's narrative, the blind man was declared guiltless by Jesus. This resonates with cases of injustice in the world that result in the suffering of innocent people. The final traditional argument underpinning theodicy is the "divine pedagogy" theory which postulates that God makes use of earthly suffering to turn us to him and to give us hope for life eternal. This argument presupposes that Christians are to view all suffering such as bereavement, diseases and other perils of life as an opportunity for spiritual growth. This position interprets human suffering as God's orchestration to wean people away from earthly or worldly things and to cause them to fix their eyes on heaven rather than on the pleasures of the present life (Calvin, quoted in Solle, 1975). If this argument is stretched further, it can be concluded that human suffering is an act of God to humble the self-exalted (Matthew 23:12).

In the light of the foregoing, Barth grants that the activity of God is sovereign and must be understood in relation to his revelation in Christ (Barth, 1936-1969). This agrees with Luther's theology of the cross which postulates God's own self-revelation in the suffering Christ hanging on the cross (Trueman, 2005). This suggests that time and again, God's redemptive activity in the world had been characterized by suffering and violence and chaos (cf. Genesis 7-10).

Nevertheless, aside the aforementioned traditional arguments underpinning the doctrine of theodicy, there are other emerging contemporary arguments on theodicy. The first among them is the

“protest theodicy” propounded by Elie Wiesel which rejects the total goodness of God in the face of much evil in the world. The second is the “process theodicy” which teaches that God’s power is essentially limited and persuasive rather than coercive. The third is the “person-making theodicy” which can also be referred to as Irenaean theodicy developed by John Hick. According to the Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, Hick argues that the possibility and experience of evil are conditions of growth towards free and mature humanity in the image of God. He further argues that “God allows evil and suffering in the world in order to develop humans into virtuous creatures capable of following his will”. The last but not the least is the “liberation theodicy” developed by American and Latin American liberation theologians including James Cone. This position states that God is at work in the world to liberate the poor and the oppressed. According to McGrath (2001), similar themes of liberation theodicy can be established in the famous writings of Martin Luther King Jr., especially in his “Death of Evil upon the Seashore”.

Marcion’s Theodicy

One of the earliest leading proponents of the concept of theodicy in church history is Marcion of Sinope (c. 85-160 AD) who argued that God had created a world full of most deplorable imperfections. He accused God of creating humans and allowing them to fall into sin and suffering. The teachings of Marcion stipulate that God frequently forgives the sins committed by people dear to his heart, although he punishes others cruelly for their sins. Marcion also taught that God intentionally created snakes, scorpions, crocodiles, creeping things, and all natural disasters including earthquake, volcano, flood, thunder storm to cause harm to innocent people. He insists that a wicked God had pointed out to humans the foundation of morality in the “Law” but wished to enforce the commandments by a system of punishment, which rests upon the idea of retaliation. In Marcionism, God’s principle was an eye for an eye, a tooth for tooth, blood for blood (Exodus 21). According to Marcion, God is an unmerciful judge who punishes the sins of the fathers on innocent children down to the fourth generation (Exodus 20:5). Marcion therefore concludes that God is a God of imperfection, cruelty and repulsiveness.

In analyzing Marcionite theodicy, one realizes that the problem of evil cannot be resolved until one admits the existence of two distinctive and separate “gods” of which one is “evil” and the other “good”. This presupposes that the evil God is the Creator God, that is to say, the one who made the visible world. This is because, this God boasts himself in being the author of evil (Isaiah 45:7). So, for Marcion, God is cruel and belligerent and that it is by God’s design that the fall of humanity took place in the Garden of Eden. He maintains that in the Mosaic Law, which is God’s enactment, God is depicted to be barbaric and fanciful (Exodus 21).

Marcion maintains that the Creator God is ignorant and not all-knowing because he was unable to foresee the evil that exists in the world. Again, for Marcion, if God was willing and wanted to prevent evil in the world but was unable to do so then it means that he is impotent and not all-powerful. In the light of this, Marcion concludes that the “Evil God” causes fear and panic in the world with evil, while the “Good God” is and shows love and mercy to people.

The Goodness of God and Human Suffering

As outlined in the abstract, human suffering seems to be increasingly on the ascendancy today and victims are still reflecting on the theology of God’s potency and willingness to deal with evil in the world. This still boils down to the philosophical and moral arguments about the existence of a merciful and an all-powerful God. However, despite the perceived deficiencies in the nature of the divinity of God, what have been said so far concerning Marcion and his understanding of evil suggests that he was working with a false conception of what God really is, and his relationship with the human person. This is precisely what theology presupposes, namely the human attempt to relate to the divine (God). It can be argued that Marcion's thought was based purely on social facts which led him to play down heavily on suffering and death as a necessary component of life.

However, are Marcion’s views different from those of Christians today? Christians generally see suffering and death as an experience that threatens their existence. In view of this, their attitude towards

God and fellow human beings with regards to the experience of evil has been narrowed down to an individualistic antagonism.

Nonetheless, Moltmann states that the Son of God experiences suffering and death out of love for the world. As such, all of the suffering of the world is encompassed in the affliction of the Son, the grief of the Father, and the comfort of the Spirit, who inspires courage and hope to pray and work for the renewal of all things. This however gives the impression that suffering is an eternal phenomenon. Yet, according to 1 Corinthians 15:55, suffering, pain and death are temporal human experience that will cease at the coming of the Kingdom of God.

One cannot deny the fact that pain and suffering and death are always present in human beings insofar as they are mortal. The point to note here is that whereas Marcion rejects evil, suffering and death as a human condition, realistic Christian hope takes the tragic aspect of human experience as a necessity for eschatology until such time that human suffering in the sense of experiencing mortality and of being vulnerable to death have been overcome. This is because, as long as death remains the last enemy to be conquered (I Corinthians 15:26), human suffering will persist irrespective of the goodness of God. This is why Paul encourages Christians that even though they are hard pressed on every side, they are not crushed; and even though they are perplexed, they must not be driven to despair (2 Corinthians 4:8).

Migliore (2004) asserts that a Christian's approach to the lordship of God in relation to the reality of suffering must be explicitly Christocentric and Trinitarian and that God is present with creatures as co-sufferers. This concurs with Bonhoeffer (1972) that only a suffering God can help suffering creatures. In analyzing both Migliore and Bonhoeffer and according to a Christian doctrine of providence, God accompanies human beings in their suffering. This reflects the biblical affirmation of the participation of divinity in human suffering and affliction even in death (Psalm 139:8, Psalm 23 and Matthew 9:36). All of this is vividly wrapped in the Apostles' Creed that Christ descended into hell for us.

In his explication, Hall (1986) argues that so long as we do not have only human-made evil such as the Holocaust and other genocides of the world but there is equally natural evil such as accidents, diseases, earthquakes, fires and floods, it means that some forms of suffering belong to the very structure of life. For him, for one to wish the world was immune to every form of struggle and suffering would mean to wish that the world was never created at all. This arguably suggests that human beings are not inherently evil. This also resonates with Tillich (1957) that the structures of evil and suffering are driving human beings into the state of despair and sorrow. As a result, he concluded that even in the state of separation, God is creatively working in us, even if his creativity takes the way of destruction. The study therefore agrees with Tillich that human beings are never cut off from God, not even in the state of condemnation, punishment or chastisement.

Conclusion

It is clear from the foregoing that it is difficult to understand the nature of God's love for the world without the existence of evil in the world. This is because, there is every tendency to ignore God when everything is rosy, especially with human beings. The changing dimension of evil in the world today with its resulting uncertainties and anxieties epitomises an inescapable feature of the role of religion in creating chaotic and undesirable situations for people in today's complex, disintegrated and multi-faceted globalised world.

One conclusion is that evil remains part of the world's order and it takes God's intervention and religious tolerance to deal with it. Understanding God's role as a liberator from evil is vital since the goodness of God is fundamental to every theistic religion. This means, for example, even if evil persists in the world, Christians are indiscriminately obliged to affirm the goodness and strength of God to deal with, and overcome evil, even, in the face of contemporary global terrorism and extremism and natural disasters.

Similarly, the paper established that the presence of evil in the world always posed great theological challenge to the argument for the existence of a good, loving, merciful and an all-powerful God.

The paper has also argued that the concept of theodicy gave rise to the concept of deism, a philosophical viewpoint that God does not intervene in the affairs of nature's violenceness. This theological explication, no matter, how convincing and persuading, with all its strength had been flawed at the onset. The fact is that irrespective of the spiritual perplexity and horror accompanying evil occurrences in the world, it is prudent for Christians to prepare themselves decorously for them because they are inevitable part of life even though, difficult to reconcile with any system of belief in a God of justice and love and mercy.

The study also argued that the presence of evil and human suffering in the world does not give a course to suggest that God is irresponsible to his creatures. It does not also suggest that God is impotent to deal with evil in the world. The article maintains that no matter how mysterious it may sound, evil and suffering are inevitable part of life; they reveal our weakness as well as fortitude and trust in God. This is because, the spirit of God is actively working in the world creating new life, new community and new hope in the midst of the present horrors and decay and hopelessness.

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