Questions, answers, stories
Speaking of God and suffering

Peter Dula

How do we speak about God, given the presence of so much suffering in the world?

Who asks that question? In what straits? And who attempts to stammer his way beyond silence and answer it? The sufferer? When? In the midst of suffering at its most acute, or later, when the wound has scabbed over? The caregiver? When? In the face of the sufferer, or after, at home, pondering the day's encounters? Or is this a question for students in a philosophical theology seminar (a place I recommend visiting, if only for a brief time)?

The most severe problem we face with regard to suffering is not "How can it coexist alongside a good God?" but "How can we bring ourselves to face it, to stop avoiding it, in ourselves and in others?"

Does the question ask too much or too little? When Plato asks, "Can the just be happy?" some readers respond, "Can anyone?" When someone asks how we speak of God in a world that includes tsunamis and Baghdad, some will say that the real question is half as long: "How do we speak about God at all?" Moreover, given a certain kind of suffering, or a certain kind of sufferer, the question gets halved again and becomes, "How do we speak?" How do we overcome muteness, give words to selves, let alone a God, we can no longer find?

Perhaps we misapprehend the problems associated with speaking of God in the midst of suffering because of a failure to properly attend to the mutual entanglement of these various questions. Sometimes it is just difficult to talk at all. And it is hard to speak *well* of God all the time. What counts as proper theological speech? Christian theology is a 2000-year-old argument about just that. That argument, bound as it is to the cross, has rarely gone on in isolation from the ques-

tion of suffering. One of its earliest episodes, the quarrel with gnosticism, may help us approach the question of how to speak about God and see how that question has been tangled up with the question of suffering since the beginning.

Answers

For almost everyone, philosophical questions emerge from suffering. But Christians have the added challenge of holding suffering alongside their belief in a good God. To make matters worse, Christians also have to hold suffering alongside their belief in a good creation. Six times in the first chapter of Genesis we are told that it was good—as if the writer, like a Bush administration strategist, thought the only way to convince us of such an implausible idea was through sheer repetition.

Gnosticism, the first great philosophical threat to the church, can be understood as the church's opportunity to be released from this dilemma. Gnostic cosmology promised to uncouple God and world: belief in the good God would no longer entail belief in a good creation. According to gnostic belief, an evil power or malevolent demigod (sometimes identified with the God of the Old Testament) is responsible for the calamity that is creation. The world is a mistake, an accident, completely external to the purposes of God. To the question, "How does one speak of God in the midst of suffering?" therefore, the gnostics had a clear and compelling answer. God is not responsible, and creation is evil all the way down. Redemption will not be redemption *of* the world but redemption *from* the world. Salvation is the soul's escape from the prison of the body and the world.

The price of this resolution was the alienation of God from world, the alienation of soul from body, the denial of Christ's full humanity, and the severing of the unity of creation and redemption. That price was too high for what came to be called orthodoxy. But gnosticism has never stopped haunting the church. When the creeds rule out gnostic formulations, they rule out a certain way of speaking about God in the midst of suffering. But that doesn't mean that the creeds provide another answer. As Anglican theologian (now Archbishop of Canterbury) Rowan Williams has repeatedly argued over the last few decades, that is part of the point: the problem with heresies—including gnosti-

cism—is not that they are wrong answers, but that they are answers. They represent failures to keep certain questions alive. In other words, Williams thinks that the church's dogmatic formulations provide "the abiding stimulus to certain kinds of theoretical questions."[1] Certain answers get us off the hook too easily.

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It is commonly supposed that Christian theology does have an answer. In Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov,* Ivan Karamazov articulates one such answer in the process of giving our question its most disturbing modern articulation. Ivan doesn't argue against the existence of God or of salvation. He firmly holds to the eschatological conviction that in the end "there will occur and be revealed something so precious that it will suffice for all hearts, to allay all indignation, to redeem all human villainy, all bloodshed; it will suffice not only to make forgiveness possible, but also to justify everything that has happened with men."[2]

Ivan's argument is not that this conviction is pie-in-the-sky nonsense. He believes it is true but that it isn't worth the cost. Any future resolution is not the worth the suffering of a single child. "They have put too high a price on harmony…. It is not that I don't accept God…. I just most respectfully return him the ticket."[3] That Christianity is a cozy fantasy that must be rejected in the name of clear-eyed realism is an old claim. That Christianity is a cozy reality that must be rejected in the name of decency is new. For Ivan, the traditional answer, like gnosticism, gets us off the hook too easily.

But what hook, exactly? Any decent philosophical theology, Rowan Williams writes, "should be worrying about seeing suffering always in its historical particularity: this, here, for this person, at this moment, with these memories."[4] In contrast, most theodicies—most attempts to reconcile the existence of evil or suffering in the world with the assumption of a benevolent God—are attempts to see suffering from a God's-eye view. "I suspect that it is more religiously imperative to be worried by evil than to put it into a satisfactory theoretical context, if only because such a worry keeps obstinately open the perspective of the sufferer."[5]

But of course, opening ourselves to the pain of the sufferer is exactly what we usually want to avoid. One reason, I think, why we might want quick answers to the problem of suffering is because of the burdens suffering—our own or that of others—places on us. But a faithfully Christian response to the problem of suffering will always direct us toward more intense engagement with suffering. A Christian response will keep in mind that the most severe problem we face with regard to suffering is not “How can it coexist alongside a good God?” but “How can we bring ourselves to face it, to stop avoiding it, in ourselves and in others?” It is a curious thing about humans that we are prone to deny what is most human about us, our connection with others, and to deny it most when it most needs to be recognized: in times of suffering.

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In such straits, we may long for Augustine’s God: “The mute sufferings of my mind reached your mercy as loud cries. You alone knew my pain, no one else; for how little of it could I express in words to my closest friends! Could their ears have caught all the tumult that raged in my soul, when even I had neither time enough nor eloquence to articulate it?”[6] Whether we live in Augustine’s world or in Rilke’s,[7] who is willing to take up the challenge to be more like Augustine’s God than like Augustine’s friends?

Stories

In this light, Ivan Karamazov looks less compelling, and Job’s comforters seem worth emulating. Notice how Ivan introduces his argument. “‘I must make an admission,’ Ivan began. ‘I could never understand how it is possible to love one’s neighbors. In my opinion, it is precisely one’s neighbors that one cannot possibly love. Perhaps if they weren’t so nigh…. If we’re to come to love a man, the man himself should stay hidden, because as soon as he shows his face—love vanishes.’”[8] For this reason, Ivan argues, beggars should solicit funds through the newspapers. The stories of suffering that compel Ivan to return his ticket are all stories of children. Children, Ivan says, because they are innocent. “I’m not talking about the suffering of grownups, they ate the apple and to

hell with them … but these little ones."[9] Yet Ivan never talks about a child he actually knows. All his stories are gathered from newspapers. I don't mean to judge Ivan harshly. Most of us feel the same way about beggars, and we find children easier to love than adults. Ivan is just honest about it.

Now notice how Job's comforters are introduced.

> *Now when Job's three friends heard of all these troubles that had come upon him, each of them set out from his home…. They met together to go and console and comfort him. When they saw him from a distance, they did not recognize him, and they raised their voices and wept aloud; they tore their robes and threw dust in the air upon their heads. They sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great. (Job 2:11–13)*

Job's comforters have a bad reputation, but it is hardly apparent why they do.[10] That they sit in silence with Job for seven days, and speak only after he speaks, is as important as the fact that in the end their response is found wanting.

We get a clue to just why Job's friends have a bad reputation, in a story from Elie Weisel, which—like Job, and unlike Job's comforters—flirts with blasphemy and is critical of those who defend God's ways. God was once put on trial in one of the concentration camps. Three rabbis, among the most learned of Eastern European sages, indicted God and conducted his trial among themselves. With great solemnity they brought out all the arguments against God.

> *I remember that after many, many days the verdict came and the verdict was "Guilty." But then the head of the tribunal simply said, "Now let's go pray." I would like to do a story on that one day … but there I will introduce a new character. I will introduce a character who defends God, the only one who takes God's side, the only one who says that God's ways are justified even there, even in Auschwitz, and I would say that that character is Satan.*[11]

Finally, some people *don't* ask these questions, or they ask in ways I don't recognize. On August 1, 2004, four Baghdad churches were car-bombed. The worst attack was at St. Peter and Paul. Two car bombs there killed ten worshipers as they were leaving after mass. Sister Maria was at a nearby church and hurried over to offer any aid she could. She says that all her life she has fainted at the sight of blood, but on that day she diligently picked through the ashes and car parts to match up scattered human limbs for proper burial.

We were hiking alongside a creek in the mountains of Kurdistan one afternoon when Sister Maria told me, "I don't know where I got the strength that day. And I don't know why I have survived, why I happened to be absent the night they killed Sister Cecille [in her bed in their Baghdad convent], or why I was at a neighboring church in August instead of at Saint Peter and Paul. I think there must be a reason, don't you?" I expected her to go on to say something pious, such as, "God must have preserved me for the work I am doing now." But when she continued, she said that all she could think was that her death would be still more horrible.

I speak to her on the phone every now and then. Once I called to let her know that a couple in Oregon wanted to make a gift of several hundred dollars to the convent. I needed the convent's Beirut bank account information in order to make a transfer. She was grateful, but she wasn't very interested. At least a dozen times in that ten-minute conversation, she said, "Please pray for me," "Pray for us," "Pray for Iraq." The question, "What kind of prayers can be heard above the roar of the American helicopters over Baghdad?" or, "If God cared at all about Iraq, wouldn't he have answered our prayers already?" were all conceivable responses. But they were not hers.

Notes

[1] Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 80.

[2] Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov,* trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Vintage, 1990), 236.

[3] Ibid., 245.

[4] Rowan Williams, "Reply: Redeeming Sorrows," in *Religion and Morality*, ed. D. Z. Phillips (London: MacMillan Press, 1996), 147.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Augustine, *The Confessions*, trans. Maria Boulding (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), XII, 7, 11 (130).
[7] I understand the opening of Rainer Maria Rilke's "The Duino Elegies"—"Who if I cried out would hear me among the angels' hierarchies?"—to be a response to *The Confessions*.
[8] Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov,* 235–37.
[9] Ibid., 242.
[10] This point is made by Stanley Hauerwas in "Salvation and Health," in *The Hauerwas Reader,* ed. John Berkman and Michael Cartwright (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 551.
[11] Wiesel went on to write a play based on this story: *The Trial of God* (New York: Schocken Books, 1979).

About the author

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