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A Biblical-Theological Response to the Problem of Theodicy in the Context of the Modern Criticism of Religion

Rolf Hille

When Eugen Gerstenmaier, former president of the German parliament, theologian, and passionate game hunter returned to Bonn, Konrad Adenauer, former German chancellor, asked him, 'Where have you been this time?' The reply: 'In Africa'. 'And what did you do there?' The answer: 'Hunted lions'. 'How many did you take down?' 'None', to which Adenauer responded: 'Well, that's quite a lot for lions.' In a similar way, one could ask me: 'What are you working on?' The answer: 'On the problem of theodicy'. 'How many answers have you found so far?' The answer: 'None'. Then, 'Well, that's a lot for theodicy.'[1]

Certain problems are apparently of such a nature that few definitive answers are expected for them, but, rather, they have the function of holding open a fundamental and irrefutable question. In these contexts, then, it is some achievement not to settle for the existing status quo of the reality, but, rather, to become more deeply aware of the problem which the self-contradiction of human life includes in itself *coram deo* (before God).

One can state what the problem is, and frame the question of justifying God, intensifying it in different ways, such as: 'How can a good and just God allow suffering in the world?', or, from a different perspective, 'Why do evil people prosper?' The critical point in each lies in the empirically obvious disparity between morality on the one hand, and the experience of fortune or misfortune on the other. The imbalance shown can, of course, also be interpreted as an anthropodicy if, in the context of relating human activity and one's resultant condition, the connec-

1 Related by Odo Marquard in Willi Oelmüller (ed.), *Theodizee-Gott vor Gericht?I* (Munich, 1990), 102 (a loose translation from the German).

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tion to God is negated. But, the problem of theodicy gets its full weight, historically as well as systematically, in pointing to those attributes which are associated with God in the Jewish-Christian tradition and which are apparently not compatible with reality as it is experienced.

The criticism of religion, then, which began in Europe with the Enlightenment era produced a wide spectrum of very different bases for atheism. For example, there was the denial of God in the name of the autonomy of reason or the empirical sciences. Then there was atheism which appealed to psychology or political-economic emancipation. Yet, no form of the denial of God has worked as effectively even until the present as the apparently insoluble conflict between God's goodness and omnipotence and the evils of the world.

Man's complaint against God's seeming failure in the world has been taken up before the forum of critical reason in philosophy and literature under the topic 'theodicy' since Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz' work, *Essays on Theodicy: On the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man, and the Origin of Evil (ET),* was published in Amsterdam in 1710. Leibniz sought to resolve the problem in terms of the creation by an omnipotent and omniscient God of the 'best of all possible worlds'.

However, in more modern times, Bernhard Gesang, in *Angeklagt Gott (God on Trial,* 1997*)*, comes to the following conclusion: 'The complaint lodged against God is proven to be baseless in the truest sense of the word, as there is every indication that the accused has been absent during our entire trial proceedings.'[2]

With this, then, the question of theodicy necessarily flows into an anthropodicy, which is taken up no less passionately and intensely and which cannot be brought to any more satisfactory an answer. Yet, because human kind is proven to be of a hopelessly religious nature, the problem of theodicy which is supposedly overcome arises again and again despite modernity's adoption of atheism. In a pointed turn on the phrase about the future of boxing champions, 'They never come back', one must say, then, in view of the question of theodicy, 'They always come back'.

I Human Existence as the 'Scream' in the Face of Evil

The theodicy problem is marked by the collision time and again of human longing for happiness with the reality of evil in the world. It is expressed in a very basic manner in the cry of man before God and against God.

The Norwegian artist Edvard Munch gave clear expression to this primeval anthropological moment in his painting, 'The Scream': a young woman is standing on a bridge on a sunny day and some pedestrians are leisurely walking around close by her. All in all, it would be a harmonic world of colours and light if it were not for this very deep cry which tears into the picture with sheer horror. The oversized disfigured face of the young woman develops into one single cry which dominates

2 Bernhard Gesang, *Angeklagt Got* (1997), 180 (a loose translation from the German).

the entire scene, the cause of which remains hidden from the observer and possibly even from the affected herself.

As perplexingly distant and undefined as the cry seems in this radical threat to the individual, it confronts us concretely as a cry which rings throughout world history. The slaves of the Egyptian pharaohs let it out, as did the peoples who were laid low by the chariots of the Assyrians. One hears this cry in the Medieval torture chambers as well as in the concentration camps of Auschwitz and from the victims of Hiroshima. In view of the cry which resounds throughout history, the present generation is simply left with the feeling of relief as if they have just barely escaped and survived.

Yet, Munch's impressively depicted cry is becoming increasingly ominous in that it prevails all over the world today. Our globally networked media society is constantly confronted with this cry in view of natural disasters, accidents, wars and expulsions. In this way, a highly problematic apathy arises towards suffering. Personal distance from the misery conveyed by the media is the only apparent escape from the massive amount of suffering. Of course, the cry then becomes unavoidable if it meets the individual in direct interpersonal communication and thereby either penetrates one's ear as the suffering of one's neighbour or as suffering affecting one personally which pierces one's own heart.

As long as the cry is articulated and not muffled because of despair or apathy, the 'why' question arises concerning the reason for evil. As soon as this cry is experienced as an existential crisis, it provokes the question of meaning in the form of the 'wherefore' question. Both ways of looking at the problem lie at the heart of the question of theodicy. In this way the forms which evil takes concretely in the world, which must be looked at and carefully distinguished philosophically, overlap one another in daily life.

Classical philosophy has defined evil in a threefold form: first as physical pain and emotional hurt, then as suffering from wickedness, that is as moral evil, and, finally, as the all-compassing event of the radical finality of all existence, that is, as metaphysical evil. In Munch's painting, it is not simply the artistic openness and the frightening undefined nature of the cry that makes one uneasy. In its deep dimension, the cry doesn't allow itself to be defined by philosophical terms, that is, 'defined or limited', here in the literal sense, and thus controlled.

II The Origin of Evil in Western Tradition

In western philosophical tradition one can find two quite different understandings of the origin of evil: the one is the Greek idealistic weakening of the power of evil by reason of metaphysical-ontological dualism. The other is the Jewish-Christian radicalizing of the morally evil in the theological contradiction between divine holiness and human sin, or, the omnipotence of God and human freedom.

Greek idealism sees the essential cause of all evil in material reality. On the basis of a theoretical system of dualism of soul and spirit, on the one hand, and body, on the other hand, Greek philosophy, influenced by Platonism, presumes that good befits the intellectual being in the actual sense,

while the material world is bad in and of itself. The soul is bound in the prison of the body and is freed only by death, that is, by the decay of the body. Materialism, then, is not only the sickness that leads to death physically, but, even more so, metaphysically, because in it and through it all the bad in life and in the world arises and becomes active.

According to Plato, and especially according to Plotinus, being is structured in a hierarchy. Therefore, the world of ideas possesses a qualitatively high degree of being, while the material world suffers from a lack of being. Evil (the bad) can thus be described as a '*privatio boni*' (a lack or deficiency of the good); it has no independent reality of its own. Evil is thus defeated morally through contempt for the physical, i.e., through asceticism and apathy, and, in some instances, through a libertinism which disregards the body.

Metaphysical evil is thereby ultimately overcome when the soul or the spirit itself influences our thinking because participation (*methexis*) in the divine makes the soul immortal as an indivisible entity of being. In terms of ideas, the philosophical approach of idealism manifests a great number of parallels to the Buddhist understanding of the world and its way of religious, psychological self-redemption.

In fundamental contradiction to this philosophical concept is the view of Jewish-Christian tradition regarding the explanation for evil, which primarily argues in a theological way. It does not see the dualism of good and evil ontologically, because the creation as a material reality, is originally and essentially good. The contrast, however, is more of a theological nature because evil exists in the form of the Satanic and the sinful in absolute opposition to the holy and just God. The roots of evil lie thus in the 'moral'; physical and metaphysical evil grows, then, out of the morally evil.

In order to understand the mystery of evil, personal and not ontological categories are therefore needed. What is the relationship of anthropological freedom to the sin of human kind? And how should one relate theologically the omnipotence and providence of God to the self-responsibility of man? Evil is understood as the proud rebellion of the creature against his Creator. Because of human sinful rebellion God has put not only people, but also the entire natural order under a state of curse and decay. Creation, which was very good, has become the fallen world (Gen 3).

Overcoming evil and therefore, the plan of salvation, must then also begin with overcoming sin in order to bring God and human kind into renewed personal fellowship. Salvation can come neither from the intellectual or moral capacity of people because they are totally corrupted by sin. Salvation is, rather, an external act of the grace of God which has come to human kind through Christ.

This is the reason why the problem of theodicy in Christian theology is not the question of the acquittal of God before the tribunal of human reason. Instead, according to basic biblical teaching, it is the theological problem of the justification of the sinner *coram deo* (before God).

III Theodicy in the Course of a Syllogistic Process and Philosophical Speculation

Philosophically, the problem of theodicy first becomes a pressing issue when the idea of a personal God who, by definition, embodies absolute good, must be communicated rationally in the context of evil in the world in which we exist. The first precise statement of the problem of theodicy is found in the writings of Epicureus, who presents specific premises and conclusions in syllogistic variants.

> God either wants to do away with evil and cannot, or, he can and does not want to, or he cannot and does not want to, or he can and wants to do so. So, if he wants to and cannot, he is then weak, which is not true of God. If he can and does not want to, then he is mean, which is also alien to God. If he does not want to and cannot, then he is weak as well as mean and is therefore not God. Yet, if he wants to and can, which alone is fitting for God, where then, does evil come from; why does he not take it away?[3]

The existential cry of the sufferer has developed into the logical problem of the philosophy of religion.

With the 18th century European Enlightenment, the conflict over the righteousness of God sharpened through the complete emancipation of philosophy from theology, or, reason's becoming autonomous from revelation's claim to authority. It is not surprising that, with the changes brought about by the Enlightenment, the topic of theodicy gained increasingly explosive force in the context of the criticism of religions. If, for western Christendom, the question of the justification of man before God had become the central challenge at the latest by the Reformation, so the tables of the court proceedings are now turned so that God is being charged before the judgment seat of reason.

At first, though, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz approaches the topic in his work on theodicy from the viewpoint of the 'pious Enlightenment' prevalent in Germany. That is, Leibniz, on the rational basis of the critical case against God, tries to decide in God's favour. Leibniz' understanding of theodicy is based on the conviction that two true statements cannot contradict one another. Scientific knowledge and philosophical insights are compatible with the revelatory truths of Christianity. Therefore God's foreknowledge could be reconciled with the spontaneous, yet not arbitrary freedom of man, and the fact of the creation of the world with the ills of the world. For this our world would not exist as the best of all possible worlds if God had not created any world at all. God intended the good and only permitted evil.

The fact is worth mentioning that, in view of the further discussion of the problem in the 18th and 19th centuries which used Leibniz as a starting point, the problem of theodicy is even treated by Leibniz himself from two contrasting positional perspectives: first of all, as criticism of the traditional theistic question: '*Etsi deus est, unde malum*?' (If God exists, where does evil come from?), and then also as atheism's query: '*Etsi deus non est, unde bonum*?

3 Epicureus, *Overcoming Fear*, (quoted and translated freely from the German translation, Zurich, 1949, 80)

(If God does not exist, where does the good come from?)' The last-mentioned aspect, which, however, is very essential to the matter at hand, was largely replaced in later philosophical discussion by the momentum of the critical approach to religion.

While Voltaire only satirically ridiculed the line of argument posited by Leibniz, Immanuel Kant took Leibniz' position seriously in his work 'Concerning the Failure of All Philosophical Attempts to Solve the Theodicy Problem' (*Über das Mißlingen aller philosophischen Versuche in der Theodizee'*). However, he came to the conclusion:

> The outcome of this legal case before the court of reason is the following: That all previous attempts at solving the theodicy problem do not achieve what they promise, namely, to justify moral wisdom in the world government against the doubts which can be made against it from that which experience in this world lets one know.[4]

In his '*A Critical Exposition of the Philosophy of Leibniz'*, Bertrand Russell points out importantly that, in his attempt at the theodicy question, Leibniz had fallen into a self-contradiction between his own logic, on the one hand, and his metaphysical presuppositions, on the other hand.[5]

The Hegelian system presents a final solution to theodicy which has been highly effective and positive in the history of philosophy. In the dialectic self-development of the absolute spirit, God, as the dynamic principle of all reality in a universal synthesis, is the eschatological completion of the immanent process of history. Therefore, the necessary evils at work in the process of history are justified in view of the goal of the apotheosis of the world. Yet, the leftist Hegelians, Ludwig Feuerbach and Karl Marx have already negated the theodicy of the great idealist in their efforts to 'turn (Hegel) upside down from head to toe', and replaced it by a radical atheistic criticism of religion.

IV The Heightening and Intensification of the Theodicy Problem in Modern Literature

The course which the theodicy question has taken in the history of western philosophy and literature, however, makes one thing quite clear: the topic gains its relevance and power not so much from rational discourse but rather from the very acute experience of suffering. In view of its contingence, it provokes again and again (in increasingly intensified form in the bold advancement of modern history) the question of the why and wherefore of evil.

Because a satisfactory answer, coherent in itself, to the case of the justice of God is not recognizable in view of the rational insoluble questions of philosophy and theology (*aporia*), the literary and artistic portrayal of the problem has gained in power, intensity, and influence. Yet, in 1713, Leibniz was still able to respond to Duke Anton Ulrich in boundless optimism: 'Nobody can imitate our Lord better than a writer of beautiful novels.' God is the

4 Translated freely from the German edition of Kant's Works, (*Immanuel Kant*, Werke, ed. By W. Weischedel, Darmstadt, 1983, vol. 9, A 210'.

5 Bertrand Russell, *A Critical Exposition of the Philosophy of Leibniz* (London, 1900).

brilliant writer and world history is his literary work.

The contingency of world events arises from an artistic spirit which the human reader can understand only in part at first, yet, who, according to his brilliant idea, is necessarily beautiful. That the world story, instead of being beautiful, could also become a horror story, is clear in the change during the Modern Age from Enlightenment optimism, especially in view of the catastrophes of the 20th century. The experiences of suffering of the modern world with its technologically-based wars of annihilation, mass escapes, and expulsions as well as the mass liquidation of ideological opponents have allowed the purely intellectual quest for a philosophically-based theodicy to become a bloodless abstract idea.

Instead, a literary solution to the problem in the form of tragedy has increasingly been brought into the foreground. Examples of the intensification of the problem of theodicy in literature can be given by referring to a few titles which have contributed much to the understanding of human suffering, based on their excellent ability to leave a lasting impression: F.M. Dostoyevsky's '*The Brothers Karamasov'* with the key statement that the tears of a single innocent child are enough to 'shake the universe'.[6] Georg Büchner's question in '*Danton's Death'* has become a classic: 'Why do I suffer? This is the rock of atheism.'[7] In the post-war period, Wolfgang Borchert's play, 'Standing Outside the Door'[8] became extremely effective as an atheistic charge levelled at the 'storybook loving God' of theology. Finally, Albert Camus' novel, '*The Pest'*[9], should be listed in this very brief catalogue as a prime example in which Dr. Rieux battles against becoming accustomed to suffering and despair because of suffering. The theological drama sparked by the outbreak of a pestilence is fought out in the dialogues between Dr. Rieux and Father Paneloux.

In fact, the literary form of the problem in poetry and prose texts not only makes it clear that the problem of theodicy has continually intensified in the Modern Age, but also that the sensitivity of contemporary man to suffering has grown. Odo Marquard talks about a 'princess on the pea' syndrome in this context; i.e., in spite of a real reduction of suffering through modern medicine and technology, the remaining 'rest' of suffering is experienced as even more difficult and more painful.

With the ideals of the French Revolution of 1789, which were put into practice for the first time in the New World, i.e., in the United States of America, people began to understand themselves no more primarily in terms of their duties and obligations, but in terms of their rights. And so the 'pursuit of happiness' is declared and demanded as a self-evident human right in the American Declaration of Independence.

6 F.M. Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamasov*, translated freely here from the German translation, Munich, 8. edit., 1987, 330.

7 Georg Büchner, *Dantons Tod, Werke und Briefe* (München 7 Ed., 1973), (a free translation from this work), 40.

8 Wolfgang Borchert, 'Draußen vor der Tür' (Reinbeck 30. Ed., 1967) (also loosely translated).

9 Albert Camus, *The Pest* (Hamburg 1995), a loose translation from the German translation.

V A Biblical-Theological Discussion of the Problem of Theodicy

Corresponding to the philosophical and literary attempts to solve the problem of theodicy, there is an effort in theology which is every bit as intensive and comprehensive. Some of the basic elements of biblical theology will be presented in what follows, after which the exegetical findings can be helpfully applied to the discussion of theodicy within the context of various approaches to solving this issue.

1. Creation

According to biblical understanding, the condition of the relationship of humankind to God is mirrored in the physical reality of the world. The reality of original fellowship with God, as was given in the protological condition of humankind, corresponds to the paradisiacal condition of the world. With the fall of the human race, not only the inner condition of people was changed, but sin also effected a curse-laden upheaval in the entire condition of the cosmos. The world becomes a place of trouble, pain, and death. Out of moral evil grows the physical and the metaphysical evil as well. Ethics and *physis* (nature) stand in a fundamental relationship of correspondence. With the fact of the Fall, the announcement of punishment by the Creator: '…but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die' (Gen 2:17) becomes a world-defining reality, which Paul later sums up in the statement: 'For the wages of sin is death ….' (Rom 6:23).

Every theologically meaningful discussion of the problem of theodicy must start from this context. Therefore, the simple philosophical syllogisms which conclude with atheism as a logically proven fact from the failure of theodicy are too short-sighted. At first glance, the argument of philosophical logic seems to be compelling: God is good, but the world is bad. Therefore, God cannot be omnipotent, etc. God is omnipotent, yet the world is bad. Therefore, God cannot be good.

In the tradition of Jewish-Christian theism, the attributes 'good and omnipotent' are indispensable for the doctrine of God. Because, in the context of philosophical reason, they apparently cannot be brought into harmony with the falleness of the world, God's nonexistence is concluded. However, the flaw in the reasoning of this philosophical process lies not in the formal completion of syllogisms, but in the theologically inadequate premises. Goodness and omnipotence are indeed indispensable characteristics of God, yet, the problem of theodicy deals more essentially with the attributes of God's holiness, his wrath upon sin, and thus, his judgment of the world. From a Christian standpoint, the theodicy question can start only from the problem of the so-called moral evil. As soon as one takes physical or metaphysical evil as the starting point, one ends up only with the inner logic of an *aporia* or atheism. The facts presented here do not in any way mean a simple theological solution to the problem, but simply a change of the circumstances before which the entire complex of the topic stands.

2. Torah and covenant

At the beginning of Israel's history, the revelation of the Law stands centrally with the formation of the people through the Exodus as well as the wilderness wandering and the possession of the land. The Torah as good instruction is, at first, a gift, then a task:

> Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers (Psalm 1:1-3).

Life is successful when the people hold to the covenant of the Law. Blessing and curse are decided by faithful obedience:

> See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse—blessing if you obey the commands of the LORD your God that I am giving you today; the curse if you disobey the commands of the LORD your God and turn from the way that I command you today by following other gods, which you have not known '(Deut 11:26-28).

Even the promise of land in the future is shaped in terms of the splendours of the Garden of Eden. Israel is to be a place and a fellowship of blessing in the midst of the peoples. An essential characteristic of the covenant is the unbroken connection of Israel's personal fellowship with her God and the fullness of life and joy which grows out of it. The inner holiness of this relationship to God is mirrored in the successful life and external happiness. The wisdom of the heart opens up a wide horizon of well-being for the people:

> For the LORD gives wisdom, and from his mouth come knowledge and understanding. He holds victory in store for the upright, he is a shield to those whose walk is blameless, for he guards the course of the just and protects the way of his faithful ones. Then you will understand what is right and just and fair—every good path (Prov 2:6-9).

Israel is tempted when this certainty and wisdom for life which is centred on the Torah falls apart. Job, the righteous man of God, suffers unimaginable misery and therefore his friends call in question his integrity and faith. Does some deep sin lie concealed beneath his apparent piety? Asaph asks a similar question in Psalm 73. Why do the ungodly prosper?

> For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong. They are free from the burdens common to man; they are not plagued by human ills. Therefore pride is their necklace; they clothe themselves with violence… . This is what the wicked are like—always carefree, they increase in wealth. Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure; in vain have I washed my hands in innocence. All day long I have been plagued; I have been punished every morning (Psalm 73:3-6; 12-14).

The absurdity of the world's situations seems to lead to faith in God's justice and faithfulness. Just how deeply Israel is shaken by this irrita-

tion of the connection between conduct and welfare even into the time of the New Testament is made clear by the portrayal of the catastrophic events reported on in Luke 13:1-5:

> Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. Jesus answered, 'Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish (Luke 13:1-5).

Noteworthy here is the sceptical inquiry about the guilt of the victims. Even today, the charge against those responsible remains indisputably necessary. Who is the architect responsible, whose tower collapsed and caused such a terrible accident? Doubtless Pilate, who had praying pilgrims cut down is a corrupt powerful politician who really ought to be tried for war crimes. This way of dealing with guilt needs no special justification. But, even among the victims, who first appear innocent prey to an accident, it must be asked, by reason of the inner logic of the connection between conduct and welfare, why these particularly were affected by disaster and death. Moreover, in characteristic fashion, the question of guilt (sin) is raised even there in an inquisitorial sense where the individual quite obviously is incapable of any sin (guilt). This aspect is talked about in detail in the meeting between Jesus and the man born blind:

> As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned', said Jesus, 'but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life' (John 9:1-3).

It is clear from these biblical passages that Israel understood there to be an unswervingly valid correlation between piety and happiness in life on the one hand, and sin and destruction on the other hand. If this divinely ordered framework was disturbed, these kinds of events not only provoked the question of the guilt of the evil doers, but also of the victims. If the victim was incapable of guilt, then one looked for the deed which brought the curse among the parents or other relatives.

If the connection between sin and suffering could not be made clear and evident, then the form of the problem of theodicy typified in Job developed into the familiar form seen in the Old Testament. One held fast in faith and obedience to the God who was faithful to the covenant ('*emunah,* faithfulness). Therein lay, though, the temptation and, on the contrary, also the way to overcome it.

3. Justice and suffering

The insoluble problem for Old Testament faith lies in the question of divine justice in view of the suffering of the righteous and the good fortune of the ungodly. Jesus takes here a fundamentally different position, when he says: 'I tell you, no! But unless you repent,

you too will all perish' (Luke 13:5). Beside this intensification of the problem of guilt is the other side of the same coin in the answer to the problem of the man born blind, namely, the assuring promise: '"Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life."' (John 9:3).

Paul brings Jesus' completely revolutionary way of looking at it into the context of a strict systematic form of argument. With very legal precision, the apostle makes clear in the first three chapters of Romans that Jews and Gentiles have both fallen short of God's righteousness. Therefore, every human being, without exception, stands under the curse of the Law and has been given over to the wrath of God's judgment which brings death.

> This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God … (Romans 3:22-23).

Even very high moral achievements are not able to break through this connection between guilt and ultimate welfare. The classic starting point for the Old Testament question of theodicy is placed into a completely new light by the absolute radicalization of sin in the New Testament. For as the Romans passage makes clear, there is no one who suffers because they are innocent. All the good fortune of the ungodly turns out to be a terrible deception in view of coming eternal damnation. The only thing meaningful for time and eternity is salvation in Christ which is offered to the sinner as a free gift of grace through the preaching of the gospel. From this perspective, the demand of theodicy, i.e., the acquittal of God before the tribunal of man, is a manifestation in itself of the total godlessness of the sinner. For the sinner cannot claim any special rights before God, but, rather, is totally dependent on God's pardon and justification. The New Testament's call to repentance is ultimately about turning away from theodicy to the justification of the sinner *coram deo* (before God).

4. The right to happiness

The modern demand for theodicy implies yet another aspect, which is worthy of discussion in the context of the radicalization and universalization of sin. The attempt undertaken by theodicy to justify (or acquit) God *coram homine* (before man) contains, namely, the conviction, among others, that man would like and is willing to accept the rule of God over his life if God were proven to be good and omnipotent in allowing life to go well for man. According to this, then, the happy and fortune person would be the believer who would not be tempted by atheism. Good fortune in life on this earth is, according to this understanding, the precondition for faith.

Yet, this hypothesis, which is so often held, especially in the Modern Age, is already flawed by the fact that people who are outwardly happy and societies that are wealthy are in no way more open for faith than those who have to struggle with the miseries of the world and terrible situations in life. However, this fact does not only agree with general observation of the world, it is also firmly anchored in the basic

framework of the Bible regarding the history of salvation.

The requirement of happiness as a precondition of a spontaneously positive experience of God was already given protologically in the Garden of Eden as the starting point for humanity. Any supposed case for theodicy in the prefall state is erroneous and unfounded. Yet, even under the conditions of the paradisiacal bliss, the creature is seen as receptive towards the tempter and rebellious against his creator.

A corresponding mirror image of this is true for the eschatological announcement of the millennium. The Revelation to John depicts a situation in which the conditions and effects of the Fall are limited, and the Law of Christ is valid for humanity. The basis for the problem of theodicy is thus eliminated. Yet, even this ideal establishment of the world, including knowledge of all the negative historical experience of preceding human history without God, is not able to immunize man against renewed Satanic temptations, but, instead, leads to new suffering on the way to a new Fall.

> And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain. He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. He threw him into the Abyss, and locked and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations anymore until the thousand years were ended. After that, he must be set free for a short time… . When the thousand years are over, Satan will be released from his prison and will go out to deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth—Gog and Magog—to gather them for battle. In number they are like the sand on the seashore (Rev 20:1-3; 7-8).

Overcoming disaster, and thereby coping with the problem of theodicy, cannot therefore begin with humankind's right to happiness. All measures to deal with external harm and the hindrances to human existence, even through special divine miraculous deeds, can have only temporary significance over against the fundamental restoration of the relationship to God. The portrayal of the healing of the paralytic in Mark 2:1-12 is instructive in connection with this.

The expectations of the sick man as well as those of his four friends and all present are directed in anxious excitement towards the miracle worker from Nazareth. Yet, instead of speaking the healing words: 'I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home', Jesus says to him: 'Son, your sins are forgiven' (v 5). Jesus' priorities are quite obviously different from the horizon of expectations of his hearers.

First, the basic cause of sin must be removed, and only then does the healing of physical handicap make any sense. The reversal of the theodicy question is likewise emphasized in this Gospel story in the question of the justification before God by the forgiveness of sins. The solution of the 'question of guilt' is clearly placed before the 'question of power', as Karl Heim briefly explained in his theological work, 'Jesus, Culminator of the World'.[10]

10 Karl Heim, *Jesus der Weltvollender* (Hamburg, 3. Ed., 1952), 35-52 (a loose translation from the German).

5. Sovereignty of God

If one considers that, according to the biblical understanding, *hybris* (pride) is the fatal root of sin, then the demand for theodicy moves biblical understanding once again into a completely different light, in view of the sovereignty of God. Only the creator is absolute in his will; the creature, even with his gift of reason, remains completely dependent on and in relation to him. People cannot claim any 'rights by nature' for happiness from the creator, but, rather, are invited to entrust themselves to God's goodness and thus to respect God's lordship and affirm it in trust.

Despite the anthropological privilege of being created in the image of God, the infinite difference between the creator and the creature is firmly held to throughout all the Bible. Theodicy as a legal entitlement against God is *superbia* (arrogance) and is thereby the sin of *katexochen* (willfulness, the very nature and origin of sin). It is no surprise, then, that the conflict of Eve with the serpent bears all the basic marks of an attempted theodicy. Still, on the other hand, the exalted self-revelation of God to Job, sorely confronted by the theodicy question, is not given simply as an argumentative self-justification by God, that is, as a theodicy made good on by God, but, rather, as the sovereign claim to rule made by the autonomous Creator.

> Then the LORD answered Job out of the storm. He said: 'Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge? Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me. Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Tell me, if you understand (Job 38:1-4).

At the end of the dialogue is not the theodicy of God, but Job's confession of sin and his humbling before God.

> Then Job replied to the LORD: 'I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted. You asked, 'Who is this that obscures my counsel without knowledge?' Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know. 'You said, 'Listen now, and I will speak; I will question you, and you shall answer me.' My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes (Job 42:1-6).

The historical-theological basis for God's autonomous freedom, which finds its expression in the free selective action of God, stands in a direct analogy to that based on the theology of creation. The history of Israel is the permanent model and theological paradigm for this fact, which Paul briefly develops in Romans 9-11:

> What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all! For he says to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion (Rom 9:14f.).

Although Israel's path is marked by divine punishments and visitations and they cried for theodicy long before Auschwitz, the apostle emphasizes with Isaiah 1:9: 'It is just as Isaiah said previously: "Unless the Lord Almighty had left us descendants, we would have become like Sodom, we would have been like Gomorrah."' (Rom 9:29). Even for Israel as a whole repentance, not theodicy, is what is required. The-

odicy will take place first at the end of all of Israel's ways in history in the sense of an eschatological doxology, in same way as a *donum super additum* (a gift beyond what might expect). 'Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!' (Rom 11:33).

Theodicy, understood biblically, is shown as an act of grace of God's sovereign lordship of history, which is never charged for, but is granted as a gift. This eschatological perspective of divine grace is thus now valid beyond Israel for all of world history in as much as this allows itself to be brought into the covenant of God as the history of salvation for all peoples.

> Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.' (Rev 21:1-4).

In view of this hope, the longing for theodicy becomes the motivating factor for the question: 'How much longer?'. This moving power can be seen in Job and also among the martyrs depicted in Revelation. In this sense, the question of theodicy, as an antidote to unrest in the light of the eschatological expectancy ('not yet'), gains a positive and legitimate task. By reason of the salvation which has occurred and the forgiveness of sins which has been received, faith waits for the culmination of salvation.

Put in philosophical terms, after moral evil has been overcome by God's free sovereign act, the definitive ending of physical and metaphysical evil must also begin by virtue of the promise. Yet, this eschatological resolution of theodicy is not defined by man, but, rather, freely granted by God. The lasting and rationally untraceable sovereignty of God is shown in this connection, indeed, in view of the twofold judgment of the world.

VI Practical Theological Perspectives with the Framework of Christology

The dogmatic treatment of the theodicy question shown with the words of Scripture is foundational for the apologetic and doctrinal discussion, yet, it needs deepening with a practical-theological approach. The person who is suffering, even though a believer to whom redemption has been granted, is still tempted and therefore should receive reassurance in a special way. So in conclusion, there are still some essential spiritual aspects to this distasteful topic.

1. The fellowship of suffering

First of all, the Bible takes up the cry of the person who is suffering and takes it seriously. While it rejects the cool distant discourse of a purely intellectual case against God by pointing

to God's sovereignty and human sin, it still opens up a wide open space to the person who is pleading his case before God. Temptation is not brushed aside, complaint is not prohibited, doubt is not suppressed. Believers are, instead, invited to pour out their hearts before God. It is in this speechlessness of suffering that Job, the Psalms, the Fathers , and the prophets are able to grant one necessary speech. The confession and insight of Asaph in Psalm 73:16f is especially worthy of our attention in this regard: 'When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny.'

There are two aspects which Asaph believes have helped him to find solid ground again in view of the depths of the questions of theodicy: besides the fact that Asaph is an excellent example of an honest complaint before God, he first points to the congregation assembled for worship. The fellowship of believers and persons praying gives the one in doubt strength and support. For the *homo incurvatus in se ipsum* (man bent over inwardly into himself) is not simply a theoretical construct of theological anthropology, but, rather, it has to do with the very relevant counselling situation and the danger in which a person who is tempted by doubt is found. It is because of this very crisis of faith and the unsolved question of life that this person is in danger of isolation and of falling out of the supportive fellowship of the people of God. Asaph's experience of faith stands against this as an invitation to celebrate the worship of God and to experience the presence of God in the assembly (church), even in spite of the seeming good fortune of the ungodly.

The other help that Asaph has received is the eschatological perspective which fundamentally relativizes the good fortune or misfortune in this world: ' … and he saw their end.' Ultimately, the problem of theodicy with its apparent irregularities is not solved in a terms of current behaviour and well-being. It is only the view of the end, that is, of the eschatological fate, which reveals the evidence of God's justice.

The relativisation of all earthly situations and the orientation on the eschatological goal of life gives one the consolation of overcoming suffering and holding onto hope, as Paul writes in Romans 8:18: 'I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.' The reason for such hope, as far as Christians are concerned, has to do with the fact of salvation history that the new Creation, beyond the evil of this world, has already begun with the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and has already been set in motion.

2. The distinctive perspective

With the opening of the christological horizon, we have touched on the distinctive perspective of Christian theology which is of central importance for the response to the question of theodicy, and which connects the systematic-theological aspect and the practical-theological approach together.

Ancient Greek teaching about God started from the apathy of the blessed gods towards all human conditions. Islam means submission to the destiny placed on one by Allah, i.e., the kismet. Hinduism and Buddhism seek

to overcome the thirst for life in order then to be able to enter Nirvana. An individual's right to personal welfare is negated in this. Therefore, Buddhism has neither the prerequisite nor the serious occasion for the theodicy question in its intensity or the struggle that goes with it.

In a unique way, God's personal assurance as a declaration of love for his people and as the promise of reliable faithfulness to his covenant is found in the Old Testament. The longing for theodicy in a specific sense first emerges through the good fortune of the ungodly and the suffering of the righteous. Within an anthropological framework, the New Testament not only points to the radicalness and universality of sin, it even emphasizes first and foremost the solidarity of the triune God with sinful, suffering man in the context of the doctrine of God.

In order to understand this, one has to take a careful look at the whole biblical context. The ominous thundering threat of the problem of theodicy is not more sinister in any place in Old Testament history than in God's command to the patriarch of faith, namely, to Abraham: 'Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about."' (Gen 22:2). Here the word of God's promise is pitted against the command of God to sacrifice Isaac, done as a rationally insoluble mystery which is as unfathomable as the problem of theodicy.

In the end, God himself solves the conflict with the promise:

> and [he] said, 'I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me.' (Gen. 22:16f.).

This sparing of one's only beloved son is taken up by Paul in his theological summary of salvation in Christ: 'He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?' (Rom 8:32). God remains as sovereign Creator and Lord of history not apathetic to the world and to man. He is also not simply a transcendent power of destiny to whom one must submit. He is also not an impersonal sphere of all being in the sense of pantheism, in which the individual, forgetting joy and suffering, is lost to himself, but, rather, he is the loving Father who offers himself in the Son.

3. *Crux probat omnia*

God in Christ is a sympathetic God who suffers along with us. He bears our pains, suffers our sickness, and dies our death. In Christ, the theodicy question arises between the Father and the Son as the inner tension within the Trinity: 'And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani*?"—which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"' (Mk 15:34). In the resurrection of the righteous one who dies in place of the sinner and who makes the ungodly righteous, the theodicy

between the Father and Son is finally then completed.

God in Christ is, in terms of dogma and in terms of counselling, the only possible answer to theodicy. *Crux probat omnia* (the cross proves everything). In it, the Christian, as a disciple of Jesus, has participation in his cross and lives from the power of his resurrection. Christian faith stands against the temptation and doubt active in this world with the prayer and certainty of Paul Gerhardt, who penned this hymn, 'O Sacred Head, Now Wounded':

> Lord, be my consolation; my shield
> when I must die;
> Remind me of thy passion when my
> last hour draws nigh.
> These eyes, new faith receiving,
> from thee shall never move;
> For he who dies believing, dies
> safely in thy love.'