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Building the bridge from academic theology to Christian mission

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Bi-polar theology

Ideally, Christian theology will always be striving in a balanced way to integrate the two poles of its ellipse, God's revelation and the world of human existence. We will be attempting to correlate, as Tillich said, the truth of the Word with the questions people are asking today.¹ We want to view everything around us in the perspective provided by the gospel. Theology is truly exciting and has a real cutting edge when it is effecting a transformation of contemporary reality. Revelation can only do people any positive good if it is understood, and to be understood it must be phrased in intelligible terms. Standing between, as we do, the world of the biblical text and the world of today, we have to build bridges across the divide for the sake of reaching today's generation for Christ.²

In all forms of classical Christianity it would go without saying that this work of translation whereby the gospel is rendered into modern speech and categories would be done in a posture of complete faithfulness to the Word of God. We would be trying to clarify the truth of the Bible without changing its meaning in the slightest way. The fourth mark of the church in the Nicene creed, apostolicity, signifies the commitment to the cognitive substance of apostolic teaching enshrined in the New Testament.³ It was always just assumed that the revelation pole of the theological ellipse yields valid truth and information about God's person and will for us to which we ought to be submissive. In this context then the main challenge would be hermeneutical: how can we convey the truth given in the biblical culture to people living in the modern situation? There would be absolutely no thought of demythologising the message to make it more acceptable. It would be a matter of clarifying normative truth to assist with understanding. Theology was conservative with respect to the Word pole, and contemporary only with respect to the modern setting and the problems of communication.

¹Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology I* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), pp. 59-66. In fairness to the reader one must point out that Tillich's own practice fell far short of his stated method of correlation. His theology lacks biblical substance.

²John R. W. Stott describes preaching in terms of bridging between two worlds. The title of his book in North America reveals that. *Between Two Worlds, The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982). In Britain the book was entitled *I Believe in Preaching* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1982).

³On the apostolicity of the church, see Hans Küng, *The Church* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1967), pp. 344-59.

The sword and the trowel

But all of this has radically changed in our day. No longer can we take the revelation pole for granted when building our bridges. Like Timothy, we live in an age when we have to guard the gospel because false teachers are out to change it (2 Tim. 1:14; 2:2; 3:9; 4:3-4). One has to guard the substance of the truth at the same time as trying to make good the communication. It reminds me of Nehemiah and his colleagues who had to hold a sword in one hand while building with the other because of the danger of attack from their enemies. Needless to say, these circumstances make it harder to get on with the building.

I have reference of course to what we call religious liberalism, which is more dedicated to transforming than to translating the Christian message. If one surveys the history of dogmatic theology, one cannot fail to notice that a major shift took place with Kant and Schleiermacher which dropped out the objective truth content of the gospel and substituted for it some form of human reason or experience.⁴ Biblical doctrine was no longer regarded as infallible or even essential to Christianity. Apostolic teaching was shoved aside as the touchstone of catholic continuity and replaced by a vague continuity of spirit or life stance. Of course doctrine was not dropped altogether, but it was seen to be the expression of man's self-understanding and not revealed truth. What was now taken to be crucial was human experience or perhaps philosophical reasoning. No longer was revelation seen to involve authoritative content; instead it was taken to be an experience which throws up different intellectual and moral patterns which are themselves human in origin and authority.⁵

The result has been a great transformation of classical theology. Think of Bultmann or Tillich or Robinson. And with the transformation of course there has also occurred a great assimilation of the church into secular modernity. It has reached the point where it is hard to distinguish what some theologians are saying from what the humanists declare.⁶

⁴Otto Weber includes a history of dogmatics in his own book *Foundations of Dogmatics I* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), pp. 73-166.

⁵On the nature of religious liberalism, see Alasdair I. C. Heron, *A Century of Protestant Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980), ch. 1, and Jan Walgrave, *Unfolding Revelation, The Nature of Doctrinal Development* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972), ch. 9.

⁶For a candid self-description see Peter C. Hodgson and Robert H. King (eds.), *Christian Theology, An Introduction to its Traditions and Tasks* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982). James Hitchcock delivers a devastating critique in *What is Secular Humanism?* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Servant Books, 1982), ch. 8.

The effect of this tragic development upon theological bridge building has been disastrous. First, it has meant that classical Christians (evangelicals as well as others) have been forced to put a lot of time and effort into defending the revelation pole. While absolutely necessary, this delayed more constructive activity. Second, because of the atrocities which have been done in the name of updating the gospel by the liberals, classical Christians have become nervous about the whole operation. It has forced us into a defensive and suspicious posture because we want no part in gospel twisting.

In defence of the faith

It would be nice if the liberals would listen to Stott's impatient question, 'Why can we not be biblical as well as contemporary?'⁷ But we must not be naive about the situation; for what we face is, in many cases at least, a determined decision not to submit to biblical teaching as an essential element in theology and a stubborn insistence to follow human wisdom instead. What we have to do therefore is to make a strong stand and argue that true Christianity is a religion wedded to biblical substance and not malleable and formless. How then can we support such a conviction?

In supporting our belief in the indispensability of biblical content in a truly Christian theology, it is not necessary to exaggerate the point. Revelation surely involves more than propositional truth. The acts of God, a way of life, and existential involvement are all important. But it is impossible to deny that doctrine is part of divine revelation according to the New Testament. It belongs to what is permanent and normative in it. One could list a large number of texts which bring this out. Christians are repeatedly told to stand firm in their faith, to maintain the gospel, to guard the truth, to pay close attention to what they were taught, and to contend for the faith once delivered (Col. 1:23; 2 Thes. 2:15; 2 Tim. 1:14; Heb. 2:1; Jude 3). To be a Christian involves obedience to the standard of apostolic teaching (Rom. 6:17). The church leader is told 'to hold firm to the sure word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also confute those who contradict it' (Tit. 1:9). In the same way the preacher according to the New Testament is a herald with a message to deliver, a sower with a Word to scatter, an ambassador with a cause to plead, a steward entrusted with God's mysteries, and a workman charged with rightly dividing the Word of truth. They have been given a message and have the responsibility to convey it. Of course they must take into account the situation of the audience, but above all else they must preach the truth of God, not their own opinions.⁸

Thus when the early theologians sought to unpack the dogmatic significance of the New Testament message in the face of new questions and challenges which arose, they were not distorting the gospel as Harnack charged but following the lines indicated in the original revelation

⁷Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, p. 144.

⁸Thomas C. Oden, *Pastoral Theology, Essentials of Ministry* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983), ch. 9. J. R. W. Stott, *The Preacher's Portrait* (London: Tyndale Press, 1961).

and message. It is perfectly clear that making a good and true confession of faith ranks alongside other criteria of true Christianity in the New Testament.⁹ Doctrine is the grammar and syntax of the message. It summons us back from our own speculations to the bony structures of God's truth. It points us to the essential content of the gospel which it is theology's task to state coherently. Theology really is translation – charged with rendering the God-given content of the Word into modern languages and thought patterns. People such as Bultmann and Tillich really have no basis for speaking of their work in these terms as they do since they have no intention of rendering biblical content.¹⁰

Building bridges

But the other side of the coin is crucially important too. It is essential that we relate God's infallible Word to the ever-changing human situation. We seek relevance as well as truth in evangelical theology. Just as the Lord spoke to us in the modalities of human speech and in his incarnation took our flesh upon himself, so we are summoned to communicate the Word of God in a manner which is intelligible and challenging to our hearers. What God has given in the gospel can always be freshly understood and applied. His Word can never be exhausted and proves able to be related effectively to every new circumstance. The commandment may be old, as John said, but ever new (1 Jn. 2:7-8). Let me offer a few suggestions to help us all ground the Word in the world.

First, we must needs be prayerful and conscious of our dependence upon the Spirit of God. Liberal theology and preaching has been far too much the product of merely human comment upon God's Word. It has been a human performance, not an event of the Word breaking out, the articulation of pious feelings and humanitarian thoughts. If theology and preaching are to be the Word for today, as Barth was so concerned to say, then it will have to be done in a spirit of humbly waiting upon God. This was the concern which led Barth to emphasize (no doubt, overemphasize) the freedom of the Word of God and its power to prove its authority again and again in the present day. Evangelicals might say, what is crucial is the exposition of the Bible under the unction of the Spirit. The Spirit will see to it that the Word gets grounded in the world. The factors which will guarantee this are not in our hands or under our control. We depend upon the promise of God to honour his Word and preserve his people.¹¹

⁹See Gerald L. Bray, 'The Patristic Dogma' in P. Toon and J. D. Spiceland (eds.), *One God in Trinity* (Westchester, Illinois: Cornerstone Books, 1980), pp. 42-61.

¹⁰David H. Kelsey points this out in *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), pp. 185-92.

¹¹See Bernard Ramm, *After Fundamentalism, The Future of Evangelical Theology* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983). Despite the title, this book is a presentation of Barth's theology as a paradigm for evangelical theology today. Ch. 4 deals with preaching according to Barth.

Paul referred to this when he prayed for 'a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him' (Eph. 1:17). God has given us the Spirit precisely to lead and guide us as the mind and will of the Lord. As we yield our lives to God, we can expect to experience illumination in the things of God and direction in discipleship flowing out of a vital relationship with him. We can expect to receive guidance as to the significance of biblical texts for our situation and time. This is an aspect of what was meant by the promise that the Spirit would lead us into all truth (Jn. 16:13). Let no-one scoff and say this is just wisdom by intuition and guesswork. This is God's promise, and all of his promises prove true.¹²

Second, we have to be clear about why we want to build the bridges. Is it in order to float an idea no-one else thought of? Is it to make the gospel easier to accept than it actually is? Is it to establish how clever we are? Theology in the New Testament was missionary theology. Its rationale and driving force was the reaching of the nations for Jesus the Christ. Paul wanted to convert Greeks and Romans to the Jewish Messiah, and had to think how to communicate an originally Jewish gospel to them. He was not trying to write a definitive systematic theology for all time. He longed to see the nations saved and baptised. Theology was channelled down the track of the great commission. Is that true of our theology?¹³

We can also learn from Paul how to go about the task of building bridges. He was a very flexible communicator who actually claimed to 'be all things to all men' (1 Cor. 9:22). Evidently he was prepared to go a very long way to identify with the concerns of his hearers in order to get through to them. Short of perverting the gospel, Paul was willing to cross over cultural barriers and express himself in terms people could understand. For the sake of Christ he was prepared to undertake even this difficult and often painful transition. This is surely the kind of flexibility and elasticity of approach which ought to characterize all of us if we are serious about effective contextualizing.¹⁴

Third, there is a place for human wisdom. Paul told Timothy to think over what he said to him (2 Tim. 2:7) and this is indeed what we must do in relation to the Bible and in relation to our modern audience.

In relation to the Bible we must take care to understand the message which God has given us in the text. It is the norm and not the contemporary human consensus, whatever that may be. But in order to recover its teaching, whether theological or ethical or practical, we will

¹²Richard C. Lovelace discusses theological integration in the context of spiritual renewal. *Dynamics of Spiritual Life, An Evangelical Theology of Renewal* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1979), pp. 172-84.

¹³The great passion of Donald McGavran's life has been to remind the church that its task is to call people out of darkness into light. This is the task of theology also. See most recently Donald A. McGavran and Arthur F. Glasser, *Contemporary Theologies of Mission* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983).

¹⁴On this characteristic in Paul, see Richard N. Longenecker, *Paul Apostle of Liberty* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), ch. 10.

have to try to distinguish what is permanent and applicable to us in it, as over against what is merely traditional opinion or what is of mainly local significance. This will involve a never-ending struggle to understand the text and the message it bears. What aspects in the texts about creation, for example are meant to be binding on us and which are only part of the Hebrew way of expressing the truth? How are we to understand Jesus' message in relation to what the Zealots or the Pharisees were saying? What did Paul mean by his difficult remarks about the place of God's law in the Christian life? If our hermeneutical bridges are to be sound, they must be grounded in an accurate interpretation of the Word of God.¹⁵

In relation to the modern audience we have to search for points of contact within their cultural setting. We need the wisdom of which Proverbs so often speaks to locate the cultural issues and forms in which the biblical message can have the same impact it had originally. That means we will have to be informed about the cultural situation, both our own and that of our audience, if we hope to deliver a message which registers and strikes home. When we do that we will always find that the situation throws up questions to which the gospel provides good answers. But for this to happen it is necessary that we become familiar with the frame of reference of the intended hearers. As a result we will become able to translate the message in a dynamically equivalent way.¹⁶ As we penetrate deeper into the Bible and deeper into the cultural setting we are aiming at, effective communication can be the result. Without in any way violating the substance of Scripture, we will find it possible to preach the gospel with relevance and power.

The modern theological discussion is full of examples of what can be done. Some of it is unreliable because the scriptural foundations have been cast aside and people are floundering about. Christianity is being equated with Marxism, process philosophy, and self-fulfilment ideology in ways that biblical Christians can only protest against. But some of the work is by no means unbiblical and foolish. It is profound and proper to ask as Rahner does how the good news is the true fulfilment of man's life. It is right to ask what God requires of us in a nuclear age. It is stirring to point to the biblical theme of hope in a world which longs to know whether there is any purpose in history as Moltmann does. It is appropriate to bring biblical values to bear upon the slaughter of innocents we call abortion on demand. We must declare what the Bible says about mammon and violence and power. The Bible speaks to all the things people today are so exercised about so that when we address them we are not turning away from the Bible but rather implementing it. Of course it would not be right to dogmatise about our own personal opinions. But it is right to

¹⁵Millard J. Erickson is completing a major systematic theology in three large volumes, and discusses what is involved in theological translation in *Christian Theology I* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), pp. 105-26.

¹⁶For the principle of dynamic equivalent translation, see Charles Kraft, *Christianity in Culture, A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979), chs. 13-15.

share what the Bible says and to equip the Christian mind so that it can think responsibly and biblically about these vital matters.¹⁷ The result will almost certainly be the re-invigoration of our teaching and preaching. The Bible will be seen to count for something important and gain a new hearing.

¹⁷I would refer the reader to John Stott's helpful treatment of the way in which we ought to make the connection between the Bible and current issues. *Between Two Worlds*, pp. 151-78.

In conclusion

A bridge has two ends, and needs to be securely grounded in both. As evangelicals, along with classical Christians of every kind historically, we want to be found faithful to the Word of God and creative in our handling of it in the modern world. May God give us a great company of those who will bridge the chasm between the Bible and the modern situation by being both true to the Scriptures and relevant in their contemporary circumstances.

'Only the suffering God can help': divine passibility in modern theology

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In 1917 H. M. Reltón made a judgment which has turned out to be remarkably far-sighted: 'There are many indications that the doctrine of the suffering God is going to play a very prominent part in the theology of the age in which we live.'¹ The idea that God cannot suffer, accepted virtually as axiomatic in Christian theology from the early Greek Fathers until the nineteenth century, has in this century been progressively abandoned. For once, English theology can claim to have pioneered a major theological development: from about 1890 onwards, a steady stream of English theologians, whose theological approaches differ considerably in other respects, have agreed in advocating, with more or less emphasis, a doctrine of divine suffering.² A peak of interest in the subject is indicated by J. K. Mozley's important study, *The Impassibility of God* (1926), which was commissioned by the Archbishops' Doctrine Commission in 1924 and which itself tells the story of English theological interest in the suffering of God up to 1924.³ Since then, a large number of English

theologians have continued the tradition.⁴

During this century, however, the idea of divine suffering has appeared in many other theological traditions,⁵ with very little influence from England.⁶ The Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno developed a doctrine of the infinite sorrow of God.⁷ The Russian theologian Nicolas Berdyaev vigorously rejected impassibility in favour of a doctrine of 'tragedy' within the divine life.⁸ The Japanese Lutheran theologian Kazoh

¹E.g. B. R. Brasnett, *The Suffering of the Impassible God* (London: SPCK, 1928); H. M. Reltón, *A Study in Christology* (London: SPCK, 1929); W. R. Matthews, *God: In Christian Thought and Experience* (London: Nisbet, 1930), pp. 246-9; *idem*, *Essays in Construction* (London: Nisbet, 1933), ch. 17; E. S. Jones, *Christ and Human Suffering* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1933); *Doctrine in the Church of England* (London: SPCK, 1938), pp. 55-6; O. C. Quick, *Doctrines of the Creed* (London: Nisbet, 1938), pp. 184-7; H. W. Robinson, *Suffering human and divine* (London: SCM, 1940); L. Hodgson, *The Doctrine of the Trinity* (London: Nisbet, 1943), p. 71; T. H. Hughes, *The Atonement* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1949); D. Jenkins, *The Glory of Man* (London: SCM Press, 1967), pp. 106-10; K. J. Woollcombe, 'The Pain of God', *SJT* 20 (1967), pp. 129-48; L. Paul, *First Love: A Journey* (London: SPCK, 1977), pp. 187-9; W. H. Vanstone, *Love's Endeavour, Love's Expense* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1977); F. Young, in J. Hick (ed.), *The Myth of God Incarnate* (London: SCM Press, 1977), pp. 36-7; *idem*, *Can These Dry Bones Live?* (London: SCM Press, 1982); G. W. H. Lampe, *God as Spirit* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), p. 209-10.

⁵For a very brief survey, see D. D. Williams, *Interpreting Theology 1918-1952* (London: SCM Press, 1952), pp. 113-7.

⁶Moltmann's doctrine of divine suffering was first developed apparently in ignorance of the English tradition, of which he later became aware from Mozley's book: see *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God* (ET: London: SCM Press, 1981), pp. 30-6. He admits: 'In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries it was English theology which carried on the theological discussion about God's passibility. Continental theology passed it by unheedingly' (p. 30).

⁷*Tragic Sense of Life* (ET: London: Constable, 1954). The original work in Spanish appeared in 1912. On Unamuno, see Moltmann, *Trinity*, pp. 36-42.

⁸N. Berdyaev, *The Meaning of History* (ET: London: Geoffrey Bles, 1939), and other works. *The Meaning of History* originated as lectures in Moscow in 1919-1920. On Berdyaev, see Moltmann, *Trinity*, pp. 42-7.

¹H. M. Reltón, *Studies in Christian Doctrine* (London: Macmillan, 1960), p. 79. (Ch. 2 of this book was first published in the *Church Quarterly Review* in 1917.)

²Mention should also be made of the earlier work of the American theologian Horace Bushnell, *The Vicarious Sacrifice* (London: Alexander Strahan, 1866), which had a good deal of influence on the English tradition. On Bushnell, see F. W. Dillistone, *The Christian Understanding of Atonement* (Welwyn: James Nisbet, 1968), pp. 243-6.

³J. K. Mozley, *The Impassibility of God: A Survey of Christian Thought* (Cambridge: CUP, 1926), ch. 2. Mozley's survey does not, however, include all important contributions within his period: he misses, e.g., H. R. Rashdall, *The Idea of Atonement in Christian Theology* (London: Macmillan, 1919), pp. 450-4. Cf. also A. M. Ramsey, *From Gore to Temple* (London: Longmans, 1960), pp. 58-9, who comments: 'Equally characteristic of Anglican divinity have been both the move towards patpassianism and the drawing back' (p. 59).

Kitamori published his famous and ground-breaking book *Theology of the Pain of God* in 1946.⁹ Other Asian theologians have subsequently followed him in emphasizing the divine suffering.¹⁰ For them, as for James Cone's black theology, God's suffering is a necessary part of his solidarity with the oppressed.¹¹ American process theology, following A. N. Whitehead's oft-quoted characterization of God as 'the fellow-sufferer who understands', has readily incorporated God's suffering into its reformulation of theism which makes much of God's receptivity to the world.¹²

In Germany, Emil Brunner was prepared to abandon the philosophical dogma of the divine impassibility for the sake of a more biblical concept of God,¹³ while Karl Barth asserted, though without extensive discussion, that God can suffer, as a necessary implication of God's self-revelation in Christ and his cross.¹⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his letters from prison, made his tantalizingly brief but suggestive remarks about God's weakness and suffering in 'the world come of age'.¹⁵ Some Continental Catholic theologians, including the rather conservative Jean Galot,¹⁶ have also attempted to speak of God's suffering.¹⁷ But especially Jürgen Moltmann has expounded a theology of divine suffering in *The Crucified God*, and more recently again in *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*.¹⁸ For Moltmann, the divine suffering is closely related not only to the theodicy problem and the cross, but also to the trinitarian nature

⁹ET: London: SCM Press, 1966. For a brief summary of Kitamori's views, see W. McWilliams, 'Divine Suffering in Contemporary Theology', *SJT* 33 (1900), pp. 43-7.

¹⁰E.g. K. Chung-Choon, 'God's Suffering in Man's Struggle', in J. C. England (ed.), *Living Theology in Asia* (London: SCM Press, 1981), pp. 15-21. Cf. now V. Samuel and C. Sugden (eds.), *Sharing Jesus in the Two-Thirds World* (London: Marshalls, 1983). See also J. Y. Lee, *God Suffers for us* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974).

¹¹On Cone, see McWilliams, *art. cit.*, pp. 39-43.

¹²See, e.g., D. D. Williams, 'Suffering and Being in Empirical Theology', in B. L. Meland ed., *The Future of Empirical Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), pp. 175-94.

¹³E. Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God: Dogmatics I* (London: Lutterworth, 1949), pp. 268, 294. For a negative comment on Brunner's treatment, see Woollcombe, *art. cit.*, pp. 130-1.

¹⁴E. Jungel, *The Doctrine of the Trinity: God's Being is in Becoming* (ET: Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), pp. 83-8, makes the most of Barth's statements on this, most of which were missed by Woollcombe, *art. cit.*, pp. 131-2.

¹⁵D. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (London: SCM Press, 1967), pp. 348-9, 360-1, 370.

¹⁶J. Galot, *Dieu souffre-t-il?* (Paris: P. Lethielleux, 1976). For a brief account of Galot's position, see E. L. Marshall, *Whatever happened to the Human Mind?* (London: SPCK, 1980), pp. 87-93.

¹⁷H. Mühlen, *Die Veränderlichkeit Gottes als Horizont einer zukünftigen Christologie* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1969); H. Küng, *Menschwerdung Gottes* (Freiburg/Basel/Vienna: Herder, 1970) Exkurs II; *idem*, *On being a Christian* (London: Collins, 1978), pp. 434-5.

¹⁸Ch. 2. See also 'The Crucified God and Apathetic Man', in *The Experiment Hope* (ET: London: SCM Press, 1975), pp. 69-84; 'Anxiety', in *Experiences of God* (ET: London: SCM Press, 1980), pp. 37-54.

of God.¹⁹

In the rest of this article we shall first examine the basis of traditional theology's refusal to attribute suffering to God, and then attempt to isolate and discuss the various contributory factors in the widespread modern acceptance of a doctrine of divine passibility.

The Greek doctrine of divine 'apatheia'

The idea of divine impassibility (*apatheia*) was a Greek philosophical inheritance in early Christian theology. The great hellenistic Jewish theologian Philo had already prepared the way for this by making *apatheia* a prominent feature of his understanding of the God of Israel,²⁰ and virtually all the Christian Fathers took it for granted, viewing with suspicion any theological tendency which might threaten the essential impassibility of the divine nature.

To say that God is incapable of suffering does not really convey the full meaning of *apatheia*. Nor does the English word 'apathy' help very much, but reflection on the connexions between the English words 'impassibility', 'passion', and 'passive', could bring us somewhere near the implications of *apatheia*, *pathos* and *pathein* (*paschein*). For the Greeks, God cannot be passive, he cannot be affected by something else, he cannot (in the broad sense) 'suffer' (*paschein*), because he is absolutely self-sufficient, self-determining and independent.

Pathos, which the divine *apatheia* excludes, means both 'suffering', in our sense of pain or calamity, and also 'passion', in the sense of emotion, whether pleasurable or painful. The connecting thought is passivity. Suffering is what comes upon one, against one's will. It is something of which one is a passive victim. Thus suffering is a mark of weakness and God is necessarily above suffering. But, for the Greeks, one is also passive when one is moved by the passions or emotions. To be moved by desire or fear or anger is to be affected by something outside the self, instead of being self-determining. Again this is weakness and so God must be devoid of emotion. To suffer or to feel is to be *subject* to pain or emotion and the things that cause them. God cannot be subject to anything.

The divine impassibility is also closely connected with other aspects of the Greek understanding of God. Suffering is connected with time, change and matter, which are features of this material world of becoming. But God is eternal in the sense of atemporal. He is also, of course, incorporeal. He is absolute, fully actualized perfection, and therefore simply is eternally what he is.

¹⁹On Moltmann's view of divine suffering, see J. J. O'Donnell, *Trinity and Temporality* (Oxford: OUP, 1983), ch. 4; R. Bauckham, in P. Toon and J. D. Spiceland (eds.), *One God in Trinity* (London: Bagster, 1980), pp. 121-4; M. Welker (ed.), *Diskussion über Jürgen Moltmanns Buch 'Der gekreuzigte Gott'* (München: Kaiser, 1979).

²⁰On Philo, see J. C. McLelland, *God the Anonymous: A Study in Alexandrian Philosophical Theology* (Cambridge, Mass.: Philadelphia Patristic Foundation, 1976), pp. 37-40.

He cannot change because any change (even change which he wills rather than change imposed on him from outside) could only be change for the worse. Since he is self-sufficient, he cannot be changed. Since he is perfect, he cannot change himself.²¹ Thus suffering and emotion are both incompatible with the nature of a God who never becomes, but *is*. Whereas for many modern minds this idea of God is unattractively 'static' (always a pejorative word in modern theology!), for the Greek mind it was an attractive ideal of *stability*. God's benevolent will cannot be swayed by passion and his eternal blessedness is unassailable.

Although the general tendency of the Greek view of God was to remove him from any contact with the world, as adopted into Christian theology it did not mean that God was 'apathetic' in the modern sense. The Fathers have no doubt of God's love for the world, but his love is his benevolent attitude and activity, not a feeling, and not a relationship in which he can be *affected* by what he loves. Tensions in the patristic doctrine of God arose especially in the attempt to reconcile the immutability and impassibility of God with the Fathers' belief in a real incarnation of God in Christ and in the real sufferings of Christ, to both of which they held tenaciously as Christian theologians, in spite of the problems created by their Greek philosophical presuppositions about the divine nature. If the Fathers are to be criticized, it is not, of course, for the necessary attempt to make some connexion between the biblical God and the God of Greek philosophy, but for the insufficiently critical nature of their reconciliation of the two.²² They retain the most important features of the biblical God, but do not allow these features sufficient scope for calling in question the philosophical notion of divine nature.

A few of the Fathers seem to have moved rather timidly towards the idea that, although God cannot be thought to suffer unwillingly or out of any lack in himself, he could be conceived as free to undergo suffering voluntarily for the sake of human salvation.²³ But the majority of the Fathers, even though constrained by Alexandrian Christology to attribute the sufferings of Jesus to the Logos, can do so only by a paradox (Cyril's 'he suffered impassibly'; Gregory of Nazianzus' 'the

suffering of him who could not suffer'²⁴), which usually means that the Logos, though aware of the sufferings of his human nature, is unaffected by them.²⁵

A further implication of the doctrine of divine *apatheia* is very important: it had as its corollary *apatheia* as a human ideal. This occurs in varying degrees and forms in the Greek philosophical schools and in the Fathers, but the general Greek tendency was to see essential human nature as self-determining reason, which as such resembles God. Ideally the emotions ought to be subject to the reason, but in fact through them the flesh and the material world are able to influence and sway the reason, resulting in sin and suffering. Hence the Greek religious ideal of becoming like God is to attain, as far as possible, to the divine *apatheia*.²⁶ It should be noted that, although there is an anti-anthropomorphic motive in this tradition of thinking about God, there is also a sense in which the idea of divine *apatheia* is, in its own way, thoroughly anthropomorphic. It conceives God in the image of pure reason, abstracted from the human body and from the emotional aspects of human psychology, and it does so because this pure reason is what the Greek thinker himself aspires to be.

It is important to notice that most modern advocates of divine passibility recognize elements of truth in the patristic doctrine of divine *apatheia*.²⁷ At its best, the notion of divine and human *apatheia* as a moral ideal suggested moral constancy, in which the will is able to maintain its loving purpose without being deflected. God's love is 'apathetic' in the sense that it is free, generous, and self-giving, not a 'need-love' dominated by self-seeking desires and anxieties.²⁸ Moreover, it is true that God cannot be *subject* to suffering against his will, but that is not to say that he may not voluntarily expose himself to suffering.²⁹ As Moltmann points out, the Fathers made the mistake of recognizing only two alternatives: 'either essential incapacity for suffering, or a fateful subjection to suffering. But there is a third form of suffering – the voluntary laying oneself open to another and allowing oneself to be intimately affected by him; that is to say, the suffering of passionate love.'³⁰

²⁴*Theol. Or.* 4:5

²⁵On the problem of impassibility in patristic Christology, see W. Elert, *Der Ausgang der altkirchlichen Christologie* (Berlin: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1957); Gunton, *Yesterday*, pp. 94-6. On the meaning of Cyril's paradox, see F. M. Young, 'A Reconsideration of Alexandrian Christology', *JEH* 22 (1971), pp. 112-3.

²⁶On this theme in Clement of Alexandria, see McLelland, *God*, pp. 78-92.

²⁷*Cf.* M. Jarrett-Kerr, *The Hope of Glory* (London: SCM Press, 1952), ch. 2, for a nuanced appreciation of the basic concerns of the traditional position. Other examples of recognition of elements of truth in the divine *apatheia* are W. Temple, *Christus Veritas* (London: Macmillan, 1924), pp. 269-70; McLelland, *God*, p. 160; Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (ET: London: SCM Press, 1974), pp. 269-70; *Experiment*, p. 74; *Trinity*, p. 23.

²⁸Moltmann, *Crucified God*, pp. 269-70.

²⁹*Cf.* Mozley, *Impassibility*, pp. 145, 152, 153, 163; Brasnett, *Suffering*, p. 12; Galot, *Dieu*, pp. 154-5.

³⁰*Trinity*, p. 23.

²¹See R. B. Edwards, 'The Pagan Doctrine of the Absolute Unchangeableness of God', *Religious Studies* 14 (1978), pp. 305-13.

²²*Cf.* W. Pannenberg, 'The Appropriation of the Philosophical Concept of God as a Dogmatic Problem of Early Christian Theology', in *Basic Questions in Theology* vol. 2 (ET: London: SCM Press, 1971), pp. 119-83.

²³*Cf.* especially Gregory Thaumaturgus' treatise on divine impassibility, summarized and quoted in Mozley, *Impassibility*, pp. 63-72; and comments in C. E. Gunton, *Yesterday and Today: A Study of Continuities in Christology* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1983), p. 95; McLelland, *God*, pp. 141-2. Gregory anticipates Barth's view that God is 'not his own prisoner', i.e. his impassible nature cannot be a constraint on his freedom. But Gregory still seems to think that the wholly voluntary 'suffering' of God in Christ is not experienced as suffering, i.e. it is not unpleasant in any way, since he triumphs over his sufferings in the act of suffering them. *Cf.* also the much less reflective comments of Ignatius, *Pol.* 3:2; *Eph.* 7:2; Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 3:16:6.

Factors in the modern doctrine of divine passibility:

1. Context

It is certainly no accident that modern concern with the question of divine suffering has frequently arisen out of situations in which human suffering was acute. The English theological tradition on this issue seems to have received considerable impetus from the First World War,³¹ which raised the problem of suffering for a generation of theologians recovering from nineteenth-century optimism. Kitamori's *Theology of the Pain of God* was published in Japan soon after Hiroshima. 'We are living in an age of God and pain,' he wrote. 'the world today seems to be stretched out under pain.'³² It was in his Nazi prison cell that Bonhoeffer reflected that 'only the suffering God can help'.³³ Moltmann's theology of the crucified God has its earliest origin in his experience as a prisoner of war,³⁴ and eventually took the form of an attempt at a 'theology after Auschwitz'.³⁵ The black theologian James Cone is thinking especially of the history of oppression of American blacks when he writes of God's identification with the suffering world.³⁶

A context of human suffering cannot itself sufficiently account for a doctrine of divine suffering. After all, the patristic doctrine of divine impassibility flourished in the great era of Christian martyrdom. There have been a whole variety of ways of relating God to human suffering. A doctrine of divine impassibility can encourage men and women to rise above suffering in the hope of attaining the unshakable blessedness of God, and in fact the martyrs were often seen as realising the ideal of *apatheia* in triumphing over pain.³⁷ However, it could be said that the sheer scale of innocent and involuntary human suffering in our century has posed the problem of suffering in a way which makes a doctrine of divine suffering very attractive (see section 5 below).

2. The God of the prophets

A strong trend in modern theology has been towards the emancipation of the biblical understanding of God from the categories imposed on it by the influence of Greek philosophical theism, in particular the attributes of immutability and impassibility, which are by no means easy to reconcile with the biblical God's involvement with his people in their history.³⁸

³¹Cf. F. House, 'The Barrier of Impassibility', *Theology* 83 (1980), pp. 409-10, though he incorrectly thinks that concern about the issue subsequently faded; Mozley, *Impassibility*, p. 160, on Studdert-Kennedy.

³²P. 137. (The original Japanese work appeared in 1946.) Cf., however, England (ed.), *Living Theology*, p. 34, for other Japanese theologians' criticism of the book as showing 'little awareness of the suffering known by many of his fellow Japanese'.

³³*Letters*, p. 361.

³⁴*Crucified God*, p. 1; *Experiences*, pp. 7-9.

³⁵*Crucified God*, pp. 277-8; *Experiment*, pp. 72-3.

³⁶J. H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (London: SPCK, 1977), pp. 139, 172-7.

³⁷For a moving modern example of the same thought, see Kim Malthe-Bruun's words quoted in Woolcombe, *art. cit.*, 146-7.

³⁸Cf. especially T. E. Pollard, 'The Impassibility of God', *SJT* 8 (1955), pp. 353-64.

As far as Old Testament theology goes, the Jewish theologian Abraham Heschel has been particularly influential. Originally in his 1936 dissertation and later in his major work *The Prophets*,³⁹ he developed from the Old Testament prophets a theology of the divine *pathos*. From his own background in kabbalistic and Hasidic Judaism, Heschel was able to recognize in the prophets a quite different understanding of God from that of the Greeks, and in deliberate opposition to the doctrine of divine *apatheia* he used the word *pathos* to describe God's concern for and involvement in the world. The 'anthropopathisms' of the Old Testament, in which God is represented as emotionally involved with and responding to his people, are not to be set aside as rather crude ways of speaking of God which are not really appropriate to the reality of God,⁴⁰ but should be seen as a central hermeneutical key to the prophetic theology. 'The most exalted idea applied to God is not infinite wisdom, infinite power, but infinite concern.'⁴¹ 'Not self-sufficiency, but concern and involvement characterize His relation to the world.'⁴² 'In order to conceive of God not as an onlooker but as a participant, to conceive of man not as an idea in the mind of God but as a concern, the category of divine *pathos* is an indispensable implication.'⁴³ Heschel is even prepared to say that the divine *pathos* shows that 'God is in need of man'.⁴⁴ He is not, it should be noted, guilty of the kind of naive dismissal of philosophical theism for which biblical theologians can sometimes be criticized. His account of the doctrine of divine *apatheia* is no caricature, but a serious and indeed illuminating treatment. Although the difference between Greek and Hebrew thought is a theme which has been much abused in biblical theology, Heschel's case for significant differences at this point is a good one.

God's suffering, of course, is an aspect of his *pathos*. He is disappointed and distressed by his people's faithlessness; he is pained and offended by their lack of response to his love; he grieves over his people even when he must be angry with them (Jer. 31:30; Hos. 11:8-9); and because of his concern for them he himself suffers with them in their sufferings (Is. 63:9). It is a merit of Heschel's exposition of the prophets that he finds the note of divine sorrow and suffering not only in the obvious proof-texts (cited above),⁴⁵ but in many parts of the prophetic oracles.⁴⁶ He also finds the divine *pathos* reflected in the *pathos* of the prophets themselves.⁴⁷ The prophets, by *sympathy* with the divine *pathos*, are themselves intimately involved in God's con-

³⁹A. J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York/Evanston: Harper and Row, 1962).

⁴⁰For the deficiencies of the traditional treatment of anthropopathisms, see L. J. Kuyper, 'The Suffering and Repentance of God', *SJT* 22 (1969), pp. 257-77.

⁴¹Heschel, *Prophets*, p. 241.

⁴²*Ibid.*, p. 235.

⁴³*Ibid.*, p. 257.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, p. 235.

⁴⁵For earlier use of the more obvious texts to support divine passibility, see, e.g., Bushnell, *Vicarious Sacrifice*, p. 31.

⁴⁶Note especially his treatment of the theme in Jeremiah (*Prophets*, pp. 109-13) and Second Isaiah (pp. 151-2).

⁴⁷Note especially Hosea (pp. 49-56) and Jeremiah (pp. 114-27).

cern for his people.⁴⁸ Thus just as divine *apatheia* had its anthropological corollary, so does divine *pathos*: 'The ideal state of the Stoic sage is apathy, the ideal state of the prophets is sympathy.'⁴⁹

Finally, Heschel's treatment of the problem of 'anthropopathy' is of interest.⁵⁰ The Old Testament itself recognizes that God is not to be compared with humanity (Nu. 23:19; 1 Sa. 15:29; Is. 40:18; 55:8-9), but this does not mean that language about divine emotions is *mere* anthropopathism, not to be taken seriously. Rather, it means that, in Heschel's adaptation of Isaiah 55:8-9: 'My pathos is not your pathos. . . . For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My pathos than your pathos.'⁵¹

Heschel's views have been followed by other Old Testament theologians,⁵² and have also been taken up enthusiastically by Moltmann.⁵³ Another major exponent of divine suffering for whom the Old Testament prophets played a major role is Kitamori. For him Jeremiah 31:20 was of particular significance, because it 'literally agrees with the truth of the cross',⁵⁴ i.e. it expresses the pain of God's love for those who reject his love, the pain which 'reflects his will to love the object of his wrath'.⁵⁵

3. The God of personal love

In modern theology it has often been said that if God is personal love, analogous to human personal love, then he must be open to the suffering which a relationship of love can bring. Traditional theology understood God's love as a one-way relationship in which God exercises purely active benevolence towards the world, but cannot be affected by the objects of his love, but this picture of the impassive benevolent despot⁵⁶ has tended to give way to pictures drawn from more intimate human relationships⁵⁷ in which a love which is unaffected by the beloved seems unworthy to be called love,⁵⁸ even if the term is applied analogically to God. The point that if

God is love, he must suffer, is characteristic of the English (and Welsh) tradition,⁵⁹ strongly stated, for example, by Maldwyn Hughes: 'It is an entire misuse of words to call God our loving Father, if He is able to view the waywardness and rebellion of His children without being moved by grief and pity. . . . It is of the very nature of love to suffer when its object suffers loss, whether inflicted by itself or others. If the suffering of God be denied, then Christianity must discover a new terminology and obliterate the statement "God is love" from its Scriptures.'⁶⁰ For Moltmann also, 'The theology of the divine passion is founded on the biblical tenet, "God is love".'⁶¹

From the assumption that real love is vulnerable to suffering, Moltmann also argues that, so far from impassibility making God superior to humanity, 'a God who cannot suffer is poorer than any man. For a God who is incapable of suffering is a being who cannot be involved. Suffering and injustice do not affect him. And because he is so completely insensitive, he cannot be affected or shaken by anything. He cannot weep, for he has no tears. But the one who cannot suffer cannot love either. So he is also a loveless being.'⁶²

The kinds of suffering which are involved in human personal relations include compassion, in which the lover suffers sympathetically with the beloved who is suffering, and it is the divine sympathy which comes to the fore especially in discussions which focus on the problem of human suffering. A stronger form of sympathy is active solidarity with the suffering person, where the lover actually shares the situation from which the beloved is suffering.⁶³ The cross has often been understood along these lines. But human relationships also involve the pain of being hurt by the beloved, the suffering of rejected love, and the pain involved in forgiveness and reconciliation. These kinds of divine suffering come to the fore where the doctrinal focus is on human sin and rebellion, and have entered extensively into modern treatments of the atonement.

For some writers, especially Kitamori, the special character of the divine pain arises from the fact of God's wrath, a theme which fits well with the emphasis of the prophets, as expounded by Heschel (above), and also with the interpretation of the cross in the Lutheran tradition (to which Kitamori belongs), where the cross is seen as a victory of the divine love over the divine wrath. For Kitamori, God suffers because his love for fallen humanity cannot be the kind of love which liberal theology attributes to him, which envisages no real obstacle to his immediate love of humanity. Rather, in the face of sin, God's immediate love turns to anger, but since he continues to love those who should not be loved,

⁴⁸ *Prophets*, ch. 18.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 258.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, ch. 15.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 276.

⁵² E.g. E. S. Gerstenberger and W. Schrage, *Suffering* (ET: Nashville: Abingdon, 1980), pp. 98-102; E. Jacob, 'Le Dieu souffrant, un thème théologique vétérotestamentaire', *ZAW* 95 (1983), pp. 1-8.

⁵³ *Experiment*, pp. 75-7; *Crucified God*, pp. 270-2; *Trinity*, pp. 25-7; J. Moltmann and P. Lapede, *Jewish Monotheism and Christian Trinitarian Doctrine* (ET: Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), pp. 47-9.

⁵⁴ Kitamori, *Pain*, p. 59; cf. also p. 156.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁵⁶ For the *political* overtones of the traditional view (God as absolute monarch), see Studdert-Kennedy, quoted in Mozley, *Impassibility*, p. 159. It could also be argued that there are sexist overtones: the purely active god of traditional theism is a masculine God, from whom the more 'feminine' characteristics of receptivity and capacity for suffering have been excluded.

⁵⁷ For this development as characteristic of nineteenth-century atonement theology, and related to divine passibility, see especially Dillistone, *Atonement*, ch. 6.

⁵⁸ Cf. Jenkins, *Glory*, pp. 106-7, on God as compassionate rather than condescending.

⁵⁹ Most recently, Vanstone, *Love's Endeavour*.

⁶⁰ H. M. Hughes, *What is the Atonement?* (London: James Clarke, n.d.), pp. 93-4.

⁶¹ *Trinity*, p. 57.

⁶² *Crucified God*, p. 222.

⁶³ This seems to be the point of Lee's distinction between 'empathic participation' and 'sympathetic identification': God's suffering, he claims, is the former, not the latter (*God Suffers for us*, pp. 10-13).

he suffers the conflict of love and wrath within him. In the victory of his love over his wrath God's pain mediates his love to sinners.⁶⁴

The analogy of the suffering of human personal love can lead not only in the direction of the theology of the cross, but also to a trinitarian interpretation of the divine suffering: "To us the bitterest pain imaginable is that of a father allowing his son to suffer and die. Therefore God spoke his ultimate word, "God suffers pain," by using the father-son relationship."⁶⁵

4. The crucified God

The cross is the point at which every genuinely Christian theology has found itself obliged to speak in some way of the suffering of God, even if, as often in traditional theology, the statement is highly qualified.

The English tradition has made much of the cross as the central revelation of God's nature, and therefore of the sufferings of Christ on the cross as revealing the divine passibility. The cross is the expression in this world of the suffering in the eternal heart of God.⁶⁶ In this respect, the tradition stems from the American theologian Horace Bushnell who, in a famous passage, frequently quoted in the literature, wrote: 'It is as if there were a cross unseen, standing on its undiscovered hill, far back in the ages, out of which were sounding always, just the same deep voice of suffering love and patience, that was heard by mortal ears from the sacred hill of Calvary.'⁶⁷ One of Bushnell's English followers, C. A. Dismore, continued the thought: 'there was a cross in the heart of God before there was one planted on the green hill outside of Jerusalem. And now that the cross of wood has been taken down, the one in the heart of God abides, and it will remain so long as there is one sinful soul for whom to suffer.'⁶⁸

It should be noted that this view of the historical sufferings of Jesus as a kind of temporal revelation of eternal truth is not necessarily tied to incarnational Christology, but can be adopted by writers, such as H. R. Rashdall⁶⁹ and Frances Young,⁷⁰ who do not see the sufferings of Jesus as actually experienced by God as his own human sufferings (as in orthodox Christology), but see the divine suffering revealed by the human suffering of Jesus.

Writers in the tradition of Luther's *theologia crucis*, such as Kitamori and Moltmann, are more inclined to emphasize the cross as not just an illustration of the divine suffering, but itself the decisive event of divine suffering, without confining God's suffering to the cross. Although he does not establish the point very clearly, it

appears that for Moltmann this is so because the cross is not just a revelation of the divine sympathy for those who suffer, but an act of divine solidarity with 'the godless and the godforsaken', in which the Son of God actually enters their situation of godforsakenness. Only as the godforsaken *man* Jesus and as the Father of the godforsaken man Jesus, could God suffer in the way that he did in the event of the cross. It is important to establish this point if a theology of divine suffering is not to have the effect of reducing the cross to a mere illustration of what God suffers throughout history. Further clarification is still needed as to how the cross, understood in this way as a unique event of divine suffering, relates to God's suffering at other times.

Traditional theology, afraid of the ancient 'patripassian' heresy,⁷¹ confined the suffering of the cross to the Son, but in recent theology writers as diverse as Barth,⁷² Kitamori,⁷³ Galot,⁷⁴ and Moltmann have affirmed that the Father also, in his love for the Son, must be understood to suffer in the event of the cross.⁷⁵ For Moltmann, this is essential to his understanding of the cross as the event which necessitates trinitarian language about God,⁷⁶ and to his claim that 'we can only talk about God's suffering in trinitarian terms'.⁷⁷ For Moltmann, the cross is the event of God's love for the godless, in which the Father forsakes his Son and delivers him to death. The surrender of the Son to death is the action of both the Father and the Son, and in the suffering of the Son both the Father and the Son suffer, though in different ways. The Son suffers abandonment by the Father as he dies; the Father suffers in grief the death of the Son. 'The grief of the Father is just as important as the death of the Son.'⁷⁸ But the painful gulf of separation between Father and Son is still spanned by their love, and so the Holy Spirit is the powerful love which proceeds from this event to reach godforsaken human beings.⁷⁹ Essential to Moltmann's position is the view that the cross is an event of suffering *internal* to God's own trinitarian being. It therefore determines the Christian doctrine of God, and also makes possible Moltmann's treatment of the theodicy problem (see below), in which he sees the whole history of human suffering taken by the cross *within* God's own trinitarian history.

5. Divine suffering and theodicy

It is part of the character of the specially modern awareness of the problem of suffering that any attempt to *justify* human suffering, in all its enormity, is ruled out. An authentic human response to suffering must always

⁷¹ See Mozley, *Impassibility*, pp. 29-36.

⁷² *CD IV/2*, p. 357.

⁷³ *Pain*, p. 115.

⁷⁴ *Dieu*, ch. 2.

⁷⁵ The New Testament does not speak in so many words of the Father's suffering in the cross, but arguably implies it in Rom. 8:32; see Moltmann, *Crucified God*, pp. 242-3.

⁷⁶ *Crucified God*, p. 207.

⁷⁷ *Trinity*, p. 25.

⁷⁸ *Crucified God*, p. 243.

⁷⁹ Moltmann's trinitarian interpretation of the cross is found in *Crucified God*, pp. 240-9, and with some further reflection in *Trinity*, pp. 75-83.

⁶⁴ Kitamori, *Pain, passim*, especially ch. 10. Cf. also Lee, *God Suffers for us*, pp. 15-17.

⁶⁵ Kitamori, *Pain*, p. 47. The point has a specially Japanese appeal, see p. 135. See further, below, on Moltmann.

⁶⁶ Cf. Mozley, *Impassibility*, pp. 146-9, 153.

⁶⁷ Bushnell, *Vicarious Sacrifice*, p. 31.

⁶⁸ *Atonement in Literature and Life* (1906), quoted Mozley, *Impassibility*, p. 148.

⁶⁹ *Idea of Atonement*, pp. 450-4.

⁷⁰ In J. Hick (ed.), *The Myth of God Incarnate*, pp. 36-7.

retain an element of protest against suffering which cannot be justified. Hence the autocratic God of absolute power who simply presides over this suffering world and cannot himself be reached by suffering appears a cosmic monster. It seems possible to justify God ('theodicy') only if he too suffers. 'The only credible theology for Auschwitz is one that makes God an inmate of the place.'⁸⁰

Though this is a widespread motive for reflection on divine suffering,⁸¹ again it is Moltmann (in *The Crucified God*) who has made this the central feature of his approach to the issue and focused it on the cross. He sees the theology of the crucified God as opening a way forward in relation to the problem of suffering, beyond the unsatisfactory alternatives of 'metaphysical theism', with its impassible God, and 'protest atheism', with its rebellion against a world in which innocent suffering happens. Theism cannot explain suffering without justifying it, but nor can atheism keep up its protest against suffering without the longing for God's righteousness in the world. The *crucified* God, however, shares in the suffering of the world, and in Jesus' dying question he himself takes up humanity's protest against suffering and the open question of God's righteousness in the world.⁸² Thus for the sufferer God is not just the incomprehensible God who inflicts suffering, but 'the human God, who cries with him and intercedes for him with his cross where man in his torment is dumb'.⁸³ God himself maintains the protest against suffering.

However, if God were *only* 'the fellow-sufferer who understands' (Whitehead), it is arguable that the problem of suffering would be, not alleviated, but aggravated. It is no consolation to the sufferer to know that God is as much a helpless victim of evil as he is himself.⁸⁴ In answer to this, Moltmann can argue, first, that the divine solidarity with sufferers *does* help in that it transforms the character of suffering: it heals the deepest pain in human suffering, which is godforsakenness.⁸⁵ But secondly, and characteristically, Moltmann will not isolate the cross from the resurrection: 'Without the resurrection, the cross really is quite simply a tragedy and nothing more than that.'⁸⁶ The resurrection is God's promise of liberation from suffering for all those with whom Christ is identified in his cross, the godless and the

godforsaken. In the cross all human suffering is taken within God's own 'trinitarian history' in *hope* for the joy of God's eschatological future.⁸⁷ God 'is vulnerable, takes suffering and death on himself *in order* to heal, to liberate and to confer new life. The history of God's suffering in the passion of the Son and the sighings of the Spirit serves the history of God's joy in the Spirit and his completed felicity at the end. That is the ultimate goal of God's history of suffering in the world.'⁸⁸ The message of divine suffering would be no gospel without the message of the divine victory over suffering.

Conclusion

It seems increasingly obvious that the Greek philosophical inheritance in traditional theology was adopted without the necessary critical effect of the central Christian insight into the divine nature: the love of God revealed in the cross of Christ. For the Greeks, suffering implied deficiency of being, weakness, subjection, instability. But the cross shows us a God who suffers out of the fullness of his being because he is love. He does not suffer against his will, but willingly undertakes to suffer with and for those he loves. His suffering does not deflect him from his purpose, but accomplishes his purpose. His transcendence does not keep him aloof from the world, but as transcendent love appears in the depth of his self-sacrificing involvement in the world. Finally, if Christians know anything about God from the cross, it is that 'the weakness of God is stronger than men' (1 Cor. 1:25). The cross does not make God a helpless victim of evil, but is the secret of his power and his triumph over evil. This is why 'only the suffering God can help'.⁸⁹

The anthropological corollary is, as always, important. The man or woman who lives within the *pathos* of the crucified God becomes capable of real love, which is concerned for others, sensitive to their suffering, ready for the pain of loving the unlovable, vulnerable to sorrow and hurt as well as open to joy and pleasure.⁹⁰ If a cold and invulnerable self-sufficiency is not the divine ideal, it is a foolish idolatry to make it the human ideal.⁹¹

⁸⁷ *Crucified God*, p. 278.

⁸⁸ *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* (ET: London: SCM Press, 1977), p. 64 (my italics). Cf. C. E. Rolt, quoted Mozley, *Impassibility*, pp. 155-6.

⁸⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Letters*, p. 361.

⁹⁰ Cf. Moltmann, *Experiment*, pp. 69-84.

⁹¹ In my thinking about the subject of this article, I have been helped not only by the books referred to, but also by Dr Paul S. Fiddes' lectures on 'The Suffering of God', given as the Whitley Lectures for 1980, at the Northern Baptist College, Manchester. These lectures, when published, will be a very important contribution to the subject.

⁸⁰ K. Surin, 'The Impassibility of God and the Problem of Evil', *SJT* 35 (1982), p. 105.

⁸¹ See also S. P. Schilling, *God and Human Anguish* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1977), ch. 11.

⁸² *Crucified God*, pp. 219-227.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 252.

⁸⁴ Cf. E. L. Marshall, *Existence and Analogy* (London: Longmans, 1949), p. 142.

⁸⁵ *Crucified God*, p. 46.

⁸⁶ *Experiences*, p. 53.

Why study philosophy of religion?

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The author is on the staff of Trinity College, Bristol. In this article he introduces the subject of philosophy of religion, looking particularly at the question of religious language.

This article attempts to explore how we may understand the place of philosophy within theological studies, and especially its place in first degree courses in theology and related studies. Many theology undergraduates find it difficult to appreciate what significance, if any, philosophy has for their theology; hence the need for an article of this sort.

Let us first define our terms and try to assess why there is a problem. Different theological courses have different philosophical components: in this article we shall confine ourselves to those courses which are usually termed 'philosophy of religion' and which typically require the student to examine issues such as: the nature of faith, faith and reason, arguments for and against divine existence, the problem of evil, miracles, selfhood and immortality, the concept of God, human freedom, the relationship between morality and religion, religious language, religious experience, *etc.*, *etc.* Thus our primary concern will not be with courses in the history of philosophy, nor with a phenomenological approach to religion (though there are of course many related areas of interest in this approach) nor with another area of academic growth, the use of philosophical categories and concepts in biblical interpretation.

It has been said that philosophy is essentially about those children's questions which society conditions us to ignore in adulthood. Certainly philosophy is about big questions, ultimate questions: Who am I? What is life? What is death? Is there any sense to human existence? Is there a transcendent power governing all? What is good? What is bad? What is the relationship between individual and society?

It may appear that much modern philosophy, with its clinical concern to analyse concepts and linguistic rules, has deserted these big questions. But those who feel a sense of disillusionment with modern philosophy for this reason may be making a judgment which, in over-all terms, is far too superficial. For the continuing interest in language amongst philosophers often arises out of the conviction that language is itself a formative factor determining how we perceive and classify (organize) reality: that language is the spectacle through which we 'constantly' come to the world.

Thus if we can describe philosophy as a concern for the ultimate questions of human existence, then philosophy of religion should presumably be defined as a concern for those ultimate questions which are about the existence, or non-existence, of god (or gods) and about his (or their) dealings with the world. And it is perhaps here that

the student once more has qualms of disorientation and doubts of this sort: 'Surely man does not reach up to God in a proof. Man cannot explore and find God in argument. Rather God graciously discloses himself to man. Man is not to put the revelations of God to the evaluation of his own finite and fallen understanding. He is to walk by faith and obedience: not proudly seeking to assert the autonomy of human reason, but consciously drawing meaning and strength from his Creator. Let us make sure' (says somebody, wholly ignoring the biblical context) 'that no-one makes a prey of us by philosophy and empty deceit.' And if, in addition to these doubts, the student also finds the subject extremely intellectually taxing, then perhaps the temptation 'not to give it his or her all' is doubly powerful.

But do these particular doctrinal assertions represent the whole story? More to the point, don't they themselves make certain philosophical assumptions, assumptions which at the end of the day the student may not be very happy to live with? I want to take this further by simply listing some very basic questions about the nature of faith itself (although at this point we must constantly beware of confusing philosophical questions, *e.g.* What is the rational status of Christian beliefs?, with psychological ones, *e.g.* Why do people come to faith?).

1. Is faith distinct from credulity?
2. Are there any 'independent' evidences of any kind which indicate the reasonableness of Christian belief? OR
3. Is the notion of independent evidence in this context a logical nonsense?
For does not our understanding of 'what counts as evidence' always logically depend on the presuppositions which we have made in the first place? (Fred and Jim both receive cheques for £100 in times of dire financial need. By Fred, this is 'seen as' sure evidence of God's good hand upon him. But by Jim, it is 'seen as' an outstanding piece of good luck.)
4. (The fourth question is to be understood strictly as a theological one.) What is the place of the mind (that is in terms of critical scrutiny and intellectual assent) in Christian commitment? If little place is ascribed to it, then does this not introduce a dualism into Christian experience – a dualism which appears to violate our doctrine of creation?
5. Can Christian beliefs be viewed as constituting an internally coherent whole? If so, would this be a sufficient basis for commending them to the minds of men?
6. What is the locus of revelation? Is it historical events or words about events or both or . . . ?

The student of philosophy of religion will come upon these questions in a direct way in his studies, and in relation to a great range of philosophical minds from

Aquinas through Locke, Newman, Kierkegaard and many others to John Hick. But these questions are also implicit in much of the twentieth-century debate about the nature of religious language.

Religious language: anthropomorphism and analogy

Perhaps the best place to start here is with the question of anthropomorphism. Most of the words which we use to describe God and his relationship to man are words which we usually use to describe human actions, attitudes and roles: king, shepherd, judge, potter, forgive, redeem, reconcile. The question thus arises: how can we speak of God thus without making him human – without making God in our own image? Since St Thomas Aquinas, many theologians have wanted to approach the problem of anthropomorphism through the concept of analogy (though treatments of analogy differ significantly from one theologian to the next. Indeed the approach to analogy in a modern Protestant such as Pannenberg has theological presuppositions which are so different from those operating in Thomas that we effectively end up with a rival doctrine.¹)

Take the following two statements: (a) God loves us. (b) Dad loves Tom.

To put it in very bald terms, traditional doctrines of analogy declare that love in (a) does not have exactly the same meaning as love in (b); for such literalism would reduce theology to anthropomorphism. Nor does love in (a) have a radically different meaning to love in (b), for that would create the real danger of emptying theology of meaning altogether. Rather it is said that while love in (a) does not have exactly the same sense as love in (b), there is a fundamental analogy between their meanings: a fundamental analogy between God's love for us and a father's love for his children. In this sense analogy is usually regarded as a middle way between anthropomorphism on the one hand and emptiness on the other.

This of course still leaves us with a great many questions unanswered. Exactly how is God's love 'like' human love and exactly how is it different? If questions such as this are left unanswered, theological language must for ever remain imprecise. There are also crucial theological issues at stake here. How can we talk about the infinite in terms drawn from the finite? Does not an analogy of meaning entail a real analogy of being between man and God? Traditional Catholic thought has been happy to defend this analogy of being on the ground of incarnation and the divine image. But some modern Protestant theologians have drawn back here because they believe that this way of thinking violates the transcendence – the 'holy otherness' – of God.

Logical positivism and responses to it

The need to respond to the central question of anthropomorphism opens up a great many issues. One of these

¹See, W. Pannenberg, 'Analogy and Doxology' in *Basic Questions in Theology 1* (London: SCM, 1970).

relates to the critique of religious language made by the logical positivists.

If we accept that there is a fundamental analogy between the meaning of words when they are used of people (words like love, care, answer, etc.) and the meanings of these words when they are used of God, then does not consistency urge that these words follow the same linguistic rules in their religious usages as in their 'personal relationship' usages? The fundamental complaint of the positivists is that the talk of believers is just not as consistent as it should be in this respect. Thus A. J. Ayer makes his basic charge against the users of metaphysical and religious language as follows: 'We accuse them of disobeying the rules which govern the significant use of language.'² Anthony Flew's equally famous attack reaches its emotional, if not intellectual, climax in the following words:

Someone tells us that God loves us as a father loves his children. We are reassured. But then we see a child dying of inoperable cancer of the throat. His earthly father is driven frantic in his efforts to help, but his Heavenly Father reveals no obvious sign of concern. Some qualification is made – God's love is 'not a merely human love' or it is 'an inscrutable love,' perhaps – and we realize that such sufferings are quite compatible with the truth of the assertion that 'God loves us as a father (but, of course . . .).' We are reassured again. But then perhaps we ask: what is this assurance of God's (appropriately qualified) love worth, what is this apparent guarantee really a guarantee against? Just what would have to happen not merely (morally and wrongly) to tempt but also (logically and rightly) to entitle us to say 'God does not love us' or even 'God does not exist'? I therefore put to the succeeding symposiasts the simple central questions, 'What would have to occur or to have occurred to constitute for you a disproof of the love of, or of the existence of, God?'³

It is not very difficult to see the point being made here. The force of much of our Christian proclamation requires that there is this fundamental analogy between God's love and the love of a father for his child. But, as against this, there seems in practice, to be a qualitative difference between the rules governing the use of 'love' in religious usages, and those which govern its use in person-to-person talk. Thus 'Dad's love' is only affirmed if some very definite states of affairs obtain; and if other states of affairs obtain it is unequivocally denied. But God's love appears to be different to this. For the proposition 'God is love' is affirmed by believers to be true, whatever happens. Its truth appears to be compatible with all possible experimental (experienc-able) states of affairs.

If we generalize from this single example, we come to what is an essential part of the logical positivists' concern with religious language. They want to suggest that all statements which are genuinely of factual significance (that is which belong to the family of fact stating discourse: whether actually true or false) are statements which can in principle stand or fall in relation to

²A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (London: Gollancz, 1967), p. 27.

³A. Flew, 'Theology and Falsification' in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology* (London: SCM, 1955).

experience. There are of course many meaningful statements which do not meet this test. Some philosophers would suggest that one type of such statements is, '2+2=4.' 'All triangles have three sides.'

Here, it is suggested, are examples of statements which are not derived from experience, and which can never, in principle, be falsified by our experience of the world. These statements do not inform us about the nature of reality, and they are in this restricted sense not facts. Rather they are a mode of classification and order which we impose onto reality. Thus the central question which logical positivism urges upon Christian theology is: Are our theological claims about God more like the former class of statements (their truth or falsity being dependent upon experience: past/present/future)? Or are they more like the latter class ('truths'/doctrines which we impose onto experience)? Or do we ultimately need a much more sophisticated network of distinctions and categories to make a satisfactory response here? The student should not duck these first order questions or dismiss them as irrelevant. For they challenge us with profound questions about the nature of the faith which we cherish and proclaim: ones which can enhance and enrich our spirituality and promote Christian growth and maturity. Thus another example here might be: Is the proposition (suitably theologically qualified), *God always answers our prayers*, (a) a truth derived from experience (and so in principle open to falsification by experience), or (b) a doctrinal truth which we impose onto our daily experience, or (c) . . . ?

This makes the issue clear. We are in final terms here being asked to make judgments about the inter-relationships between revelation, history and experience in the formation of Christian belief, and about the inter-relationship between belief and experience in our ongoing day-to-day lives.

A great variety of responses have been made to the probings of the positivists. In response, we should, I believe, be searching for understandings of religious language which are characterized by full intellectual integrity, and which also do justice to biblical self-understandings. Perhaps it is pertinent to reflect here that in the Scriptures, 'word' and 'explanation' sometimes precede experience and are to be imposed onto it – to be used to interpret and order it (e.g. the prophetic warnings about judgement; the Old Testament anticipation of the Messiah and the kingdom). But at other times 'word' is apparently made logically dependent upon experience (e.g. 1 Cor. 15:3-19).

One of the most sustained and serious responses to the positivistic critique arose out of the later philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein.⁴ Certain philosophers now want to argue that it is not the case that uniform linguistic rules are violated in religious usages. Rather, they say, religious talk has its own distinctive concepts governed by their own distinctive language rules. Thus it is not that

⁴We are talking here of 'creative applications' of Wittgenstein's own philosophy to specific questions within the philosophy of religion. Probably the most well-known text here is D. Z. Phillips, *The Concept of Prayer* (London: RKP, 1965).

the concept of love is misused by believers when they talk about God; it is that religious language has its own distinctive concept of love. (Here therefore the doctrine of analogy is substantially watered down: reduced to a theory of mere 'family resemblance'.) Or, to put exactly the same point in a much more generalized way: Christian religion is an autonomous, self-governing mode of talk (or universe of discourse, language game) with its own distinctive and internal criteria of meaning, intelligibility, reality and truth. If you want to understand what is meaningful, what is rational (what counts as a reason), what counts as real, within Christian religion, then you must look within Christianity. You must look and see. You must observe how believers actually use words in ordinary religious contexts. Thus here religion becomes immune to criticism from external criteria, invulnerable to attack and rebuttal by reference to any non-religious standards of truth, meaning and rationality. And of course, by exactly the same token it also becomes insusceptible to confirmation from any sources outside of its own distinctive presuppositions and dogmas. In short the possibility of rational dialogue with unbelief is 'logically' precluded.

I do not need to point out that this motivation to render Christian belief immune (that is, immune in principle) to all external criticism – to make it a total epistemological island – already finds its place in a good deal of Christian thought and apologetic. But once again, the student needs to be fully aware of what is going on here. Any positions which imply a variety of different rationalities (which isolate 'the truth', say, of science from that of religion, or 'the truth' of one religion from that of another) are highly relativistic. They repudiate the notion of 'the truth' and replace it with the notion of 'different approaches to truth', there being no way of deciding between the approaches on rational grounds.

Now of course relativism is both a serious and a contemporary doctrine. Many see it as the appropriate cultural response to the social needs of the pluralist society. But if the student is to adopt an isolationist understanding of the faith – and the weakening of the doctrine of analogy that accompanies it – then he must understand fully the relativistic and the theological implications of what he is doing.

I have taken up such a large proportion of this article on these areas because I believe that they are the very heartland of the discipline. The relationships between presupposition and proof, presupposition and evidence, revelation and historical event, doctrine and experience: our understandings here constitute an essential part of the theoretical foundations of our theology. Always to be dodging these questions is to be interested in the superstructure of theology but never in the foundation. Let us be clear, it is theology as an academic discipline which we are considering here. I am not saying that these profound questions have to be pursued and agonized over by every person who graces a pew . . . or whatever. But I am saying that they cannot be ignored by the serious student of theology.

Arguments for the existence of God

It is also the case that our judgments in these areas will determine our approaches to many other questions within philosophy of religion itself. This is obviously true, for example, in respect of an area of study which most students will meet at some point in their syllabuses: arguments for the existence of God. Thus those who hold to the relativistic positions outlined above view the notion of independent evidence/proof for a particular world-view (which here means 'for the existence of God') as, in principle, misconceived. This position entails that all arguments for divine existence must, even if they are not deficient in other ways, be ultimately based on presuppositions which are essentially religious in character, such as (it is alleged) the existence of order in the universe or the intelligibility of existence (of being) itself. In stark contrast, those who argue for the existence of God (or who wish to commend the claims of Christianity to unbelief on rational grounds, and other than by 'merely' appealing to its internal consistency) are batting on a different sort of wicket altogether. They are, at least implicitly, assuming that there is a common human rationality, one which in final terms transcends different world-views and the sorts of distinction which exist, for example, between religious and scientific approaches. And they are arguing that within the boundary of this common human rationality there are some pointers God-ward.

A variety of other examples could be furnished here. Take for instance the question of evidence for the miraculous. Is rational belief in the miraculous dependent upon the prior (prior; that is, in a logical sense) adoption of a world-view in which miracles are possible – or even to be expected? (Thus here rational is clearly being used in a relativistic sense.) Or can there be independent evidence for miraculous occurrences? Obviously much will depend on how one has defined miracle in the first place. In his excellent book on the subject, Swinburne discusses both of these approaches to the question of evidence, as well as the prior subject of definition – the latter being a question which itself raises many highly significant issues, from the nature of scientific law to the psychosomatic dimension of human health.

The problem of evil

The final example to be given here concerns a problem which in some form we all face constantly: How are the undeniable facts of evil and suffering reconcilable with a God of omnipotent love?

We need not deny that there will always be some degree of mystery here: that God's ways and thoughts are never fully open and comprehensible to finite intel-

lects. But we cannot I think, affirm that God's love is totally mysterious, for then we would find ourselves faced with the serious question, How is a love which is totally mysterious different from no love at all?

In orthodox terms, the intellectual challenge implicit in the problem – and of course it has to be approached other than intellectually as well – is to give some defence of the claim that, even given a world such as this, there is an omnipotent God whose love towards man is analogous to a father's tender love towards his children. To concede that God's love is wholly inscrutable, or to affirm that it is qualitatively different to any form of human love, is to deny the concept of analogy; and thus to denude our preaching of its biblically rooted force – and to leave the notion of divine love hopelessly vague and vacuous. Once more the concept of analogy would have been reduced to family resemblance. The obligation upon us is to so expound and unpack 'the faith' that the Abba Father of the gospel is no empty, unintelligible and cruel jibe in the face of human anguish and hurt.

Thus a familiar pattern has emerged once more. The extent to which we are willing to defend analogy – or something logically akin – will always determine our basic philosophical and epistemological approaches: whether we are talking about our approach to relativism and the nature of truth or to the problem of evil.

Conclusion

In this article, I have deliberately emphasized the more epistemological aspects of the philosophy of religion. I have done this because it is often here that students find it most difficult to find their way about and to make links with other parts of their studies and with their daily walk with God. But whatever aspects of the philosophy of religion we are concerned with, I do want to suggest one further, and much more general reason, why the student should not just see his philosophy as a distraction from the 'real' tasks of biblical studies and confessional/ecclesiastical doctrine. It was said at the very start of this article that philosophy expresses a concern for the most ultimate questions of human existence, the ones which society so often conditions us to ignore. What we should never forget is that theology is about ultimate questions also. And yet there can be a temptation even within theology (though it is perhaps stronger at a post-graduate level than at the undergraduate one) to become so immersed in highly specific questions of biblical history, language, church history or pastoral theology that we lose sight of theology as having to do with big questions. An ongoing commitment to the issues of philosophy of religion and philosophical theology is as healthy an antidote to this as one can have.