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Who Wants a God Who Suffers?

William Joshua Shrader-Perry

Introduction

In the last few years my family has undergone two terrible tragedies. First, my wife's uncle died of brain cancer after a two-year long battle. Then just two months later, my father-in-law died in a motorcycle accident. I have often thought about God's relationship to human suffering, but after these two deaths in my family God's relationship to human suffering has come to the forefront of my mind. Many have attempted to provide a theodicy to explain God's relationship to human suffering and to evil in the world, but in this paper I will not be attempting a theodicy, at least in the traditional sense. I will not even attempt a defense of God against human suffering. In this paper, I hope, as Johann Metz explains, to provide a way for Christians to continue to "speak of God at all in the face of the abysmal history of suffering in the world."¹ I will attempt to answer the question: who wants a God who suffers?² My response is this: we have a God who suffers and we all need a God who suffers, because God's willingness to suffer with and for creation enables us to make our own suffering meaningful. In identifying with Christ in his suffering, human suffering can be made meaningful and appropriated into one's being; this meaning-making also provides the impetus to stand in solidarity with others who suffer and to work against the oppression of all people.

In order to answer the question: who wants a God who suffers, I will begin by providing a framework for understanding that God, as a loving God, must at least be open to suffering; I will show that God does indeed suffer with creation. Following Roberto Sirvent, professor of political and social ethics at Hope International University, I will suggest that based on the idea of the *imitatio Dei* it is possible to reason from the human moral experience to the moral nature of the Divine, particularly the moral experience of love.³ Second, I will examine Jürgen Moltmann's and Jon Sobrino's understanding of the crucifixion as paradigmatic of the suffering of God in continuity with God's willingness to suffer out of love, and I hope to reclaim the crucifixion as an event within the Godhead. This will provide the basis for the final section in which I will explicate, following Marilyn Adams and Moltmann, how identifying our own suffering with Christ's suffering on the cross can be a way to make suffering meaningful, and

¹ Johann Baptist Metz, "Suffering Unto God" *Critical Inquiry*, 20 no. 4 (1994) 612, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343852>. Accessed: February 14, 2017. This is how Metz describes the purpose of theodicies; however, I understand Metz's understanding of theodicy as different than the norm.

² This question is part of the impetus for this paper. It comes from the movie *God on Trial* which is based on a play written by Eli Wiesel.

³ Roberto Sirvent, *Embracing Vulnerability: Human and Divine* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2014) 45.

how the concept of a God who suffers provides the basis for suffering in solidarity with others and at times resisting the oppression of others.

Before beginning I would like to offer further clarification of my overall goal. I have said that I do not intend to provide a theodicy or a defense of God, however I do intend to make some specific claims about who God is and how the Divine relates to humanity. It is important to be able to speak about God in concrete ways; if not for the simple reason that what we believe about God influences our praxis.⁴ However, I do recognize that God is transcendent beyond what human speech and thought can capture. Therefore, the claims that I will make about God are intended to be both specific and humble. It is also necessary to point out that I am in no way arguing for a concept of normative suffering in the Christian life. What I mean by normative suffering is this: suffering understood as an integral and constitutive part of the Christian life. This does not neglect the importance of suffering with those who suffer. The difference between suffering in solidarity with others who suffer and normative suffering is love.⁵ Love is inherently open to suffering as I intend to show; therefore, suffering that results from love is unavoidable in the Christian life. However, I would call this normative love, not normative suffering. Therefore, I do not intend to suggest that to be a Christian and to fully identify with Christ one *must* suffer. As a Christian, one must love others and therefore be open to suffering. Yet, I think it is important to note that the emphasis, the normative aspect of this kind of suffering, is not the suffering itself, but love. Instead, this paper is a recognition that all people at some point in their lives will deal with suffering, yet this does not mean suffering is constitutive for the Christian life. Now, I will begin to lay the foundation for understanding that for God to love God must be open to suffering.

The *Imitatio Dei* and the Suffering Love of God

Sirvent suggests that it is possible to reason from the moral experience of human beings to the moral nature of God. He focuses on two aspects of human moral experience: justice and love.⁶ For my purposes, I will focus on Sirvent’s treatment of human and divine love as requiring openness to suffering in connection with the *imitatio Dei*. The *imitatio Dei* finds its theological ground in the Hebrew Bible, especially in the commands of God to the Israelites in Leviticus: “You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy” and in similar exhortations in Deuteronomy to “walk in the ways of the Lord.”⁷ However, as Sirvent explains, the most important theological basis for the *imitatio Dei* is the biblical principle that human beings were made in the image of God.⁸ Because of this close connection between humanity and the Divine, it is possible to reason from human moral experience to the Divine moral experience. Sirvent continues: “Human beings, by virtue of being created in God’s image, are thus endowed with

⁴ Jon Sobrino, *Christology at Crossroads: A Latin American Approach* (New York: Orbis Books, 1985) 181.

⁵ Some might object and say that certain practices that involve intentional (self) suffering are acts of love meant to bring one closer to God. To this I might respond that often these practices (I am thinking here of fasting, intentionally living in poverty, self-denying practices, etc.) are intended to be used to create the time and resources to better connect with and serve the Divine; while these practices certainly can lead to suffering, this is not primarily their intent. See 1 Cor. 7:5; Lk 2:37; Acts 13:2; Acts 14:23.

⁶ Roberto Sirvent, *Embracing Vulnerability*, 68.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 42; Lev. 11:44; 20:7; 26; 21:8; Deut. 8:6; 10:12; 11:22; 26:17; 28:9.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 45.

certain faculties that enable them to approximate God’s moral likeness.”⁹ The exhortations to act like God assume that there is some moral affinity between humanity and the Divine.

This affinity allows human beings to make certain judgement about the moral actions of God. For instance, one way in which human beings can judge God’s actions is by asking whether or not a particular action would be moral if a human being did it. Human beings are able to make such assumptions about God’s moral nature because of the connection implicit in the *imitatio Dei*. Because human beings are created in the image of God, they share certain faculties with the Divine. Therefore, as Sirvent states, “if God and humanity share similar moral faculties (i.e., if they both have the abilities and faculties to act in a moral fashion), then it follows that God and humanity are accountable to the same moral standard.”¹⁰ I would suggest, following Sirvent, that God subjects God’s self to the moral standard that is placed upon human beings.¹¹ We see suggestions of this in stories that show human beings judging God’s actions. For example, in Gen. 18:25 Abraham argues with God concerning the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah, and in Exodus 32:11-14 when Moses attempts to stave off God’s wrath brought on by the building of the golden calf.¹² Ultimately, the concept of the *imitatio Dei* does not suggest that God and human persons are equally moral beings; it does however, suggest that God and humanity “share the same moral language.”¹³

Sirvent also explains that the difference between God’s moral nature and humanity’s moral nature is one of degree and not of kind. He does this by using ideas implicit within perfect being theology. Perfect being theology suggests, in the tradition of Anselm, that God is the greatest possible being.¹⁴ This suggests that God possesses all of the properties to the highest degree that would make God the greatest possible being. However, this does not mean that God possesses all of these qualities “in an *absolute* sense,” as Sirvent notes.¹⁵ It is possible that God could have competing attributes, therefore God cannot have all of these great-making properties to an absolute degree, only to a maximal degree. Sirvent, following Daniel Hill, gives the example of God’s omnipotence and God’s inability to do evil. God cannot both do everything and be unable to sin, therefore, according to Hill, God cannot be both omnipotent and impeccable to an absolute degree.¹⁶ However, God can have the combination of great-making properties *maximally* that make God the greatest possible being.

This is important to our current discussion because it further emphasizes that the difference between God and humanity, in terms of their moral nature, is one of degree and not kind. God possesses the moral virtue of love to a maximal degree, not to an absolute degree. If God did possess the virtue of love in perfection, we would not necessarily be able to say that the difference between the moral nature of God and humanity is one of degree.¹⁷ However, this does

⁹ Ibid., 45.

¹⁰ Ibid., 46.

¹¹ Ibid., 46.

¹² Ibid., 46.

¹³ Ibid., 47.

¹⁴ Ibid., 48.

¹⁵ Ibid., 48.

¹⁶ Ibid., 49.

¹⁷ How might we understand this in light of the biblical affirmation that God is love? I think it is still entirely possible to retain this affirmation by suggesting that God loves maximally; if we were to push the perfect being

not mean that God is not a morally perfect being.¹⁸ Sirvent explains that although God does not possess the moral virtues to an absolute degree this does not disallow God’s ability to “act perfectly out of duty...or out of the greatest good for the greatest number.”¹⁹

The *imitatio Dei* is only plausible if there is some moral affinity between God and humanity. Without a common moral language or common moral standard to follow, human beings simply could not make sense of the call to imitate God. This moral affinity allows Christians to both learn how to act by examining the moral character of God, and also, as Sirvent says, to discern “what is normative in the *human moral realm*” and therefore “attain a glimpse of what constitutes *divine* moral goodness as well.”²⁰ Here I will focus on Sirvent’s examination of love as constitutive of a worthwhile moral life in order to show that God must be open to suffering to truly love humanity.

In order for human beings to love, they must be open to risk, and I would further suggest to suffering. Love can be understood in several different ways from a philosophical perspective, but overall human love is understood to inherently involve openness to suffering.²¹ Here I will focus on one perspective which understands love to be an investment in the good of the beloved. Sirvent explains that to care about the good or well-being of the other is to “open oneself to the possibility that this particular good is not realized.”²² Not only this, but when one invests one’s self in the good of another, one becomes involved in the “desire to *pursue* it,” therefore the lover is emotionally “vulnerable” to whether or not the realization of this good is achieved.²³ If God loves maximally then I suggest that God’s own investment in the well-being of creation makes God open to suffering; especially in light of the suffering that seems to be ever present in the world.

In this section I have suggested that on the basis of the *imitatio Dei*, human beings can reason from their own experience of morality to the Divine moral experience; especially concerning the moral notion of love. I focused on one philosophical conception of love which understands love as concern for the well-being or good of the beloved. Because of the investment of the lover in the well-being of the beloved, there is an inherent risk involved in love; namely, the possibility that the good or well-being of the beloved could be thwarted. Based on the concept of the *imitatio Dei*, I suggest that we can apply this concept of love to God. In doing so, I have shown that God is open to suffering because of love. Now I will examine the crucifixion of Christ in continuity with the suffering God.

theology described by Sirvent further, one might suggest that God’s primary attribute is love. We therefore could talk about God’s loving justice, loving mercy, etc. We might also be able to understand this in a Trinitarian sense described by Moltmann in *Trinity and the Kingdom*. Moltmann seems to hold that the affirmation God is love can be understood by the fact that the essential unity of the Trinity is the loving relationship between the three divine persons. This love between the persons of the Trinity can still be understood to be maximally had by God. See, Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and The Kingdom: The Doctrine of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

¹⁸ Ibid., 50.

¹⁹ Ibid., 50.

²⁰ Ibid., 69.

²¹ Ibid., 74.

²² Ibid., 76.

²³ Ibid., 76.

The Crucifixion in Continuity

Sobrino, a Jesuit priest and liberation theologian, explains that contemporary Christians have lost touch with a theology of the cross. He suggests that contemporary Christianity has tried to overshadow theologizing about the cross with the resurrection. This loses an important aspect of the cross; namely, how the crucifixion affects God.²⁴ Here I would like to attempt to articulate a theology of the cross, following Moltmann, professor emeritus of systematic theology at the University of Tübingen, Germany, that sees the crucifixion in continuity with God’s willingness to suffer out of love for humanity.

On the cross, God suffers; God suffers death and God suffers the death of a Son.²⁵ It is here that Christian theology must begin. On the cross, God takes the suffering of the Son, forsaken by God, into God’s self. Here God appropriates suffering and death into God’s own life and transforms them, thereby giving hope to human sufferers.²⁶ As Moltmann states: “nothingness itself is done away with in the being of God, who in the death of Jesus has revealed [God’s] self and constituted [God’s] self in nothingness, it changes the general impression of the transitoriness of all things into the prospect of the hope and liberation of all things.”²⁷ The cross opens up the Trinitarian life of God to all people; for, as Christ cries out on the cross “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me” God in some mysterious way becomes the Father of all the forsaken (Mk 15:34).²⁸

Moltmann explains that “any being that cannot suffer cannot love either.”²⁹ Therefore I suggest that the crucifixion is the highest expression of God’s love for humanity. However, it may seem that the Father and the Son are put at odds with one another here, but Moltmann explains that in spite of the godforsakenness of Christ on the cross these two persons of the Trinity have never been so united in love.³⁰ Moltmann notes that only when we understand the cross as an event first and foremost within the Godhead, can the cross become truly valuable for those who “suffer and protest at the history of the world.”³¹

In the cross event, God is revealed most fully as the God who suffers. However, Moltmann is quick to point out that God does not suffer in the same way as humanity. Humanity suffers because they are, at least in some sense, receivers. Only to a certain extent can they create themselves, and in reality all human beings have received life from another and according to Christian theism from God.³² However, God is not a passive sufferer. On the contrary, because

²⁴ Jon Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, 180-181.

²⁵ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992) 216; Jürgen Moltmann, *Jesus Christ for Today’s World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994) 37.

²⁶ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 218.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 218.

²⁸ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and The Kingdom: The Doctrine of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993) 81; All biblical quotations come from the NRSV.

²⁹ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God.*, 222.

³⁰ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 82-83.

³¹ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God.*, 227.

³² See, William Desmond, “Desire and the Absolute Original” *Desire, Dialectic, and Otherness: An Essay on Origins* (Cambridge: James Clark & Co, 2014) 218 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1cgf4pb.13>; William Desmond, “Being Good” *Being and the Between* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995).

God loves creation God is involved in what Moltmann calls “active suffering”: “the suffering of love, in which one voluntarily opens himself to the possibility of being affected by another.”³³ And as I hope to show in the next section, all Christians are called to imitate this love of God by being willing to suffer for the sake of love.³⁴

Here I have shown that the crucifixion is first an event within the Godhead. This event is paradigmatic of a God who is willing to and does suffer with creation. The cross is the place in which all Christian theology must begin, because it is here that God “renounced [God’s] long-standing privileges and...experienced the agony of death.”³⁵ In the cross, the old understanding of power over and against is replaced by the power of suffering love.³⁶ Now I will show how the suffering of Christ can be the basis for making suffering meaningful in our own lives, as well as, the impetus for standing in solidarity with others and resisting the oppression of all people.

Making Suffering Meaningful

How does one make seemingly meaningless suffering meaningful in their own lives? I suggest, following Adams, an Episcopal priest and philosopher of religion, and Moltmann, that identification with Christ in his suffering is able to make our own suffering meaningful. Here it might be useful to provide a brief definition of suffering. I understand suffering to be a state of mind (as often suffering is subjective) in which one understands their own circumstances as especially painful because of physical, emotional, or metaphysical³⁷ torment. I would also include in this definition, as both Moltmann and Adams do, those who participate in the oppression of others. Feelings of extreme guilt, meaninglessness, lack of love, etc., that might accompany one who is actively involved in the oppression of others can be their own forms of suffering.

Adams suggests that if God is an “incommensurate good” then anything that enables human beings to grow closer to God can be understood to be meaningful.³⁸ Adams explains that for God to be good, God must provide each person with a life which they could consider to be a great good (I might say a life that is meaningful). This does not mean a life without suffering (although I do not think that God plans a life of suffering for individuals), but it does mean providing the epistemic possibility of understanding one’s life as meaningful.³⁹

This does not mean that an individual’s life needs to be objectively (that is to the view of outsiders) understood to be good or meaningful. Instead, what is important is that the individual

³³ Jürgen Moltman, *The Crucified God*, 230.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 253.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 226.

³⁶ John Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, 219-221.

³⁷ I use metaphysical here in a fairly literal sense to describe those forms of pain or torment that might affect the human being in ways that are *beyond* the physical – i.e., suffering that damages social identity, spiritual suffering, etc. I might have included emotional suffering in this category, but I think, especially in contemporary society, it is understood well enough as a category of its own.

³⁸ Marilyn Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1999) 155. I hesitate to call this suffering made meaningful good as Adams does, because I do not want to suggest that suffering should be a normative part of the Christian life.

³⁹ Marilyn Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God*, 156.

subjectively is able to understand that her life has meaning.⁴⁰ She therefore looks to the crucifixion as God’s identifying “with all human beings who participate in actual horrors—not only with the victims...but also with perpetrators.”⁴¹ Therefore, as Adams states, suffering then becomes the “secure points of identification with the crucified God.”⁴² Moltmann explains that because of the willingness of Christ to suffer on the cross “no suffering can cut us off from this companionship of the God who suffers with us.”⁴³ Moltmann also notes that the suffering of Christ has a liberative aspect because knowing that “someone else has gone through everything that threatens me...liberates me from my fear of fear.”⁴⁴

Adams notes that this does not mean that suffering then becomes normative for the Christian life. She explains that if one’s life ended with no suffering, or at least no meaningless suffering, it is still entirely possible to have “beatific intimacy” with God.⁴⁵ Ultimately, the ability to identify with Christ’s sufferings can make our own suffering meaningful. This identification with Christ empowers us to appropriate our own suffering into our lives. Therefore, it is possible to understand a life full of suffering as meaningful and worth living. Moltmann explains that “people who believe in God, and God in their suffering...in companionship with [God] find the strength to remain in love and not to become bitter, in spite of pain and sorrow.”⁴⁶

It is here in solidarity with the God who suffers that people are empowered to continue in the love of God to stand with those who suffer and to stand against the oppression of others. For, if human beings could not understand their own lives as meaningful, how then would they be able to find the strength to suffer with others, or to resist the oppression of others? I think that it is important for persons to be able to understand their sufferings, or at least their lives generally, as meaningful. Otherwise, those who stand in solidarity with others who suffer might become entrapped in a hole of despair. It seems to me that without a means of making suffering meaningful, all suffering with others does is bring more and more people into despair.

Sobrino asks this question in regards to the cross: “What sort of power is it that really and truly renders the deity present?”⁴⁷ For Sobrino and Moltmann, the cross reveals that God’s true power is the power of suffering love in solidarity with human suffering. And for Moltmann, to remain in love is to live like Christ lived: “In other words, men and women who take Christ’s road take up the struggle of life against death.”⁴⁸

Conclusion

In this short paper, I have attempted to articulate how human beings can understand seemingly meaningless suffering as meaningful in their own lives. I began by suggesting that the

⁴⁰ Ibid., 156.

⁴¹ Ibid., 166; Jürgen Moltmann, *Jesus Christ for Today’s World*, 41.

⁴² Ibid., 166.

⁴³ Jürgen Moltmann, *Jesus Christ for Today’s World*, 40.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 56.

⁴⁵ Marilyn Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God*, 167.

⁴⁶ Jürgen Moltmann, *Jesus Christ for Today’s World*, 46.

⁴⁷ Jon Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, 213.

⁴⁸ Jürgen Moltmann, *Jesus Christ for Today’s World*, 47.

notion of the *imitatio Dei* provides the framework for reasoning from the moral experience of humans to the moral experience of the Divine, focusing on what Sirvent explains as the moral phenomenon of love. Ultimately, I suggest that if God is to be loving, then God must be open to suffering. In the next section, I show that the crucifixion is an event within the Godhead which is paradigmatic of the willingness of God to suffering with and for creation. Lastly, I suggest that because of God’s suffering love, human beings are empowered to appropriate their own sufferings as meaningful experiences of identification with Christ into their lives. This meaning-making not only empowers people to move through their own suffering, but it also empowers them suffer in solidarity with others who suffer, and to resist the suffering that is often placed upon others. As Moltmann states:

“Proclaiming God’s kingdom to the poor means giving back to them the divine dignity of which the violent have robbed them. Healing the sick means planting the seeds of life in this world of death. Cleansing the lepers means accepting the handicapped who are pushed out of our society. Casting out devils means shaking the idols set up in our national and social life, to which so many of the weak have been sacrificed.”⁴⁹

Here we see that those who are empowered by an identification with Christ’s suffering are called not only to move through their own suffering, but also to stand opposed to those who oppress others. This is why I suggest that we all need a God who suffers.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 47.

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