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### Human Suffering and the Impassibility of God

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The God Who Suffers  
God: The Presence of the Wholly Other  
The God of the Early Fathers  
God Does Not Suffer  
The God of Love and Compassion  
The Impassible Suffers

#### The God Who Suffers

From the dawn of the Patristic period Christian theology has held as axiomatic that God is impassible, that is, he does not undergo emotional changes of state, and so God does not suffer. Toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century a sea change began to occur within Christian theology such that at present many, if not most, Christian theologians hold as axiomatic that God is passible, that he does undergo emotional changes of states, and so does suffer. Historically this change was inaugurated by such English theologians as Andrew M. Fairbairn and Bertrand R. Brasnett.<sup>1</sup> Within contemporary Protestant theology some of the better known theologians who espouse the passibility of God are Karl Barth, Richard Bauckham,

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<sup>1</sup> See A.M. Fairbairn, *The Place of Christ in Modern Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1893) and B.R. Brasnett, *The Suffering of the Impassible God* (London: SPCK, 1929).

John Cone, Paul Fiddes, Robert Jenson, Eberhard Jüngel, Kazoh Kitamori, Jung Young Lee, John Macquarrie, Jürgen Moltmann, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Richard Swinburne, Alan Torrance, Thomas F. Torrance, Keith Ward, and Nicholas Wolterstorff.<sup>2</sup> Among Catholic theologians, while they may differ as to the exact manner and extent of God's passibility, one nonetheless finds a strange mix of theological bedfellows. They include, among others, Raniero Cantalamessa, Jean Galot, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Roger Haight, Elizabeth Johnson, Hans Küng, Marcel Sarot and Jon Sobrino.<sup>3</sup> Of course, one must add the host of Process Theologians who, following the lead of Albert North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne, hold, by the very character of their philosophical position, that God is by nature passible and so suffers.<sup>4</sup> So overwhelming and so thorough has been this theological shift, one that has been achieved with such unquestioned assurance, that Ronald Goetz has simply, and in a sense rightly, dubbed it, the 'new orthodoxy'.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1957), pp. 495-99; R. Bauckham, "'Only the Suffering God Can Help": Divine Passibility in Modern Theology', *Themelios* 9(1984:3)6-12; J. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (London: SPCK, 1977); P. Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); R. Jensen, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1: *The Triune God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); E. Jüngel, *God as Mystery of the Word* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1983); K. Kitamori, *Theology of the Pain of God* (London: SCM, 1966); J.Y. Lee, *God Suffers for Us: A Systematic Inquiry into a Concept of Divine Passibility* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974); J. Macquarrie, *In Search of Deity* (London: SCM, 1984); J. Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (London: SCM, 1974); W. Pannenberg, *Basic Questions in Theology*, Vol. 1 (London: SCM, 1971); R. Swinburn, *The Coherence of Theism: Revised Edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); A. Torrance, 'Does God Suffer? Incarnation and Impassibility', in *Christ in Our Place*, eds. T. Hart and D. Thimell (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1987), pp. 364-68; T.F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996); K. Ward, *Religion and Creation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996); N. Wolterstorff, 'Suffering Love', in *Philosophy and the Christian Faith*, ed. T.V. Morris (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1988)196-237.

<sup>3</sup> See R. Cantalamessa, *The Power of the Cross* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1996); J. Galot, *Dieu Souffre-t-il?* (Paris: Editions P. Lethielleux, 1976); H. Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama IV: The Action* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994); R. Haight, *Jesus: Symbol of God* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1999); E. Johnson, *She Who Is* (New York: Crossroad, 1993); H. Küng, *The Incarnation of God* (New York: Crossroad, 1987); M. Sarot, *God, Passibility and Corporeality* (Kampen: Kok Pharos Publishing House, 1992); J. Sobrino, *Christology at the Cross Roads* (London: SCM, 1978).

<sup>4</sup> For example see D. Griffin, *A Process Christology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1973) and N. Pittenger, *God in Process* (London: SCM, 1967).

<sup>5</sup> R. Goetz, 'The Suffering God: the Rise of a New Orthodoxy', *The Christian Century* 103/13(1986)385.

[Footnote continued on next page ... ]

What has brought about such a radical reconception of God? How, in only one hundred years, has the Christian theological tradition of almost two thousand years, so readily and so assuredly, seemingly been overturned? There are basically three factors that have contributed to this change: the prevailing social and cultural milieu, modern interpretation of biblical revelation, and contemporary philosophy.

Human suffering became the catalyst for espousing a passible and so suffering God. Surely, God must suffer in solidarity with those who suffer. This was first expressed within the context of the social ills of industrial Britain of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, the icon that has come to embody this premise is Auschwitz. Jürgen Moltmann, in *The Crucified God*, was the first to employ Elie Wiesel's graphic and horrific story (which has subsequently appeared in over forty books and articles) of a Jewish boy hung by the Nazis along with two men in the camp at Buna (Moltmann wrongly places it in Auschwitz). It took half an hour for the youth to die and, as the men of the camp watched his torment, one asked: 'Where is God now?' Wiesel heard a voice within him answer: 'Where is he? He is here. He is hanging there on the gallows.'<sup>6</sup> While Wiesel interpreted his inner voice as expressing his now disbelief in a loving and just God, Moltmann exploited the story to argue for a God who suffers in union with those who suffer. In the midst of the Holocaust and hundreds of other contemporary occurrences of horrendous human suffering, due to all forms of injustice – ethnic, economic, religious, gender and social – this argument, often expressed with passionate

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Goetz's claim of a 'new orthodoxy' has subsequently come under sever attack. Beginning with my book, *Does God Suffer?* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), there has been a major scholarly resurgence defending the impassibility of God as essential to the proper understanding of the Bible and for Christian theology. This defence comes from Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant scholars. See, for example, P. Castelo, *The Apathetic God: Exploring the Relevance of Divine Impassibility* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2009), M.J. Dodds, *The Unchanging God of Love: Thomas Aquinas and Contemporary Theology on Divine Impassibility*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2008), P.L. Gavriluk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God: Dialectics of Patristic Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), D.B. Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), D.B. Hart, 'No Shadow of Turning: On Divine Impassibility', *Pro Ecclesia* 11(2002)184-206, J.F. Keating and T.J. White, eds., *Divine Impassibility and the Mystery of Human Suffering* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), and D. Stephen Long and G. Kalantzis, *The Sovereignty of God Debate* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> See J. Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, pp. 273-74 and E. Wiesel, *Night* (London: Fontana/Collins, 1972), pp. 76-77.

sentiment and emotion, continues to win theological adherents. How can God be an immutable, impassible, idle, and indifferent bystander in the midst of such unspeakable suffering? If God is a loving and compassionate God, as he surely is, he must not only be aware of human suffering, but he must also himself be an ‘active’ victim of such suffering. He too must suffer.

This contemporary experience of human suffering, which seemed to demand a passible God, found a ready ally and firm warrant, it appeared, within the biblical revelation of God. The Old Testament seems to give ample proof that he not only is passible but that he also indeed suffers. God revealed himself to be a personal, loving and compassionate God who has freely engaged himself in, and so ensconced himself within, human history. He mercifully heard the cry of his enslaved people in Egypt and determined to rescue them. Moreover, God revealed himself, especially in the prophets, to be a God who grieved over the sins of his people. He was distressed by their unfaithfulness, and suffered over their sinful plight. So disheartened was God by their hard-heartedness that he actually became angry. However, ‘my heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and not mortal; the Holy One in your midst and I will not come in wrath’ (Hos. 11:8-9). Thus, God in the Old Testament suffers on account of, with and on behalf of his people. Ultimately, it is the revelation of his love that demands that God suffer. Expressing the sentiment of many, Moltmann writes: ‘Were God incapable of suffering in any respect, and therefore in an absolute sense, then he would also be incapable of love.’<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, the heart of the Christian kerygma is that the Son of God became man and lived an authentic human life. Within that human life the Son’s death on the cross stands as the consummate event. From the Incarnation and the cross theologians argue for God’s passibility on three interconnected levels. First, it is because God has always suffered with those he loved that he sent his Son into the world. The cross then expresses fully God’s eternal divine nature,

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 230. See also p. 222.

and thus is the paradigm of a suffering God. Second, while the Christian christological tradition has always upheld the truth that the Son of God suffered as man, though not as God, contemporary theologians find such a distinction illogical and therefore unacceptable. If the Son of God actually became man, then he not only suffered as man but such suffering must have washed into his very divinity as well. Third, the Son, on the cross, did not then merely experience the abandonment of the Father as man but equally as God. Moreover, such abandonment simultaneously pertains to the Father's own experience. The Father suffered the loss of his Son. Thus, the suffering cry of dereliction was a cry being experienced within the very depths of God's passible nature.

The world was not immune from human suffering until the last two centuries, nor had Christians ceased reading the Bible until recently. Why then did what now seems so obviously true only become blatantly evident after nearly two thousand years of Christian theology? Simply put, according to many contemporary theologians, Greek philosophical thought, especially Platonism, had hijacked bible revelation. The static, inert, self-sufficient, immutable and impassible God of Platonic thought usurped, via Philo and the early church Fathers, the living, personal, active, loving and so passible God of the Bible. This philosophical and theological deformity, having entered into the very genetic make-up of the Christian Gospel, bred its mature distorted offspring within Scholasticism, especially in the writings of Aquinas. Only relatively recently, especially in the wake of Hegel with the rise of Process Philosophy, have theologians perceived the extent of the deformity and so been able therapeutically to redesign the authentic genetic structure of the Christian Gospel. Actually, the curative procedure is easily done. One only needs to hold now that God is neither immutable nor impassible, but is both mutable and passible, and so he suffers. Presto, the Christian Gospel is once more, philosophically and theologically, its vibrant self.

I would acknowledge that the above arguments are, even in the brief summary form that I have presented them, intellectually and emotionally persuasive, though often the emotional sentiment appears to far outdistance reasoned argument. Nonetheless, I believe that the entire project on behalf of a passible and so suffering God is utterly

misconceived, philosophically and theologically. It wreaks total havoc upon the entire authentic Christian Gospel.

Because the matter of a suffering God incorporates so many philosophical and theological issues, I will not be able to address them completely here, having done so in my book. Nonetheless, here I wish briefly to offer some of the more pertinent arguments in favour of the traditional belief that God is impassible and so does not suffer. The first issue that must be examined is the nature of God as revealed within the biblical narrative, for ultimately the question of his impassibility or passibility must be in conformity with it.

### **God: The Presence of the Wholly Other**

Undeniably, the Old Testament speaks of God as though he did undergo, at different times and in diverse situations, emotional changes of state, including that of suffering. However, I believe that such passages must be understood and interpreted within the deeper and broader revelation of who God is. While the Old Testament does not philosophically or theologically address the issue of God's impassibility or passibility, yet it does provide the revelational context from which it must be examined. This context consists in rightly discerning the biblical notion of God's transcendence and immanence. The manner in which God both transcends the created order and is present to and immanently acts within the created order will ultimately control whether he is impassible or passible. Now, within the Old Testament, it is precisely the very immanent actions of God that reveal the character of his transcendence. What then do these immanent actions reveal about the transcendent God?

God, in initiating the covenant and acting within it, manifested that he possessed at least four fundamental characteristics that set him apart as God. First, he is the One God. While the Old Testament never treats the philosophical issue of 'the One and the Many', yet the more the unique oneness of God matured within the biblical faith the more God was differentiated from all else – the many. Thus, to say that God is one not only specified that there is numerically only one God, but also that, being one, he is distinct from all else. His oneness speaks his transcendence. Second, God is the Savior. As Savior his will and actions are not frustrated by worldly power or might, or by the vicissitudes of history, or even by the limitations of the natural physical order. Thus, the very same immanent salvific actions of God

that manifested his relationship to his people equally identified his complete otherness. God could be the mighty Savior only because he transcended all this-worldly and cosmic forces. Third, the mighty God who saves is the powerful God who creates. As Creator, God is intimately related to and cares for his good creation, particularly his chosen people, and yet, as Creator, he is not one of the things created, and is thus completely other than all else that exists. Fourth, God is All Holy. God sanctified the Israelites for they were covenanted to him as the All Holy God. God's holiness distinguished him (the root of the Semitic word means 'to cut off') from all that was profane and sinful. Even when the Israelites defiled themselves by sin and infidelity, God himself was not defiled, but rather it is specifically because he is the transcendent (the 'cut-off') Holy One, and so incapable of being defiled, that he could restore them to holiness.

For God, then, to be transcendent does not mean that there are certain aspects of his being which are distinct from those aspects of his being which allow him to be immanent. For the Old Testament, that which makes God truly divine and thus transcendent is that which equally allows him to be active within the created order and so be immanent. To say that God is the One All Holy Creator and Savior is to express his immanent activity within the created order as the one who is not a member of that created order. This is the great Judeo-Christian mystery, which finds its ultimate expression in the Incarnation: He who is completely other than the created order can be present to and active within the created order without losing his complete otherness in so doing. To undermine the transcendent otherness of God in order to make God seemingly more immanent undermines the very significance of his immanence. The importance of God's immanent activity is predicated in direct proportion to his transcendence. It is precisely because God transcends the whole created order of time and history that his immanent actions within time and history acquire singular significance. The one who is in the midst of his people is 'The Lord [who] is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary, his understanding is unsearchable' (Is 40:28, also see the whole of chapters 40-45).

From within this biblical context of the immanent activity of the totally transcendent God, God is said to undergo emotional changes of

state or even to change his mind. While such statements are saying something literally true about God, they are, I believe, not to be taken literally. Such statements do wish to inform us that God is truly compassionate and forgiving. He does grieve over sin and is angry with his people. However, such emotional states, firstly, are predicated not upon a change in God but upon a change within the others involved. God is sorry that he created human beings (Gen. 6:6-7) or that he appointed Saul king (1 Sam. 15:11, 35) because they have become sinful. He relents of his anger and threatened punishment of the Ninevites (Jon. 4:2) or of the Israelites because they have repented (Ex. 32:14). Such reactions or changes predicated of God actually express a deeper truth – that of God’s unchanging and unalterable love and justice as the transcendent other. It follows, secondly, that God is said ‘to change his mind’ or is portrayed as undergoing differing emotional states precisely because, as the transcendent God, he does not change his mind or undergo emotional changing states. ‘God is not a human being, the he should lie, or a mortal, that he should change his mind’ (Num. 23:9 also Pss. 110:4, 132:11, Ezek 24:14). The very language used, such as compassion, sorrow, suffering, anger, forgiveness, and relenting, seeks to express God’s unswerving and unalterable transcendent nature as the One All Holy God who is Savior and Creator. The predication of various emotional changes of state within God are not literal statements of his passibility, but illustrate and verify the literal truth that God, being transcendent, far from being fickle as men are, is unalterably, within all variable circumstances, all-loving, all-good, and all-holy.

Some argue that such an understanding of the biblical notion of God only demonstrates his ethical immutability, that is, that he is consistently true to himself as morally good and loving and not necessarily that he is ontologically immutable. However, I will now argue that, for God to be ethically immutable, unchangeably loving and good, demands that he is ontologically immutable, that is, ontologically unchanging in his perfect love and goodness.

### **The God of the Early Fathers**

While the Fathers of the Church are often accused of transforming the living, loving, compassionate, and personal God of the Bible into the static, lifeless, inert, and impersonal God of Greek philosophy, this is blatantly false, though there was the occasional



misstep. What the early Fathers, such as Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Tertullian, and Novatian, brought to the longstanding philosophical colloquium concerning the nature of God was not primarily their own philosophical acumen, but their faith in the biblical God. In keeping with biblical revelation, as opposed to pagan mythologies, they were concerned with upholding the complete otherness of the one God in relationship to the created order. They actuated and clarified, against Platonism and Aristotelianism, that God did not merely order or set in motion pre-existent matter but that, by his almighty power, he created all out of nothing – *creatio ex nihilo*. God was then no longer merely at the pinnacle of a hierarchy of being, but his transcendence, as Creator, radically placed him within a distinct ontological order of his own. As such, he was the perfectly good and loving personal God who eternally existed in and of himself.

In order to accentuate these positive biblical attributes the Fathers predicated of God a whole cluster of negative attributes some of which are directly biblical in origin and some of which came from philosophical reflection. These negative attributes served a twofold purpose. They primarily were employed to distinguish God from the created order, but in so doing, they equally gave more noetic content to the positive attributes. For example, unlike the anthropomorphic pagan gods, God was incorporeal and so did not possess physical feelings, passions, and needs such as pain, lust, and hunger. This enhanced in turn the spiritual nature of his being. In the light of this complementary and reciprocal interplay between these positive and negative attributes, the early Fathers insisted that God was immutable and impassible.

Negatively, God is immutable in the sense that he does not change as do creatures, but he does not change for positive reasons. God's immutability radically affirms and profoundly intensifies the absolute perfection and utter goodness of God, who as Creator, is the one who truly lives and exists. Because God's love is unchangeably perfect and so cannot diminish, he is then the eternally living God who is unreservedly dynamic in his goodness, love, and perfection. Similarly, while the divine attribute of impassibility primarily tells us what God is not, it does so for entirely positive reasons. God is impassible in that he does not undergo successive and fluctuating

emotional states, nor can the created order alter him in such a way as to cause him to suffer any modification or loss. Nor is God the victim of negative and sinful passions as are human beings, such as fear, anxiety and dread, or greed, lust, and unjust anger. For the Fathers, to deny that God is passible is to deny of him all such passions that would debilitate or cripple him as God. Almost all the early Fathers attributed impassibility to God in order to safeguard and enhance his utterly passionate love and all-consuming goodness, that is, the divine fervour and zealous resolve with which he pursues the well-being of his cherished people. Origen, for example, while ardently upholding God's impassibility, can equally speak of his 'passion of love' for fallen humankind. Even God's anger was not conceived by the Fathers as a separate passion or intermittent emotional state within God, but constitutive of his unchanging perfect goodness and providential care in the face of sin and evil.<sup>8</sup>

Augustine, building upon the earlier Patristic tradition, East and West, argued that God is both immutable and impassible and did so, like his predecessors, for entirely positive biblical reasons. For Augustine, because God, as the great I AM, is the fullness of life and being itself, and thus eternally perfect and loving, existing neither in time nor place, he is unchangeable for no change could possibly make him more eternally perfect in his goodness and love. It is precisely because God is immutably perfect that he can share with us, his mutable creatures, his unchangeable glory.

To know you as you are in an absolute sense is for you alone. You are immutably, you know immutably, you will immutably. Your essence knows and wills immutably. Your knowledge is and knows immutably. Your will is and knows immutably. In your sight it does not seem right that the kind of self-knowledge possessed by unchangeable light should also be possessed by changeable existence which receives light. And so my soul is 'like waterless land before you' (Ps. 142:6). Just as it has no power to illuminate itself, so it

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<sup>8</sup> Origen, *In Exech. Hom.* 6, 6. Translation in *The Early Christian Fathers*, H. Bettenson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956).

cannot satisfy itself. For ‘with you is the fountain of life’, and so also it is ‘in your light’ that ‘we shall see light’ (Ps. 35:10).<sup>9</sup>

Because God, as being itself, is eternally unchangeable, so he is also impassible. He is impassible not in the sense of lacking passionate love and goodness. Rather, it is precisely because he is all loving and good that he needs not undergo emotional changes of state depending upon temporal and historical circumstances.<sup>10</sup> It is this patristic heritage, especially through the writings of Augustine, that has influenced the whole of Western theological thought concerning the immutability and impassibility of God.

Thus, the present critique of the Fathers is entirely misconceived. Contemporary theologians wrongly hold that the attribute of impassibility is ascribing something positive of God, that is, that he is static, lifeless and inert, and so completely devoid of passion. This the Fathers never countenanced. The Fathers were merely denying of God those passions that would imperil or impair those biblical attributes that were constitutive of his divine being. They wished to preserve the wholly otherness of God, as found in scripture, and equally, also in accordance with scripture, to profess and enrich, in keeping with his wholly otherness, an understanding of his downright passionate love and absolutely perfect goodness.

### **God Does Not Suffer**

Aquinas brought new depth to this patristic, particularly Augustine’s, understanding of God and to why he is immutable and impassible. Creatures exist and so are in act, yet they constantly change because they continually actualize their potential either for good and become more perfect, or for evil and become less perfect. God is not in this act/potency scheme of self-actualization. God, Aquinas argued, is ‘being itself’ (*ipsum esse*) or ‘pure act’ (*actus*

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<sup>9</sup> *Confessions*, 13:19. Translation from H. Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

See also Augustine, *Confessions*, 7:4 & 11, 12:11, 13:2, 5 & 12; *City of God*, 8:6 & 11, 11:21, 14:19, 22:2; *Exposition on the Book of the Psalms*, 106:3, 132:11; *On the Gospel of John*, 1:8; *On the Trinity*, 1:3, 3:21, 4:1, 5:3, 5:5 & 6, 7:10, 15:7.

<sup>10</sup> See *Exposition on the Book of the Psalms*, 79:8, 83:10 and 106:31.

*purus*) and so cannot undergo self-constituting change by which he would become more perfect.<sup>11</sup> Two pertinent points flow from this.

First, by being pure act, God possesses the potential to perform acts that are singular to his being pure act. While we cannot comprehend how God, as pure act, acts, the act of creation is God acting as pure act whereby created beings are related to God as God is as pure act and so come to exist. Thus, the very act of creation that assures the wholly otherness of God is the very same act that assures creation's immediate, intimate, dynamic, and enduring relationship with God as God truly is in all his transcendent otherness. Second, as pure act or being itself, all that pertains to God's nature is in pure act. While God and rocks may both be impassible, they are so for polar opposite reasons. A rock is impassible because, being an inert impersonal object, it lacks all that pertains to love. God is impassible because his love is perfectly in act ('God *is* love') and no further self-constituting act could make him more loving. God is absolutely impassible because he is absolutely passionate in his love. Thus, creatures, and particularly human beings, through the act of creation are immediately and intimately related to God as he exists in his perfectly actualized love.

On the theological level, the persons of the Trinity are impassible for similar reasons. The Father is the pure act of paternity for he is the act by which he begets the Son in the perfect love of the Holy Spirit. The Son is the pure act of sonship for he is the act by which he is wholly the Son of and for the Father in the same perfect love of the Spirit. The Spirit is the pure act of love for he is that act by which the Father is conformed to be the absolute loving Father of the Son and the Son is conformed to be the absolute loving Son of the Father. Thus, the persons of the Trinity are impassible not because they are devoid of passion, but because they are entirely constituted as who they are in their passionate and dynamic fully actualized relationship of love. Creatures, as merely created, are immediately related to this trinitarian mystery of love and, human beings can actually abide within the very trinitarian relationships by being conformed by the

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<sup>11</sup> See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, Q. 3, 4, 9, & 10.

Holy Spirit into the likeness of the Son and so becoming children of the loving Father.

While I will now limit myself to speaking in terms of the one God rather than to the Trinity in order to simplify the grammar and syntax, what is said could be equally applied to the Trinity. Now, because God is fully actualized in his love and goodness, he cannot be deprived of that love and goodness which would cause him to suffer, for to suffer such loss would make him less than perfectly loving and good. Moreover, and here we touch the heart of the issue, it must be remembered, in accordance with the biblical notion of God, that while God is intimately related to creation as its Creator, he exists in his own distinct ontological order as the Creator. Therefore, the sin and evil that deprive human beings of some good and so cause them to suffer is contained wholly within the created ontological order and cannot reverberate or wash back into the uncreated order where God alone exists as absolutely good. If the sin and evil of the created order caused God to suffer, it would demand that God and all else would exist in the same ontological order, for only if he existed in the same ontological order in which the evil was enacted could he then suffer. This is why most of the theologians who espouse a suffering God intentionally advocate a panentheistic notion of God, that is, that while God is potentially more than the cosmos, yet the cosmos is constitutive of his very being. (Those theologians who espouse a suffering God, but not panentheism fail to grasp the logic of their own position.) Being ensconced within the cosmic order, God must necessarily assume all that pertains to that order including sin and the suffering it causes. However, if his very nature is constituted by his being a member of the cosmic order, then he can no longer be its all loving Creator. He becomes merely the one who attempts to bring order to the cosmic process after the manner of the Platonic Demiurge. Equally, since evil, which causes suffering, is the privation of some good, it would mean that a suffering God was deprived of some good and thus he would no longer be perfectly good. Moreover, if God, having lost his singular transcendence, is now infected by evil and suffering, then he too is immanently enmeshed in an evil cosmic process from which he, like all else, cannot escape. God may now suffer in union with all who suffer, and those who espouse a suffering God boast this to be of singular value,

but in so suffering humankind, and even God himself, are deprived of any hope of ever being freed from evil and so the suffering that it causes. There is no hope of divine justice ever setting things aright nor is there any hope of love and goodness vanquishing evil. The transcendent One All-Holy God of the Bible who, as Creator, is present to all creation, and who, as Savior, acts immanently within that creation, vanishes. Thus, a suffering God is not only philosophically and theologically untenable, but also religiously devastating, for it is at least emotionally disheartening if not actually abhorrent. However, the truly biblical God does offer hope.

### **The God of Love and Compassion**

Human beings have to enact various aspects of love depending on the situation. Sometimes love requires kindness or compassion or mercy or forgiveness. At other times, it demands corrections and even anger. However, because God's love is perfectly in act all aspects that pertain to that love are fully in act. God does not need, therefore, sequentially, in a passible manner, to enact these various facets of love in accordance with changing situations. God is always in 'go position'. For example, when a person repents of sin, God need not change the manner of his love within himself from being that of an admonishing love to that of being a forgiving love. If God did need, sequentially in a potency/act manner, to adapt and re-adapt and re-adapt himself again to every personal situation in every momentary instance, he would be perpetually entangled in an unending internal emotional whirligig. Correlatively, human beings are able to know in faith or even experience the various facets of God's fully actualized love in accordance with their personal situation. In sin, they experience God's love as rebuke and admonishment. In repentance, they experience God's love as compassion and forgiveness. But, it is God's unchanging love that is moving them and they experience that unchanging love in various ways as they move.

More specifically, God's compassion is then subsumed and contained within his perfectly actualized love, but now, unlike human compassion, devoid of the suffering which would render his love less than perfectly actualized. God is perfectly compassionate not because he suffers with those who suffer, but because his love fully and freely embraces those who suffer. The absence of suffering in God actually liberates God from any self-love that would move him to act to

relieve his own suffering. The absence of suffering allows God's love to be completely altruistic and beneficent. What human beings cry out for in their suffering is not a God who suffers, but a God who loves wholly and completely, something a suffering God could not do. Michael Dodds has perceptively written that 'if it were my friend's compassionate suffering itself that brought me consolation, then I would be in the peculiar situation of reacting in quite the opposite way to my friend's suffering from the way that he reacts to mine. For I would be taking some sort of joy in his suffering while he reacts rather with sadness at my own'.<sup>12</sup> It is love and not suffering that ultimately is at the heart of compassion, for it is love that brings true healing and comfort. Thus, for Aquinas, 'mercy is especially to be attributed to God, as seen in its effects, but not as an affection of passion'.<sup>13</sup> The truly compassionate person endeavours to dispel the cause of suffering, and thus God's mercy and compassion is most clearly manifested in his divine power and perfect goodness through which he overcomes evil and the suffering that it causes. While I would agree with Aquinas that mercy is not 'an affection of passion' in the sense that it is a passible emotional state within God, yet I would see it, nonetheless, as a positive facet of his perfectly actualized and so completely altruistic love.

### **The Impassible Suffers**

The compassion of God is seen then not in his suffering in solidarity with humankind, but in his ability to alleviate the cause of human suffering – sin. Here we witness the good news of the Gospel and its evangelistic importance. The eternal Son of God, sent by the Father, came to exist as an authentic man by the power of the Holy Spirit. In becoming man the Son assumed our fallen humanity inherited from Adam, and so, as one of us, lived a holy life of obedience to the Father which culminated in the offering of his life on the cross to the Father as a loving sacrifice of atonement for sin. Thus the Son of God, who is impassible as God, truly suffered and died as man and as a man truly rose bodily from the dead. The import of this,

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<sup>12</sup> M. Dodds, *The Unchanging God of Love*, p. 224.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, 21, 3. See also *Summa Contra Gentiles*, I, 91, 16.

in the light of the contemporary espousal of a suffering God, must be clearly grasped.

First, in accordance with the authentic christological tradition, the eternal, all-perfect, and immutable Son of God experienced, as man, human weakness, frailty, suffering and death in a truly authentic human manner. He who is impassible as God was truly passible as man. As Cyril of Alexandria poignantly put it: ‘The Impassible suffers.’<sup>14</sup> However, since it was the Son of God who suffered, did he not equally experience such suffering within his divinity? No, for suffering is caused by the loss of some good, and while as man the Son was deprived of his human well-being and life, he was not deprived of any divine perfection or good. Moreover, to hold that the Son suffered as God would mean that he experienced our human suffering in a mitigated divine manner, and thus that he did not truly experience authentic human suffering. God in the end would not truly experience suffering and death as men experience suffering and death. Ironically, those who advocate a suffering God, having locked suffering within God’s divine nature, have actually locked God out of human suffering.

Second, and most significantly, it was the human suffering and death of the Son, enacted on the stage of real history, that is salvific. In espousing that the Son of God suffered as God and that the Father suffered in union with his divine Son, contemporary theologians have reduced the passion and death of Jesus to a myth. What is taking place in history is but the mythical ahistorical expression of what is more importantly taking place within the Trinity itself. The overcoming of sin and the human suffering it causes is replaced by the more important concern of the Father and the Son extricating themselves from the suffering they have now experienced.

While these theologians hold that the Father suffered in solidarity with his Son, there is no biblical warrant for this view. Rather, the Father, while not condoning the execution of his Son, is well pleased that his Son, in faithful obedience, would willingly offer his human life to the Father out of love for humankind.

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<sup>14</sup> Cyril of Alexandria, *Ad Nestorium*, 4. See also *Ibid.*, 2 & 3; *Ad Nestorium*, 3, Anathema 12.



Third, the pleasure of the Father is witnessed in raising his Son gloriously from the dead. The bodily resurrection testifies that Jesus' offering of his human life was salvific, and thus that the human suffering and death he bore were of the utmost importance. To place the significance of the Son's suffering within his divine nature is to relegate his human suffering and death to insignificance, and thus to relegate all human suffering to insignificance. The fully human resurrection of Jesus not only authenticates the reality and even importance of human suffering, it equally ensures that sin and death and the suffering these cause have been vanquished. The suffering and death of the Son incarnate is the Father's answer to human suffering.

Fourth, human suffering can only rightly be interpreted within the light of Christ as head of his body, and so within an ecclesial context. Those who come to faith and are baptized into the risen Lord Jesus are united to him and so are confident, through the Spirit that dwells within them, that they, in the midst of their suffering, already share in his resurrection. Thus, they anticipate their own resurrection upon the return of Jesus in glory when he will right every evil and wipe away every tear. Moreover, as members of Christ's body, the Church, Christians find support within that entire body – the Saints in heaven and the saints on earth. This ecclesial confidence, as a member of the risen Lord Jesus' body, is completely absent within a theology of a suffering God. There one is merely 'consoled', in the midst of one's own isolated suffering, by God's co-suffering. While such consolation does not meet the test of its own meaning, it equally gives the impression that all men and women, regardless of their religious affiliation, experience such consolation. This undermines entirely Jesus' evangelistic summons to proclaim the good news to all the world, for there is now no need since whatever consolation there is to be had in the midst of suffering can be had apart from Christ. It is no longer Jesus who is the Father's answer to evil and the suffering it causes and in whom one finds consolation and hope; hope is merely lodged in some generic suffering being called God. While Christians, in their acts of compassion and love, are able to bring non-Christians within the orbit of Christ's own consolation and love, yet non-Christians can only fully participate in and so fully experience Christ's compassion and love if they themselves become Christians.

Fifth, Christians not only experience and interpret all their various forms of suffering in the light of Jesus their risen head, but they also realize that he too, as their head, continues to suffer with them, his body. Some of the Fathers, such as Origen and Augustine, basing themselves upon the New Testament, especially Jesus' declaration that Paul was persecuting him, argued that when Christians suffer, either because of their own sin or the sin that is committed against them, it is properly attributed to Jesus as their head.<sup>15</sup> In a real way it is not Christ who shares in the present sufferings of Christians, it is Christians who share in the present sufferings of Christ and so in their own flesh 'complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions' (Col. 1:24). While Christ has completed the work of salvation, yet the suffering of righteous men and women continues to be the sufferings of Christ who is the head of the body, and thus their sufferings are in completion of or the filling up of Christ's present sufferings. This suffering is the consolation and the glory of Christians. 'For if we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too' (2 Cor. 1:5). Equally, 'we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him' (Rom. 8:17).

I hope that in this brief article I have given a taste for the arguments that I develop more fully in my book. I am convinced that a suffering God destroys the whole of the Christian Gospel and the Good News that it embodies. Equally, I am convinced that the all loving God who does not suffer in himself, but who has suffered as man is the good news for all peoples and all nations for all times, for in that suffering the Son of God won our salvation and in his resurrection as man offers us eternal life.

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<sup>15</sup> See Origen, *Hom. in Leviticum*, 7 and Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, 62, 2. For passages from other Patristic and Medieval authors see H. de Lubac, *Catholicism* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), pp. 397-407.



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