

"In what sense (if any) can God's unlimited power and goodness be affirmed given the pervasive presence of evil in world process and world history?" In other words, this final question is "what is my theodicy?" It seems a simple enough question and an appropriate ending for a class named "God, Suffering and Evil", but the risk here is what if I am wrong? Not because of the class grade I'll receive, but what if my beliefs are wrong and I minister them to others incorrectly? My view of theodicy could make or break someone's relationship with God if I do not present it correctly. I am thankful that this semester we have studied a number of writers and theologians, so we have been exposed to various viewpoints on these matters. This allows me to highlight the theories I align with the most and test my conviction on those that I do not agree. Seminary truly does make you test your traditional religion!

Though raised in Catholic schools from 1st through 12th grade and I being a minister member of the United Church of Christ, I have always felt a personal relationship with God and with my interpretation of the gospel. Faced with this question and the materials of this class, I fall back on my ole-reliable logic, but now with some academic tools of support, "what does my gut tell me – how do I feel?" My theodicy stance follows my belief as Dr. Winters points out in the beginning of her book, *God's Power*:

1. God is all powerful – Omnipotent
2. God is good
3. Evil exist in the world (Case-Winters, 1990, P17)

I believe God doesn't stop it because God isn't required to do anything. God is not ours to control. What we define as evil, may not be evil to God at all, especially if it is something we choose to do.

That's my starting theory. I admit, I waiver on it depending on the situation, but this theory is my "ground zero". It helps me to see my world and the community I serve as part of God's love, regardless of circumstances. And I believe too many times we judge on circumstances and not conditions. The condition for me must be that I am loved by the all-powerful God at all times. Without that foundation, I surely will crumble.

Everything else around me are circumstances of life, nature, incorrect choices, fear and doubt. *"You of little faith," he said, "why did you doubt?" (Mat 14:31).*

Before I start writing a sermon, instead of a final academic paper, I'll outline my approach to landing where I have on my above theodicy. My self-questioning process follows:

- I. Who do I believe God is?
- II. What is evil and how does God feel about it?
- III. Are there exceptions to God's and power over evil?

WHO DO I BELIEVE GOD IS?

To uncover this answer for myself, we must go back to the beginning of this semester.

Though I have always considered myself "open-minded", "liberal" and a "modern thinker", I must admit I find my views aligned with traditional approaches to theodicy, especially the

theories of Augustine of Hippo. Central to his theodicy is the assertion that God is perfectly good, all-powerful, and the ultimate source of all creation. This is the view of God that I not only was raised to believe through my schooling and church, but as an adult, this is the view of God that I rely on daily. In Augustine's "City of God", *"God is described as the ultimate source of all goodness, all-powerful creator, who is completely transcendent yet intimately involved in the lives of creation."* (Augustine, Saint, Bishop of Hippo). Augustine describes God as eternal, unchanging, and the creator of all that exists. I follow his philosophy that God created everything good, as supported in God's biblical declaration Genesis 1:31 NRSV, *"God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day."* As Dr. Winters describes John Calvin's insisting, *"omnipotence cannot be defined simply as 'the ability to do that which is logically possible.' It is rather to God's 'ability to do whatever God wills.'" (Case-Winters, 1990, P43)* I follow this belief that God is not limited to metaphysical constraints. God's power transcends time, direction and human logic. With God, there are neither coincidences nor changes. God's will is intentional, "One of the chief benefits Calvin saw in this understanding of divine providence is that nothing is left to chance." (Case-Winters, 1990, P57).

God's nature as omnipotent and omnibenevolent underscores His role as a sustainer of creation. A view that author Elizabeth Johnson expands and emphasizes goes beyond God's love of humankind, but of all creation and God sustains the continuous re-creation

(evolution to some) of all that He has brought life to. *“...the divine creative power was operational not just once, “in the beginning” as told in the Genesis narrative, but continuously over time as the need arose... Even if one admitted a limited role for evolutionary development, the history of life came about by direct divine agency and unfolded according to a plan conceived in the mind of God.”* (Johnson, 2014, P32)

WHAT IS EVIL AND HOW DOES GOD FEEL ABOUT IT?

Augustine persuades that God does not create evil; instead, evil is a corruption or privation of the good. (Week 2 PowerPoint) Just as darkness is the absence of light, evil exists only where goodness is diminished. This understanding preserves God’s goodness, as evil is not a substance or creation but rather a deviation from the perfect order God intends. I remain a bit confused if I agree with Calvin’s assessment that evil ultimately serves God (Case-Winters, 1990, P71,73). I understand how creation is only present in the service of God, but evil does not seem the most “logical” service is it involves the suffering of others. Again, I remain conscious of using the word “logical” to refer to God’s will or intentions. *“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord. “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”* (Isaiah 55:8-9) God’s logic need not be clear to me in order to be valid. Augustine argues that *“God judged it better to bring good out of evil than to*

suffer no evil to exist.” Augustine On the Free Choice of the Will, III.ix.26 (Week 2

PowerPoint, 2024)

I, like Augustine, place the emphasis of evil on human free will. God has given humans the freedom to choose because of God’s love for us and desire for us to choose Him. For a more modern take, 20th century theologian, Karl Barth, speaks of divine love and freedom as being almost interchangeable phrases. “*God’s freedom is loving, and God’s loving is free.*” To quote Dr. Winter’s regarding the challenges of Barth’s views on omnipotence. (Case-Winters, 1990, P100) However, this gift of choice also introduces temptation and potential for moral evil. When we turn away from God and worship other things (materialism, capitalism, power, prestige, physical pleasure, etc.) , sin and suffering result. Thus, evil is a consequence of human choice, not divine action or inaction.

God’s justice and mercy are revealed in His response to sin. Why else would God design and implement the sacrifice of His son and greatest teacher ever, Jesus Christ? Dr. Winters describes Karl Barth’s Christological orientation, of which I very much agree and follow, “*Jesus Christ to be the embodiment of divine power and our only guide to what power means in relation to God... It is through Jesus Christ that we will learn the meaning and scope of operation of true omnipotence.*” (Case-Winters, 1990, P109-110) While God allows humans to face the consequences of their own actions, God also offers redemption through His grace. This duality illustrates God’s sovereignty and God’s desire for a restored

relationship with all of creation. God remains actively involved, drawing humanity toward full reconciliation. This reconciliation, for me, invokes the majesty of God's power. *"It is not that the power (of God) inspires worship, but that the worshipfulness is the power."*

(Case-Winters, 1990, P147) This may be my favorite quote from the semester. It aligns with a sermon I shared reflecting the text of Ephesians 1:11-14, *"In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory."*

ARE THERE EXCEPTIONS TO GOD'S LOVE AND POWER OVER EVIL?

My gut answer is an astounding "NO!" But we have studied this semester theologians and authors who have posed creditable arguments. We have also experienced life in this past Fall 2024 semester that would appear to be evidence of evil winning over good (or at least being elected...) Where is God in all this?

Many years ago, when I was in high school, we studied Fyodor Dostoevsky in an existential literature class. I remembered and we studied again this semester a character who gives this description, and I have never forgotten it, "I think if the devil doesn't exist, but man has

created him, he has created him in his own image and likeness. “ (Peterson, 1992, P59)

This excerpt reminds me that when faced with evil and suffering, don’t’ rush to judgement and external blame. The devil may be coming from the inside. This is how I feel about the theology that seeks to limit God’s love and power over evil, like Thomas Jay Oord. Though I would never challenge Oord’s knowledge, I do disagree with his logic in addressing God’s power. His questioning of biblical translation and the sabbath are heavily relied on human writings and not on lived experience, which is where our philosophies part ways. I do not base my faith in an all-powerful God dependent on whether the scriptural words are translated correctly, but on how I have known God’s presence in my life. God need not have written evidence to prove himself to me. For example, Oord argues that “*It is impossible for God to lie, for instance, because this would mean denying God’s necessary characteristic of being truthful...“Nothing is impossible for God” or “God can do all things” (is) not actually true, at least without numerous exceptions.*” (Oord, 2023, 31-32) This attempt to define God through human logical explanation does not sit well with me. I believe God “can’t” lie, as Oord describes, is not in the limitation of His ability, but in the limitation of His nature. The “can’t” is manifestation of His will. Just like I can’t see a child as sexual, it doesn’t mean it is a limitation of mine, it is utterly impossible because it is not anywhere in my nature to do so.

I fully believe in God’s ability to transcend human understanding. As I’ve learned from Augustine, God has the ability to transform our suffering into instruments of His grace and

mercy. Furthermore, Augustine emphasizes that God's providence ensures the ultimate triumph of good over evil. While evil may exist temporarily, it cannot undermine the eternal order established by God. From my experience, history itself is a narrative of divine intervention, guiding humanity toward its ultimate purpose: union with God. It is not always easy, suffering is tough, but my faith leads me to believe in an unchanging God, who has all power and will to bring me closer. I challenge myself and all believers to trust in God's wisdom, even when faced with life's trials. In my ministry I underscore the importance of aligning human will with divine will, recognizing that true freedom is found in seeking God rather than succumbing to disordered desires. And always including all of creation in the valued beauty of God.