

Theodicy at the margins: New trajectories for the problem of evil

Mark Stephen Murray Scott

University of Missouri

Theology Today

68(2) 149–152

© The Author(s) 2011

Reprints and permissions:

sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/0040573611405878

tj.sagepub.com



Abstract

Traditional theological approaches to the problem of evil seek to reconcile the reality of evil with divine goodness and omnipotence. Recent work in theodicy, however, has expressed deep dissatisfaction with theoretical "solutions" that operate in abstraction from real life situations of suffering. In this article I sketch a new category in theodicy that offers fresh perspectives on a theologically and philosophically stalled issue. Rather than formulate the problem of evil in global, abstract terms, theodicies at the margin formulate it in terms of particular, concrete situations of oppression. It draws from the theoretical resources of black, liberation, and feminist theology in particular to construct theodicies that speak to these marginalized groups in their irreducible particularity.

Keywords

theodicy, problem of evil, marginalization, oppression, philosophical and practical theology

Reflection on the problem of evil has operated at a high level of abstraction in contemporary philosophy and theology. Theologians and philosophers alike formulate the problem of evil in terms of the logical tension between the affirmation of divine goodness and omnipotence and the ubiquitous reality of evil. "Solutions" or responses to the logical problem of evil, called theodicies, attempt to give global answers to a global dilemma. Recent work in theodicy, however, has problematized overly abstract, strictly logical approaches to the problem of evil. Instead, there has

Corresponding author:

Mark Stephen Murray Scott, Department of Religious Studies, University of Missouri, 221 Arts and Science Building Columbia, MO 65211-7090

Email: scottms@missouri.edu

been a clarion call for pragmatic and socially engaged theodicies, that is, ethical and practical approaches to the problem of evil.¹

In keeping with the growing impulse to rethink theodicy along these lines, I would like to propose a new category that has the potential to revitalize the enterprise by suggesting new, creative avenues for theological reflection on the experience of suffering, specifically oppression, in the world. I call it *theodicy at the margins*. In what follows I will establish its essential characteristics and practical implications. In particular, I will: (1) define the category; (2) explain its theological underpinnings; (3) discuss its biblical foundations; (4) give some theological examples of the theodicy at work; and (5) assess its problems and prospects.

Theodicy at the margins refocuses the problem of evil through the lens of particular experiences of exploitation, thereby taking the perspective of the oppressed as its starting point. "Margins" signifies the marginalized in society: the underprivileged and powerless. It refers to the disenfranchised who experience oppression at the hands of those with power. It employs and expands on "contextual theologies" for its theoretical scaffolding. These include but are not limited to: feminist and womanist theology, black theology, and liberation theology. Hence, theodicy at the margins is a multifaceted, pliable category that encompasses multiple experiential and theoretical approaches to the problem of evil, which are united by their common concern with oppression and the call for liberation.

Moving theodicy in this new direction begins with two theoretical moves. Established approaches to the problem of evil such as free will, soul-making, and process theodicies attempt global answers to the global question of evil. Theodicy at the margins, conversely, attempts specific answers to specific problems of evil. It moves from the universal to the particular. Moreover, whereas standard theodical systems engage the problem of evil in highly rarified concepts and categories, theodicy at the margins attends to real life situations of oppression, such as domestic violence, economic exploitation, and racism. It moves from the abstract to the concrete. So, instead of asking "how do we reconcile the existence of God with the reality of evil?" it asks, "how do we reconcile belief in God with these situations of oppression?" It localizes the global problem of evil and transfers it from the sanitized setting of the ivory tower to the messy experience of real life.

Theologically, theodicy at the margins hinges on God's preferential option for the poor and oppressed. It sees God as the defender of the poor, widow, alien, and orphan. God shows special concern for the plight of the most vulnerable in society, those unable to care for their basic needs. Matthew 25 provides the theological locus for what I call an ethic of "the least of these." The authenticity of our faith and the criteria for our inclusion in heavenly bliss turns on our care for the hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, sick, and imprisoned. Christ says that our relation to

1. See, for example, John Swinton, *Raging with Compassion: Pastoral Responses to the Problem of Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007); Sarah Katherine Pinnock, *Beyond Theodicy: Jewish and Christian Continental Thinkers Respond to the Holocaust* (New York, NY: State University of New York Press, 2002); Kenneth Surin, *Theology and the Problem of Evil* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1986); Terrence W. Tilley, *The Evils of Theodicy* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2000).

people in dire straights determines our relation to him. If we reject them, he rejects us. If we embrace them, he embraces us. God identifies with the “down and out” to such a degree that Jesus says whatever we do for “the least of these” we do for him. They gives us a direct access to Christ. This provides an ethical paradigm to follow and a spirituality of suffering in solidarity with Christ. Since Christ was the ultimate victim of oppression, he identifies with those who suffer from victimization.

In addition to the ethic of the “least of these” that we glean from Matthew 25, theodicy at the margins searches the Bible for resources to interpret suffering and strive for liberation from oppression. Job and the ancient Israelites, for example, provide ancient analogues to contemporary situations of injustice and exploitation. Victims of oppression often identify with these biblical examples of unjust suffering and negotiate their experiences of oppression through creative and critical engagement with these biblical narratives. Correspondingly, theodicy at the margins redeploys biblical paradigms of redemption and liberation, particularly the exodus out of Egypt and the resurrection of Christ. So Scripture often plays a pivotal role in the unfolding of various theodicies at the margin. They interpret and reflect on particular situations of suffering through biblical narratives and paradigms of unjust oppression and liberation.

We see these types of theodicy at work in feminist, black, and liberation theology, for example. While these types of theology do not always explicitly construct a theodicy, they nonetheless wrestle with the problem of evil from particular theoretical and experiential vantage points. Serene Jones, for instance, explores the different faces of oppression against women, which can form the basis of a theodicy at the margins.² Likewise, James Cone looks at the problem of evil from the perspective of “black suffering.”³ Finally, Gustavo Gutiérrez examines the problem of poverty from the perspective of liberation theology.⁴ These types of theological reflections supply fertile ground from which we can begin to develop new, positive trajectories for theodicy.

A theodicy at the margins holds tremendous promise for thinking about the problem of evil. It brings theodicy down from the clouds into the streets of everyday life by moving from the abstract and global to the concrete and particular. It repositions theodicy from a cold, detached exercise in mental gymnastics to a robust, practical, ethical quest for liberation from all forms of oppression. It accents God’s preferential option for the poor and disenfranchised and Christ’s identification with “the least of these,” giving us a clear ethical agenda and stressing God’s solidarity with the oppressed.

2. Serene Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2000), 70–93.

3. James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997, rev. ed.), 150–78.

4. Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988, rev. ed.), 162–73; *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*, Matthew J. O’Connell, trans. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987), 39–49.

But it also poses potential difficulties. Its particularity might have some unintended consequences. A theodicy at the margins might run the risk of privileging one form of oppression over another. In its specificity it might lose sight of the suffering of other oppressed persons. It might also lead to a "martyr complex" where we fixate on our oppression rather than seek empowerment. Moreover, a critic might argue that it does not give us any answers: rather than explain the reality of evil, it simply tries to cope with it. Lastly, it seems to lack global relevance. A theodicy at the margins, that is, a theodicy constructed in the context of specific situations of oppression, would have to address these potential problems by joining in solidarity with related experiences of suffering and connecting a particular theodicy to the broader project of theodicy.

By shifting our focus to theodicy "at the margins" I do not imply that we ought to dispense with classic approaches to the problem of evil enshrined in philosophical theology. Many detractors have argued forcefully that traditional theodicy has failed, in part because it has neglected the experiential and pastoral dimensions of the problem. While I concede the latter point in part, I do not think we should rush to hasty judgments about the viability of theodicy, nor repudiate philosophical approaches *in toto*. We need to redefine the project of theodicy and rethink what constitutes success and failure in concert with philosophical theology, not in isolation from it. The way forward in theodicy, in my view, lies in the intersection between philosophical, systematic, practical, and pastoral theology, where we combine the need for logical, systematic coherence with a more robust ethical, pragmatic consciousness.

These, then, constitute the essential characteristics of a theodicy at the margins. It reframes the problem of evil from a strictly intellectual endeavor to an existential and ethical enterprise. It opens new horizons for thinking about the problem of evil in particular situations of oppression that global approaches often ignore or elide in their quest for global solutions. It searches for paradigms of suffering and liberation in Scripture in order to interpret and cope with contemporary situations of suffering. In short, it gives us fruitful new ways to conceptualize and engage the problem of evil, drawing from the insights of feminist and womanist, black, and liberation theology, which we can then expand to other contexts of oppression.

Author biography

Mark Stephen Murray Scott is a Visiting Assistant Professor in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Missouri. His monograph, *Journey Back to God: Origen on the Problem of Evil*, will be published with Oxford University Press in 2012. His articles have appeared in *Harvard Theological Review*, *Journal of Religion*, *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, and elsewhere.



Copyright and Use:

As an ATLAS user, you may print, download, or send articles for individual use according to fair use as defined by U.S. and international copyright law and as otherwise authorized under your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement.

No content may be copied or emailed to multiple sites or publicly posted without the copyright holder(s)' express written permission. Any use, decompiling, reproduction, or distribution of this journal in excess of fair use provisions may be a violation of copyright law.

This journal is made available to you through the ATLAS collection with permission from the copyright holder(s). The copyright holder for an entire issue of a journal typically is the journal owner, who also may own the copyright in each article. However, for certain articles, the author of the article may maintain the copyright in the article. Please contact the copyright holder(s) to request permission to use an article or specific work for any use not covered by the fair use provisions of the copyright laws or covered by your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement. For information regarding the copyright holder(s), please refer to the copyright information in the journal, if available, or contact ATLA to request contact information for the copyright holder(s).

About ATLAS:

The ATLA Serials (ATLAS®) collection contains electronic versions of previously published religion and theology journals reproduced with permission. The ATLAS collection is owned and managed by the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) and received initial funding from Lilly Endowment Inc.

The design and final form of this electronic document is the property of the American Theological Library Association.