

# **A Typology of Responses to the Philosophical Problem of Evil in the Islamic and Christian Traditions**

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## **Divine and Human Ways of Dealing with Evil**

Islam and Christianity both give accounts of how God deals with things like unbelief, sin, injustice, suffering, and alienation, things that we can bring together under the rubric of 'evil'. For Christians, God confronts evil by entering history to redeem his creation, primarily in Jesus Christ (soteriology). For Muslims, God deals with evil by sending messengers and books to guide humankind, culminating in Muhammad the Prophet and the Holy Qur'an (prophetology/*nubuwwa*). Shi'i Muslims add that God continues to guide and sustain the world through the Hidden Imam.

Although Muslims and Christians tell different stories of how God overcomes evil, we share the problem of how to cope with the fact that God has not yet eliminated evil completely. One can make long lists of the ways that we try to meet this challenge. We pray, protest, teach, obey God, agitate for political change, and wait patiently for God to act. The efficacy and rightness of these various means are sometimes subjects of vigorous debate. This can be seen, for example, in Christian disagreements over whether Christians may engage in warfare to solve political problems.

## **The Philosophical Problem of Evil**

The subject of this paper is another controversial way of coping with evil: explaining it. This means finding solutions to the philosophical problem of evil that emerges in questions such as the following. Why has God not yet eliminated evil? What is God like that he should coexist with evil? Is evil somehow good? And, why do the innocent suffer? This paper surveys the ways that Muslims and Christians have answered such questions and groups them into three types: 1) divine voluntarism, 2) optimism or best-of-all-possible-worlds theodicies, and 3) free-will theodicies. We will look at the broad sweep of both the Islamic and Christian traditions but make very few references to

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writings that are specifically Mennonite or Shi'i. However, views held by Shi'is and Mennonites are noted, and it will become apparent that I work within the traditional Mennonite affirmation of human free will.

### **Objections to Philosophical Reflection on Evil**

For some Muslims and Christians, raising the problem of evil borders on the blasphemous, and there is widespread feeling among Sunni Muslims that dwelling on this problem is a road to unbelief (cf. Qur'an 21:23). For some Christians, including some Mennonites, thinking through the problem is an inadequate response to evil, and compassionate ministry with the suffering is set forth in its stead. Mennonite pastor Leo Hartshorn articulates this view, contending that "intellectual answers do not adequately address the problem of evil. . . . Ethical action for another person's well-being takes precedence over untangling intellectual and theological pretzels."<sup>1</sup> A few modern Christian theologians have gone further and charged that supplying reasons for horrors insults the suffering, sanctions evil, and deadens initiative to oppose it.<sup>2</sup>

The opposition between thought and action implied in these claims can be misleading. Certainly, 'intellectual answers' do not eliminate evil by themselves. In most cases we need to do more than take up the pen to overcome it. And there are surely times when offering an explanation for tragedy is a sign of ignorance at best and a mark of complicity with the perpetrator of evil at worst. Yet, wrestling with the problem of evil among the suffering is an important part of expressing compassion. This problem often rears its head in the midst of religious competition and when religious frameworks fail to adequately interpret experiences of radical evil. Old answers ring hollow, and life no longer makes any sense. It is here that the philosophical problem of evil becomes a practical problem of finding reason to live within a particular religious tradition or even to live at all. In the face of despair at the irrationality of suffering and evil, especially all that has occurred in modern times, we cannot retreat from the problem of evil in the name of compassion. Silence is at times fitting until the shock of tragedy wears off. However, the battle to make sense of the senseless must eventually begin if evil is to be overcome.<sup>3</sup>

**A Three-Fold Typology of Responses to the Problem of Evil***1. Divine Voluntarism*

Divine voluntarism seeks to place God above the exigencies of reason implied in the problem. The divine voluntarism of the Ash‘ari theology that is fairly widespread in Sunni Islam well illustrates the type. The Ash‘aris uphold God’s exclusive power, unfettered will, and metaphysical self-sufficiency. God is subject to no external constraint, and he creates all things — evil included — without deliberation, cause, or rational motive. Since God wills what he wills without reason, inquiring into God’s purposes is not valid. As the Ash‘ari theologian al-Shahrastani (d. 548/1153) puts it, “It is not said, ‘Why did He bring the world into existence, and why did He create servants?’”<sup>4</sup> Thus for the Ash‘aris, God’s creation of evils such as unbelief and injustice are susceptible to no explanation except that God wills them. In fact, all that God wills is just, simply by virtue of the fact that God wills it.<sup>5</sup>

Divine voluntarism is also found in the Christian tradition, perhaps most rigorously in the Protestant reformer John Calvin (d. 1564). Calvin condemns all speculation into reasons for God’s acts, and, although he speaks of God’s ‘secret counsel’, he also asserts that God’s will does not have a cause outside that will, and he upholds the justice of God’s sheer will.<sup>6</sup>

It is easy to criticize the voluntarist view of divine justice on moral grounds. The Mu‘tazili theologians, about whom I will say more later, charge the Ash‘ari God with injustice and folly. How could God be just to predetermine that some disbelieve and then suffer punishment, and is not God a fool to command people to believe while simultaneously creating unbelief in them? Likewise, Calvin’s doctrine that God predestined the damnation of the wicked from eternity disturbs our moral sensitivities. However, these critiques assume that God’s activity should be rational and comprehensible to the human mind, and this is, of course, what Calvin and the Ash‘aris reject.

The predestination and the lack of what I will call ‘libertarian freedom’ in Calvinism and Ash‘arism raise a further ethical problem. Can human beings be held accountable to divine commands if they do not have free choice? This is not the place to go into the complexities of how predestinarians have tried to understand human action. Instead, I will borrow the term ‘compatibilist freedom’ from modern philosophy of religion to denote their core conviction that predestination is not incompatible with human choice and responsibility.

In compatibilist freedom, an external cause — either God or a secondary cause — determines our wills in such a way that we paradoxically perceive ourselves to be freely choosing and morally responsible for our deeds.<sup>7</sup>

I will be noting that each type of solution to the problem of evil does not yield a wholly predictable response on the ethical plane.<sup>8</sup> In the case of divine voluntarism, the exaltation of God's power and his radical freedom may evoke reverence and obedience before a mysterious and holy God. However, the notion of compatibilist freedom may prove unconvincing and may engender passivity and moral laxity in the face of predestination. At worst, perceived injustice or caprice in the inscrutable will of a voluntarist God may provoke disgust and rebellion.

Yet, the divine voluntarism of Ash'aris and Calvinists does not necessarily yield a capricious and inscrutable God, and this is because God predestines all things. Predestination implies a divine promise to complete the creation in the way predestined, and the content of what God has promised has been partially revealed in scriptures. Ash'aris and Calvinists also usually trust God to bring them to some end which they deem good for themselves, namely, Paradise. In this case there is a correspondence between divine and human value in the workings of God's will that contradicts a full rejection of divine rationality. Ultimately, divine voluntarism falls into the paradox of asserting that God works outside the realm of human rationality while speaking rationally of God's relationship with humankind.<sup>9</sup>

## *2. Best-of-all-Possible-Worlds Theodicies/Optimism*

In contrast to divine voluntarism, theodicies argue that God does indeed have reasons for creating a world in which there is evil, even if human beings cannot always fully comprehend them. Marilyn McCord Adams helpfully distinguishes two broad strands of theodicy in western Christian thought, and this may be extended to Islamic thought as well. The 'best-of-all-possible-worlds' strand argues that evil is necessary or inevitable to God's creation of the best possible world, while the 'free-will' strand maintains that the great goods of human dignity and freedom justify God's creation of a world so full of evil.<sup>10</sup> The best-of-all-possible-worlds theodicy, also called optimism, forms the second type in my typology and free-will theodicies the third type.

Optimism maintains that God fully determines all existents and that everything God creates is wholly good and the best possible from God's

perspective. Evil is only evil relative to us, and it is nothing more than an instrument in God's creation of the best possible world overall. Here we must ask: What kind of value calculus is at work in God's will that makes this world, so evidently full of evil, the best of all possible worlds?

Arthur Lovejoy shows in *The Great Chain of Being* how the Neoplatonic value of 'plenitude' was employed to answer this question in medieval Christian theology and then in the optimism of the eighteenth century. In Neoplatonism, the ineffable One, which is beyond 'being', overflows and emanates the world. 'Being' or 'existence' as such is good, perfect, and beautiful. Evil is explained metaphysically as non-being and imperfection, which are most acute at the farthest reaches of the divine effusion. Moreover, following what Lovejoy calls the 'principle of plenitude', the One fills the universe with every imaginable variety of creature in a 'great chain of being' that extends from the highest possible perfection down to the least. This world is better the more existence and diversity it contains, and the best possible world is one that contains every possible evil.<sup>11</sup>

In much medieval Christian thought, as for example in Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274), and then most fully in Leibniz (d. 1716) and other eighteenth-century optimists, moral and natural evil were interpreted in light of the metaphysical sense of evil as non-being and privation.<sup>12</sup> The principle of plenitude then served to explain the manifold evils in the world, and it provided a reason to make one's peace with reality and celebrate it as it was. However, the implication that every evil that exists is necessary for the greater good may also breed pessimism. The French writer Voltaire (d. 1778) attacked the eighteenth century's so-called 'optimism' because he deemed it less troubling not to have reasons for evil than to know that necessity required it from eternity. Being supplied with reasons for evils actually made them worse.<sup>13</sup> Earlier, I mentioned the similar criticism in some modern theology, namely that explaining evil only adds insult to injury for the suffering and serves to justify it.

Islamic best-of-all-possible-worlds theodicies sometimes explain God's creation of evil in terms of religious values instead of plenitude. Sufi optimism gives evil significance as an instrument of divine discipline on the spiritual path toward God.<sup>14</sup> The fourteenth-century scholar Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328), an important inspiration for modern Sunni revivalists, explains evil in a similar fashion. God creates evil for the wise purposes of purifying us through testing, deterring us from sin, and providing opportunity for us to develop

virtues such as humility and repentance. Interestingly, Ibn Taymiyya asks whether we should then sin in order to repent. He says that we should not, for this would be like drinking poison in order to take the antidote.<sup>15</sup>

For other Muslim optimists, evil is necessary for knowledge. The well-known Sunni al-Ghazali (d. 505/1111) notes that things are known only by their opposites. Thus, illness is necessary to enjoy health, and Hell is necessary so that those in Paradise realize their blessedness.<sup>16</sup> The tenth-century Sunni theologian al-Maturidi (d. 333/944) explains that God in his wisdom creates evil as a tool to lead human beings to knowledge of God. In its own peculiar way, evil shows the contingency of the creation and thus its need for the Creator. Moreover, the wise way in which God combines harmful and beneficial things leads to knowledge of His unity.<sup>17</sup>

With the Sufi theosophy of Ibn 'Arabi (d. 638/1240), which has had significant influence in both the Sunni and the Shi'i worlds, we again notice the imprint of the Neoplatonic principle of plenitude.<sup>18</sup> For Ibn 'Arabi, God's intention in giving existence to the universe is to make himself known. In all things, God reveals his names, names like All-Merciful, Giver of Death, and Giver of Life. These names extend in number far beyond the traditional ninety-nine to encompass every possible form of existence. Evil and imperfection do, in some sense, obstruct obedience to divine Law. Yet, in another sense, evil is nothing more than privation and 'otherness' from God, and it is necessary to give God opportunity to manifest the great diversity of his names.<sup>19</sup>

Just as Leibniz has drawn contradictory responses in the western Christian tradition, so also has Ibn 'Arabi among Muslims. Defenders of Ibn 'Arabi explain that his intention is not to undermine the divine Law but to guide people to happiness through it. Yet, his thought has been used for antinomian ends. Some reduce the notion that everything in existence reveals God to a monism in which everything is divine. Then, they argue that since all things are divine no distinction between good and evil remains, and everything becomes licit.<sup>20</sup>

In sum, the aim of these theodicies is usually to engender obedience and trust in God by inspiring awe at his perfect creation or by explaining evil as an instrument of divine training. Optimism can also provide hope and comfort in the midst of suffering that God will work everything out for the best in the end, and it can be a source of strength to accept what is and to move on to other things. Conversely, optimism with its inherent determinism suffers from the same problem of denigrating human freedom that is found in

divine voluntarism. At best, human freedom is compatibilist, and at worst, optimism reduces to a monism that abolishes moral categories completely. Moreover, best-of-all-possible-worlds theodicies may engender depression and disgust at the necessity of such a horrible world and God's inability to do better.

This brings us to a metaphysical difficulty with optimism: it endangers God's omnipotence and freedom. Lovejoy points out that there are two conflicting senses of divine goodness at work in Plato, Neoplatonism, and, by extension, much medieval Christian theology. The first sense corresponds to the values of divine voluntarism. God's goodness consists in being self-sufficient and totally without need for a world. If God had never created the world, he would have been no less God, and he is no better off for having created it. The second, and very different, sense of God's goodness is generosity and productivity. A good God will necessarily create, as in the Neoplatonic vision of the One that by its very nature emanates the world from eternity. Here God would not be God without his world.<sup>21</sup>

Lovejoy explains that these contradictory notions of God's goodness sit uncomfortably side-by-side in medieval Christian thought from Augustine onward, with divine self-sufficiency holding pride of place.<sup>22</sup> Aquinas, for example, employs the principle of plenitude to make sense of evil, and he saves God from the caprice of voluntarism by arguing that God's goodness controls his creative will. Yet, Aquinas evades the necessitarianism implicit in these ideas to preserve God's free choice in creation and the possibility that God could have created a better universe.<sup>23</sup>

In the Islamic tradition, however, the philosopher Ibn Sina (Avicenna, d. 428/1037) gives full rein to God's productive goodness in eternally emanating the best possible world, and he draws sharp critique from both medieval and modern defenders of God's freedom. A recent study argues that Ibn Sina's emanation scheme nullifies his claim that God wills and intends good. Ibn Sina's God could never will or intend anything, and therefore cannot be held responsible for evil because he is nothing more than "an instrument in the hands of necessity."<sup>24</sup> Such criticism of Ibn Sina is not new; al-Ghazali articulated it some nine centuries ago.<sup>25</sup>

From this discussion, we see that even though optimism posits a God who is the all-powerful and exclusive creator, it raises doubts about God's freedom by subjecting his will to reason. As troubling as this might be for divine voluntarists, it need not disconcert us too much. After all, as mentioned

earlier, advocates of divine voluntarism themselves usually fall into the paradox of expecting God to be rational enough to carry out what he has predestined. In simpler terms, this means that God is personal and works with us in ways that we can understand, at least to some degree.

### 3. *Free-Will Theodicies*

Free-will theodicy shares with best-of-all-possible-worlds theodicies the conviction that God has a good reason for bringing forth a world in which evil occurs. However, it departs from them by admitting libertarian freedom in either of two ways.

First, modern Christian process theodicy posits a metaphysical limitation to God's power, which approaches the ancient dualisms of Zoroastrianism and Manicheism. God is not omnipotent in the sense that he could control every aspect of the universe, even if he wanted to. Instead, God is metaphysically confined to persuading — and in no way controlling — the ever-evolving universe toward the goods of greater intensity, complexity, and harmony.<sup>26</sup> Process theodicy relieves God of considerable responsibility for evil in the world because God is only doing what he can within the process metaphysic. However, the radical limitation of God's power to the point that God may not be able to bring the world to good ends denies Christian, not to mention Muslim, convictions about God's control of the future.<sup>27</sup>

In the second and more common way that free-will theodicies introduce libertarian freedom, God is not limited metaphysically. Instead, God chooses to limit his own power and freedom to make room for the freedom of creatures. The remaining free-will theodicies I discuss operate within this framework.

Christians, including Mennonites, have often resorted to what Marilyn McCord Adams calls a 'free-fall' version of the free-will theodicy. In this view, the great goods of human dignity and freedom led God to create humankind with free moral choice. God then respected human dignity by not interfering in human affairs. However, humans freely disobeyed God and fell from their originally good state. In the Augustinian account of this 'free-fall' theodicy, God set up a system of retributive justice in which humans earn rewards and punishments for their deeds and so ultimately deserve heaven or hell. In some modern free-fall versions, humans are not subjected to retributive justice but are left to reap the natural consequences of their acts.<sup>28</sup>

The moral intention behind free-fall theodicies is to encourage adults to take responsibility. The confident are energized to pursue their reward, and the threat of hell scares the lazy into doing good. However, the heavy load of responsibility may paralyze the fearful and the suffering, and it may create bewilderment and resentment when God does not rescue people out of respect for human dignity, even in the face of the most horrific evils. These difficulties with free-fall theodices have precipitated further Christian reflection in modern times.

British philosopher John Hick levels a sharp critique against the Augustinian theodicy, which employs the Neoplatonic notion of privation to explain how evil emerged out of God's good creation. Evil does not come from God or an independent metaphysical principle. Rather, it is a privation, which is fundamentally an absence and lacks an efficient cause, and it occurs when something ceases to be what God created it to be. Hick responds that evil as 'privation' does not stand up to the human experience of evil as a positive demonic power, and he wonders how sin could arise spontaneously out of nothing in good creatures. Moreover, he wonders, why did Augustinian's God bring the world into existence even though he knew in advance that it would go wrong?<sup>29</sup>

Adams expands on this moral objection when she argues that free-fall theodicies place far too much responsibility on Adam and Eve for instigating 'horrendous evils', which is Adams's term for tragedy or pointless evil. Free-fall theodicies make a moral appeal to adult responsibility-taking — either to take charge of one's fate or to act well enough to attain heaven. However, Adams believes that God's relation to humans is more like that of parents to small children than that of adults one to another. Along these lines, she likens the free-fall account to putting a three-year-old alone in a gas-filled room with a stove and telling him not to play with the stove's brightly colored knobs. Who is to bear the most blame here when the child blows the room up: the parent or the child? Obviously the parent. So, Adams argues, the great destruction wrought by horrendous evils far exceeds what retributive justice can rectify by meting out reward and punishment, and God must shoulder full responsibility for having set up such a world as this in the first place.<sup>30</sup>

In the Islamic tradition, the foremost advocates of a free-will theodicy are the Mu'tazili theologians. Mu'tazili theology passed off the scene in the Sunni world in the thirteenth century, but it was carried on by the Shi'ites,

especially in the work of the fourteenth-century Twelver scholar 'Allama Ibn al-Mutahhar al-Hilli (d. 726/1325).<sup>31</sup> Mu'tazilism has also enjoyed a revival among some Sunnis in the last century.

In the Mu'tazili theodicy, the reason God created human beings is to give them opportunity to earn reward. In line with this, God granted humans libertarian freedom, and he established a retributive order of justice. The Mu'tazilis also affirm that God must do the best (*aslah*) for his servants in matters of religion, and some theologians, such as 'Allama al-Hilli, extend God's obligation to do the best even to worldly affairs. Although humans are to blame for evil, the Mu'tazili free-will order entails a great deal of innocent suffering and pain, some of which God produces for the educational ends of testing, warning, and deterring. Because of this, God must compensate innocent sufferers in this world or in the hereafter.<sup>32</sup>

Ash'ari theologians reject the Mu'tazili theodicy for giving humans the ability to create their own acts and thereby violate God's uniqueness as the sole creator in the universe. They also tell a story of three brothers to show that the Mu'tazili God is not perfectly fair. One brother died young, and the other two reached maturity. One of these two became a believer, the other did not. God gave the believer a high rank in Paradise. The brother who died young received a lower rank in Paradise because he had not performed the good deeds of his brother. When the brother in the lower rank complained, God told him that he had taken his life early for his benefit because he would have become an unbeliever. At this, the third brother cried out from the depths of the Fire, asking why God had not taken his life before he fell into unbelief, for that would have been of benefit to him too.<sup>33</sup> As is evident from the story, our experience of life does not easily confirm a doctrine of God's absolute fairness. In reply to this story, later Mu'tazilis explained either that God took the life of the one brother young out of pure grace, not divine obligation, or that the good of the community required his early death but not the early death of the unbelieving older brother.<sup>34</sup>

Returning now to the Christian tradition, John Hick tries to overcome the moral difficulties in free-fall theodicies with a 'soul-making' theodicy. He begins with the developmental views of human nature found in Irenaeus (d. ca. 202) and Schleiermacher (d. 1834) and explains that God created human beings initially immature and at a distance from God. God created this world of sin and suffering as a 'vale of soul-making' in which God's aim is human

growth into the mature perfection of Christ and “the bringing of many sons to glory” (cf. Hebrews 2:10). Evil is instrumental in bringing about the final goal of a humanity perfected through the struggle of this world. Whether in this life or in the life to come, every human being will eventually respond to God’s love in freedom. This is the great good justifying God’s creation of this present world.<sup>35</sup>

In free-fall and soul-making theodicies, God chose to limit the scope of his power and make room for human agents with libertarian freedom. Even though human beings thus constitute a second source of agency in the universe and might be blamed for some of its evils, God remains responsible for having created this order in the first place. The Mu’tazili notion that God does the best for us and the Mu’tazili system of divine compensations show a concern to reduce the divine harshness entailed in this fact. This concern is all the more evident in Hick’s vision of universal salvation. Nonetheless, Adams still criticizes Hick’s God for being a bad educator who subjects some people to horrors that irreparably damage their ability to grow toward God in this life.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, it is unclear whether Hick’s God, who always leaves humans completely free from determinative causes, is consistent with the traditional Christian, and Muslim, hope that God will eventually intervene to set things right.

Adams makes this hope central to her own thought on evil. One of her points of contention is that retribution is not the only or even primary value category present in the Christian tradition. In addition to the metaphysical value of ‘being’ that prevailed in medieval theology, she argues that the Bible is filled with concern for purity and defilement and honor and shame. It also includes aesthetic elements in the irony of its plots, in God giving order to primal chaos, and in the beauty of the divine light. Ultimately, there are the goods of beatific vision, intimacy with God, and divine compassion and identification with humanity — as in the Christian doctrine of Incarnation — that overcome the horrible evils that humans suffer.<sup>37</sup>

Adams maintains that she does not intend to develop a theodicy. She says that it is too much to expect that victims of horrendous evils should ever find these evils reasonable enough to gladly go through them again.<sup>38</sup> Such evils by definition defy the ability of our conceptual frameworks to domesticate them as necessary to some greater good. Nonetheless, Adams does propose that this destabilizing function of evil is in fact “a *good* thing because it jolts us out of our complacency and propels us to search for deeper, more complicated truths” (italics mine).<sup>39</sup> Here, she comes closer to a theodicy

than she is willing to admit, and she is not far from Hick's soul-making version in giving evil a growth-inducing role. However, she goes beyond Hick to press the soteriological claim that only God can overcome the extraordinary damage that horrendous evils cause. As she colorfully puts it, "Horrors smash Humpty Dumpty so badly that only God can put him back together again."<sup>40</sup>

In order to allow God to causally determine some things so as to save the world from total destruction, Adams sacrifices the values of absolute human dignity and libertarian freedom often found in free-fall and soul-making theodicies. Nonetheless, she still retains a measure of free-will for her replacement values of relationship and love.<sup>41</sup> She also ventures that a 'partial reason' why God put us in a world such as this is that "God *loves* material creation" and desires to interact and join with other relational beings who have the capacity to love and be loved. This love led God to enter even the creation himself in the Incarnation. Shifting to soteriology, Adams explains that by suffering evil at the hands of his creation, God endowed participation in horrendous evils with a "good aspect" that enables participants in such evils not to wish their experiences away and to accept their lives as fundamentally good.<sup>42</sup>

I have given Adams the last word in this survey because I as a Christian find her approach the most helpful. Her proposals that only God can overcome horrendous evils and that God created a world such as this out of love fit well with the dramatic character of the Bible and Christian experience. However, Adams's work is problematic on at least one point. Her conviction that we never get beyond the status of unaccountable young children in our relationship with God leads naturally to her belief in universal salvation.<sup>43</sup> For Adams, God in his power saves all of us because none of us ever reaches an age of accountability. However, the Christian tradition, and especially the Mennonite tradition, has usually held that God in his love created us to grow beyond the level of young children. Some of us are held accountable before God for at least some things. Yet, this creates a further problem: How does this measure of human accountability relate to God's grace and unique ability to save? I doubt that this can be explained neatly, given the personal character of our relationship to God. Possibly, the ratio of God's saving intervention to human freedom varies according to where we find ourselves in the love story that God is writing with us and through us in history.

**Concluding Thoughts**

Adams does not claim to provide but a partial answer to the problem of evil, and as with other answers, it may make unredeemed tragedy worse when pronounced inappropriately, and it may prove inadequate in the long run. However, inadequate answers to the problem of evil do not invalidate the search for better solutions. To give up the search for meaning in tragedy is to give up on God and the goodness of life. The difficulty of the search keeps us humble, but the search itself is a sign that we believe that life is fundamentally worth living.

In this paper, I have tried to show that Christians and Muslims have faced similar philosophical problems and produced a similar range of thought in the search to understand God and evil. Each tradition has experimented with divine voluntarism, optimism, and free-will theodicies. Despite our different beliefs about how God intervenes to deal with evil, we share similar challenges affirming the rationality of life under God in the face of senselessness and tragedy.

In closing, I suggest that a fruitful line of further inquiry would be comparing how we have made sense of particular tragedies that are central to our religious traditions. For Mennonite Christians, the obvious place to begin is the death of Jesus Christ. For Shi'ah Muslims, I presume that it would be the martyrdom of Husayn.

**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Leo Hartshorn, "God and the reality of evil," *The Mennonite*, November 13, 2001, 6-7 (quote on 7).

<sup>2</sup> See the critiques of Kenneth Surin, *Theology and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 46-54, 61-67, 155; and Terrence W. Tilley, *The Evils of Theodicy* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University, 1991), 235-51, and passim.

<sup>3</sup> Dorothee Soelle, *Suffering*, trans. Everett R. Kalin (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1973), 144, makes this point well: "Love cannot resign itself to the senselessness of suffering and destruction. It cannot 'break itself of the habit' of inquiring about people who are beyond help."

<sup>4</sup> Al-Shahrastani, *Kitab nihayatu 'l-iqdam fi 'ilmi 'l-kalam*, ed. with English trans. Alfred Guillaume (London: Oxford University, 1934), 404 (Arabic). Death dates of Muslim scholars supplied in the text are given first according to the Islamic Hijri calendar and then according to the Gregorian calendar.

<sup>5</sup> For the Ash'ari views, see Peter Antes, "The First Aš'arites' Conception of Evil and the Devil," in *Mélanges offerts à Henry Corbin*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (Tehran: McGill University, Institute of Islamic Studies, Tehran Branch, 1977), 177-89; Mohammed Yusoff Hussain, "Al-Ash'ari's Discussion of the Problem of Evil," *Islamic Culture* 64.1 (1990): 25-38; and G. Legenhausen, "Notes

towards an Ash'arite Theodicy," *Religious Studies* 24 (1988): 257-66.

<sup>6</sup> On Calvin, see Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol. 4, *Reformation of Church and Dogma (1300-1700)* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1984), 217-32. The medieval theologian Duns Scotus (d. 1308) also held a strongly voluntarist view of God. For this see Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, vol. 2, *Medieval Philosophy: From Augustine to Duns Scotus* (1950; Reprint, New York: Doubleday, 1962), 529-34.

<sup>7</sup> I have adopted the vocabulary of 'libertarian freedom' and 'compatibilist freedom' from Richard Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University, 1998), 33-35. Some philosophers use different terms to refer to libertarian freedom. Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom and Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977), 30, speaks of 'significant' freedom, while Marilyn McCord Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 1999), 178, speaks of 'incompatibilist' freedom. See also Thomas P. Flint, "Providence and predestination," in *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Philip L. Quinn and Charles Taliaferro (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1997), 569-76. Neo-Thomists are particularly concerned to configure the compatibilist divine-human relation in order to make room for some kind of authentic freedom. For a sketch of recent attempts by David Burrell and Katherine Tanner, see Adams, 66-69. See also David B. Burrell, *Freedom and Creation in Three Traditions* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1993), who wrestles with this problem at length in dialogue with the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic religious traditions.

<sup>8</sup> I owe this insight to Adams, 190, but I extrapolate it beyond what Adams considers.

<sup>9</sup> J. L. Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," *Mind* 64 (1955):200-12, explores this paradox insightfully in somewhat different terms as the 'paradox of omnipotence'.

<sup>10</sup> Adams, 17-20, 179, and 190.

<sup>11</sup> Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1966), 45-66. This description of Neoplatonism based on Lovejoy has been augmented from Adams, 139-40, and John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 2d ed. (London: Macmillan, 1977), 40-43, 49-50.

<sup>12</sup> Lovejoy, 213 and passim. See also Adams, 63-64, and Thomas Aquinas on evil in *Summa Theologica* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1963), 1a. 44-49 (8:107-47).

<sup>13</sup> Lovejoy, 210-11.

<sup>14</sup> Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 198.

<sup>15</sup> See my thesis, "An Islamic Theodicy: Ibn Taymiyya on the Wise Purpose of God, Human Agency, and Problems of Evil and Justice" (Ph.D. thesis, University of Birmingham, UK, 2002), 237-44, and 276 n. 73.

<sup>16</sup> Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, *Ihya' 'ulum al-din*, 5 vols. (Beirut: Dar al-ma'rifa, n.d.), 4:258-259 (at the end of "Kitab al-tawhid wa al-tawakkul").

<sup>17</sup> J. Meric Pessagno, "The uses of Evil in Maturidian Thought," *Studia Islamica* 60 (1984): 59-82.

<sup>18</sup> For the wide impact of Ibn 'Arabi on Sufism in the Sunni world, see Michel Chodkiewicz, *An Ocean Without Shore: Ibn 'Arabi, The Book, and the Law*, trans. David Streight (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1993), 1-18. Ibn 'Arabi's thought is also an important source for the Twelver Shi'i Hikma-i Ilahi school of Isfahan associated with the name Mulla Sadra (d. 1050/1640). For this, see Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 1985), 217.

<sup>19</sup> William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-'Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989), 33-44, 289-97.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 289-309.

<sup>21</sup> Lovejoy, 39-66, 82-98, 156-63, 315-16.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 67-73.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 73-82. Augmented from Hick, 93-96.

<sup>24</sup> Shams C. Inati, *The Problem of Evil: Ibn Sinâ's Theodicy* (Binghamton, NY: Institute of Global Cultural Studies, Binghamton University, 2000), 127-73, quote on 147.

<sup>25</sup> Al-Ghazali, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, Ar. ed. of *Tahafut al-falasifa* and English translation by Michael E. Marmura (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, 1997), 56-78 (Third Question).

<sup>26</sup> David Ray Griffin, *God, Power, and Evil: A Process Theodicy* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1976), 275-310.

<sup>27</sup> This problem of divine power in process theology and other modern theology is treated at length in Paul S. Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering of God* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University, 1988). See also Adams, 78-80, 159-61.

<sup>28</sup> Adams, 33-49. For a theodicy in which humans reap the natural consequences of their acts, see Swinburne, 196-201.

<sup>29</sup> Hick, 38-69, 265-71.

<sup>30</sup> Adams, 36-41, 190. Hick, 69, makes the same point less forcefully.

<sup>31</sup> For 'Allama al-Hilli's Mu'tazili-style thought on divine justice, see Sabine Schmidtke, *The Theology of al-'Allama al-Hilli (d. 726/1325)* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz, 1991), 99-141.

<sup>32</sup> Margaretha T. Heemskerck, *Suffering in Mu'tazilite Theology: 'Abd al-Jabbar's Teaching on Pain and Divine Justice* (Leiden: Brill 2000), 142-91, especially 151-53, 178 and 191. For 'Allama al-Hilli on God's obligation to do the best for humans in worldly affairs, see Schmidtke, 109-15.

<sup>33</sup> On the history of this story among the Ash'aris, see Rosalind W. Gwynne, "Al-Jubba'i, al-Ash'ari and the Three Brothers: The Uses of Fiction," *The Muslim World* 75 (July-Oct. 1985): 132-61.

<sup>34</sup> Schmidtke, 115-16.

<sup>35</sup> Hick, 201-386. Hick also draws into his framework the *felix culpa* noted by Aquinas and employed by later Catholic theologians. This is the notion that human sin gave opportunity for the good of God's redemption, which is a much greater good than no sin at all. This is found in the following lines that have been part of the Roman Catholic liturgy for the evening before Easter since at least the seventh century, "O truly necessary sin of Adam, which is cancelled by Christ's death! O happy fault (*felix culpa*) which merited such and so great a redeemer!" (Text quoted with slight changes from Hick, 244 n. 1, see also 97-98, 107-14, 176-77, 244, 364). For a 'soul-making' theodicy worked out in a context of world religions, see Brian Hebblethwaite, *Evil, Suffering and Religion*, rev. ed. (London: SPCK, 2000).

<sup>36</sup> Adams, 52-53.

<sup>37</sup> Adams, 86-139, 161-77.

<sup>38</sup> Although Adams does not draw theodicies out of most of the value frameworks that she identifies in the biblical texts, her discussions do suggest directions that such theodicies could take. In looking at honor and shame, for example, Adams elaborates how in Exodus 3-15 God was initially of no reputation before Pharaoh or even with the Children of Israel but then won "an extended game of challenge and riposte" in the course of visiting the ten plagues upon Egypt. God worked this game so that in the end He could "strut His stuff" by disposing of Pharaoh and his chariots in the Reed Sea (114-19). The theodicy implied in this story is that evil and the ensuing drama it provoked was necessary for God to show His power and thereby garner praise from His

client Israel. It may be objected that God thus requires our human misery to give Him opportunity to show off His power. While this may indeed be morally problematic, an explicit theodicy of this kind does occur in the New Testament. Jesus explains to his disciples that a certain man was born blind not because he or his parents had sinned but “that God’s works might be revealed in him.” Jesus then gave the man his sight, and this provoked an ordeal affording Jesus the opportunity to get the better of the religious leaders of his day (John 9).

<sup>39</sup> Adams, 203-04, quote on 204.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 205.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 157. Adams suggests that if God determines some things causally, this is “no more an insult to our dignity than a mother’s changing a baby’s diaper is to the baby” (157).

<sup>42</sup> Adams, 165-68.

<sup>43</sup> This is most apparent in Adams’s argument against various kinds of free-fall theodicies, including the notion of a ‘mild hell’ for those who freely reject God. Rather, she understands that God will be good to each person “by insuring each a life that is a great good to him/her on the whole, and by defeating his/her participation in horrors within the context, not merely of the world as a whole, but of that individual’s life” (32-55, quote on 55).