THE DIVINE *APATHEIA* AND THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

by

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I. Introduction

The concept of the divine *apatheia*, or the impassibility of God, is thought by many to be a genuine problem in light of the existence of evil in the world. In the context of human suffering, believers have often drawn comfort from the belief that God, in some sense suffers with them, shares in their experiences of sorrow and loss, and is thus able to empathize with them in their weakness. The incarnation of God the Son who takes upon himself all of the limitations of frail humanity, and who, through his death on the cross, enters into human suffering, is often the *locus* of this conviction. And yet a tension becomes apparent when we place this idea of a suffering God, alongside of the classical Christian doctrine of the divine impassibility. If God is a Being whose essence equals his existence, a Being in whom there is no contingency, no change, no potentiality, how can we say in any coherent sense, that he suffers with his creation, that he experiences its pain? Even more unsettling is the question of whether God can be said to be a God of love, if he is incapable of passion.

In this paper, I would like to survey the history of this problem, taking note of some of its proposed solutions, indicating the degree to which one may reverently critique the traditional view, while retaining the sovereign freedom of God over his creation. The

charge that the traditional view renders the problem of evil more acute will also be considered.

II. Some Definitions

The word "impassibility" considered in classical theology to be a divine attribute, is derived from the Latin root, *passio*, meaning "suffering." It is the equivalent of the Greek words *pathema*, (παθημα) and *pathos* (παθος).[1] The English word "passion," is often used in reference to inappropriate feelings of strong desire, sometimes with strongly sexual overtones, or in connection with fits of anger and other intense emotional states. This has led to some degree of misunderstanding over its use by many contemporary theologians in reference to God's suffering, pain, sympathy, sorrow, and so on.

Among Greek theologians, the word απαθεια ("apatheia") - the negative prefix α, denoting "no" or "not" - refers to the inability of God to experience passions of any kind. God experiences "no suffering," "no pain," because to do so would be to be acted upon, and this cannot be said of an Absolute Being. Again, we may be led into misunderstanding through our English usage, where "apathy" means an attitude of careless indifference, and indeed this is how some have conceived of God - as the Unmoved Mover, sitting passionless in the heavens unmoved by the plight of the cosmos.[2]

Traditional theism has usually denied three types of divine passibility.

1) External passibility, or the capacity to be acted upon from without.
2) Internal passibility, or the capacity for changing the emotions from within.

[1] *Passio* was used in the Latin Vulgate to translate both of these Greek words.

[2] I have in mind, both the Platonic "First Cause," and the Deistic "watchmaker."

3) Sensational passibility, or the liability to feelings of pleasure and pain caused by the action of another being.[3]

The question must be asked whether such a portrait of God, as a being without passions of any kind, matches with that found in Holy Scripture.

III. The Biblical Portrait of God

The concept of God as a being without "passions" seems to be at odds with the Old Testament portrayal of God as an active Covenant God creatively and passionately interacting with his people. He loves and hates; grows angry, and is placated in his anger; is jealous and generous; patient and wrathful. Such descriptions are usually thought of as anthropomorphisms - or more technically, in this case, anthropopathisms - ascribing to God human feelings in order to communicate the mystery of his being to fallen creatures, by way of the principle of analogy. They are not to be understood, so it is maintained, as ontological statements about the divine nature itself, but only as accommodations to human weakness.

In the New Testament, and perhaps especially in the doctrine of the Incarnation, we also read of the capacity of God to enter into suffering in his interaction with his creation. According to R.S. Franks, it is "the fundamental New Testament doctrine of God's Fatherhood [which] suggests the very reverse of His impassibility."[4] Maldwyn Hughes in his early twentieth century study of the atonement, strikes a similar chord, focusing on the love of God as evidence against divine impassability.

[3] F.L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone, eds. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), 694. Cited in Warren McWilliams. *The Passion of God: Divine Suffering in Contemporary Protestant Theology*. (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1985), 5.

[4] R.S. Franks, "Passibility and Impassibility," in James Hastings, ed. *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1928) IX: 658, cited in McWilliams, 10.

> We must choose whether or not we will accept the Christian revelation that "God is love." If we do, then we must accept the implications of the revelation...It is an entire misuse of words to call God our loving Father, if He is able to view the waywardness and revelation of His children without being moved by grief and pity...It is the very nature of love to suffer when its object suffers loss, whether inflicted by itself or others. If the suffering of God be denied, then Christianity must discover a new terminology, and must obliterate the statement "God is love" from its Scriptures.[5]

How then, given the biblical portrayal of God, did the doctrine of the divine impassability develop in the history of the church's dogmatic reflection?

IV. The History of the Idea of the Divine *Apatheia*

The hellenization of Christianity had earlier been preceded by the hellenization of Judaism, as represented in the work of the Jewish philosopher, Philo of Alexandria (c. 350 BC - 45 AD). Philo has been thought by many to have distorted the biblical concept of Yahweh, the Covenant God of Israel into the Impersonal Absolute of the Greek philosophical schools. However, it is also possible to trace a resistance in Philo to any complete absorption of the biblical God into hellenistic impassibility.[6]

Similarly, the Alexandrian Christology of Clement and Origen may be understood in one of two ways. It may be thought of as a brilliant *tour de force*, enabling the Church, through the hellenization of its message, to convert its "cultured despisers." On

[5] Maldwyn Hughes, cited in Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Suffering Love," in Thomas V. Morris, ed. *Philosophy and the Christian Faith*. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 212.

[6] Cf. Hallman, Joseph M. *The Descent of God: Divine Suffering in History and Theology*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 23-29.

the other hand, it might be conceived to be the ultimate sell-out of simple biblical religion to an alien philosophy, achieved in the name of relevance, but at the cost of truth.[7]

The condemnation of the "Patripassionist" theology in the third century, which disallowed the possibility that God the Father suffered on the Cross, further sent the doctrine of God in the direction of asserting a radical impassibility in the divine being. The orthodox during the period of the great Christological controversies understood that in some sense at least, God, in Christ, had "in some way descended from his blessedness" but they were very cautious about taking this concept too far in an immanentist direction.[8]

> But beyond a certain point orthodox theology could not go. It could not make an adequate investigation of Patripassianism, or Monophysitism, to see whether any precious elements of truth might be involved in either heresy. That was not the method of their age, and indeed, in no age, while a struggle is actually taking place, is it easy to appreciate what may be the strong points in an opponent's position.[9]

Augustine defended the impassability of God,[10] and following him the scholastic theologians of the Middle Ages, such as Anselm, who maintained that God certainly *appears* compassionate toward us but in his essence feels nothing.[11] For Thomas Aquinas, God is *actus purus* ("pure act"). As a being whose essence equals his existence, God is pure act and a being in whom there is no

[7] An example of the former approach might be Jaroslav Pelikan, of the latter Adolf Harnack.

[8] J.K. Mozley, *The Impassibility of God: A Survey of Christian Thought*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1926), 175.

[9] op. cit.

[10] Cf. St. Augustine, *City of God*. Translated by Marcus Dods. (New York: Random House, 1950), 263.

[11] McWilliams, *The Passion of God*, 13-14.

contingency, thus he may be said to love humanity, but with a passionless love. In Thomist vocabulary, passion may be defined as "receptivity, being acted upon by another."[12] If God is acted upon by another, he is less than the first cause of all existence, and thus, less than God. Aquinas demonstrates the immutability of God in a three-fold fashion.

> First...,there is some first being, whom we call God; and...this first being must be pure act, without the admixture of any potentiality, for the reason that, absolutely, potentiality is posterior to act. Now everything which is in any way changed, is in some way in potentiality. Hence it is evident that it is impossible for God to be in any way changeable.
>
> Second, because everything which is moved, remains as it was in part, and passes away in part; as what is moved from whiteness to blackness, remains the same as to substance; thus in everything which is moved, there is some kind of composition to be found. But...in God there is no composition, for He is altogether simple. Hence it is manifest that God cannot be moved.
>
> Thirdly, because everything which is moved acquires something by its movement, and attains to what it had not attained previously. But since God is infinite, comprehending in Himself all the plenitude of perfection of all being, He cannot acquire anything new, nor extend Himself to anything whereunto He was not extended previously. Hence movement in no way belongs to Him.[13]

Martin Luther developed a strong distaste for the Aristotelian distinctions upon which Aquinas' scholastic theology was based. Through his treatment of the doctrine of the *communicatio idiomatum*

[12] Peter Kreeft, ed. *A Summa of the* Summa: *The Essential Philosophical Passages of St. Thomas Aquinas'* Summa Theologica *Edited and Explained for Beginners.* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 28.

[13] Ibid, 105-6.

(by which there is a direct correlation between the humanity and the divinity of Christ, so that all that was suffered in his human nature, was suffered also in his divine nature), Luther became the first major theologian to challenge the traditional view of the divine impassibility.[14] However, the majority of Protestant reformers affirmed the doctrine in fairly traditional terms, conceiving of God as one who is "without parts and passions" in order to safeguard the divine transcendence.

Joseph Hallman has indicated the manner in which a minority report has been entered on the issue of divine impassibility, even within the classical Christian tradition.[15] He traces instances of orthodox attempts to "adhere to the portrait of the biblical deity as one who suffers and changes."[16] Even the Alexandrians, Clement and Origen, departed from the Greek concept of impassibility and immutability at a number of points.[17] Tertullian (well known for his anti-philosophical dictum, "What has Jerusalem to do with Athens, the Church with the Academy?") countered the prevailing neo-Platonism by arguing that God does indeed experience emotions and undergo change.[18] Athanasius resisted the logic of divine immutability that lay behind the Arian rejection of Christ as *homoousios*,[19] and Gregory of Nyssa's Christology posited "infinity on the divine and mutability on the human level."[20] Even St. Augustine, whose theology set the Western church on a trajectory of asserting divine immutability and impassibility, was not without a certain emphasis on divine compassion. His *Deus humilis* contrasted sharply with the god of the philosophers who could never have

[14] Cf. Althaus, Paul. *The Theology of Martin Luther.* Translated by Robert C. Schultz. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 197.

[15] See Hallman, Joseph M. *The Descent of God: Divine Suffering in History and Theology.* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991.

[16] Ibid, xii.

[17] Ibid, 36-46.

[18] Ibid, 51-66.

[19] Ibid, 77-85.

[20] Ibid, 85-93.

become the condescending and humble God of the Incarnation.[21] Such reminders ought to caution against an overly simplistic view of classical theology as though it were a complete capitulation to the hellenistic spirit of the age. Even those theologians who drew most freely from the great schools of philosophy, were always Christian theologians before they were philosophers, and were thus frequently active in countering those aspects of philosophy they felt to be incommensurate with the biblical system of belief.

J.K. Mozley indicates three principle motives in the traditional doctrine of the divine apatheia.

1) The desire to uphold the divine transcendence.
2) The concern to uphold the life of God as a perfectly blessed life.
3) The dread of an inappropriate anthropomorphism.[22]

Modern theological discussion has been less concerned with such issues, taking a radical turn in the opposite direction.

V. Contemporary Theology -"Only the Suffering God Can Help"

In the late nineteenth century, increasing numbers of theologians began to challenge the traditional view of divine impassibility, and the rate of this trend has accelerated into the twentieth century. Daniel Day Williams suggests three reasons.

1) The influence of the process philosophy of Charles Hartshorne and Alfred North Whitehead, with its emphasis on God's active involvement with creation.

2) The post-World War II biblical theology movement with its understanding of God as actively involved in salvation history.

[21] Ibid, 123.
[22] Mozley, 173.

3) Contemporary theologies of the atonement which have taken the cross as the key to an understanding of the being of God as undergoing suffering.[23]

Many modern theologians have insisted that in order to make sense of the biblical teaching that God is love, God must in some sense suffer along with his creatures. The way Mozley see the matter, "the introduction of the notion of God's suffering was no adulteration of the true faith through the leaven of un-Christian thinking, but a logical correspondence with the very core of true Christian thought about God."[24]

Most contemporary theologians of the divine pathos have been concerned with God's response to human suffering, and as such, have been engaged, either implicitly or explicitly, in theodicy. According to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "God lets himself be pushed out of the world onto the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us....Only the suffering God can help."[25]

The Korean theologian, Jung Young Lee,[26] in his doctoral dissertation, dealt with the suffering of God. His work draws on the Taoist philosophy of the I Ching, as it critiques the traditional view of God's impassibility. Following Paul Tillich, Lee defines love as "the drive toward the reunion of the separated."[27] To say that God is love is to speak of God's drive toward the reunion of himself with his people by way of his active participation in the world. This

[23] Daniel Day Williams, cited in McWilliams, 16.
[24] Mozley, 176.
[25] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, rev. ed., ed. Eberhard Bethge, (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 188, cited in McWilliams, 177, 190.
[26] Born 1935 in Korea, and educated in the U.S., Lee received the Th.D degree at Boston University in 1968.
[27] Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), III: 134, cited in Jung Young Lee, *God Suffers for Us: A Systematic Inquiry into a Concept of Divine Passibility*. (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974), 3.

participation arises out of his empathy, his "feeling with" humanity, and thus God is passible.

Process philosopher, Charles Hartshorne, sees a rejection of the traditional view, in favor of divine passibility, as the way forward for a doctrine of God that makes sense in the face of suffering.

> If deity is a process and not a mere stasis, then the old objections to the idea of a suffering deity become less impressive... God is spectator of all existence, but a sympathetic spectator who in some real sense shares in the suffering he beholds. He is neither simply neutral to these sufferings nor does he sadistically will them for beings outside himself. He takes them into his own life and derives whatever value possible from them, but without ever wanting them to occur. Why then do they occur?...because...creatures are not infinitely wise or good, and it is they and not God who finally decide the details of the world's happenings...[and] they cannot entirely foresee the way their own decisions will interact with the decisions of others. Not even God can do that, and this not from weakness or deficiency, but simply because really creative decisions are not foreseeable.
>
> Life is process, divinity itself is process, nothing matters but the kind of processes which occur or can be made to occur...[F]or reality as a whole every new value is a gain. Our role is to do what we can to maximize this gain. That is all we can do, but it is enough. The ultimate issue, the permanence of values once created, is out of our hands, and in God's forevermore.[28]

There seems to be a contradiction here. Hartshorne wants to say that it is with human decisions that lie the final details of "the world's happenings," and yet "the ultimate issue...is out of our hands,

[28] Hartshorne, Charles. "Process Philosophy as a Resource for Christian Thought," in Perry LeFevre, ed. *Philosophical Resources for Christian Thought.* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1968), 65-6.

and in God's forevermore." It is hard to see how, in Hartshorne's universe, anything at all may be said to be "in God's hands," since humans finally decide the details, and maximize the gains of the outcomes of their decisions. As Lewis Ford summarizes the process view, "In process theism the future is an open risk. God is continuously directing the creation toward the good, but his persuasive power is effective only in so far as the creatures themselves affirm that good."[29] It is unclear from this proposal, precisely how God ensures the permanency of the values gained by human choices.

The work of Jurgen Moltmann on the suffering God, makes heavy concessions to process philosophy, which are disconcerting to more orthodox thinkers.[30] He openly admits that his "trinitarian theology of the cross," which seems to focus on an ontological change to God's being wrought through the cross, is "panentheistic... For in the hidden mode of humiliation to the point of the cross, all being and all that annihilates has already been taken up in God and God *begins to become* 'all in all.'"[31]

Clearly Moltmann's theology exhibits an apologetic concern, and serves as something of a theodicy. He wishes to overcome the antagonism toward the traditional doctrine of God on the part of its cultured despisers. One of the important platforms of this antagonism is the apparent responsibility of God for evil. God's perceived apathetic attitude toward human suffering is brought clearly into focus by Moltmann, in the horrors of Auschwitz. Against the

[29] Lewis Ford, "Divine Persuasion and the Triumph of Good," in Michael L. Peterson, ed. *The Problem of Evil: Selected Readings.* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 257.

[30] Moltmann, Jurgen. *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974. This material on Moltmann is taken from Glen A. O'Brien, *A Trinitarian Revisioning of the Wesleyan Doctrine of Christian Perfection.* Unpublished M.A. thesis. (Wilmore: Asbury Theological Seminary, 1998) 48-51.

[31] Moltmann, *The Crucified God,* 277. Italics mine.

traditional view of the omnipotent God as one who is "overwhelmingly active, as doing everything, and therefore as, apparently the cause of evil," Moltmann stresses the suffering of God on the cross.[32]

But this suffering is not a patripassian suffering, such that the Father is the locus of the Passion. Rather, the Father and the Son alike suffer, and out of this suffering, both experience a new quality of being in the Holy Spirit. In asserting that the Trinity is "deeply involved in the death of Jesus on the cross,"[33] Moltmann rejects the classical concept of *apatheia*, and its corollary belief that only the human, and not the divine nature of Christ suffered on the cross. "The cross stands at the heart of the trinitarian being of God; it divides and conjoins the persons in their relationships to each other and portrays them in a specific way. From the life of these three, which has within it the death of Jesus, there then emerges who God is and what his Godhead means."[34]

According to Moltmann, "The Son suffers dying, the Father suffers the death of the Son. The grief of the Father is just as important as the death of the Son."[35] Not only does the Son suffer the agony of being forsaken by the Father, the Father suffers at the separation from his Son, thus losing his identity as Father. In the mutual surrender of the identities of Father and Son for the sake of humanity, the Father and Son experience "a new unity with one another in the Spirit."[36] The Spirit is "the personification of self giving love," and this love is set loose in the world, enabling the establishment of "a deeper and richer form of human life."[37]

[32] Colin E. Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*. (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1991), 21.

[33] Joseph A. Bracken, *What are They Saying about the Trinity?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 27.

[34] Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 207, cited in Bracken, 26.

[35] Ibid, 243, cited in Bracken, 27.

[36] Ibid.

[37] Ibid, 28.

Our salvation depends on this complete identification of the Father and the Son with each other. The Father must share in the sufferings of the Son. "[O]nly if all disaster, forsakenness by God, absolute death, the infinite curse of damnation and sinking into nothingness is in God himself is community with this God eternal salvation, infinite joy, indestructible election, and divine life."[38]

Moltmann rejects the God of classical theism, because "the God of theism is poor. He cannot love nor can he suffer."[39] In Moltmann, "God has a history with the world. He allows what happens to him in the world in time and on the cross to act back and influence him and so change him."[40] The Trinity, for Moltmann, "is an evolving event between three divine subjects and the world and...the triune God is not complete until the end."[41] God is still "becoming" until the consummation of all things when God will be all in all.

O'Hanlon responds rather negatively to this concept. "[This] Hegelian-type identification in which the cross is seen as the fulfillment of the trinity in a Process Theology-type way...has no difficulty in directly ascribing change and suffering to God and...ends up with a mythological, tragic image of God."[42]

And what of the doctrine of providence, which Langdon B. Gilkey calls "the forgotten stepchild of contemporary theology"? What responsibility does God have in the creation of suffering itself? How can we be confident that God will ultimately triumph over suffering? Are God's love and God's power incompatible? Does his love cancel out his power?[43] Furthermore, what is the extent to which

[38] Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 246, cited in Bracken, 29.

[39] Ibid, 253, cited in Bracken, 29.

[40] John Thompson. *Modern Trinitarian Perspectives*. (New York/ Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 33.

[41] Ibid, 51.

[42] Ibid, 38.

[43] Langdon B. Gilkey, "The Concept of Providence in Contemporary Theology," in *Journal of Religion* 43 (July 1963), 174, cited in McWilliams, 177.

God maintains his freedom from his creation in the new theology of the divine pathos? It is not at all clear that the theologians of the divine pathos have avoided the complete identification of God with creation, often entailed in immanentist forms of theology. If God is acted upon by his creation, is the divine transcendence compromised? Can the life of God remain essentially a "blessed" life if it enters into the contingencies of time and motion?[44] Such questions are indicative of the need for further development of the new theology if it is going to prove to be an adequate replacement for the traditional doctrine of divine impassibility.

VI. Is there a *Via Media*?

It cannot be denied that there is "a real religious value"[45] secured in the idea of God entering into human suffering. How else can the believer make sense of God's promise to be with him or her in the midst of trials? The God who stands aloof may be said to be *for* the pilgrim struggler, but hardly *with* her. The sports fan in the grandstand is *for* his or her favorite player, but can hardly be said to be *with* the player. If God watches the contest from the stands but does not compete, he is a spectator God but not a fellow sufferer.

In addition, one's view of the passion of God has been thought by some to influence human engagement with the world's suffering ones. The knowledge that God actively strives to overcome evil and suffering in the world motivates believers to do the same.[46] Abraham Heschel, for example, describes the Hebrew prophet as *homo sympathetikos*, because of his being acquainted with the suffering of God, contrasting this with the Stoic philosopher as *homo apathetikos*, unmoved by human suffering because bearing the image of his passionless god.[47]

[44] Mozley, 179-80.

[45] Mozley, 181.

[46] Cf. 2 Corinthians 1:4.

[47] Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets*, vol. 2 (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 88. Cited in McWilliams, 182.

A comparison of the experiences of two men in the face of personal tragedy might serve as an example of two types of response in the face of seemingly meaningless suffering. Richard Hoard reflects on the weak and impassive God who could do nothing to stop the brutal murder of his father.

> [I]f somebody determines to kill you, then God Almighty Himself couldn't stop it from happening. Or at least wouldn't. God's only sure-fire way of preventing the lot of us from killing one another was to strike with lightning everybody who'd ever conspired to harm a fellow human being. But there wasn't enough lightning in the world to strike all of us who had ever wanted to do someone harm; He might as well send another flood, but that was something He had already tried and determined never again to do. Instead He sent His best work down in His best effort to reform us. But then even Jesus Christ got killed.[48]

Our second sufferer, Nicholas Wolterstorff, lost not a father, but a son. Through his own suffering, he came to understand God as a sufferer.

> God is not only the God of the sufferers but the God who suffers. The pain and the fallenness of humanity have entered into his heart. Through the prism of my tears I have seen a suffering God...Instead of explaining our suffering, God shares it...God is love. That is why he suffers. To love our suffering sinful world is to suffer. God so suffered for the world that he gave up his only Son to suffering. The one who does not see God's suffering does not see his love.[49]

[48] Richard G. Hoard. *Alone Among the Living.* (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1994), 2-3.

[49] Wolterstorff, Nicholas. *Lament for a Son.* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1987) 81,90.

In researching this topic, one might be forgiven for thinking that the only alternative to a stoic, insensible, and thus unsympathetic God, is a weak and suffering God. Might there not be a middle ground which would hold together both the transcendence and the immanence of God?

Michael J. Dodds, writing from a Thomist perspective, speaks in defense of divine immutability, asserting that God's love is both dynamic (and therefore not stoic) and static (and therefore not passive[50]) at the same time. He does so by making a careful distinction between God's love and human love. Human love is associated with motion and change. It is a restlessness and desire quenched and fulfilled in an unfolding relationship between persons. Dodds resists the identification of this kind of love with God. Love may also be characterized by immovability. The complete fulfillment of love has a fixed character about it. When "the affection or appetite is completely imbued with the form of the good which is its object it is pleased with it and adheres to it as though fixed in it, and then is said to love it."[51] Dodds lead us from this definition of love to his concept of "the dynamic stillness of love."[52] The idea sounds oxymoronic at first, "dynamic" and "stillness" seeming to be antithetical each to the other. But God's love is understood by Dodds as dynamic, because in the divine life of the Trinity, the procession of the Son from the Father and of the Spirit from the Father and the Son[53] is love in motion, a procession based on love. Yet this dynamic and active love is also characterized by "stillness" because it fully apprehends that "other" for which it seeks. God's nature is love, but

[50] I am using the word "passive" in the technical sense of "unable to be acted upon."

[51] Michael J. Dodds. *The Unchanging God of Love: A Study of the Teachings of St. Thomas Aquinas on Divine Impassibility in View of Certain Contemporary Criticisms of this Doctrine.* (Fribourge, Suiss: Editions Universitaires, 1986) 278.

[52] Ibid, 280.

[53] Following the Western *filioque* tradition.

his love for us, unlike our love for each other, is not based on any lack in him, nor on any perceived goodness in us needed to make up some absence of good in God's own being. While our love is both dynamic and *mutable*, God's love is dynamic and *immutable*.[54] "All passions implying imperfect possession of goodness are therefore said of God only metaphorically."[55] Similarly, to speak of divine compassion is to speak of more than human compassion.[56] Human compassion includes suffering, divine compassion does not. But divine compassion is nonetheless an expression of love which "casts out and triumphs over suffering."[57]

Jerry Walls argues that the pain felt by God over his creatures' rejection of his love is not so much "a feeling which could dominate the divine consciousness," but rather, "a moral attitude, a certain way of thinking about loved ones who have experienced great loss."[58] Similarly, Paul Fiddes speaks of the way we may conceive of God as one who suffers and yet is not *ruled by* suffering. God *chooses* to suffer along with his creatures, but this is not a choosing based on any desire or thirst for suffering *itself*, but for fellowship with his creatures.

> To desire suffering would be a kind of divine masochism, and would detract from the conviction of God's victory over suffering; he would be the eternal auto-victim of the universe. Rather, out of his desire for his creatures he chooses to suffer, and because he chooses to suffer he is not ruled by suffering; it has no power to overwhelm him because he has made the alien thing his own.[59]

[54] Dodds, 280-81.

[55] Ibid, 282.

[56] Ibid, 292-304.

[57] Ibid, 304.

[58] Walls, Jerry L. *Hell: The Logic of Damnation.* (Notre Dame and London: The University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 108-9.

[59] Paul S. Fiddes. *The Creative Suffering of God.* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 108-9.

The Japanese theologian, pastor, and teacher, Kazoh Kitamori, a pioneer in indigenous Japanese theology, created quite a stir when his *Theology of the Pain of God* was first published in the 1950s. Whilst positing pain in the heart of God, he labors also to make a distinction between divine and human pain. "Man's pain and God's pain are qualitatively different, 'as a dog is different from the Dogstar'...Man's pain is unproductive; it is darkness without light. God's pain is productive; it is darkness with the light of salvation."[60]

Some kind of distinction along the lines suggested above would seem to be necessary if the idea of a suffering God is to protected against the idea of a weak and ineffective God.

VII. Does the Concept of the Divine *Apatheia* Render the Problem of Evil More Acute?[61]

It has often been claimed that the God of classical theism must be a callous and indifferent God in light of the world's great suffering and his apparent non-involvement in eliminating that suffering. Is Peter Geach's concept of God accurate when he refers to God as one for whom "a billion rational creatures are as dust in the balance; if a billion perish, God suffers no loss, who can create what he wills with no effort or cost by merely thinking of it"?[62] The rejection of such a God lies behind the assertion on the part of process theists that the traditional view renders the problem of evil more acute. How can such a God, all powerful, yet unconcerned and unmoved for the plight of his creatures, be worthy of worship?

[60] Kazoh Kitamori. *Theology of the Pain of God.* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1965), 167.

[61] The so-called "problem of evil" is a philosophical problem which may be summarised as follows – God is an all powerful Being. God is a perfectly good being. Yet pointless suffering exists in the universe. If God is all powerful he is able to eliminate such evil. If he is all-good, he must want to. Yet such evil exists. Therefore, either God is not all-powerful, or God is nor perfectly good, or God does not exist.

[62] Geach, *Providence and Evil*, 128, cited in Walls, *Hell*, 106.

Instead, we must understand God as one who resorts only to persuasive power, and never to coercive force in accomplishing his purposes for humanity.

Peter Hare and Edward O. Madden, however, have argued persuasively that the process claim that the traditional view of divine power is a "pseudo-idea," and that its own concept of divine persuasion provides a resource for a more coherent theodicy, is mislaid. How can the process theist explain how the high number of those who remain unpersuaded by God, remain so, in light of the exercise of God's great persuasive power?[63] To Hartshorne's claim that any metaphysic should be judged on the basis of its conceptual coherence, Hare and Madden, retort that the process concept of an immeasurable amount of persuasive power appears to be as much a "pseudo-idea" as to speak of "weight that can never require force to lift it."[64]

> If the concept of persuasive power in process theism is incoherent, then the metaphysics of process theism fails to pass the very test that Hartshorne proposes. If, on the other hand, persuasive power is made coherent by making such power experientially measurable, then the process theist is obliged to produce a theodicy in which it is shown that the proportion of goods to evils in the world is compatible with the exercise of great persuasive power for the good, and...no such theodicy has been produced.[65]

To assert too strongly the capacity of God to experience suffering, is to run the risk of "depicting God as an emotional hostage to recalcitrant sinners."[66] On the other hand, to assert too strongly the

[63] Peter Hare and Edward Madden, "Evil and Persuasive Power," in Peterson, Michael L., ed. *The Problem of Evil: Selected Readings.* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 268.

[64] Ibid, 271-72.

[65] Ibid, 272.

[66] Walls, *Hell*, 106.

absoluteness of God and thus his incapacity for sharing in our sufferings, is to run the risk of depicting God as an aloof and indifferent absentee God, a *Deus Absconditus*, blissfully unconcerned with the misery of his creatures. It seems then, that in neither direction is the problem of evil rendered more acute. Each approach creates its own set of questions.

VIII. Conclusion

We have seen that the biblical portrayal of God as in some sense actively feeling along with his people, contrasts with the theology of the divine *apatheia* as it developed in the classical Christian tradition. However, we have also identified a "minority report" within this tradition, which resisted the complete hellenization of the biblical portrayal of God, and spoke of God's condescending love, his experience of pain and sorrow and his capacity, in some sense at least, for change. The modern theology of the divine pathos, has rightly rejected the absolutizing tendency in the centrist tradition, but in doing so, has compromised the divine transcendence. It might be argued that the achievement of liberation from an overly-hellenized Christianity (if indeed such has been achieved) is a positive contribution to Christian thought, and that it alleviates to some extent the acuteness of the problem of evil. On the other hand, the price may have been too high, especially if the freedom of God from his creation is compromised. Greater distinctions between human passion and divine passion must be developed, in order to make sense of a God who feels, but is not ruled by, feelings. A revisiting of the "minority report" in the classical Christian tradition may well provide a more adequate resource for this task than can be provided by either the mainstream traditional position, or the new theology of divine suffering.