

# Preface

In Christian theology, the problem of evil refers to the logical tension between belief in divine goodness and omnipotence on the one hand and the ubiquitous reality of suffering on the other, especially unjust or innocent suffering. In its basic form, it asks: “Why does God allow evil?” Theologians from the first century until today have debated the many permutations of this quandary. Alvin Plantinga catalogues the constellation of questions that comprise the problem of evil: “Why does God permit evil, or why does he permit so much of it, or why does he permit those horrifying varieties of it?”<sup>1</sup> This multifaceted problem has both theoretical and existential dimensions. Theoretically, it explores the complex interrelationship between God and evil within Christian theology, broadly conceived. Existentially, it expresses the feeling of divine abandonment and absence that overtakes us when we descend into our own valley of the shadow of death, or when we internalize the agony of the world around us, which elicits the cry of Godforsakenness: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34).<sup>2</sup>

Karl Rahner delineates the existential scope of the problem of evil in his essay “Why Does God Allow Us to Suffer?” He calls it

1. Alvin Plantinga, “Supralapsarianism, or ‘O Felix Culpa,’” in *Christian Faith and the Problem of Evil*, ed. Peter van Inwagen (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 2.
2. Throughout I will employ the NRSV unless stated otherwise.

“one of the most fundamental questions of human existence . . . which is universal, universally oppressive, and touches our existence at its very roots.”<sup>3</sup> We cannot dismiss it as irrelevant, since suffering impacts all humanity, eventually. While some theological questions are experientially and existentially remote, the question of God’s permission of evil remains perennially proximate and urgent. It appears in ancient and contemporary Christian texts with devastating theological force, and it appears in the news with equal force, raising the question anew with every natural disaster or heinous crime. It does not discriminate based on temporal, spatial, or social location. It is not reserved for specialists writing from the safety and comfort of the ivory tower. It is a basic question of human life. We suffer. We cry out. We wonder. We hope.

Jürgen Moltmann also notes the force of the problem and posits the provisionality of theodicy, that is, the attempt to vindicate divine justice or, more simply, to explain suffering. Despite its ubiquity and urgency, we search in vain for definitive, final answers to the problem of evil. Moltmann argues that “the problem of theodicy” cannot be answered *or* ignored. Theodicy does not promise conclusive answers, but it does give us resources to engage the problem of evil: “No one can answer the theodicy question in this world, and no one can get rid of it. Life in this world means living with this open question. . . . It is the *open wound of life* in this world.”<sup>4</sup> Living with the open question of theodicy, for Moltmann, requires the willingness to suspend final judgments until the eschaton while we work toward the realization of God’s new creation.

3. Karl Rahner, “Why Does God Allow Us to Suffer?” in *Theological Investigations XIX, Faith and Ministry*, trans. Edward Quinn (New York: Crossway, 1983 [1961]), 194.

4. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 49.

My study strives to promote dialogue on the problem of evil through an analysis and assessment of the major models and motifs in Christian theodicy, and to recommend some ways forward. I do not purport to offer any definitive solutions. When you turn over the final page of the book, you will not have discovered *the* answer to the problem of evil. In fact, you will probably have more questions than you had when you opened the first page. Theodicy, in the end, does not provide solutions as much as it provides perspectives that help us come to terms with suffering. My study seeks to equip readers with tools to contribute to a dynamic, nuanced, and open-ended conversation with diverse interlocutors. It identifies several pathways in theodicy, not just one. It is the beginning of a conversation, not an end to it.

Do not tread lightly on the paths of theodicy. The journey taxes the heart, mind, and soul. To encounter even a slight fraction of the breadth and depth of evil in the world outstrips our intellectual, emotional, and spiritual capacities, and leaves us winded and wounded. Theodicy traverses the shadowlands of suffering, where dangers await at every step and darkness shrouds the long, tortuous road ahead. It is an arduous, perilous, but, finally, wondrous journey into the sacredness of a broken world awaiting redemption, tilting between despair and hope, moving toward the Light. The bush burns but is not consumed, and God speaks from within the flames.

We are standing on holy ground.