

DECLARATION

**SUFFERING AND GOD:  
A THEOLOGICAL-ETHICAL STUDY OF  
THE WAR IN THE SUDAN (1955-)**

by

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**Promoter: Prof DA Du Toit**

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# DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this dissertation is my own original work and has not previously in its entirety or in part been submitted at any university for a degree.

Signature:

Date:



## ABSTRACT

This dissertation is a theological-ethical study of suffering and God in relation to the war in Sudan. It examines historical, political, socio-economic and religious factors behind one of the longest wars of Africa. Over the last forty years, Sudan, the largest country in Africa has intermittently been at war with itself. This bitter conflict, pitting the predominantly Moslem north against Christian and animist south, has devastated communities, families as well as basic socio-economic infrastructure and has turned this potentially rich land into one of the most impoverished and heavily indebted countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. From 1983 to the present, this war of attrition has claimed nearly two million lives and displaced double that figure of people from their homes, scattering them all over the globe. But in the midst of this human catastrophe, the church has grown enormously. It has one of the fastest growth rates in Africa today. In its struggle with faith and the reality of suffering, the church in Sudan variedly interprets its predicament if only to make sense of this sordid experience. In that regard, it interprets suffering as divine judgement and as a direct result of a cosmic conflict between God and the forces of evil. At the same time, the church pleads with God for his intervention and deliverance. Thus, the image of God as Judge-Deliverer largely dominates the theology and worship of the suffering church in the war-torn country. This seems to be the major theme of more than 1 500 Bor Dinka new songs, composed in the war.

To place the suffering of the church in Sudan in the larger context of Christian theology, this dissertation briefly looks at the problem of evil and suffering in 'classical theology', examining the thought of Augustine, Luther and Calvin as well as the paradigm shift in the optimism of the Enlightenment. Similarly, this dissertation takes a brief look at 'alternative theodicies' that followed the collapse of the fine edifice of the Age of Reason and the dereliction of the world wars and natural disasters. In this category is to be found the dialectic theology of Karl Barth and Jürgen Moltmann. The praxis of Liberation Theology is also briefly explored as a response to suffering. GC Berkouwer's 'believing theodicy' is examined as a theological and Biblical critique of the whole project of theodicy as a wrongheaded enterprise vainly trying to justify the ways of God to man instead of the reverse. The African traditional view of suffering and evil is explored as a sharp contrast to the Western view. Looking at the Scripture, this work identifies five ways the Bible addresses the problem of evil and suffering. In the Bible, suffering may come as a punishment for sin or as a

disciplinary measure from God or as a test of faith or faithfulness or as a price of choosing to follow Jesus or simply as innocent as in the case of Job.

Admitting to the apparent mystery and insolubility of the problem of evil, this dissertation, finally, proposes the cross, community, character and hope as the only viable framework of transcending and transforming suffering. It argues in that regard that the incarnation is the distinctively Christian answer to the problem of evil and suffering in which that transcending and transforming can be effected. Within the framework of the cross, community, character and hope suffering can be transcended and transformed into the highest good possible in this life. The cross reminds those who suffer that God has done and will do something about suffering and that he does not abandon us in suffering. The community absorbs suffering and helps the victim through the ordeal. Character is formed and toughened as the sufferer chooses to respond appropriately to suffering. Hope tells us that suffering shall be ultimately overcome and a new order of things shall be ushered in, thus spurring us on to participate in the present as we anticipate that bright future.



# OPSOMMING

Hierdie proefskrif is 'n teologies-etiese studie van lyding en God in verhouding tot die oorlog in Soedan. Dit ondersoek die historiese, politiese, sosio-ekonomiese en godsdienstige faktore agter een van die langdurigste oorloë in Afrika. Soedan, die grootste land in Afrika, is oor die afgelope veertig jaar ononderbroke in oorlog met sigself gewikkel. Hierdie bittere konflik, waarin die hoofsaaklik Moslem Noorde die Christen en animistiese Suidelike deel van die land teenstaan, het gemeenskappe en gesinne verwoes, sowel as die basiese sosio-ekonomiese infrastruktuur, en het sodoende hierdie potensieel ryk land omskep in een van die armoedigste lande, met een van die swaarste skuldlaste, in Afrika benede die Sahara. Vanaf 1983 tot op hede het hierdie uitputtingsoorlog amper twee miljoen lewens geëis, terwyl dit tweemaal soveel mense van hul tuistes verplaas en hul wêreldwyd versprei het.

Ter midde van hierdie menslike katastrofe het kerklidmaatskap ontsaglik toegeneem. Die groeitempo is inderdaad tans een van die hoogstes in Afrika. In sy worsteling met die geloof en die realiteit van lyding interpreteer die kerk in Soedan sy toestand op 'n verskeidenheid van wyses, in 'n poging om sodoende van hierdie haglike omstandighede sin te maak. Lying word interpreteer as die strafgerig van God, en as 'n direkte gevolg van die kosmiese konflik tussen God en die bose magte. Gelyktydig pleit die kerk met God vir sy ingryping en verlossing. Die siening van God as Regter-Verlosser is dus oorheersend in die teologie en aanbidding van die lydende kerk in 'n oorloggeteisterde land. Dit blyk die hooftema te wees van die meer as 1 500 Bor Dinka liedere wat ontstaan het gedurende die oorlog.

Om die lyding van die kerk in Soedan binne die groter konteks van die Christelike Teologie te plaas, word die probleem van die bose en lyding in die klassieke teologie in hierdie proefskrif kortliks behandel. Die denke van Augustinus, Luther en Calvyn, sowel as die paradigmaverskuiwing wat gepaard gegaan het met die optimisme van die Verligting, word ondersoek. Hierdie proefskrif beskou ook kortliks die alternatiewe godsleres wat gevolg het op die ineenstorting van die agttiende eeu se "Age of Reason" asook die verwaarlosing and ontwrigting van die wêreldoorloë en verskeie natuurrampe. In hierdie kategorie vind ons die dialektiese teologie van Karl Barth en Jürgen Moltmann. Die praktyk van die Bevrydingsteologie word ook kortliks ondersoek as reaksie op lyding. GC Berkouwer se 'believing theodicy' word ondersoek as teologiese en Bybelse kritiek op die hele projek van godsleer as 'n aweregse onderneming wat vergeefs probeer om die werkwysse van God te

regverdig vir die mens, in plaas van die teenoorgestelde. Die tradisionele Africa-siening van lyding en die bose word ook ondersoek, as skerp kontras met die Westerse siening.

Vanuit die Skrif, identifiseer hierdie studie vyf wyses waarop die probleem van die bose en lyding in die Bybel aangespreek word. In die Bybel is lyding 'n straf vir sonde, 'n tugmaatreël van God, 'n toets van geloof of trou of die prys wat geëis word vir die keuse om Jesus te volg. Andersins, kan die mens heeltemal onskuldig wees, soos in die geval van Job.

Hierdie proefskrif erken dat die probleem van die bose raaiselagtig en skynbaar onoplosbaar is. Die kruis, die gemeenskap, karakter, en hoop word uiteindelik voorgestel as die enigste gangbare raamwerk vir die transendering en transformasie van lyding. Daar word geredeneer dat in hierdie verband die opstanding die kenmerkende Christelike antwoord op die probleem van die bose en lyding bied, waarbinne hierdie transendering en transformasie kan geskied.

Binne die raamwerk van die kruis, die gemeenskap, karakter en hoop, kan die mens lyding transendeer en dit transformeer tot die hoogste moontlike goed in hierdie lewe. Die kruis herinner die lydendes dat God reeds iets gedoen het, en nog sal doen omtrent lyding, en dat Hy ons nie in ons lyding sal verlaat nie. Die gemeenskap absorbeer lyding, en help die slagoffer deur die beproewing. Karakter word gevorm en geslyp soos die lydende kies om op geskikte wyse te reageer op die lyding. Die hoop verkondig die uiteindelijke oorwinning oor lyding, en die begin van 'n nuwe bedeling; dus word ons aangespoor om deel te neem aan die aksie van die hede terwyl ons op daardie helder toekoms wag.

## DEDICATION

I humbly dedicate this work to my parents, Dau and Adut, who perished in the upheaval and the devastation of the ongoing vicious Sudanese civil war and who practically lived out Christian principles without knowing. By their exemplary life of patience and perseverance they taught me how important it is to keep your head high and never give up even when things go wrong. Their practical wisdom that if you do good to others even when they take advantage of you, you do good to your own soul has always helped me in my relationship. For that and much more, this dissertation is appreciatively dedicated to their memory.



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I also acknowledge the support of my home Church, Sudan Pentecostal Churches (SPC) and other Sudanese Church Organisations, ACROSS, NSCC and others. ECS's Bor Diocese

Bishop Nathaniel Garang permitted me to use the New Dinka songs in this study, enthusiastically supporting this endeavour. Andrew Wheeler personally encouraged me in the initial and difficult stages of this project. His talks with Tearfund about this undertaking provided the opening that my church used to apply for a scholarship grant. Furthermore, the valuable and insightful *Faith In Sudan Series*, of which he is the editor, has been extremely helpful in my work. Marc Nikkel's *Dinka Christianity* has also been very beneficial. I appreciate his many letters and the discussions we have had even when his own physical health made it difficult. To all these wonderful people, I say a big Sudanese "Shukran" (Arabic for thank you).

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In a very special way, I am deeply grateful for the support of my family. The love, the patience, the understanding and the prayers of my wife, Lydia, and the sacrifices of our four children — Sammy, Jeremiah, Joseph and Rebecca — strengthened and sustained me greatly. Without this I could not have made it. I love you and thank you.

While acknowledging and appreciating all the assistance that I have received from the individuals and the organisations I have mentioned above, it remains that none of these may be held accountable for any misrepresentations, misinterpretations and mistakes in this dissertation. For I alone am responsible for such.

Finally to 'the God who is there', for his grace and mercy, I am thankful. His unfailing love has carried me through a daunting academic journey that did not start until the age of seventeen when I first learned to read and write. Nearly thirty years down the line, the gracious God has fulfilled the dreams I did not even know I had. For that and other undeserved blessings that I am definitely unable to count, they being countless, I say thank you very much.



## **ABBREVIATIONS AND FOREIGN WORDS**

<b>ACROSS</b>	Association of Christian Resources Organisation Serving Sudan.
<b>CIENG</b>	To inhabit, treat with respect, way of life and culture
<b>DHEENG</b>	Dignity, generosity, nobility, hospitality, kindness, elegance and grace.
<b>ECS</b>	Episcopal Church of Sudan
<b>CD</b>	Church Dogmatics
<b>GDP</b>	Gross Domestic Product
<b>IGAD</b>	Inter-Governmental Authority on Development
<b>IMF</b>	International Monetary Fund
<b>JIHAD</b>	Islamic Holy War
<b>JOK (Pl. JAK)</b>	Dinka ancestral spirits, divinities or evil forces
<b>JUR</b>	Foreigner or non-Dinka
<b>Mahdi</b>	The guide or Islamic Messiah
<b>NHIALIC</b>	The one above, the exalted one, God
<b>NIF</b>	National Islamic Front
<b>NIV</b>	New International Version
<b>NSCC</b>	New Sudan Council of Churches.
<b>Sharia</b>	Islamic Law
<b>SPC</b>	Sudan Pentecostal Churches
<b>SPLA/SPLM</b>	Sudan People's Liberation Army/Movement
<b>UN</b>	United Nations.
<b>UNICEF</b>	United Nations Children's Education Fund



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# CHAPTER ONE

## RESEARCH PLAN AND METHODOLOGY

### 1.1 MOTIVES AND INTEREST

Suffering has been and still is a question of interest to me. Since childhood, I have had a fair share of suffering. Born in a hard pastoral milieu, mine has not always been an easy life. At the age of five, I survived an epidemic that swept away nearly all children of my age, leaving my left eye permanently impaired. Once I almost got drowned in the Nile when a boat I was on capsized. From 1970 to 1972, I was bedridden with a mysterious disease. Mercifully, I was completely cured from this disease. Because of this disease, I managed to elude life in the cattle camp and found access to school after being denied this privilege for a long time. I was born a few years after the outbreak of the first Sudanese civil war in 1955, a war of which the present one is a continuation. Dodging bullets, suffering hunger and poverty, being displaced and sleeping in the cold as well as persistent fleeing and hiding from approaching government armies were part of my early life. I have grown up in war and suffering and my offspring are children of war. Ours is a life of constant struggle with no foreseeable ending to war and suffering in our land. The psychological, emotional, economic and spiritual impact of war and suffering is deeply imbedded in our conscience. War is the only thing we have known for a long time. Instead of peace and stability, we have known only fear and insecurity, war and suffering. We have never lived what could be called a normal life, nor have we enjoyed freedom and liberty. We have virtually lost our humanity and our dignity.

In addition, the human loss that I have experienced in the war is incalculable. I lost my parents, two brothers, and several close relatives, not to mention close friends and acquaintances, in the ongoing war and related conditions. Mine is by no means a unique situation. There are families that have been completely wiped out in the war and suffering in Sudan. From 1983 to the present as many as two million people have died in the conflict with double that figure displaced from their homes into neighbouring countries where they live as refugees. Thus, suffering is a practical issue for me; it has been and is still a part of my life. However, I cannot claim having suffered much more than the ordinary South Sudanese people, who daily face the realities and the rigours of war, whether in the bushes or in the

refugee camps. For most of the 1980's and the 1990's, I have been privileged to study and work in the country of Kenya, where the war kept me separated from my country and people. Although the pain of separation and uncertainty never ceased to be part of my life during all that time, I was by comparison relatively secured and 'comfortable'. However, from 1992 up to the time of my coming to South Africa for further study, I constantly travelled to the Sudanese refugee camps in Kenya and Uganda to be with my people and conduct pastoral and discipleship training courses in the churches. During that time and while on study, I was privileged on numerous occasions to visit war-devastated areas in South Sudan where I came face to face with the reality of evil and suffering. Given the fact that I believe in all-powerful, all-loving and wholly good God, the reality of suffering and evil perplexes me and stretches my faith. What does faith in this God mean when suffering and evil overtake us? Is God present with us when we suffer and does he share our suffering or does he stand aloof? Being a participant in suffering, I am in a living solidarity which involves a protest and acceptance of suffering as well as a belief in a God of love who gave his son for me (Depoortere 1994: 3).

The tension between the reality of suffering and faith in my experience was heightened by two recent incidents in my life. One of these was a life-threatening sickness that my wife contracted two years after our wedding. Her body was massively swollen. Doctors told us that the swelling was due to a kidney failure. As a result she spent most of 1990 and 1991 in hospitals without success. A highly risky renal biopsy yielded no results and we came home expecting the worst. As if that was not enough, one of her fallopian tubes burst and she had to undergo an emergency operation to have it removed. Financially and otherwise we were strained. But miraculously and mercifully, my wife, Lydia was healed. Towards the end of 1992 she became completely well to the pleasant surprise of the doctors and of ourselves. Thereafter, two of our children were born through the one fallopian tube that was not removed. The second incident occurred while I was still writing this dissertation. My brother, Rueben, who had survived gunshot wounds in the war, was brutally murdered in the refugee camp in Kenya in January 1998. He had been living with us in Nairobi while undergoing treatment for a bullet lodged in his lungs. We had helped negotiate his marriage and his bride had hardly been with him for two weeks when he was killed in a mindless quarrel he was never a party to. We were devastated by his death, but again God graciously sustained us to deal with our pain and loss and to accept the things that we cannot change or explain. Thus



my interest in suffering is born out of my relatively minute experience of suffering and my struggle of faith in a good God of love. As it were, it is born out of living under the tensions of faith and suffering.

Although my experiences of suffering have not been pleasant, I believe they have shaped me and made me what I am today. More than I normally acknowledge, my character and attitude toward life owe a great deal to the suffering I have undergone. Although I do not claim to have attained perfection, I feel and sympathise with those who suffer. I understand when someone says they are hungry or in lack because I myself have experienced the same before. I have been brought to a place of deeply appreciating all the blessings and the privileges that I have received because I realise I do not deserve them. Having received such help from God and his people in my times of need and suffering, I appreciate the importance of being in the community when we experience suffering and tragedy. I would not have survived my ordeal if other people in the community of faith had not been on my side. It is in this context and much more that suffering is of interest to me. It is born out of my own continual formation in suffering and faith in God.

## **1.2 PROBLEM**

Suffering is a fact of life for many people in our world today. It touches us in many ways. We see and hear of many people who are suffering even if we ourselves are not experiencing it. In recent times, the world has witnessed a great deal of suffering. The genocide wars in Rwanda and the Balkans that claimed hundreds of thousands of lives are still fresh in our minds. In Africa, the ongoing wars in Somalia, Sierra Leone, the Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, to mention a few, have shattered many dreams and destroyed many lives. The intermittent war in Sudan for nearly five decades now has caused massive death and suffering. In the midst of this suffering, the church has experienced tremendous growth as many people have come to believe in God, renouncing their traditional African deities. For these believers, the continual war and suffering raise serious questions relating to the meaning and purpose of suffering, and hence the various interpretations they give to their predicament.

One may also speak of recent reports of famine in the Horn of Africa, now threatening several million people. Thus, the problem of suffering and evil is a daily reality to many people in our world. With the fast growth and vast advancement of global communication technology, we

are instantly made aware of the reality of evil and suffering like never before in human history. Easily, we can become potential or actual victims as we stare evil and suffering in the face. Living in any part of our world today, none of us is safe or immune to suffering. Suffering is thus a tangible problem in our existence as human beings.

With faith in the God of love, good and omnipotent, the problem is much more compounded. Positing the goodness, the love and the power of God in polarising ends with the reality of suffering causes problems for many a believer. To doubt God's goodness or power or love is to make our moral sense superior to God's or in fact make it a God. To deny the fact of suffering or domesticate it to the point of making it a servant and not the monster that it really is, in order to rescue God's reputation, is to compound the problem (Janzen 1998: 153). This tension or dilemma of how belief in a good God is to be related to suffering is what constitutes the problem. It is a vexing problem that greatly challenges faith. It understandably generates questions such as: Why should suffering exist at all? What is the purpose of suffering? Why does God allow suffering? If he does not, why does he not remove it altogether? Could there be some value in suffering and if there is, is suffering the only means of obtaining such? Could one still experience God as almighty and loving even when suffering strikes? More easily asked than answered, these questions constitute the so-called problem of evil. Whether openly acknowledged or not, we have at different times asked these questions audibly or silently in our hearts when faced with the fact of evil and suffering. "The human heart cries out for an answer which reaches down to the sorrowing and the sufferer with a word which brings some hope in a world of despair" (Carson 1978: 13). This dissertation attempts to provide some responses from an evangelical, biblical perspective. In this context, the aim of this dissertation is to construct a theological response around the biblical and theological images of the cross, community, character and hope. In a practical sense, the ultimate aim is to provide some encouragement and strength to those who are now suffering in Sudan and elsewhere. If it achieves this, I shall be deeply appreciative.

### **1.3 HYPOTHESIS**

The fact of evil and suffering is perhaps the most persistent and enduring challenge to the Christian faith (Peterson 1982: 7). Many thoughtful people consider evil incongruous with the biblical affirmation that God is perfectly good and absolutely powerful and sovereign. However, the pattern of traditional Christian belief has always defined and defended the



nature of God as both the creator and governor of the world. As creator, he is both transcendent over the world and immanent in it. His presence and power are necessary for the continuing existence and life of the world. As governor, God providentially directs, wholly or partly, the events of the world according to his benevolent divine purposes (Meadows 1999: 52). Thus, the *activity* of God in creation is affirmed and explained. But as Philip R. Meadows continues to explain, the ever-present reality of suffering challenges us to account for the apparent *inactivity* of God or the scope and limit of God's *action* in our lives (Meadows 1999: 52-3).<sup>1</sup> This tension constitutes the problem of evil and necessitates the construction of theodicy or justification of God's ways to man. These attempts, ranging from those that either limit the power of God or heighten it to the point that human responsibility is almost obliterated, suffer from grave inadequacies. Some theologians (Berkouwer 1983, Pannenberg 1991) argue that the whole project of theodicy is wrongheaded in trying to justify the ways of God to man and not vice versa. More seriously, a major deficiency of theodicy is its theoretical treatment of evil as something to explain or solve not something to face, sometimes to the neglect of the practical concerns of daily life and suffering in the structures of society. As Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki rightly observes there is a close relation between the interpretation of evil and the structures of society. For the problem of evil is not only a theological problem, it is also a social and individual problem and therefore its ordering should include the ordering of oppressive structures in society (Suchocki 1994: 26). In addition, one other deficiency of theoretical treatment is its tendency to leave practical issues of suffering in the background or reduce real victims of suffering to mere topics of discourse. Consequently, theorizing apparently substitutes practical action to alleviate suffering. Some, like those suffering in Sudan, would no doubt be more concerned with practical things such as how to get some food, medicine or clothes or some form of settlement for the war so that suffering is alleviated. Similarly, how to respond to their prevailing situation of suffering rather than to have a detailed scientific or theological and philosophical analysis will be a prime concern for them. But this is not to say inquiry into this perplexing problem should be given up altogether. Inquiry or analysis is very important but it is a very poor substitute for practical action, especially in regard to the problem of suffering and evil. The two seem to be interrelated. Be that as it may, theodicy still falls short of reaching the bottomless mystery of

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<sup>1</sup> Italics are Meadows'. We suppose Meadows means by God's inactivity the apparent lack of intervention of God when suffering strikes. But even when God seems to be inactive he may be active in ways that we cannot easily discern.



evil as far as solving it is concerned. This humble recognition that it is insoluble, far from being an escapist gimmick to remain passive in the face of evil, leads to a conscientious attempt to reconstruct a practical biblical and theological response to suffering. This practical response is based on the incarnation as a distinctively Christian answer to the problem of evil and suffering within the framework of the cross, character, community and hope.

My hypothesis, therefore, is that while the best theological and philosophical explications of the problem of suffering and evil must be retained, an admission must be made to the effect that this problem in the last analysis is actually insoluble. It is insoluble if solving means the complete and total elimination of suffering and evil so that we never suffer or even die in this life. In that sense, even the incarnation as the Christian answer is not a solution because as Christians we suffer and die. However, the incarnation still remains the only solution that provides a viable framework in which we can now respond to suffering, transcending and transforming it as we presently live in the promise of the ultimate solution. In that regard, my proposal is that in the framework of the cross, being in a caring community, with the character formation as the end result and with the hope of final triumph over suffering, we can now positively respond to suffering, transcending and transforming it into the highest good possible. I believe this is how the Sudanese church has survived suffering and war, as it will become clear later. To give shape to this hypothesis, I shall attempt in Chapter two to explore factors behind Sudan's long conflict and suffering. I believe that this is very important, considering that suffering and war in that land are deeply rooted in these factors and are difficult to understand without them. In addressing these historical, political, religious and socio-economic factors one gets the grim inside story of the Sudanese tragedy. Given my background as a Southern Sudanese affected by suffering as rooted in these factors, my treatment does not claim complete objectivity or neutrality. In Chapter three, I shall endeavour to investigate suffering and faith in Sudan, dealing with the impact of war on the community, on the proclamation of the gospel and church growth and on how the Christian people interpret their experience of suffering in the light of their faith. The experience of the Bor Dinka people will be used as an anchor, given the dramatic cultural and religious evolution of their community through suffering and their song outpouring as a response to faith and suffering. Again, my treatment is not completely neutral or objective, being a part of this community and having experienced what they have experienced, albeit, to a small degree. Chapters four and five will bring us to classical theological explication of evil as

handed down in the thought of Augustine, Luther, Calvin and the Enlightenment. This choice is based on the fact that much of our modern theological thought is indebted to this heritage. In the thought of Barth, Moltmann, Liberation theology, Berkouwer and African theology, we will encounter positions that deviate somewhat from classical theology but which are still indebted to it. By introducing nearly antithetical approaches to the problem of evil and suffering as addressed in the classical heritage, these perspectives merit inclusion. To provide an alternative view and to introduce a comparative element, the African view is placed at the end of chapter five. Once again, being an African obviously militates against complete neutrality or objectivity in my evaluation and interpretation. Chapter six places suffering in biblical perspective, giving five different explications of suffering in the Bible. The final chapter proposes the cross, the community, character and hope as the biblical and theological framework in which a distinctively Christian response to suffering may be constructed. This response while not necessarily discarding the best available theological and philosophical explications as given in Chapters four and five, tries to build on or perhaps go beyond them.

#### **1.4 METHODOLOGY**

The methodology I follow in this dissertation is an integrative (interpretive) and comparative approach. It basically includes literature review and theological reflection. In this process, a position or an author is allowed to formulate the case as accurately and objectively as possible before analysis or interpretation or evaluation is undertaken (Cooper 1984: 12). Thus, aspects of social and qualitative analysis are obviously used, especially in chapters two and three of this work. Library research is primarily used while insights gained in interviews and conversations with Sudanese in the refugee camps and inside Sudan are included. From 1992 to 1997 I have talked to, observed or interviewed those who have been affected by war and suffering. Both young and old, many of my interviewees became Christians in the midst of their suffering and war. From 1998 to the present, I have continued to make observations or conduct interviews whenever I visit the camps or Sudan. Here, the participant observer methodology became handy for me (Richardson 1991: 62). Sometimes, the interviews were not formal at all but just spontaneous in normal conversations. In the cultural context of the Dinka for instance, formal interviews may actually be unproductive, as people do not easily share intimate feelings but tend to let you hear what you want to hear. In that sense,



conversation and ordinary talk as well as questions generated by observations and generally asked became helpful.<sup>2</sup>

In using the Scripture, I follow what Frank Matera (1996) has called synchronic method. This method deals with the writings of the Bible in their present forms rather than tracing them into time in order to see how particular writings developed and grew. Matera argues that taken in their current form, the biblical writings are the basis of Christian moral life and practice. This life, he says, is a response to God's work of salvation. It is lived in the light of God's coming kingdom and in the community of disciples called church. It is a life that the examples and the legacies of Jesus and Paul inspire and instruct. It consists in doing the will of God as expressed in love for God, neighbour and enemy. This life is a life of faith in the midst of the reality of suffering and evil (Matera 1996: 248-55). While Matera's use of the synchronic method as opposed to the diachronic method is in dealing with the NT writings as they apply to ethical concerns, I believe this method can be applied to the OT writings to a certain degree.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the principles and methods of exegesis used in NT studies govern the interpretation of other historical texts, including the OT (Conzelmann & Lindemann 1988: 2-102). As Richard Hays has rightly pointed out the NT is intelligible only in the light of the OT (Hays 1996: 9).<sup>4</sup> Both are two sides of the same coin; they are jointly God's voice to us. This is consistent with the Reformation heritage that the scripture, the OT and the NT combined, is 'the inspired and authoritative Word of God and the only Christian rule of faith and conduct'. I will, therefore, use conventional exegetical and hermeneutical methods to interact with Scripture and draw pertinent conclusions. In this task, I will employ Richard Hays' proposed guidelines of serious basic exegesis, listening to the full range of canonical witnesses, acknowledging any substantive tensions in the texts, applying the focal images of the community, cross, (new creation to a lesser extent), granting authority to the

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<sup>2</sup> On methodological issues, the following works were helpful: William B. Shaffir & Robert A. Stebbins (eds.) *Experiencing Fieldwork*, New York: Sage, 1991. Michael S. Lewis-Beck (ed), *Research Practice*, New York: Sage, 1994. Else Oyen (ed), *Comparative Methodology*, New York: Sage, 1990. Harris Cooper, *The Integrative Research Review*, London: Sage, 1984. R. A. Krupp, *A Primer In Theological Research Tools*. London: University of America, 1990.

<sup>3</sup> Since the diachronic method uses the tools of historical criticism to reconstruct the meaning of the text, there is no reason why the synchronic method as applied to NT writings cannot be applied to OT writings just as it is the case in historical criticism. It is my argument that hermeneutical methods can be applied to Biblical studies without exception.

<sup>4</sup> I share Richard Hays' concern that we should retain the designation OT instead of 'Hebrew Bible'. As he rightly notes, the designation 'Hebrew Bible' maybe descriptively accurate and sensible but it may imply that it does not belong to the Church. See *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, note 34, p. 312.



texts in the mode they speak whether as paradigm, principle, rule or symbol, narrative and imagination where applicable (Hays 1996: 291-310).

At this point, I would like to give some broad working definitions of basic terms used in this dissertation. First, suffering and evil are used interchangeably. It may be true that not all suffering is evil but it is also true that suffering is inseparable from the problem of evil. Tyrone Inbody (1997) is thus right to use them interchangeably as I do here. Although difficult to define, Mary Ann Fatula defines suffering as "the disruption of inner human harmony caused by physical, mental, and emotional forces experienced as isolating and threatening our very existence. As a deprivation of human good, suffering is inseparable from the mystery of evil" (Fatula 1987: 990). I believe this definition is generally inclusive and it serves my purpose. Second, the definition of community that I will use is perhaps much broader. It has the church as its focus but it is not restricted to it. Joseph A. Bracken defines community as "a body of people having a common organisation or interest or living in the same place under the same laws. It is like a family in that relationships between members are basically personal rather than interpersonal, it is unlike the family in that the association between members of the community is based on free choice rather than common ancestry" (Bracken 1984: 216-8). Bracken thinks that the ideal community is a free association of individual persons who highly prize their interpersonal relationship more than any value or goal that may otherwise be achieved in living and working together (Bracken 1984: 218). Both of these definitions will be used broadly in this work. Third, character as used here is defined as the subtotal of all the mental, moral or spiritual qualities that make persons who they are. It is the ability and moral strength to handle difficult and dangerous situations (Oxford Dictionary). Fourth, I will define hope as a belief that there will come a time when all that is now wrong will be put right, a time when suffering and evil will ultimately be defeated. As T. Lorenzen puts it, "the disciple of Christ lives in the hope that ultimately God will triumph over the forces of estrangement, enmity and death. This hope is not wishful thinking. It is grounded in the resurrection of Jesus Christ" (Lorenzen 1995: 275). Finally, the cross being self-explanatory does not need a definition. Among many other things, it speaks of the agony, the suffering and the humiliation of Christ to effect our redemption and reconciliation with God and with one another. The cross speaks of God's presence and participation in our suffering (McGrath 1995: 57). As it is always the case with definitions, these ones have limitations and shortcomings but they serve my purpose in this work.

Talking about limitations, this dissertation is no exception. It is an endeavour in a particular context, the context of Sudan. It does not claim to answer all the questions inherent in the problem of suffering and evil or theology. But it proposes a framework of a distinctively Christian response for suffering that may be applicable in any situation. The theological and biblical images—the cross, community, character and hope—it proposes can be used in any place. While some of these images might have been used in one way or another before, to the best of my knowledge, this dissertation uses them in this form for the very first time. It proposes these images not as a solution to the problem of evil and suffering but as framework of transforming and transcending it. That does not eliminate its apparent limitations, but it perhaps opens up new areas worth of further studying and exploring. If that proves to be the case, then this dissertation shall have broken new grounds, not to mention its aim of giving encouragement to those that suffer or to alleviate their suffering.

## **1.5 OUTLINE**

This dissertation consists of seven chapters, dealing with the following:

- Chapter One: Research plan and methodology.
- Chapter Two: Factors behind war and suffering in Sudan.
- Chapter Three: Suffering and faith in Sudan.
- Chapter Four: The problem of evil
- Chapter Five: Suffering in some post-Enlightenment theologies.
- Chapter Six: Suffering and evil in biblical perspective.
- Chapter Seven: Facing suffering: Constructing a theological and biblical response.
- General Summary and Conclusion



## CHAPTER TWO

### BACKGROUND TO SUDAN'S LONG CONFLICT

#### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter we examine factors behind the war and suffering in Sudan. We do this in the belief that it is by exploring these factors that one would understand the context of war and suffering in Sudan. The ongoing Sudanese war and suffering are deeply rooted in the historical, political, economic and religious factors, which cannot be bypassed without jeopardising the treatment of the subject at hand. As a Southern Sudanese, who is affected by the war and suffering as rooted in these factors, my treatment of the concerned issues does not claim absolute neutrality or objectivity as may be obvious to the reader. However, a conscious attempt is made, where possible, to procure a measure of objectivity if only from a scholarly viewpoint. Before turning to these factors, we begin with a general overview of Sudan.

##### 2.1.1 SUDAN: A GENERAL OVERVIEW

Sudan<sup>5</sup> is the largest country in Africa. It occupies a vast area of nearly one million square miles. Its size is as big as the United Kingdom, France, Italy, and the Scandinavian countries combined. Sudan borders Egypt in the north, Libya in the northwest, Chad and Central African Republic in the west, Eritrea and Ethiopia in the east, the Democratic Republic of Congo in the southwest, Uganda and Kenya in the south and southeast respectively.

Sudan is broadly divided into two regions: north and south. The north is predominantly Muslim and Arabic in speech and culture with certain strong exceptions in the east and the west where some African indigenous peoples such as the Nuba and the Beja still maintain their traditional cultures and ways of life. They have staunchly survived Islamic cultural onslaught and oppression for many centuries.

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<sup>5</sup> Sudan means the land of the blacks. The Arabs called it *Bilad el Sudan* and it included in their view all the lands south of modern Egypt as well as some parts in West Africa and Ethiopia.

The south, in contrast, is African, Christian and animist with a strong Muslim minority. In very general terms, the vast majority of the people of the south are socially, culturally, religiously, and historically related to the peoples of East Africa (Arnold 1998:245).<sup>6</sup>

The population of the Sudan is estimated at about 30 million people. Muslims make up 70% of the population while Christians and animists make up 30%. Blacks, Muslims or Christians or Animists, are 52% and Arabs are 39%. Other Hamitic people such as the Beja in the east are 9% of the population. In all, there are some 597 tribes and sub-tribes, which broadly comprise 56 major tribal groups that speak more than 115 languages (Said 1965:12-16). The population growth rate is 2.2% per annum with life expectancy of 54 years and child mortality rate of 77 per 1000 live births according to 1995 statistics (Arnold 1998:245).

Sudan became an independent state on January 1st, 1956, after nearly 60 years of Anglo-Egyptian rule or Condominium. Before independence, Sudan was already a country at war with itself. A bloody mutiny in the southern town of Torit was ignited and sparked off, in August 1955, by mutual mistrust and suspicion, which had come to poison relations between the south and the north in the period leading to independence and before. Thus the first war known as the Anya-nya<sup>7</sup> war broke out. Suffering and death ensued on a large scale. Conservative estimates had it that more than two million people lost their lives and nearly another million were displaced from their homes and became refugees in neighbouring countries as a direct result of this bloody war. The south was ravaged and devastated economically, socially, educationally, as it became the battleground. The north was not spared the impact of the war either, though on a different level. Its financial and human resources were sucked and drained by this war that seemed endless and unrelenting at the time. It became increasingly evident after 17 years of fighting that the war could not be won militarily, an illusory objective, which various Khartoum regimes have pursued for many years without success. These regimes laboured under a mistaken view that the south must be conquered and dominated into submission. They thus underestimated, and still do, the resilience and determination of the southern peoples to resist by all means and at all costs any oppression and subjection that would dehumanise them and injure their pride and dignity as a people. This, we ought to say, is an inherent quality in all human beings regardless of race,

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<sup>6</sup> This relation of the south to East Africa led some Colonial administrators in the south to advocate the possibility of attaching it to Uganda rather than to the north.

<sup>7</sup> Anya-nya means poisonous snakes but it has come to mean resistance to northern domination in a very wide southern Sudanese usage.



colour, sex, or religion—we all resist when our humanity and sense of being a people are threatened and endangered either by forces greater or smaller than ourselves, since our very survival completely depends on it.

In 1972, the military regime of Jaffer Numeiri finally realised that the so-called problem of the south can be solved politically, not militarily. Talks were convened in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia under the auspices of emperor Haile Selassie's government between the Southern Liberation Movement and the Numeiri regime. An accord that granted the south self-government or autonomy within united Sudan was reached. The gist of this accord was the preservation of the integral entity of the south. Southerners were able to run their own affairs for the first time in their history although political and economic strings continued to be pulled from the north. The Numeiri regime and the Southern Liberation Movement agreed to continue exploring possible ways and means of cementing and consolidating the newfound peace and unity after 17 years of war and destruction. The manner in which this 17 year-old-war was peacefully ended indicated a remarkable shift in political dynamics in the country. It somehow accommodated southern calls for various forms of regionalism or federalism, which had meant nothing in the past to northerners but separation. It also achieved some form of unity for the whole country, which had meant previously to southerners nothing but northern domination (Deng 1978:173).

Ten years of relative peace followed the signing of the agreement. But it must be added in honesty that all was not really that well in the south itself and in the north at this time. Many in the south still felt that the accord did not go far enough and that its framework for autonomy was not comprehensive enough as the central government still had a stranglehold on financial and military matters as well as foreign relations of the south and the whole country. Furthermore, little development was done in the south in the years of peace contrary to the terms of the accord. This greatly discredited the accord in the eyes of many southerners and caused deep suspicion and doubts about its purpose and sincerity in the first place. How was it different from other dishonoured past agreements between the south and the north? What would guarantee its durability for years to come?

Similarly, many felt in the north that the government had given in too much already for the south and had thus set a dangerous precedent for the south to call for what it had all along wanted—separation from the north. These voices were powerful and disturbing to the government and indeed to the whole country, as they grew louder towards the end of 1970's



and the beginning of 1980's. Political bickering and jostling for power and positions among southerners themselves did not help matters much. This was in addition to the growing influence of some powerful northern politicians who had become part of the regime and shrewdly but negatively contributed in shaping its policies and decisions for the south in such a way that the accord was either severely undermined or mutilated and rendered ineffective.<sup>8</sup>

It was only a matter of time before the accord came under fierce attacks, not least from President Numeiri himself.<sup>9</sup> He went public in both word and deed against the accord saying loud and clear that the accord was not the Bible or the Quran not to be abrogated. It is not divine. Faithful to his pronouncements, Mr. Numeiri decreed the abrogation of the Addis Ababa accord in 1983 and imposed the Islamic Sharia laws on the whole country. The south was re-divided on tribal lines into three regions, as some southerners had demanded. They had complained of alleged domination by the Dinka and other large tribes who supposedly had a big share in the regional government at the expense of smaller tribes.<sup>10</sup>

All these events and many others that preceded them set the stage for the current ongoing war in the southern part of Sudan. In fact, the rebellion against Numeiri and the northern domination he represented was already in full swing before he declared his *Sharia laws* in September 1983. Mostly southerners formed the Sudan People's Liberation Movement and the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLM/SPLA) in May 1983, having been sparked off almost by similar circumstances as in 1955 in Torit. Its main objective states as follows: "To fight for a just secular, united and democratic New Sudan and for a new social system based on justice, full democratic participation, equality for all citizens regardless of race, sex or religion" (SPLA 1998:4).<sup>11</sup> This SPLM/SPLA vision appealed to many not only in the south but also in the north. Large numbers of people who swelled its ranks and files in just little over five years after its inception showed this. By 1989, 90% of the south was under its control and its forces penetrated deep into the Nuba Mountains and southern Blue Nile. For

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<sup>8</sup> In this regard, the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood was greater especially when their leader, Hasan el Turabi became a member of Numeiri's cabinet in the beginning of the 1980's.

<sup>9</sup> President Numeiri was at this time heavily influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood whose leader Dr. Hasan el Turabi had become part of his government. It was not therefore surprising that most of his political pronouncements and policies towards the south were saturated with religious slogans at the beginning of 1980's.

<sup>10</sup> This was despite the fact that the real power was not with these tribes but with Khartoum which actually incited tribal sentiments to weaken the south and neutralise its future threat of secession that a united south always poses to the north. Many southerners soon realised this manoeuvre and resisted it.

<sup>11</sup> This is taken from SPLA's position and vision paper presented to the Horn of Africa and the Great Lake Region Council of Churches conference on the Sudan held in Nairobi, Kenya, April 7-8, 1998. It is a modified version of its vision of liberating not just the south as the Anya-nya advocated but the whole Sudan in which the south will be given opportunity to either choose confederation or independence.



the first time in the history of south-north relations, the war came closer to the north. The challenge presented by SPLA sent reeling shock waves to rulers in Khartoum like never before. It greatly weakened successive governments in Khartoum and led to two military coups in 1985 and 1989. With these military advances and attempts by successive regimes in Khartoum to contain them came untold suffering and massive displacement to the civilian population in the south and other war affected areas. War in this country for the last 17 years has claimed more than two million lives and displaced twice as much into refugee camps locally and across the borders. The period between 1989 and the present time has been the worst ever in this relentless long war of attrition. It was in 1989 that the Islamic government of Omer Beshir came to power through a military coup. For the first time in recent memory the war in the south was viewed as a *jihad*. This is in addition to a bitter split<sup>12</sup> in the SPLA in 1991 in which the south turned against itself and many southern lives were lost, weakening the prospects of its own liberation. But why are the Sudanese fighting? What are the main factors behind this ruthless and longest war of Africa? To respond to these questions and many more we acknowledge that there are many and complex factors and reasons behind the Sudanese war, as we shall shortly see.

### 2.1.2 TWO DIFFERING VIEWS ON THE CONFLICT

Both the north and the south have different views as to what might be considered to be the root causes of this conflict. A classical northern view lays the blame squarely on colonial powers for administering the south as a separate entity and thus creating secessionist aspirations therein. To support this view, Beshir Mohammed Said argues that Anglo-Egyptian government's southern policy of 1900-1946 and 1946-1953 that stipulated separate administration for southern provinces was a bad omen in north-south relations as it set the stage for division and suspicion between the two regions. Said is especially critical of Christian missionaries in the south who he accuses of doing everything within their power to keep the north and the south apart and to encourage dissension and to breed mistrust and hatred against the north. He also contends that these missionaries kept reviving the unfortunate memories of slave trade in the south and continually reminded southerners that

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<sup>12</sup> SPLA commanders, Riek Machar and Lam Akol led this rebellion against John Garang. Inter-tribal fighting between the Dinka and the Nuer tribes ensued leading to the death of thousands upon thousands from both tribes as well as other tribes. Machar and Akol made peace with Khartoum and became part of the regime in Khartoum for a while. Later frustrated by Khartoum's intransigence, Machar redefected, leaving Akol in the government. Garang on the other hand has remained in the struggle, having the support of the majority of southern people and other oppressed people in the west and the east as well as some in the north itself.



northerners were descendants of slave traders and by so doing planted seeds of hatred and suspicion between the two (Said 1965:21-45). Although virtually still the same, this northern view has been modified in recent times. Now that the missionaries and colonial administrators are long gone from the south, the blame has been shifted to others. The United States of America, the United Kingdom and the neighbouring countries of Uganda, Eritrea and others are all accused of instigating the south to agitate for secession or fight for its rights. What all this means is that the south can do nothing for itself without being influenced or instigated by some external powers. This is nothing short of an insult to the south. What must be remembered, however, is that this game, if not ended soon, will only prolong the war and block sincerity in negotiating a lasting solution to the conflict in Sudan. It ignores the fundamental issues of importance endangering peaceable coexistence between these two regions, which are raised by the south but not heeded by the north. Justice, equality, equal opportunity for all citizens of the Sudan, true religious and cultural freedom are some of the main issues. When no fair hearing is given to these, war inevitably results and suffering unfortunately continues. The northern view's solution to the conflict is the preservation of national unity by all means and at all costs. Methods of achieving this objective range from Islamisation to cultural uniformity through Arabisation.<sup>13</sup>

On the other hand, William Deng and Joseph Oduho articulated what might be considered a southern classical view in 1963.<sup>14</sup> They argue that the root causes of the war are northern subjection and domination of the south. This subjection and domination, they assert, have political, religious, social, economic, and historical dimensions, a view still shared to this day by the majority of southern people and not a few from the north itself (Deng & Oduho 1963:21-59). They strongly maintain that the south in its history had never been an integral part of the north at any time, contrary to what is claimed by the north.<sup>15</sup> They regard the 1947 Juba conference, which is alleged to have paved the way for unity between these two regions

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<sup>13</sup> The calls for an Islamic State and full imposition of Islamic laws in the Sudan are steps in that direction. Many Islamists may deny this but their call for jihad in the war in the south only confirms it as does their adamant insistence on nothing but an Islamic state in a multi-cultural, multi-religious state that the Sudan is.

<sup>14</sup> These prominent southern politicians died in the struggle for the rights of the south. The Arabs killed Deng in 1967 and Oduho was killed in 1992, a victim of southern political intrigues and divisions.

<sup>15</sup> The south was only administrated as part of modern Sudan during the Turko-Egyptian regime of 1821 to 1885 but it was always a different region from the north socially, culturally and politically. It might have been in this regard that the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium chose to administer it separately if only to preserve its identity and protect it from the ever-looming northern exploitation and domination.



as a political scam, which must be rejected.<sup>16</sup> This southern view has also undergone changes over the years. It accepts the view that the ongoing war is partially a product of colonial history and policies which did not go far enough in ensuring the political and territorial integrity of the south as an entity on its own and not as a part of the north. Colonial authorities, this view continues, did little to raise the economic, educational, and political standards of the south before they hurriedly departed at independence in 1956. This action, charges this view, left a huge gap in the south that the north was only too happy to exploit and use to oppress the south. So far as the south is concerned, the southern policies of the colonial administration only succeeded in achieving some security in many parts of the south but left a lot to be desired in terms of education and development.<sup>17</sup> In short, these policies were nothing less than shortsighted efforts that did not help the south much. This southern view's solution for the crisis in the Sudan ranges from independence to federation, failure of which to achieve through honest negotiation leads to war and suffering. Here below we examine, in some detail, factors that may be regarded to be behind the war in Sudan. Some have already been alluded to above in brief.

## **2.2 HISTORICAL FACTORS**

### **2.2.1 THE TURKO-EGYPTIAN PERIOD: INVADING THE SOUTH**

The current war and suffering in Sudan are deeply rooted in history, a history of mutual mistrust, suspicion and intrigues between the south and the north. As early as 1821, when Mohammed Ali, the Ottoman ruler of Egypt, invaded the northern part of Sudan, the south was not a part of modern Sudan. It was a different country with little or nothing to do with the north.<sup>18</sup> Arab penetration up the White Nile had been going on slowly for generations. The strong resistance by the Nilotic Shilluk, whose territory extended to the location of the

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<sup>16</sup> There was a great deal of political arm-twisting and intimidation at this conference. Mohammed Saleh Shingeiti, a witty northern judge, literally pushed and intimidated southern delegates into accepting the idea of unity which the northern delegates and the civil secretary, James Robertson, seemed to have agreed upon before they met the southerners. Allegations of bribery are not far from the truth as the sudden change in southern position showed when the meeting resumed the next morning (see Said's *The Sudan: The crossroads of Africa*, pp.46-71 for full proceedings of the conference).

<sup>17</sup> The only schools in the south during most parts of colonial presence were mission schools. The bulk of southerner intellectuals were and still are products of these schools.

<sup>18</sup> The Shilluk warriors, whose territory's borders reached the Aba Island in central Sudan, constantly raided places in the north and east where some of them are believed to have played a major role in the founding of the Funj sultanate (see Holt's *the Modern History of Sudan*, pp.16-34).

modern town of Dueim in northern Sudan, hampered these penetrations for a long time. The Egyptian conquest, however, strengthened the hand of the Arabs by making more accessible to them the use of firearms and the Nilotic tribes fell back further south not being able to withstand this superior weaponry (Holt 1977:8-9). A formidable physical barrier known as the sudd, a swampy papyrus marsh that blocked navigation on the White Nile and made penetration difficult if not impossible, also hindered Arabs penetrating into the south.

The Turko-Egyptian government, determined to overcome the sudd, sent expeditions into the south under the command of Salim, a Turkish frigate captain, between 1839 and 1841. Salim succeeded where others before him, including the Roman emperor Nero eighteen centuries before, had failed. He cut through the sudd and arrived in Gondokoro by boat in 1839 for the first time. By this significant discovery the outside world was woken up to a navigable watery way stretching deep into the unknown and undiscovered interior (Gray 1961:1-19). This opening up of the south to the outside world was to have far-reaching implications later on the people of the south. Many foreigners flocked into the south. The northern trader, the Turko-Egyptian official, the European explorer and missionary all came. They had different and conflicting interests in coming to the south; a fact that at times caused them to incite local prejudices against one another.<sup>19</sup> The Turko-Egyptian official had imperial expansionist interests, the northern trader wanted to make quick profits and extend his personal fortunes, the missionary had the divine mandate to deliver the southerner from the fires of hell awaiting all 'pagans' and the explorer needed to study the 'primitive' people and their culture and inform the 'civilised' world of the strange customs and ways of life of these 'backward' tribes. The explorer was also out to discover the sources of the Nile. They, however, all shared one thing in common: their contempt for the southerner as an inferior being, coupled with a complete indifference to his religious ideas, his ethics and standards of living, his social and tribal patterns (Henderson 1965:153-5). The local people in keeping with traditional respect and generosity to foreigners nevertheless, welcomed them all. But in the long run, the total unpreparedness of the southern tribes to encounter the increasing impact of the outside world was matched by a complete ignorance on the part of the missionary, the northern trader and the Turko-Egyptian official of the values of the tribal society. As an inevitable result, the

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<sup>19</sup> Samuel Baker was later to become a victim of this device. Northern traders incited the local people against him. This was also what Gordon later tried to avoid when he took into his service Abu Suud and other Danagila traders.



early generous welcome rapidly degenerated into deep suspicions and finally open hostility (Gray 1961:32-5).

### 2.2.2 THE GENESIS OF SLAVE TRADE

The trade was the first arena in which southern trust and confidence in the foreigner were eroded. The government at first bought ivory fairly from local people and transported it to Khartoum annually. Arab traders also bought<sup>20</sup> ivory, hides, honey and other southern goods and sent them up north by boat. The main trading was, however, in ivory. As may be expected, ivory supplies were soon exhausted after 1850 when the Europeans traders from Khartoum entered the market. Prices of ivory went up. This led to organised elephant hunts and bitter rivalry between trading firms. This rivalry usually spilled over into local affairs and threatened stability and peace of the tribal society. When ivory stocks grew scarcer hunting into the interior started, this time round not for elephants but human beings. Local chiefs were recruited by the traders and rewarded with cattle for services rendered in securing ivory or prisoners, eroding further the tribal setup. Before long, the slave trade was the outcome. It soon grew into a lucrative business on a scale never seen before. There is no doubt that there was some slave trade going on in the Sudan before the Egyptian conquest but nothing like this. The sultanate of Sennar, for instance, exported 1500 slaves every year to Egypt.<sup>21</sup> However, by the end of 18th century, it was estimated that the annual caravans from Darfur and from Bahr el Ghazal<sup>22</sup> brought five to six thousand slaves to markets in Egypt, the majority of whom were girls destined for domestic service (Douin 1944:5). In one campaign, the Egyptian soldiers captured more than five thousand slaves in the mountains south of Sennar and Kordofan. The government retained half of this catch; the other half was given as payment to the soldiers who in turn sold them to the northern Danagila traders (Gray 1961:5).

Soon after, the terror of slave traders and the government soldiers reached unbelievable heights in the south and other areas. More than twelve thousand slaves were exported to Egypt every year. Prominent northern slave traders such as Zubeir Rahma in Bahr el Ghazal and Mohammed Khair in Upper Nile became larger than life, threatening and intimidating not

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<sup>20</sup> They actually bartered these goods for beads, clothes, salt and other materials not produced or found in the south.

<sup>21</sup> What may be in doubt is whether these slaves were captured in the south. This is highly probable since the Arabs by that time had not penetrated the south as the Shilluk resisted and the introduction of firearms was still future.

<sup>22</sup> Bahr el Ghazal was a part of Turko-Egyptian Region of Western Sudan which comprised the provinces of Darfur, Kordofan, Dongola, and Bahr el Ghazal. See Holt's *The Mahdist State in the Sudan*, p.14.



only the helpless southerners but also the Turko-Egyptian administration. They had 'zaribas' or slave camps beyond the control of the government or with its consent.<sup>23</sup> The government was either a willing partner in or even an initiator of slave trade.<sup>24</sup>

The outcry in Europe against slave trade led to the sending and arrival of Samuel Baker as governor of the south in 1872. His coming eased the slave trade a little although Baker himself soon came into conflict with the local people who were by now understandably very suspicious of all foreigners and their unknown intentions. Baker's vision of opening up the south and developing it through trade was soon in tatters as he was frustrated by increasing local hostility apparently instigated by el Agad traders who were the sole owners of trading rights in the area<sup>25</sup> (Gray 1961:94). By 1873, Baker had no choice but to leave having failed to win the confidence of the local people after resorting to the same repressive methods and tactics of slave traders that he came to combat if only to survive in an increasingly hostile environment.

Charles Gordon was the next in line to come to the south as governor. His tenure, 1873 to 1876, was markedly different from that of his predecessor. Gordon came to the south with a 'pacific pragmatism'<sup>26</sup> and deep reluctance to use force. Unlike Baker, he had no comprehensive plans for development. His only burning passion was to fight the slave trade.<sup>27</sup> He traveled widely by camel, covering nearly 10,000 miles, raiding the 'zaribas' and the slave markets and arresting slave traders (Wesseling 1996:57).<sup>28</sup> Against all odds, Gordon and his aides, Romolo Gessi<sup>29</sup> and Edourd Schnitzer<sup>30</sup> seemed to have succeeded in combating slave trade in a manner no one before them had. But not everyone was happy with Gordon and his

<sup>23</sup> Zubeir's camps were at Meshra el Rek and Deim Zubeir while Mohammed Khair's were at Kaka in the Shilluk territory but he extended his raids into Ager Dinka areas.

<sup>24</sup> Local collaborators did much havoc to their own people as they associated with the northern slave traders, the Turks and others in capturing slaves or selling them.

<sup>25</sup> It is not clear who granted el Agad the trading rights in the area. It would seem that the local headman of the Bari, Alloron, granted the trading rights, as he had become an ally of el Agad.

<sup>26</sup> This is Gray's phrase for which I am indebted.

<sup>27</sup> Gray discusses this aspect and draws a contrast between Baker and Gordon in his *A History of the Southern Sudan: 1839-1881*, pp.104-25.

<sup>28</sup> Wesseling is a little unfair when he compares Gordon's action against the slave traders with the crusades. This slave trade was an evil which the whole world fought against and Gordon, although a very devout Christian, was a part of that universal campaign.

<sup>29</sup> Gessi succeeded against slave traders in Darfur and Bahr el Ghazal. He defeated and killed Suliman Zubeir, the son of the chief slave trader, Zubeir Rahma.

<sup>30</sup> Schnitzer, also known as Emin Pasha, did little in combating slave traders in comparison to Gessi but he courageously held out against the Mahdist invasion of the south to the last minute when he was evacuated against his will by Stanley, see Collins' *The Southern Sudan, 1883-1898*, pp.67-9. His time in the south as governor enjoyed relative peace.



aides and their war against slave trade, not at least the Danagila merchants in Darfur and Bahr el Ghazal. Their resentment against Gordon and his slave trade crusade was extremely intense. Upon leaving the south in 1876, Gordon was appointed Sudan's Governor General, a post he held until he resigned in protest in July 1879. He was to return later at the height of the Mahdist rebellion in which he was killed in February 1885.<sup>31</sup> Gordon's weaknesses include his apparent dependency on the Danagila merchants such as Abu Suud and Wad el Mak whom he had taken into his service and only discarded later when they became a liability.<sup>32</sup> In addition, the Danagila merchants continued to rule large areas without much trouble from Gordon.<sup>33</sup> They had control over the important river stations of Shambe and Bor where they launched raids into the interior to capture slaves. But in all fairness, Gordon's successes in the south outweigh his failures and that must be given serious consideration when he is judged.<sup>34</sup>

### **2.2.3 THE MAHDIYYA: PERPETUATING SLAVE TRADE AND EXPLOITATION**

During the Mahdiyya, the anti-slavery campaigns that Gordon and others headed took a serious knock. The Danagila and other Arab merchants traded in slaves with impunity. Indeed, of the four causes of the Mahdiyya (namely, the violence of the Turko-Egyptian regime, its corruption, its favouritism, its suppression of the slave trade), the suppression of the slave trade seems to have been the major. The Turko-Egyptian government had tried to put checks on the slave trade first by establishing police patrol on the White Nile and later by confiscating traders' boats and imposing heavy taxes on them. Military posts were established at Fashoda and other stations along the Nile for this purpose. These measures aroused anger amongst merchants upon whom the tax burden came to lie. Later, however, the traders

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<sup>31</sup> Gordon, it would seem, was killed against the orders of the Mahdi. He had ordered his army to capture him alive, but his killing might have been carried out by revengeful slave traders or their associates who were now in the Mahdist army and whose activities Gordon and his aides had successfully stopped when he was governor of the south in 1870's.

<sup>32</sup> Wad el Mak had hanged a chief who had refused to give him porters. This was brought to Gordon's attention indirectly but all he could do was to be furious with the man. He went on to forgive him and continued dealing with him as he found him to be useful, Gray, *A History of the Southern Sudan*, p.114-15.

<sup>33</sup> This might have been the reason for public outcry back home that Gordon was not doing enough to combat slave trade in the south. I think, though, that this was a little unfair to him and expecting too much too soon, considering the difficulties that were involved in the fight against the slave trade at the time. For a discussion of this outcry see Charrier's *Gordon of Khartoum*, pp.165-185.

<sup>34</sup> Gordon had a very positive attitude towards the peoples of the south and treated them with honour and respect. He called them 'virgin tribes' not savages as many used to refer to them. He however humbly acknowledged that the task of eradicating the evil slave trade from their land needed nothing short than God's intervention. He once said about his work in the south: "Beyond being civilised in my operations and making allowance for these virgin tribes, this is no mission of humanity"(A letter sent to a Mr. Walker, 29.1.1875, cited in Gray, p.105). It was in this regard that he passionately advocated the evangelisation of the south.



successfully learned to elude government patrols and continued the trade with little trouble. But in general terms, these measures were reasonably effective and successful in areas along the Nile, but not deep in the interior. Gordon and his aides were successful in Bahr el Ghazal against the trade as mentioned earlier. But now many of these disgruntled merchants who suffered slave trade losses under Gordon and his aides passionately supported the Mahdist uprising not least for the saving of this unfortunate trade (Holt 1977:33-48).<sup>35</sup> Thus under the Mahdist state, slave trade was to go on unchecked and even flourished, specially, in Bahr el Ghazal, parts of Upper Nile and Darfur.<sup>36</sup>

The same may be said of other types of trade. The northern trader was everywhere in the south. To the southerner, the professional northern trader, slave trader or otherwise, was an undesirable immigrant in his environment. Not least for the fact that his trading methods included swindling the unsophisticated southerner, paying him in counterfeit coins or play-cards, selling him rubbish goods at a very high price and luring his wife or daughter with his goods or money into illicit sexual relationship with himself and in the process infecting her with venereal diseases (Henderson 1965:162). He lived in the south and behaved like a master. He was never interested in developing the location of his trade but preferring rather to stash his wealth and capital in the north where he built flashy permanent residences with the profits made in the south. He heavily interfered in local politics and always sided with the local northerner administrator against the southerner and betrayed any that dared to treat southerners fairly (Deng & Oduho 1963:26).<sup>37</sup> To the southerner, the northerner is either a trader or raider, a fact that the northerner seems to confirm by his behaviour and actions. All these historical factors, namely territorial invasion of the south, cultural disregard, slave trade effects and exploitation, continue to influence relations between the south and the north today. The current civil war is deeply rooted in these factors, not isolated from them. Along with these are other factors that we will examine below. They cannot be ignored without endangering stability and peace, which are so desperately needed in the country. We cannot escape or ignore the past without endangering the future. We must courageously face the past

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<sup>35</sup> There were many other supporters of the Mahdi who were not slave merchants but whose attitude towards the south as a land to be conquered and Islamised was still basically the same as that of slave traders.

<sup>36</sup> Things were never easy for the Mahdists in Equatoria as Emin Pasha and the Jahadiya forces under the command of Mohammed Fadh Mulla, probably a Southerner, held out against them for a long time. Only after Stanley evacuated Emin and Fadh Mulla was killed by the Mahdist commander, Arabi Dafa Allah, that the Mahdists found some breathing space for a short spell.

<sup>37</sup> They refer to southerners as 'abid' or slave and by so doing revive the memories of slave trade.



and deal with its troubling facts in order to ensure and secure a bright future, not divorced from it.

## 2.3 POLITICAL FACTORS

### 2.3.1 BRITISH POLICY: THE POLICAL MARGINALISATION OF THE SOUTH

These political factors are related to the history discussed above. To begin with, very little political activity went on in the south during the times of Turko-Egyptian, Mahdiyya and Anglo-Egyptian regimes. In contrast, the north was active politically if only under severe colonial repression. This is not to say the south took colonial subjection lying down or that its contribution was lacking in comparison to the northern struggle against colonial powers.<sup>38</sup> The south resisted colonial powers, as the Nuer resistance of the late 1920's showed (Hutchinson 1996:22-30). Many other southern peoples also did not make things easy for the British District Commissioners in the south. However, the political events that had had an enduring impact on south-north relations date back to the second half of the 1940's. The formation of the Advisory Council for northern Sudan in 1944 was in this regard a major development in the colonial government policy.<sup>39</sup> It underlined the fact that the authorities could no longer ignore the Sudanese nationalism or deny the participation of the Sudanese in the affairs of the country. But the functions of this council were limited, as was its representation, which excluded the south. For valid historical reasons, the south was administered separately from the north since the beginning of the Condominium. This localisation of southern administration was later translated into southern policy which reflected aspects of a local government with its own military and police force recruited mostly from local people (Henderson 1965:161). The initial aim of this policy was to protect southern peoples from the slave trade, a cruel enterprise from which they had previously suffered, and to put in place some form of government through chiefs, although the British District Commissioners were still to be the ultimate authority. However, the official enforcement of this southern policy did not actually materialise until the government

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<sup>38</sup> Ali Adelatif, the leader of White Flag League was a Southerner in origins, see Holt's *Modern History of The Sudan*, pp.127-140.

<sup>39</sup> This was a body of Sudanese notables appointed to advise the British colonial authorities on selected issues of concern. It played a major role in the constitutional development. It took an active part in the Sudan administration conference in 1946. It also defined steps towards self-determination and the creation of the Legislative Assembly in 1948. All this made the southern exclusion from it both intriguing and suspicious, especially after the south had presumably become part of the Sudan in June 1947.



discovered in 1929 that the Arab Beni Shanqul and Baggara tribes were still trading in slaves, possibly captured in the south and other vulnerable areas, in inaccessible markets in the north (Henderson 1965: 163-65). From this point onward, the southern policy was enforced with relative success as it virtually excluded northerner traders and monitored closely those permitted to enter the south. Because of this, northern doubts and fears that the primary aim of the policy was to divide the country were aroused as were their suspicions and mistrust of the missionaries and southern elite who were products of mission schools. It was in this context, in late 1943, when the plans for the setting up of the Advisory Council for northern Sudan were in high gear, that these northern fears and doubts increased. The Civil Secretary, Douglas Newbold, was forced to explain in a broadcast from Umdurman in January 1944 that there were no plans from the government to split the Sudan into two since it was not empowered on its own to make such a decision. He went on to say that the exclusion of the south from the proposed council was not sinister. He further explained:

We are not prejudging the future status of the southern Sudanese. It is simply that the southern Sudanese have not yet, for historical and natural reasons, reached a degree of enlightenment and cohesion, which enables them to send competent representatives to a council of this kind. Nor are there any northern Sudanese who can fairly claim to be able to conscientiously represent the southern peoples. We must look the facts in the face. The same difficulty applies to the Nuba Mountains Districts in a lesser degree, but owing to their close connection with the north and the fact that they are an integral part of Kordofan Province<sup>40</sup> we have thought it necessary in spite of some differences in language and outlook and social life, to arrange for their representation on the Kordofan Province Council ... It has been suggested that District Commissioners or even missionaries might be nominated as southern representatives ... but the diversity of tribes and customs and languages and the distances in the southern provinces are such that almost every district would have a representative, and it is the government's aim that this council should be a predominantly Sudanese assembly. We have carefully drafted the Ordinance so that later on, when our plans for accelerating the educational and economic development of the south have matured, it can either join up with the northern council or have a separate council of its own. It is interesting that in several southern areas native local government is developing well.<sup>41</sup>

It is not entirely correct that the south lacked competent representatives to send to the proposed Advisory Council or to have its own council at this point in time. Had this been the case, it would not have been possible three years later, that is in 1947, to have representatives capable of speaking on behalf of their own people when the question of unity was discussed

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<sup>40</sup> The Nuba Mountains were absorbed into Kordofan Province in 1928 according to Henderson, p.166. The Nuba Districts had been administered separately under 'Closed Districts' policy before then.

<sup>41</sup> Quoted in Henderson, *Sudan Republic*, pp.165-6



at the Juba Conference. What is more, the Civil Secretary, James Robertson,<sup>42</sup> admitted after the Juba Conference in that same year that he found southern representatives not inferior in any way to their northern counterparts in dealing with matters that were being discussed. Newbold's arguments on behalf of the government for the exclusion of the south from the Advisory Council are not therefore convincing. They are typical of British half-hearted, inconsistent, shortsighted and mostly irreconcilable policies and interests in the south from which pain and suffering were and still are the unfortunate consequences.<sup>43</sup>

Newbold did not live long enough to see his southern policy of 'accelerating' the educational and economic development of the south carried out. Nor did this southern policy survive him. He died in office only a few months after this announcement. His successor, James Robertson, did his own thing, as he seemed to have already made up his mind that the only option for the south was to join up with the north, not to separate. During his tenure as Civil Secretary, it was decided to hold a conference in Juba to discuss the question of unity between the south and the north. In June 1947, this conference convened in Juba as planned. Six British officials, including Robertson who chaired the meeting, six northern Sudanese, including Judge Mohammed Saleh el Shingeiti who did much persuasion<sup>44</sup> of southern delegates, and fifteen southerners attended the two-day meeting. Robertson's opening remarks are as confusing and contradictory as they are subtle. He said: "The policy of Sudan Government regarding the Southern Sudan is to act upon the facts that the peoples of the southern Sudan are distinctly African and Negroid, but that by geography and economics combine, as far as can be foreseen at the present time, to render them inextricably bound for future development to the Middle East and Arabia and Northern Sudan: and therefore to ensure that they shall by educational and economic developments be equipped to take their places in the future as socially and economically the equals of their partners of the northern Sudan in the Sudan of the future" (Robertson 1947:48). He then went on to ask the meeting if this statement should be adopted as the new government southern policy. Is it really correct

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<sup>42</sup> Robertson said: "I found at the Juba conference that a number of southerners were quite as able as many northerners to take part in discussions of this kind, and that they are no less intelligent and capable" quoted in Voll & Voll, p.61.

<sup>43</sup> It seems that the British interests in Egypt and especially its control over the Suez Canal affected its interests in the Sudan, notably its haste in granting independence due to Egyptian influence in possible exchange for continued control over the Canal. Its southern policy became an easy victim in that regard as well since Egyptian political sentiments supported the unity of the Sudan for obvious reason of Nile water supply security.

<sup>44</sup> El Shingeiti, as mentioned earlier, did a lot to literally push southern representatives into some sort of agreement for unity so that he did not have to go back to Khartoum without one. He was a clever judge who used



both historically and socially that the peoples of the south are 'inextricably' bound to the Middle East or Arabia or even northern Sudan? At least not in 1947 and before. But if what Robertson meant by economics and geography are references to the slave trade and the Nile waters then he may be right if only Uganda or Egypt do not claim attachment to the south by virtue of being joined by the Nile with them. In addition, subsequent events in the Sudan that followed this unity meeting proved Robertson and the government he represented terribly wrong. Unity forced on the south became and still is an unrealised dream in the 'Sudan of the future' as the wars of 1955 to 1972 and 1983 to the present have shown. In spite of this, the meeting discussed the proposal put on the table by Robertson, not in a manner seeking the southern opinion on the matter and leaving it at that for the time being, but in a manner that put an intensive pressure and arm-twisting on the southern delegates to agree to the unity idea there and then. In fact, the intensity with which this conference was conducted left a lot to be desired, particularly after the southern delegates had made it abundantly clear that the south was not yet ready to join up with the north at that time. Although Judge el Shingeiti accused the southern delegates of coming to the conference with fixed ideas, the truth may be that he and his northern colleagues and to a lesser degree Robertson<sup>45</sup> were more guilty of this charge than the southerners (Said 1965:57). After a considerable discussion,<sup>46</sup> the southern delegation agreed to the idea of unity but only with a clumsy promise of 'safeguards' that the northern delegation detested and regarded as unnecessary, undesirable and a breach of trust and confidence between brothers but nevertheless agreed to. The Civil Secretary, however, failed to include these 'safeguards'<sup>47</sup> in the ordinance of his new southern policy after the Juba conference on the mistaken assumption that the Governor General's veto power could cover them should they come into contention in the near future. It never did when they came into contention and southerners felt betrayed, an unfortunate sequence, which would later become characteristic of future north-south relations.

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his legal capabilities to arm-twist southerners and manipulate British administrators. He dominated the meeting, speaking more than thirty times much of which was intimidating and threatening talk.

<sup>45</sup> One British official thought to be Owen, the deputy governor of Bahr el Ghazal at that time, was very critical of the whole meeting and went as far as accusing Robertson of 'sacrificing his conscience' in giving in to northern insistence on unity at all costs, see Henderson, p.171.

<sup>46</sup> Allegations of bribery overnight are hard to confirm but they seem to merit some credibility in the light of sudden change in the position of some southern delegates the following morning when the conference reconvened. Deng & Oduho assert in their *Problem of Southern Sudan* that this was indeed the case.

<sup>47</sup> Could it be that Mr. Robertson failed to include the 'safeguards' in his new southern policy ordinance due to northern pressure behind the scene? No one can really tell but considering his obvious support of the idea of unity and not separation for the south makes this a possibility!



### 2.3.2 THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY AND THE EXCLUSION OF THE SOUTH FROM PRE-INDEPENDENCE TALKS

Finally, an all-Sudan Legislative Assembly opened on December 15, 1948 with thirteen southern members who did not have the best of times in the northern-dominated chamber. A few years later, self-determination talks between the Anglo-Egyptian government and northern political elite went on unofficially. Soon it became official that these talks will be convened in Cairo, but southern representatives were left out again in an all-party agreement in 1953 in which this question of self-determination for the Sudan was decided. Southern fears that the north was out to dominate it were frighteningly confirmed. How else could it be left out in an agreement in which the future of the whole country was decided? The contention that the south did not have a political party of their own to represent them at this vital agreement and that they gave their blessing to northern delegates who signed the agreement may not historically be correct.<sup>48</sup> Already, there was a political committee<sup>49</sup> under the chairmanship of Paulo Logaali in Juba that issued a memorandum in which they protested the signing of this agreement without first consulting the south. The memorandum stated its case as follows:

The people of the southern Sudan have raised the present political issues because the leaders of political parties in the northern Sudan after coming to an agreement with the south in 1947, the logical culmination of which was expressed in self-government statute, made a unilateral agreement with General Neguib (of Egypt) without consultation with the south. This made the people of south doubt the good faith of the northern political leaders and has led the people of southern Sudan to decide that they must clarify their position by explaining to the northern Sudanese and to the world at large their political aspirations and their views on the present state of affairs ... The people of the south stand by the self-government statute as agreed by the Legislative Assembly and do not agree to any modifications to that statute unless such modifications are agreed to by a fully representative and democratic body. The people of the south are anxious to co-operate with their brothers in the north in the self-determination of the Sudan. They differ strongly however from the northern view that self-determination should take place in three years. The south considers that it is not yet in a position to enter into an entirely free and democratic union with the north. The south is at present behind the north in standards of education and in all spheres of development. The people of the south wish the present civil service which has contributed mainly to the standard of evolution reached in the north, to remain to guide the southern people towards the same goal. The people of the south look forward to the day when they will be able to join with the north in a free and independent Sudan. They feel however that this cannot come about until such a time when we are on the same footing as the north. There should not be a fixed period for self-determination (Logaali 1952).

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<sup>48</sup> See the Report of the Commission of Inquiry into Southern Sudan disturbances of 1955.

<sup>49</sup> Although only a political committee and not a political party, it was still representative of the southern people as their memorandum indicates. Besides, the representation at this vital meeting was not strictly confined to political parties but to all peoples' representatives since the future of the whole country was being decided upon. This was what made southern omission both obnoxious and suspicious.



Southern representation was not therefore lacking at this point in time. The reason for this serious omission may lie in the over-hasty political change in the country and northern obsession with independence at all costs even at the cost of paying no heed to southern genuinely raised concerns. On the one hand, the pressure was building up in the south, as was the fear of what would become of it when the British finally left. On the other hand, the north was busy with independence arrangements and the prospects of finally shaking off nearly sixty years of foreign rule and of becoming the new masters in the backward south. Elections were hastily organised and conducted in November and December 1953. Traditional northern parties or their allies won the elections. Ismail Azhari was elected Prime Minister by parliament in January 1954. Southerners asked for a federation or autonomy in parliament. They wanted the question of the south's status solved before independence but were told this request would be given 'full consideration' later; a promise never kept and later discovered to be a familiar northern delaying political gimmick. When the first independence parliament convened, the northern politicians turned their own promise of 'full consideration' to a southern genuine demand for autonomy or federation into a war over semantics and finally threw it out altogether through the window. The south was angry and frustrated as the reality and the fear of domination and exploitation by northern new rulers stared them in the face. As expected, these northern rulers came to the south but at a disadvantage, not knowing how to handle the unsophisticated but highly politically aware southerner who was used in the past to the more familiar British administrators some of whom had local names if only still aliens. The south revolted and did so in a bloody manner.<sup>50</sup> The Anya-nya war was the result. The north went ahead anyway with the independence despite southern reluctance to subscribe to the independence resolution.

### **2.3.3 THE DAWN OF INDEPENDENCE AND A PATTERN OF BROKEN PROMISES**

With this southern reluctance, Sudan became an independent country on January 1, 1956. Meanwhile, later in September of the same year, a special constitutional committee had been set up to prepare a draft new constitution for submission to the new constituent assembly. This committee, which was to decide the federal form of government that would address the

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<sup>50</sup> Some northern people completely underestimated the strong feelings in the south against them. Little did they realise that they were more or less just as alien in the south as the British. What is more, they made matters worse for themselves by their negative attitude and behaviour towards southerners with some arrogantly calling the local people "abiid" or "slaves" or "our slaves" and thus asserting openly that they were the new masters in the south and they must be obeyed or else. Strong resistance was inevitable; war was the ultimate result.



concerns of the south as a matter of importance, had forty-three members and only three<sup>51</sup> were from the south. In their view, the first task of the committee was to decide on a federal form of government but to their disappointment this was relegated to a sub-committee, one of six that discussed questions of principle. The federal question was debated for a full year and was finally put to voting in December 1957. The majority, mostly from the north, decided that the benefits of the federal form of government were far much less than its disadvantages. The southern case for a federal system that could have guaranteed its equal participation in the affairs of the nation was thus rejected. In February 1958, elections for constituent assembly were held. The southern federal party fought these elections on the issue of federalism. They found support in the north from a small but very vocal Anti-imperialist Front party, a radical group of young men dissatisfied with old liberals. They called for a federal or regional government in the south, recognition of Christianity as a state religion on par with Islam, English as a national language on par with Arabic, a separate education system and a university for the south as well as a new development program. It also called for the transfer of Sudan from the Arab world to Africa. They were strongly opposed by the Umma Party for obvious reasons (Henderson 1965:180).<sup>52</sup> The federal party won forty seats while six more members from the south came in on other tickets.<sup>53</sup> Relations in the House between southern and northern members unfortunately went from bad to worse. When the new constitution was presented to the House, southern members vigorously opposed it and finally walked out en masse from the assembly on June 16, 1958. Father Saturnino Lohure tersely articulated southern protest and anger before walking out. Addressing the speaker and the House, he said: "Sir, the South has no ill-intentions whatsoever towards the North; the South simply claims to run its local affairs in a united Sudan. The South has no intention of separating from the North, for had that been the case nothing on earth would have prevented the demand for separation. The South claims to federate with the North, a right that the South undoubtedly possesses as a consequence of the principle of free self-determination, which reason and democracy grant to a free people. The South will at any moment separate from the North if and when the North so decides, directly or indirectly, through political, social and economic

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<sup>51</sup> The southern members of this committee were Father Saturnino Lohure, Stanislas Abdullah Paysama and Bullen Alier. They later walked out and took no further part in the discussions.

<sup>52</sup> The pro-establishment newspaper, *The Sudan Times*, castigated and criticised these proposals and appealed to tribal sentiments by commenting that the great Nilotic tribes in the south have little in common with the Equatorial politicians. This implied that the agenda of southern resistance was doomed as long as the Nilotic tribes, mainly the Dinka and the Nuer, stay out of it.



subjection of the South" (Deng & Oduho 1963:36). These comments were viewed by many in the north as a threat of separation and they surely were. The south had no other option left after its proposal for a federal government was rejected. The north on the other hand dreaded the prospects of opening a floodgate of demands for regionalism from the west and the east if the south were granted autonomy or federation. Already, the west and the east were agitating for their regional governments if not only at the same advance stage as the south. It was alleged that after the southern delegates walked out, members from the east and the west pressed for regionalism. When the civilian government of Prime Minister, Abdallah Khalil, attempted to give consideration to these demands, the military took over the reins of government to put an end to these threats to national unity.<sup>54</sup>

#### **2.3.4 USE OF THE MILITARY TO SILENCE AND SUBDUED THE SOUTH**

The military led by Ibrahim Abboud took over on November 17, 1958. Parliamentary system of government ceased to exist and so did southern representation and dreams of federation or autonomy. The policies of this military regime towards the south made the differences between the south and the north even greater than at any other time before. Its unbridled zeal to spread Islam and Arabic culture in the south as the only way to achieve national unity and harmony alienated southern people and aroused grave fears and consequently stiff resistance in the south. Its southern policies, based on suppression of opposition and implementation of harsh measures, did not take into consideration the special conditions of the south. Its banning of political parties deprived the southern people of the only forum through which they could voice their grievances. Its expulsion of foreign Christian missionaries from the south between 1962 and 1964 on the ground that they supported the southern opposition's secessionist aspirations, was seen as a form of religious domination. It further confirmed southern fears that the north was really out to dominate the south not only politically, economically, socially, but also now religiously and culturally as well. The flood of Islamic schools and teachers pouring into the south after the expulsion of Christian missionaries convinced many southern Christians that the real reason behind it all was to make way for a forceful spread of Islam and Arabic culture in the south. The subsequent persecution of those who dared to oppose these

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<sup>53</sup> Local northern administrators rigged in two northerners in the south despite legal challenges from southerners that fell on deaf ears.

<sup>54</sup> Deng & Oduho say in their *Problem of the Southern Sudan* that this was indeed the case. Oduho who was a member of that parliament said that Prime Minister Khalil confessed to a number of southerners after the military takeover that he gave in to the army because he could not deal with the issue of federalism that



moves was further evidence to this. Consequently, the resistance that followed introduced a dangerous religious element in the war, a trend that have continued to have serious repercussions on south-north relations to this day. Its terror on the southern population and especially southern intellectuals forced many into exile in neighbouring countries where they easily joined the Anya-nya to fight the government (Beshir 1978:214-5). By 1964, the Anya-nya controlled much of rural southern Sudan, making it very difficult to venture outside southern towns. The southern problem had taken on new and dangerous dimensions and the fragile national unity that the regime intended to preserve was in real jeopardy. The days of this military regime were, however, numbered. It was disgracefully forced out of office by a popular people's uprising on October 21, 1964.

The transitional government that replaced it tried hard to normalise the situation in the south. It made contacts with southern opposition<sup>55</sup> in exile and succeeded in arranging a round table conference that failed to agree on substantial political issues in the south. The major achievement of this meeting, however, was the serious attention given to the problem of the south for the first time by northern politicians in the transitional government. They sought to solve it politically and not with violence, but unfortunately, the initiative was lost in the political smoke of electioneering soon after. Elections were held again in 1965 in the north and not in the south due to the deteriorating security situation. A new civilian government came to power after these elections. From 1965 to early 1969, whatever little hopes there were for solving the problem of the south were dashed by persistent political infighting among traditional parties in the north. These parties, at least some of them, seemed to have, after all, resorted to the same repressive methods of the Abboud military regime in dealing with the south to save their own political skin and survive in a volatile political environment.<sup>56</sup>

The military takeover by Jaffer Numeiri on May 25, 1969 put an end to northern political bickering and paved the way for solving the problem of the south. As mentioned earlier, this

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threatened to tear the country apart. The army, according to northern political sensibilities at the time, was the only organ with sufficient power to deal with it. This was, however, never to be.

<sup>55</sup> The Southern opposition was badly divided. William Deng came to Khartoum to make peace with the government and fight for federation from within while his opponents, led by Aggrey Jaden, remained in exile committed to the armed struggle. Other Southern parties inside were also divided, sometimes sending wrong signals to northerners that there was really no one to talk to on the problem of the south.

<sup>56</sup> In 1967 and 1968, the government army randomly shot civilians in Juba and Bor. Many southern people especially intellectuals were secretly killed by the army. It was also during this time that William Deng himself was killed while touring the countryside.



military government signed the Addis Ababa Accord in 1972 with the Southern Liberation Movement, an accord abrogated ten years later as Mr. Numeiri gave in to northern political pressure and religious intrigues. The result was the ongoing civil war with no solution in sight to this point in time. Since Numeiri's overthrow in 1985, nothing much have been achieved to bring about peace in the Sudan. From that time to the present, the war has gone from bad to worse, causing a great deal of death and suffering. With the current Islamic government coming to power in 1989, religious slogans have been introduced into the conflict, making the prospects of solving the problem disappointingly slim and remote. In all, the main political factors behind the Sudanese long conflict include lingering mutual mistrust and suspicion between the south and the north, a well-grounded southern fear of northern domination and exploitation which only seem to be confirmed by successive northern-based governments' policies and actions towards the south, a historical northern suspicion of southern secessionist intentions, aroused by colonial southern policies and aggravated by persistent southern calls for special status within the country, understandable southern frustrations and disappointment with the seemingly persistent northern pattern of dishonouring promises as shown by 'safeguards' of 1940's, 'full consideration' of the federal question in the 1950's, exclusion in self-determination talks in 1953, and being ignored in the first constituent assembly after independence and the abrogation of the Addis Ababa Accord in 1983. Coupled with these are religious and socio-economic factors to which we now turn our attention.

## **2.4 RELIGIOUS FACTORS**

### **2.4.1 THE COMING OF CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAM TO SUDAN**

Religion plays a major role in south-north relations in the Sudan, a multi-religious, multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-linguistic society. But it is this very nature of the country that has made the current situation both complex and difficult to deal with. Efforts to impose uniformity on the Sudanese peoples have created conflict rather than a common identity. There are diversities within the Sudan that make openness to compromise a serious necessity (Voll & Voll 1985:1-2). The politics, history and social dynamics of the Sudanese reality and identity, past and present, are deeply rooted in religion one way or the other, an area in which compromise, not fundamentalism, is desperately needed. Both Christianity and Islam as well as traditional religions have considerable following in the Sudan, a fact which makes the place of religion in the Sudanese politics prominent.



Historically, Christianity was introduced to the Sudanese ancient kingdoms<sup>57</sup> in the sixth century. It flourished and became state religion after the Byzantine Kingdom's patterns. The kings of these Sudanese Christian kingdoms were priest-kings vested with both ecclesiastical and secular powers (Beshir 1974:5). Next on the Sudanese religious stage came Islam, not initially through invasion, but through Arab nomads and itinerant Islamic teachers. Some of these intermarried with the local people and settled in the area, making living through trade, nomadism or teaching in the royal courts. Islam, at this stage in history, was successfully spread due to the peaceful dealings of the Arab traders and settlers who intermarried with the local people. However, the Arabisation and Islamisation of Northern Sudan gained impetus after the advent of the Mamluk dynasty in Egypt in 1250. Although Christianity survived in Nubia well beyond this date, the way was now wide open for nomadic Arabs from Egypt to establish themselves in the Nile valley and adjacent plains (Hunwick 1990:164). Christianity was defeated finally in 1504 and the Sultanate of Funj came into being.<sup>58</sup> From this point on, the Sudanese Islam acquired a unique Sufi character as it retained several local characteristics and pre-Islamic cultures (Ayubi 1991:104). Furthermore, the Sufi leaders came to represent the embryonic origins of the traditional Sudanese intelligentsia, especially as their role was not confined to purely religious matters but also extended into various aspects of social and political life (Ali 1987:79ff).<sup>59</sup> This is by no means an implication of an 'Islamic state' since the main task of these religious teachers largely remained the puritanical quest to restore Islamic simplicity and orthodoxy perceived by them to have been drowned in the sea of increasing worldliness in their society. It was by this appeal that the Mahdi first found great support in the ranks of ordinary Sudanese Muslims when he rose up against the Turko-Egyptian regime in the eighteenth century. He wanted to get rid of a corrupt administration that had defiled the good name of Islam and to replace it with a just and godly establishment based on primitive Islam as he envisaged it.

#### **2.4.2 SOWING THE SEED OF AN ISLAMIC STATE**

As the Mahdiyya movement grew and extended, the idea of an Islamic state grew even bigger far beyond its capacity and available resources at the time. This was especially true of Mahdiyya under Khalifa Abdullah who strove so hard to create a genuine Islamic state in the

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<sup>57</sup> These Nubian ancient kingdoms are Maqurra, Alwa and Dongola.

<sup>58</sup> The first ruler of this Sultanate, Amar Dunqas, became a Muslim perhaps to have easy trade relations with Muslim rulers in Egypt.

<sup>59</sup> This is cited in Ayubi's *Political Islam*, p.105.



Sudan. Although his political and religious efforts to achieve this were brought to nought when he was defeated by the Anglo-Egyptian conquest in 1898, his legacy of Islamic propagation through political means has contributed to profounder Islamisation of other groups in the Sudan (Hunwick 1990:166). Over the years, militancy in doing this has increased, particularly in relation to the south. The Abboud military regime of 1958 to 1964 may rightly be regarded, in this context, as the most ardent advocate of Arabisation and Islamisation<sup>60</sup> of the south as the only way of neutralising an increasingly intransigent south and fostering national unity. It was to this task that the missionaries were allegedly a stumbling block and therefore deserved to be expelled from the country in 1964. By comparison, the Numeiri military regime, especially from 1983 to 1985, exceeded that of Abboud in its advocacy of Islamisation and Arabisation and therefore the Islamic State in the Sudan as a means of preserving national unity. It was the first in modern history of Sudan to boldly declare the imposition of Islamic Sharia laws on the whole country in September 1983.<sup>61</sup> As if not to be outdone by previous Islamic-oriented regimes, the current Khartoum Islamic government has made no secret of its Islamic policies and intentions. Since coming to power via a military coup in June 1989, it has consistently stirred the country towards greater Islamisation and Arabisation, arguing that this is the wish of the majority who happen to be Muslims. Its ideological architect and leader, Hasan Abdallah El Turabi, further explains: "An Islamic state is part of Islam's comprehensive, integrated way of life where there is no division between the private and the public, between the state and society" (El Turabi 1983:241).<sup>62</sup> What about the status of non-Muslims who are also Sudanese citizens? What will happen to them in an Islamic state? No problem, according to Ghazi Salahuddin Atabani, another leading figure in the Sudanese Muslim Brotherhood. They will have equal rights and duties with Muslims regardless of creed, race, culture, and ethnic origin. Their customs and the sharia will be the two bases of legislation for them,<sup>63</sup> thus preserving their own specific

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<sup>60</sup> To some extent, this idea is shared by all political opinion in the Muslim north. There may be a few who do not share it, but the majority does.

<sup>61</sup> It is immaterial in the final analysis if Numeiri imposed these laws on the country under the influence of Muslim Brotherhood or not. He did what no one else before him did and by so doing widened the gap between the south and the north. As a result, the place of religion in the Sudanese political landscape has become central like never before. No real solution to the Sudanese conflict can be found without attending to this question in the first place.

<sup>62</sup> Cited in Ayubi's *Political Islam*, p.104.

<sup>63</sup> Atabani is not clear on whether the non-Muslims' customs will also be the only base for legislation concerning them or that the sharia together with their customs will be applied. If the latter is the case, then a glaring contradiction results since the sharia law is regarded by the Muslim to be the supreme law of the land, not customs in an Islamic state. But if the former is, then there are two legal systems in which case it is also unclear



character and identity. A plural legal system will be adopted at federal and personal levels at which the non-Muslims will be exempted from sharia requirements and penalties. Full expression of their religious and cultural identities are to be respected and protected. Finally, and may be more important, commitment by non-Muslims to uphold the duties of citizenship and to respect the Islamic faith and the right of the Muslim majority to express itself fully in the form of its religion, including the political expression is non-negotiable (Atabani 1995:68-69). However, in the current situation in the Sudan, none of all this is anywhere near practical reality as the application of the sharia laws has been at best indiscriminate in the past and the present. Consider that for instance, between 1983 and 1984, when Numeiri first declared the Islamic sharia laws, both Muslims and Christians had their feet and hands chopped off. Other punishments were also applied indiscriminately (Ayubi 1991:108). At that time, El Turabi who is now the main architect of the current regime was saying the same thing that Atabani and others are saying today in different words, as he was Numeiri's chief religious and political advisor. He said then: "Under Islamic rule, non-Muslims have a guaranteed right to hold their own religious convictions and regulate their private lives, education and family affairs. If there is any rule they think is religiously incompatible, they can be absolved from it" (El Turabi 1983:242-245). But as it is well known, the right to hold one's convictions is indelibly inherent in all human beings. Whether guaranteed by law or otherwise we still hold them and die for them if need be. Nevertheless, both El Turabi and Atabani dismally fail to convince the non-Muslim Sudanese by their actions even if their words are seemingly plausible on paper. The truth of their forceful advocacy for an Islamic state may be found in Atabani's last statement that the non-Muslims must uphold the duties of citizenship and respect the Islamic faith and the right of the Muslim majority to express itself fully in the form of its religion, including political expression (Atabani 1995:69). Such strong feelings and ideas of NIF leadership generate strong resentment in non-Muslims who understand them to be exclusive and discriminative against their status as equal citizens and favourable to that of the Muslim in the same society.<sup>64</sup> To find out why these deep-seated feelings are so strong in both Muslims and non-Muslims over the question of an Islamic state and therefore the contentious Islamic sharia laws, we now turn our attention to the origins and philosophy of

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which one will take precedence in case of a legal dispute and why. And is it really possible to have two legal systems in an Islamic state? Practically, we think not.

<sup>64</sup> That is only to NIF members. Other Muslims who do not subscribe to the ideology of this fundamentalist clique are subjected to all kinds of harassment more or less the same as non-Muslims.



the Muslim Brotherhood. This is what both Atabani and El Turabi so passionately represent, advocate and refuse to compromise.

#### **2.4.3 MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD: THE PHILOSOPHY AND ORIGINS OF AN ISLAMIC STATE**

At the outset, we observe that the vigour and the zeal with which the idea of an Islamic state in the Sudan is being pushed through today are a recent development. Its origins are to be found in the resurgence of the Muslim Brotherhood, founded in Egypt by Hasan Al-Banna<sup>65</sup> in 1928 (Vatikiotis 1981:173; Enayat 1982:84). The Brotherhood bases its religio-political philosophy on three basic principles: First among these is the idea that Islam is a comprehensive, self-evolving system; it is the ultimate path of life in all its spheres. Second, Islam emanates from, and is based on two fundamental sources, the Quran and the prophetic tradition or hadith; and third, Islam is applicable to all times and places. These principles are to enhance and bring about the liberation of the whole Islamic world from all foreign domination and institute the Islamic state practicing the basic principles and teachings of Islam, applying its social system, propounding its solid fundamentals and transmitting its wise call to the whole world (Enayat 1982:85). This philosophy is radically revolutionary and ambitiously expansionist in scope. It aims at liberating the whole Islamic world from foreign domination and at transmitting its call to the whole world through jihad more often than not.<sup>66</sup> It does not accommodate the non-Muslims, their culture, their religion, their political or civil rights and freedoms in any way. No non-Muslim, no matter how qualified he or she may be, can become a head of state in that Islamic State.

In terms of method and approach to societal issues, there is a marked difference between the Muslim Brotherhood and Islamic reformist movements in history that preceded it such as the Mahdiyya for instance. Whereas in the past attempts at the regeneration of Islam and its claims to a leading role in the affairs of the state were led by an elite of intellectuals and religious teachers and concerned with theological-philosophical disputations and religious reforms, today these are carried out by militant leaders who can mobilise and directly involve the masses of the population (Enayat 1982:170). This explains in part the consistent calls for

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<sup>65</sup> Al Banna, assassinated in 1949, owed a lot of his Islamic State philosophy to Mohammed Rashid Rida who is believed to be the great Islamic theoretician of this century. See Enayat's *Modern Islamic Political Thought*, pp.69-83.

<sup>66</sup> It is an open secret that the current Islamic government in Khartoum—Turabi and Atabani are its prominent members—has called again and again for jihad in the ongoing war in the south. Southern rebels are referred to as infidels against whom all Muslims should rally and fight.



jihad<sup>67</sup> in the Sudanese ongoing war in which the south is viewed as an area to be conquered and Islamised. But, if one may ask, how did the Muslim Brotherhood come to play such an important political and religious role in the Sudan? It emerged from student circles in 1946, apparently through the influence of lecturers associated with the Egyptian Brotherhood at the Sudanese institutions of higher learning at the time. It steadily grew and formed an alliance with the Egyptian Brotherhood in 1954. It later became a political organisation in 1964 under the leadership of Hasan El Turabi. It was then known as the Islamic Charter Front, a name later changed to National Islamic Front (NIF) to underline its national agenda and scope (Ayubi 1991:112-3). It has been and is still very influential in Sudanese politics from 1964 to the present. Its leadership, predominantly under El Turabi for 35 years now, has turned it into an ardent opponent of any measures that can be remotely interpreted as a concession by Muslims to non-Muslims.<sup>68</sup> Both the issue of southern autonomy and that of comprehensive application of sharia laws are seen in this light. Although NIF was no longer part of the last Sudanese democratic government, overthrown in 1989, it is believed to have influenced the events that led to its demise (Ayubi 1991: 113). It ardently opposed a proposed peace deal, which was about to be signed by SPLA and El Mahdi's regime in June 1989, the same year that the Islamic coup took place. All this makes one conclusion unavoidable: The Islamic state envisaged by the north only aggravates and complicates normal relations between these two regions of the Sudanese nation. It makes the chances of true national unity very remote and out of reach. The north wants, especially under the current regime, nothing less than an Islamic state in the Sudan. The south objects to this very strongly, opting instead for a secular state despite the fact that the majority of its people are Christians. This is the stalemate of the Sudanese situation. Religion may not be the main factor behind the war in the Sudan. There are other factors involved, but if the religious questions were to be solved today, other factors may as well easily follow suit. We have already looked at some of these factors. We now look at the last one.

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<sup>67</sup> The call for jihad or holy war is only theologically—Islamic theology that is—appropriate in case of a national threat to an Islamic state, usually when persuasion fails. But in the current Sudanese case, the call for it has antagonised non-Muslims and made them even more resistant to the government, reasoning quite understandably that this regime's intention is to destroy their culture and way of life and replace it with Islam. "We must either fight it or perish altogether", so they argue.

<sup>68</sup> This contradicts the non-Muslims' guaranteed rights espoused by both el Turabi and Atabani. Their movement's tenacious opposition to any concessions made to non-Muslims flies in the face of 'non-Muslim minority's guaranteed rights myth' which they hold.



## 2.5 SOCIO-ECONOMIC FACTORS

### 2.5.1 SOCIO-ECONOMIC DISPARITIES

The socio-economic disparities between the south and the north are great. The south is backward and undeveloped in many ways. There is no proper road system in the south, making it one of the most difficult places to travel in Africa. There are no standard hospitals, clinics, schools, colleges and any other important social facilities. In sharp contrast, the north is developed and developing at a reasonable rate. It is the home of the great Gezira Scheme, the Sennar and Roseiros dams, railways and reasonably well tarmacked roads, a good number of industries, schools, universities, colleges and many other aspects of socio-economic development. Historical, political and religious factors, discussed above, have contributed to these socio-economic disparities and inequalities between the south and the north in various ways. It is a well-known fact that the south was not an area of *primary concern* and interest to the colonial administration. The first concern of the colonial Sudan Government was to maintain a basic stability at minimal cost as well as sufficient control to prevent any other country from gaining a foothold in this region (Voll & Voll 1985:54). The colonial government's intentions for the south were honest and humane but its policy towards it was neither consistent nor far-sighted enough to incorporate a socio-economic development agenda both in short and long term plans. Education in the south was left for Christian missions to undertake with their limited financial resources.<sup>69</sup> In that regard, it is correct to say that the colonial southern education policy was not a matter of consensus between the colonial Sudan Government and British Residency in Cairo, with the former favouring financial support for mission schools and the latter favouring instead the establishment of government schools as was the case in the north (Daly 1983:92). Because of this, the south was the victim as no consensus on this issue was ever reached. But in the middle of 1940's there were at least three government schools in the south, following a softening by the Sudan colonial Government on its southern education policy.

However, hopes for putting in place any consistent education policy in the south were dealt a severe blow when parliament hastily nationalised all mission schools and prohibited private school ownership in 1957. This was done despite objections by southern members who

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<sup>69</sup> The bulk of southern political leaders were educated in mission schools. When some of them became critics of the government they were viewed as agents of the missions rather than southern nationalists. Father Saturnino Lohure was the government's enemy number one in that regard.

preferred the mission schools to be left alone for a while but supplemented by the government (Henderson 1965:179). Nationalising mission schools for the government was a means of unifying the system of education for the whole country but it actually destabilized it. Furthermore, the haste and the vigour with which it was done left many questions unanswered, especially when Arabic was to replace English as the language of instruction in mission schools.

## **2.5.2 DISPARITIES IN TRADE AND DEVELOPMENT**

Trade, an area in which the south still lags behind, was (and still is) a monopoly of the Jallaba or northern traders who operated in the south on permission from the government but who still shamelessly exploited the local people. For many centuries, the Jallaba or northern traders had been the only traders in the south. Their trading methods as mentioned earlier include swindling the local people, selling them low quality goods for exorbitant prices and buying valuable goods from them with counterfeit coins or play-cards. Southern venture into trade had been very slow over the years for many historical, cultural, economic and political reasons. There was a little change in this regard after the Addis Ababa accord in 1972 when the regional government in the south offered capital loans to rising southern traders. But lack of experience in trade caused the collapse of most businesses established at that time and resulted in bad debts and losses. This was in addition to unavoidable dependence of some southern traders on their northern counterparts for experience and transportation of their goods from the north to market places in the south at high prices (Hutchinson 1996:70-71). Today, there is still a great imbalance in trade between the south and the north particularly as war has continued to make it impossible to trade normally in the south.

At independence, in 1956, much did not change in the socio-economic conditions of the south. Northern administrators, better equipped than southerners, naturally took control of means and methods of government and used them effectively to their own advantage. Traders came to the south, exploiting the local people even more than they did under the British. The successive governments in Khartoum did very little to improve economic conditions in the south, choosing in some cases to suppress, for political reasons, economic development plans meant to uplift living standards in the south (Albino 1970:89-92).<sup>70</sup> Since the establishment

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<sup>70</sup> He gives four possible economic undertakings designated for the south, which were suppressed for political reasons. These were: a sugar factory in Mongalla undertaken by Bauxal Company; a German Paper Firm denied access between 1959 and 1961 to build a factory in the sudd region where papyrus abounds; a fish-canning plant meant for Malakal in Upper Nile Province relocated to Jebel Aulia near Khartoum and a meat factory in Bahr el



of the Nzara cotton factory in the late 1950's, there has not been any major developmental project worth talking about undertaken in the south, granting that this region has virtually been a war zone since 1955 to the present. But even so, it is true that the ten years of relative peace in the south after the signing of the Addis Ababa accord in 1972 did not yield any meaningful socio-economic development.<sup>71</sup> Instead, the south became even poorer and was left with no chance but to economically depend heavily on the north, a serious vulnerability that has been exploited time and time again for political reasons. What is more, before the resumption of the current war, the economic potential of the south was brought to light when rich oil reserves were discovered in western Upper Nile and other areas in western and central southern Sudan. Although still unexploited, the prospects of building refineries, not in the south where the oil was discovered, but in the north as announced by the government of Numeiri in 1981 sparked off violent confrontations between the authorities and the people of the south. Deeply rooted feelings of suspicion and mistrust, a notorious recurrent menace in south-north relations, were unfortunately brought to surface again. The inevitable result was the ongoing war. Furthermore, this newly discovered economic potential of the south has become or is becoming a factor that dashes any hopes of a peaceful settlement to the crisis. The north will not give up the south or give in to any settlement that seems to favour or support directly or indirectly, secessionist sentiments—not now; not ever. The south, on the other hand, has never been more resistant and adamant in asserting its aspirations for freedom and equality, refusing to agree to any settlement that may prove to be a hoax in the long run like the infamous 'full consideration' promise of federation or the 'safeguards undertaking' of the 1940's and the 1950's or even the Addis Ababa accord of the 1970's. For these reasons, peace talks between the successive Sudanese governments and the SPLA have failed at least fifteen times since 1985 to the present.<sup>72</sup>

These socio-economic, political and religious as well as historical factors have been at the centre of these talks whenever they occur. These factors, combined, are behind war and

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Ghazal frustrated and funding meant for it diverted to improve another in Kosti. It is also believed that the Asalaya Sugar factory built in the 1970's in White Nile Province was originally meant for the town of Melut in northern Upper Nile.

<sup>71</sup> Some may contend that the Jonglei Canal was undertaken in the beginning of 1980's as a major developmental project for the south. But this remains a very controversial project which the war has thankfully stopped for now but one that will still cause difficulties in the future as its negative effects on the affected areas seem to outweigh its benefits, a fact not well considered before the project was launched.

<sup>72</sup> The majority of southern people reject the Khartoum peace agreement signed by the Islamic Government of Omer Beshir and some SPLA renegade commanders in 1996. Its failure to yield any meaningful peace for the south since it was signed shows this to be true. Peace and stability in the Sudan remain as elusive as ever.



suffering in the Sudan. As long as the socio-economic inequalities and injustices—equal educational and trade opportunities, exploitation, imbalance in development and social infrastructure and the like—are not properly addressed, peace, unity and stability in the Sudan will continue to be an illusory mirage for many years to come.

## **2.6 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

There is no one single factor that may adequately explain the war in the Sudan. There are, instead, several factors behind it. There are historical factors which include the invasion of Southern Sudan by the Turko-Egyptian, 1839-1884, the Mahdiyya, 1885-1898, Anglo-Egyptian, 1890-1955, as well as conflict between north and south 1955 to the present. Slave trade was the legacy that both Turkiyya and Mahdiyya left in the south. Anglo-Egyptian regime's measures stopped this cruel trade and provided the south with the only period of relative peace it had ever known. Along with this is its legacy of a well intentioned but shortsighted southern policy which has left both good and bad for south-north relations to this day. Then there are political factors, which are deeply rooted in history, a history of mutual mistrust and suspicion between the south and the north. The south suspects the north of harbouring a political, religious, cultural and economic domination agenda against it. A series of dishonoured promises and breaches of confidence by the north from 1948 to the present seem to confirm this southern fear and suspicion. The north on the other hand suspects the south of persistently harbouring secessionist aspirations that have made it to resort to war from 1955 to the present in order to achieve them. Not to be left far in the background, are religious factors, which are solidly based, in the northern vision of establishing an Islamic state in the Sudan. The south views this as another northern route to reach its aspirations of dominating and subjecting it. The south unequivocally rejects this. But the north contends that this is the wish of the majority who happen to be Muslims and who promise to accommodate non-Muslims and allow them to follow religious and legal practices of their own choice. However, the south, being conscious of previous dishonoured promises, counters that this is highly implausible since the Islamic state by its very intrinsic nature is known to be very exclusive, intolerant and generally tends to suppress and persecute dissenting minorities. To the south, being in an Islamic state means either submission or suffering, neither of which it is prepared to accept, given the long history of suspicion and mistrust between the two regions. Socio-economic factors such as inequality in education, imbalance in trade, uneven



development and other disparities between the south and the north combined with the just discussed historical, political and religious factors also contribute to war in the Sudan. All these factors together are behind the long Sudanese conflict, a bitter conflict that has led to enormous suffering and pain for the last forty years. The south for all this time has borne much of this suffering and pain. The north also has not been spared. It has suffered as much. The problem of war, as fueled by these factors, is real to many people both in the south and the north. They variously interpret their experience of suffering and war. In the next chapter, we turn our attention to how the Christian people of Southern Sudan interpret their faith in relation to their experience of war and suffering in the Sudan.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **SUFFERING AND FAITH IN SUDAN**

#### **3.1 INTRODUCTION**

The main aim of this chapter is to investigate how the people of South Sudan interpret their present experience of suffering in relation to their faith. In doing this, we shall examine some theological themes, which have come to prominence in songs, prayers and interpretation of certain scriptural passages, believed to have a bearing on the current war and suffering in the Sudan. In order to avoid indulging in boundless generalisations, we shall use the experience of the Bor Dinka people as an anchor of our investigation. The reasons for this choice are first, the familiarity of the present writer with their context. Second, they have experienced a massive church growth for the last 17 years of the war, bringing about great changes in their cultural outlook and identity. And third, they have gone through a great amount of suffering, having been massively displaced from their ancestral land, losing virtually all their cattle in the beginning of the 1990's in circumstances related to war. Furthermore, their songs, mostly composed and popularised during the ongoing war, express theological nuances and themes that illuminate how faith and suffering are now perceived and interpreted. To be sure, all South Sudanese communities have suffered the viciousness and devastation of the war, in various ways, as much as the Bor Dinka have. The war has spared no one, not even the north, as shown by the impact it has left on the whole country. Beginning with the impact of the war, we shall also examine church growth in the Sudan<sup>73</sup> at this time of suffering before we turn our attention to how faith and suffering are perceived and interpreted.

#### **3.2 THE IMPACT OF WAR AND SUFFERING**

##### **3.2.1 LOSS OF HUMAN LIFE**

The Sudanese war, pitting the north against the south and now in its fifth decade, has virtually devastated life in its various forms. It has been and still is a lingering human catastrophe that the world knows little about. Although the death toll and destruction in Sudan's war are



beyond accurate accounting, it is estimated that 1.3 million people lost their lives through war, famine and resulting disease between 1983 and 1993 alone.<sup>74</sup> However, from 1994 to the present that figure must have been exceeded by at least a half. The famine in Bahr el Ghazal region between 1995 and 1997, for instance, cost more than a quarter of a million lives and so has the genocide in the Nuba Mountains in the west. Many lives have also been lost in inter-tribal conflicts between rival SPLA factions and Sudan Government-sponsored militias in western Upper Nile on the one hand and between SPLA and Sudan Government on the other. It is also estimated that 3 million people have been displaced both inside and outside the country. But again, this statistics cannot be conclusively verified, considering that the Sudan war is one of the most under-reported wars in the world. There are several factors responsible for this. The first is the sheer vastness of the Sudan, the largest country in Africa. It is almost impossible to monitor what goes on behind the scenes in different parts of the country. The second is the difficulty in accessing the country with one of the worst road systems in Africa. International media organisations cannot easily penetrate the Sudan and report on the devastation of the war as they did in Rwanda and Bosnia. If the Sudanese war were adequately covered by the world media like the genocide in Rwanda and Bosnia or the recent crises in Kosovo and East Timor, the world would be horrified by the extent of death, destruction and suffering in that country. The third is that there seem to be powerful forces within the Sudanese warring parties and outside that are trading and cashing in on the war for their own vested interests. These forces work hard to ensure that war and suffering continue and frustrate any efforts for a just settlement of the crisis and lasting peace in the country. Sabotaging and concealing correct information on the real situation of the war and suffering form a major part of their scheming.

### **3.2.2 THE EROSION OF CULTURAL AND COMMUNITY VALUES**

The impact of the war is also felt in the erosion of community and cultural values. Wherever one goes in the war-ravaged South Sudan, it is easy to see that family values have badly been eroded, leaving the war generation culturally impoverished and without identity. The traditional African family setup has been disturbed as family members are separated and scattered to different corners of Sudan and the world. Children grow up without their parents and thus miss out on parental discipline and upbringing. Parents, in most cases, do not have

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<sup>73</sup> South Sudan is here in focus although the inclusive term Sudan is used throughout in this work.

<sup>74</sup> Millard Burr, *Quantifying Genocide in the Southern Sudan: 1983-1993*, U.S. Committee For Refugees Study, Washington, D.C., September 1993. Cited in William O. Lowrey, p.132.



the joy of seeing their children grow up or the privilege of inculcating in them communal values and norms since the war keeps them apart for protracted periods of time. This writer knows of cases in which family members have not seen one another for between ten and fifteen years. In a talk with a group of youngsters, known by the UNHCR as 'minors' in Kakuma Refugee Camp, Kenya, this writer learned that some of them parted ways with their parents when they were only six years of age. One minor confessed that he would not recognize his parents if he met them. He did not also believe they would recognize him since he parted ways with them when he was only six. He is now seventeen.<sup>75</sup> Community values have been changed or adapted as a result of inter-cultural influences. Consistent contacts with people of different cultures and communities have resulted in mutual influences, sometimes with positive, often with negative dynamics. One community that provides a good example in that regard is the Bor Dinka. When they lost virtually all their cattle, a major source of their livelihood and identity, they faced an unprecedented crisis in their long history of resistance to foreign influences. They got displaced from their ancestral land in a massive way, following a bitter and bloody split in the SPLA in 1991 and became refugees in the jur<sup>76</sup>land. Being in the jur land, they had no alternative but to learn how to coexist with the jur and put up with new and foreign ways of life. Here, they came in contact with an animal called the United Nations, which requires them, in an unintentional but total disregard to their traditional values, to queue up for food rations with their wives, children and in-laws. This is never done in Dinkaland, where men never feature anywhere near the kitchen or eat in the presence of their in-laws. But the Dinka, quickly coming to terms with the realities of being a refugee, comfort themselves by retorting: "*Karec roor*" meaning, it is not always easy in a foreign land, for things will not always be done the way they are done at home. Cultural and community values are thus rapidly being eroded or changed. But what are some of the community and cultural values that are being or have been eroded as a result of the war and suffering? First, traditional leadership and authority have come under increasing challenge. This is especially true in the refugee camps. Here, traditional chiefs or their descendants do not run things in the camps as they naturally would in traditional society. The camps are run by people who are qualified in terms of education and ability to communicate with the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) authorities.<sup>77</sup> Hereditary traditional

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<sup>75</sup> Talk with minors at Kakuma, August, 1996.

<sup>76</sup> Jur in Dinka means foreigner or non-Dinka. Jur land means foreign land.

<sup>77</sup> This is also true as far as the SPLA or Sudan Government are concerned. Promotion is always on the basis of merit not on hereditary grounds. This trend may not be completely a result of war and displacement, but it has



leadership is thus left in the background. But when the war is finally over and peace is restored, and people consequently return to ancestral homes, it will be interesting to see what will then become of traditional authority and leadership. Second, the war generation suffers from a lack of respect and honour to the elders. In traditional society, the young always respect and give honour to the elders, whether in the home or outside the home. Such gestures as giving way when the young meet the old, supporting and helping them should they be in any need, heeding their advice and counsel when it is offered and speaking with them with respect at all times, even when they are in the wrong, were never gainsaid in traditional society. But now with all the queuing for food in the refugee camps, these values are rapidly and seriously being eroded. This writer frequently visits the refugee camps and always hears of persistent complaints by the elders that the youth do not respect and honour them any more. In a conversation with some clan elders at Kakuma Refugee Camp, in 1995, one elder told this writer how a young relative he tried to correct barked at him with the words. "*Ye nga e cok ngek bo roor*<sup>78</sup> *ku ye nga muk ngek? Ye nga ye UN?*" Meaning, "who brought whom to the refugee camp and who is responsible for whom? Who is the UN?" The implication is unmistakable: You are not responsible for me; we are all refugees. The UN feeds us all; it is only the UN that can correct me, not you.<sup>79</sup> For a Dinka elder to hear this from any of his relations or indeed, any other youth, is like being speared to death. Thus, it is not surprising to hear the elders generally complaining: "*Cieng da acii riaak, miithkuo acin rieeu ku dheeng*"<sup>80</sup> meaning, "our culture is destroyed, our children have no respect and honour." The Dinka, like other African peoples, lay a great deal of stress on respect both for oneself and for others. They are a proud people with a cherished notion of stratification in their hierarchy of respect (Deng 1971:209). Thus, by failing to accord respect and honour to the elders, the war generation is evidently out of touch with its cultural heritage and identity, a great disservice to the community and to themselves. War and suffering have, in that sense, placed the

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been heightened by the fact that the centre of life for most people at this time of war is no longer in traditional homelands, but in refugee camps, whether inside or outside the Sudan.

<sup>78</sup> 'Roore' in Dinka refers to a place that is not home, a foreign land, unfamiliar territory. It literally means forest. In this sense the refugee camps are roore.

<sup>79</sup> Story told in a conversation with Ayual clan elders at Kakuma, December 1995. I have had the privilege of visiting Kakuma and other Sudanese refugee camps once every year, from 1992 to present. Much of what I am relating was collected during these visits.

<sup>80</sup> Francis Deng rightly notes that *cieng* is a complex concept. As a verb it means to inhabit, to live together, to treat with respect, to dominate and to wear as garment. As a noun, it means conduct, human relations, way of life and culture. The main emphasis of *cieng* is human relations, a cultural process in which the human factor is dominant. *Dheeng* is also a complex concept. It means dignity, beauty, nobility, generosity, hospitality, respect, kindness, elegance, charm and grace. Francis Deng, *Tradition and Modernization*, pp.24-9, 209.



community and its value system in a difficult spot with no apparent solution in sight as long as the war continues. Third, relief and handouts are greatly undermining the traditional work ethic. While it is understandable that the war situation has put people in conditions that are beyond their control, there are fears that a culture of dependency and laziness is quickly developing. Conscientious initiative and creativity in hard work as a means of earning an honest living are declining in the communities, and slothfulness and dependency are rapidly replacing them. Dependence on relief items and handouts, not hard work, is on the rise and is alarmingly becoming a normal way of life for many. In the Bor Dinka community, people, especially the war generation, are either reluctant to work or when they do, wholehearted self-application is disturbingly lacking, because the belief that the relief agencies will provide is ever present at the back of their mind. Generally speaking, the Dinka have always been a very hardworking people. This is true whether in looking after cattle, doing subsistence farming, hunting or fishing. Hard work was highly encouraged in the Dinka traditional society. There were few lazy and slothful people in the traditional community. Whenever laziness was detected, redemptive measures were urgently taken by the community to help. These measures included teaching, training and exposure to work. When and if these failed, ridicule songs, depicting how despicable and degrading laziness is to the individual and society, were composed and sung. Individual lazy persons' names were conjoined to the songs in a bid to force them to renounce laziness and develop a healthy work ethic. Those who persist in laziness after these societal redemptive measures faced the harsh possibility of staying unmarried for life as no one in the community was ready to give his daughter to a lazy person who would not take care of her. But now in the situation of war this is rapidly changing. Relief assistance is daily pouring into the country, making many people, particularly young, susceptible to dependency and laziness. One young person in one refugee camp brazenly rebuffed an elder who had told him to work hard as that is a rewarding virtue in life. He sarcastically said: "Why should I work when it is still raining in Geneva?"<sup>81</sup> The implication is that as long as his support as a refugee continues to flow in from UNHCR in Geneva, he does not have to work, because the UN will provide. It is thus clear that relief assistance, although given with noble intentions to meet a desperate need, is dangerously cultivating a dependency syndrome in the war-affected areas of Sudan. The sooner the war ends the better

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<sup>81</sup> I am indebted to Pastor Samuel Udu of Sudan Pentecostal Churches who related this story to me in Adjumani refugee camp, Uganda in April 1994.



are the chances of remedying this situation. The longer the war continues the more desperate it will become.

### **3.2.3 THE DESTRUCTION OF SOCIAL-ECONOMIC INFRASTRUCTURE**

The impact of the war is also seen in the destruction of socio-economic infrastructure of the country. As a result, Sudan economy and social services are in a shambles. The South, in that regard, has borne the greatest impact of the war from 1955 to the present. This means that such social institutions as hospitals, schools, roads and markets are either non-existent or in a shambles. To be sure, Sudan had always had some economic difficulties but its economic problems took a turn for the worse in the early 1970's. The then military government of Gaffer Numeiri, against the advice of the World Bank and other international financial institutions, embarked on an ambitious and expensive programme of development, aimed at diversifying and expanding the country's export base (Cheru 1989:79). This programme was ill advisedly meant to turn the Sudan into the 'bread basket' of the Middle East. The Gulf countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, in the wake of the 1973-74 oil embargo and in seeking to lessen their own dependence on the West for food supplies, literally pushed the Numeiri government into undertaking this programme. The initial ventures of the programme were into sugar and textile industries as well as general infrastructure and irrigation. But the programme was disgracefully halted just before it took off the ground, leaving USD 3 billion in unpaid loans.

The failure of the 'bread basket' programme complicated the economic problems of the country. This is because the Sudan, although one of the poorest countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, had one of the most stable economies in Africa before the Numeiri coup in 1969. The backbone of the economy was agriculture, which counted for more than 40 per cent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The industrial sector, despite being underdeveloped, counted for between 12 and 13 per cent of GDP. The inflation rate was estimated at just 20 per cent and the value of the Sudanese pound (LS) was stable from independence in 1956 to 1978. The value of the pound stood at an official rate of 035 to the Dollar. Sudan's foreign debt stood at about USD 2 billion. But the introduction of the 'bread basket' white elephant put the country's economy into a deep crisis and a downhill turn from which it has never recovered to this very day. It cost in loans over USD 3 billion between 1973 and 1974. From 1975 to 1977 it drained the economy and forced the country to heavily borrow in order to pay for its basic operations. The government had no alternative but to negotiate a series of economic

stabilisation programmes with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (Brown 1989:57). The first of these was negotiated in mid 1978. Others followed in a quick succession with disastrous economic consequences due to gross economic mismanagement of the Numeiri regime. The period between 1978 and 1983 witnessed a rundown of the economy in a fashion never seen before in the history of the country. The Sudanese pound depreciated by more than 27 per cent of its pre-1978 value. The GDP per capita declined and fell from USD 483 to USD 344. Gross national savings went into the red, falling from about 2 per cent of the Gross National Product (GNP) to -03. National deficit rose from 5 to 6 per cent of GDP. The inflation rate rose from 20 to 40 per cent. The country's foreign debt jumped from USD 2 billion to 8 billion. What is more, the war rubbed salt into the wounds in that it daily cost the country USD 1 million. The negative economic impact was being felt everywhere in the country when the Numeiri regime finally collapsed in 1985. It left behind a ruined economy, a huge foreign debt, abject poverty for the majority of Sudanese and a bloody, costly war.

As the economic woes of the Sudanese people did not go away with the fall of Numeiri in 1985, the country continues to suffer. Successive governments in Khartoum inherit and perpetuate his legacy of corruption, mismanagement and a costly war, which now costs about USD 2 million a day. From the fall of Numeiri to the present, the economic suffering of the vast majority of the Sudanese people has grown from bad to worse as many people live just below the poverty line. At the moment, the Sudan is one of the most heavily indebted countries in sub-Saharan Africa. Its foreign debt stands at about USD 20 billion. Its inflation rate is roughly 150 per cent. For some time now, the IMF has declared the Sudan ineligible for borrowing because of its failure to service its national debt. Other international donor agencies have also stopped lending funds to Sudan because of its poor economic policies and bad governance. What does all this mean to the ordinary Sudanese? It means suffering and poverty. The ordinary Sudanese people are the real victims in this unfortunate situation. With sky -rocketing food prices, the majority of the people are restricted to eating only once a day or every other day. They cannot find jobs as the country has one of the highest unemployment rates in the world. It is also the scene of the longest war of Africa, which has ravaged and turned it into one of the poorest and most heavily debted countries in Sub-Saharan Africa (Nafziger 1993:14). Suffering, poverty and lack are evident everywhere in a country with great agricultural potential as well as minerals and oil resources. In spite of all this suffering,



the church in the Sudan is experiencing substantial growth. It is to this growth that we next turn our attention.

### **3.3 CHURCH GROWTH IN SUFFERING SUDAN**

#### **3.3.1 GREAT OPENNESS TO THE GOSPEL MESSAGE**

From as early as AD 350, the gospel message reached the northern part of Sudan. Christianity became the official religion of the Nubian Kingdoms in AD 580 and remained as such until the 15<sup>th</sup> century when the invading Islamic forces conquered the area. The south, however, was untouched by the gospel for a long time. It was not until the beginning of 1900's that the first missionaries had a real chance of bringing the gospel message to selected areas of the south. General Charles Gordon had advocated the evangelisation of the Sudan in 1878. But the Church Missionary Society (CMS) sent missionaries into the Sudan only in 1899. The resistance and fears of Lord Cromer, the British Agent and Consul-General in Cairo, that evangelisation in Sudan would aggravate the delicate religious situation in the country and lead to another religious uprising in the fashion of Mahdiyya, were finally overcome (Wheeler 1998:12-3). This step resulted in the sending of missionaries to the south in 1905. Mission stations were established at Malek amongst the Dinka, Yambio amongst the Zande, Lui amongst the Moru and Yei amongst the Kakwa (Roome 1929:79). By 1914, there was already a considerable number of churches in the south (Neil 1964:388-9). Baur notes that a large wave of conversions was experienced in the south in Catholic and Anglican churches and that this wave largely bypassed the nomadic tribes (Baur 1994:398).<sup>82</sup> These churches later faced serious challenges of Islamisation and Arabisation from 1956 to 1964. At the height of the Abboud regime's repressive Islamic policies, foreign missionaries were finally expelled from the south in 1964, accused of supporting southern agitation for secession or autonomy. Arabic was imposed as the language of communication and learning. Quranic schools were established everywhere in the south and a process of cultural repression was strongly imposed. Many South Sudanese Christians who voiced concern were subjected to increasing

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<sup>82</sup> This is still correct even though this wave of conversions reached some places in rural Bor Dinka between 1939 and 1956. But the fruit of this wave did not last long as most converts reverted to traditional worship after a while so much so that there were no churches in rural Bor Dinka from the late 1950's until the 1970's when rural Bor was re-evangelised. This undoubtedly was the genesis of the ongoing en masse conversion in Dinkaland. Compare Marc Nikkel's 'Archibald Shaw' in *Gateway to the Heart of Africa*, pp. 103-25. Edited by A Wheeler, F Pierli and MT Ratti.



harassment and harsh restrictions despite the fact that Sudan's constitution enshrined freedom of worship. With the intensification of the civil war in the years that followed and due to the reign of terror that the Abboud military government inflicted on the south, many people, including church leaders, were forced into exile. Here, they came in contact with the wave and influence of the great East African revival of the 1950's and 1960's. Many were converted or revitalized. When the Addis Ababa peace accord was signed in 1972, they came back to the country with great evangelistic zeal and vigour. As a result, the church in the south, which had been greatly impeded by the expulsion of missionaries and persecution, but still maintained her presence, sometimes with great difficulty, began to grow again. This growth, however, was still limited; it did not extend into rural areas, especially into nomadic areas.

For the Bor Dinka people, the Christian faith was confined to the towns while traditional worship flourished in the rural areas. Christians, among the Dinka, were always a minority, at times forced by the dominant culture to either revert to traditional ways of life or simply syncretise if only to survive in both the church and the traditional community. Because of this, there was no significant church growth amongst the Bor Dinka people for a long time, particularly in the rural areas where the majority of people lived. Even in urban centres of Bor, Juba, Khartoum and Medani, the Dinka church growth was still small in proportion to their large population.<sup>83</sup> The breakthrough for the ongoing Bor Dinka church growth began with the ordination of Nathaniel Garang Anyieth and his posting to The Bor Parish of the Episcopal Church of the Sudan (ECS) in 1974. He was the first Bor Dinka pastor to be stationed in the parish for many years. The church in the area had declined following the destruction of the only missionary station among the Dinka at Malek in the 1960's. This is in addition to the fact that many Bor Dinka priests had left the ministry for spiritual and economic reasons, leaving the church in the area without pastoral care for a long time. The coming of Nathaniel Garang was therefore a fresh relief even though he had to face an uphill task in reaching a resistant people that the Dinka are. But his contagious faith and charismatic gifts as a determined evangelist and patient teacher yielded significant fruit in a comparatively short amount of time. His vision of taking the gospel message to the rural Dinka was a wise foresight and a gigantic step in the right direction. This vision received a huge boost when the Dinka congregations in Khartoum and other northern cities made substantial financial

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<sup>83</sup> Marc Nikkel in his insightful paper, 'Children of our Fathers' Divinities or Children of Red Foreigners?' discusses three areas of missionary perception and methodology which have shaped the Bor Dinka Christian experience. See Andrew Wheeler (ed.), *Land of Promise*, pp. 61-78, in Faith in Sudan series.



contributions in 1977-78 for large evangelistic campaigns in rural Dinka. As a direct result of these campaigns, churches were planted in the rural Dinka centres of Kongor, Duk, Baidit, Kolnyang, Makuac and others. The explosion of growth later experienced during the years of war can only be understood correctly in the context of these early endeavours. The rural centres just mentioned later became outreach centres into the deep interior. The message was thus brought to the very doorsteps of the rural man; it was no longer confined to distant towns. It is perhaps true to say, in that regard, that the vision of reaching out with the gospel message to the rural Dinka, conceived and partially carried out in planting churches in rural Dinka centres in the late 1970's, is the one major factor behind Nathaniel's success and the present explosion of church growth among the Bor Dinka people.

### **3.3.2 THE GROWTH OF THE CHURCH IN WAR AND SUFFERING**

In very paradoxical terms, the major breakthrough in the growth of the Dinka church came with the outbreak of the current civil war and the resulting suffering. In 1983, when the war resumed, the Bor Dinka took a direct hit. Their main town, Bor, was targeted because it was perceived to be the hotbed of resistance and rebellion to the authorities in Khartoum. Many Christians and town people fled and sought refuge in rural, traditional areas. But they 'journeyed' with the message to the very doorsteps of the rural Dinka, known for their long history of resistance to foreign customs and cultures. But this time round, they heard the message in their own tongue and from the mouths of their own children. They fully embraced it on a scale never witnessed before. The result was a huge explosion of church growth, perhaps with one of the fastest rates in Africa. The ECS, now under the bishopric of Nathaniel Garang Anyieth and with only a small number of churches before 1983, is perhaps the fastest growing church in the Anglican Community today. Also growing rapidly among the Bor Dinka people is a cluster of churches called the Sudan Pentecostal Churches (SPC). Having come into being under difficult circumstances in 1981, the SPC had only one congregation with several tiny branches in the outskirts of Bor town. Its total membership was less than a hundred people in 1983. Now, 17 years later, the SPC lays claims to more than 20 churches and a membership of approximately 7000 people. Both the ECS and SPC enjoy a very strong presence among the Bor Dinka in the refugee camps in East Africa and in displaced people's camps within and outside Sudan. As Andrew Wheeler has pointed out in his excellent survey of Sudan church growth 1983-1996, church growth has also occurred in other church denominations in South Sudan (Wheeler 1997:11-38). The Catholic Church, the

Presbyterian Church, the African Inland Church, the Sudan Interior Church, the Sudan Church of Christ and others have all experienced considerable growth. At this time of war and suffering, the growth of the Sudanese church seems to extend across denominational lines. Persecution, oppression, suffering, war and other afflictions have not succeeded in diminishing the light of the gospel. These have, instead, strengthened and propelled the church into a gigantic growth at an amazing speed. The experience of the Sudanese church, like the experience of the early apostolic church, has shown that persecution and suffering contribute to the growth and expansion of the church. It is indeed true that 'the blood of the saints is the seed of the church'.

### **3.3.3 THE CHURCH AS A COMMUNITY CAPABLE OF ABSORBING SUFFERING**

Because the church is present among the people in their suffering, its significance as a community of the suffering has increased. The growth of the church in the Sudan at this time of war and suffering has added to that significance. The church has become a new community capable of absorbing suffering. It is trying to do its utmost to provide encouragement, protection, refuge, healing and hope for the victims of the war. In the difficult realities of war and its extensive destruction, the church with its meagre resources, tries to feed the hungry, nurse the wounded, clothe the naked, educate the illiterate, defend the defenceless, speak for the voiceless and the marginalised. For many people and communities, the church has now become what it never was in the past. In the past for some communities, the church was perceived as a threat in that it extracted people from their 'mother culture' (Nikkel 1997:63), a community of those who have adopted European ways of life at the expense of their own. The church, in the eyes of many, appeared to have existed for its own sake and that of the few who had become part of it for whatever reasons. It was in that context that some of these communities had little or nothing to do with the church. They thus consigned the church to the periphery, as an institution existing not of necessity but of convenience and without which the traditional community could do better. One such community, more or less, was the Bor Dinka community. Despite the fact that it was among the first communities in South Sudan to have a mission station established in their area and that some of its brilliant sons<sup>84</sup> are

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<sup>84</sup> Both the Honourable Abel Alier, the first president of Southern Sudan Regional Government in the early 1970's and Col Dr John Garang, the leader of the Sudan's People Liberation Army (SPLA) as well as many other leading sons of the area were pupils at the mission school at Malek.



products of this mission school at Malek, they still had little regard for the church as a community.

Prior to the outbreak of the ongoing civil war, most intellectuals in the Bor Dinka community stayed away from church. They generally thought of it as a place for those who have failed to make it in the real world of education, material prosperity and intellectual prestige. For them, the very best of life was not to be found in the church but elsewhere. With poverty and low education standards of its clergy, the church was indeed weak and vulnerable. In addition, the image of the church was marred by its failure to set moral standards for the community and by the reversion of its clergy who had previously renounced traditional ways but later reverted to them with vengeance, morally stooping lower than the traditional person. There was also the problem of associating the church and its message with a foreign culture. Rightly or wrongly, the traditional Dinka saw little distinction between a British District Commissioner and a missionary. They were both white and spoke the same language. Worse still, the early missionary's unqualified rejection of their culture and religion increased their suspicion of the real motive or the agenda behind the message he sought to communicate. There was no point of contact between the missionary and the traditional person. Moreover, the rural Dinka worse fears and suspicion were confirmed when their own children or relatives came home from the mission school and denounced their culture and tradition as demonic, refusing to participate in them. All these reflected negatively on the church and caused the intellectual and traditional Dinka to stay away from it. The church was no better than the general community. Loyalty to one's clan and family was more sensible than loyalty to a foreign church as community.

Now, however, that attitude is thankfully changing. As Marc Nikkel has rightly observed the church for the Bor Dinka has become the centre of social solidarity, ritual and healing. For people stripped of cattle and forced out of their ancestral lands, the Christian message, hitherto a threat, has emerged as a central and highly positive aspect of their new evolving identity (Nikkel 1997:65). Consequently, the church has become a new community of acceptance and solidarity for a people who believe that the community is a solid base of life, protection and identity, for we are what and who we are because of our community. We reflect, consciously or unconsciously, the values, the norms and the behaviours of our respective communities. Our communities protect, love, train, and sustain us at all times and especially when we are weak and vulnerable. The Bor Dinka have now wholeheartedly

embraced the church as a vital part of their communal life. It is true that the church at this time of suffering and war in the Sudan may not have the answers for the evil of war and destruction but it is becoming a community capable of absorbing suffering. Stanley Hauerwas is absolutely right when he writes: "... historically speaking, Christians have not had a 'solution' to the problem of evil. Rather, they have had a community of care that has made it possible for them to absorb the destructive terror of evil that constantly threatens to destroy all human relations" (Hauerwas 1990:53). Again, the church may not have any solution to the problem of war, destruction and suffering in the Sudan, but it can at all costs be a community capable of absorbing the terrible pain and the suffering that the Sudanese people have endured for nearly five decades of relentless war. To this end, the church has been and is still striving. The church is with the people and among the people in their daily struggles and afflictions. It may have very little to offer in terms of material substance. But its very presence with the people in the midst of their suffering and pain is already a lot to offer in a situation in which hopelessness and desperation may cause death much more quickly than hunger or the bullet. For this reason, the church is a new community.

### **3.4 INTERPRETING SUFFERING AND FAITH IN SUDAN**

#### **3.4.1 SUFFERING INTERPRETED AS GOD'S PUNISHMENT**

Suffering in the Sudan is perceived and interpreted variously. Perceptions and interpretations of why and what might have caused suffering pop up in ordinary conversations, prayers, songs and common daily talk. Thus, in the Bor Dinka community you could hear a question in a conversation on the latest from the war front, particularly if the news is not so good: "*Ye ngo ye Nhialic wo yong?*" meaning "why does God put us through this?" Although no reply to that question is expected, it is assumed that God has something to do with what is being experienced. He could have stopped what had happened if he so willed. But this mood is quickly turned into an exhilaration if the news from the war front is good and you could hear someone saying: "*andaa, aci Nhialic loi!*" meaning: "O yes, God has done it, he has given us victory". Thus God is always in focus whether things are good or bad. He is praised when things are good and indirectly indicted when things are bad. It is quite natural for human beings to do this in the situation of suffering. We try to seek meaning or explanations to what we suffer or experience. 'Why me' is an old question we pose when suffering strikes. It



underlies our quest to seek and find possible answers that may be behind our agony and suffering. The Bor Dinka community is doing the same in the ongoing conditions of war and suffering in the Sudan. In doing this, many interpretations of suffering have been floated in this community for a number of years now. But one major viewpoint that has come to gain currency among the Bor Dinka in recent years is the one that God is punishing the Sudan. The 18<sup>th</sup> Chapter of the Book of Isaiah is cited as a validation of this view. 'God will punish Sudan' as this passage is misleadingly entitled in the Good News Bible translation, is accepted as a powerful summation of God's prophetic judgement on the Sudan and as a reputed interpretation of the ongoing suffering in the Sudan. This passage has become the most popular and widely read passage of Scripture in the current civil war. On numerous occasions, SPLA soldiers or ordinary Christian people have asked the present writer to teach or explain this passage of Scripture.<sup>85</sup> From this passage it is claimed that the current war and suffering are punishment from God. It is said that the war and suffering are the exact fulfillments of this divine prophecy. But does this interpretation do justice to the text? Does this passage, as it stands, adequately explain the complexities and difficulties associated with the problem of suffering or the problems of the Sudan? What does the passage mean in the larger context of the prophetic Book of Isaiah? In response, we briefly look at the passage itself.

The passage concerned is located in the first part of the Book of Isaiah, dealing with the message of judgement (Chapters 1-39). Specifically, the passage is one of the prophetic judgement oracles addressed to certain nations, of which Cush or Sudan is one (Chapters 13-23). The judgement predicted in this oracles shall be universal even as the messianic promises addressed to Israel will be. The messianic promises make up the second part of the book of Isaiah (Chapters 40-66)<sup>86</sup>, dealing with the message of restoration and peace. From the passage itself, it cannot be denied that Cush refers to the Sudan, more specifically to the South, and particularly, the Upper Nile region (vv 1-2). The references to "a tall, smooth-skinned, aggressive people of strange speech, papyrus boats and land divided by rivers" are all descriptions appropriate to Nilotic peoples. The pronouncement of judgement in verse 1 seems to be a continuation of the same on the nations in Chapter 17:12-14. God almighty is

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<sup>85</sup> It is ironic that this passage and most of the OT is not yet translated or published in the Dinka language, nearly 100 years since the first Protestant missionary set foot in Dinkaland and more than 140 years since the first Catholic came to Dinkaland.

<sup>86</sup> I take the view that the Book of Isaiah is divided into two parts and not three as advanced by some form critics. I believe the message of Isaiah is two-dimensional, dealing with judgement and restoration. This seems to be the view, which most evangelical Bible scholars espouse and it seems to do justice as far as I am concerned to Biblical theology, as well as to the internal evidence and contents of this book itself.



the judge and ruler over these nations; they are all subject to his authority and power (Young 1965:474). The land is described as the land of 'whirring wings', which may be taken to be a reference to the tsetse fly, a troubling insect abounding in Western Equatoria region. EJ Young, a leading authority on OT, believes that 'whirring wings' is a metaphor, which may be taken to mean multitude of people who inhabit Cush or a multitudinous army that the Sudan will mobilise for war (Young 1965: 475). The phrase may also be taken to mean insects or shifting shadows in the land of Cush, due to the position of the equator or even papyrus boats, commonly used as means of transportation on the Nile and its tributaries. However one interprets it, it is only appropriate to see it as a reference to the land of Cush.<sup>87</sup>

This chapter may be divided into three sections. The first section, constituting verses 1-2, describes the land and its people. The second section, constituting verses 4-6, arguably describes judgement on the land and its people. The third section, consisting of verse 7, contains a message of hope and restoration. The first section, a major portion of the passage, is a difficult one to interpret. OT scholarship is not agreed on what it exactly means. To cite an example, John DW Watts, a leading OT commentator, does not even think 'woe' in verse 1 introduces a curse or judgement on the Cushites at all. Rather, he thinks that 'woe' is a cry of dismay by the people of Jerusalem at the news that the Cushite army was about to invade their land (Watts 1985:245). John Oswalt, another OT interpreter, is even more blunt than Watts when he comments on 'woe'. He writes: "Woe is not directed to the Ethiopians or Cushites, (because) no word of judgement is pronounced upon them. Rather, they are to be the bearers of a message that God will not allow oppression to come to its full fruition. This (the 18<sup>th</sup> chapter as a whole) is not in any sense a judgement oracle" (Oswalt 1986:359). While the message of judgement may not be as easily dismissed as Oswalt and Watts do, emphatic and conclusive endorsement of this message as the only possible meaning of the text blurs the message of hope and restoration which seems to be much more clearer. It is corroborated elsewhere in Scripture, where it is attested to that the Cushites will be among the most dedicated worshippers of Jehovah (Psalm 68:31, Zephaniah 3:10). But the real point of difficulty in the interpretation of this passage as it relates to the current situation of war and suffering is whether or not it is actually being fulfilled now. Is the ongoing war and suffering the unequivocal fulfillment of this passage? Does the passage apply only to the present

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<sup>87</sup> It is difficult to sustain the view that these are references to the Zulus or Afrikaners of South Africa. The descriptions seem to fit Nilotic peoples of Southern Sudan better (See Peter Hammond, *Faith under Fire in Sudan*, p. 29).



realities of war and suffering in the Sudan or does it look to the future also, in the context of a universal judgement? What will the passage mean if and when the war and suffering are over in the country? We think the truth may be somewhere in the middle. Both present and future fulfillments may be possible. However, the passage itself, like other OT prophecies, seems to have a double fulfillment, with one already having taken place in the older times and the other still anticipating the future, an eschatological fulfillment to which the present upheavals of war and suffering may just be a prelude. The present realities in the Sudan are difficult to be entirely divorced from an eschatological fulfillment. It is our contention, therefore, that the use of this passage as a validation of the interpretation that the current war and suffering are God's punishment is inadequate. In the current context of suffering and war, any interpretation of this passage that emphasises judgement alone and ignores the message of hope and restoration must be regarded as biblically and theologically one-sided and deficient.<sup>88</sup> To be sure, the message of judgement has some credence but this judgement will be on all nations and not just on the Sudan (Chapters 13-23). The universality of human sinfulness and rebellion against God calls for a universal judgement of which the current wars and the sufferings they bring are only a small portion (Zephaniah 1:1-2:15). For now, however, we must accept the fact that there are no easy answers to the problem of war and suffering in the Sudan. That our knowledge and explanations are inadequate and limited is a fact we must learn to live with in the face of the ever-mysterious problem of evil and suffering, such as the one that has been experienced in the Sudan for nearly five decades now.

### **3.4.2 SUFFERING AS A RESULT OF COSMIC CONFLICT BETWEEN GOD AND THE *JAK***

Besides viewing the current war and suffering as punishment from God, many Bor Dinka Christians also consider the current civil war and the resulting suffering and devastation as an outcome of a cosmic conflict between God and the *jak* or forces of evil. They conceive of themselves as existing between two great wars. One war is the bloody conflict between the liberation movement and the armies of the Khartoum regime and the other is that between Christ and the evil forces or *jak rac*. These forces, which have been revered and venerated in the Dinka traditional religion for centuries, must now be destroyed if peace and stability are to be realised in the country. As Marc Nikkel has correctly observed, the Bor Dinka Christian

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<sup>88</sup> While giving meaning, hope and direction to many communities, this text or rather how it is interpreted has also had a baleful influence. Sudanese Church leaders as Andrew Wheeler notes have both embraced and criticised its focus on judgement (Wheeler 1997:38).

community believes that unless the entire population destroys their numerous shrines and embraces the Christian message, there will be no peace and prosperity. Coupled with this is the affirmation of faith and hope that Nhialic is now ushering in a new age of direct relationship with himself, unmitigated by old powers (Nikkel 1997:88). So intense is this interpretation of suffering as a result of cosmic conflict that it has become the major theme of more than 1,500 songs, composed and sung by the Bor Dinka Christians during this time of war and suffering. Here is how one of these songs puts it:

*Let us leave the evil one behind us; let us not allow the evil one to rule over us again. The evil one has come with conflict and destruction of the country (baai), both man and the evil one is any between them better than the other (implicitly in the task of destroying lives and inflicting suffering)? Being more crafty than human, the evil one is cunningly driving us into the fire of hell. He is filled with fury having been cursed with sin from the beginning.*

*Evil and good are in great conflict (in the Sudan).  
The earth will stand still when the spilt blood shall call out, Lord, Lord.  
Mankind is weeping on the earth (due to much suffering).  
O God, do not let us become orphans on the earth!  
Look at us with favour, O Creator of mankind.  
Evil is in conflict with us; it is tying on our necks a heavy burden that none of us is able to carry (Mary Alueel Garang).*

The kingdom of God and the kingdom of the jak are in conflict, a conflict of which the current war and suffering are consequences. This cosmic and spiritual conflict is perceived in the song to be the cause behind the war and suffering in the Sudan. But the battle that must be won now is over the evil forces of the jak rac. It is believed that winning this one will ultimately lead to winning the persisting civil war as well. To win the battle over the jak rac, one must receive the gospel message. One writer describes another way to defeat the evil jak: "Awake, awake chosen warriors, awake and pray. The power of God is at war with the jok (singular of jak). But if we worship (or pray), we will chase jok away from the world" (Isaiah Malek). Failure to do this, may result in dire consequences as yet another singer in the following chorus explains:

*Anyone who has been deceived by the evil one (so as not to believe), the evil one will eat him with his bull offering. Rely on the hand of the Lord, on the blessed Lamb, the Lamb who was sent to bring life eternal.*

*Anyone told to believe but refused, will not blame anyone else. None will stand for another (as before the judgement throne), on that day we will be sifted like seeds. Words from the land of darkness lead us astray, they lead us to sin; they deny us entrance into the blessed land (Dabora Nyanreu).*



The land of darkness is believed to be the dwelling place of the evil one. The Christian is strongly admonished in the songs to have nothing to do with it or else the same judgement that will come on the *jak rac* will also be his. The suffering and war have come because people have refused to believe God and have instead allowed *jak rac* to deceive them. Because of this, *jak rac* will eat them with their bull sacrifices.<sup>89</sup>

Suffering is closely associated with the worship of the *jak rac* and the believer is strongly warned in the songs to reject them completely and have nothing to do with them. It is repeatedly emphasised in the songs that the *jak* bring sin and sin brings judgement in the form of suffering and therefore the *jak* must of necessity be rejected and destroyed. Upon rejecting the *jak*, Christ must be received as Saviour, Protector and Helper. One singer puts it this way:

*Go away from me, you deceptive evil one; I have rejected you. I want Jehovah, the Lord of life; I want Christ, the Saviour who protects my soul. The Holy Spirit is present with me; he is my Helper (Stephen Dit).*

The total rejection of the *jak* and the destruction of paraphernalia associated with their worship have in some extreme cases included cultural relics and antiques that the Dinka highly value. While it is true that much of the relics, artifacts and antiques was associated with the *jak* in one way or another, it is not true that all artifacts, relics and antiques in the traditional culture belonged to the *jak* and their worship. Some people have expressed concern that the indiscriminate destruction of relics, artifacts and antiques will deprive the Bor Dinka community of its cultural heritage.<sup>90</sup> The challenge that the Bor Dinka church must face is to differentiate between what belongs to the *jak* and therefore deserving of destruction and what does not and therefore worth of keeping and of creative use in the proclamation of the gospel.<sup>91</sup>

<sup>89</sup> In the Dinka traditional religion, sacrifice is the essential part of worship, which cannot take place without sacrifice. From beginning to end, the Dinka traditional religion is primarily based on sacrifice and without shedding of blood there is no meaningful worship. There are thus striking similarities between the Jewish sacrificial system and the Dinka system. This is why the Dinka Christians easily identify with the OT and particularly the book of Leviticus and its meticulous sacrificial system.

<sup>90</sup> Some intellectuals from the community, including SPLA commanders and other leaders, have expressed this concern to this writer on many occasions.

<sup>91</sup> An excellent example of creative use of what was traditional to serve the cause of the gospel is the turning of traditional walking sticks, spears and clubs into crosses. As Marc Nikkel explains, "the crosses of today stand in the tradition of *yuai* and *waai* (both walking sticks), carried as emblems of beauty and sophistication, of spiritual and social authority, of initiation, and as weapons" ('The Cross as a Symbol of Regeneration in the Jieng Bor Society' in Andrew Wheeler (ed.), *Land of Promise*, pp. 86-114.



### 3.4.3 SUFFERING HAS COME TO TURN US TO GOD

The Bor Dinka Christian community believes that God has allowed suffering and death for another special reason. This reason is that the Dinka, renowned in the past for their resistance and opposition to the gospel, may turn away from their *jak* to Jehovah Nhialic. As underscored in the songs, suffering and death have come to show faith as Mary Alueel Garang expresses it in these words:

*Death has come to show faith; it began with us (the modern Dinka generation) and it will finish with us. You, who worry about death, do not worry about death. It only vanishes (humans) from the face of the earth. Who is able to deliver his/her own soul and keep it from dying? We are all visitors in the world as the Lord said. Let us work for the truth, we should call no one our father on the earth; we are all brethren, one to another. God has not created us to be slaves to creatures like us, this should not happen on the earth.*

The message that the songs and ordinary conversation with the Dinka convey is that death and suffering are things that should not be a cause for worry since they are allowed by Nhialic for the purpose of bringing people to himself. They must be borne bravely because they will bring about good in the long run. There should therefore be no regrets when one suffers or dies for his faith or for the liberation of his country. Thus, of all the things one hears in the massive upheaval and devastation that the Dinka have experienced in the ongoing bloody war, regret is not one of them. The Dinka never regret or despair of life because of the suffering they are undergoing; they strongly believe that in the end, some good will result out of it. One clan leader expressed it vividly when he said: "*Nhialic aci riaak cook bo panda. Hokuo ku miithkuo aci riaak ke nyai. E wei kekaci dong kepei. Eyen Nhialic Benydit yetok eka nyic ke loi. Abi wook cok ting piath ku loi ne kolde. Aci wook waan ku ka to ke wook eya*" (Akoi Jurkuc, 1994). Meaning, "God has allowed suffering or destruction to come to our country. We have lost our children, our cattle and everything we had. Only our life (literally our breath) has been spared. It is only the Great God who knows what he is doing (in allowing this suffering and destruction). He will let us see some good and prosperity someday. He has abandoned us and yet he is still with us also!" Wrestling with the problem of suffering and evil is evident in these words. Both the sense of God's absence and the sense of his presence as experienced by the speaker show this. Because he is present, the vital breath of life is still there even if all the material goods are lost. He is absent and therefore war, suffering and devastation continue. But he is still the only one trusted to bring deliverance, peace and prosperity someday. Whether or not the speaker feels the absence or presence of Nhialic at the moment, there is absolutely no suggestion that Nhialic is to be rejected or trust in him



discarded because one is plagued by suffering and upheaval. The only reason why this cannot be done is because the breath of life is still there. Valuing life more highly than material goods, the Dinka realistically remark if they lose their material wealth: "*Piir wei eka dit*" meaning, "life is the most important thing". Nhialic is the one who gives this life and as long as this life is still in the body there is no reason to reject Nhialic. By drawing from their traditional resources that God is never to be rejected even if he does not seem to hear or intervene in the time of trouble, the Dinka Christians acknowledge the sovereignty of God over a person's life and destiny and readily accept the inevitable that life is more than they can explain or control.

Although the belief that suffering has come to show faith is widely entertained in the Dinka community, it is not intended to be *the* only explanation. Other explanations are given as we noted above. However, one other explanation, closely related to the one we have just examined and which the Bor Dinka accept, is that suffering has come to fulfil the words of Archibald Shaw (1879-1956) of the British Church Missionary Society (CMS). For nearly four decades (1906-1940), Shaw wrestled and fought with the Dinka over cattle and sought to penetrate the Dinka mind in his tireless efforts to bring the message of the gospel to them. He was respectful and sensitive to the Dinka culture as he sought to convey the message of Christ to them. The following comments, which he made when he had an encounter with a Dinka diviner (tiet), bear witness to this:

... I am sure our best plan with regard to native superstitions and false beliefs is to seek to give the Truth as God has revealed it rather than to set about destroying their faith in what they have hitherto held sacred, to give positive rather than negative teaching. When Christ the Truth is known shams and lying professions will be exposed and destroyed (Shaw 1910).<sup>92</sup>

With this sort of respect, it is no surprise that Shaw earned the reputation of being 'the only white man with the heart of the *Jieng* or Dinka'<sup>93</sup> and of being the first and the most intimate missionary to the Bor Dinka. Shaw is reported to have told the Dinka people after his long and somewhat 'fruitless' labours that the time will come when they will hear the gospel message from the mouths of their own sons and daughters and they would then embrace it. After only five years of hard work among the Dinka, Shaw was already writing back home

<sup>92</sup> Quoted in Nikkel's 'Archibald Shaw'.

<sup>93</sup> One of his adopted sons, Daniel Deng Atong, spoke for many Dinka people when he said this about Shaw. See Marc Nikkel's article on Shaw for the phrase.

that the *Jieng* Christians would be the ideal evangelists of their own people.<sup>94</sup> Shaw was conscious that this would need unlimited patience as he acknowledged in his 1911 report. Here is what he wrote in that report: "The people are very primitive and ignorant with deep tribal prejudices against foreigners of any kind. Unlimited patience and years of labour are, humanly speaking, necessary before these people can be won for Christ."<sup>95</sup> In Shaw's mind, that time of being 'won for Christ' was still in the future but to the present Dinka that time has now finally come. Shaw's words have been fulfilled during this time of war as shown by the mass conversion of the Dinka. Thus, the Bor Dinka today regard Shaw's words as prophetic, almost on the same level with biblical prophetic words. The following song shows this:

*Do we not get what is written in the Book?  
You the blind and the magician you have been  
Warned of the judgement to come. He said  
He will pour out his wrath on the earth. The  
Worldly life we depend on will be destroyed.  
When he takes away his life, will you live again?  
Let us hear him; let us not worship the world.  
The Father spoke to us through the prophets,  
Isaiah spoke of the suffering we now face. Was it?  
not long ago that he spoke these things? Yet, they  
are now being fulfilled and we are suddenly surprised.*

*Behold! Behold! Behold! The suffering that has come upon us  
is the beginning of the greater judgement still to come.  
On that day you will not say, save me, my father, save me, my mother.  
The child you bore will not save you; each person will stand alone;  
Suffering will be greater.  
Holy Spirit, you have fulfilled your work, the truth you spoke through  
Archdeacon Archibald Shaw when we (the Dinka) refused to hear him. He said  
Our own children will teach us the Words of God. What he said has now come  
to pass and we must pay attention to it. The Book is a testimony to all people on  
the earth. It tells of the judgement to come, of the day when the trumpet shall sound  
(Tabitha Akuek).*

Suffering is thus believed to have come not to only show faith but also to fulfil the prophetic words of a resilient missionary who dedicated his entire life to the Dinka.

#### **3.4.4 GOD WILL DELIVER FROM SUFFERING IN AN ANSWER TO PRAYER**

In whatever way the upheaval, the devastation and the suffering, caused by the raging war, are interpreted, people strongly believe that God will deliver them in an answer to prayer. The Bor Dinka believe that Nhialic is mighty and able to deliver from evil and suffering, now

<sup>94</sup> Marc Nikkel notes this in footnote 53 of his article on Shaw in Wheeler's Gateway to the Heart of Africa, p. 116.

<sup>95</sup> "General report on British Sphere of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan", undated, about 1911. Quoted in Nikkel, p. 110.



being faced. The current severe *guom* or suffering in the Sudan is not considered to be beyond his sovereign control and yet at the same time the sense of God's presence and absence plagues the believer even as he/she waits for that deliverance to come. The following prayer shows how this is:

*Yin leechu Nhialic ne riel ditdu. Kace piou ne wook ne guomda yic ku riaakde panda.<sup>96</sup> Duk wo ye waan, Nhialic. Ye wook kony ne guomda yic ku bei door panda, yin Banydit. Pale wook kareckuo ku bar ne wook yic.<sup>97</sup>* Meaning, we thank you oh God for your great power. Be merciful to us in our suffering and in the destruction of our country. Do not abandon us, oh God. Deliver us from our suffering and bring peace in our land, Great Lord. Forgive our sins. Come and dwell within us.

God is perceived to be the mighty one who can deliver from suffering and sin. This is so despite the fact that both the sense of his presence and absence is real as underscored in the prayer. The Bor Dinka Christian community strongly believes that God will deliver them from the current suffering in the same manner he delivered Israel from Egypt as recorded in the Exodus narrative. One man told this writer, "God will deliver us from our bondage as he delivered the Israelites from Egypt. He is the same God, is he not?" Another confidently said: "When God finally intervenes in our situation, the whole world will know it and will celebrate with us".<sup>98</sup> Such faith and confidence in the delivering power of God are firmly upheld in the midst of unbearable destruction and suffering. But there still exists a tension between the reality of this power and how it can be appropriated in alleviating the vicious, devastating ongoing suffering. Faith in a mighty God who delivers his people is strongly expressed and the reality and the severity of pain and suffering, caused by war and displacement, are not denied. The following prayer, offered at a displaced Bor Dinka camp on the occasion of a visit by an American missionary who brought some relief assistance to the beleaguered refugees, provides a good example. In this prayer, the reality of the presence of Nhialic with the one praying contrasts sharply with the catalogue of needs, problems and difficulties she has encountered during her flight to the camp.

We give you thanks our Nhialic. We give you thanks, Almighty Nhialic. We give you thanks, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. We give you thanks, Lord of life. We give you thanks, Nhialic of the deaf, Nhialic of the blind, Nhialic of those who are stranded. You are the Nhialic of those who are utterly helpless...

<sup>96</sup> *Panda* generally refers to the Sudan and specifically to ancestral homelands, destroyed in 1991 in intertribal raids.

<sup>97</sup> This prayer was recorded at Kakuma refugee camp in 1995.

<sup>98</sup> Related in conversation with Sudan Pentecostal Church elders in Narus, Sudan on August 17<sup>th</sup> 1998.



... If you were not present to whom would I compare myself? If I were not here and if you were not present upon the earth, O Nhialic of Israel, then America could not come to see me. Who am I? I am (only) a woman who dresses in rags, a woman who cannot speak a foreign tongue: I am blind, and I am unschooled. My survival has always relied on cattle, but now all our animals have been raided. My children have been bribed to come and torment me. My Nhialic, my Nhialic, have mercy on me. It is you who will raise me out of this suffering. I endured ten days without eating and I lived on the water you brought me, and then America came and saw me. O Nhialic, don't let me be deceived. People ask how I will find knees to crawl to America. Do I have a car to take my children and hide them? Do I have a car or an aeroplane to take me? You, the Nhialic of generations, you are my aeroplane, for the widows here in Lebone (Displaced people camp) whose eyes are red with weeping, you are our aeroplane...

... There is a son who has visited me called 'America'; (he) has given me a pot to cook in. He is the one who has given me jerry cans for water. He is the one who has given me porridge to warm my mouth. He is the one who has given me medicine from hospital, the medicine I drink. O Nhialic be merciful. If there is even a single son who does not accept the misfortune that afflicts me, Nhialic of the generations, let him come closer to Dr. John (Garang) and help him (in the task of liberating the country).<sup>99</sup>

This prayer is directed to Nhialic who is powerful, responsive and accessible to a displaced, lowly widow. So intimate is the relationship with Nhialic that the speaker addresses him as if he is sitting alongside. His power to provide is represented by the Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) bringing assistance to the displaced people. That Nhialic cares for his own is evidenced by the fact that all the speaker now has, was given by him through human agents, one of which is America. America, as Marc Nikkel rightly notes, is a term not so much used to refer to a nation or place, as it is a concept or a force which Nhialic has employed to extend his compassion and provision to the suffering. Nhialic is so sovereign and powerful that he is the only one who can send America to bring badly needed relief assistance to those who have been displaced and deprived of livelihood. He is the one who is mighty to deliver from suffering and war. He alone can move the forces of war to reconcile and work for peace as yet another prayer illustrates:

Oh, Lord; help me to reconcile with myself for the powers of evil and righteousness are always at war (within me and around me). Help my sisters to have peace with their neighbors. Help my brothers (in SPLA warring factions) to enter into dialogue with each other for (the sake of) peace. Help our leaders in the Sudan to negotiate peace for the life and freedom of mankind, as these are extremely valuable.

Help all the mediators to act wisely as peacemakers for now rather than for tomorrow as we desperately yearn for this peace and freedom. Help the big powers (America, Russia, China and Europe) to work for peace rather than for war as the whole world yearns for it most.

<sup>99</sup> A prayer of a prominent Episcopal Church women's leader at a Lebone Displaced Camp, February 1994, quoted in Marc Nikkel's 'Children of our Fathers' Divinities' in Wheeler's *Land of Promise*, pp. 61-78.



Oh, Lord, make my tongue sing songs of peace; set my feet to the direction of peace; direct my fingers to print to the places of peace; direct my mind to think only of peace; build in my heart the fountain of peace; make my entire body a temple of peace; and above all make me a messenger of peace (Rebecca Joshua, 1998).

Prayers for peace such as this are understandably commonplace in the Sudan, where peace and stability have eluded the country for many years. Only the Great God is earnestly sought through prayer to satisfy this yearning for peace and freedom. At other times, God is asked to take up his weapons of war and fight alongside the afflicted ones as the following prayer-song shows: "We call upon you (oh, God); we pray to you. Take up your shield and javelin; intervene on our behalf; come and defend us" (Elisabeth Yaar Garang). When an answer does not come forth as desired, God, in the Trinity, is reminded to look upon those who suffer with mercy and compassion once again. "We pray to you Great Three (Trinity) to look back on us once more. We pray to you, Nhialic of hosts, look back on us once more. The generation born today (at this time of war and suffering) is scattered everywhere. We pray to you to gather us once again and we will find power" (Mary Acieu Areem). Thus, the prayer motif underscores a longing of the suffering people of Sudan for peace and stability in their country. Prayer and trust in an almighty Nhialic who is able to deliver from war and suffering seem to override the different explanations of suffering. That God is present with those who suffer and that he can be called upon to intervene at the time of need, rather than elaborate theological and philosophical explanation of suffering and evil, seem to make much sense to the Bor Dinka, a people to whom Nhialic was a distant deity until recently.

### **3.5 SONG OUTPOURING AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE ONGOING SUFFERING AND CHURCH GROWTH AMONG THE BOR DINKA**

#### **3.5.1 THE COMING OF NHIALIC**

At this time of war and suffering in the Sudan, there has been a powerful song outpouring among the Bor Dinka in response to the gospel message. These songs of suffering and faith, more than 1,500 of them, express a variety of theological themes with a direct bearing on the upheaval and destruction of the war in relation to newfound faith in Nhialic. Salvific themes such as repentance, faith, deliverance, reliance on God, protection, anguish, fear, complaint, lament and cosmic conflict between Nhialic and the *Jak* dominate these songs. Composed in

nuances familiar to the Dinka heart and soul, these songs reiterate the biblical message and themes in a captivating style. The traditional Dinka culture of song is invaded with a new Christian celebration, producing a powerful mixture of Christian and Dinka dynamics which has led to a massive people's movement. As it is well known, the Dinka are habitual singers with the average person composing and singing off head between 100 and 200 songs. They always sing with pride of their show bulls and in some cases they sing of anguish, pain and ridicule in parabolic and figurative language. A proud Dinka youth, showing off his new acquired bull or trying to impress a beautiful girl he loves or just for the love of singing, can sing and entertain a cattle camp for a whole night. It is significant that the Dinka can sing about anything at all at this time of war, pain and death.<sup>100</sup> They have lost virtually all their cattle, have been displaced from their ancestral land and are now refugees in jur land and have suffered many other upheavals as a result of the war. Their *cieng* and *dheeng* have been challenged or eroded like never before in many long centuries of resistance to foreign cultures. Life as they knew it is now only a dream of the past, having been largely eroded and impaired. But with all that and much more now gone, they still can sing. How are we to interpret this? What can explain this strange trait? One thing may explain it, and it is this: the gospel message has finally found room in the heart and soul of the Dinka and it has become a valuable part of their life and they can therefore sing about it. The *cieng* of Nhialic has come and is much more valuable than the *cieng* of cattle and all that the Dinka were boasting about in the past. The coming of Nhialic and his capturing of the traditional song culture with his word of life have replaced the cattle wealth on which the Dinka *cieng* and *dheeng* were based. The response to the words of Nhialic has thus occasioned the song outpouring among the Dinka. The coming of Nhialic, being now experienced by the Dinka, was predicted in an extremely popular song, which Adoor Juac of the Ngok Dinka composed and sang in the 1950's.

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<sup>100</sup> The Dinka do not sing at the time of death or at a funeral. When death occurs in a family, a period of mourning raging from 6 months and 1 year is observed. Beads and other paraphernalia that allude to happiness are discarded.



*Let us turn our hearts to the Truth, Nhialic is coming<sup>101</sup>*  
*The Lord Jesus is coming, smiling at us, my lost people he has found*  
*You will take them to the right hand of your Father*  
*Come; wash our bodies to be lighter like adeet<sup>102</sup>,*  
*Our good Lord surrounds us with his bright light.*  
*Jesus Christ has sought and found us to turn our hearts to our Father*  
*To turn our heads heavenward (as in prayer), our Father will hold back our tears*  
*He will write our souls in a book for a thousand years.*  
*Show your head, you will not fall; Jesus our Lord, you will not fall*  
*We will receive you to give us life everlasting*  
*Our Dinka mock us (for your sake), the whole nation is bound by fear*  
*They refuse our truths and run to the river to wash (as an act of divination and worship),*  
*Anei with Deng and a woman called Anok are among these who run*  
*They slaughtered a bull to no avail,*  
*They slaughtered a he-goat to no avail*  
*I will turn my head to our Father; I will turn my head to Christ*  
*Lord Jesus, come and put in order the destroyed home.*

This song was the centre of Christian proclamation among the Dinka in the 1950's. The essence of its message is the announcing of the imminent approach of Nhialic. This announcing of the imminent approach of God, as Andrew Wheeler has pointed out, is characteristic of the understanding of the contemporary people's movement amongst the Bor Dinka as well as among other Dinka groups (Wheeler 1998:67). For Adoor Juac and his generation, this coming of Nhialic was still in the future and perhaps eschatological. For the generation of the 1980's and 1990's, the coming of Nhialic is a present reality. Nhialic is now here, in our midst, although we did not realise it. The proclamation that Nhialic is now here evokes a powerful sense that he will intervene in the current war and bring deliverance from suffering sooner rather than later. The presence of Nhialic gives hope and encouragement in the face of death and destruction. Nhialic is here and yet we have not realised it as the following song asserts:

<sup>101</sup> The charismatic Ngok Dinka evangelist, Lual Ayei, greatly used and popularised this song in his proclamation among the Ngok Dinka as Andrew Wheeler notes. However, he is not the one who composed it. Adoor Juac, whom I had the privilege of meeting in Adong while attending a primary school in the Ngok Dinkaland in the early 1970's, composed this song. Adoor Juac, like most Dinka Christians of his time who believed, unfortunately reverted to the worship of jak that he had early repudiated. Lual Ayei himself retreated into tobacco and hashish addiction. However, the prophetic impact of his song still stands, Nhialic has truly come to the Dinka at this time (Wheeler 1998:66-8).

<sup>102</sup> Adeet is a type of plant that grows on the sudd and is used to make a type of light shield that the Dinka use for protection in stick fighting. It is used as storage for tobacco as well as a pillow.

*Nhialic has come amongst us slowly and we did not realise it. He is standing nearby, right next to our hearts; he is shining his bright light on us. We ask you, our Father, Great Lord of peace in heaven above, who calls in secret, Who knows the hearts of humans, our faith is weak; make us strong. So that we stand with firm courage until you reach us without wavering.*

*Send to us your power, Lord, the Comforter, the Spirit of Truth to teach us the written law. So that we may receive your salvation slowly, slowly, all of us, with no one left out. Then, prepare your coming, when we all have received the knowledge. On that day, you will make the whole world to account; you will make us to account. Men will scream in anguish. Nhialic, let us repent in time, Christ, let your light triumph.*

*Christ, the king of kings has not disowned us. Because he loved us and died for us. If we have not reached it, if we have not tasted it, how can we wait for it (that is the Second Coming of Christ)? He puts his light in us so that we can wait in faith. And he reveals to us the truth, which is yet to come. The son of man will come like lightning. He will sit in the clouds, glorified by his father. This is the light that darkness can never overcome (Mary Alueel Garang).*

The coming of Nhialic is both a present and future reality to the composer. Nhialic will come and make all people to account for their deeds on that Day. Thus end time themes such as the final judgement and a future bliss, freedom from suffering and other troubles, readily come to the fore in the coming of Nhialic. The prophetic imagery in the Bible and particularly in the apocalyptic books of Daniel and Revelation sparks much interest among the Dinka.<sup>103</sup> According to the Dinka mind, the imagery of judgement and destruction in these books seems to bear resemblance to what is now going on in the Sudan. Thus, the coming of Nhialic connotes blessing to those who believe and judgement to those who do not. This is the message of the two songs we have examined.

### **3.5.2 SONG OUTPOURING AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CHRISTIAN PROCLAMATION AMONG THE BOR DINKA**

But what are some implications of this song outpouring among the Bor Dinka at this time of war and devastation? How do these relate to suffering and faith as experienced by the Bor Dinka? First, the song outpouring emanates from a deeply seated wrestling with suffering and faith. Both in the first civil war and in the ongoing one, songs and hymns have been the most important medium through which the theological wrestling of the people have been worked out. Whether it is through praise, prayer, dialogue with God, or reiterating biblical stories or

<sup>103</sup> Though quite alien to Dinka and Nilotic traditional thought, as Marc Nikkel points out, the end time events generate interest among the Dinka not so much because judgement is coming and freedom from suffering is at hand but because the idea that jok will be finally defeated and thrown in the fire very much appeals to the Dinka. This is in addition to their insatiable curiosity to discover or explain the meaning behind the imageries (Nikkel 1997:99).



searching for the meaning of life in the light of present losses, these songs and hymns clearly express people's struggles and wrestling with suffering.<sup>104</sup> Sometimes, the composers themselves emerge from personal loss and suffering into deep song. Mary Alueel Garang who composed a good number of the contemporary Bor Dinka songs, for example, emerged from great personal suffering and pain to become the most prolific contemporary Dinka singer. Rejected by her own family and jilted by a man she dearly loved and had a child with, Mary suffered humiliation and disdain beyond what a Dinka girl of her age could possibly bear. On top of all that, Mary lost her child, aggravating her suffering and leading to a near emotional breakdown. It was in the midst of this upheaval that she became a Christian and experienced God's power in a special way, enabling her to compose many songs that have brought fresh meaning to Dinka Christianity. Most of her songs carry deep and dynamic expressions of the Christian message, suited to the Dinka context. The suffering she experienced seemed to have contributed greatly to the uniqueness and maturity of her songs and message.

Second, the song outpouring articulates the Christian proclamation in idioms and nuances familiar to the Dinka heart and mind. Because of this, the rural Dinka, in particular, experienced little difficulty to comprehend or receive the message of the gospel that the songs convey. In traditional society, the song was an important vehicle of communication. The Dinka song culture as such, had its roots in attempting to articulate and convey the religious, social, ethical and other issues of life in a firm but non-threatening manner, in a way that ordinary speech could not do. Through song, vital community values were disseminated and popularised. The community told its story and shaped its character effectively through songs. The oral history of the community was mainly preserved through song and story. So essential was (and still is) the song culture that every Dinka clan had its own peculiar songs that told its own story and preserved its own identity within the larger context of the Dinka cultural hegemony.<sup>105</sup> It is in this important context that the current song outpouring among the Bor Dinka and other Nilotic groups should be seen and interpreted. If this is done, it becomes clear that the current song outpouring can hardly be divorced from the people's mass

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<sup>104</sup> Andrew Wheeler notes that Sudanese theology is primarily worked out in hymns and spiritual songs. During the first war, 1955-1972, there was song outpouring among the Bari, the Moru, the Zande and other groups in the Equatoria region as it is now among the Nilotic peoples, the Dinka, the Nuer and the Shilluk during the ongoing war. It is interesting to note that in each case, suffering was much more severe in each of these regions when song outpouring occurred (Wheeler 1998:69).

<sup>105</sup> Francis Deng records one of the Ngok Dinka clan songs in his *The Dinka of the Sudan*, p. 135. This is an example of what we are trying to say here. This song, dating back at least 15 known generations, had been orally



movement and church growth among the Bor Dinka. The song has become an extremely valuable vehicle of spreading the message of Christ among a people whose *cieng* and *dheeng* are rooted in song. The song has efficiently done what other types of communication could not do because it is articulated in idioms and nuances familiar to the Dinka conscience and sensibility.

Third, the song outpouring provides a basis of identification with and a sense of ownership of the Christian proclamation. The Christian message, expressed in the songs and conveying local, familiar cultural idioms and meanings, is unlikely to be treated as foreign. As mentioned earlier, the Dinka have been resistant to the message for a long time, regarding it as foreign and therefore highly suspicious of its influence. Even when the 'strongest and bravest warriors'<sup>106</sup> like Archibald Shaw were sent, the Dinka, as ever, were still reserved, suspicious and prejudiced against 'foreigners of any kind'.<sup>107</sup> The Dinka suspicion of and prejudice against all foreigners grew out of the dark history of the inhumane slave trade and exploitation. The Dinka hardly told the difference between a Turk, an Arab or an Englishman. They were all the same in their eyes; they were '*Turuuk*' or '*Aciek*'<sup>108</sup> even when they claimed to have come with a message from Nhialic. It took a long time before the Dinka learned the difference between them. The Christian proclamation too could not escape being regarded foreign, especially, after Dinka children who attended missionary schools came home denouncing the Dinka *cieng* and *dheeng* as demonic and earned themselves being branded *Turuuk* or *Aciek* like their missionary teachers. And although the Dinka put them in 'line' at vulnerable times such as when they wanted to marry using cattle, these '*Turuuk* and *aciek*' were subjected to persistent ridicule and harassment until they established themselves, obtained cattle of their own and lived the Dinka way. For the Dinka, therefore, it was difficult to relate to the Christian proclamation, wrapped up in the foreign baggage; there was no point of contact for them to relate to. The church was for *mith ke thukul*, (school children), not for *Muonyjang* (men of men as the Dinka refer to themselves). All this has radically changed during the last 17 years since the song outpouring in the Dinka language became a reality.

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preserved before Dr. Deng put it into writing in 1971 with considerable difficulty due to the archaic nature of an extant Dinka language.

<sup>106</sup> This is taken from a tribute by Jon Aruor e Thor, Shaw's first convert at a Diocesan Council and ordination in Juba, 1946. Reported by M Willoughby H Carey as quoted in Nikkel's 'Archibald Shaw', p. 102.

<sup>107</sup> See note 224 above.

<sup>108</sup> *Turuuk* is a corruption of Turk that the Dinka used to refer to the repressive regime of the Ottoman Turks who ruled and subjected the Sudan to exploitation, 1821-1885. The Dinka called the Arab and the British *Turuuk* as



The Dinka have overwhelmingly received the Christian proclamation that the songs convey. This proclamation is no longer a foreign cultural import; it is conveyed in familiar cultural idioms and nuances that the Dinka can relate to. The song outpouring has therefore created some vital identification with the Christian proclamation and has enhanced a sense of its ownership. The church for the Dinka is no longer for *mith ke thukul* (school children) but *kanitha da* (our church), because we can relate to and identify with it. The song outpouring among the Bor Dinka has thus provided a basis of identification with the Christian message as well as a sense of belonging to the community of believers.

Finally, the song outpouring among the Bor Dinka contains a large and influential women's contribution, providing a unique gender balance. Contrary to the Dinka traditional culture, women lead the way in composing and popularising the new Dinka songs. This is highly unusual in a male dominated society. The Dinka, like most African peoples, have certain roles that only fall in the male sphere. Composing and singing songs was one such sphere. It is not that women never composed or sang songs at all, but the fact is that men did it most of the time. For sure, some prominent women in the Dinka traditional society composed good songs, usually when praising her family or letting out a grievance in a ridicule song.<sup>109</sup> But now, the ongoing song outpouring among the Bor Dinka has changed all that as women have come to assume influential traditional roles in the Dinka family and community circles due to the present realities of the war and displacement. With most men engaged in the war, women have taken up responsibilities in the home and the church and have provided exemplary leadership. They lead prayers in the home, in the displacement camps and serve as prominent evangelists, while they also care for the wounded and the orphans among other victims of the war. A good number of them have arisen to become what Marc Nikkel has called 'natural theologians' as they provide strong, visionary and influential leadership in the church and the community (Nikkel 1997:65-6). The Dinka community is coming to appreciate the effective role women can play in promoting social, religious, economic and political values of the society. Most Dinka girls are now being sent to schools along with their brothers, once an anathema that the Dinka detested and rejected. War, suffering and exposure to other cultures seemed to have combined to finally convince the traditional Dinka that survival in the harsh

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well. *Aciek* is a Dinka word, which inclusively refers to foreigners who are inventors or creators of such things as aeroplane and motor car, which the Dinka see as creative miracles.

<sup>109</sup> Mary Alueel Garang, the current leading Dinka woman singer, ridiculed the betrayal of the friend who jilted her in a lengthy song in the early 1980's. She did this before she became a believer and composed her current popular spiritual songs.

world we live in takes more than solely depending on bride cattle wealth, shown to be very unreliable as a result of the 1991 massive cattle raids and losses. Perhaps, education, trade and investment and other means of making a living are necessary if the Dinka are to maintain economic stability. What we are saying in all of this is that women's contribution in the song outpouring among the Dinka is a unique balance in a society, which has not always given women their proper due. It is a significant sign of a social, cultural and religious change on a large scale that the war and suffering in the Sudan has forced on the Dinka.

### **3.6 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

In this chapter we have examined suffering in relation to faith in God and how it is interpreted in the current war in Sudan. We looked at the impact of the war as seen in massive loss of human life, erosion of cultural and communal values, destruction of socio-economic infrastructure. This impact of war and suffering has reduced life for many Sudanese to a long nightmare with widespread displacement, rampant poverty, and destruction and fear everywhere. Grounding our investigation on the experience of the Bor Dinka people, we stated that war and suffering while causing devastation, displacement and death, have not been able to stop the church from growing. Against all odds, there has been a tremendous church growth on a scale never witnessed before in the history of the Sudan. Previously consigned to schools and urban centres before the outbreak of the ongoing war in the Sudan, the church has always been regarded by the rural Bor Dinka to be a tool of foreign cultural influence and they laboured vigorously to resist it and restrict its influence. However, with the explosion of church growth among the Bor Dinka, beginning from 1983 to the present, this attitude has radically changed. Consequently, the majority of the Dinka now view the church as a new community, a community of love and mutual acceptance, capable of absorbing suffering. It is no longer the church of the school children and foreign white missionaries; it is our church, our community.

We also looked at how suffering is interpreted. In the first place, we noted that suffering is perceived and interpreted as God's judgement. This interpretation is mainly based on the 18<sup>th</sup> Chapter of Isaiah, taken to be a validation of the war and suffering in Sudan, particularly, in the Upper Nile region. It is alleged that judgement in the form of war and suffering has come because the Dinka and other Nile groups refused to believe the gospel message, stubbornly



choosing instead to worship their traditional gods and idols.<sup>110</sup> Second, suffering is interpreted as a result of cosmic conflict between God and the *Jak* (pl. of *jok* or devil). This cosmic war is embodied in the ongoing bloody civil war, pitting the north against the south. Most of the new Dinka songs, exceeding more than 1,500, composed and popularised during the devastation and upheaval of the war, give shape to this interpretation of suffering. Thirdly, suffering is believed to have come to show faith as one song has put it. God has to 'thrash' sin out in people's hearts via suffering so that the Dinka may turn to him by faith. In whatever way suffering is understood and interpreted, there is a strong belief that God will deliver from suffering in an answer to prayer. God is asked in this prayer outpouring to deliver from suffering and bondage in the same manner that he delivered Israel from Egypt.

We also looked at the implications of the song outpouring among the Bor Dinka at this time of war and suffering. We first noted that in these songs the theological wrestling and struggles of the people with suffering are mostly worked out. Both in the first war and the current one, song outpouring seems to have always been related to suffering. The more intense the suffering in an area, the more deeply and greater the song outpouring. The experiences of the Moru and the Bari peoples during the first war as well as the most recent experiences of the Dinka during the ongoing war seem to bear witness to this. Second, we observed that the song outpouring, articulated in idioms and nuances familiar to the Dinka soul and mind, has become a very effective medium for promoting the Christian proclamation and enhancing church growth in the rural Dinka areas. It has taken advantage of the traditional song culture, a medium of communication formerly used in the Dinka traditional society to inculcate values and norms in a firm but non-threatening manner. Third, we observed that the song outpouring provides a sense of identification with the Christian proclamation. The Dinka may now easily identify with the message as articulated by the songs in their own language and with meanings they can relate to. Because the idioms and nuances contained in the songs reflect their tradition and culture, the Dinka recognise a point of contact with the Christian message, which they can rightly now call their own. Finally, we noted that the song outpouring contains a large contribution from women. It thus provides a rare gender balance and participation of women in a society in which female potential, skills and abilities have not always been

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<sup>110</sup> It is striking that the two largest Nilotic tribes, the Nuer and the Dinka, believe that the judgement of God as predicted in Isaiah 18 is particularly sent on them because of their unbelief. As Sharon Hutchinson notes, James Mut Kueth, an Eastern Nuer clergy, believes that because the Nuer did not convert fast enough when the missionaries brought the gospel message, God has doomed them to war and famine. Kueth bases his interpretation on Isaiah 18 just as the Dinka do (Hutchinson 1996: 316-7).



exploited beyond the traditional roles of marriage and motherhood. This woman's song contribution along with other factors generated by the upheaval, devastation and suffering of the war are part of an ongoing dynamic of radical change that the Dinka have been experiencing for the last few years. The long Dinka resistance to change seems to be rapidly crumbling, with both positive and negative cultural and communal implications.

We conclude that the story of the church in Sudan at this time of war and suffering is a story of a people who are on a journey of faith. Faced with unparalleled destruction and loss in their country, the Sudanese church is exploring, praying, trusting and wrestling with what faith in God means in the midst of upheaval and devastation. While not being able to find answers to the evil of war and suffering, the Sudanese church has, nevertheless, experienced God in suffering. Probably, with the fastest growth rate in Africa and the world as well as being the most persecuted church today, the suffering church in Sudan is a witness to the amazing grace of God, abounding all the more with evil abounding. It is by no means a perfect church, lacking in sound biblical and theological base, struggling with practical living out of faith in marriage and family and having to deal with some heavy traditional and cultural baggage such as surrogate marriages, still practiced among the Dinka and many other moral, ethical issues. In addition and as a matter of crucial urgency, the church in Sudan still has to work toward genuinely breaking down ethnic and tribal barriers and thus showing evidence of unity in Christ as 'one people of God'. While it is true that, for historical reasons, the growing church in many areas has a distinct ethnocentric character and outlook, it is also true that in the Christian message all the ethnic groups, amongst whom the church is growing, are one people, united in hope and faith in Christ. It is in that regard that more than anything else, the church sorely needs to work for the creation of an atmosphere in which true healing, peace and reconciliation can occur, which the Christian message has the potential to bring. The urgency of peace and reconciliation has been impressed immensely upon South Sudanese by the brutal and innumerable atrocities of the early 1990's inflicted by southern upon southern in politically instigated intertribal violence. By and large, it increasingly seems that the greatest challenge, which the church faces now and will face after the war, is working for peace, healing and reconciliation of the war-battered and ethnically polarised southern communities. Undeniably, in spite of tremendous growth and persistent resilience in the face of unbearable suffering, the church in Sudan still has a long and a rough road ahead to walk. Whereas it has remarkably persevered in its endeavour to self-understanding, apprehension of



the reality of God and wrestling with suffering, it has still to firmly establish itself in a society turned against itself through war, impoverishment, and inter-communal violence. Yet, in spite of that, it still has much to offer to the universal church of Christ, having walked with and learned from the Lord of the church in the fires of suffering and costly witness (Wheeler 1997:38). In the next chapter, we examine the problem of evil and suffering as seen and interpreted in Western thought.

### 4.2 THE REALITY OF EVIL AND SUFFERING

The problem of evil confronts all of us with the stark reality of suffering and death. The communication technologies - satellite pictures of famine, the news on television, the daily brought right into our living rooms on a state news wire - have made it so easy for us to witness the suffering of millions of people who are actual or potential victims of pain and death. We are increasingly made to realize, consciously or unconsciously, that we live in a world, a place where we are prone to disaster - natural and human-made - terrorism, hurricanes and drought. One way or the other, we frequently witness the reality of evil and suffering.

The 1990's will go down in recent human history as the years of genocide in Rwanda and the Balkans that shocked the world and convinced all of us that suffering is not

# **CHAPTER FOUR**

## **THE PROBLEM OF EVIL**

### **4.1 INTRODUCTION**

The aim of this chapter is to investigate the problem of evil and suffering as explicated in Western theological thought. We begin by looking at the nature of the problem and how different thinkers and theologians address it. The thought of Augustine, Luther and Calvin will be briefly explored. Our choice of these men stems from the fact that much of Western thought on the problem is indebted to them. Their thought provides a standard for what some have called 'classical theology'. There is therefore a strong sense in which no theological issue can be properly discussed without consulting their thought. In our opinion, this is particularly true in regard to the problem of evil. The optimism of the Age of Reason, which seriously challenged the Augustinian-Reformation heritage and gained significance as an alternative view, will also be briefly examined. Leibniz, who in our opinion epitomizes the optimism of this age, will be used as paradigm in that regard. But we first consider the reality of evil and suffering.

### **4.2 THE REALITY OF EVIL AND SUFFERING**

The problem of evil confronts all of us. With the vast increase in our time of global communication technology, countless stories of horror, tragedy, pain and suffering are almost daily brought right into our living rooms on a scale never witnessed before in human history. Whenever we switch on the television or radio or read the newspapers, we come face to face with millions of people who are actual or potential victims of pain and suffering in our world. We are increasingly made to realise, consciously or unconsciously, that ours is a dangerous world, a place where we are prone to disasters—natural and unnatural—war, famine, death, bereavement, sickness and disease. One way or the other, we become actual or potential victims of evil and suffering.

The 1990's will go down in recent human history as the years of genocidal horrors in Rwanda and the Balkans that shocked the world and reminded all of us that, after all, the holocaust is



still alive and well in different forms in our world. What about the tragedy of relentless wars and suffering in the Sudan, Sierra Leone, Somalia and other bleeding spots in the world which have claimed millions of lives and displaced many more? Do we need to mention violent crime and terror in our urban centres, deadly road accidents, rape and child abuse, domestic violence and other evils that have increased in recent times and caused pain and suffering to families and individuals? What about killer hurricanes and tornadoes in Latin America and the USA, which claimed so many lives and destroyed property estimated at millions of dollars? Evil and suffering, it would seem, are inevitable accompaniments of being human. They are common conditions of all men everywhere. There are no exceptions here. To be human is to face the issue of suffering (Carson 1978:11). But we all react to evil deeds with horror, we try to prevent them, we seek to solace and comfort the victims of the torturer and the victims of natural disasters (Tilghman 1994:189). We understandably ask in frustration and anger: where is the God of love, power and goodness? Why does he not intervene in the desperate conditions of our world? Does he care? This is what is called the problem of evil.<sup>111</sup> It is a vexing difficulty for both believers and non-believers. We explore it further below.

### **4.3 THE NATURE OF THE PROBLEM**

#### **4.3.1 FORMULATING THE PROBLEM**

The problem of evil<sup>112</sup> is the problem of how God, by definition omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good, could make the world and there is evil in it (Swineburne 1990:200). It is the problem of how this all-powerful, all-knowing and wholly good God made this world in which evil exists (Tilghman 1994:189). The problem arises from the claim that it is logically inconsistent to say that an all-powerful, all-knowing and wholly good being would create a world such as ours in which evil does exist. The problem may be stated as follows: "If God is perfectly good, he must want to abolish evil; if he is unlimitedly powerful, he must be able to abolish evil. But evil exists; therefore either God is not perfectly good or he is not unlimitedly

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<sup>111</sup> John S. Feinberg argues that there is more than one problem of evil; the problem of evil has many faces as the title of his book, *The Many Faces of Evil*, suggests.

<sup>112</sup> The categorization of 'the problem of evil' and the development of theodicy are recent theological constructions, dating back to the seventeenth century. The early Church most definitely tried to deal with evil and how it related to the God of love as shown by their rejection of Marcion's OT's and NT's two gods but this they did differently as Placher argues in his *The Domestication of Transcendence*, pp.201-15.

powerful" (Hick 1966:5). In other words, how can the presence of evil in the world be reconciled with the existence of a God who is unlimited both in power and goodness?<sup>113</sup> In the famous words of the Greek philosopher Epicurus as quoted in Hick, the problem may be stated this way:

*God either wishes to take away evil, and is unable; or he is able and unwilling; or he is neither willing nor able or he is both willing and able. If he is willing but unable, he is feeble, which is not in accordance with the character of God. If he is able but unwilling, he is envious, which is equally at variance with God. If he is neither willing nor able, he is both envious and feeble and therefore not God. If he is both willing and able, which alone is suitable for God, from what source then are evils? and why does he not remove them?* (Hick 1966:5).<sup>114</sup>

This is the problem of evil as formulated by the skeptic who regards it as a huge stumbling block to believing in an all-powerful, all-knowing and perfectly good God or his existence. The problem also causes some considerable trouble for the theist or believer since he experiences the reality of evil in the world as well. He could understand a world in which the righteous reap the sweet fruit of their uprightness, the wicked reap the bitter fruit of their wickedness, and the innocent are protected. But the believer does not know what to make of a world in which the innocent suffer, the upright people lose everything, the moral shortcuts seem to pay off so long as you do not get caught. And what kind of God would design a world in which such things can happen? (Janzen 1998:152). The believer, therefore, resorts to several possible explanations or theodicies or attempts to explain why evil exists and why God may be justified in arranging the things the way he did and that he is not being cruel or careless in his dealings with his world (Tilghman 1994:192). Thus, a defense of the righteousness and justice of God is presented to counter the vexing problem of evil.

### 4.3.2 ADDRESSING THE PROBLEM

There are several of these defenses which have been espoused by believers for a long time. Richard Swineburne lists some of these: the first is the free will defense, which states that evil, is in the world because man is a free agent. He chooses to do evil and is thus responsible, at least partially, for evil in the world. The second is the claim that much of the evil suffered by humans in the world is God's punishment for their sin. The third is the contention that evil, especially natural evil and epidemics, is brought upon humankind by free spiritual agents or the fallen angels and demons (Swineburne 1990:201-2). Hick says of the third category that

<sup>113</sup> This is Hick's question in regard to how the skeptic formulates the problem of evil. See his *Evil and the God of Love*, pp.5-20.



these free agents are part of the problem of evil and do not constitute a unique kind of evil that might provide a key to the solution of the problem of evil as a whole (Hick 1966:19). Swineburne on the other hand says that the first and the second categories both fail to explain the suffering of babies and animals (Swineburne 1990:201). He, however, gives some weighty consideration to the third category as does Alvin Plantinga who, in addition, asserts that the first category or the free will defense successfully rebuts the charge of logical inconsistency brought against the theist or the believer, contending that if evil is a problem to the believer, it is not that the existence of evil is logically inconsistent with the existence of God (Plantinga 1974:192). But, argues Plantinga, that the theist may find a religious problem in evil; in the presence of a person's own suffering or of a relative that individual may find it hard to maintain proper attitude towards God. When someone is faced with great personal suffering and misfortune, that person may be tempted to rebel against God or shake a fist in anger in his face or even give up faith in him altogether (Plantinga 1977:63). Others, however, may turn to God for refuge when they suffer even if their basic questions remain unanswered. This is largely true because the real problem of evil<sup>115</sup> in the final analysis is not theoretical, but it is the practical problem of how one lives a religious life in a world of evil and misfortune, a life of worship, prayer and faith in God. Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945), a prominent German theologian and pastor found this to be true in a cruel Nazi German prison. His life and writings while in that prison, at a time at when his fate was hanging in the balance, show that he did not react by raising the traditional problem of evil. He rather confessed that faith, grounded in a solid spiritual heritage, "gives one a feeling of confidence and security in the face of all passing strains and stresses" (Bonhoeffer 1971: 165). More often than not, it is the observer, who raises the theoretical issues related to the problem of evil, not the participants who are usually preoccupied with how to survive the ordeal. Such persons' immediate and absorbing task is how to face and cope with the evil pressing upon them and how to maintain their spiritual existence against the final despair. They do not need a theoretical theodicy; they need practical grace, courage and hope (Hick 1966:10). For the skeptics, the problem is an intellectual one that needs to be settled in the mind. Their big question is how should God allow this to happen? Where is he in all this tragedy which is now being undergone? Elie Wiesel's description of the execution of three inmates in a Nazi

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<sup>114</sup> *Evil and the God of Love*, note 5, p.5.

<sup>115</sup> There is a strong sense in which the so-called problem of evil is actually a problem of life. As long as life in this world continues evil will continue to exist; it is a part of life. Bad days and good days will always be parts of our life here on the earth.



concentration camp provides a good example. He relates this incident in which two adults and a child were hanged in this manner:

The two adults were no longer alive. Their tongues hung swollen, blue tinged. But the third rope was still moving; being so light, the child was still alive ... For more than half an hour he stayed there, struggling between life and death, dying a slow agony under our eyes. And we had to look him full in the face. He was still alive when I passed in front of him. His tongue was still red, his eyes were not yet glazed. Behind me, I heard the same man asking: "Where is God now?" And I heard a voice within me answer him: "Where is He? Here He is - He is hanging here on this gallows ..." That night the soup tasted of corpses (Wiesel 1960:76-77).

Not only did the soup taste of corpses that night but also Wiesel's God had been hanging on the gallows ever since. Wiesel was more of an observer rather than a participant on that particular day. This is not to say observers do not suffer evil. They do. There are at least four victims when evil strikes. The first is the immediate victim whose life has been lost or maimed or affected in any other way. The second is the one upon whom bereavement has come and who will have to endure the agony of the loss. The third is the skeptic observer who stands and condemns the act and the resulting loss as wicked and evil. The fourth is the one who questions why it is right for the sovereign Lord to have power over death and why it is wrong for us to have the right to take life (Zacharias 1998:212-4). In a real sense, there are actually no observers when it comes to this problem of evil and how it affects our lives. The radical and pervasive presence of evil cannot be ignored or simply explained away. It meets us at every turn and forces each one of us to ponder the purpose and the meaning of existence. This is why it is not surprising at all that this perennial problem of evil persistently haunts those areas of inquiry which primarily deal with the destiny of humankind (Peterson 1982:11).

### 4.3.3 EVALUATING BASIC ASSUMPTIONS

In trying to address the problem of evil as shown above, there are several moral assumptions that are made or implied or taken for granted. The first is that the presence of evil is given precedence over the presence of some good that may be found and observed in the created order. The coexistence of a good God with a world of evil is thought to be impossible as if there is no good to be found at all in life and in the world.<sup>116</sup> But it ought to be said that evil is not all there is in the world. There is some good in the world just as there is evil. There is selfishness in the world, but there is love also. There is greed in the world, but also self-

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<sup>116</sup> The good being spoken of here is mainly natural or even moral but it is not one that may qualify us for justification or acceptance before God—it is not enough to produce our justification before God. We are only justified by faith in Christ.



discipline. There is avarice in the world, but also generosity. Actual human history, it would seem, is carried forward and moulded by the paradoxical presence of each of these (Temple 1935:511). Harry Emerson Fosdick pointed out many years ago that "the mystery of evil is very difficult when we believe in a good God, but the problem of goodness seems to us impossible when we do not" (Fosdick 1941:214-5).<sup>117</sup> Fosdick underlines the fact that the problem of evil cannot disprove the goodness of God any more than the 'problem of goodness' can. There are problems to be encountered when this is attempted. He further explains:

Once I decided that I could not believe in the goodness of God in the presence of world's evil, and then I discovered that I had run headlong into another and even more difficult problem: What to do about all the world's goodness on the basis of no God? Sunsets and symphonies, mothers, music, and the laughter of children at play, great books, great art, great science, great personalities, victories of goodness over evil, the long-won ascent from the Stone Age up, and all the friendly spirits that are to other souls a 'cup of strength in some great agony' – how can we, thinking of these on the basis of no God, explain them as the causal, accidental by-products of physical forces, going it blind? I think it cannot be done. The mystery of evil is very great upon the basis of a good God but the mystery of goodness is impossible upon the basis of no God (Fosdick 1941:214-5).

While it is true that the atheist may not be obliged to explain the universe as Fosdick observes it, he still has to contend with the apparent objective fact that there is actually much more in the universe that can prove God's existence, power, love and goodness than just the problem of evil. The theist may be at an advantage to believe in a good God and appreciate the goodness in his created order in spite of the problem of evil. At a disadvantage, the skeptic will, on the other hand, have to battle both the problem of evil and the problem of goodness in the absence of a good God.

The second is the moral law, which is presumed but rarely acknowledged when the problem of evil is discussed. Implicit in the contention that a perfectly good, all-powerful and all knowing God could not have created the world with evil in it, is this question of the moral law. If there is a moral lawgiver, then he must be above the law that he gives and this law must be consistent with his character. Once such law is given, it will be the basis upon which distinction is made between what is good and what is evil. But the situation is complicated even more when the existence of the moral lawgiver is denied on the basis of the problem of evil or the presence of pain and suffering in the world. The question of how a thing or an incident is judged to be good or evil is left begging for an answer if the moral law is excluded. However, it can be argued that if there is no moral lawgiver, there is no moral law.

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<sup>117</sup> This is also quoted in Hick's *Evil and the God of Love*, p.11



And equally that if there is no moral law there is no good or evil since they cannot be distinguished without it as Ravi Zacharias aptly argues. He elaborates further:

In the same vein, we are positing a legitimate category when we ask why this universe seems immoral if the universe itself has no moral basis or reason for being? The disorienting reality to those who raise the problem of evil is that the Christian can be consistent when he or she talks about the problem of evil and gives a coherent response to it, while the skeptic is hard-pressed to respond to the question of good in an amoral universe. In short, doing away with the existence of God in the face of evil does not solve the problem of evil; the problem of evil and suffering must be resolved by keeping God in the picture (Zacharias 1998:69).

Thus the problem of evil cannot be solved if the moral lawgiver is not kept in the picture. The position the believer holds on the goodness of God in the face of evil is consistent with his argument that it only makes sense to talk of good and evil if the concept of a good God who is also the moral lawgiver is retained. This is what makes Christian tradition the only one in which the problem of evil is discussed with intensity. There are some traditions, indeed, in which the problem of evil is no problem at all. In the Hindu tradition, for example, what humankind calls "evil" is as much a true manifestation of the divine as everything else. In its occurrence, there is nothing out of joint, nothing startling, nothing cries out for an answer (Lowry 1998:90). It, therefore, ought to be remembered that one cannot talk sensibly about good and evil without invoking a moral law and therefore a moral law-giver and also that one cannot deny the existence of an all-knowing, all-powerful and perfectly good God on the basis of the presence of evil in the world without actually denying the problem of evil in the first place. The two seem to be inseparably and logically connected together.

The third is the mystery surrounding evil, life and God as well as our finite attempts to explain or understand them. We try to eliminate the complexity and the mystery that surround God and evil. God becomes the quintessence of simplicity as finite human beings lay claim to understanding in detail his nature and purposes (Abraham 1985:100). We try to justify our believing in God in the face of raging tragedies, horrible diseases, and severe pain and suffering in our own lives and in our world. But the admission that we must honestly make is that there is much more concerning God, evil and a myriad of other things in life that we could not be able to explain even if we wanted to. This is a limitation we must accept and live with however we choose to think about God. Whether or not we think of God as limited in love, power and goodness and hence the presence of evil in our world, we still have to come to a place where we acknowledge that there is much we would not exhaustively know or



explain in this life. It is in this regard that William Placher is absolutely right when he argues that early believers accepted this limitation:

... Earlier Christian writers were doing something different. They were not trying to produce logical arguments that would "solve the problem of evil". First, they acknowledged that reflection on evil particularly calls attention to what Barth called "the necessary brokenness of all theological thought and utterance." We do not understand what our words mean when we apply them to God. We find ourselves called to say things even as we have to admit that we cannot explain how they all fit together ... Second, they did not think about evil in relation to an abstract God, but with the Triune God and therefore in the context of the cross of Christ and the comforting work of the Holy Spirit ... Third, earlier responses to these questions (that is questions that concern God and the problem of evil) were rhetorical. That is, they addressed the particular concerns of victims of evil in particular situations ... They were willing to live with apparent logical inconsistencies, but they wanted something one could actually say about evil to its victims (Placher 1996:205-6).

We are not saying here, and nor is Placher, that the best human inquiries about God and the problem of evil, or indeed any other, should be given up altogether because of unexplained mysteries involved in such an undertaking. That is not the case at all. God has given us inquiring minds to use in serving, loving and worshipping him. We are saying rather honestly that there is much more we cannot know or explain. We are finite and limited in our understanding, a fact we must not be ashamed to accept and live with. On these issues of theodicy and the problem of evil, even a leading authority in the person of Alvin Plantinga admitted many years ago that they are of little help in pastoral counseling or in helping people to cope with specific cases of suffering even if they solve some problems of logical inconsistency that might pose an intellectual challenge to the Christian faith (Plantinga 1974: 28-30). Ultimately, the aim of theodicy is to justify the ways of God to us humans. But it is odd that this should be the case since it is men or women who should be called upon to justify their ways and actions to God. God is not another actor in the human drama; he is the only sovereign Lord who stirs all things towards his will and purposes (Tilghman 1994:192-3). In reality, according to Dorothee Sölle, atheism and theism are equally remote from an existential faith, which shapes the way one lives. Neither means much for our living relationship to the ground of life and its goal, to where we come from and where we are going, to creation and redemption (Sölle 1990:172). Sölle's contention is that these concepts block believers from speaking concretely about God and his relationship to them and she goes as far as declaring the theistic God dead. She concludes: "I therefore see the end of theism or the death of the theistic God as an opportunity finally to be able to speak of God in a concrete way, in a way related to praxis. That means bearing witness to God in a world dominated by death and orientated on death". May we not speak concretely of God and still fail to



comprehend him? Mystery surrounds his being, his ways, his purposes, his will and his designs. This is true in regard to suffering and the problem of evil as well as many other realities of life. This we must honestly accept and live with as finite creatures of God. But the debate is far from being over as is evident in the continuing discussion below.

## **4.4 EVIL IN WESTERN EUROPEAN THEOLOGICAL THOUGHT**

### **4.4.1 TWO OPPOSITE POLES OF WESTERN CHRISTIAN THOUGHT**

Like many aspects of contemporary European thought, the European view of the problem of evil and suffering is deeply indebted to the Greek philosophical thought. This is largely true whether one speaks of the medieval dichotomy between the finite and the infinite or mind and matter as advocated by Descartes or empirical and transcendental truth as advanced by Kant or dialectical idealism as preached by Hegel or fact and value as popularised by Hume or epistemological double-aspect-reality as espoused by Russell or being and nothingness as taught by Sartre who built on Heidegger's being-time concept or indeed the artificial distinction between the secular and the sacred or church and state as evident in most Western nations (Watson 1995:210-11). It is a view that seems to swing between the pendulums of monism and dualism. John Hick, in this regard, concedes that these two opposite poles of Western Christian thought concerning theodicy are the most consistent and possible solutions to the problem of evil, neither of which unfortunately is compatible with the basic claims of Christian theology (Hick 1966:21). On the one hand, monism, the view that the universe is an ultimate harmonious whole and unit, contends that evil is only apparent and may be recognised as good if it could be seen in the full cosmic context. On the other hand, dualism, the view that the universe is caught and trapped in a fierce conflict between the forces of good and evil, rejects monism<sup>118</sup> and insists that good and evil are irreconcilably opposed to each other in a battle which will only end if one or the other is finally destroyed.

While both of these views mutually polarise their adherents, they contain some undeniable truths that the Judeo-Christian tradition seems to affirm. On the one hand it is true, in both

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<sup>118</sup> Brian P. McLaughlin identifies three brands of monism, namely, ideal, neutral and material. These, he explains, have two difficulties to encounter. These are: How to characterise fundamental entities and how to explain how these fundamental entities make up non-fundamental ones. His conclusion is that both idealism and neutralism have greater difficulties in this task than materialism whose task has been made easier by scientific discoveries of the last few centuries (Monism in the Dictionary of Philosophy, edited by Robert Audi, pp.597-606)



Judaism and Christianity, that God is the sole creator of the world and the sovereign ruler of all things. This fundamental truth may therefore entail the conclusion that evil or suffering must only exist by God's permission and for his purposes, his creation and that it will in the end be subject to him. Such emphasis on God's sovereignty may, however, be overstretched to the dangerous point of no longer recognising evil for what it is or regarding it as utterly inimical to God's will and purposes. That way, evil becomes a naturalised servant in the family of God, not the deadly and mortal enemy that it really is. On the other hand, it also seems very true, in these related faiths, that life is a bitter struggle and continual warfare between the forces of good and evil or between God and the evil one. There is a great deal of injustice, greed, cruelty, disease, sickness, suffering and pain in the world which is condemned and attacked in Scripture and of which God is not the source. If God is not for sure the one behind it all, then it is difficult not to conclude that the devil is. Jesus in his life and ministry underscored this by uncompromisingly condemning these evils and by compassionately granting relief and healing to their victims and thus declared his hostility and enmity to evil as his and his father's most dangerous foe. While this is absolutely true, and some may choose to disagree, one must be aware of the dangers of according evil and wickedness an equal and independent status with that of the God who is all-sovereign, the only Lord of the whole universe who has no equal in all his creation. With this in mind, we proceed to examine various expressions of these views by briefly looking at Augustine, Luther and Calvin and others whose thought greatly shaped the discussion of the problem of evil.

#### **4.4.2 AUGUSTINE'S FREE WILL DEFENCE**

##### **4.4.2.1 AUGUSTINE'S STRUGGLE AND CONTRIBUTION**

Augustine (354-430) still remains a prominent theological figure<sup>119</sup> who has done a great deal in the development of Christian thought from which much of the contemporary Western theological thought is derived. His historic achievement, in that regard, was to bring together diverse elements of Christian thought and in that way he made an immensely powerful impact on the intellectual and theological imagination of the West and indeed of the whole world. In his early years, Augustine absorbed much Platonic philosophical thought, which he successfully employed in his theological induction. Much of this is evident in his major

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<sup>119</sup> I share Gonzalez's view that Augustine is one of the most influential figures in the entire history of Christianity. See his *The History of Christianity*, vol. 1, pp.207-16.

works, the City of God and the Confessions. He was first attracted to Manichaen dualism which he later renounced, fiercely fighting it.

In dealing with the problem of evil, Augustine asserted the absolute sovereignty and goodness of God as he also wrestled with the reality of evil and sin<sup>120</sup>, which are common themes in his writings. In his theological thought, the reality of sin is almost an obsession, its powerful presence and virulent power a challenge that seemed to bother him as he sought answers and solutions to undo its complexity and uncover its mystery. With his belief in the absolute goodness and sovereignty of God, he struggled with the origins of evil. To him, all creation is very good as it expresses the creative fecundity, the goodness and the beauty of the creator. He thus rejected the independent force of evil as being on par with the omnipotent God. Nevertheless, that did nothing but only compounded his difficulties as the following remarks show:

Where then does evil come from, if God made all things and, because he is good, made them good too? It is true that he is the supreme Good, that he is himself a greater Good than these lesser goods that he created. But the Creator and all his creation are both good. Where then does evil come from? Can it be that there was something evil in the matter from which he made the universe? When he shaped this matter and fitted it to his purpose, did he leave in it some part which he did not convert to good? But why should he have done this? Are we to believe that, although he is omnipotent, he had not the power to convert the whole of this matter to good and change it so that no evil remained in it? Why, indeed, did he will to make anything of it at all? Why did he not instead, by this same omnipotence, destroy it utterly and entirely? Could it have existed against his will? If it had existed from eternity, why did he allow it to exist in that state through the infinite ages of the past and then, after so long a time, decide to make something of it? If he suddenly determined to act, would it not be more likely that he would use his almighty power to abolish this evil matter, so that nothing should exist besides himself, the total, true, supreme and infinite good? (Confessions VII, 5).

Augustine struggled with these issues and admitted that his belief on them was still indefinite and sometimes wavered from the strict rule of faith but that his mind did not relinquish the faith (Confessions VII, 5) He questioned the existence of evil and concluded that 'therefore, either there is evil and we fear it, or the fear itself is evil'.<sup>121</sup> He went on almost to the point of denying evil when he asserted that evil has no positive nature of its own and it is only the loss of good which has received the name 'evil'. In that sense, evil was not created but consists in the voluntary turning away of free beings from the good. Evil is thus seen in Augustine as the

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<sup>120</sup> The problem of evil in relation to God is said to have prompted his theological inquiry, particularly in his early years. See Gonzalez's *History of Christianity*, vol.1.

<sup>121</sup> John Hick also quotes this in his *Evil and the God of Love*, pp.43-55.



privation of good, a view found in other Christian literature<sup>122</sup> prior to Augustine. Evil, according to this view, does not exist except as a loss, a lack, a privation of something. Augustine went on to explain: "What after all is anything we call evil except the privation of good? In animal bodies for instance, sickness and wounds are nothing but the privation of health. When a cure is effected, the evils which were present do not retreat and go elsewhere. Rather, they simply do not exist anymore. For such evil is not a substance; the wound or the disease is a defect of the body substance which, as a substance, is good" (City of God, XI, 9). Elsewhere, Augustine contended that what is called evil is nothing but the corruption of natural measures, form and order and that once the good is corrupted it becomes evil. Everything that exists is good, but many things are at the same time less good than they were when God first created them. They have fallen away from their original status and their worth has become disproportionate to that which God endowed them in the beginning. There is therefore some decrease in their goodness or corruption of their nature that they have become evil. Evil is therefore nothing but the absence of good which comes about when a thing defects from the mode of being originally intended for it by God in his creative design. 'There can be no evil where there is no good ... Nothing evil exists in itself, but only as an aspect of some actual entity ... Evils therefore have their source in the good, and unless they are parasitic on something good, they are not anything at all' (The Nature of the Good, XVII).

#### **4.4.2.2 THE FREE WILL**

When we come to Augustine's free will defense, we find his ideas on the problem of evil amplified a little further. He argued that before the fall, we were free both to sin and not to sin. Between the fall and redemption, the only freedom left for us is the freedom to sin. When we are redeemed, the grace of God works in us, leading our will from the miserable state in which it is found to a new state in which freedom is restored, so that we are now free both to sin and not to sin. Finally, when we are in heaven, we shall still be free, but only free not to sin.<sup>123</sup> Although some difficulties still remain, Augustine argues again that evil does not exist in its own right as one of the original constituents of the universe since the whole creation is good and evil can only exist as the corrupting of a good substance and its privation of good. God made the world good and it only became evil through corruption. But where does this

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<sup>122</sup> According to Hick, the privative view of evil appears in Origen, *De Principiis* ii 9,2 and *commentary on John* ii.13; Athanasius, *Contra Gentes* Ch 7; Basil the Great, *Hexameron*, *homily 2*, para 4; and Gregory of Nyssa, *The Great Catechism*, Ch 7.

<sup>123</sup> For similar a paraphrase of Augustine, compare Justo Gonzalez's *History of Christianity*, vol.1, and p.216.



corruption come from? It comes directly from wrong choices that the free rational beings make, from the free will which is the cause of all evils, from pride which is the beginning of sin. Evil is self-created. But realising the difficulties which such reasoning would cause, Augustine further argues: "I was told that we do evil because we choose to do so of our own free will ... but who made me? Surely it was my God, who is not only good but also goodness itself. How then do I come to possess a will that can choose to do wrong and refuse to do good ...? Who put this will into me? If it were the devil who put it there, who made the devil? If he was a good angel who became the devil because of his wicked will, how did he come to possess the wicked will which made him a devil, when the creator who is entirely good, made him a good angel and nothing else?" (Confessions VII, 3). Augustine had no illusions whatsoever that there are difficulties involved even in the free will defense itself. However his sole comfort in the face of the perplexing problem of evil came from the inexplicable assurance of the goodness and incorruptibility of the God in whom he had come to place his faith, a faith he staunchly refused to relinquish despite his failure to resolve this tantalising problem. However his treatment of the problem still remains theologically very influential.

The discussion of the free will defense was related to the question of the original sin, which Augustine dealt with in remarkable details. He argued that our actions flow from our nature and will. We as free will agents are not externally compelled to do evil or good. We are created with a free will to do that which we do truly and freely. We have the power to will and are responsible for our actions and yet our will is in bondage to sin so that we do not choose to do good but evil. As sinful people, Augustine continued, we cannot live righteously and piously unless our will itself is liberated by the grace of God from the bondage of sin in which it is imprisoned (Merits and Remission of Sin, II, 30-31). We are thus created with the freedom for doing either good or evil; that we wrongly will and so lose our freedom for doing good and that God foreknew all this before the foundation of the world and made contingent and compatible plans for it.<sup>124</sup> According to Augustine, therefore, the existence of evil may be explained by simply affirming that the will is created by God, and is therefore good; but that the will is capable of making its own decisions. And that it is good for the will to be free, even though this means that such a free will can produce evil. The origin of evil, then according to Augustine, is to be found in the bad decisions made by both human and angelic wills—fallen angels. In this way, Augustine was able to affirm both the reality of evil and the

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<sup>124</sup> John Hick also discusses this point in his *Evil and the God of Love*, p. 75.



creation of all things by a good God. Evil, though, is still not a thing or substance as implied in the Manichean argument, but a decision, a direction, a negation of good (Gonzalez 1984:213). But Hick still maintains that Augustine's notion that man was at first morally good and spiritually oriented towards God cannot escape the charges of self-contradiction and absurdity and of ultimately failing to clear God of final responsibility for the existence of sin and the fall of man whom he created with the full knowledge that he would sin freely (Hick 1966:75-6). Hick may be right although he does not offer an alternative for Augustine's reasoning or why this is incompatible with the notion of free will as presented by Augustine. However, the Augustinian contention that evil is not a thing or substance but a negation of good is weak as it seems to imply a denial of both the existence and reality of evil. It also fails to take cognisance of the fact that evil may be a tangible thing as wars, epidemics, floods, hurricanes and other natural evils have shown many times. Another more serious challenge to this argument is that if evil is nothing but the negation of good because that is how God views it, then how is good what we know it to be in our human language without being contrasted with a real tangible thing called evil? Like so many other words in our human language, evil and good go hand in hand. They are better understood by contrast. So if God does not mean by evil what we mean, then he cannot mean by good what we mean either (Tilghman 1994:190). It is therefore difficult not to conclude that evil is a thing in its own right just as good is another in its own right. How else can it be a problem if it is just a negation of something and not a thing on its own? But again, there is more to the problem of evil and suffering than we can explain or know. "Evil, in its root and essence, is a mystery. How God grapples with it and overcomes it is a mystery too ... But the theologian cannot use this either as an excuse for indifference or to provide a too hasty consolation for those who suffer" (Surin 1993:192-99). And yet its origins, its purpose, its ultimate solution are all shrouded in the mystery of God, a mystery of which our existence and destiny are a vital part. In that sense therefore "evil is not a problem, finally, that can be solved by theories, by explanations of theodicies or by defense of the coherence of Christian beliefs. To see evil as part of divine mystery rather than a compelling evidence for atheism requires a perspective such as one a Christian develops by being part of a community that imitates Christ in recognizing sin, suffering and exploitation and in overcoming evil by incarnating the patient power of a harsh and dreadful love that reconciles" (Tilley 1988:363). The reformers and other thinkers may or may not agree; it is to them that we now turn our attention to investigate further.

### 4.4.3 LUTHER'S BONDAGE OF THE WILL AND THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS

#### 4.4.3.1 LUTHER AND AUGUSTINE

Generally, the reformers follow Augustine in his theological designations of the problem of evil. This is particularly true in regard to the biblical and theological rather than philosophical thought of Augustine. Both Luther and Calvin are heavily indebted to the Augustinian doctrines of sin and grace. But in very general terms, the reformers had no theory of the nature of evil such as the Augustinian privative analysis or his principle of plenitude or his aesthetic perfection of the created order and the universe (Hick 1966:122). The reformers also had no philosophical theodicy, presumably due to their general distaste of reason<sup>125</sup> and the absence at their time of any serious philosophical heresy to combat such as Manichaeism which Augustine combated. But on a positive note, they were passionately adhering to Scripture<sup>126</sup> upon which the whole Reformation enterprise was solidly built as the only normative source of Christian truth. They thus chose not to accord Augustinian philosophy of evil the same status as Scripture, the revealed truth of God they so highly cherished and dearly held. The reformers in addressing the origins of evil did not look at pre-fall angelic fall that may be regarded as the genesis of free will deprivation. They dealt with evil from the fall as the Bible does.

#### 4.4.3.2 THE BONDAGE OF THE WILL

Luther taught that free will led us into original sin and brought death upon us. Afterwards, he continued, followed not only death but also all manner of mischief as we find daily in the world: murder, lying, deceiving, stealing and other evils, so that no man is safe in the twinkling of an eye, in body or goods, but always stands in danger (Luther "1518" 1995:132). According to him, the free will is entangled in such bondage that it cannot help sinning. After the fall, Luther continued, free will exists in name only and as long as it does what it is able to do, it commits a mortal sin because the will is captive and subject to sin. It has power to do good only in a passive capacity but it can always do evil in an active capacity. This free will can never be in a state of innocence much less do good in an active capacity but only in passive capacity (Luther 1518:48-9). How does the free will come out of this malaise? Only by the grace of God and the liberating power of the Holy Spirit can it be made truly free to

<sup>125</sup> This is largely true of Luther rather than Calvin. Luther went as far referring to reason as the 'whore of the devil'. But some of his sermons and teachings incorporated some reason.

<sup>126</sup> The four basics of the reformation were *sola scriptura, sola fide, sola gratia and solus Christus*.



obey God and enjoy him. Before then, it is odious to even call it free will, because it is not that free. "I wish that word 'free will' had never been invented. It is not in Scriptures and it were better to call it 'self-will' which profiteth nothing", Luther lamented at one point (Works, vol. 3, p.110). He nevertheless continued to explain that the whole human nature is wholly spoilt and perverted, outwardly and inwardly, in body and soul, through the original sin (Works, vol. 3, p.137). But where does all this originate? From the devil who is not only responsible for moral evils but natural evils such as hail, lightning, thunders, air pollutions and much more as well. He made his point as he elaborated further:

No malady comes upon us from God, who is good, and wishes us well; they all emanate from the devil, who is the cause and author of plagues, fevers, etc. When he is at work with jurisconsults, he engenders all sorts of dissensions and machinations, turning justice into injustice. Approaches he great lords, princes, kings, he gives birth to wars and massacres. Gains he access to the divines, he produces the worst mischief of all: false doctrines, which induce and ruin men's souls. God alone can check so many calamities (Ibid. 276-8).

As such the will is captive and a slave of sin engendered by the devil who is ultimately responsible for all moral and natural evils as well as suffering in the world, but God is the only one who can check all these calamities. God is still the sovereign ruler of the world he has created. This is true even if Satan and man who are both fallen beings cannot will good or do things, which please God. That God is omnipotent and works in all things is attested to by the fact that he is incessantly active in all his creatures and that he is the God who necessarily moves and works even in Satan and wicked men to attain his purposes (Bondage of the will, p.131). What God wills is not right because he ought to or was bound to so will. On the contrary, what takes place must be right, because he so wills it, concluded Luther.

As it may be clear, Luther's discussion of free will and its bondage is in the context of grace versus good works for salvation or acceptance before God. He does not deal with the philosophical problem of evil or provide a theodicy as his debate with Erasmus shows.<sup>127</sup>

#### **4.4.3.3 THE THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS**

What might be considered to be Luther's theodicy would be found in his theology of the cross. In this, Luther argued that only through the cross of Christ do the definitive self-revelation and saving action of God become manifest and available to man. This is so because the Christian faith is centred on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Any way of

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<sup>127</sup> Luther rejects Erasmus's thesis that man has a free will either do good or evil, a fact which may imply his ability to obtain salvation or favour in the eyes of God on his merits. Luther vehemently rejects this contending

thinking about God and his activity in the world must finally be evaluated in terms of its relationship to the cross of Christ (Murphy 1998:223). Luther made this very clear in the 'Heidelberg Disputation', 1518, when he made a sharp contrast between the theology of glory and theology of the cross, explaining that the former is the idea that human reason can discover God while the latter is the belief that God can only be known by his own self-revelation in the cross of Christ, a place of weakness, suffering and apparent absence of God. A theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is. He who does not know Christ does not know God hidden in suffering and thus calls the good of the cross evil and the evil of the deed good, said Luther. God can be found only in suffering and the cross, continued Luther, and added that the friends of the cross say the cross is good and works are evil, for through the cross the works are destroyed and the old Adam, who is especially edified by works, is crucified (Luther 1518:53). For Luther, the theology of the cross should provide both the *method* and *content* of the whole theological enterprise. He argued so persuasively that the work of theology must begin on Calvary, where God is paradoxically revealed and hidden simultaneously. This hiddenness of God in his revelation is discernible only within the context of faith. It is only the eye of faith which can see the righteousness, the glory, the wisdom, the strength, and the salvation of God revealed and yet hidden in the injustice, the shame, the weakness, the folly and the condemnation of the cross of Christ.<sup>128</sup> By the cross, the almighty God identifies himself with the weakness and suffering of his creation and willingly participates in its dying. God must then be sought as the one who is always active but also always hidden in the cross of Christ. Any attempt to seek God elsewhere than in this cross is to be rejected out of hand as idle speculation, said Luther. The hiddenness of God is an old riddle with which the people of God are sometimes forced to come to terms, one way or another when they face suffering. The prophet Isaiah as well as the psalmist and Job discovered this fact that God is at times both present and hidden, especially at the time of suffering and pain (Isa 45:15; Ps 44:24; Job 13:24). Commenting on the verse in Isaiah, Blaise Pascal remarked, "What meets our eyes denotes neither a total absence nor a manifest presence of the divine, but the presence of a God who conceals himself" (Pascal 1961:222). The theologian of the cross will then be very wary of claimants to a God who either does nothing or whose presence is supposedly obvious

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that man has a free will but it is in such bondage that he can will nothing but evil. See their debate in *Discourse on Free Will*, pp.1-137.

<sup>128</sup> Cited in McGrath's *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, p.155



only to people with sufficient piety or intelligence (Murphy 1998:224). But he will find some solace in the God who is both present and hidden as portrayed in the cross of Christ and experienced at the times of pain and suffering. Luther sought to make this point very clear in order to provide some comfort and encouragement to the suffering as the following comment highlights:

God is the God of the humble, the miserable, the afflicted, the oppressed, the desperate, and of those who have been brought down to nothing. And it is the nature of God to exalt the humble, to feed the hungry, to enlighten the blind, to comfort the miserable and the afflicted, to justify the sinners, to give life to the dead, and to save those who are desperate and damned (Luther 1535:314).

By emphasising the presence and hiddenness of God so much, Luther reached the point of being accused by his critics of speaking of two different Gods: the known and the unknown or the revealed and the unrevealed Gods. But he argued that our assertion of anything good is hidden in the denial of it in order that faith may have its place in God and that revelation does not solve the divine mystery but rather that it confronts us with it even more as God might be perceived hidden within or outside revelation. All this was really fine to a certain extent, but his contention that God is hidden outside revelation caused serious difficulties as Brian Gerrish explains: "Whereas the hiddenness of God in his revelation...has been found theologically fruitful, the hiddenness of God outside his revelation...has been found something of an embarrassment" (Gerrish 1996:48). "If there is a God hidden outside revelation, then how can Christ really be God's self-revelation?" is the crucial theological question that William C. Placher poses in that regard (Placher 1996:48). Could it be that Luther, in his middle age, changed his view of an almighty and sovereign God that dominated his early life? Was he so depressed in his latter years that he lost his theological equilibrium on these matters? Placher seems to agree that these considerations may contain some elements of truth, taking a leaf from some of Luther's biographers and historians (Placher 1996:49-51). Bainton,<sup>129</sup> for instance, shares the view that Luther's middle and final years were plagued by apparent bouts of depression and emotional upheavals, adding that these were so intense and great on occasions that he could consider suicide and feared to pick up a carving knife, being afraid of what he might do to himself. Recurrent ill health made things more difficult for him too as he suffered from constipation, insomnia, gout, hemorrhoids,

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<sup>129</sup> Bainton says that Luther also suffered a blood clot in January 1527 and later depression in the summer of that year which was preceded by a stone attack in 1526. He also explains that Luther worked a lot, making himself an easy target of despondency at times. See Bainton's "Luther's Struggle for Faith" in *The Reformation: Material or Spiritual?* pp.92-99. Edited by Lewis Spitz. Massachusetts:Lexington, 1962.

stone, catarrh and ringing in the ears—quite enough to depress anyone then and today<sup>130</sup> (Bainton 1962:92-9). But he was also elated at other times and could burst spontaneously into song whenever Katherine took him for a drive in the woods. He remarked once that "his moods were like April weather" (Bainton 1962:93). It must however be pointed out that none of this takes away anything from the person of Luther or his historic achievements as a highly respected reformer. That will be a mistake. But it needs to be equally pointed out that Luther was after all a man like us, struggling, as we all do, with issues of perspective and faith. This is especially true when we face pain and suffering in a world where evil, not good, seems, at times, to take the upper hand in the battle of life. "By haunting us with the image of that unknown God, Luther reminds Christians of the insecurity with which we must be willing to live if we are to live in trust of a God who remains mystery even in revelation. It may be, he would have claimed, the most insecure among us. Those who are in the best position to understand what living such a Christian life might mean"<sup>131</sup> (Placher 1996:51).

#### ***4.4.3.4 THE SIGNIFICANCE OF LUTHER'S THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS FOR SUFFERING***

What then is the significance of Luther's theology of the cross? How does it relate to the problem of evil and suffering? Luther's theology of the cross is very significant in that it emphasises that the crucified God identifies with our pain and suffering because he knows how it feels like. When we ask, 'Where are you God when pain and desperation assail us?' He answers 'Right here with you as I was on Calvary.' This is so because 'the inexhaustible loving which endured through Calvary does not abandon those for whom Calvary was undertaken in the first place' (McDonagh 1998:112-3). He is familiar with our struggles in the battle of life even when he seems to be so hidden and far too much removed from us. The paradox of his presence and absence at the time of pain and suffering is a perennial challenge of faith that the believing community should learn to live with even if it cannot explain it. Luther made

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<sup>130</sup> One wonders whether the great and lengthy ill health which Luther experienced contributed in any way in the sharpening of his deep understanding of the reality of suffering and of how the cross of Christ is a point of contact of God's grace in pain and suffering. Could this be why Luther so highly esteemed the theology of the cross as both the method and content of all theology? Did he identify his own pain and suffering with the cross and thus found strength to persevere in it all following Christ's example? We suspect all these to be true.

<sup>131</sup> Those who hold a theology of triumphalism, which might be another name for what Luther called a theology of glory, may object to this on the grounds that the cross of Christ did it all for us. This is very true in many ways, but the mystery of suffering and evil still remains a disturbing fact of our existence and life in this world from which Christ prayed that the Father would keep us and protect us from the evil one but not take us away from it. The cross of Christ has an eschatological aspect in which the mystery of evil and suffering will be finally resolved.



this clear and was heavily criticised for it. The eighteenth century European Protestant liberalism saw Luther's theology of the cross as little more than an ascetic or ethical principle, a relic of a bygone age. It regarded it as of ephemeral significance in an era in which man was presumed to have become of age and far much too advanced to live by such primitive principles. But before long, this shaky optimism was severely shattered by the devastation and dereliction of the first and the second world wars. Liberal ethical values and aspirations took a severe battering and new practical answers were earnestly sought. Luther's theology of the cross assumed a new significance because it was the only theology which addressed the question that could no longer be ignored: Is God really there, amidst the devastation and dereliction of civilisation as unleashed upon Europe by the horrors and tragedies of the wars? (McGrath 1985:179). Luther's proclamation of the hidden presence of God in the experience of Calvary, of the Christ forsaken on the cross and yet with whom the father was still paradoxically present, deeply struck a chord of sympathy in those who after the devastation of the war felt abandoned by the God whose presence they were now unable to discern anywhere in the destruction and cruelty of the wars. McGrath mentions Karl Goerdeler, a German Christian executed for conspiring against Hitler, as one among those who identified with Luther's 'hidden God concept'. Goerdeler wrote the following words shortly before the Nazis executed him in the dark days of the war:

In sleepless nights I have often asked myself whether a God exists who shares in the personal fate of men. It is becoming hard to believe this. For this God must for years have allowed rivers of blood and suffering, and mountains of horror and despair for mankind to take place ... He must have allowed millions of decent men to die and suffer without lifting a finger. Is this meant to be a judgement?...Like the psalmist, I am angry with God, because I cannot understand him...and yet through Christ I am still looking for the merciful God. I have not yet found him. O Christ, where is the truth? Where is there any consolation?<sup>132</sup>

Goerdeler's questions are familiar to anyone who has been through any form of suffering. For sure, many Sudanese believers will identify with him in his anger with God as well as with his faith as we have already found out. His comments highlight the reality of both the absence and presence of God at the time of pain and suffering.

Luther's theology of the cross has another significance for the believing community today. It recalls it to come to the foot of the cross to be reminded of the mysterious ways through which the hidden God of Calvary works in his world. In this regard, the community needs to come stripped of its pride, triumphalism, false security, self-reliance and self-righteousness

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<sup>132</sup> I am indebted to McGrath for this quotation. See his *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, pp.179-81.

but clothed in humility, folly, weakness and poverty, in order to receive strength from the God who strengthens the weak and helps the needy. This must be so because "the scene of total dereliction, of apparent weakness and folly, at Calvary is the theologian's paradigm for understanding the hidden presence and activity of God in his world and in his church. Where the church recognises her hopelessness and helplessness, she finds the key to her continued existence as the church of God in the world. In every weakness lies her greatest strength. The 'crucified and hidden God' is the God whose strength lies hidden behind apparent weakness, and whose wisdom lies hidden behind apparent folly" (McGrath 1985: 179-85). It is in this that the theology of the cross is also a theology of hope for those who despair in suffering and pain, as it was in the time of Luther and so it is now; it is a theology of seeming weakness and foolishness for the believing community (McGrath 1985:181).

Finally, the theology of the cross brings us to a place of being utterly at a loss in the face of the mystery of suffering and evil. We are confounded when pain and suffering invade our world and disturb our peace and security. "All of us have found ourselves at a loss when confronted with humanly intolerable suffering whether it be in the presence of heart-breaking illness, natural calamity, outrageous cruelty, or inconsolable grief. We may not be at a loss for a causal explanation of what has happened and, yet, still have no comforting answer to the deeper questions, 'Why me?' or 'Why my beautiful and sweet child?'" (Hall 1996:51). It is always at such moments that we are either at loss for words and explanations or that the words we find are hollow and inappropriate even if the truths they contain or convey are still valid. This is especially true when we are in the company of those who have experienced some severe loss and who in their own grief and suffering are at a loss themselves. The theology of the cross as presented by Luther says that being at such a place is quite normal in the struggles of our faith. Calvary gives it credence, as does the Book of Job. Sometimes, it may just be the right thing to be there with the grieving and say nothing at all. Of course much may still be going on in our minds: the utter pointlessness of the whole thing, the sheer meaninglessness and purposelessness of suffering, the mystery of evil and its relation to faith in a good and loving God and the vexing paradox of the human existence as a whole, are issues which refuse to be pushed aside. Simplistic responses, usually typical of many Christians, are inadequate and may not help much as they theologically and pastorally tend to belittle the sheer particularity of suffering and evil by offering all-inclusive answers to different victims. Individual persons affected by suffering should not be denied their



particularity as persons who are bound by ties of love, respect, loyalty and common life to the victims and thus must be allowed to mourn and sorrow for those whom they have lost. They need space to deal with the reality of their respective situations. Nicholas Wolterstorff who lost his twenty-five-year old son in a tragic climbing accident provides a recent example in that regard. He vividly relates a moving account of this tragedy and of his own feeling of personal isolation and helplessness in mourning his irreparable loss:

Eric is gone, here and now he is gone; now I cannot talk with him, now I cannot see him, now I cannot hug him, now I cannot hear his plans for the future. That is my sorrow. A friend said, 'Remember, he is in good hands.' I was deeply moved. But the reality does not put Eric back in my hands. That is my grief. For that grief, what consolation can there be other than having him back (Wolterstorff 1987:31)?

Wolterstorff, who does not abandon his Christian faith through the thick and thin of his great loss, should under no circumstances be robbed of this opportunity to feel the way he does about his tragedy. The theology of the cross gives the sufferer enough room to weep, mourn and even question and be angry with God. It is in that way that he will learn to cope with his irreplaceable loss and may become an encouragement to others who might find themselves in his place since the endurance of piercing pain of some irretrievable and irreparable loss seems to be a part of Christian life. Wolterstorff found this out to be true in his case. He remarks: "I know now of helplessness—of what to do when there is nothing to do. I have learned coping. We can often overcome the disagreeable, the unpleasant, the painful in life but death—death shatters our illusion that we can make do without coping. We cannot overcome death, it is irrevocable and is left for God's overcoming". He was brought to a place of discovery by Eric's tragic death and he came to grips with what suffering is and means to all of us. He says in that regard:

Suffering is down at the center of things, deep down where the meaning is. Suffering is the meaning of our world. For love is the meaning. The tears of God are the meaning of history. But the mystery remains. Why isn't love-without-suffering the meaning of things? Why is suffering-love the meaning? Why does God endure his suffering? Why does he not at once relieve his agony by relieving ours (Wolterstorff 1987:73-93)?<sup>133</sup>

Wisely, Wolterstorff chooses not to answer these questions which have been asked over and over again throughout human history. But he leaves no doubts in our minds that suffering and pain defy our logic and intelligence. They are the centre of things, which compose our complex and inexplicable reality. The theology of the cross reminds us that life and suffering

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<sup>133</sup> I am deeply indebted to George Hall for drawing my attention to the Wolterstorff's story. I have a lot to identify with in a way because of my own struggles and losses in the ongoing war in the Sudan.

are the deep mysteries of the hidden God who is paradoxically revealed in the suffering love of Calvary.

#### **4.4.4 CALVIN'S DIVINE PREDESTINATION AND HUMAN RESPONSIBILITY**

##### ***4.4.4.1 THE DIVINE PREDESTINATION AND THE FALL***

When we come to John Calvin's teaching on the origin of evil, we find that like Martin Luther, he followed Augustine with a slight difference. Whereas Augustine traced the origin of evil to a pre-mundane angelic fall, Calvin traced it to the fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. There actually is a sense in which Augustine described the fall twice, in heaven and on earth, whereas Calvin only dealt with the Edenic fall.<sup>134</sup> He argued, in the Institutes, that Adam, the father of us all, was created in the image and the likeness of God, endowed with wisdom, righteousness and holiness, gifts of God's grace by means of which he cleaved to God so that he would have lived in him forever and remained in the nature which he had received from God. But as soon as he fell into sin, this image of God was erased and obliterated. As a result, he lost all the gifts of divine grace through which he would have been led into the way of life. He was furthermore cut off from God and became a stranger. Consequently, he was stripped of wisdom, righteousness, virtue and life, which can only be possessed in God. Nothing remained in man except ignorance, iniquity, impotence, death and judgement, which are nothing but the fruits of sin.

This calamity, Calvin explained, fell not only upon Adam but also upon us, his seed and posterity. We are all ignorant, perverse, corrupt and destitute of all good as we are always inclined towards evil and given over to depraved desires and longings which enthrall us and alienate us from God. We are rebellious against God, continued Calvin, and any occasional good we may display in our outward appearance, our inmost desires still remain crooked perversity and stand under the judgement of the God who does not judge according to outward appearances, external values but considers the secrets of the heart. And so, although we may have an externally noble appearance of sanctity, it is nothing in the eyes of God except hypocrisy and abomination as our thoughts and intentions still remain corrupt and perverse.

The fall did not only ruin man's righteousness, freedom and life but also the world in which he lived, resulting in the pain and hardship which the human race now experiences. Adam's



fall, Calvin explained, perverted the whole order of nature in both heaven and earth so much that all the creatures are now bearing part of the punishment which man deserves as they were created for his use. Man's fall ruined him and his environment as well. What is more, we can do absolutely nothing to get ourselves out of this situation. The guilt is ours, originating from our sin which holds us in such bondage that we neither will nor are we able to do good. We therefore owe it all to God to deliver us from our sin and depravity. By his grace, God has done it all for the elect in Christ (Calvin 1536:141-235).

Calvin also emphasised divine predestination, explaining that it is not just a matter of God foreseeing what every person will freely do, but also that every human being will out of his own nature freely follow the path to which he has been predestined, some to heaven and others to hell. To leave no one in doubt of what he meant by predestination Calvin explained further:

We call predestination, God's decree, by which he determined with himself what he willed to become of each man. For all are not created in equal condition; rather, eternal life is foreordained for some and eternal damnation for others. Therefore, as any man has been created to one or the other of these ends, we speak of him as predestined to life or to death (Institutes, Book 3, 22:5).

This can only be so, reasoned Calvin, since the destiny of all things is in the hand of God and since the decision of salvation or death only rests in his power. He is the one who in his plan ordained it that among men some are born destined for certain death from the womb and who by this death glorify his name as those who are destined for life also do. Calvin honestly confessed that this is a very dreadful decree but quickly added that no one can deny that God foreknew what end man was to have when he created him and that he consequently foreknew because he so ordained by his decree (Institutes, book 3, 23:7). In that sense, Calvin did not hesitate to say that God foresaw the fall of Adam and in him the ruin of his posterity and meted it out with his own decision or decree of predestination. From this perspective, it is somewhat clear that God ordained the fall of the first man, in which his descendants involuntarily inherited his sin and guilt. In one way, Calvin's view seems to place the blame for sin and suffering upon the shoulders of humankind, a view not so much different from the traditional Augustinian view of the fall which in another way, and because of the divine decree, implicates God. Here, the cosmic calamity with all its dreadful consequences is wholly man's fault, resulting as it were from the first fatal act in Eden and bringing a curse

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<sup>134</sup> In *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book 3, 23:4, Calvin briefly mentions the angelic fall but his main

under which all human beings are born already sentenced to death and of which God because of his foreknowledge may not be totally exonerated as Van Den Brink seems to advocate (Van den Brink 1993:226).<sup>135</sup> It is in this regard that John Hick has argued that human responsibility for the fall holds for a while until the question of divine predestination is brought into the picture. This, he states, as a doctrine which sets a stamp of a divine predestination decree upon humans' eternal destiny, ultimately makes the fall a divine responsibility since God knew that man would sin and yet went ahead to create him. But for Calvin, man was created a free and responsible agent, who acts voluntarily and under no compulsion. He is not able to will rightly as a fallen creature but he is still morally responsible for his evil actions and thus eligible for God's punishment. Furthermore, Calvin argued that predestination is taught in Scripture, a divine authority that human reason should not attempt to alter in order to make any doctrine palatable. Again, said Calvin, "we shall never be clearly persuaded that our salvation flows from the wellspring of God's free mercy until we come to know his eternal election, which illuminates God's grace by contrast that he does not discriminately adopt all into the hope of salvation but gives to some what he denies to others" (Institutes, Book 3, 21:1). Hick admits that Calvin's position that those whom God does not elect he condemns, is consistent with his doctrine of predestination, although it still remains more repulsive to him than Augustine's position in which God elects but only leaves those he does not elect to 'stew in their own juice'<sup>136</sup> (Hick 1966:126). Hick, nevertheless, rejects both, arguing that they restrict God's love to the elect and thus nullify the attempt to present faithfully the theological structure of the Christian gospel. His charge may, however, only hold if applied to what he calls 'over-developed' doctrine of divine decrees which is not necessarily held by all Calvinists.

#### **4.4.4.2 DIVINE SOVEREIGNTY AND HUMAN RESPONSIBILITY**

A stronger case against Calvin's position on the problem of evil, which Hick and others seem to bypass, is the whole question of divine sovereignty, human moral responsibility and

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attention is focused upon the earthly fall of Adam and Eve in Eden.

<sup>135</sup> Following this endless debate to its logical conclusion leaves us with no satisfactory solutions. But we may rest in the fact that our finite minds cannot exhaust the divine mystery of which our life and existence are vital parts. Calvin graciously acknowledged this and so must we. We can only trust in the God whose love and grace are our comfort even if his mysteries still elude our best explanations.

<sup>136</sup> Augustine contended God has not positively predestined the lost to eternal perdition even though he omits to elect them to eternal life. This is what Hick considers inconsistency in his position in comparison to Calvin's. See Hick's *Evil and the God of Love*, pp.123-32.



freedom. John S. Feinberg,<sup>137</sup> himself a convinced Calvinist, states the problem that Calvinists may face in that regard as follows: "If Calvinists are right about divine sovereignty, there seems to be little room for human freedom. If freedom goes, so does human responsibility for sin. Worst of all, if Calvinists are right, it appears that God decides that there will be sin and evil in our world, may be even brings it about that there is such evil, and yet, according to Calvinists, is not responsible for any of it. We are" (Feinberg 1995:459). Feinberg goes on to show that it is possible to demonstrate that one can hold a strong view of divine sovereignty and still make room for what he calls genuine human responsibility. He employs both scriptural and philosophical arguments to resolve the problem of evil at least as far as he is concerned. Despite possible objections to his position, such as the one presented by Hick and others that strong emphasis on divine sovereignty tends to curtail genuine human responsibility and freedom, Feinberg still insists that his system harmonises divine sovereignty with human responsibility and solve the problem of evil in its logical form. He argues that God can guarantee that his decisions are enacted, but he can also arrange things in such a way that most of the time we choose in accordance with our wishes and are thereby free and responsible. Like Calvin, he contends that Scripture teaches both divine sovereignty and human responsibility and adds that the doctrine of plenary inspiration of the Scriptures also supports human responsibility in the compatibilist sense. Feinberg further argues that there is evidence in the scripture that one and the same action can be under God's control so that his will is done, and at the same time be the act of the person who does it freely (Feinberg 1995:465-83). Although Feinberg finally resorts to a philosophical compatibilist view to resolve the tension between divine sovereignty and human freedom, his system is consistent and somehow convincing. Less convincing in his treatment of the problem of the evil is his rejection of the element of mystery involved in this whole question, an element that Calvin himself seemed to readily acknowledge.

But whatever position one takes, divine sovereignty and human responsibility still remain at the heart of the problem of evil, defying our best possible logical conclusions and solutions. If God is all-sovereign, how can humans be responsible since all that they do seems to have been predetermined long before they actually do it? If they are free to do what they want, how free are they in the light of God's absolute sovereignty? Do sovereignty and freedom have the

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<sup>137</sup> Feinberg states the problem as may be presented by an Arminian opponent. He goes on to refute the case and establish that the Calvinist position successfully reconciles its view of divine sovereignty with human freedom

same meanings that are usually attached to them in our human language or do they mean different things when we apply them to God? These questions have been asked before and Scripture seems to affirm that both the notions of absolute divine sovereignty and human responsibility coexist. Any attempts to deny one put the other in an awkward position. God created humans as free moral agents, able to choose to either do good or evil without constraint, the only trouble being that they always choose to do evil instead of good. Our morally evil acts seem to ultimately begin with our desires which are not evil in themselves but which may be unbecomingly aroused to make us disobey God and sin against him and against one another. God did not create us with the inclination to sin, but the nature of our free will and choice is such that even the first humans in the Garden of Eden, placed in the most ideal surroundings and circumstances, wilfully chose to sin. They had all the opportunity to choose otherwise but they did not. Today, we still do the same in different ways. Although God is sovereign, he never forces us to do good or obey him and yet whatever we do is predestined by him before we do it and we are still responsible for it. If he forces us to do only what he desires or commands, the freedom he has given us will be compromised and we will cease to be free moral agents. And yet at the same time the freedom that he has given us comes with grave responsibility and we cannot escape the consequences of our actions whether good or bad. We are morally responsible for whatever we do. Is God to blame for endowing us with freedom to choose and for creating us free moral agents? Would he also be blamed if he had created us as robots or machines? That is the dilemma, the tension we must all face in dealing with the questions of divine sovereignty and human responsibility.

#### **4.4.4.3 DIVINE SOVEREIGNTY, GRACE AND HUMAN RESPONSIBILITY**

There appears to be an unmistakable ring of mystery about it all when it is pressed to its logical conclusion. Both Calvin and Luther admitted this. Are we to do less than they did? We think not or is that another roundabout way of avoiding trouble as Feinberg suggests?<sup>138</sup> But what do we make of all this in regard to the problem of evil? What does the Calvinist position offer? In very general terms we deduce the following:

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and responsibility in relation to the problem of evil. Doubts remain, however, on the success of some of his arguments especially those of a philosophical nature. See his *The Many Faces of Evil*.

<sup>138</sup> See his 'God, Freedom, and Evil in Calvinist Thinking' in *The grace of God and the Bondage of the Will*, pp.459-83, edited by Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1995. This Feinberg chapter, which we have been examining, contains some thoughts from his book, *The Many Faces of Evil*, an impressive work on the problem of evil.



First, the Calvinist position emphasises divine sovereignty without denying human freedom and responsibility. More often than not, however, some Calvinist accounts of God's sovereign control in relation to human freedom and moral responsibility for evil appear somewhat counterintuitive at the very least (Feinberg 1995:459). The tension between divine sovereignty and human moral responsibility is undeniable. God is absolutely sovereign and knows all that humans do or intend to do long before they actually do it. And although God foreknew that humans would sin when he created them, he is not responsible for sin in any way. Humans who are free moral agents, able to choose to do good or evil and are responsible for their actions, bad or good. Humans are responsible for evil and not God who is all good and loving. And yet at the same time there seems to be little room for human freedom since God in his sovereignty and foreknowledge perceived and foresaw that humankind would sin and do evil in the world and went ahead to create them. Is God truly good and sovereign? Is humankind truly free? Does evil really exist? Can humans comprehend all this with their finite wisdom and come up with *the solution* to the problem of evil? Our answer to the first three questions is in the affirmative. It leaves the tension unresolved and forces us to answer the last question in the negative, a fact that makes evil and suffering inextricably part of the inexplicable mystery of our paradoxical existence in the world of our all-sovereign God.

Secondly, the Calvinist position emphasises that God's grace sets us free and redeems us from sin and its terrible consequences. As human beings, we are sinful and separated from God by our wickedness. We are depraved and subject to God's judgement. We inherited sinful nature from our forefather Adam. That is what is called original sin which Calvin defined as "a hereditary depravity and corruption of our nature, diffused into all parts of the soul, which first makes us liable to God's wrath, then also brings forth in us those works which the Scripture calls 'works of the flesh'" (Institutes Book 2, 1:4). This high view of sin necessitates a high view of grace and redemption that only God in his grace freely grants to those who believe. This is not to say that evil and suffering as problems of our existence cease to be once we receive God's grace. Evil and suffering still remain but not as entities other than consequences of the fall which God in his sovereign will foresaw and for which we are responsible as free moral agents endowed with the power of choice. For sure, the magnitude of some evil and suffering remain frighteningly mysterious; and the only hope in which one can finally rest is that Christ, the source and centre of all love and perfection, will ultimately triumph over evil (Minnema 1976:140-62). Theodore Minnema rightly observes that Calvin's

interpretation of suffering contains much apologetic and pastoral significance. He takes the obvious fact of human solidarity in suffering and meaningfully relates it to Christian theology. A theology, concludes Minnema, that speaks relevantly to the common problem of suffering has a good possibility of receiving a hearing in any culture (Minnema 1976:159). The dreadful reality of human helplessness in the face of suffering can only be overcome by the power of God's sufficient grace, a grace which affords us wisdom and strength to find meaning even in meaningless suffering. Calvin who was not himself spared suffering as he battled with persistent frail health and later his wife's untimely death, taught that the gravest temptation in suffering is the feeling of nothingness and meaninglessness. As if to underline the importance of God's grace when that becomes the case, Calvin saw in suffering a universal experience that affords humans an opportunity to look *beyond themselves* as well as look at *themselves*.<sup>139</sup> That is what he did in his coming to Geneva and in eventually writing his Institutes of the Christian Religion which were partially brought about by the persecution of evangelicals in France, his homeland. He undertook the writing of the Institutes to explain the Christian faith to King Francis I in order to alleviate the persecution of evangelicals in France. That is grace in action and it is a vital necessity which one cannot do without being in suffering, even in the so-called undeserved suffering.

Gerald Sittser<sup>140</sup> who lost his mother, wife and daughter in a car accident, caused by a drunken driver, found out the importance of grace in suffering although answers still elude him as they do us all. He movingly concludes his story in this manner:

Despite the fact that I had been a Christian for many years before the accident since then God has become a living reality to me as never before. My confidence in God is quieter but stronger. I feel little pressure to impress God or prove myself to him, yet I want to serve Him with all my heart and strength. My life is full of bounty, even as I continue to feel the pain of loss. Grace is transforming me, and it is wonderful. I have slowly learned where God belongs and have allowed him to assume that place—at the centre of life rather than at the periphery. So God spare us a life of fairness! To live in a world full of grace is better by far than to live in a world of absolute fairness. A fair world may make life nice for us, but only as nice as we are. We may get what we deserve, but I wonder how much that is, and whether or not we would really be satisfied. A world with grace will give us more than we deserve. It will give us life, even life in our suffering (Sittser 1999:27).

Sittser's point is well taken. Fairness is the opposite of grace. If fairness were to be applied to life there would be no grace. Highlighting the importance of God's grace as a remedy for sin

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<sup>139</sup> Italics are mine.

<sup>140</sup> Mr. Sittser is a professor of history at Whitworth College in Spokane, Washington, USA where he lives with his three children, Catharine, David and John.



and therefore suffering and evil is a very strong point of the Calvinist position. Problems with evil still abound but grace abounds even much more.

Thirdly, the Calvinist position gives prominence to Scripture. Calvin in particular worked very hard to derive his teaching from Scripture and not just from human reason. But Hick still maintains that in forming his doctrine, Calvin in fact used reason to select among biblical data, draw inferences, make speculative extensions and projections and thus produced from them dogmatic assurance concerning the mysteries of God. He concludes that Calvin is actually guilty of asserting more than the Scriptures themselves reveal which is precisely what he criticised others for doing. Hick's criticisms of Calvin mainly concern the doctrine of predestination and the fall (Hick 1966:128-9). What Hick is saying may be right but it should be pointed out that Calvin or even Luther did not say they never used reason at all in deducing doctrines or in selecting or interpreting biblical data as such. What they were against was the use of reason over and above Scripture. They alarmingly reacted, in their time, to the widespread use and even apparent deification of reason instead of the Bible as the sole authority in matters of faith and life. It was in this context that their maxims, or more precisely their battle cry, of *sola scriptura*, *sola fide* and *sola gratia* made sense. They no doubt used reason but only within the limits of Scripture which they so highly regarded. Calvin was a scriptural theologian who largely employed a literal method of interpretation. He accorded Scripture a high place in his theological system as the first article of the Geneva confession affirms as well as his other numerous works.<sup>141</sup> In his final will, dictated to Pierre Chenelat on 25th April 1564, shortly before his death, he had this to say about the Scripture after two introductory paragraphs: "I further declare, that according to the grace of God granted to me, I have endeavoured to teach his word soundly in preaching and writing and always to give true exposition of the Holy Scripture".<sup>142</sup> Calvin emphasised the uniqueness of the Bible as the voice of God to humankind. In regard to the problem of evil, he did not go beyond Scripture. He was contented with the fact that the origin of evil, the fall, the predestination or even the grace that God grants to us are all shrouded in God's mysteries which we should receive by faith even if we cannot explain. The Enlightenment posed a serious challenge to this Reformation thought and heritage. It is on this that we now focus our attention.

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<sup>141</sup> Like Luther, he wrote commentaries almost on every book of the Bible, making him one of the most prolific Bible commentators of all time, a feat not easily attained these days.

#### 4.4.5 ENLIGHTENMENT'S PHILOSOPHICAL OPTIMISM

##### 4.4.5.1 HUMAN REASON AND OPTIMISM

The enlightenment or the Age of Reason as it is usually called posed a serious challenge to traditional Christianity or, more precisely, to the Reformation heritage. Western European Christianity was more or less well established as a continental religion at the peak of the Middle Ages, around 1200 (Heron 1980:1). Theology was highly regarded both inside and outside the church. It was the supreme intellectual discipline and was known as 'the queen of sciences', excitedly pursued by scholars.<sup>143</sup> Society was hierarchically structured in such a way that the church and the state became an interwoven static unity, loyal to the pope and the king. As time went by, Europe was opened up to the world beyond with discovery voyages to India, China, America and later on to Africa. The Renaissance which touched off in Italy in the fifteenth century helped to inspire new confidence in human capacity to inquire into the past in order to emulate its achievements in the present. Using the scientific approach, the world was interpreted in the light of its own evidence, not merely via traditionally received wisdom. A critical attitude to traditional authority was thus developed and used effectively towards creative exploration and the opening up of new horizons and investigation in the present world. It was into this milieu that the Reformation was born with its emphasis on the unique authority of the Bible as the inspired word of God over and against established church teachings and authorities. In the Bible and there alone was the truth of God authentically and immediately available to humankind.<sup>144</sup> The impact of the Reformation was felt politically, socially, and economically as well as religiously in most of Western Europe. The spirit of the Reformation inspired nationalism and the independence of some states in Europe, at least partially.

But as time went by, this newfound freedom produced both positive and negative elements. On the one hand, wars such as the English Civil War and the American War of Liberation as well the French Revolution were ignited, bringing about pain and anguish on the continent. On the other hand, the rise of capitalism, the industrial revolution, urbanisation and

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<sup>142</sup> Quoted in Potgieter's '*Calvin as a Scriptural theologian*' in *Calvinus Reformator*, pp.115-128, University of Potchefstroom, 1982.

<sup>143</sup> It is worth noticing here that most universities in Europe and later in America actually began as theological institutions.

<sup>144</sup> Heron 1980:2 brings out this point and explains that there was a good deal of variation in the way the Bible was understood and interpreted by different groups of reformers, a fact which led to further fragmentation of the Reformation enterprise.



democracy were ushered in, producing much progress with mixed fruit, much of which was not necessarily good. While the agenda of the Enlightenment was never irreligious, it seriously questioned the credibility of the Christian faith and placed new confidence in the power of reason to discover truth. It challenged the authority of the Bible, the possibility of miracles and stressed rationalism. It introduced new critical methods for the study of the Bible, giving uncritical priority to the scientific and historical approaches. The Christian orthodox belief that the Bible is a compendium of God's revealed truths, inspired and consistent in all its parts and therefore supremely authoritative in all matters of doctrine and life came in for a special brand of the Enlightenment's fierce attack for the obvious reason that it claimed exclusive authority. This could only be so as the fundamental issue underlying the conflict between rationalism as represented by the Age of Reason and orthodoxy as represented by the Reformation was 'authority'. The sharp contrast was between reason and authority. Alasdair Heron rightly observes that the echoes of that conflict still reverberate around us although the issues are not posed in the fashion of the Enlightenment.<sup>145</sup>

Dissatisfaction with this highly radical and pragmatic rational agenda of the Enlightenment came from inside its own ranks. Both Emmanuel Kant (1724-1804) and David Hume<sup>146</sup> (1711-1776) fiercely attacked the presuppositions of rationalism, sharply raising in their philosophical works the question of what it is that constitutes genuine knowledge and understanding.<sup>147</sup> In his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Hume penetratingly raised the question of the basis and character of genuine knowledge and understanding. He argued that our knowledge of facts as opposed to ideal truths is drawn from our experience upon which it must be firmly based or else our reasoning and arguing cannot be properly controlled. Kant likewise raised these concerns in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, further arguing that all attempts to employ reason in any merely speculative manner in theology are fruitless, null and void and that the principles of its employment in the study of nature do not necessarily lead to any theology whatsoever. He concluded that the only theology of reason possible is that which is based on moral laws or seeks guidance from them. He added that all synthetic principles of reason allow only an immanent employment; and in order to have knowledge of a Supreme Being we should have to put them to a transcendent use for which

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<sup>145</sup> Heron 1980:6.

<sup>146</sup> Both of these thinkers were never irreligious but still remained some of the most severe critics of orthodoxy as championed by the Reformation. Hume in particular was unrelenting in his skepticism.

<sup>147</sup> Hume's *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* and Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, published in 1748 and 1787 respectively, were especially devastating in criticising reason as advanced by the Enlightenment.

our mind is not fitted (Kant 1787:528). Gotthold Ephraim Lessing was another fierce critic of the Enlightenment. He raised the question of the relevance of history. In this, the infamous quest for the 'Historical Jesus' as opposed to the Jesus of the gospels preached by the church was raised. He also raised the difficulties involved in trying to discover the past or interpret the present in the light of its evidence, culminating in his famous quip 'There is a broad, ugly ditch of history that I cannot jump across'. Lessing, who made some vital pioneering contributions in the field of New Testament historical studies,<sup>148</sup> was from time to time caught in between the continual controversies between rationalism and orthodoxy. These Enlightenment thinkers left the door wide open for relativism as the alternatives they bequeathed had scaled down and reduced the events on which the Christian faith or the person of Jesus Christ are based to merely relative and passing significance (Heron 1980:21). In the past century, Richard Niebuhr sharply criticised the ideals of the Age of Reason as manifested in American liberalism. In his book, *The Kingdom of God in America*, he said:

The Romantic conception of the kingdom of God involved no discontinuities, no cries, no tragedies, or sacrifices, no loss of all things, no cross, and no resurrection. In ethics, it reconciled the interests of the individual with those of the society by means of faith in a natural identity of interests or in the benevolent, altruistic character of man. In politics and economics, it slurred over national and class divisions, seeing only the growth of unity and ignoring the increase of self-assertion and exploitation. In religion, it reconciled God and man by deifying the latter and humanizing the former ... Christ the redeemer became Jesus the teacher or the spiritual genius in whom the religious capacities of mankind were fully developed ... Evolution, growth, development, the culture of the religious life, the nurture of the kindly sentiments, the extension of humanitarian ideals, and the progress of civilization took the place of the Christian revolution...A God without wrath brought man without sin into a kingdom without judgement through the ministration of a Christ without a cross (Niebuhr 1957:191f).

European Protestant liberalism was a legitimate child of the Enlightenment whose ideal of an enduring community of God's kingdom in the world meant something different from what Jesus taught in the gospels. Although Niebuhr's criticisms are primarily directed at American liberalism, their relevance is still valid in our context. They imply the fact that life in the kingdom involves the possibility of suffering in the present even as we await the full consummation of the kingdom in the future. There are both continuities and discontinuities, cries and joys, gains and losses, tragedies and pleasures, crosses and blessings, faith and hopelessness to be encountered here and now in the kingdom interim period. There is a cross to carry in the present, as there will be a crown to wear in the eschaton. One is only real and

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<sup>148</sup> Both lower and higher criticism, especially in NT studies, may be traced to the works of Lessing. The result of all this was what later became to be known in Germany as 'Life of Jesus Research' or 'the quest of the



meaningful in the light of the other, a point sorely missed by the Enlightenment in its optimism.

In regard to the problem of evil, the Age of Reason will go down in history as the golden age of theodicies, a time at which the problem of evil took centre stage in discussions and received optimistic, comprehensive solutions, at least in the eyes of those who offered them. New vibrant confidence in the power of reason developed at this time the conclusion that our world is the best that there is despite the presence of evil in it. The conception of evil as serving a larger good also gained increasing acceptance. This in itself was not a new argument. Augustine, drawing from Plotinus with a Christian touch, had used this argument before. The Enlightenment theodicians were now using it with some variations, appropriate to their own context.

#### **4.4.5.2 THE BEST POSSIBLE WORLD**

Chief among the theodicians of this period who offered 'solutions' to the problem of evil was Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716). He was a many-sided genius with interests in natural sciences, mathematics, politics, law, economics, theology and of course philosophy. In his treatment of the problem of evil, he opposed the dualism of Pierre Bayle, arguing strongly that God is the only supreme sovereign ruler of the world.<sup>149</sup> He viewed the world as a whole under God's power and not just an arena being contested by two conflicting principles of good and evil as suggested by Bayle. He maintained that God in creating the world chose between two possible systems and because God is a wise and good God he chose the best of these. God in his infinite wisdom united with goodness, could not have chosen but only the best. For as a lesser evil is a kind of good so a lesser good is a kind of evil if it stands in the way of a greater good and there would be something to correct in God's actions if it were possible that what he chose was not the best. Anticipating possible objection that the best world would have been without evil and suffering, Leibniz strongly denied that it would then be better, arguing further that if the smallest evil that comes about in the world were missing in it, then it would no longer be this world, which with nothing omitted and all allowance made was found to be the best by the creator who chose it. Leibniz admitted that someone may imagine possible worlds without sin and without unhappiness or even make a utopian world, but these again would still be inferior to ours in goodness since God chose it. Our world, concluded

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historical Jesus'.

<sup>149</sup> By the same token, he came closer to the monism of Spinoza in his emphasis on divine sovereignty.

Leibniz, is therefore the best possible world that God could have chosen despite the presence of evil in it (Theodicy 123-35).

How did evil come to be in the best of possible worlds? Some evil is inevitable, as belonging to that which is finite, some is willed by God as punishment for our sins and wrongdoings or even for a higher good, answered Leibniz. The source of evil, contended Leibniz, must be sought in the ideal nature of the creature, in so far as this nature is contained in the eternal verities which are in the understanding of God, independently of his will. For we must consider that there was an *original imperfection in the creature*<sup>150</sup> before sin, because the creature was limited in essence where it ensues that he cannot know all and that it can deceive itself and commit errors (Theodicy 135).<sup>151</sup> He added that properly speaking, the formal character of evil has no efficient cause, for it consists of deprivation in that which the efficient cause does not bring about. But he nonetheless went on to explain that evil might be taken metaphysically, physically and morally. According to him, metaphysical evil consists in mere imperfection, physical evil in suffering and moral evil in sin. Both physical and moral evil are not necessary but are made possible by eternal verities and because these verities contain all possibilities, it is possible that evil will enter them and consequently the best possible world contains a measure thereof. God wills not moral evil at all and physical evil or suffering he does not will absolutely although he may often will it as a penalty for guilt or as a means to an end, that is to either prevent greater evil or to gain greater good. Thus God has been induced to permit evil. But what do we mean when we say that God 'permits' evil? To answer this question, Leibniz started by explaining the nature of the will, saying that taken generally, the will consists in the inclination to do something in proportion to the good it contains. This will he called antecedent will which considers each good separately in the capacity of a good. In this will, God tends to do all good but this will although efficacious of itself does not pass into final exercise or else it would not fail to produce its full effects. Consequent will is the other will Leibniz identified. Having this will, he said, one never fails to do what he wants when power is granted, adding that from the concurrence of these wills comes the total will. The antecedent will is both efficacious and effective with success. It follows from this, argued Leibniz, that God wills antecedently the good and consequently the best and that the moral evil that God often permits serves to make us savour good the more as it sometimes

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<sup>150</sup> Italics are Leibniz's.

<sup>151</sup> With this line of thought, Leibniz made a fundamental departure from the traditional Augustinian position that man was created perfect as all that God created was declared good but only became corrupted after the fall.



contributes to greater perfection in him who suffers. The moral evil is permitted to serve as a means of obtaining greater good or preventing another evil; when it is considered to be a certain consequent of an indispensable duty. From this he concluded:

It is in this sense that God permits sin: for he would fail in what he owes to himself, in what he owes to his wisdom, his goodness, his perfection, if he followed not the grand result of all his tendencies to good, and if he chose not that which is absolutely the best, notwithstanding the evil of guilt, which is involved therein by the supreme necessity of the eternal verities. Hence the conclusion that God wills all good *in himself antecedently*, that he wills the best *consequently* as an *end*, that he wills what is indifferent, and physical evil, sometimes as a *means* but that he will only permit moral evil as the *sine qua non* or as a hypothetical necessity which connects it with the best. Therefore the *consequent will* of God, which has sin for an object, is only *permissive* (Theodicy 136-8).

In all this, said Leibniz, God is no more the cause of sin than the river's current is the cause of the retardation of a heavy-laden boat. Thus Leibniz was not clear on how moral evil was to be explained as his ideas of freedom and determinism could not be easily reconciled. He observed that God co-operates in moral evil, and in physical evil and in each of them both morally and physically; and that man as well co-operates in these evils, becoming a subject to blame and punishment. He maintained that God is not the originator of sin even though he co-operates in moral evil. Thus he defended freedom and rejected determinism, arguing that the foreknowledge of God has nothing to do with the dependence or independence of our actions being of the opinion that the will is always inclined towards the course it adopts but it is never bound by necessity to adopt it. He thus believed in a freedom of contingency or indifference, stating that nothing necessitates us to one or the other course of action but that at the same time we are inclined towards one or the other, as we cannot be on both sides simultaneously. We are responsible for our actions although more often the reasons behind them may be complex and incomprehensible, being the concatenation of causes beyond ourselves. Yet at the same time, God in his omniscience seems to have predetermined our actions and destiny, leaving us with no choice but to do only what is already decreed for us. We are free and yet our actions are determined at the same time. This Leibnizian position, if understood correctly, seems to implicate God indirectly in evil. Leibniz's assertion that God co-operates in moral evil seems to confirm this, as he honestly admitted in his dialogue with Bayle.<sup>152</sup> What is more, his argument that God permits evil and directs it wisely towards greater good is difficult to reconcile with his co-operation in moral evil or any evil for that matter as 'permit' and 'co-operate' are never synonymous. His contention that the source of evil lies in the

possible forms anterior to the acts of God's will makes mockery of God's infinite power and knowledge. Hick is right when he observes that the Leibnizian position in effect denies the power of God and places limitation on God's creative activity within compossibilities that restricted him to create only the best possible world (Hick 1966:170-1). But he is off the mark a little when he asserts that the Leibnizian position stands within the broad Augustinian tradition. Leibniz actually denied that man was created perfect, a fundamental fact affirmed by the traditional Augustinian position.<sup>153</sup> The greatest weakness of the Leibnizian position, in our opinion, seems to be its attempt to place God's creative activity within mathematical limits as suggested by the notion of possibility which is his central thesis. This is so rigidly defined that both the power and the freedom of God are severely restricted. Given these restrictions, God made only the best possible world as the compossibilities imposed limitation on him. Indeed, the whole productive activity of God is assumed to be selective and therefore secondary.<sup>154</sup> In the Leibnizian system, God becomes a limited being without power and freedom and not the all wise, all-sovereign God whose eternal decrees spring from his own inexplicable being and character.

#### 4.4.5.3 REEXAMINING THEODICY

Although the Age of Reason was an age of theodicies, by the same token it was the age in which faith in an all-loving and perfectly good God in the face of the problem of evil was deemed unreasonable and deserving of rejection. It was precisely for this reason that theodicies needed to be developed to defend the justness of God and therefore make faith plausible. Reason not faith was the guiding light of this age. But the Age of Reason, nevertheless, had faith in humans and what they could discover and achieve for their own progress and development. Indeed, great human achievements and discoveries made at this time gave birth to the optimism for which this age is well known. But this optimism was to be badly shaken later by the events that were to follow this age. Prominent among these are the two world wars. Since these events are beyond the scope of this work, we will not turn to them, but we will instead evaluate theodicy as developed in the Age of Reason, particularly as initiated by Leibniz and perpetuated by others after him. In doing so, we examine four possible objections to the whole project of theodicy.

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<sup>152</sup> In his dialogue with Bayle, he admitted his difficulty was in maintaining that God co-operates morally in moral evil without being the originator of sin. See *Theodicy*, p.182, para 107.

<sup>153</sup> Compare Hick's *Evil and the God of Love*, p.164-65 and Leibniz's *Theodicy*, p.135.

<sup>154</sup> Schleiermacher's *The Christian Faith*, p.241, quoted in Hick above.



First, there is a theological objection. This objection contends that the whole project of theodicy is wrongheaded in working to justify the ways of God to humankind and not the other way round. How could sinful, little human creatures put themselves in a position to justify the all-powerful, all wise and wholly perfect God whose justice is beyond doubt? (Berkouwer 1974:246-49). This objection is valid whether one views theodicy as justifying our talk of God or justifying God's ways to humans. Either way, humans are still in a position to incriminate God.<sup>155</sup> Humankind puts God to trial on the issue of his justness.

Second, there is an epistemological objection. This objection is philosophical in nature rather than theological. Its main contention is that a construction of theodicy is both unwarranted and unnecessary since the theist and atheist have conflicting bases for their belief in God, since they use different epistemologies in the construction of that belief. In that regard, all that may be incumbent upon the theists in the context of their epistemology is only to show that their belief in a good and loving God is not logically inconsistent with the existence of evil in the world. They do not need a theodicy to justify that belief although they may be called upon from time to time to defend it. The atheists on their part operate in an entirely different epistemological context to affirm their disbelief in the theist God. Whether or not their objection is plausible is beside the point. It might be quite possible that the reasons God has in permitting evil in the world transcend our limited human understanding. It is also very doubtful that a construction of a theodicy can undo all that and relieve us of perplexities that we face in regard to the problem of evil. Theodicy may not be entirely convincing in that sense, as Alvin Plantinga would argue (Plantinga 1974: 9-28f).

Third, the methodological objection. Due to its abstraction from concrete instances of particular evils, theodicy may be susceptible to irrelevance and may be undermined for that reason by the reality of evil in particular circumstances. Kenneth Surin succinctly pinpoints the essence of this when he remarks concerning theodicy: "It requires us to be articulate, rational and reasonable in the face of the unspeakable" (Surin 1985:155). In concrete situations of suffering and evil such as in South Sudan, a theodicy's arguments as an observer, rooted in the abstract as they are, may be untenable or even worthless in the eyes of actual victims of suffering and evil. Van Den Brink's contention in that connection that theodicy is not aimed at consoling or ministering to the afflicted, but rather at trying to understand God in the face of evil or evil in relation to God is still inadequate as the aim of

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<sup>155</sup> Thus Van Den Brink's objection to this theological objection falls short. See his *Almighty God*, pp.241-42.

that understanding would only be meaningful if it were related to real victims of suffering and evil (Van Den Brink 1993:243). His other contention in this regard that theodicy is not aimed at the community of faith but only at concrete sufferers in so far as they want to make sense of their suffering in the light of faith is self-contradicting. This is precisely because if theodicy fails to console sufferers who are part of a community, it has failed in consoling that community as well. In as far as the community is composed of individual persons, it is not possible to aim a theodicy at a community without aiming it at individual members of that community.<sup>156</sup>

Fourth, there is the moral or ethical objection to theodicy. This objection states that theodicy is immoral because it implies a tacit endorsement of evil as it seems to sanction evil by attempting to explain and justify it. By trying to justify the ways and works of God to man and not vice versa, theodicy has implicitly incriminated God in the problem of evil and made a huge mountain of what is apparently an inextricable part of existence. Although some theodicies may have some apologetic benefits, the moral objection is likely to affect both theoretical and other types of theodicy. But the most serious defect of the traditional treatment of the problem of theodicy, precisely in the classical form that Leibniz gave it, is that it has thought it could give a proof of the righteousness of God in his works exclusively from the standpoint of the origin of the world and its order in God's creative work, instead of taking into consideration the history of God's saving action and the eschatological fulfillment that has dawned already in Jesus Christ (Pannenberg 1994:164-6).<sup>157</sup> From another perspective, the development of the whole project of theodicy has some positive elements in thrusting forward the problem of evil into the centre of theological reflection and forcing thoughtful believers to ponder on their faith and crystallise it in the face of challenges posed by this perennial problem. With that put aside, the disadvantages of theodicy still outnumber its advantages.

## 4.5 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This chapter has examined the problem of evil and suffering, as formulated by those who consider it as a huge stumbling block to believing in the God who is all-powerful, all loving

<sup>156</sup> I will later deal with the place of community in absorbing our suffering and pain.

<sup>157</sup> Barth seems to share the same sentiments as Pannenberg although Pannenberg's approach is from the standpoint of salvation history. Compare CD III|I, p.405-6.



and wholly good. Also examined have been various Christian responses or defenses to meet the challenge that the problem presents. We have briefly considered Augustine's free will defense and its modifications by the reformers. We observed that although the reformers are indebted to Augustine in their biblical and theological thought they do not share his philosophical thought, which is heavily platonic. We looked at Luther's bondage of the will and how it is related to his understanding of grace as opposed to works. We acknowledged that although Luther did not construct a theodicy, his theology of the cross may serve as a justification of God in that it assures the sufferer that God is present in and shares his pain and suffering. Calvin's divine predestination and human responsibility reminded us that grace overcomes the apparent contradiction between God's decree of predestination and our responsibility.

Examining the theodicies of the Age of Reason, we looked at Leibniz's best of all possible worlds and how that led to optimism in that age. Underlying this optimism was the faith in the power of reason to explain the world. The reality of evil and suffering as manifested by the cruelties of the world was dealt a deadly blow to the fine edifice of human progress and development. In the light of all this, we concluded that with all our best theological and philosophical explanations, the problem of evil and suffering is in the last analysis a mystery; it is closely linked to the reality of God and our existence in his world. The reformers humbly acknowledged this, explicitly reminding us today that it is by the grace given to us in the cross of Christ that we can face this mystery even if we cannot explain or understand it. The next chapter examines other ways of coming to terms with the problem of evil and suffering.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **POST-ENLIGHTENMENT: COMING TO GRIPS WITH THE REALITY OF SUFFERING AND EVIL**

#### **5.1 INTRODUCTION**

The purpose of this chapter is to look at the problem of evil and suffering as expressed in the theologies that came into existence after the collapse of the optimism of the Age of Reason. We have chosen in that regard Karl Barth, Jürgen Moltmann and liberation theology. Our choice of Barth is based on his being the most ardent critic of the ideals of the Enlightenment, as he challenged the prevailing assumptions of his time and drew people back to the biblical and theological basics of the faith. His emphasis on Jesus Christ as the sovereign word of God over evil and the central focus of Christian theology is significant. We have chosen Moltmann because his theology of the cross and of hope underlines that God shares our suffering. This concurs with one of our proposals that while we may not solve the problem of suffering, we can take comfort in the fact that God as portrayed in the cross of his son, is with us in our suffering; he suffers with us. Liberation theology, born in the midst of an immense suffering, is examined to shed light on the importance of praxis in the face of suffering. We also have taken a brief look at G C Berkouwer's 'believing theodicy' as a serious critique of Western forms of theodicy. Finally, Africa theology is looked at to underscore the fact that suffering is a reality of life that we must face, rather than try to explain. For purposes of comparison with other theological thought we bring in the African perspective as well. We begin our investigation with the limits of reason.

#### **5.2 THE LIMITS OF REASON AND THE REALITY OF SUFFERING AND EVIL**

Optimism and idealism dominated the Enlightenment era. As mentioned earlier, the problem of evil, a prominent topic of discussion and debate, came to be formulated at this period as it is, more or less, known today. But the theological and philosophical solutions it sought to



offer either diminished God's attributes of power and love or brought them into irreconcilable conflict. Some of these solutions really made the problem of evil even much more worst than it actually was. Leibniz's best of the possible worlds, for instance, compounded the problem of evil by claiming that although God is metaphysically perfect, that is, having every simple possible perfection of necessity, nevertheless, he is not morally perfect of necessity but rather by choice. This made the perfection of God—as well as his other attributes—and the whole enterprise of the best of possible worlds only contingently true. Thus, the optimism and idealism of the Age of Reason in trying to explain life, evil and God in easy optimistic terms, characteristic of the spirit of the time, in fact complicated and compromised them. Christian theology too readily accommodated itself to the prevailing assumptions and ideals of the Enlightenment. The gospel message could not go beyond limits set by human reason. No revelation from on high, or divine authority or witness that could not be subjected to reason or judged by it. Reason became the supreme goddess, deserving of veneration and worship. So appealing were the intellectual, theological and philosophical ideals of the Enlightenment that students from other parts of Europe flocked to German and Swiss universities—to sit at the feet of the leading thinkers, men of great learning and prestige, of the period. In this way were the liberal theological ideas of this era disseminated to other lands. As a matter of fact, the liberal theological ideas did not only succeed in meeting the intellectual challenges of modern science, philosophy, and historical criticism, but they also strengthened freedom and individualism as known in western society today.

In spite of all this, a cluster of complex events that followed seriously challenged the Enlightenment's theological and moral agenda.

First, the catastrophe of the First World War shattered the ideals of a peaceable society oriented by human progress and development. The brutal and violent veracity of the war dealt a mortal blow to moral and intellectual progress assumingly made through human reason and ability as advocated by the Enlightenment. The large-scale death and tragedy resulting from the war at a level never witnessed before in human history shattered faith and confidence which this period had come to place in human moral capability and reasoning.<sup>158</sup> It became indisputably clear that evil was much more than what the goddess of reason could handle or

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<sup>158</sup> Of this eighteenth century man Barth says "It is paradoxical and yet it is a fact that the answer to his humiliation was those philosophical systems of rationalism, empiricism and scepticism which made men even more self-confident. The geocentric picture of the universe was replaced as a matter of course by the anthropocentric" *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, p.38. London :SCM Press, 1959.

resolve. The emphasis of the Age of Rationalism on human individualism and freedom failed to bring freedom from war and evil as implied by its moral ideals and values.

Second, serious doubts emerged within the ranks of this period, shaking its well-established presuppositions and moral ideals. This was partly due to the tragedies of the war and partly to further serious examination of leading accepted assumptions of the time. Johannes Weiss who was himself a product of Ritschlian tradition, for instance, tore into pieces Ritschl's assumption that the kingdom of God as taught by Jesus was to be established in this world. Weiss argued that the kingdom of God as proclaimed by Jesus in the gospels was an eschatological reality to be revealed in the near future by the sovereign act of God. Harnack's 'Jesus of History' assumption too was demolished by George Tyrrel's pinpointing criticisms. He got everyone amused when he charged that Harnack looked at the Jesus of history down a deep well and saw nothing at the bottom but the reflection of his own face. Similarly, early in the twentieth century, Albert Schweizer in his *Quest for the Historical Jesus*, staged the *coup de grace* when he charged that the nineteenth century liberalism in attempting to portray Jesus and his message in terms acceptable to the modern mind had proved nothing but bankruptcy. As if to illustrate the practicality of Jesus' message in his own life, Schweizer became a medical missionary to Africa, basing his own philosophy of ministry on 'reverence for life'. In one of his meetings with Karl Barth, he is reported to have said: "You and I, Barth, started from the same problem, the disintegration of modern thought; but whereas you went back to the Reformation, I went back to the Enlightenment".<sup>159</sup>

Third, and probably more seriously, the liberal ideals went over the head of the ordinary pastor and layperson and by the same token over the head of the average believer. These ideals left them with a little more than a vague moral idealism, scarcely distinguishable from other non-Christian humanitarianism. It was, to say the least, an ivory tower theology hardly applicable to daily life as experienced by the ordinary believer (Vilder 1961:214).<sup>160</sup> Thus, the factors we have just examined and many more brought into being what is usually referred to as 'the theology of crisis' or 'dialectical theology', a theology more or less initially associated

<sup>159</sup> Quoted in Vilder's *The Church in the Age of Revolution*, p.214. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1961. I am deeply indebted to Vilder for most of what I am trying to narrate in this section.

<sup>160</sup> Without being over critical, modern theology in its diversity suffers from the same malady. It has been said that theology, unlike other university disciplines, faces its real extramural test in the pulpit, not in another lecture room. See Brian Gerrish's *A Prince of the Church*, xii. Thus, the problem of relating theology is never a new problem. It still remains the most formidable challenge to thoughtful theologians of all time. How can the gap between doing theology in the academy and doing it in the local church be bridged? is the vital question that must be honestly confronted in balanced theological enterprise.



with Karl Barth.<sup>161</sup> With this background in mind, we now turn to evil in Barth's theology as one of post-Enlightenment theologies.

## 5.3 KARL BARTH: JESUS CHRIST, GOD'S SOVEREIGN WORD OVER EVIL

### 5.3.1 THE THEOLOGY OF CRISIS

Barth was himself originally one of the theological liberals of the Ritschlian School. After completing his theological studies at the University of Marburg, Germany in 1908, he returned to Safenwil, Switzerland to take up pastoral ministry. His preaching, saturated with liberal social gospel ideals he imbibed at the university, made no impact on the lives of his audience in this Swiss town church. His woes were later aggravated by the outbreak of the First World War when he preached under the sound of gunfire and made no headway in assuring his increasingly desperate audience of the reality of God in a world gone mad and intoxicated by the raging war. With the Bible that speaks of the reality of God on every page on the one hand and his idealistic theological training on the other, Barth was painfully aware of the fact that his preaching could not reach and comfort his congregation in their hour of need as it should. It would seem, his training did not prepare him to help and encourage a people upon whom the evil of the war had come or was dangerously looming.

Furthermore, Barth was greatly enraged and disgusted on August 14th, 1914 when he learnt that many of his former professors were among 93 German intellectuals who signed a declaration supporting the war as necessary for the defense of what they called Christian Civilisation. He later termed that day 'a black day' and predicted that both the political ideals

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<sup>161</sup> Alasdair Heron correctly observes that Brunner, Bultmann and Gogarten were initially in the same dialectical theological camp with Barth. They later parted ways as their respective positions drifted apart. But Barth and Brunner still had some mutual common ground until Brunner published his *Nature and Grace* in 1934. In it, he criticised Barth's position on the point of contact in which man could experience grace, further suggesting that this point of contact is to be found in nature. Barth's reply to Brunner was both sharp and dramatic, as it came in the form of his famous dialectical principles of Yes! and No!. In fact, the reply itself was entitled *No! An answer to Emil Brunner*. In it, Barth demolished Brunner's arguments, leaving the gap wide open between the two men. Barth once said about their differences that Brunner and himself were like the elephant and the whale, both are God's creatures but it is impossible for them to meet. However, many years later, when Brunner was on his deathbed, Barth sent him a warm reconciliatory message. This is what Barth said: 'If he is still alive, and it is possible, tell him again "commended to our God" even by me. And tell him, Yes, that the time when I thought that I had to say "No" to him is now long past, since we live only by virtue of the fact that a great and merciful

of his former teachers and the theological principles underlying them had no future. To Barth "neither cultural Protestantism nor 'reverence before history'<sup>162</sup> could tell him what to preach in Safenwil, Sunday after Sunday, while the inheritors of Christian Civilisation tore the world apart in the name of their enlightened values (Heron 1980:75). Barth was forced to go out of his way to seek and find help wherever he could. He was not disappointed, as the works of Kierkegaard, Dostoyevsky, Luther, Calvin and the Bible readily became handy for him.<sup>163</sup> From all this, he thankfully came to acknowledge that the living God, revealed in Scriptures, is wholly different from the God argued into existence by the theologians and philosophers of his day. Deducing from this, he strongly emphasised God's transcendence over humanity and human religions, arguing that God is God, he cannot be taken for granted or spoken of simply by speaking of ourselves in a loud voice. We can meet or encounter God, he said, as the only eternal one on his own terms not ours, we finite creatures of time and history. He thus sought to bring the theological mind-set of his time into recognising and accepting that there is absolutely no continuity, similarity, resemblance or analogy of being between God and humans or between God and any other creature for that matter. He powerfully asserted that humanity would never come to hear the authentic word of God until it acknowledges its own plight as it is only those who know they are blind who can receive their sight. He taught that God makes himself known to us in his word. This word, he continued, was made known to us in time and in history in the person of Jesus Christ. This word, he added, contradicts and condemns our pride, our self-sufficiency, our ethics, our politics and our religions, being both the word of mercy and judgement. The gale force of the word tears down the shaky structures of our pretensions, breaks down the altars of our false gods and destroys the artificial securities in which we put our trust. To all this, concluded Barth, the cross of Christ is God's final No! We are left with nothing but to put our trust in God and be willing to hear his Yes! behind and beyond his No!

By introducing and ushering in this alternative theological approach, Karl Barth shook the theological foundations of his time with lasting implications even for us today. This approach

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God says his gracious Yes to all of us' (Eberhard Busch, Karl Barth, E.T. 1976, pp.476-7, quoted in Heron's *A Century of Protestant Theology*, pp.90-91).

<sup>162</sup> These were slogans of some of his professors when he was at the university; they were now utterly meaningless to him in his desperate situation.

<sup>163</sup> Vilder rightly observes that it would be foolish to suggest that only the recovery of Kierkegaard was responsible for the coming into being of the dialectical theology. He adds that "There is a whole complex of circumstances and factors that must be brought into the picture if its genesis and vogue are to be understood" *The Church in an Age of Revolution*, p.212.



was clearly very different from the prevalent liberal theology of the time both in tone and in style; in fact, the two were markedly opposed to each other. This may clearly be seen in the three basic elements of Barth's theology.

First, God being God or the 'Godness' of God. This is the total otherness of God and the impossibility of coming to true knowledge of him by our own efforts. Although heavily criticised for being too negative and for virtually making it difficult for humans to find a God who is too transcendent, this basic element of Barth's theology is compatible with biblical teaching that humans can never find God on their own initiative. For God in his mercy and grace, avails himself for humans to find and not humans on their own finding him. God has done it all in Jesus Christ for humankind to receive by faith and faith alone.

Second, God's giving of himself to be known in Jesus Christ. This element later became the central focus of his theology. He made it clear that we cannot know the reality of God except through Jesus Christ, an assertion similar to what the reformers, drawing from Scripture, taught. This and the first element are somewhat the same.

Third, the impossibility of building theology on any other foundation but Jesus Christ. Barth insisted that any theology built on the contemplation of our spiritual navels or that which seeks to blunt the challenge and the promise of the gospel by trying to reinterpret or improve it is not adequate. It is far removed, he said, from the basis of Christian theology which is irreplaceable in the person of Jesus Christ.

This Barthian theological revolution exploded like a bombshell, sending shock waves to his contemporaries and leaving an impact that still reverberates in theology today. Much of this theology's foundations were based on Barth's commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, which he initially intended to be an exegetical commentary and wished it to be regarded as such. But when it first appeared in 1918, it was unlike any commentary seen before. It was rich in bold theological language and content. In it, Barth attacked what he considered as the degenerating of true theology prevalent at his time. The theological basis he laid in two editions of this commentary were later consolidated in his massive work—*Church Dogmatics*, a work he never completed before his death in 1968. Barth's social and theological impact was and is still greatly felt; only a few pundits could afford to ignore it with detrimental theological effects.

### 5.3.2 EXPLICATING THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

In addressing the problem of evil, Barth blatantly refused to write a separate piece of work on it. Like his ethics and dogmatics, his theodicy was an inseparable part and parcel of his doctrine of God.<sup>164</sup> He argued that evil does not deserve to be treated as an independent entity on par with God. As far as he was concerned, God and evil were not two equal entities in need of being reconciled or considered on equal terms. All this did not mean Barth refused to discuss evil at all. His treatment of evil in relation to the doctrines of God, creation, election and the work of Christ is very massive and extensive (Hick 1966<sup>165</sup>:132-9; Rodin 1996:4-5). Barth strongly insisted that the only unequivocal framework in which evil must be discussed is the sovereignty of God and his self-revelation in Jesus Christ. In that sense, one cannot meaningfully engage Barth's theodicy without engaging his whole theology. His theodicy is closely interwoven with almost every major doctrine he discussed.

On how evil is to be explained as far as it involves divine and human responsibility, Barth went back to creation and divine decrees. In that regard, he could contend that the fact that God resolved to take to himself and to bear man's rejection is prior justification of God in respect of the risk to which he exposed man by creation and in respect of the far greater risk to which he committed him by permitting the fall. But, continued Barth, we cannot complain because God put a creaturely being in this frontier, a being unlike him in that it was subject to temptation. We cannot blame God, he added, for confronting man with evil, an evil which in his case was excluded by the divine nature but which in man's case could be excluded by divine word and commandment. We cannot hold it against God, he continued, that he did not prevent the fall of man, his succumbing to the temptation of the devil and his incurring of the actual guilt. Because, explained Barth, in God's eternal decree, these things did not involve an injustice to the creature, for by this same decree God decided that the risk which he allowed to threaten the creature and the plight to which he allowed it to plunge itself should be his own risk and plight. By creating man, Barth further explained, God exposed him to the risk and yet from all eternity he did not let him fall, but upheld him even when Satan's temptation and his culpability resulted in a fall into sin. Thus, concluded Barth, even when we think of

<sup>164</sup> Barth argued that a good dogmatics is ethics; good dogmatics and ethics are inseparably linked and one cannot have either without having the other as well.

<sup>165</sup> Hick says that if Barth's 98-page section on evil in vol.3: 3, 40-page exegesis of Genesis 1:1-5; 58-page of discussion of goodness of the created world in vol.3: 1 and the 178-page treatment of sin and fall in vol.4: 1 were brought together, Barth would have a massive treatise on the subject of evil, see his *Evil and the God of Love*, p.132.



man in his negative determination, we will still think of him as the one whom God loved in his son from all eternity, as the one to whom God gave himself that he might represent him, bear his sin and suffer on his behalf what man himself had to suffer. It is in this sense, continued Barth, that:

We must insist upon man's responsibility for his failure to do in that frontier that which he ought to have done as a creature of God and hearer of the word of God. But much more, we must insist upon the responsibility which God Himself shouldered when He created man and permitted the fall of man. Man cannot evade his own responsibility by complaining that God required too much of him, for what God required of Himself on man's behalf is indefinitely greater than what He required of man. In the last analysis, what God required, consists only in the demand that he should live as the one on whose behalf God required the very uttermost of Himself (CD II/2, p.164-6).

Barth thus emphasised the divine decree in which creation, election or predestination were all contained. But what exactly does predestination mean? It means, according to Barth's account, that from all eternity, God has determined upon man's acquittal at his own risk. It means God ordained that in the place of the one acquitted, he himself should be the one perishing, rejected and abandoned—the lamb slain before the foundation of the world.<sup>166</sup> This God's eternal decree, said Barth, in the beginning was the decree of the merciful and just God, of the God who was merciful in his justice and just in his mercy. In what sense was he both just and merciful at the same time? He was merciful, he answered, in that he willed to treat evil seriously, to judge it and sentence it, to reject and condemn its author, delivering him to death. He was merciful in that he took the author of evil to his bosom, and willed that the rejection, condemnation and death of this author of evil should be his own. In this decree of the just and merciful God are grounded the justification of the sinner and the forgiveness received in Christ.<sup>167</sup>

If the author of evil is man as Barth seems to suggest, then he would appear to attribute the origin of evil to man. But if not, Barth's position on the origin of evil would in the least be ambiguous. Closely examined however, Barth seems to affirm the former rather than the latter, particularly when he insists upon man's sole responsibility for his sin and evil and when he does not seem to completely exonerate God himself at the point of relating his decree to human responsibility. Wherever one places him on the continuum, Barth remains non-committal on this issue, especially when it comes to clearly distinguishing the extent of human responsibility from the divine decree. He argues, for instance, that the fact that God

<sup>166</sup> CD, vol.2: 3, p.167.

<sup>167</sup> CD, vol.2:3, p.168.

willed and chose man, the fact that he predestined him to be a witness of his glory and therefore of eternal life and blessedness, inevitably meant that he was foreordained for danger and trouble. He was willed and chosen by God, he says, with limitations as a creature which would do harm to God by the application or misuse of his freedom. The danger-point of man's susceptibility to temptation, continues Barth, as well as the zero-point of his fall were all included in the divine decree—the predestination decree. They were indeed the object of divine will and choice.<sup>168</sup> Thus God, in ordaining the overflow of his glory, entered the sphere of contradiction where light and darkness are marked off from each other, where what God wills, the good, stands distinctively from what he does not will, the evil, where by the very existence of good there is conceded to evil and created for it a kind of possibility and reality of existence, as where it can and does enter in as a kind of autonomous power.<sup>169</sup> But, shouts Barth to silence possible objection, "the possibility of existence which evil can have is only that of the impossible, the reality of existence only that of the unreal, the autonomous power only that of the impotence".<sup>170</sup> In saying this, Barth comes very close to denying the reality and existence of evil as an entity even as he does seem to be affirming it in the same breath. In his *Church Dogmatics*, however, he makes it very clear that evil has no independent status, as it is wholly dependent upon God. He contends that evil can only be said to originate in God in as far as it finds its existence in God's rejection of it. It has no power except that which God allows it. Evil is therefore under God's control; it is his No! and left hand, the object of his jealousy, wrath and judgement. It is not the same as God and his creation; it is only existent in its own improper way, as an inherent contradiction, as impossible possibility (CD III/3, pp.350-2).

It is in this sense, according to Barth, that evil is permitted, for without evil, there can be no universe or man and without this permission God's decree will be something other than what it actually is. From Barth's perspective, then, the permitting of evil and even the permitting of man's liability to fall are God's will. Yet Barth still argues that the divine willing of evil has no proper autonomous basis in God. It is not as it were an independent force in conflict with God on equal terms. God wills evil only because he wills not to keep the light of his glory to himself but ordains man to be the witness of that same glory. There is therefore, concludes Barth, nothing in God's willing of evil or his choice of man that either evil or the doer of evil

<sup>168</sup> CD, vol.2:3, p.169.

<sup>169</sup> CD, vol.2:3, p.170.

<sup>170</sup> CD, vol.2:3, pp.170-1.



can appeal to as though evil too is divinely created or has origin and counterpart in God. For God wills it only as a shadow which only yields and flees; he wills it only because he wills the shining of his only true light which he reveals and imparts to man. "Thus we cannot present as proportionate but only as disproportionate the relationship between the good which God intended for man and allotted to him from all eternity, and the danger and distress of evil which he "permitted" and to that extent willed in the same decree" (p.170-1). Although permitted and willed by God, as per Barth's own account, he still insists that the only autonomous status that evil can have is that of a being and essence excluded from divine economy and rejected by it as the non-being which necessarily confronts and opposes being in the realm of creation and which has its basis and meaning only in this confrontation and opposition, only as the spirit of constant negation. Nevertheless, says Barth, we will take evil seriously for what it is in its own way—and only in its own way—as something allowed on the basis of the eternal decree. However, continues Barth, we will not make of the twofold nature of this decree a dualism. But how should evil be viewed in relation to the work of Jesus Christ? In Jesus Christ, answers Barth, we can see and know that this whole sphere of evil is something which has already been overcome, something which has been destroyed by the positive will of God and his overflowing glory (p.171-2).

### 5.3.3 *SCHATTENSEITE AND DAS NICHTIGE*

Central, perhaps, to Barth's discussion of evil is his attempt to distinguish between the 'shadow side' of creation or *Schattenseite* and *das Nichtige*<sup>171</sup> by which he means that which is utterly and essentially inimical to God and his creation or evil in its strongest possible sense. According to him, creation consists in both Yes and No, clarity and obscurity, growth and decay, progress and impediment, beginning and ending, success and failure, gain and loss, laughter and tears. In other words, life has both the bright and dark side; there are both thesis and antithesis in the theatre of life. This is what Barth calls the shadow side of life.<sup>172</sup> He explains further that the shadow side of creation is constituted of No and is distinct from God in that it pertains to creaturely nature (CD, vol.3:3, p.296). It does not exactly correspond to what has traditionally been called metaphysical evil as Hick alleges (Hick 1966:135). It belongs to the essence of creaturely nature; it is a mark of its perfection and it does not stand in opposition or resistance to God's creative will (CD, vol.3:3, pp.295-6). Rather, the creative

<sup>171</sup> This term better expresses Barth's originality. The English word 'nothingness' does not quite communicate the concept that Barth wants to convey. See translator's note on CD, vol.3:3, p.289.

<sup>172</sup> CD, vol.3:3, p 297-9.

will of God is fulfilled and confirmed in it. Barth argues this is only so because Jesus Christ has claimed the whole of creation as his work, adopting both its positive and negative aspects.<sup>173</sup> This is the shadow side of creation as Barth sees it. It is not to be confused with *das Nichtige*, that is not a special case of it but rather a menacing and corrupting power over us, an object deserving of our fear and loathing.

Meanwhile, *das Nichtige* is primarily an enemy of God. It is utterly distinct from the creator and his creation. God disclosed to us the full horror and peril of *das Nichtige* in relation to Jesus Christ. In this regard, Barth remarks: "When seen in the light of Jesus Christ, the concrete form in which *das Nichtige* is active is the sin of man as his personal act and guilt ... In the light of Jesus Christ, it is impossible to escape the truth that we ourselves as sinners have become victims and servants of *das Nichtige*, sharing in its nature and producing and extending it" (CD, vol.3:3, pp.305-6). By yielding himself to *das Nichtige* in the person of Jesus Christ, God made the conquest, the removal and the abolition of *das Nichtige* primarily and properly his own affair. Properly speaking, *das Nichtige* is that which brought Jesus Christ to the cross and that which he defeated there. Barth further elucidates that the concept of *das Nichtige* does not exhaust the full range of sin. For sin as such is not only an offence to God but also to the creature. Attended by suffering, sin disturbs, injures and destroys the creature and its nature. In that sense, *das Nichtige* is something more comprehensive than simply sin. It is an enemy of God and it takes the form of sin, pain, suffering and death. But God is Lord over *das Nichtige*. He controls it as an instrument of his will and action. God permits it to retain a semblance of power in order that he may use it to serve his own purposes.<sup>174</sup>

Three things become clear to us in Barth's discussion of *Schattenseite* and *das Nichtige*. The first is that *das Nichtige* or evil in form of sin, pain and suffering is real opposition to God. This, according to him, is not the same as creaturely finitude, imperfection, impermanence and limitation, which he calls *Schattenseite*. The second is that evil is under God's control. It is not independently existing on its own right, but only as an object of God's rejection, denial, condemnation, as an entity to which God has irrevocably said no. And finally God in Jesus Christ has defeated evil and brought it under his control. He uses it at the meantime for his purposes and will ultimately vanquish it when Christ returns again. But in all this, Barth's

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<sup>173</sup> CD, vol.3:3, P.305.

<sup>174</sup> CD, vol.3:3, p.366-7.



distinction of *Schattenseite* and *das Nichtige* still remains the most difficult aspect of his treatment of the problem of evil.<sup>175</sup> This distinction seems to be blurred in his thought.<sup>176</sup> Hick, who charges Barth with violation of his own principle of 'brokenness of all theological language' in Christian discourse concerning God and evil, is probably right when he accuses Barth of engaging in bold speculation in addressing the relationship between *Schattenseite* and *das Nichtige* (Hick 1966:143). Less convincing in that regard is Rodin's assertion that Barth has destroyed the link between sin and shadow side of creation (*Schattenseite* and *das Nichtige*) and by so doing created a breach between creation and the covenant.<sup>177</sup> This, he seems to suggest, came about as a result of Barth's insistence that the shadow side of creation was a necessary antithesis within the good creation which God took up into himself in Jesus Christ (Rodin 1997:190). While Barth may not be clear on what he means by shadow side of creation being good and necessary antithesis, he seems to leave no doubt that creation as God made it has both the positive and the negative side. As mentioned earlier, what he referred to as the shadow side of creation consisted in the 'not' as distinct from God and only pertaining to the creaturely nature (CD, vol.3:3, pp.349-50). This, according to Barth, is completely different from real evil which he calls *das Nichtige*, an enemy of God defeated, but strangely still here with us. He thus maintains a crucial balance that on the one hand *das Nichtige* can be reviewed and interpreted only in retrospect as something which has already been judged, refuted and done away with by the mercy of God in Jesus Christ. On the other, it can be reviewed only in prospect as something that will be finally defeated and eliminated at the return of Jesus Christ.<sup>178</sup> In that sense, *das Nichtige* in its reality, character, whether past, present and future is an adversary that God has regarded, attacked and defeated. But it is strangely still here with us if only by God's permission. As Barth puts it "God still permits His kingdom not to be seen by us, and to that extent He permits us to be a prey to *das Nichtige*. Until the hour strikes when its destruction in the victory of Jesus Christ will finally be revealed, He thus permits *das Nichtige* to retain its semblance of significance and still to manifest its already fragmentary existence".<sup>179</sup> It exists, explains Barth, in this already

<sup>175</sup> R. Ruether as cited in Rodin's *Evil and theodicy in the theology of Karl Barth*, note no. 21, p.188.

<sup>176</sup> Hick still acknowledges that the constructive value of Barth's thought lies in his distinction between the shadow side of creaturely existence and evil in the much stronger sense of enmity against God of which sin is a primary expression. See his *Evil and the God of love*, p.150.

<sup>177</sup> Rodin seems to confuse categories when he fails to clarify the relationship between creation and covenant. What covenant is he referring to here? Is it Edenic or Abrahamic? See his *Evil and Theodicy in the theology of Karl Barth*, p.191.

<sup>178</sup> CD, vol.3:3, p.366.

<sup>179</sup> CD, vol.3:3, p.367.

innocuous form as an instrument of God's will and action but it remains an echo and shadow. It still emanates menace, corruption, disturbance, destruction, and suffering in the present but *das Nichtige* is firmly and completely under the decree and control of God. As defeated, captured and mastered enemy of God, it has in that way become God's servant. It is a strange servant whose presence constantly reminds us never to cease fleeing to the one who had conquered it on our behalf.<sup>180</sup>

### 5.3.4 EVALUATING BARTH'S POSITION

What are we to make of Barth's treatment of *das Nichtige*? Two issues readily come to mind. First and positively, Barth does well to argue that evil is firmly and completely under the sovereign decree and will of God. He does well to maintain that it is broken, refuted, judged and destroyed in the mighty act of salvation accomplished in Jesus Christ. Barth admits, nevertheless, that evil still has some standing and significance in the present and that the final revelation of its complete destruction has not yet taken place, an event the whole creation eagerly awaits and expects. This is the cumulative point from which Barth develops his understanding of evil, doing so within the context of creation, providence, election and other doctrines. According to Barth's own confession, there is a paradox or mystery involved in all this. Evil is defeated in Jesus Christ actually and potentially and yet it is still here, inflicting destruction and suffering. Whether or not this calls the benevolence of God into question as Rodin suggests is a matter of debate (Rodin 1997:204). The Biblical witness and the Christian experience of evil and suffering in this life show that evil is utterly defeated in Jesus Christ and yet it still is here, wreaking havoc on God's creation.<sup>181</sup> It is firmly and completely under God's control but it still awaits ultimate elimination at the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. This is Barth's strong point, although his decision to call evil *das Nichtige* instead of *Böse* is unfortunate as Hick rightly points out (Hick 1966:141).<sup>182</sup>

Second and negatively, Barth's treatment of evil, like others in his time, remains at a speculative and theoretical level. It leaves those in concrete situations of suffering aside. While the tendency to theorize in theology is never unique to Barth or his contemporaries, it

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<sup>180</sup> CD, vol.3:3, p.367-8.

<sup>181</sup> If this were not the case, evil would never have been a problem to the Christians. As it is, it is a problem to them precisely because they believe that God in Christ defeated evil and yet it is still causing pain and suffering to them.

<sup>182</sup> While his decision to call evil *das Nichtige* may be regarded as the most difficult aspect of his thought on evil, Barth's major defect is that his usage of *das Nichtige* does not differ much from the usage that both Heidegger and Sartre employed, which Barth himself vehemently rejects (CD III/3, p.334-48).



is a little surprising that Barth is guilty of the same impracticality in his theodicy that he accuses Leibniz of. One would have hoped that Barth's bold theological statements on the absolute lordship of God and the complete victory of Jesus Christ over evil had translated into concrete proposals to those in real difficulties, struggles and challenges resulting from *das Nichtige*. There is, of course, no one final answer to the huge universal problem that evil is. There are no quick magic buttons to press so that the world is instantly cured of evil and suffering. But, it would seem, those who are touched by suffering and evil in one way or another tend to be more realistic and practical than professional theologians in dealing with the problem of evil. The late Mother Teresa of Calcutta was once asked how she planned to feed all the poor and hungry children, who daily poured into her Calcutta premises. Her reply was as practical as it was sobering: 'One at a time'.<sup>183</sup> That is what she exactly did for five decades until her death in 1997. She gave the dying and the suffering a solid hope that extended beyond their pain and tragedy. She incarnated the love of God and in that way magnificently modelled the presence and the power of God in the midst of evil and abject poverty. Her hands of mercy and compassion became God's means of healing the afflicted and the dying. The message of Jesus' cross was her source of motivation and basis of her selfless and willing service.<sup>184</sup> What would have happened if Mother Teresa had tried to first work out her theodicy or theology of suffering and evil before she helped the poor and the dying? What would have been the result? Things would have been very different for millions of people touched by her life than they were when she died in 1997 with the words, 'I love you, Jesus' on her lips. Her love for Jesus was the prime motive in her ministry to the poor and the suffering. This is evident in the preamble of her Missionaries of Charity recent constitution. It states: "Our objective is to quench the thirst of Jesus Christ on the cross by dedicating ourselves freely to serve the poorest of the poor, according to the work and teaching of our Lord, thus announcing the kingdom of God in a special way ... Our task will be to proclaim Jesus Christ to all peoples, above all to those in our care" (Mother Teresa 1997:55). That she did not provide an answer to or eradicate evil and suffering in the whole wide world is for sure. But her impact on the world as a saintly model of God's love and compassion in the midst of evil and suffering will be remembered for many years to come.

<sup>183</sup> Quoted in Steve Chalke and Paul Hansford's *The Truth about Suffering*, p.73. Eastbourne: Kingways Publications, 1996.

<sup>184</sup> Not everyone was impressed by her work of charity and compassion. A half-hour film entitled *Hell's Angel*, screened on British Channel Four TV on 8 November 1994, is a case in point. Both the author, Tariq Ali, and

She did not try to explain suffering and evil; she did something about them. The issue at the heart of evil and suffering is not why; it is how we practically respond to concrete situations of inscrutable evil or any other evil. What does all this imply for theology, Barth's or ours? In very simple but subtle terms, a practical theodicy is better than a theoretical one. Let theology be action-oriented when it addresses evil and suffering. Let it answer the question 'what do we do now or how do we respond?' not 'why did this happen?' If this was the challenge to Barth's theology, it is even much more so to ours today, a time at which suffering and evil are perhaps more rampant than they were at the time of Barth, especially in Africa. For Jürgen Moltmann the theology of the cross and hope provide the basis for practical theodicy. We examine his thought in that regard here below.

## 5.4 JÜRGEN MOLTSMANN: THE SUFFERING OF GOD AND ESCHATOLOGICAL HOPE

### 5.4.1 MOLTSMANN WITH THE POETS

Jürgen Moltmann is one of the most influential German Protestant theologians today. Born in 1926, Moltmann first experienced the reality of suffering and its relation to faith in God when he was a prisoner of war, 1945-1948. As a child he had not had any meaningful 'Christian socialization' as he puts it. He grew up, instead, with the poets and philosophers of German idealism. When he was forced into the German army at the height of the Second World War, at the end of 1944, Moltmann could only take with him for reading Goethe's poems and Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* and not a Bible. He only acquired one later at a prisoner of war camp in Belgium when an American chaplain gave him one. He immediately began to read it for the first time. This was the beginning of his long theological journey. He first studied theology at Norton, near Nottingham, England and later at Göttingen.<sup>185</sup> From 1967 to the present, he has been professor of systematic theology at the University of Tübingen. In his own words, theology has been and is still for him 'a tremendous adventure' 'a journey of discovery' and a virtue of 'curiosity'.<sup>186</sup> He further explains in that regard:

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presenter, Christopher Hitchens, were heavily criticised for the film. See *Mother Teresa* by Anne Sebba, 1997, p.122-28.

<sup>185</sup> *The Coming of God*, p.xiii-xiv.

<sup>186</sup> He said this in an apparent response to criticisms on his theological method. He admits that doing theology for him is both experimental and exploratory—a suggestive approach in the communion of saints in which we become true saints not merely because we are sanctified sinners but also accepted doubters (Ibid. p.xii).



In the last thirty years I have travelled a long theological road, a road with many surprises and bends. Very little that actually happened was planned. But since the beginning of 'systematic contributions to theology' which I began in 1980 ... a certain programme has emerged. I have followed particular lines. For me these lines point, first, to a trinitarian thinking about God; secondly, to an ecological thinking about the community of creation; and thirdly, to an eschatological thinking about the indwellings of God in his people, in his Christ, and in our hearts through his life giving Spirit (Moltmann 1996:xii).

His theological thinking has mostly followed these lines in recent years. But in his early years, the power of hope and God's presence in suffering were two themes which dominated his thinking, particularly in the 1960's and the 1970's (Bauckham 1995:1). Perhaps, his experience of suffering and despair in the prisoner of war camp made these themes more pertinent to his theological thinking in those years.<sup>187</sup> His theology and theodicy at this point were primarily concerned with the question of God's justification in the face of evil and suffering in the world. The main concern in that regard, according to him, was not so much to explain suffering and evil, but rather to provide hope for those who suffer that the promise given in the resurrection of Jesus Christ was God's final triumph over evil. It was to provide, in addition, an initiative for Christian praxis in overcoming suffering and evil now. In other words, Moltmann's theodicy, as expressed mainly in *Theology of Hope* and *The Crucified God*, presupposes a two-aspect possible response to suffering. The first is that 'innocent and involuntary suffering' must neither be justified by theodicy nor by anthropodicy.<sup>188</sup> If this happens, the protest and the sense of moral outrage against evil will be suppressed and infliction of suffering on the vulnerable will be justified. The second is that any adequate theological response to suffering must include a practical initiative to overcome suffering. This response does not exclude protest and outrage against suffering but it contains them and at the same time intensifies the chances of a strong initiative to overcome suffering.

#### 5.4.2 THE THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS AND OF HOPE

In Moltmann, therefore, the theology of the cross and the theology of hope are two sides of the same coin. The starting point of the theology of hope is the theology of the cross, and

<sup>187</sup> He acknowledges this in the following words: "...I believe that this—that is the theology of hope—has been the guiding light of my theological thought. This no doubt goes back to the period of my first concern with questions of Christian faith and theology in actual life, as a prisoner of war behind barbed wire" (*The Crucified God*, p.1).

<sup>188</sup> In other words, this is a rejection of attempts to explain suffering as serving some higher purpose for both God and man.

specifically the resurrection of the crucified Christ (Moltmann 1974:5). To answer his critics as to why the theology of hope preceded the theology of the cross,<sup>189</sup> and whether this is a step backward in his thinking, Moltmann argues, first, that his presentation of the theology of the cross is necessary to balance what he calls 'one-sided presentations' of it in tradition. He would like in that regard to make the crucified Christ understood in the light of his resurrection and therefore of hope and freedom. Second, that the theology of the cross should go beyond the limits of personal salvation into a new understanding of the concept of God as the one whose presence and absence are felt at the time of suffering and pain. Third, that the theology of the cross that he presents would go beyond a concern for personal salvation into liberation of humans in their new relationship and reality in the society today. Who is the true human being in the sight of the son of man, who was rejected but rose again in the freedom of God, is the vital question Moltmann wants to investigate. Fourth, that a theology of the cross he advocates would work to reform and critique the society, calling upon it to look at itself in the light of the cross in regard to its culture of violence and blood-letting. Finally, this theology of the cross is a call to a radical orientation of the Christian church and Christian theology on the crucified Christ. In that sense, Moltmann passionately contends: "Either Jesus who was abandoned by God (on the cross) is the end of all theology or he is the beginning of a specifically Christian theology, and therefore critical and liberating, theology and life". This must be so, he argues, because the more the reality of the cross is taken seriously, the more the crucified Christ becomes the general criterion of theology. For the real issue, at the heart of theological praxis, continues Moltmann, is not that of an abstract theology, but that of a theology of the crucified Christ (Moltmann 1974:4). Because "the cross is the test of everything that deserves to be called Christian".<sup>190</sup> Christian theology as such finds its identity in the cross of Christ and the Christian life is identified as such with the crucified Christ. The cross distinguishes it from unbelief and superstition.<sup>191</sup>

Furthermore, says Moltmann, in the crucified Christ are to be found the relevance and identity of the Christian faith. This Christian identity can be understood only as an act of identification with the crucified Christ, to the point to which one has accepted the proclamation that in him God has identified himself with the godless and the abandoned.

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<sup>189</sup> His *theology of hope* was the first to be published in 1964 before *the Crucified God* in 1974. Some critics saw that as a possible indication of change of direction in his thinking and approach, although this is not the case since most of his thought lines are still largely kept in both books.

<sup>190</sup> *The crucified God*, p.7.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.* p.24.



Christian identification with the crucified Christ means in that sense solidarity with the sufferings of the poor and the misery of both the oppressed and the oppressor. This answers as well the question of the relevance of the Christian faith in the face of increased apathy and unbelief.<sup>192</sup> Identity and relevance are complementary to each other because where there is identity, relevance is called into question and where relevance is achieved, identity is again called into question. As concerns the Christian faith, each simply reflects the other and both find a common denominator in the cross of Christ. Christian theology, therefore, is necessarily the theology of the cross if it is to be identified with the crucified Christ. It is a theology that must be worked out with and amongst those who suffer in society.<sup>193</sup> In praxis, the theology of the cross is a critical and liberating theory of God and humankind. It consists in following the crucified Christ and it changes both humans and the circumstances in which they live.<sup>194</sup> As far as Moltmann is concerned, then, the Christian church and Christian theology become relevant to the problems of the modern world only when they reveal what he calls 'the hard core' of their identity in the crucified Christ. Because through this 'hard core' Christians are called into question, together with the society in which they live.<sup>195</sup> This too is pertinent to the question of suffering.

At the centre of Moltmann theology, as discussed in *Theology of Hope* and *The Crucified God*, is a dialectic interpretation of the cross and the resurrection of the crucified Christ. Moltmann interprets the resurrection in terms of God's promise and hope as he does the cross in terms of divine suffering and love. In this dialectic, the cross and the resurrection are almost contradictory experiences. On the one hand, the cross means god-forsakenness, godlessness, death, nothingness and even suffering. On the other, the resurrection means nearness of God, life, hope, promise and everything. The dialectic of the cross and the resurrection of Jesus, in Moltmann's thought, therefore, represents complete opposites: death and life, the absence and presence of God, god-forsakenness and God's glory (Bauckham 1995:82). Is it possible at all to identify both of these experiences in one and the same person without making one or the other of no account? Only by the words spoken by the risen one

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<sup>192</sup> This according to Moltmann needs some balance between uncritical assimilation and escapist withdrawal. He further elaborates: "For the Christian faith to bring about its own decay by withdrawal into the ghetto without self-criticism, is a parallel to its decay through uncritical assimilation. And the decline into pusillanimous faith and superstition is a parallel to the decline into unbelief (Ibid. pp.19-21).

<sup>193</sup> Moltmann adds that "Christian theology is 'contemporary' theology when its thought is conducted in the sufferings of the present time, and this means in concrete terms, amongst and with those who suffer in this society" (*The Crucified God*, p.24).

<sup>194</sup> *The Crucified God*, pp.22-28.

before either of the two events took place. There was some form of continuity in the identity of the one who spoke and the one who later appeared. "What he said must have contained something in the nature of self-identification ('It is I'). In that case, the self-identification of the one who appears in glory of the promised divine life with the one who was crucified can be regarded as an act of self-revelation of Jesus" (Moltmann 1965:199). The resurrection is thus tied to the promise of God, a promise which is eschatological in orientation and whose ramifications are far-reaching for our life today. Moltmann further elucidates this in the following words:

The fact that the one who appears is heard to speak contains ... not only the element of self-identification, but also a constant note of mission and promise. The appearances of the risen Lord were experienced by those involved as a commission for service and mission in the world, but not as blissful experiences of union with the divine being appearing here. The commission to apostolic service in the world was held to be *the* word of the risen Lord. His appearances were vocatory appearances by which the men involved were to follow the footsteps of the mission of Jesus. By the revelation of the risen Lord the men involved were identified with the mission of Jesus and thus placed in the midst of a history which is instituted and determined by the mission of Jesus and by his future as revealed and made an object of hope in the fore-glow of Easter.<sup>196</sup>

This kind of hope, sustained as it is by the promise of the crucified Christ, is a call for service and mission today. While it may be considered to be hope for future divine transformation of reality, it is seriously involved in the transformation of reality in the present life. This is because hope for the future divine transformation of reality becomes the motive for Christian involvement in the present transformation of life — individual, social, economic, political — in line and in anticipation of the promised eschatological transformation by God.<sup>197</sup> It may therefore be said that the eschatological theodicy that Moltmann proposes is not an explanation or justification of suffering, but is one of hope as contained in the divine promise. This hope is the hope for liberation from suffering, serving as a basis for an initiative for Christian praxis in overcoming suffering in the present time. This hope finds its foundation in God's promise and serves to strengthen the protest against suffering and converts it into action. How can all this be channelled to those who feel abandoned and forsaken in suffering? What does the promise of hope and resurrection do to help those who find themselves in 'pointless suffering'? Moltmann's response is that this comes to them through their identification with Jesus on the cross. Through his suffering and death on the cross, the risen

<sup>195</sup> *The Crucified God*, p.3.

<sup>196</sup> *Theology of Hope*, pp.201-2.

<sup>197</sup> *Theology of Hope*, p.22-35.



Lord brings righteousness and life to the unrighteous and the dying. Through his death, he introduces the coming reign of God into the godless present by means of his representative suffering. The dialectic of the cross and the resurrection combines to change hope from being an eschatological event only into an event of liberating love for the suffering and the dying now. Christ's representative suffering and sacrifice 'for them' in his death on the cross bring hope to the hopeless, future to those who are passing away and new rights to the unrighteous (Moltmann 1974:184-7). The crucified God suffers with those who suffer. He is a voluntary fellow sufferer in loving solidarity with the victims of injustice, exploitation and suffering. In love, he comes alongside those who suffer and identifies with them in their suffering. The crucified God does not, therefore, keep his impassible distance from those who suffer, but he embraces and comforts them with his benevolent love and presence.<sup>198</sup>

### 5.4.3 THE SUFFERING OF GOD

Central, perhaps, to Moltmann's theodicy is the question of God's suffering. The full force of his argument for the God who suffers comes in the context of his theology of the cross.<sup>199</sup> Moltmann rejects the traditional doctrine of divine impassibility and wonders how the Christian faith can understand Christ's passion as being the revelation of God if the deity cannot suffer (Moltmann 1981:21). He contends that the idea that God does not suffer was borrowed from Greek philosophy and is unsatisfactory even when it is combined with the gospel's statements. He adds that it is contradictory and paradoxical to talk about the 'suffering of the God who cannot suffer'.<sup>200</sup> On addressing why the patristic theology clung to what he calls the 'apathy axiom' even though the Christian church has always adored and proclaimed the crucified Christ, Moltmann gives two possible reasons behind the patristic thinking. The first is that God is distinguished from human beings and other non-human beings by his essential incapacity for suffering. He is not subject to transience, death and suffering or he is no different from his creatures. The second is that the God who gives humankind salvation gives them a share of his eternal life, and by so doing he confers on them immortality, non-transience and impassibility. Such a God cannot suffer. Moltmann rejects both of these options and offers a somewhat mediating alternative that God suffers in an active sense of passionate love. That is the voluntary allowing and laying open of oneself

<sup>198</sup> Ibid. p.247-9

<sup>199</sup> Richard Bauckham rightly observes that Moltmann's development of the theology of the cross and therefore the suffering of God is a modern radical continuation of Luther's *theologia crucis*. See his *Theology of Jürgen Moltmann*, p.48.

to another to be intimately affected by that person. God suffers in that sense; he loves and therefore suffers. For if God were incapable of suffering in every respect, argues Moltmann, then he would also be incapable of loving. He would only be capable of loving himself but not loving another. So if he is capable of loving something else, then he lays himself open to the suffering that love for another brings. But by virtue of his love, God still remains master of the pain that love causes him to suffer. God, continues Moltmann, does not suffer out of deficiency of being, like created beings. But he suffers from the love, which is the superabundance and overflowing of his being.<sup>201</sup>

Drawing from Origen's insights into God's suffering, Moltmann insists that the suffering of love does not only affect the redeeming acts of God but also the trinitarian fellowship within God himself. In other words, both 'extra-trinitarian suffering' and 'inner trinitarian suffering' of God correspond. God suffers within his own being as the trinity. He maintains that we can only talk about the suffering of God in trinitarian terms as such is impossible in monotheistic terms.<sup>202</sup> But in what way can God suffer? How is this related to the suffering of Christ on the cross? Moltmann's answers to these questions come within the context of his trinitarian theology of the cross. In this, the incarnation of the Son of God climaxed in the cross on which God himself suffered humiliation and pain. What happened on the cross was happening between God and God. There God disputes with God; there God cries out to God. There God dies in God; there God is acting in himself. God suffers within himself on the cross (Moltmann 1979:63). In Moltmann, therefore, there can be no theology of incarnation, which does not become a theology of the cross. In that sense, the death of Jesus on the cross is the centre of all Christian theology. The Christ event on the cross is necessarily a God event. Conversely, the God event takes place on the cross of the risen Christ. In this, God does not just act externally, in his unattainable glory and eternity, but he goes on to suffer. The Son suffers and dies on the cross. The Father suffers with him but not in the same way (Moltmann 1974:204-5). Moltmann argues that the Greek concept of God's inability to suffer is not a perfection of deity but rather a deficiency. He also argues that a God who is only omnipotent is incomplete, dispensable and a superfluous being. He cannot be loved but only feared. He describes what kind of God is the God who is incapable of suffering in the following words:

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<sup>200</sup> *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, p.22-24.

<sup>201</sup> *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, p.23.



A God who cannot suffer is poorer than any man. For a God who is incapable of suffering is a being who cannot be involved. Suffering and injustice cannot affect him. And because he is so completely insensitive, he cannot be shaken or moved by anything. He cannot weep, for he has no tears. But the one who cannot suffer cannot love either. So he is a loveless being.<sup>203</sup>

According to Moltmann, this God is Aristotle's God, not the Christian God who loves and suffers the death of Christ on the cross. He is no 'cold heavenly power' nor does he 'tread his way over the corpses', but is known as the human God in the crucified son of man.<sup>204</sup> As the cross shows, God allows himself to be forced out. He allows himself to be crucified and is crucified, and in that he consummates his unconditional love and hope. In that way, the cross becomes the condition of his love. But the fact of this love can be contradicted; it can be crucified, but in crucifixion it finds fulfillment and becomes love for the enemy. In trinitarian terms, the suffering of Christ on the cross is also the suffering of God through the Spirit. The cross is an event of the love of the Son and the grief of the Father through which the Spirit creates patterns of love in human beings in revolt. Within the trinitarian theology of the cross that Moltmann espouses, faith in the cross of Christ escapes the traditional dispute<sup>205</sup> between atheism and theism. In this the cross shows that God is not only other-worldly but also this-worldly; that is he not only God but also human; he is not only rule, authority and law but also the event of suffering and liberating love. Conversely, the death of the Son is not the 'death of God' but the beginning of that God event in which the life-giving Spirit of love emerges from the death of the Son and the grief of the Father (Moltmann 1974:248-52).

Building on the work of Abraham Heschel, Moltmann develops what he calls 'the pathos of God' as a possible framework in which to describe the suffering of God. This pathos of God has nothing to do with irrational human emotions like desire, anger, anxiety, envy or sympathy, but it describes the way God is affected by events, human actions and suffering in history. These events affect God because he is interested in his creation, his people and his

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<sup>202</sup> Moltmann asserts that Origen is the only one among the Patristic Fathers who dared to speak about the suffering of God. *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, p.24-5.

<sup>203</sup> *The Crucified God*, p.222.

<sup>204</sup> Moltmann deals with the theology of the cross in relation to theism and atheism. He thinks that both have failed to respond adequately to suffering, with the former trying to justify God in the face of suffering at the expense of humans and the latter trying to justify humans at the expense of God. He suggests that only the theology of the cross can do justice to the question of suffering. In this, God suffers with the suffering and dying and gives them hope. Only the suffering God can help those who suffer. See his *The Crucified God*, pp.235-79.

<sup>205</sup> Moltmann spells out the essence of this dispute by comparing the Gods of theism and atheism in the following remarks: "The God of theism is poor. He cannot love nor can he suffer. The protesting atheist loves in a desperate way. He does not want suffering because he loves. But at the same time he protests against love which makes him so vulnerable and wants to 'hand back his ticket' as Ivan Karamazov said. Love makes life so lively and death so deadly. Conversely, it makes life deadly and death lively" (*The Crucified God*, p.253).

rights. The pathos of God is in that way intentional and transitive since it is related to the history of the covenant people. In that context, God takes human beings so seriously that he suffers under their actions and can be injured by them. His pathos is here not the capricious mood of some mythical god, but it is his free relationship to his creation, his people and their history. He takes the people of his love so seriously that he suffers under their actions and is capable of being hurt by their disobedience — hurt by his interest in them. His wounded love is his anger over his obdurate people.<sup>206</sup> God's pathos is reflected in human persons' participation, their hopes and their prayers. Suffering does not only affect God's pathos externally but also that God himself suffers in the human history of injustice and force and therefore suffering is in the midst of God himself. The pathos of God, as Moltmann understands it, finds its fullest expression in the theology of the cross. When God becomes man in Jesus, he enters into man's finitude and Jesus in his death enters into man's situation of god-forsakenness. That is pathos in action. Equally, God humbles himself and takes upon himself the eternal death of the godless and the godforsaken so that when he experiences communion with human beings he engages in pathos (Moltmann 1974:267-78; 1981:23-58).<sup>207</sup>

#### 5.4.4 QUALIFYING THE SUFFERING OF GOD

But in speaking about divine suffering, how does one justify it in the face of possible objections, which come from various quarters? Is it possible to sustain the contention that God suffers? Why believe in a suffering God? In what ways can this be done? In what has been outlined above, Moltmann's theology of the suffering of God seems to be possible and sustainable for the following reasons:<sup>208</sup>

First, the meaning and nature of love involve suffering. God is love and he loves. Love is not an activity that one bestows on others without being involved. There is an element of vulnerability in giving and receiving love, and therefore in laying oneself open to hurt and

<sup>206</sup> *The Future of Creation*, p.69.

<sup>207</sup> We must note here that Heschel does not share Moltmann's concept of the 'suffering God'. He called it the 'cult of the suffering god'. Probably influenced by his rejection of Hellenistic philosophy, Heschel castigates the idea of the suffering god as human's attempt to become like god. He attributes the whole project of the suffering god to ancient Babylonian and Egyptian deities who were subject to murder and death. Heschel does this in contrasting *passion* and *pathos*, saying that the former is applicable to other gods and the latter to the God of Israel, who is the Lord, concerned with his creation and not a victim of a tragic destiny. Could it be that Heschel is implicitly rejecting the cross and the suffering of Jesus? (Heschel, *The Prophets*, pp.319-22).

<sup>208</sup> Richard Bauckham helpfully acknowledges that Moltmann himself does not explicitly set out these reasons in his work, they are nonetheless evident in them, especially, in *The Crucified God* and *The Trinity and the*



suffering. By virtue of his love, therefore, God cannot be passive in suffering. Paul Fiddes puts it in another way: "Now, if God is not less personal, and if the claim that 'God is love' is to have any recognizable continuity with our normal experience of love, the conclusion seems inescapable that a loving God must be a sympathetic God and therefore suffering God" (Fiddes 1988:17). Although one may be called upon to watch the language of anthropomorphism when drawing parallels between human and divine love, there still remains the fact that we can only understand God's love in the light of our own experience of love. Otherwise, we fail to relate to it or receive it. Moltmann, as Bauckham rightly points out, does not equate the divine love with human love in every respect but he rather says that being loving presupposes vulnerability to suffering, essential to what is best and valuable in human love (Bauckham 1995:49). But in the same way, Moltmann still maintains that pathos, which is not deficiency in itself, should not be far removed from our concept of God's love or else God's love will not be recognizable to us. Thus, the distinction between divine love and human love in relation to suffering cannot be made without jeopardizing one or the other. Yet they are not quite the same in every respect.

Second, the central place of the cross of Christ involves suffering on God's part. Jesus Christ who is both God and man suffered on the wooden cross of Calvary. If 'God was in Christ', he suffered in Christ on the cross. If he was involved in Jesus life, work and ministry, he must have shared in his suffering when he died on the cross. Christ being one with the Father could have not suffered without the Father suffering with him. "For we must move on to affirm that the cross is an actualization in our history of what is eternally true of God's nature. If indeed God suffers in the cross of Christ in reconciling the world to himself, then there must always be a cross in the experience of God as he deals with a world which exists over against him" (Fiddes 1988:27-29).<sup>209</sup> Moltmann argues that if the deity does not suffer, it will be very difficult for us to understand the passion of Christ. According to Moltmann, the cross reveals decisively that God suffers, contrary to the metaphysical concept of God, which the Fathers borrowed from Greek philosophy. He contends that Christian theology cannot seek to understand the death of Jesus on the presupposition of that metaphysical or moral concept of

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*Kingdom of God*. Paul S. Fiddes has also mentioned these reasons in his *The Creative Suffering of God*. We will use both of these in evaluating Moltmann's theology of the suffering of God.

<sup>209</sup> In the words of Horace Bushnell, "It is as if there were a cross unseen, standing on its undiscovered hill, far back in the ages, out of which there were sounding always just the same voice of suffering love and patience that was heard by mortal ears from the sacred hill of Calvary" (*Vicarious Sacrifice*, Ch. 2, quoted in Fiddes's *Creative Suffering of God*, p.29).

God. For if that presupposition holds, the death of Jesus cannot be understood at all in theological terms.<sup>210</sup> Moltmann criticises and rejects the patristic understanding of the two natures of Christ, which regards the divine nature and human nature of Christ as impassible and passible respectively. Instead, he proposes that Christian theology should seek to think of God's being in suffering and dying in the death of Jesus in order to preserve itself and save its identity. It must think of the suffering of Christ as the power of God and the death of Jesus as God's potentiality (Moltmann 1974:214-5). Does God, then, suffer in the same way we do? What is the difference between our suffering and that of God? There are difficulties involved in dealing with the suffering of God. First, there is our finite knowledge of who God really is even though in Jesus we see him. We cannot know what it is like for God to suffer. Neither can we say he does not suffer since Jesus who is both God and a human being suffered and died. There is therefore a sense of mystery of which the whole project of incarnation, the suffering and death of Jesus are an inseparable part. God is too transcendent to suffer but he is also too lowly to fail to suffer. He is passible and impassible at the same time. Error beckons us when we make him either passible or impassible and not both at the same time.<sup>211</sup>

Second, there is the problem of the untamed use of anthropomorphism in our speech about God. To be sure, God does not have the bodily shapes that we have. But we can only think of him in those terms or else we cannot comprehend him since he is not limited to time and space. But that surely does not mean he is so transcendent that we can only speak of him in terms of what he is not. There is a paradox involved in all this. God is transcendent and yet he relates to us. He is omnipotent and yet he accommodates himself to our weakness; he became human like us, suffered and died. We are sinful and yet he loves us more than he hates our sinfulness. He is the giver of life and yet he dies in Christ and rises again in victory. There is therefore a sense in which he suffers and yet he is the only one who delivers us and transcends our suffering. God is a deep mystery which faith enables us to accept even if we do not fully comprehend him.<sup>212</sup> As Richard Bauckham wisely acknowledges, we may say that there is something analogous to human suffering in the divine nature, but we may not thereby

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<sup>210</sup> *The Crucified God*, p.215.

<sup>211</sup> It is said that the foundation of Marcion's error in his entire criticism of the creator or just god was his conviction that God must be impassible. M. Pohlenz, *Vom Zorne Gottes*, p.21, quoted in Heschel's *The Prophets*, p.299.

<sup>212</sup> This is the knowledge in which we are called upon to live in if we shall know God and our own misery. Blaise Pascal is right when he says in that regard that 'the knowledge of God without that of man's misery causes pride. The knowledge of man's misery without that of God causes despair. The knowledge of Jesus Christ constitutes



claim that we know what it is like for God to suffer. The cross and the whole enterprise of incarnation anchor our language of God in concrete human experience and history, a history of which suffering and pain are a part. But even that still floats endlessly in the boundless and unfathomable mystery of God's infinity (Bauckham 1995:69).

Third, the problem of human suffering demands a belief in a suffering God. This is the question of theodicy in the face of immense suffering in our world. For Moltmann, the cross of Christ tackles the problem of human suffering within the framework of soteriology and the doctrine of God. It would seem that Moltmann does not use the problem of suffering as an argument for divine impassibility. While sharing the modern widespread Christian feeling that a loving God cannot be perceived to remain passive in the suffering of the world, he does not turn this into an argument for God's impassibility. According to him, there is only one way of knowing what suffering is really like: the cross of Christ. But in what way then does the problem of human suffering demand a belief in a suffering God? What does this mean to the victims of suffering such as those in the Sudan? In suffering, at one level, it is a consolation to those who suffer to know that God suffers too. To know of his suffering, whatever it may be, along with those who suffer means that he understands their situation; it is a clear message that he has not forgotten their hurt and pain. The knowledge that he is the one who is always present in suffering as the cross of his son shows, brings solace to those who suffer. At another level, by knowing that God suffers too, those who suffer will not think of God as the one who is inflicting suffering on them. While the victims of suffering may protest and get angry at God for his seeming slowness to intervene in their predicament, the thought of his sharing in the same suffering is somewhat liberating and comforting. God's suffering with those who suffer, at yet another level, speaks of the prospect of his ultimate intervention and redemption of those who suffer. He may now seem slow to intervene, but all or any hope of deliverance is firmly pinned on him. For the suffering God is also the deliverer of those who suffer. His suffering is the means by which he redeems and delivers as indicated by Jesus' death on the cross.

#### 5.4.5 EVALUATING MOLTSMANN

What are some possible implications of Moltmann's theodicy? Where and how is it different from what we have thus far considered? First, we note that his theodicy is rooted in the cross

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the middle cause, because in him we find both God and our misery' (*Pensee*, p.526-7, quoted in Moltmann's *the Crucified God*, p.281.n.no 33).

and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In that sense, the cross speaks of God's solidarity in suffering with those who now suffer. Moltmann does not pretend to solve or explain suffering. His view of divine solidarity with those who suffer and feel abandoned involves neither the denial of the horror of the cross nor the negation of God's presence in it. Suffering is thus understood within the dialectic of the cross and the resurrection. However, Moltmann's response to the problem of suffering still falls in the context of its recent discussions within the Western European theological thought. His main dialogue partners in that case are Dostoyevsky, Camus and Wiesel.<sup>213</sup> He rejects both the theistic and atheistic view points and presents the theology of the cross as God's response to suffering. According to him, the cross is the only way past protest atheism. Because it understands God as the suffering God in the suffering of Christ and it cries out with Jesus 'my God, my God, why have you forsaken me'. In the theology of the cross, therefore, God and suffering are no longer contradictions, as it is the case in atheism and theism. But God's being is in suffering and suffering is in God's being, because God is love (Moltmann 1974:226). In a sense, this response may be regarded as faithful to the historic Christian incarnational understanding of the cross and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Whether it is an 'authentically Christian response to the characteristically modern perception of the world' like other aspects of Moltmann's theology, as Bauckham suggests, is open to question (Bauckham 1995:71). In very general terms, Moltmann's treatment of the problem of suffering still remains within the larger spectrum of theoretical Western thought. It has no tangible experience of suffering, poverty and oppression. One may be tempted to interpret his praxis theory as nothing more than a theoretical reflection on the faith as exercised in the Christian church in his part of the world.<sup>214</sup> But his emphasis on the suffering of God as evidenced by the cross and as a symbol of God's solidarity with those who suffer is a major strength of his position. It is a source of encouragement to those who face suffering such as those in the Sudan.<sup>215</sup>

Second, Moltmann's theodicy advocates Christian practical action to overcome suffering now. While admitting to inability to explain or justify suffering in any way, Moltmann contends for Christian praxis and protest against suffering within the framework of an eschatological hope.

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<sup>213</sup> Moltmann engages these thinkers under what he calls 'the theology of the cross and Atheism'. See the *Crucified God*, pp.219-27.

<sup>214</sup> Cf. Arne Rasmussen's evaluation of Moltmann in *The Church as Polis*, p.57-60.

<sup>215</sup> We must note that the cross of Christ is the most visible sign of the Christian faith in the war-torn South Sudan. Everywhere one goes, crosses are evident, not only as symbols of the church but also evidence of God's presence in suffering now being undergone. In the final chapter we shall later look at the cross in relation to suffering.



This hope should work to motivate praxis in the face of suffering at the present moment and cause those who suffer to look forward to the future when suffering shall be overcome. This hope is built on God's promise, which strengthens and converts it into action.<sup>216</sup> It is not an explanation of suffering but an initiative for Christian praxis now, finding in Christ not only consolation but also protest against suffering. Thus Moltmann does well to show us that the problem of suffering defies our best explanations<sup>217</sup> and calls for our practical action. Suffering must not be justified either by explaining it as necessary for God's higher purpose or serving higher human good, not obtainable except through suffering.<sup>218</sup> Any meaningful Christian response to the problem of suffering must contain a practical initiative for dealing with suffering. In this, a protest that initiates action against suffering must be maintained, not done away with. This is the heart of Moltmann's response to the problem of suffering. As a church, our response to suffering should be action-oriented. As Dennis Ngien puts it, as the church of the suffering God we must exist in and for this world, accepting suffering as we care for the needy, the sick, the poor and seek the liberation of the oppressed. If we admit in humility that God is found in the suffering of Jesus, we should be careful of the triumphalist language and instead come to terms with the reality that suffering and affliction befall all, even those who believe (Ngien 1997:42).

Fieteke Lugt whose son, Jan-Paul, was injured in a rugby accident seven years ago found out this to be true. Jan-Paul, who has become a believer and a quadriplegic since the accident, is always a source of courage, strength of character, loving care and honesty to many. His suffering in the light of his faith has helped him to appreciate life and value other people more than he did before the accident. And even though Fieteke and her family do not have any satisfactory explanation for this tragedy, they see it in a new perspective as the following portion of her recent poem on suffering shows.

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<sup>216</sup> Moltmann's suggested Christian praxis against suffering initially contained political overtones. *The Future of Hope*, pp.47-8.

<sup>217</sup> Richard Bauckham is once more on target when he remarks: "The difficulty with such explanations of suffering is not that they do not explain anything, but that they should not explain everything". Bauckham, *The Theology of Jürgen Moltmann*, p.72.

<sup>218</sup> This may actually be the case when one looks back after surviving the ordeal that suffering is but it is a terrible argument for the justification of suffering. This is especially true from the vantage point of the observer rather than that of the participant in suffering.

It is by grace that I can say:  
 Come in, my pain, and show your face.  
 Six years you've lived with me  
 As an unwelcome guest  
 But now the time has come  
 to greet you as a friend.

While strength and power helped me to cope  
 It's you, my pain, who helped me to grow  
 In ways unthinkable before.  
 And, with you, let me too invite some other guests  
 whose presence I so long denied:  
 Come in, uncertainty and fear,  
 there is room for insecurity and doubt  
 And you my little lonely girl,<sup>219</sup>

No longer do you have to hide.  
 I ask you all: Be part of me  
 You long repudiated friends  
 So that together we can work  
 Towards balancing the whole  
 In which each separate element  
 Can play a special role  
 And is respected for its quality  
 exactly AS-IT-IS (Lugt 1998:11).

These mature words of faith, character and courage have been born out of a tragic pain of a loving mother. Suffering is overcome by persistent trust in the God who does not abandon us in our sordid misfortunes. As Mrs. Lugt acknowledges it is only possible by grace to grow in our suffering and pain. Hanging on to such grace when we suffer is only possible if we believe in a suffering God, who is always present in our suffering. While we may not be able to fully fathom suffering and evil, we may take comfort in knowing that God works through it for our good as he shares our hurt and pain. The cross and the suffering of Christ show us that God feels our pain and shares our hurt. We do not need to fully comprehend suffering, but we need the grace of God to grow through it. This is because in every attempt to deal with the problem of suffering a sense of human ignorance and God's greatness will always remain. There are, of course, no limits to our questioning, but in the end we may find that all we can do when suffering strikes is to look at Jesus on the cross and trust in his unfailing love (Rodd 1998:95). We all respond to suffering around us one way or the other, for there is no one

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<sup>219</sup> This is a reference to Jan-Paul's fiancée, Joann Brown when this was written. Joann and Jan-Paul tied the knot in December 1999 in a colourful wedding. I have had the undeserved privilege of being friends with Jan-Paul and Joann for the last three years. We share our experiences of what suffering means in the light of our faith in God on many occasions. It is with their kind permission that I am using their story. For that and their valuable friendship, I will always be very thankful.



sensitive to the reality of God and life who can ever remain passive in the face of this monster. This is the point Liberation Theology tries to make as we explore below.

## **5.5 LIBERATION THEOLOGY: PRAXIS AND SUFFERING**

### **5.5.1 HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

Liberation Theology emerged in the context of suffering and poverty in Latin America in the late 1960s<sup>220</sup>. It emerged both as a social and theological movement. Initially, it was a movement concerned with the massive poverty, oppression and subjugation of the indigenous people in that continent. However, with the passage of time, Liberation Theology has come to be regarded as a disciplined understanding of the Christian faith and as an interpretation of reality mediated by the symbols of the Christian tradition that has grown out of commitment to the poor and the oppressed (Haight 1988:571).

In historical terms, the most basic explanation of Liberation Theology lies in the social and historical situation of the ordinary people in Latin America. Subjection to gross social human suffering, lack of basic human needs such as shelter, food, education and basic health services are behind the rise of liberation theology. Class disparity, which the traditional church<sup>221</sup> implicitly condoned, made matters worse for the poor and the oppressed and prompted the rise of Liberation Theology. Like the social gospel movement in North America at the turn of the twentieth century, Liberation Theology came on the scene as a response to this pathetic situation. Its moral vision like that of the social gospel movement advocates that the moral resources of the Christian faith should be employed to address the massive social human suffering in society. The essence of this contention is that the gospel of Christ has a word to speak on the desperate situation of the poor and the suffering. In a word, behind Liberation Theology is a rationale that there must be a concrete Christian response to the social condition of the suffering, the poor and the oppressed in society. As Samuel Escobar rightly observes, Liberation Theology is not just a new academic fashion, but its novelty comes from its source

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<sup>220</sup> David Bosch rightly states that there was concern for liberation in missionary circles prior to the 1960s. He cites the efforts of Bartolome de Las Casas, William Wilberforce and others in that regard. See his *Transforming Missions*, pp.432-3.

<sup>221</sup> The Roman Catholic Church is meant here. From its priestly ranks are to be found leading liberation theologians, particularly in the initial stages of the movement. Theologians of other church denominations later followed.

in a new praxis, in a new way of living and understanding the Christian presence and action in the world (Escobar 1993:331).

Although no particular names are officially associated with the founding and developing of Liberation Theology, some prominent Latin American theologians made vital contributions to promote and popularise it. Among these are Juan Luis Segundo, a Uruguayan Jesuit priest who attempted a systematic presentation of liberation theology in a five-volume work. In this, he reinterprets the traditional doctrines of the church in liberationist mode. His main concern, however, is Christology, which he regards as the starting point for liberation theology in terms of methodology. Gustavo Gutierrez, a Peruvian priest, is credited with the 'canonization' of liberation theology. His influential book, *A Theology of Liberation*, is highly acclaimed as one of the most influential books of the 1970s. With the publication of this book and his other work on liberation theology, Gutierrez is widely acknowledged as the leader of the liberation movement. Leonardo Boff,<sup>222</sup> a leading Brazilian Franciscan priest and academic is another prolific liberation theologian. Dealing mainly with methodological concerns, Boff, with his brother Clodovis, also addresses Christology, the church, grace and spirituality in liberation life. Not to be left far behind is Jon Sobrino, a Basque Jesuit missionary priest working in El Salvador. His work on church and Christology as method and content of theology is widely regarded as mostly accurate. Other theologians, among them J. Severino Croatto,<sup>223</sup> Porfirio Miranda have worked hard to provide hermeneutical foundations for Liberation Theology. Protestant theologians such as Uruguayan Emilio Castro, Argentinian Miguez Bonino, Brazilian Rubem Alves, South African Desmond Tutu and many others have adopted liberation perspectives and themes to meet challenges of suffering and oppression in their particular contexts. All these theologians share the conviction that unjust structures in society have a dehumanizing effect that contradicts God's design and therefore deserves urgent action to alleviate suffering and oppression in society. This action in history must aim to keep human life what God wants it to be. As a

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<sup>222</sup> His summons to the Vatican in 1984 to account for his theology caused a stir and made headlines in the world, helping to promote the course of Liberation Theology across the globe. He remarks concerning this incident: "I went to Rome as a Catholic theologian. I returned from Rome as a Catholic theologian. I hope to continue with my ministry of reflection, within the pilgrim(age) of our Church... with humility and courage, as a servant of the gospel who has only done what was expected of him" (*Liberation Theology: From confrontation to dialogue*, p.91).

<sup>223</sup> His *Exodus: A Hermeneutics of Freedom* is a classic example of his approach. His hermeneutics is a constant 're-reading of the texts in the light of processes that bring the meaning out of hiding'. His is therefore an 'adjustable' hermeneutics, trying to lay hold of God in concrete happenings in a discourse that is ever new. See *Exodus*, p.IV.



consequence, all believers are called upon to take part in the process of liberating the poor and alleviating human suffering.

In terms of methodology, liberation theology starts off by analysing and describing the human situation, and proceeds by presenting a theological teaching as a response to that situation. Croatto insists in this regard that the facts of our life in the world are prior to the biblical text not the other way. For "I do not first carry out an exegesis of the biblical passages and *subsequently* relate it to the facts of our world or our oppressed continent. Rather, the facts must be, and are *prior* to my interpretation of the biblical word. Only thus is my interpretation eisegetical and not purely exegetical" (Croatto 1981:11). The situation of human suffering and oppression thus analysed and described is then allowed to pose questions to the reinterpreted doctrines in order to elicit necessary action in specific situations. Situational analysis in this regard requires the use of the social sciences, a fundamental procedure for Liberation Theology.<sup>224</sup> This is based on the assumption that the social world properly understood is the milieu in which the oppressed, the poor and the suffering live and it governs the moral consequences of a faith that seeks to respond to oppression, poverty and social human suffering. Liberation theology does not, therefore, hesitate to take advantage of sociology, anthropology, history, economics and politics to mediate a theory of knowledge that captures theological imagination. Building on these, it realises that the dominating forces of society intrinsically influence all human language and conception, including theology. Therefore, social analysis of the situation of oppression and suffering situation opens up the way for reinterpretation and calls into question traditional theological understandings. Issues and situations are then seen in a new light and necessary action is taken to attend to possible root causes of poverty, oppression and suffering in society.

### 5.5.2 THEMES AND EMPHASES IN RELATION TO SUFFERING

But what are some emphases and themes of Liberation Theology that relate to suffering? How do these differ from dominant traditional interpretations? Major emphases and themes of Liberation Theology reveal a certain appeal and practicality in oppression and suffering conditions. It goes without saying that these are only drawn reinterpretations of traditional Christian doctrines applied to the contexts of human suffering and poverty that Liberation

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<sup>224</sup> Praxis for liberation theologians has at times meant involvement in the cause of social and political liberation as defined by Marxist analysis of history and social reality. This was a point of serious criticism of liberation theologians when Marxism held considerable sway on the world. With the collapse of Communism and Marxism more than a decade ago that charge has lost its sting.

Theology seeks to address. First, the universal offer of God's grace is advocated. The grace of God is seen as being effective in a fundamental way in all situations and aspects of life, including poverty and human suffering. The universality of grace presupposes the universality of salvation. Salvation is all-inclusive, having value for this world and the one to come. In the words of Gustavo Gutierrez: "Salvation is not something otherworldly, in regard to which the present life is merely a test. Salvation — the communion of men with God and the communion of men among themselves — is something which embraces all human reality, transforms it, and leads it to its fullness in Christ" (Gutierrez 1974:151). In the face of this grace and the salvation resulting from it, the dichotomy between the spiritual and the secular is out of the question. All areas of life are included, attributing all practical salvific values to it. In Liberation Theology, in that sense, the whole of human life is an encounter with God's saving grace.

Second, the central place of Jesus Christ as the liberator is emphasized. "Christ is presented as the one who brings us liberation. Christ the savior liberates man from sin, which is the root of all disruption of friendship and of injustice and oppression. Christ makes man truly free, that is to say, he enables man to live in communion with him; and this is the basis of all human brotherhood".<sup>225</sup> Jesus Christ as revealed in the gospels is the focal point of the doctrine of God in Liberation Theology. In the praxis of Jesus, liberation theology finds the nature and the will of God for human existence. Jesus lived in obedience and commitment to the will of the Father, which involved the concern for the poor, the oppressed, the suffering and the marginalised in society. He opted to be identified with those who were outcasts and those who were pushed to the periphery of social acceptance in society. Jesus is the liberator; he is the focal point of constructive theological imagination in all liberation theologies. The liberation that Jesus brings, according to liberationists, is mainly of a political nature. It may be equated with the removal of the evil social, economic and political structures and installation of the kingdom structures that favour the poor and the oppressed. But, as David Bosch observes, it is doubtful that Jesus intended to launch a people's movement for political liberation or that his inaugural sermon at Nazareth could be regarded as a manifesto for a popular uprising. It is, however, difficult, concludes Bosch, to deny that Jesus exerted himself for fundamental changes in the society of his day (Bosch 1991:101).

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<sup>225</sup> Gutierrez, *Theology of Liberation*, p.37.



Third, spirituality is perceived to be integral to all aspects of Christian life. It is revealed in Jesus and is inspired by the Spirit. Spirituality is a holistic way of life before God and man. According to Gustavo Gutierrez, spirituality is a concrete manner, inspired by the Spirit, of living the gospel; it is a definite way of living in solidarity with all people, especially the poor and the suffering. It is a re-ordering of our understanding of unknown or forgotten aspects of Christian life which must be converted into life, prayer, commitment and action in the present (Gutierrez 1994:204). Such spirituality should spur us on to hope and action in the face of the reality of evil and suffering in our world. This spirituality is a union with God, expressed in our solidarity with those who suffer poverty and oppression. Therefore, the integrality of spirituality, in liberation terms, means the subsuming of the individual, the communal and the transcendent dimensions of our life into a much more wider and more holistic view of the Christian faith. This is what can preserve the individual, the communal, and the transcendent dimensions of our life. True spirituality is a communal and individual practical exercise at the same time, particularly in regard to our response to suffering.

Fourth, the primary function of the church is seen in its relation to the world. From a liberation perspective, the church has a mission in the world for all aspects of life (Segundo 1979:240-59). In the words of Oscar Romero "the essence of the church lies in its mission of service to the world, its mission to save the world in its totality, and of saving it in history, here and now. The church exists to act in solidarity with the hopes and joys, the anxieties and sorrows, of men and women" (Romero 1980:294).<sup>226</sup> In liberationist ethics, the church is a sign of God's moral values revealed in Jesus Christ before the world. The heart of its spirituality and ministry in the world are better expressed in solidarity with the poor, the oppressed and the suffering. The church transforms the society in its identification with the poor and the oppressed. It should not, therefore, idealise poverty, but it should work to abolish it since it is an evil. Miguez Bonino argues in that regard that poverty—and suffering for that matter—is intolerable because it contradicts God's purpose and his mandate of creation. It breaks human solidarity and consequently destroys communion among men and with God (Bonino 1975:112). Poverty is to be fought and destroyed and in that process to achieve God's salvation as Gutierrez argues. As the church, we are required to be in solidarity

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<sup>226</sup> Archbishop Oscar Romero was later assassinated while celebrating Mass in San Salvador, on March 24, 1980. This happened roughly two months after uttering these words at an occasion at the University of Louvain, Belgium, at which an honorary doctoral degree was conferred on him for his work among the poor in El Salvador, on February 2, 1980. See Alfred T. Hennelly (editor) *Liberation Theology: A documentary History*, pp.292-303.

with the poor and thus challenge the exploitation that victimises them (Gutierrez 1997:14).<sup>227</sup>

Finally, the kingdom of God is emphasized. This is done in the context of an eschatology, which is mainly this-worldly; bringing about change and justice in the present society. In this, the hope of ultimate victory over all that oppresses and enslaves is passionately entertained and may be brought about through revolutionary and other political means.<sup>228</sup> From the teachings of Jesus in the gospel this message of the kingdom of God is drawn as the overall theme advocated in Liberation Theology. The praxis of the kingdom as shown in the ministry of Jesus has an undeniable bearing on the present reality of suffering and poverty and it holds hope for the future deliverance of the oppressed, according to liberationist understanding. These emphases and themes, in addition to many more, have had an enormous impact on Christian doctrine and practice across denominational lines. Hence, the effect and significance of Liberation Theology have gone far beyond its cradle. Liberation Theology has thus inspired Black theology, political theology, and feminist theology among others. Liberation Theology and this cluster of theologies are attempts to interpret the Christian faith and doctrine if only to elicit a responsible Christian response to the vexing universal problem of suffering in its myriad forms. For suffering and evil, whatever form they take, are always serious challenges to the practicality of faith and doctrine. These attempts draw resources and build their case on the theological and social teachings of the church.

### 5.5.3 ORTHOPRAXIS VERSUS ORTHODOXY

How are do themes different from traditional Christian interpretations of theology and especially in regard to the problem of human suffering? First, liberation theologians, with some justification, view themselves as practical theodiscists. They reject traditional

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<sup>227</sup> This way of looking at the role of the church has not escaped criticism. Evangelical theologians from Latin America have argued that the primary aim of the church is individual salvation and that the social concerns are of secondary importance. Emilio Nunez has argued that the Evangelicals of Latin America know that the reality of poverty is evident but that their concern is with the causes and cure of poverty not with its reality (Nunez 1985:26-7).

<sup>228</sup> Liberation theologians take liberty to interpret the message of the kingdom of God and other Christian doctrines in political and social terms. Sin, grace, salvation, etc, do not only refer to individual personal realities but also to social structures which must be destroyed if the kingdom of God will be ushered in. There had been times at which violence was used against the establishment. A case in point is Camilo Torres, a liberationist Colombian Catholic priest who joined the guerrillas and was killed in a military encounter. He believed that taking part in the revolutionary struggle was a Christian priestly act. He argued that love could only be maintained through revolution. See Dan Cohn-Sherbok, 'Theology as Praxis' in *Companion Encyclopedia of Theology*, pp.1001-15, edited by Peter Byrne and Leslie Houlden, 1995. Cf Gutierrez's *A Theology of Liberation*, pp.36-7.



preoccupation with orthodoxy and advocate orthopraxis instead. The basic rationale behind this is that the world is not to be explained but transformed. Suffering, in that sense, does not need elaborate philosophical and theological analysis in order to be eradicated, but it needs redemptive praxis. The essence of this praxis, from a liberation perspective, necessitates that social and political structures have to be replaced with a just and righteous system if suffering and oppression are to be eliminated in society. Evil and suffering are thus located in the oppressive and unjust systems of the world, and not in some personal sin or fallen nature. But this does not mean liberation theology denies human sinfulness or salvation and other issues of faith, for it is faith in the Triune God, which is one point of departure for the theology of liberation. As Desmond Tutu writes, 'liberation theology is in a sense really a theodicy. It seeks to justify God and the ways of God to a downtrodden and perplexed people so that they can be inspired to do something about their lot' (Tutu 1979:163). In this kind of theodicy, according to Tutu, the victims of oppression and suffering do not doubt God's power, righteousness and goodness. Their problem arises precisely because they have believed that God is good, loving and powerful. Tutu has thus succinctly pointed out what constitutes one basic difference between liberation theology and traditional theology, namely theodicy. Indeed, Tutu forcefully argues that this is the genesis of all liberation theologies. He explains it in these words:

All liberation theology stems from trying to make sense of human suffering when those who suffer are the victims of organized oppression and exploitation, when they are emasculated and treated as less than what they are: human persons created in the image of the Triune God, redeemed by the one savior Jesus Christ and sanctified by the Holy Paraclete. This is the genesis of all liberation theology and so also of Black theology, which is a theology of liberation in Africa.<sup>229</sup>

Even though Tutu is speaking in the context of apartheid, his point that liberation theology is a theodicy is insightful. Gutierrez shares his comments when he says that human suffering, involvement with it, and the questions it raises about God are in fact one point of departure and one central theme in the theology of liberation (Gutierrez 1988:xv). It is thus appropriate to say that for liberationists, the locus of liberation praxis and response to suffering is social and political as well as theological.

Second, Liberation Theology perceives itself as 'a new way of theologizing'. Claude Geffre defines it as, on the one hand, a critical reflection on historical practice in the light of faith, and on the other, as a theology that not only addresses itself to interpreting the content of

revelation, but tries to answer the question, what is to be done? (Geffre 1990:181). Geffre goes on to show us what he considers to be the difference between liberation theology and what he calls 'European theology'. He explains that the former is a reformulation of the gospel to meet the challenge posed to faith by the *nonperson* while the latter is a reformulation of the gospel to meet the challenge posed by the *nonbeliever*. For him and other liberationists, the nonpersons are the poor, the exploited, and the ones that are not even aware that they are being exploited. From their perspective, the crucial problem for theology is to know how to announce God in the nonhuman world of the nonperson. There is no doubt in Geffre's mind that the theology of liberation is the only theology capable of doing this. But how exactly can it do this? By actively and effectively participating in the process of liberation it can do this. In some cases, that participation has included revolutionary means or even violence. Geffre elucidates again in the following remarks: "... participation in the historical practice of liberation has its own legitimacy and becomes a location of theology by virtue of a reinterpretation of the gospel message and of a more radical commitment of Christians to revolutionary activity".<sup>230</sup> He maintains that there can be no hiatus between faith and social practice because it is practice that will judge the truth of a theology. This is an implicit indictment of European theology, which according to liberationists has unnecessarily created a dichotomy between the social and the spiritual. Geffre and others seem to equate a theology based on revelation with European theology and hence his proposal that 'we should juxtapose a theology based on revelation to one based on practice'. However, the two may not be that exclusive. In fact, there is much in liberation theology that is still European.<sup>231</sup> Furthermore, Geffre contends that theology must address itself to the actual problems of life. In this, it must seek to answer not only the questions: 'What is to be believed?' and 'what is to be said?' But also the question: 'What is to be done?' This can hardly be contested. But Geffre seems to think that this is only a province of liberation theology over and against what he regards as a theology of doctrinal content and hardly of action. This provincialisation of theology is what

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<sup>229</sup> 'The liberation theology in Africa' in *African Theology en Route*, pp.162-8, edited by Kofi Appia-Kubi and Sergio Torres. Orbis Books, 1979.

<sup>230</sup> Claude Geffre, 'A prophetic theology' in *Liberation Theology: A documentary History*, pp.179-94, edited by Alfred T. Hennelly, Orbis Books, 1990.

<sup>231</sup> Jürgen Moltmann in an open letter to Jose Miguez Bonino in 1976 made this very clear. He was trying to answer criticisms levelled against him by Bonino and other liberation theologians. Moltmann explicitly accused Bonino of being too provincial in his theology and of being too European at the same time. Moltmann extended the same charge to other liberationists. His warning that theology should not be provincialised or else we will end up with what he termed one-sided theologies, is as true today as it was more than two decades ago (Ibid. pp.195-204).



Moltmann refuses to take. One may, however, agree with Geffre and his colleagues that theology should no longer be exclusively the *intellectus fidei* or a quasi-exclusive monopoly of a privileged few but also an action prompted by the love of Christ in a specific situation, an action accessible to the whole community of faith. Content and action of this theology are inseparable. If this is true of all theology, it is also very true of the theology of suffering.

Third, liberation theology asserts '*God's preferential option for the poor*'. It maintains that God takes the side of the poor and the oppressed. He defends and loves them. Christ identified himself with the poor when he came to the world and died. In very sympathetic words to liberation theology in 1979, Pope John Paul II said, "in founding his family, the church, God had in mind the poor and needy humanity. To redeem it, God sent the son specifically, who was born poor and lived among the poor to make us rich with his poverty". Liberation theology insists that solidarity with the poor be at the heart of evangelism. When the church serves the poor and draws near to them, it is following Christ in what he taught and did.<sup>232</sup> But why should one speak of 'preferential option for the poor' so as to do this? Is this not exclusive, especially, when it is asserted, as liberation theology does, that God takes the side of the poor and loves them? As already mentioned, one reason for preferential option for the poor is the example of Jesus in becoming one of us, being born among the poor and dying for the poor and needy humanity. Second, liberationists contend that Jesus' example in identifying with the poor demands that his followers do likewise. They should not only evangelise the poor but they should also allow the poor to evangelise them, allowing themselves to imbibe the humility and simplicity of the poor. Third, the connection between the gospel and poverty demands a connection between the church and poverty. The ministry of giving and sharing is an essence of that connection. If poverty is lack of material goods or an attitude of openness to God in acknowledging our inadequacies and failures and our reliance on God's rich resources or solidarity with the poor, the suffering and the oppressed, then we are all poor in different ways. In that case, the preferential option for the poor may escape the charge of exclusivity, which is usually brought against it. As Robert McAfee Brown comments, 'to speak of "a preferential option for the poor" is not to speak of an "exclusive option for the poor", as though God loved only the poor and hated every else, especially the rich' (Brown 1990:60). True as this may be, yet the vividness and candour of liberation advocacy for the poor seem to lend a hand to the charge of exclusivity. Hence,

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<sup>232</sup> See Ibid. pp.253-58 for the origins and prominence of term 'preferential option for the poor'.

Bosch's warning to guard against falling into the trap of "the church for others" instead of "the church with others", "the church *for* the poor" rather than "the church of the poor" is quite in order (Bosch 1991:436). Whereas Poverty is an all-inclusive category, comprising all spheres of life, it is not a Christian virtue; it is a vice. Therefore, speaking of poverty and suffering as virtues is contrary to the gospel of Christ. Poverty is an evil, which must not be tolerated but eradicated. Its existence, as Gutierrez eloquently notes, represents a sundering both of solidarity among men and also of communion with God. It is an expression of a sin, a negation of love. For that reason, it is incompatible with the coming of the kingdom of God, a kingdom of love and justice. Poverty, concludes Gutierrez, is an evil, a scandalous condition, which has, unfortunately, taken on enormous proportions in our time (Gutierrez 1974:295). Yet, we all still suffer poverty in varying degrees. While Gutierrez is right in his unequivocal condemnation of the causes of poverty in his context and further afield, his seeming reduction of such causes to the injustice of the oppressors, their actions and exploitation of others is simplistic. Because if that were the case, it would be easy to eradicate poverty by eliminating the oppressors. But Gutierrez and others who believe that removing oppressors is the solution need to heed Desmond Tutu's warning that the removal of one oppressor may lead to replacement by another oppressor. Precisely because our recalcitrant human nature is such that yesterday's victims may rapidly become today's oppressors (Tutu 1979:166-7). The oppressed may easily become the new oppressors (Goizueta 1988:162). The circle is endless, a fact which locates the cause of poverty in human sin, greed and selfishness. This, far from being escapism, is the reality of our nature and existence as human species, which need to be redeemed from 'us', from our tendency to inflict pain and suffering on one another, in order to value others more and honour God.

#### **5.5.4 AN EVALUATION**

Liberation theology with its emphasis on praxis continues to be a vibrant force both socially and theologically. For many oppressed and suffering people, it has provided a framework for understanding God's action on their behalf. It has given them hope that God is with them and will deliver them from their predicament. It seeks to make sense of their suffering in relation to what God has done, is doing, and will do (Tutu 1979:165). Liberation theology has done well to take seriously the socio-political dimensions of reality as pertinent and determinant to the quality of spiritual and secular life, which it refuses to dichotomise. But it is this emphasis that invites criticism against this social and theological movement. The charge of putting too



much hope in socio-political agenda or even at times glorifying violence as a means of ushering in just and godly systems refuses to go away. The multi-faceted content of the gospel of Christ refuses to be reduced to social ethics and politics. Other criticisms levelled at liberation theology include its hermeneutical selectivity and partisanship.<sup>233</sup> In the light of constantly changing social and political agendas in our world, which political message is the best basis for a contemporary version of the Christian proclamation? Does the theory of orthopraxis over against orthodoxy still hold where the liberators of yesterday are the oppressors of today? Where does that leave the message of the gospel, especially when the former oppressors see it as the instrument that was used to remove them and which is not being used now as effectively against the present liberators or potential oppressors? These are questions that need to be looked at.

In regard to issues of suffering and theodicy, liberation theology succeeds in asserting God's presence in suffering and his power to deliver from it. The biblical paradigm it draws from the Exodus story gives hope to the suffering people that God knows about their situation of suffering and oppression and will soon intervene on their behalf. Liberation theology challenges us never to remain passive in the face of suffering, our own or that of others. By rejecting the traditional theodicies and advocating social and political involvement to alleviate oppression and human suffering in society, liberation theology charted a new course for Christian life and praxis. But in doing so it does not go far enough. It still remains within the confines of our desperate human attempts to explain the unexplainable. Suffering is both a mystery and challenge to our existence as finite, mortal beings. As Kathleen McManus explains, "suffering constitutes the raw and immediate challenge to countless concrete lives running desperately short of expectation, characterized by rawness, immediacy, and dearth of hope" (McManus 1999:477). Suffering, continues McManus, is at once more immanent and more ambiguous in its existence under the contradictory signs of modern comfort and success. But when earthly efforts fail, we are held by the mystery of the hidden God in whom life is stronger than death and in whom human acts of truth triumph beyond our earthly limits. Whatever form suffering takes, it will continue to be the greatest challenge to our belief in the goodness of God, his love and power. Its paradox is perplexing as it brings us face to face

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<sup>233</sup> Robert McAfee Brown lists eight distinctive points of criticism usually brought against Liberation Theology. Brown, a sympathetic inquirer into Liberation Theology, refutes these points one by one. See his *Theology in A New Key*, pp.101-31.

with what are the purpose and meaning of life. And yet in Christ it is defeated, even though we still await its ultimate elimination, anticipated in future glorification of those who believe. Our investigation, however, continues as we briefly turn to Berkouwer below.

## **5.6 GERRIT C. BERKOUWER: THEODICY AND GOD'S PROVIDENTIAL RULE**

### **5.6.1 DEFINING THE TERM**

Berkouwer begins his discussion of theodicy by defining what it means. In his own words, theodicy is an attempt to prove that God's governing of the world is holy, good and just (Berkouwer 1983: 232). Against all complaints and accusations, theodicy attempts to defend God by demonstrating that there is meaningfulness and purposefulness in the activity of God in the world and in human life. In this discussion of theodicy such problems as human suffering, tragedy, misery, death and sin feature considerably. Berkouwer also notes that theodicy assumes an apologetic stance, reaching out in the midst of tragedy to make sense of what it means to believe in an eternal God, incomprehensible, invisible, immutable, infinite, almighty, wise, just, good and overflowing with goodness and mercy as Article 1 of the Belgic Confession expresses.

### **5.6.2 EXAMINING THEODICY**

Berkouwer then proceeds to discuss five forms of theodicy that have held sway on Western Christian thought for a long time. The first form of theodicy he looks at is the dualistic theodicy, which although traceable to Persian religions, had had considerable influence upon Christian thought. It posits a good, supreme god against an evil one, who is responsible for suffering and evil in this life. This evil being will ultimately be defeated at the end of the age. Meanwhile, dualism, as based on the eternal principles of light and darkness, good and evil, matter and spirit, as opposed to each other, featured prominently in Manichaeism, which immensely influenced Augustine in his youth, but which he later strongly repudiated. Next is the harmonistic theodicy, which Berkouwer identifies with the philosophy of Leibniz and Stoicism. This theodicy contends that our world is the best possible world. Berkouwer argues that this theodicy rests principally on relativising sin, a fact that plunges it into the basic error of assuming that human reason can find a proper place for sin in creation (Berkouwer 1983:



238). The third form of theodicy that Berkouwer discusses is the teleological theodicy, which insists that evil is connected with the purpose, with the *telos*, of things. It sees evil in the light of the good that results from it, almost to the point of domesticating it. The basic failure of this theodicy, according to Berkouwer, is its oversimplification of the awful reality of sin, death and suffering. Berkouwer regards, in the fourth place, the theodicy of Wilfred Monod, as a rehabilitation of Marcion, who taught that the OT God of wrath and judgement is different from the loving God of the NT, the Father of Jesus Christ. Berkouwer castigates the theodicy of Monod as a theodicy that justifies God by stripping him of his full Godhead (Berkouwer 1983: 241). Finally, Berkouwer addresses the christological theodicy, which he associates with Karl Barth. Here, Berkouwer seems to share the fundamental structure of Barth's theology and theodicy that excludes and condemns the idea that man should justify the ways of God to man (Berkouwer 1983: 242). But he takes Barth to task for exalting the love of God above other attributes of God, a fact that he considers contrary to the biblical concepts of grace and love. In the eyes of Berkouwer, Barth's christological theodicy is closely related to his universalistic doctrine of election, a serious deviation from the doctrine of limited election, which Berkouwer undoubtedly espouses. Furthermore, he argues that while Barth emphatically rejects natural theodicy, 'he suspiciously comes close to Leibniz's view of the best possible world.' And he thus exposes a certain speculative tendency in his theodicy (and his theology, we may add) as Leibniz does in his (Berkouwer 1983: 263-5).

### 5.6.3 THEODICY AND SCRIPTURE

Basing his understanding and interpretation on Scripture, Berkouwer sees all forms of natural theodicy as revealing something of a flight from God. Dualistic theodicy, for one, according to Berkouwer, resolves man's guilt into an eternal principle over which man has no control and for which he cannot be held accountable or judged. Teleological theodicy, says Berkouwer, tries to assume God's prerogative of using evil to bring about good in order to attain his purposes. Since this is what evil results in, according to this view, there is no evil for which to judge humanity after all. Harmonistic theodicy, continues Berkouwer, regards evil as a divinely intended element of creation and thus it excludes the possibility of God's judgement upon it. Monod's theodicy, charges Berkouwer, acknowledges a God who is unable to either create or judge the world. Barth's christological theodicy, says Berkouwer, considers the world confronted, not by God's righteousness, but enveloped by his love and thus the love of God dominates over the righteousness, grace and wrath of God. Berkouwer

*potentia absoluta*, but as a loving and compassionate Father, who works out all for the good of his children (Berkouwer 1983: 254).

But Berkouwer graciously concedes that our knowledge as human beings has limits. This, he says, should not frighten us but cause us to rest in the sovereignty of God's grace, apprehended through revelation. In this, God's wrath, man's guilt and the church's doxology hold our attention as we face our limitation before the mystery of evil. First, the reality of the wrath of God insists that sin may not be causally traced back to God. God is holy and absolutely blameless. There is no injustice in his dealings with man. His wrath is an implication of his holiness. Berkouwer further argues that dismissing the wrath of God, as simply 'an anthropomorphic projection' is a thrust inimical to the entire revelation of God (Berkouwer 1983: 259). This is because, in the words of Berkouwer, 'apart from God's wrath neither his righteousness nor his holiness, neither his love nor his mercy can be understood.' Furthermore, if the wrath of God were to fall, the reality of forgiveness would fall with it. When theodicy fails to recognise this, it runs aground in the shallow waters of human endeavour, trying to find an explanation of evil where only justification and forgiveness can provide a perspective. Thus, Berkouwer concludes, the problem of theodicy is at the bottom a problem of man's lostness, a problem of the prodigal son. Secondly, Berkouwer considers human guilt as a limitation of our thought. Human beings find it very hard to escape the reality of guilt. Whether they pessimistically explain evil, suffering and death as unavoidable realities of fate or optimistically, as steps toward a gradual ascent of humanity, the guilt still remains. Berkouwer contends that the above mentioned five forms of theodicy are humans' attempts to vindicate themselves and escape their guilt. But according to revelation, says Berkouwer, the confidence of faith in God's holy direction of the world is possible only in the recognition and in the confession of guilt, not in trying to avoid it. In that regard, in the confession of guilt becomes possible to honour God's incomprehensible government of the world. In Christ, we experience God's grace, holiness, righteousness, mercy and his wrath and our guilt. Being in fellowship with Christ, we can openly express our guilt and live in the reality of faith, love and hope. Thirdly, Berkouwer looks at the church's doxology, which he considers to be 'the profoundest of all reflection on the problem of theodicy' (Berkouwer 1983: 266). The church in the midst of the inexplicable problem of evil can still sing Hallelujah. This doxology, explains Berkouwer, is neither Marx's 'opium of the people' nor Nietzsche's 'Platonism for the masses.' Rather, it is the response of faith to the



incomprehensible greatness of God in spite of pain and suffering (Berkouwer 1983: 269-71). The church's doxology pours out in the context of biblical recognition that 'God inhabits the praises of his people.' God is, as it were, enthroned upon the praises, upon the doxology of his people.

### **5.6.5 AN EVALUATION**

Berkouwer's treatment of the problem of evil does not provide the solution, but it leaves us with the thought that the whole project of theodicy is seriously inadequate. It is wrongheaded in trying to justify the ways of God to humans and not the other way round. In another vein, the believing theodicy of Kuyper and Berkouwer while being faithful to biblical revelation as perceived in the Reformed tradition is still one among many. It has no satisfactory answers to this perplexing problem. Its major forte is its faithfulness to the biblical revelation of God as absolutely righteous, holy and good. In addition, its humble acknowledgement that we as finite beings cannot explain the infinite, incomprehensible God and his ways is another strength. That suffering must be faced, not explained, is the view of African traditional thought, which we examine below.

## **5.7 AFRICAN THEOLOGY: FACING SUFFERING AS REALITY OF LIFE**

### **5.7.1 A HOLISTIC COSMOLOGY**

The African view of evil and suffering, in comparison with what we have discussed above, is a component of a complex but holistic cosmology. This cosmology, as John S. Mbiti and others have pointed out, hierarchically consists of God, spirits or divinities, ancestors, the living-dead, the living, the unborn, the animals and the plants, etc. In this worldview, reality is a coherent whole and unity. Good and bad, evil and blessing, comfort and suffering, grief and joy, fortune and misfortune, life and death are all part of this reality. Far from being fatalistic, this worldview accepts that life is sometimes unfair and bitter. Although suffering and evil are never tolerated or fatalistically accepted, they are recognised as realities deserving of unqualified resistance and rejection in the African worldview. But they are still realities of life, as we know and experience it. They are recognised as the unfortunate lot of man that God did not originally intend for humankind to experience but which are,

nevertheless, experienced here in this world. Evil and suffering are therefore regarded as realities that must be faced as part of a tragic existence. African peoples are thus very much aware of evil in the world and they endeavour to fight it in various ways (Mbiti 1990:199). But as K A Busia notes, the problem of evil as so often discussed in Western philosophy and Christian theology does not arise in the African concept of deity. For the supreme being of the African is the creator, the source of life, but between him and humankind lie many powers and principalities good and bad, gods, spirits, magical forces and witches to account for the strange happenings in the world (Busia 1998: 197). Equally, many African traditional thinkers, as it is the case among the Akan for instance, while recognising the existence of moral evil in the world, generally do not believe that this is inconsistent with the assertion that God is omnipotent. In their view, evil is the result of the exercise by humans of their freedom of the will, with which God endowed them (Gyekye 1987: 128).

### 5.7.2 EVIL IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL THOUGHT

In African traditional thought, the origin of evil is assumed, not explained. Many African tribes categorically reject the idea that evil originated from God. Some, like the Vugusu of East Africa, believe that evil originated from spiritual beings or divinities. The Dinka of Sudan believe the *jak* or independent spirits as opposed to *yieth* or ancestral spirits cause destruction and suffering (Deng 1972:122-3). These divinities or spirits were nevertheless created by God but only became evil when they rebelled against God and began to do evil. Francis Deng observes that *jak* in Dinka cosmology act as God's police, executing his prescribed judgement on those who do wrong.<sup>234</sup> Mbiti believes this concept is a personification of evil itself.<sup>235</sup> What is more, there is also human responsibility in how evil came to be. In this regard, evil is supposed to have come about as a result of human transgression of a divine command, whose exact content varies from one tribe to another. But there is a widespread notion in African traditional thought that in the beginning God and humans lived together on earth and communicated frequently. But owing to some misconduct on the part of man or woman, God left the earth and went to live in the sky, leaving humankind ever endeavouring to reach him in vain (Smith 1950:7-8). A story of 'the fall', somewhat similar to the biblical one in Genesis 3, is thus given different forms and flavours

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<sup>234</sup> Deng elaborates further that the *jak* or evil spirits do not act only when called upon. All the unexplained suffering is attributed to their malice, although the fatalistic and guilty disposition of humans often traces the chain of causation to some human fault, if only an error. See his *The Dinka of the Sudan*, p.123.

<sup>235</sup> See his *African Religions and Philosophy*, pp.199-210.



in African oral traditions in an attempt to explain the origin of evil.<sup>236</sup> The Dinka of the Sudan, for instance, relate a fall myth in which the first human persons, a man and a woman, transgressed the divine command not to cultivate in a forbidden territory. The woman, who is regarded as the main culprit, ploughing with a long pestle struck the divinity and he withdrew from the earth. Having been greatly offended, the divinity sent a sparrow or a finch called *atoc*, to sever the rope, which had previously linked humankind to God in heaven. Access to heaven, where humans were restored to vitality and youth when they became old, was thereby, denied. This is how things were 'spoilt'.<sup>237</sup> Hunger, sickness, suffering and death were the results of this abrupt separation between humankind and God to this day (Lienhardt 1961:32-55).<sup>238</sup> This is how mankind came to be in its present state of pain and suffering. It disobeyed God's command and chose to have its own way rather than the way of God. Therefore, according to the Dinka, mankind has to accept suffering and death as logical consequences of its disobedience. Thus, God is not the origin of evil. To the Dinka and other African peoples such as the Ashanti, the Yoruba, the Nuer and many others, evil did not originate from God. For he does not do what is evil nor can he harm anyone. According to the Ila people, God is always in the right and cannot therefore be charged with an offence, cannot be accused, cannot be questioned for he does good to all at all times (Smith & Dale 1920:199-211). Rosemary Guillebaud reports that the Banyarwanda-Urundi peoples believe that Imana is surpassed by nothing. He gives life to all, does no evil and there is nothing evil in him. All good comes from him and if prosperity should cease to be, it is because Imana has withdrawn himself from among humans. For it is impossible that evil should occur if he is still there (Guillebaud 1950:186). The Nuer people of Sudan share this view as well (Pritchard 1956:21).

### 5.7.2.1 THE ORIGIN OF EVIL

According to John Mbiti, in nearly all African societies the spirits are either the origin of evil or agents of evil (Mbiti 1990:199). The living-dead who become detached from the living are

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<sup>236</sup> For further reference to the similarity of African worldview and the Hebrew worldview as shown in the Old Testament, see Desmond Tutu's 'Some African Insights and the Old Testament' in the *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, volume 1, December 1972, pp.16-22.

<sup>237</sup> David Bosch rightly notes that the word used for sin in several African languages means to 'spoil', especially to spoil or harm human relationship. See his "Problem of evil in Africa: A survey of the African views on Witchcraft and of the Christian Church's response" in *Like a Roaring Lion*, edited by P R C de Villiers, p.50.

<sup>238</sup> E. Bolaji Idowu tells the Yoruba story of creation and the fall in his book, *Olodumare: God in the Yoruba Belief*, pp.18-29. There are striking similarities between this tradition and that of other African people, including the Dinka.

also believed to bring fear and evil to the living. If they are improperly buried, neglected or disobeyed, they take revenge and punish the offenders. The living, therefore, bear the consequences of their actions when they experience evil and suffering because they fail to accord the living-dead the honour they deserve. Since God is always in the right, misfortune, suffering and evil come to man mainly through his own fault (Pritchard 1956:19-21). But there are times when evil and misfortune are attributed to God. God as the only one who knows all things may be held responsible for epidemics and afflictions. Mbiti reports that the Tilo people believe God has the power to kill and the power to give life (Mbiti 1971:81). Although God is not to be rejected on account of evil, most African people believe he is the only who can deliver from evil and misfortune. The Nuer people believe God is the only one who can remove evil and misfortune from their path.

From what we have seen, God may be exonerated of responsibility for evil and yet at the same time he is implicated. Whatever is the case, the traditional Africans will never reject God because evil, suffering and misfortune afflict them. Rather, they will cling to God even more in spite of evil and suffering. People may, however, complain to God and ancestors for the suffering or evil that befalls them, but they will never accuse them of any moral wrongdoing. God is the last resort when all other helpers fail (Smith 1950:30). He cannot be charged with wrong doing because moral culpability for this is always placed on the shoulders of humanity (Magesa 1997:50).

#### **5.7.2.2 NATURAL AND MORAL EVIL**

At this point, we must distinguish between the evil that humans do to their fellow humans and the evil that naturally occurs beyond human control. The first is in the context of communal relationships and it concerns matters of virtue and character. Among the Nuer and the Dinka people as well as many other African peoples, conforming to the norms of behaviour in the family and the community is paramount. Failure to adhere to these is a serious offence that may bring evil consequences such as a curse and death. But a person is not considered inherently evil or good. That is largely determined by his/her conformity to the customs and the norms of his/her community. If he/she acts in ways that do not hurt communal relationships he/she is good and if he/she does otherwise he/she is evil.<sup>239</sup> Whatever a person chooses to do he/she should be ready to reap the results of his/her conduct. This is because

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<sup>239</sup> Compare Mbiti and his discussion of concepts of evil, ethics and justice in his *African Religions and Philosophy*, pp.199-210.



most African people generally believe that good always follows the right conduct and ill follows bad conduct. Consequences of one's actions, good or bad, always catch up with them sooner or later. This is the logic in the Nuer religion, and to some extent in that of the Dinka. The essence of this is if a person keeps in the right, that is if he/she does not break divinely sanctioned interdictions and injunctions, does no wrong to others but fulfils his/her obligations to divinities, to his/her kith and kin, he/she will avoid serious misfortunes. A person may, however, not avoid those that come upon one and all people (Pritchard 1956:17). No one can avoid suffering but God does not punish those who wrong others unknowingly. However, the consequences of one's actions, deliberate or not, are accepted when they are exposed<sup>240</sup>. But there is still no concept of inherent personal sin that is not connected with one's conduct in the community. And yet, suffering in any form in this category is always attributed to something or someone in the community. In Mbiti's words:

Every form of pain, misfortune, sorrow or suffering; every illness and sickness; every death whether of an old man or of the infant child; every failure of the crop in the field, of hunting in the wilderness or of fishing in the waters; every bad omen or dream: these and all the other manifestations of evil that man experiences are blamed on somebody in the corporate society (Mbiti 1990:204).

Usually, that somebody may be a witch, a sorcerer or a magician. "The witch", as David Bosch rightly notes, "is sinner par excellence, not primarily because of his or her deeds, but because of the evil consequences of those deeds: illness, barrenness, catastrophe, misfortune, disruption of relationships in the community, poverty and so on" (Bosch 1987:50). In African traditional thinking, it seems, there is nothing that happens without being caused by something or somebody. It is true, as Laurenti Magesa correctly observes, that in typical African traditional moral ethics sin and evil do not and cannot exist in human experience except as perceived in people. It is people who are evil or sinful whether or not they are aided by invisible forces. For even when evil forces cause harm, it is because evil people use them to attain their own ends (Magesa 1997:162). People are, nevertheless, not inherently sinful but they are sinful because they do evil and destroy communal relationships. Thus, all that happens in African traditional society may be mystically or naturally explained, sometimes resulting in sustained communal suspicion and fragmentation.

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<sup>240</sup> Being exposed when one is in the wrong results in both shame and guilt. It may not be entirely correct to say, as Van der Walt does, that shame plays a more important role than guilt in African communal ethics. Guilt seems to lead to shame and not the reverse. As in the case of the Dinka, this is true (See Van der Walt 1997: 33).

The second is in the context of what humans suffer as a result of natural causes. This may be in the form of droughts, epidemics, floods and other natural disasters that may not be directly attributed to human activity. Suffering, evil and misfortune may be experienced as a result of these. But again, nothing in African society just happens without being caused by somebody or something. It is because of this that possible explanations of whatever befalls humans are always given. Soul-searching and witch-hunting inevitably ensue in the community if only to find a scapegoat. The evil eye or even the evil heart and the evil mouth, all due to jealousy, hatred and rivalry or even ancestral anger may be possible causes to examine whenever suffering and tragedy strike (Fortes 1987:211-7). Every aspect of human conduct in the community is a possible cause for the suffering or misfortune that is now being experienced. In some societies, it is thought that suffering comes to be because God punishes the offenders who contravene his laws. For the Dinka, as Francis Deng explains, anyone who is plagued by an illness or a disaster explores the depth of his/her inner self or that of his/her close relatives in the hope of finding the sin that has brought on the discord. So when the Dinka suffer illness or injury, they are likely to attribute it to divinities that punish wrongdoers (Deng 1972:128). Whatever explanation is given, human beings, not God, are primarily to blame for their own suffering which results from their actions. But for the Nuer and other African peoples, misfortunes ultimately come from God through human and spiritual agents (Pritchard 1956:18).<sup>241</sup>

### 5.7.3 FACING EVIL AND SUFFERING

Wherever and however evil and suffering come to be, they must be fought and confronted. African societies are never passive in the face of suffering. They try to do everything possible to alleviate suffering and restore health and harmony to the individual and the community. Sacrifices, libations and prayers are offered to God and divinities to solicit their intervention and help at the time of suffering. Sometimes, this help is procured; at other times it is not. Ultimately, resignation to the mystery of evil and suffering prevails when answers are scarce. African traditional thought readily accepts that life is fraught with the unexplainable and the unknowable. Suffering and evil, life and death, God and man are all part of this mystery of human existence in the world. This being so, suffering is, nevertheless, not fatalistically accepted; it is wrestled with. It is this wrestling with suffering which boils down to a

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<sup>241</sup> The Dinka too believe that mankind, as a totality, is subject to the one supreme power of God, for it is God who creates and destroys all men. See Francis Deng's *The Dinka of the Sudan*, p.126.



continuous struggle and search for the real meaning of life as it relates to God and the origin of evil. In Africa traditional religion, God is the complete other, the absolute sovereign one, external to his creation, so far removed in his solitary glory so as to be unapproachable save through intermediaries. At the same time, he is also thought to be immanent in humans as expressed symbolically in creation stories (Smith 1950:27). This tension in traditional understanding of God is particularly manifest when suffering and adversity are encountered. It is clearly brought to surface at a time of anguish, pain and suffering. We will now explore this in the prayers and songs of African religions, especially, those offered at the time of anguish and suffering.

Prayer in African traditional thinking expresses what is deeply troubling or exciting the innermost being. Praying forms an integral part of African religious systems. It covers all issues of life without exception. Prayer is offered in life and death, in sickness and healing, in prosperity and poverty, at work and rest, in war, adversity and peace, travelling and settling down, planting and harvesting, offering, dedication, blessing, thanksgiving, confession and the like. In African traditional religion, prayer is primarily directed to God and secondarily to intermediaries. According to John S. Mbiti, everyone prays in the sense that all present at the time and place of prayer are party to the contents of the prayers, and may sometimes participate by repeating prayer formulas (Mbiti 1974:3). There are many kinds of prayers in African traditional religion.<sup>242</sup> However, our major concern here is with the prayers of anguish and anger, mostly offered at the time of suffering and adversity. In these, the basic idea is wrestling and struggling with God, sometimes expressed in very strong language. Here the sufferers complain and quarrel with God for an alleged failure to intervene at the hour of dire need. Strong feelings are expressed in these prayers when God is addressed like a fellow human being. Thus, in African traditional thinking, the expression of feelings forms an integral part of prayer. Praying is not only worship; it is also a rhetorical dialogue, a one-way dialogue in which man's questioning and heart-searching in the presence of God and other spiritual realities occur.<sup>243</sup> Heaviness of heart due to bereavement or emotional distress is openly expressed to God in a combination of song and prayer. Rosemary Guillebaud, who worked as a missionary in Burundi for many years, recorded the following song-prayers. The

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<sup>242</sup> John S Mbiti has collected over 200 such prayers, in a book entitled *The Prayers of African Religion*. The prayers cover a wide range of issues dealing with faith in God, life and communal relationships. Suffering is one of these issues. I am very thankful to Professor Mbiti for drawing my attention to this rich source when he visited Stellenbosch for a conference in May 1999.

<sup>243</sup> See Ibid. p.44.

loss of a loved one precipitated this song-prayer and the bereaved in anger and pain accuses Imana of treating him unjustly:

As for me, Imana (God) has eaten me,  
 As for me, he has not dealt with me as with others.  
 With singing I would sing,  
 If only my brother (or whoever the deceased was) was with me.  
 Sorrow is not to hang the head mourning,  
 Sorrow is not to go weeping (for that will not take away sorrow).  
 As for me, Imana has eaten me.  
 As for me, he has not dealt with me as with others;  
 If he has dealt with me as with others, I could be the Scorned-of-Enemies  
 Woe is me! (Guillebaud 1950:198f).

Being eaten by Imana implies, among other things, having been dealt with unjustly by a God who is presumed to be good and just. It betrays the feeling that the loss of one's relation is like one's own death. But Imana is not a subject of rejection here. He is being indicted for not doing for the plaintiff what he has done for others. Imana has given to others what he has not given to the plaintiff. He has given them children, he has given them covered baskets or prosperity in land produce, and he has given them bulls and other blessings. Only the plaintiff has been forgotten and hence his protest and complaint. The ring of his complaint and protest is shared in the following song-prayer by another individual who is also suffering from some heart-heaviness due to a great loss in the family, probably the loss of an only son.

I do not know what Imana is punishing me for: if I could meet with him, I would kill him. Imana, why are you punishing me? Why have you not made me like other people? Couldn't you even give me a little child, Yo-o-o! I am dying in anguish! If only I could meet you and pay you out! Come on (Imana), let me kill you! Let me run you through with a sword, or cut you with a knife! O Imana, you have deserted me! Yo-o-o! (Woe is me!).

Strong words such as these express both faith in and anger with the God whose presence and absence are experienced at the time of pain and suffering. Faith in the fact that he is present even if his presence is not felt and anger in the fact he does not seem to intervene when he is needed most. Both the notions of faith and anger, in this context, denote a process of spiritual journey that leads to maturity in the knowledge of God and in the freedom to express deep human feelings to him. Humans argue and dialogues with God as if he were face to face with them. As Mbiti rightly points out, this is an outstanding dimension of African spirituality that should be carefully cherished, not ignorantly dismissed (Mbiti 1974:44). There are no atheistic overtones in the prayer. For in Africa traditional society, there is room for complaining, quarrelling or even fighting with God but there is no room for atheism. Belief in God and other divinities is an inherent part of daily life for all in the traditional setup. It is



virtually impossible, in a typical African traditional society, to be a part of the community and fail to be a part of its religious systems and beliefs. One is because his community is. He cannot be an atheist if his community is not and vice versa. There are, therefore, no practicing atheists in African traditional communities and there is no 'death of God theology'. This holds true even when suffering and adversity abound and when answers to the problem of evil and suffering are lacking.

There is another area in which the African traditional society wrestles with evil and suffering. This is the area of the invincible death. When death strikes dialogue between human beings and God is clearly heightened. In African traditional thought, death is regarded as the climax of evil because it takes away life. When a person dies, it is acknowledged that God has let him or her go. Although the belief that a person goes to another land when he/she dies is entertained, death is still a frightening experience. The prospect of dying, particularly dying childless is the worst thing imaginable that can happen to a man. But dying at a good old age when one has raised a family is not such a bad thing. Indeed, there are communities, which believe that such a death is not a serious blow since the deceased has left offspring to perpetuate his lineage. In all this, death still generates very strong feelings, which are expressed through prayers and songs. Such prayers and songs, teeming with sorrow, pain, agony, bewilderment and suffering, are uttered to register protest. Anger and blame are vented on God and other spiritual realities for not keeping life as they are supposed to. Consider the following prayer from the Congo:

O great Nzambi or God, what thou hast made is good, but thou hast brought a great sorrow to us with death. Thou shouldest have planned in some way that we would not be subject to death. O great Nzambi, we are afflicted with great sorrow.

This prayer is a thinly veiled rebuke to Nzambi for making people subject to death. It is, however, not a cause for doubting his goodness or that of his created order. Those are acknowledged already in the beginning of the prayer. The sorrow that death brings is the point being made in the prayer. The wish that God would have planned things better so that people were not subject to death is a universal desire that we express when suffering and tragedy strike.<sup>244</sup> The utterance of that wish is a sort of bewilderment in the face of the mystery of evil and suffering, especially heightened when tragedy assails. But the fact that one can pray at such a time at all is an affirmation of faith in God even if the mystery of evil still remains

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<sup>244</sup> This is my paraphrase of Mbiti's comments on the above prayer. See his *The Prayers of African Religion*, p.91.

unresolved. That one can pray at this time is a relief to a heavy heart of sorrow. Strong language and anger underscored in the prayer are part of the process of coming to grips with the reality of suffering and grieving. This should not be condemned but should be expressed and allowed to heal with time so that it may result in relief and restoration of the bereaved.

Prayers or songs associated with suffering and death also include accepting that death shall ultimately overtake all people but it should not call too soon. In the following song we see this thought clearly spelt out with the idea that death is not the end of life but the beginning of another life.

Would it were not today!  
 God, you have called too soon!  
 Give him water, he has left without food;  
 Light a fire, he must not perish of cold;  
 Prepare (the deceased is addressed) a place for us,  
 In a little while we shall reach you,  
 Let us reach each other (Dymond 1950:148).<sup>245</sup>

The pain of sorrow in losing a loved one brings out in us the universal feeling that death should wait a little while. We wish that it did not come at certain stages in life, especially if the deceased has not fulfilled obligations vital for life, such as marriage and bearing children or living long enough to enjoy 'food'. This is the reason why God is reminded that the departed 'has left without food'. He has not lived longer to enjoy his life, he died younger. But that is the nature of death, it comes when it is least expected as a debtor or thief in the night. As the Akan people say "everybody is a debtor to death" and that "to be in the hands of death is to be in the hands of someone indeed" for it is a matter of time and every "man will die and rot away" (Nketia 1954:128). In this song-prayer, both God and the departed are addressed. God is told to give the deceased some water and food. In this is implied the belief that there exists beyond the grave a land of the dead, where people eat and drink. Hence, the deceased is not really considered dead, but gone to that land. This is the reason he is asked to prepare a place where he is now going for those who are still alive. The hope of being reunited soon with the departed is expressed in the words: 'in a little while we shall reach you, let us reach each other'. The conception of death as a journey to another world may also be expressed in dirges. In these dirges, the departed is told not to give away secrets of this world to those in the other world:

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<sup>245</sup> This as well as the above songs and prayers are also recorded in Mbiti's *The Prayers of African Religion*, pp.88-100.



Do not say anything,  
 Yaa Nyaako (the departed name), do not say anything.  
 If you did your speech will be long.  
 When you arrive, do not tell tales.  
 Yaa Nyaako, do not tell tales.  
 If you did your tales will be long (Nketia 1954:122).

The fact that death is not the end of life is brought out again. It is also implied in the dirge that life in this world is similar to the one in the other world. There, people are capable of talking and even letting out secrets as they do here. This belief neither minimises the pain, suffering and sorrow felt at the time of death nor explains the mystery of death. The sense of uncertainty and loss as to why death is here at all still fills the air. It is a cause of lingering wonder or even anger as expressed in the following dirge:

When the Creator created things,  
 When the Manifold Creator created things,  
 How did He create?  
 He created bereavement.  
 He created sorrow,  
 The sorrow of bereavement.  
 Alas! Drinking vessels!  
 Alas! Drinking vessels!  
 Alas! Drinking vessels!  
 Anno Ofori (name of deceased) that spells death to others,  
 I could shoot myself on account of this event<sup>246</sup>.

The reality of suffering and evil as manifested in death is as elusive as ever. It is a mystery, which is confronted, not explained, in African traditional religions. This is clearly shown in songs, prayers and dirges performed at the time of death. These are expressions of faith in and anger with the God whose presence and absence are experienced in the face of the reality of suffering.

#### 5.7.4 AFRICAN VIEW AND OTHER VIEWS: A COMPARISON AND EVALUATION

In African traditional religions, both good and bad are accepted as a part of life. Life to an African is, therefore, a holistic reality. In the African view, unlike in the Western view, the dichotomy between the sacred and the secular, between the spiritual and the material, between the state and the cultic is virtually absent. As Bennie Van der Walt has correctly observed the African thought aims at holistic, integral knowledge of the totality (Van der Walt 1997: 89). This totality of the traditional worldview is characterised by the multiplicity of spiritual beings; the essential connection and interaction between these beings; the virtual

<sup>246</sup> J H Nketia, *Funeral Dirges of the Akan People*, pp.119-31.

and the resurrection and other modifications of Western dualistic thought will be meaningless in the African view. Reality is a complete whole, consisting of the pleasant and the unpleasant. The cross and the resurrection will not form a dialectic but two dimensions of one event. Orthodoxy and orthopraxis will not be possible to separate for the one cannot possibly exist without the other since belief and practice are two sides of the same coin in African traditional thought. Strangely, however, Barth's understanding and explication of evil as being the shadow side of creation and his contention that creation consists of both Yes and No will fit in well with the African traditional view. As Barth argues, creation consists of clarity and obscurity, growth and decay, progress and impediment, beginning and ending, success and failure, gain and loss, laughter and tears. There are both dark and bright sides to life (CD, vol.3:3, p. 296). Moreover, Kwasi Wiredu has eloquently argued from the Akan saying, "the hawk says that all that God created is good" that there is a sense in which evil is involved in the good (Wiredu 1998: 198). Wiredu maintains that the sentiment that evil, although it is evil, is unavoidably involved in the good and is ultimately for the best, would have warmed the heart of Leibniz because it would agree with his maxim of the 'best of all possible worlds'. According to the Akan 'if something does not go wrong, something does not go right'. This saying underlines the fact that one cannot really talk about good without the possibility of contrasting it with evil (Wiredu 1998: 198). Thus, Wiredu would seem to imply that Leibniz would find a place for his philosophy in African traditional thought. However, the extent to which this contention is true is a matter of debate.

The African traditional view would also agree with Berkouwer's argument that it is improper for creatures to try and justify the ways of God to humans when the opposite should be the case. Equally, the African view like believing theodicy would refuse to discard God on account of the problem of evil and suffering, as it has happened in Western thought in the form of atheism, but it would maintain protest in suffering as a means of dialogue with God. But it would be very doubtful to say that the songs, prayers and dirges of African traditional religions are the same as the doxology of the church in the face of evil, which Berkouwer discusses. However, there are striking similarities between the African view and the biblical view. Both consider reality as a totality, as an integral whole. Both assume, not explain evil and suffering. Both do not do away with God because of suffering and evil. Both protest against suffering and evil in songs, prayers, lament and dirges as we saw in the songs of

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basing a large part of its daily activities on beliefs derived from the evidence. See his *Philosophy and an*



African traditional religions and some psalms and prophecies (Cf. Ps 10: 1,13,17-18; 22: 1,11; 13: 1 and Hab 1: 2-4,12-17). In very general terms, it seems that the African mode of thought is much closer to the Hebraic holistic, concrete way of thinking as contained in the OT than the Western mode of thinking, a fact that makes many African people more congenial to the OT literature than to the NT literature (Van der Walt 1997: 89). Although the language of protest is sometimes very strong in these prayers, songs lament or dirges as well as in the psalms and the prophets, it is not the same as protest atheism, generated by the problem of evil in Western thought. Having said this, it is in order to concede that there still exists in the African view an element of obscurity as to the origins of evil and suffering in relation to God. On the one hand, it generally exonerates God for the existence of evil in the world, which it squarely places on the shoulders of humankind. But on the other, it ultimately indicts him as the omnipotent one who can stop it altogether if he so wished as evidenced in the Nuer and Dinka religions. The African view in the context of cosmological reflection maintains a doctrine of the unqualified omnipotence of God in regard to issues with direct bearing on the fate of humans on earth. But it also maintains a diminution of God's omnipotence, a reduction of God's omnipotence to the level of a human potentate (Wiredu 1998: 199). In one sense, the African traditional view of suffering suffers from the same shortcomings that plague other worldviews. Like them, it does not reach the bottomless pit of the mystery of evil and suffering. But unlike them, it accepts this mystery as a reality to be faced rather than to be explained.

## 5.8 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The ideals of the Age of Reason were badly shattered by the two world wars. The goddess of reason, adoringly venerated and worshipped in this age, was virtually slain by the large-scale suffering and death that the wars brought about. After all, it was discovered that theodicy, as developed by leading thinkers of the time, could not face up to the mystery of evil and suffering. For whatever human progress was envisioned through the power of reason in this age, it was now being dangerously threatened by the evil and suffering that humans were inflicting on fellow humans as evidenced by the wars. It was becoming clear to many that human achievements however elaborate and magnificent they were, did not succeed in

removing evil from the human heart as the devastation of the wars had shown. Practical answers had to be sought somewhere. It was in this context, as we have seen, that the post-Enlightenment theologies were born. These theologies did not hesitate to draw from Scripture and the Reformation heritage, which the Enlightenment had consigned to oblivion. Leading the way, in that regard, was the 'dialectical theology' or 'theology of crisis', which seriously challenged the presuppositions of the Enlightenment. Karl Barth, himself a part of the period, boldly emphasised that Jesus Christ is the sovereign word of God that we need to hear. He fearlessly emphasised that Jesus Christ was God's answer to the problem of evil and the only one through whom humankind can know God. Through his death on the cross, he defeated evil and yet evil is still paradoxically here with us. Barth refused to discuss evil as a separate subject on its own and could only discuss it as a part of his doctrine of God. In so doing, he related it to the doctrines of creation, election, christology, Ecclesiology and eschatology. In short, therefore, any meaningful discussing of Barth's theodicy means engaging his whole theology as such. Because for Barth, evil, suffering and theodicy and indeed all theology can only be properly addressed within the framework of God's sovereignty and his self-revelation in Jesus Christ. This emphasis was a clear rebuff to the Enlightenment's reason-based theodicies, which Barth emphatically rejected, even though its traces are still evident in his thought.

We also saw how Jürgen Moltmann, himself a victim of suffering as a prisoner of war in the 1940's, came on the scene, emphasising the suffering of God and eschatological hope. This, in a way, is a modified version of Luther's theology of the cross. The heart of its argument is that only a suffering God can help those who suffer. The cross of Christ, according to Moltmann, is the solid evidence that God suffers with us. Because God loves, contends Moltmann, he suffers for us and with us. The cross is the climax of his love and that cross is nothing less than suffering. This suffering of God means acceptance out of love and sympathy inherent in all true mercy. "For anyone who has compassion", Moltmann says, "participates in the suffering of the other, takes another person's suffering on himself, suffers for others by entering into community with them and bearing their burdens" (Moltmann 1990:179). This is what Moltmann refers to as 'suffering in solidarity', which he believes is what the Triune God did on the cross. With the message of the cross and the suffering of God, Moltmann relates eschatological hope, which has its genesis in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. To Moltmann, the two are inseparable.



We also looked at Liberation Theology's emphasis on the importance of orthopraxis as opposed to orthodoxy, as a response to suffering and oppression. We noted that the initial specific context of liberation praxis was Latin America where suffering and evil were embodied in abject poverty and exploitation. The liberationist's emphasis on God's 'preferential option for the poor' meant his solidarity and suffering with the poor in that situation. This still is a message of hope to those who are suffering as in the Sudan. Its essence is that God is with those who suffer and will intervene on their behalf and deliver them in due time. This is a soothing message of hope and faith. We also examined Berkouwer and his terse evaluation of the project of theodicy. In his contention, trying to justify the ways of God to humans instead of the reverse is wrongheaded. He floats the idea of a believing theodicy in which God's grace and mercy are to be the basis of addressing the problem of evil. We also saw how the African view accepts and faces suffering and evil as realities of life. This view accepts that both good and evil are part of life. It faces up to the fact that both are sides of the same coin. Life, according to this view, has its good side and its bad side. Far from being fatalistic, this is a holistic view of what true life is all about. However, the African view never contends that this is the way life should be, only that this is the way life actually is as we experience it in this world. And yet, we cannot accept suffering and evil as normal. We must see them as fatal enemies that must be fought and overcome by all means since they threaten life itself. All these views, it seems, have one thing in common: We may not fully understand or adequately explain suffering but we can respond to it. What such a response should be like is what the remaining portion of this study will attempt to outline.

## CHAPTER SIX

### SUFFERING IN BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

#### 6.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter is an attempt to place the problem of evil and suffering in biblical perspective. In doing this, we will look at some ways used in the Bible<sup>248</sup> to describe or explain suffering. In the first place, suffering may generally be seen as a consequence of sin. Secondly, suffering may come as a corrective or disciplinary measure from God if only for training and restoring his wayward children. Thirdly, there are also instances in Scripture in which suffering may come as a test of faith, to reveal as it were, the content of the believer's character and extent of his trust in God. Similarly, suffering comes, more often in the form of persecution, as a direct result of being a follower of Jesus Christ. Throughout church history, many have suffered rejection, ridicule or even death for no other reason than being followers of Christ. Finally, the Bible seems to allude to a form of suffering, which may be described as "innocent suffering". This is a kind of suffering that comes on humans from sources or forces beyond their control. Job's story is an example of this kind of suffering, which may also come as a result of living in a fallen world and not necessarily through any direct fault of the victim. These we will examine in turn and draw some conclusions and applications in our endeavour to understand suffering and God in relation to our faith.

#### 6.2 SUFFERING AS A CONSEQUENCE OF SIN

It is a basic idea in the Bible, particularly in the Old Testament, that suffering comes as a result of sin. Sinful acts such as wilful disobedience and rebellion against God and his stated will bring about suffering. Defeat at the hands of enemies as Israel experienced at Ai when Achan stole the 'devoted things' (Jos 7:11-12), separation from God (Isa 59:2), physical and psychological afflictions (Job 15:20; Psa 107:17) reaping the trouble that one sows (Prov 22:8), God's anger and wrath for those who persist in doing evil and spurn his grace and mercy (Heb 10:29, Rom 2:8-9) and finally death are some forms this suffering takes (Gal

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<sup>248</sup> R. Scott Rodin uses these categories in "Evil and Theodicy in the Theology of Karl Barth, pp. 6-7, 277-293.



6:6:7-8; Rom 6:23). While it is true that the basic attitude of Scripture is that suffering is generally consequent upon sin, it is also true that this suffering serves as a warning which if heeded will lead to restoration and not to a damning retribution. For in allowing suffering to come upon the wayward, God has their good in mind and not their judgement. That suffering comes as a sin punishment was a commonplace theory at the time of Jesus and before. Jesus himself seems to lend credence to this at the healing of the paralytic when he declared the man's sin forgiven, thereby equating his paralysis with his sins (Mk 2:1-12). Yet Jesus taught in no uncertain terms that suffering is not always a result of sin. In the stories of the Galileans whom Herod brutally murdered and mixed their blood with that of their sacrifices and of the man born blind, Jesus gives no assent to this theory (Lk 13:1-6; Jn 9:1-41). Jesus did not seek to simplistically explain the fact of evil and suffering but he reached out with the love and compassion of God to heal and alleviate suffering. He went out of his way to show us practically that suffering can be turned into the glory of God by reaching out to those who suffer in a world not yet fully surrendered in obedience to God as king. Thus Jesus categorically states in answering his inquiring disciples as to who sinned that the man was born blind that, "neither this man nor his parents sinned but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life" (Jn 9:3). In saying this, Jesus shattered the old idea that suffering is always punishment for sin. By the same token he showed us that we should not view those who suffer as theological riddles to solve but as individual persons deserving of our love and compassion in their suffering. This is the best we can do in the face of the mystery of evil and suffering. We know that 'the ultimate answer to suffering lies beyond this world, (it lies) in the being and nature of God himself' (Ferguson 1972:69).

### **6.2.1 RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GOD, SIN, SUFFERING AND PUNISHMENT**

That the ultimate answer to suffering and evil lies in the being and the nature of God inevitably raises the question of the relationship between God and evil as a reality that must sometimes be faced. What is the relationship between God and the existence of evil in the world? Does God cause evil and suffering? Does his providential activity in the world imply his being responsible for all that happens in the world, including evil and suffering? (Grudem 1994: 322). To respond, we examine scriptural passages that seem to affirm that God allows and uses evil to accomplish his purposes. The story of Joseph provides a clear example in that regard. We read that Joseph's brothers were highly jealous of him (Gen 37:11), hated him and could not speak a kind word to him, particularly after relating his dreams to them (Genesis

37:4-10). They wanted to kill him and his dreams but only succeeded in selling him into slavery (Gen 37:24-28). Yet, later after his prolonged suffering and subsequent ascendance to the throne in Egypt, Joseph repeatedly told his brothers that it was God who sent him to Egypt, albeit via the suffering his brothers inflicted on him. Here is what he said to them:

And now do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance. So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God... You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives (Gen 45:4-5, 7-8; 50:20).

As Wayne Grudem has rightly put it, we have in the story of Joseph and his brothers a combination of evil deeds brought about by evil men who are rightly held accountable for their sin and the overriding providential control of God whereby his purposes are accomplished through those deeds. Joseph in the above quote seems to affirm both in a poignant manner (Grudem 1994:323). In the story of Exodus, we are repeatedly told that God 'hardened Pharaoh's heart' (Ex 4:21; 7:3; 9:12; 10:20,27; 11:10; 14:4,8). At other times, it is said Pharaoh himself 'hardened his own heart' (Ex 8:15,32; 9:34). The debate over whether God hardened Pharaoh's heart or Pharaoh hardened his own heart when he heard God's word through Moses to 'let my people go' is insignificant. For in the light of God's early promises that he will harden the heart of Pharaoh (4:21; 7:3) and Pharaoh's own defiance when he first heard the word to the effect that Israel must leave Egypt in order to serve the Lord, it seems to be clear that both are true. God hardened Pharaoh's heart as Pharaoh also hardened his own heart. Both the divine and human agents combine to bring about the same event, just as we have seen in the story of Joseph. Reflecting on this story later, Paul as inspired by God says: "I raised you up for this very purpose, that I may display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth. Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy and hardens whom he wants to harden" (Rom 9:17-18). Paul generally infers from God's dealing with Pharaoh and the Egyptians the vital truth that God is sovereign even in acts that may be regarded as evil. When the Canaanites were destroyed in the conquest of the Promised Land under the command of Joshua we are told that "it was the LORD himself who hardened their hearts to wage war against Israel, so that he might destroy them totally, exterminating them without mercy, as the LORD commanded Moses" (Josh 11:20). In objecting to his demand to marry a Philistine girl, Samson's parents "did not know that this was from the LORD, who was seeking an occasion to confront the Philistines, for at that time



they were ruling over Israel" (Jug 14:3-4). When the sons of Eli, the priest, disobeyed him and persisted in their sinful behaviour toward the sacrifice of the LORD, it is clearly stated that "his sons did not listen to their father's rebuke, for it was the LORD'S will to put them to death" (I Sam 2:22-25). Later on in his life, when jealousy and pride consumed him, Saul is said to have been tormented by 'an evil spirit from the LORD'. This happened after the Spirit of the LORD departed from him (1 Sam 16:14). David, after his adulterous relationship with Bathsheba was brought to light, was given this warning by the Lord through the prophet Nathan: "Out of your own household I am going to bring calamity upon you. Before your own very eyes I will take your wives and give them to one who is close to you, and he will lie with your wives in broad daylight. You did it in secret, but I will do this thing in broad daylight before all Israel" (2 Sam 12:11-12). David's sin was severely punished as Absalom's rebellion, Tamar's violent incestuous rape by Amnon and his subsequent brutal murder by Absalom, and other events in David's family bear witness (2 Sam 13-15). In addition, "the LORD struck the child that Uriah's wife had borne to David, and he became ill" (2 Sam 12:15). The child died even after David pleaded with the LORD for mercy (2 Sam 12:16-23). In the prosperous years of his reign, David was punished for taking Israel's census, although both God and Satan are reported to have incited him to do this (2 Sam 24:1; 1 Chron 21:1). In spite of difficulties associated with interpreting these passages, one hardly misses to see the interplay of divine, human and satanic influences that combine to work out God's purposes even through suffering. Both David and Israel nevertheless do not escape responsibility even if God's hand and that of Satan were part of the process that led to 'inciting' in the first place. There is a sense in which David was responsible for giving in to being 'incited' to the census which one of his military officers, Joab, warned him not to undertake but was overruled by the word of the king. In another vein, Solomon, after his many foreign wives turned his heart away from the LORD his God, left the LORD with no other alternative but to raise up adversaries to oppose him as a way of punishing his sin. Both Hadad, the Edomite and Rezon, the son of Eliada were raised up by the Lord to punish Solomon for abandoning the law of the LORD his God and for cleaving to the foreign gods that his numerous wives worshiped (1 Ki 11:14; 23). Solomon's story is reminiscent of the story of Israel in the times of the Judges and the kings. In an almost endless cycle, the Israelites sinned and were punished but restored upon repentance, only to repeat the cycle again when another evil judge or king took over.

In the OT it seems, therefore, that God punishes sin with suffering and pain. He put a "lying spirit in the mouth of Ahab's prophets so that he can make him fall at the battle with the Syrians" (1Ki 22:23). He sent the wicked Assyrians as 'the rod of his anger' to punish wayward Israel (Isa 10:5). He even sent the evil Babylonians 'against this land and its inhabitants and against all the surrounding lands' (Jer 25:9). But the Babylonians themselves will not escape his judgement. For "I will punish the king of Babylon and his nation, the land of the Babylonians, for their guilt and I will make it desolate forever. I will bring upon that land all the things that are spoken against it ... they themselves will be enslaved by many nations and great kings; I will repay them according to their deeds and the work of their hands" (Jer 25:12-14). When there was a false prophet who deceives people, the LORD interestingly remarks: "And if the prophet is enticed to utter a prophecy (a false one that is), I the LORD have enticed that prophet, and I will stretch out my hand against him and destroy him from among my people Israel" (Ezek 14:9). It is thus implied that in allowing himself to imbibe deception, the false prophet is permitted by the LORD to lie in order that the LORD himself may destroy him for his sin. This same sentiment is echoed in the NT in regard to those who persist in evil and refuse to love the truth. "For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie and so that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness" (2 Thes 2:10-12). In the prophecy of Amos, the LORD asks rhetorically: "When a trumpet sounds in a city, do not the people tremble? When disaster comes to the city, has not the LORD caused it?" (Amo 3:6). The LORD even allows natural disasters such as hunger, shortage of rain or too much of it, locusts, blight and mildew, plague and war and displacement to cause his people to come to him but in vain (Amo 4:6-12). In Isaiah's prophecy God says: "I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the LORD, do all these things" (Isa 45:7). The writer of Lamentations goes as far as suggesting that both 'calamities and good things come from the mouth of the Most high' and continues as follows: "Why should any living man complain when he is punished for his sins? Let us examine our ways and test them, and let us return to the LORD. Let us lift up our hearts and hands to God in heaven and say, 'we have sinned and rebelled and you have not forgiven us. You have covered yourself with anger and pursued us; you have slain without mercy. You have covered yourself with a cloud so that no prayer can get through'" (Lam 3:38-44).



There were times when punishment for sin was instantaneous and swift. Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu died before the LORD when they offered unauthorised fire before the LORD, contrary to his command<sup>249</sup> (Lev 10:1-3). Korah, Dathan and Abiram were swallowed alive with their households and all that they owned when the earth opened its mouth as a punishment for their bitter contention with Moses. The fire that came from the LORD instantaneously consumed their 250 followers (Num 16:1-35). Gehazi, Elisha's servant, went from Elisha's presence and was leprous, as white as snow after greedily taking rewards for Naaman's miraculous healing when the prophet had refused to take any from him (2 Ki 5:27). In the NT, Ananias and Sapphira fell down and died before Peter after lying about the proceeds from the sale of their land (Ac 5:1-11).<sup>250</sup>

A common thread in all these passages is that God brings destruction on people because of their sin. God punishes them for their disobedience and idolatry. His instruments of inflicting judgement include human beings, natural disasters or other spiritual forces. But God in his ultimate will does not delight in punishing humans for its own sake. His intention is to cause them to turn to him in repentance in order to receive his mercy and grace. Walther Eichrodt makes this clear when he addresses punishment in the context of covenant relationship. He remarks: "... Punishment cannot be understood either as the brutal blow of an offended being or as the unbridled revenge of a wrathful one, because in some way or other it is incorporated into the covenant relationship, within which men have learned to know the normative will of God" (Eichrodt 1967:425). God metes out punishment for sin within the framework of his constructive and saving will in order that the sinner may be restored to a living relationship with himself. In all the passages that we have examined, God is never directly shown to be doing anything evil. He is never blamed for doing or taking pleasure in evil. What these passages seem to convey is that he allows evil deeds to occur through the willing actions of free moral creatures and he uses them to attain his purposes for his own glory and the good of his people. However, as Rabbi Epstein is reported to have said, "the exact relation between

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<sup>249</sup> The pan that Nadab and Abihu used to make incense offering to the LORD was used for the sole purpose of removing ashes from under the altar and not for offering incense. This seems to have been the nature of their disobedience. They casually laid aside the LORD'S command and incurred his wrath in the process. See Jacob Milgrom's Leviticus 1-16 in the Anchor Bible Commentary Series, p. 597. New York, Doubleday, 1997.

<sup>250</sup> Joseph Fitzmyer has rightly remarked that "...the Lucan emphasis is not on the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira, but rather on how God works through the apostles, and especially through Peter in this case, within the new community to handle a scandalous activity" (Fitzmyer 1997:316-7).

sin and suffering in this world is not always to be (easily) established, but must be left to the righteous and inscrutable will of God" (Epstein 1972:74).<sup>251</sup>

## 6.2.2 RELATING GOD'S PROVIDENCE TO SIN AND SUFFERING

Having looked at some passages of scripture and their relation to God, sin, suffering and punishment, we are left with the question of how they all relate to the providence of God. What can we say about what seems to be God's providential use of suffering and evil to bring about his purposes for his own glory and our good? We may consider the following, based on the analysis of the above verses. First, in very general terms, God may choose to use all things, including suffering, to work out his purpose and our good. It is very easy to say this when we ourselves are not directly facing suffering. Yet like Paul, we may come to a place in our lives where we can say realistically that 'all things work together for good to them who love God, who are called according to his purpose' (Rom 8:28). With hindsight, we may share Joseph's conviction when he said to his brothers that 'you intended to harm me but God intended it for good' (Gen 50:20). We may come, at the end of an ordeal, to the realisation that God is glorified in the events that are evil.

Secondly, God is not to blame for evil. He allows evil and suffering but he never causes it. Even when some passages such as Isaiah 45:7 speak of God 'creating' evil, our understanding of what they mean should be in context of God ordaining evil to come about through the choices of his moral creatures and not through his direct actions. God's righteousness, holiness, love and justice exclude him from the realm of directly causing evil and suffering. But there still remains a tension that the Bible does not attempt to resolve. This tension is between the fact that God does not do evil and therefore is never to blame for it and the fact that he allows and uses it to accomplish his purposes. The essence of this tension is, on the one hand, that we cannot maintain that God does evil without saying that he is not a good and righteous God. On the other, we cannot say that he uses evil to accomplish his purposes without saying that he actually does evil. If we were to say that God himself does evil, we would be forced to say that he is not a good and righteous God and therefore not the God that Scripture describes. If we were to maintain that God does not use evil to bring about his purposes, then we would have to admit that there is evil in the world that God does not intend or know about and therefore not under his control or power. But Scripture, as shown in the above mentioned passages, affirms both the goodness of God and his sovereign overriding

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<sup>251</sup> Cited in Ferguson's *The Place of suffering*, James and Clarke, 1972, p. 74



will to use evil and suffering to achieve his purposes. Are these undesirable alternatives as Grudem suggests? (See Grudem 1994:328). They may biblically be undesirable, although they may not be philosophically. They constitute a tension, which Scripture itself does not attempt to resolve,<sup>252</sup> affirming thereby that evil and suffering are a mystery.

Thirdly, we as free moral agents are responsible for the consequences of our evil actions. We will reap what we sow, whether good or bad (Gal 6:7-8). If we spurn the grace of God, we shall suffer for it (Heb 10:26-31). If we choose our own way and our souls delight in their abominations, the LORD will choose harsh treatment for us and bring upon us what we dread (Isa 66:3-4). This was the tragic story of Israel as the people of the covenant. Their obedience to the stipulations of the covenant meant blessings for them (Deut 28:1-14) but their disobedience meant curses and judgement (Deut 28:15-68). After failing to heed God's numerous warnings through the prophets, Israel went into exile, having been subjected to God's punishment and affliction through the Assyrians and the Babylonians (2 Ki 17:7-23). But in mercy and grace, God promised a new covenant in which he would restore them to himself, writing his laws in their hearts (Jer 31:31-37). Whether under the old or new covenant, the sole responsibility for our actions is ours. We cannot blame God for the suffering and evil that result from them. We cannot escape the consequences of the evil and suffering we inflict on one another. Our cruelty as evidenced by the genocide in Bosnia and Rwanda in the 1990's; the brutality of the ongoing wars in Sudan, Somalia, Burundi, the Congo, Sierra Leone and many other hot spots in our troubled world cannot be blamed on God. They are of our own making, resulting as they are from our selfish ambitions and engrossed moral degeneration and sinfulness. We can hardly escape the consequences of the chronic violence that infests our urban centres, the rampant crime that threatens our peace in the home and the workplace, the racial or gender prejudices that distort our view of other human beings, made in God's image as we are, the drunken driving that fatally destroys life and property, the endemic corruption that enriches the privileged few and leaves the majority impoverished and other numerous social and moral evils. We cannot say God's judgement<sup>253</sup>

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<sup>252</sup> This is where theodicy begins, trying to justify the ways of God to humans or reconciling God's goodness and power with evil. James McClendon has this to say about the difficulties of theodicies: "Their great difficulty seems to be that they rescue God at the expense of making the evils that Christians confront and those they commit tolerable, or even to be expected" (McClendon 1994:172).

<sup>253</sup> Tyron L. Inbody makes an insightful comment when he explains the relation between God's wrath, glory and mercy. He remarks: "The wrath of God seems to be as much a part of the glory of God as is the mercy of God, both equally effective and both equally arising from motivations hidden within the Godhead". See his *The Transforming God: An Interpretation of Suffering and evil*, p. 104.

is unfair in the light of all that. Yet when God judges us, he always has our good in mind, because he is gracious and merciful in his justice and just in his mercy and grace. We are responsible for our actions but God loves us more than he detests our sin.

Fourthly, the realities of evil in and around us demand our total reliance on and trust in God to deliver us from the danger they pose. Whoever and however we think we are, we have a dangerous potential to inflict evil on others. If allowed to come to fruition, Nazism, Hiroshima and genocide, which are in all of us, will cause suffering and havoc in our communities and countries. As Tyron Inbody has correctly put it, all this confronts us with new dimensions of our human depravity as well as with deeper dimensions of the shadow side of God (Inbody 1997:104). The potential to cause harm and inflict evil and suffering on ourselves and on others is so incredibly great in us that suffering and evil would have hardly existed without us. This may be why Scripture insistently exhorts us to pray that the Lord will 'deliver us from evil'. We believe this is not just the evil that may be done to us but also the evil that we have the potential to do to others (Mat 6:13).

### **6.3 SUFFERING AS A CORRECTIVE AND DISCIPLINARY MEASURE**

This kind of suffering is one that God may actively bring upon us in order to draw us into conformity with his will and purpose for our lives. What distinguishes it from the previous one is that God purposefully uses it for our good, particularly for restoring us when we choose to lead a rebellious life. The OT speaks of this kind of suffering as the chastisement of God. It is seen as discipline, which refines the soul and strengthens the character. Israelites are exhorted after wandering in the wilderness for 40 years to "know then in your heart that as a man disciplines his son, so the LORD your God disciplines you" (Deut 8:5). The psalmist exults in the fact that the person the LORD disciplines is blessed. He says: "Blessed is the man you discipline, O LORD, the man you teach from your law. (For) you grant him relief from days of trouble, till a pit is dug for the wicked" (Psa 94:12-13). The writer of Proverbs advises his son: "My son, do not despise the LORD'S discipline and do not resent his rebuke, because the LORD disciplines those he loves, as a father the son he delights in" (Prov 3:11-12). The writer of Hebrews applies the same concept to all believers in their struggle with sin and determination to follow Christ, despite fierce opposition and suffering for their faith. He



urges the believers to do this as they fix their eyes on Jesus who is the author and perfecter of their faith (Heb 12:1-6). Jesus uses the metaphor of pruning to allude to this type of discipline as a means of being prepared to bear much fruit (Jn 15:2). Paul sees this discipline in an eschatological perspective when he tells the Corinthians: "When we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we cannot be condemned with the world" (1 Cor 11:32). Jesus tells the church at Laodicea "those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be diligent and repent" (Rev 3:19). Fully conscious of the fact that discipline is painful and not pleasant in the immediate time, the psalmist pleads with the Lord: "O LORD, do not rebuke me in your anger or discipline me in your wrath" (Psa 38:1). But he is also aware that the LORD "rebukes and disciplines men for their sins" (Psa 39:11). The writer of Proverbs again tells us that only "fools despise wisdom and discipline" at their own peril, a reality they will have to mourn at the end of their life (Prov 1:7; 5:12). He asserts that the lack or rejection of discipline will eventually lead to death (Prov 5:23). Because the corrections of discipline are a way of life and "he who heeds discipline shows the way of life but whoever ignores correction leads others astray" (Prov 6:23; 10:17). Moreover, says the wise man, "He who ignores discipline comes to poverty and shame, but whoever heeds correction is honoured" (Prov 13:18). Discipline is to be administered to children to prepare them for godliness and life. It is an expression of parental love to children (Prov 13:24). If not spurned by children, it shows their prudence (15:5). There is hope for the children who receive it, but parents who withhold it from their children are a willing party to their death (19:18). It drives folly far from the child (22:15). It does not kill children but saves them from death that may result if it is not promptly administered (23:13-14). Ultimately, disciplined children give peace and delight to their parents (29:17). Discipline is therefore a fruit of wisdom and life is almost impossible without it (1:1-6). Even Christian ministry is a complete shambles without it and Paul does not hesitate to list it among the most essential ministerial qualifications (Tit 1:8).<sup>254</sup>

From what we have examined, it should be clear that God does not administer discipline haphazardly. He does it with love and our good in mind even if suffering and pain are still involved. At least three times, Scripture emphasises that God disciplines because he loves (Prov 3:12; Heb 12:6; Rev 3:19). Although some form of suffering is inevitable or even necessary when discipline is applied, God does it for our good, whether in the short term or

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<sup>254</sup> Here, it is in order to make a distinction between discipline as a training, which is not our focus, and discipline as punishment for having done wrong, which is our focus. In each, an element of suffering is obviously

the long term (Heb 12:10). Ultimately, we may acknowledge with Ephraim when we shall have been through discipline and suffering associated with it that "You have disciplined me like an unruly calf, and I have been disciplined. Restore me, and I will return, because you are the LORD my God" (Jer 31:18). Restoration as such is part of the cumulative purpose of correction and discipline as is love.

### 6.3.1 DISCIPLINE AND GOD'S LOVE

One of the difficulties associated with discipline is how it relates to the love of God. The problem arises from our modern thinking that love and discipline, both of which include pain and suffering, are mutually exclusive. In other words, how can we say God loves us if he uses pain and suffering to discipline us? From what we have examined, we have seen that love and suffering are not that mutually exclusive. In the real world and real life experience, they both seem to be inseparable. This is what Scripture makes clear as we have seen above. God disciplines us, precisely because he loves us very much, for the Lord disciplines whom he loves. As John Wenham has correctly observed, "It is because God loves us that he will spare no pain to rouse us from our sins, and having roused us, to unmask each hideous sin in turn to spur us to the battle (that is the battle of life and faith)" (Wenham 1974:87). Discipline is never pleasant, considering that it contains pain and suffering but even that does not take it away from the sphere of love and compassion. It makes it worthwhile, albeit at the cost of toil and suffering. Nevertheless, it seems to be generally true in life that the richest and most worthwhile experiences are costly, involving toil, pain and suffering whether of body or mind (Wenham 1974:80). Those who excel in sports, arts, music and other disciplines will be the first to tell us that it is costly and painful to be on top. A woman giving birth to a child suffers a great deal of pain but when the baby is born she forgets her anguish because a person has been born into the world (Jn 16:21). Life from birth to death involves varying degrees of pain and suffering. However reluctant we may be to receive this truth, the Bible seems to affirm that suffering is one supreme means of God's love and grace. Donald Guthrie elaborates on this and other aspects of suffering from the perspective of New Testament theology:

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involved. Discipline, whether as a training or punishment, is painful and unpleasant and God uses it to make us and shape our character.



If suffering comes, God must have a purpose for it. Much confusion arises from the fact that it is generally believed that all suffering should be avoided. The notion that God could use suffering does not come naturally. But the NT approach to suffering constantly takes it into the sphere of God's purpose. Although it is true that suffering is nowhere explained (in the NT), there is enough evidence to show what the Christian attitude towards it should be. (But) there is no suggestion (in the NT) that God is less wise or good because suffering exists. Since the supreme example of suffering lies at the heart of God's redemptive activity in Christ, it cannot be maintained that suffering is alien to the purpose of God. It will always remain a mystery why God chose to redeem mankind the way he did (via the cross), but this very fact must be taken into account in considering the NT view of God. (However) it cannot be said that the NT answers all the intellectual problems which arise from God's permitting human suffering, but it does enable Christians to face suffering without losing confidence in the perfection of God's wisdom (Guthrie 1981:89-9).

Concurring with Guthrie in his observations, one is struck by the virtual absence of any attempt in the New Testament to explain suffering. The early Christians seemed to have devoted much of their energy to explaining the meaning of Jesus' death on the cross and how it could be appropriated to enhance the relationship and reconciliation between lost humanity and a righteous and loving God. As Walter Wink has argued the burning question for the believers in the New Testament was not *why* but *how* God used the suffering and the death of Jesus to bring salvation to the world. How God has used evil for good? And how God has triumphed over the powers through the cross? (Wink 1992:314). These were the questions they were preoccupied with and yet at the same time they acknowledged the perennial problem of suffering and compassionately responded to it.

### 6.3.2 A CUMULATIVE PURPOSE OF DISCIPLINE AND CORRECTION

In the severity of pain and suffering, it is difficult to accept that there is a purpose in suffering. There seems to be much pointlessness in suffering that we experience or see others around us experience. It is sometimes hard for us to believe in God's justice or even harder still to believe in his love when we suffer and yet it was in the context of the world's most heinous crime, the crucifixion of God's own son, that God dramatically, unforgettably and finally demonstrated his great love for us. An objective look at the death of Christ on the cross should convince us that "there is reason to believe that no man's sufferings will ever be greater than those of Christ, since throughout his life he shared the pains and sorrows of others to the utmost, and finally on the cross suffered what was due for the sins of the worst of us. To bear on a cross the sins of the world represents the limits of human suffering" (Wenham 1974:77). In the cruelty of suffering, we easily forget that our faith as the body of Christ was born, not in circumstances of serenity but of calamity (Wenham 1974:82).

What is the cumulative purpose of God's discipline and correction of his children? Why is it necessary for God as a loving parent to apply a measure of pain and suffering to discipline or correct us? First, correction or discipline is necessary because it is at the heart of legitimate sonship. As the writer of Hebrews, building on Proverbs 3:12, puts it, God 'punishes everyone he accepts as a son' (12:6). Human fathers discipline their children as a matter of fatherly legitimacy. For a child to refuse discipline or correction is to break relationship and become a bastard, not a legitimate child (Jewett 1981:218). God as human fathers disciplines his children and sees to it that they follow his ways. By way of discipline he brings them to obedience and trust in him as a father. A meaningful, fruitful life does not come automatically or easily; it comes as a result of loving fatherly discipline that all legitimate children must undergo as a necessity, not as an option. But because pain and suffering are involved in that process, we resist and avoid it. And rightly so, because no one enjoys discipline and punishment. They greatly hurt but yield enduring fruit of life if and when they are bravely borne and learnt from.

Secondly, discipline or correction is necessary because it is a vital tool of character formation. "Our fathers", says the author of Hebrews, "disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness" (12:10). The supreme good in which God's children ought to share in is his holiness, which is the highest goal they are disciplined or corrected to attain (Bruce 1984:359). Holiness is the character of God and it is formed and shaped in the fire of suffering. Paul makes this point clear in Romans when he speaks about the joy and the peace that come from knowing Christ and his fellowship even in the midst of pain and trials. He explains: "And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us" (5:2b-5). The sequence is intriguing; suffering, perseverance, character and hope are given in that order as if they can never come to us in any other way or order. Much more captivating is Paul's confidence that 'we know' that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance character and character hope. It is as if Paul wants to bring to our notice that perseverance, character and hope come mainly through suffering. For Paul and other New Testament writers, we may say, suffering, perseverance, character, hope, correction and discipline are all interconnected. They are vital recipes for producing God's



character in us. Discipline may be unpleasant because it involves suffering but it is the only way to have our character transformed to be like God's.

Thirdly, discipline or correction is necessary as a means of preparing or training us to meet the challenges of life. The writer of Hebrews states: "No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. Make level paths for your feet, so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed" (Heb 12:11-13). 'Feeble arms and weak knees' can only be strengthened in purposeful training in order to withstand the rigorous challenges of a tough life. The injunction to 'make level paths for your feet' bears witness to the toughness of life, where the ground is very uneven and bumpy. Anyone who has not been properly prepared can easily fall to the ground and hence the need to 'make paths for your feet', not only for your own sake but also for the lame. Discipline is good for us and for others who may be unable to face up to the toughness of life. Thus without training it will be virtually impossible to produce a harvest of righteousness and peace or live a life beneficial to others. This is why God as a loving, caring father will put us through discipline or correction with all the pain and suffering it involves. "For physical training is of some value, but (training in) godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come" (1 Tim 4:8). Therefore, to avoid discipline because of the suffering it involves is to pay a high price for the suffering that results from avoiding it. The suffering that we endure in accepting discipline is far less than the suffering we get in avoiding it. Is God unfair in using suffering and pain to discipline us when we go astray? The notion of fairness is not new in dealing with suffering. But scriptural evidence does not even raise it at all, may be because if it is pressed to its logical conclusion, we, and not God, will suffer greatly. In the light of the cross, we do not receive what we deserve but what we absolutely do not. John Wenham explains with telling humour: "We are simply allowed in humiliation and adoration to contemplate the fact that any apparent unfairness in God's treatment of us arises not because some have too much punishment, but because some of us, by virtue of the cross, appear to have too little" (Wenham 1974:84).

## 6.4 SUFFERING AS A TEST OF FAITH OR FAITHFULNESS

God is directly involved in this process. Its aim is not to make us stumble or fall but to test and strengthen our trust and faithfulness in God. Moses in his address to Israel when they were approaching the threshold of Canaan said: "Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commands. He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD" (Deut 8:2-3). God is purposefully involved when it is said that he later tested Abraham to "take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about" (Gen 22:1-2). The psalmist fully overwhelmed by God's searching knowledge of his life prays: "Search me, O God, and know my heart, test me and know my anxious thoughts" and again "Test me, O LORD, and try me, examine my heart and my mind; for your love is ever before me, and I walk continually in your truth" (Psa 139:23; 26:2-3). Job in the severity of his suffering could still manage to express confidence in the God whose presence seemed to elude him. His words are a mixture of faith and bewilderment: "But if I go to the east, he is not there; if I go to the west, I do not find him. When he is at work in the north, I do not see him; when he turns to the south, I catch no glimpse of him. But he knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I will come forth as gold" (Job 23:8-10). The Psalm acknowledges that God has already "tested us and refined us like silver" and remarks with overconfidence: "Though you probe my heart and examine me at night, though you test me, you will find nothing, I have resolved that my mouth will not sin" (Psa 66:10; 17:3). The LORD, speaking by the prophet Zechariah, predicts the restoration and cleansing of Israel through judgement or testing in which two-thirds of the nation will be struck and one-third left. Thus says the LORD concerning the remaining third: "This third I will bring into the fire, I will refine them like silver and test them like gold. They will call on my name and I will answer them; I will say, 'they are my people,' and they will say, 'The LORD is our God'" (Zec 13:9). The prophet Malachi shares Zechariah's view of the probing purification and testing that the LORD will subject his people to, only this time, it is especially directed to the Levites. So says the prophet: "He (the LORD) will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the LORD will have men



who will bring offerings in righteousness, and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the LORD, as in days gone by, as in former years" (Mal 3:3-4). The LORD himself through the prophecy of Isaiah identifies this process of probing and testing with afflictions, which he permits for his own purposes. Here is what he says: "See, I have refined you, though not as silver, I have tested you in the furnace of affliction. For my own sake, for my own sake, I do this. How can I let myself be defamed? I will not yield my glory to another" (Isa 48:10-11).

Affliction may also be sent as a way of teaching and restoring the wayward to hear the LORD when he speaks as Isaiah further explains: "Although the Lord gives you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, your teachers will be hidden no more; with your own eyes you will see them. Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, "this is the way; walk in it"" (30:20-21). James identifies testing with trials, which if endured, bring reward. He explains: "Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him". But he is categorical that God tempts no one with evil and that we are tempted when our own evil desires entice and drag us away from God (Jas 1:12-15). On relating testing to faith, Peter is more pinpointing when he asserts that testing or trial is inevitable if faith is to be proven. He says: "In this (birth into a living hope in Christ) you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed" (1Pet 1:6-7). Looking forward to the day when Jesus Christ will be revealed, Paul has his eyes on the prize despite his testing and suffering. He confidently says: "...I am being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. I have fought a good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing" (2 Tim 4:6-8). 'Being poured out like a drink offering' is a reference to trial and suffering that Paul was undergoing behind bars in a cruel Roman jail. 'Time for my departure', can only mean 'my anticipated death', as happened shortly with his trial under Nero. But Paul is fully confident of receiving the crown to be awarded by the righteous judge to him and others who pass the test.

#### 6.4.1 TEST, TEMPTATION AND SUFFERING IN RELATION TO GOD'S GRACE

The idea of testing with the intention of proving or improving one's quality or character represents the basic biblical teaching on temptation. The idea of seducing, commonly associated with temptation, is rather remote from the Bible. However, the Hebrew and Greek words--*masa*, *peirasmos* and *dokimazo*--translated 'temptation or testing' nearly correspond in meaning, leaving the context and usage to determine whether or not the words are used to mean seduce or prove (Packer 1986:1173). It is in this sense that a closer reading of the text must be undertaken to determine whether it is God, Satan or human being who is testing and with what intentions. When and if that is done, it will be discovered that God, Satan and humans test with different intentions. Humans test one another to measure their capacities and abilities and discover their weaknesses or strengths. The Jewish religious leaders tested Jesus by asking theological questions to trap him or test his Messianic claims or to see how genuine was his teaching (Mk 8:11; Lk 10:25-37). Humans put God to test too. This may they do by way of challenging him to prove his goodness, justice and promises. The Israelites put him to test at Massah over the lack of food and water (Ex 17:1-3). They disobeyed and tested the LORD ten times in the desert even after seeing his miracles and glory (Num 14:22). They tested the LORD wilfully, vexed him repeatedly and rebelled against him consistently (Psa 78:18; 41; 56). Satan also tests the people of God, but only within the limits and parameters that God allows in his sovereign will. Job is the case in point (Job 1:12; 2:6). There is no temptation God allows Satan to bring that goes beyond man's ability to bear (1Cor 10:13). But believers are urged to guard against him always (1Pet 5:8-9, Jas 4:7; Eph 6:10-18). This is absolutely necessary for Christians because Satan will try to cause them harm (Rev 2:10: 3:10; Heb 2:18). He will tempt them to give in to fulfilling their natural desires by using sinful means (Mat 4:1-4; 1Cor 7:5). He may even cause believers to be falsely content or careless with their own pathetic spiritual conditions while passing hypocritical judgement on others who may be entangled in more glaring sins (Gal 6: 1-5; Eph 4:27). And he may cause them to misrepresent God's will and truth to others and to themselves (Gen 3:1-6; 2 Cor 11:13-14). But God has promised protection and victory over Satan, his schemes and his agents (Lk 10: 18-19, Mat 16:18, Rev 12:11). God as well tests his people as we have seen already. This he does to train them to be patient, to strengthen their character and to root them deeply in the assurance of his love and faithfulness. There is another kind of testing, mentioned in the Bible, which is also vital. This is the constant testing or examining of



oneself before God. It is the self-scrutiny and sober knowledge of one's condition and relationship with God and others (1 Cor 11:28; 2 Cor 13:5; Ac 20:28). The necessity of this is made much more urgent by our increasing tendency to easily become presumptuous and deluded or complacent about our spiritual state. Constantly examining our hearts, our motives and purpose in life is a basic element of biblical piety (Packer 1988:1173-4). Testing, whatever its source, causes us discomfort and suffering. But the ever-available grace of our God is always more than sufficient to see us through all kinds of testing (2 Cor 12:7-10).

#### **6.4.2 THE PURPOSE OF TESTING**

Deducing from what we have seen, the Bible seems to demonstrate that God graciously and sovereignly chooses to allow suffering to come through testing in order to examine his people and strengthen their faith. Directly or indirectly, God brings his people into testing situations (Job 1:12; Gen 22:1-2,12). But it must be noted that this is different from chastisement and correction. The intent here is to build up and prepare for greater use or service while chastisement is for discipline and restoration. We are shaped in the testing to fit into God's scheme of things, to be a source of praise for God and be a blessing to others, a purpose which discipline may also serve from another perspective. God provides us with the rich resources of his grace to make us stand when we are put to test or discipline. But when we give in to temptation or sin or spurn discipline, our fellowship with God is disrupted, our power to obey is weakened and the name of our Lord is dishonoured (Lewis 1988:675). In the New Testament, early Christians' uncompromising obedience to the Lord brought them great temptation and suffering (Ac 4:18-20; 5:17-33; Heb 2:1; 10:34; 12:4). But they were prepared to suffer, having come to the conviction that God's way out of suffering did not lie in ungodly compromise or unbecoming change of circumstances (1Cor 10:13-14), but in determined faith (Heb 10:37-39), triumphant joy in difficult situations (Jas 1:2-4) and unvanquished grace, supplied in Christ (1Pet 1:5-7). So what is testing for? First, testing proves the genuineness and quality of faith. That faith is always tried is a fact underlined in the Bible time and again. The brief sketch of the life of the faithful in Hebrews 11 shows that those who had faith were severely tested or richly rewarded. Some conquered kingdoms, administered justice, received what was promised, shut the mouths of lions, quenched the flames, escaped the sword, turned weakness into strength, became powerful warriors and raised the dead. But others faced jeers and flogging, were jailed in chains, were stoned, sawed in two, were put to death, went about in goats' and sheep's skins, were destitute, persecuted

and mistreated. These were all commended for their faith (Heb 11:33-39). Had their faith not been genuine, they would not have suffered or died for it. So they did not only do great things by faith but they also suffered and died for their faith. Faith and trials seem to be inseparable in the Bible (1Pet 1:5-7). Where faith is found, trials are also found. Secondly, testing proves the quality of character. As the genuineness of gold is only proved by fire so the quality and the value of character are proved by testing. Job who was severely tested understood this when he said: "When he has tested me, I will come forth as gold" (23:10). The Psalmist knew what affliction did to his character when he remarked: "Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word. It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees" (Psa 119:67,71). It takes character refined in the fire of affliction to come to that conclusion. Malcolm Muggeridge bears witness to this when he said:

Contrary to what might be expected, I look back on experiences that at the time seemed especially desolating and painful, with particular satisfaction. Indeed, I can say with complete truthfulness that everything I have learned in my seventy-five years in this world, everything that has truly enhanced and enlightened my existence, has been through affliction and not through happiness, whether pursued or attained. In other words, if it were possible to eliminate affliction from our earthly experience by means of drug or other medical mumbo jumbo...the result would not be to make life delectable, but to make it too banal or trivial to be endurable (Muggeridge 1988:145).<sup>255</sup>

While it is true that suffering or testing is not all that we need to refine character, the Bible contends that it is an important ingredient in the package of real life and character building. Thirdly, testing deepens our reliance on God's love and grace. Paul discovered this in his experience of the 'thorn in the flesh'. 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness' was the answer he received after he pleaded with the Lord three times to take the thorn away (2 Cor 12:8-8). After suffering hardship far beyond his ability to bear, making him to despair even of life, Paul could still say: " this happened to us that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us" (2 Cor 1:8-10). Only his grace can sustain us when we come to the end of ourselves. It is difficult for us to take suffering or endure it without the provision of the grace and love of God. Fourthly, testing if endured, brings praise, glory to God and blessing to others and ourselves. When Abraham passed the test of offering his only son, Isaac, the LORD promised to bless him, his descendants and 'all nations on earth' (Gen 22:15-18). Paul after suffering great affliction in Asia, says with confidence that God comforts us in all our troubles, so that

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<sup>255</sup> Quoted in Ravi Zacharias' *Cries of the Heart*, p.75.



we can comfort those who are in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God (2 Cor 1:3-4). Peter tells us that testing comes so that our faith, more precious than gold, may be prove genuine and may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed (1Pet 1:7). The lessons we learn from our testing and sufferings are therefore not only profitable to us, but they also prepare us to help others (Carson 1978:56). Suffering is always in context and the lessons learned from it always find their application in that context and further afield. But in the severity of suffering, it is not always easy at the time to discern the purpose for our suffering in the beginning. Only with hindsight can one tell that the testing was for proving the quality of faith or character, deepening our reliance on God and not on ourselves and resulting in God's praise and glory or bringing blessing to ourselves or others. The Bible does not provide contours on how this comes about, but it leaves us in no doubt that God's love and grace are given to us when we are tested and that it is always for our good, not our destruction. We investigate below yet another dimension of suffering from Biblical perspective.

## **6.5 SUFFERING AS A DIRECT RESULT OF BEING FOLLOWERS OF CHRIST**

### **6.5.1 JESUS: THEY PERSECUTED ME, THEY WILL PERSECUTE YOU**

The Bible makes it clear that suffering will come as a result of being followers of Christ. As believers there will be times to face suffering for our faith. As such, we are called upon to endure or take up our cross and follow Christ. This suffering or persecution of the followers of Christ comes as the world's natural response to their witness. Jesus says in that regard: "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I called you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember the words I spoke to you: 'No servant is greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the One who sent me. They will put you out of the Synagogue; in fact, the time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering service to God. They will do these things to you because they have not known the Father or me. I have told you this, so that when the time comes you will remember that I warned you" (Jn 15:18-21; 16:2-4). Jesus also reminds his followers that there is a price to

pay if they choose to follow him: taking up one's cross and following him since whoever finds his life, will lose it, and whoever loses his life for his sake will find it. And he who loves his parents, brothers and sisters, son or daughter more than him is not worthy of him (Mat 10:37-39). But he quickly assures his followers that when they suffer verbal or physical abuse for his sake they are blessed. He says: "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Mat 5:11-12). The apostles as if to apply this, "left the Sanhedrin rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name" (Ac 5:41). The story of Jesus as told in the New Testament climaxes in his suffering and death on the cross. Through his suffering and death salvation is given to the world. His messianic mission may be summarised as follows. First, he came to heal suffering (Lk 4:16-19). His proclamation of the advent of the kingdom of God as the sovereign rule of God under which disease, suffering and death are conquered confirms this. Suffering for him, although potentially conquered, still is here in this incomplete order of things. Suffering has its place in the purposes of God in this life but it has no place in God's ultimate purposes (Ferguson 1972:82). Secondly, Jesus strongly rejected the idea that suffering is punishment for sin (Lk 13:2-3; Jn 9:1-5). He is not interested in abstract questions about the origins of suffering but about how the work of God may be shown in those who suffer. Thirdly, Jesus saw the ultimate goal of his mission in suffering and death on the cross. On more than one occasion he related his messianic mission to suffering, an idea which stunned even his own followers. He rejected violence as a means of attaining his kingly rule and chose the way of suffering instead (Mk 4:1-12; Mat 16:13-23; Mk 14:61). Fourthly, Jesus made it clear that his followers will also suffer. He repeatedly warned them that following him involves suffering (Jn 15:18-21). But he left no doubt that suffering will be overcome ultimately when his future rule is consummated. Meanwhile, his disciples will continue to suffer as they proclaim his message in the interim period. That may be why the risen Christ, following the Damascus road encounter, spells out the future mission of Saul the persecutor to a hesitant Ananias, commanding him to: "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he will suffer for my name" (Ac 9:15).



## 6.5.2 PAUL: THE FELLOWSHIP OF HIS SUFFERING

Paul learned right on the Damascus road that following Christ would be tough. Many years later when he had himself been through much suffering for Christ, the former persecutor, now the apostle Paul, could tell others that, "...it has been granted<sup>256</sup> to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him, since you are going through the same struggle that you saw I had, and now hear that I still have". He went as far as desiring that he wanted to know Christ, the power of his resurrection, the fellowship of his suffering and becoming like him in his death (Phil 1:29-30; 3:10). So integral to his gospel was suffering that Paul makes it a requirement for entering the kingdom of God, a must for those who want to lead a godly life. He said: "We must go through hardships to enter the kingdom of God" and on another occasion: "In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (Ac 14:22; 2 Tim 3:12). Suffering for Christ was a daily experience for Paul, so much that he could tell the Galatians not to trouble him any more because he was bearing the stigmata of Christ on his physical body (Gal 6:17). But in another context, he was exultant to tell the Colossians: "Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to the afflictions<sup>257</sup> of Christ, for the sake of his body, which is the church" (Col 1:24-25). Paul's statement that his suffering completes what is lacking in Christ afflictions does not refer to some messianic suffering that must be fulfilled before the end of the age. Nor does Paul mean that his suffering has atoning significance as Christ's. Rather, Paul completes what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ in the sense that his ministry extends the knowledge and reality of the cross of Christ to those who do not know him (Hafemann 1993:920). It is in this sense that he says to the Corinthians: "We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows" (2 Cor 4:10; 1:5).

He even appealed to them to take a hard look at his sufferings and they will see the marks of the true apostle of Christ, a telling contrast between him and his fierce triumphalist distracters

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<sup>256</sup> Gordon Fee in his comments on this passage correlates grace, salvation and suffering in an interesting manner. He says that just as salvation is graciously given so is suffering on 'behalf of Christ' remarks: "The God who has graciously given them (the Philippians) salvation through Christ, has with that salvation also graciously given them 'to suffer on his behalf' (Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, Eerdmans, Michigan, 1995, p. 170-71).

<sup>257</sup> S.J.Hafemann has correctly noted that Paul speaks of afflictions and suffering per se more than 60 times. He employs word groups for suffering—*pathema*, *pascho*—for affliction—*thlipsis*, *thlibo*—together with the

(2 Cor 11:16-33). Commenting on the significance of Paul's use of his sufferings in defense of his ministry against his triumphalist distracters, Paul Barnett says: "Paul ... sees his ministry in its sufferings as an authentic extension of the sufferings of the Crucified One. Quite possibly the sufferings incurred in his own ministry as set forth in the speech as it unfolds were, in themselves, sufficient to discredit the ministry of these triumphalists without any further comment" (Barnett 1997:539). Thus, Paul saw in his sufferings not only the evidence of being a disciple of Jesus but also the mark of a true apostle of Christ. But in all this, Paul did not make a virtue out of suffering. He acknowledged that we, the followers of Christ, as the rest of creation, groan inwardly as we await the redemption of our bodies. With that eschatological hope, he could, therefore, affirm that "our present sufferings are not worthy comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us" (Rom 8:18-24). Because, "Our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all" (2 Cor 4:17). Similarly, Paul was always conscious of the fact that we are never alone even in suffering. "We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair, persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed" is a summary statement of Paul's view of the reality of suffering and of God's presence with us in that suffering (2 Cor 4:8-9).<sup>258</sup> Whatever affliction Paul faced, his goal was always to commend himself in every way as a servant of Christ and never to be or do anything that would discredit his message (2 Cor 6:3-13). Thus, suffering is at the heart of Paul's understanding both of his relationship with Christ and of the nature of life in the '*already* and the *not yet*'. He frequently refers to suffering on behalf of Christ as the ordinary lot of believers. "Nevertheless, for Paul, whenever Christians do suffer, they too must meet their suffering with joy, knowing that their affliction is not senseless, but becomes the divinely orchestrated means by which God strengthens their faithful endurance and hope by pouring out his own love and Spirit to sustain or deliver them in their distress" (Hafemann 1993:920). Furthermore, 'suffering on behalf of Christ', which Paul uses repeatedly, gives us some theological insights into his understanding of suffering. First, as made clear in the *kenosis*, Philippians 2:6-11, Christ's resurrection and subsequent exaltation are direct results of his suffering and death on the

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general category of *astheneia* or weakness to describe the suffering and death of Christ as well as his own suffering (Hafemann 1993:919).

<sup>258</sup> The Living Bible renders these verses in a delightful version: "We are pressed on every side by troubles, but not crushed and broken. We are perplexed because we don't know why things happen the way they do, but we don't give up and quit. We are hunted down, but God never abandons us. We get knocked down, but we get up again and keep going. These bodies of ours are constantly facing death just as Jesus did; so it is clear to all that it is only the living Christ within us who keeps us safe" (4:8-10).



cross. By way of analogy, his followers will experience the same through suffering. Second, 'participation in his suffering' or 'suffering on behalf of Christ' speaks of how the sufferings of the followers of Christ are intimately related to his. It is true that the sufferings of the followers of Christ do not have the expiatory significance of Christ's, but they are nonetheless closely related. It is through the suffering of believers that the significance of Christ's sufferings is manifested to the world. Only in that way does 'suffering on his behalf', as Paul describes it in Phil 1:29-30, make sense (Fee 1995:332). Paul recognises that believers will suffer as a result of identifying themselves with Christ and in varying degrees, as a result of their distinct circumstances, bearing in mind that they live in this hostile world.<sup>259</sup>

### 6.5.3 PETER: SUFFERING FOR CHRIST'S SAKE

Paul's understanding of 'suffering on behalf of Christ' is shared by Peter,<sup>260</sup> who perhaps provides the most detailed account of what it means to suffer for Christ in the entire New Testament. Peter underscores the fact that suffering for being a follower of Christ is both possible and inevitable in the Christian walk. In the first letter of Peter, the frequent mentioning of 'suffering' and other related synonyms bears witness to this. The noun form meaning 'suffering' occurs 4 times in this letter alone and 16 times in the entire New Testament. The verb form appears at least 12 times<sup>261</sup> in this letter and 41 times in the New Testament (Marshall 1991:89). Suffering is therefore the main theme of the first letter of Peter.<sup>262</sup> How is suffering viewed in this letter? It is seen as an opportunity to prove genuine faith (1:6-7), as a strong witness to a hostile world (2:13-25), as a sharing in the suffering of Christ and following his example (4:1-6, 12-19), as a manifestation of satanic opposition (5:7-8) and as an event which occasions spiritual growth through grace, an event whose ending will ultimately bring glory and honour to God (5:9-10). Christ's cross overcomes suffering. That victory is now experienced in some limited way but it will be fully experienced in the eschaton, when Christ comes again in glory (1:7; 4:17; 5:10-11). In the meantime, the believer, although still in a state of suffering, must show the love of God by

<sup>259</sup> S.J.Hafemann makes this point in his excellent article on 'suffering' in *The Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, edited by Gerald Hawthorne and Ralph Martin, London: Inter-Varsity, 1993, pp.918-21.

<sup>260</sup> We espouse the view that the apostle Peter is the author of the letters that bear his name (1:1; 5:1; Luke 24:48). Following I. Howard Marshall (1991) and other noted conservative scholars, we believe that the problems related to non-Petrine authorship are much more intricate than those related to his. What is more, it seems that most Christian tradition and history lend weight to Petrine authorship.

<sup>261</sup> See for example chapters 1:6; 2:20,21,23; 3:14,17,18; 4:1,15,18; 5:10.

<sup>262</sup> Beare and others think otherwise. For Beare in particular, salvation for those who believe in the resurrected Christ is the main theme of the letter, which does not explicitly exclude suffering because faith in Christ and therefore salvation lead to suffering in the first place (Beare 1965:37).

continually doing good, even to tormentors. This is the way Christ overcame suffering on the cross and this is the way the believer will overcome it now. Part of the mystery of suffering and evil is that it cannot be simply wiped out, but only overcome by the suffering love of God incarnate in Christ (Marshal 1991:157). Not only is this commendable before God, but it is also his will (2:12,15,20; 3:16-17). But what is the nature of suffering that the believers faced in Peter's time and which we may also face today? Was it actual or anticipatory? While leading commentators on this letter considerably disagree on these issues,<sup>263</sup> there are a good number of reasons to adopt the view that the suffering, which Peter addresses in this letter, was actual,<sup>264</sup> not anticipatory. The passion and the tone he uses in addressing it suggest the suffering was actual. Why would the apostle take pains to deal with an anticipated situation in such detail as we find in this letter? Why mention particular believers in certain locations if the situation was only anticipated and not actual? The one plausible answer would be that there was actual suffering, undergone by believers, which merited the apostolic response as we see in this letter. He has already indicated clearly that believers were being persecuted for being followers of Christ (4:16). Suffering had been and was still being undergone when Peter wrote this letter to encourage and strengthen the believers concerned in that area (Kelly 1969:6, Selwyn 1964:81). The nature of their suffering was twofold: First, their suffering seems to have taken the form of slanderous accusations and discrimination (2:13; 3:16; 4:4,14). Fellow citizens, friends and family inflicted these accusations. Initially, the aim of the accusations was to dissuade believers from following Christ. Non-violent means were employed. However, when the believers failed to comply, more persecution and discrimination was applied (Goppelt 1978:38-60). Second, the believers were accused of sedition and other serious crimes (4:15-19). Before highly biased courts, the believers were committed to long terms in prison and executions. They became objects of state wrath and were ostracised by the community for refusing to compromise their Christian principles or conform to the world (4:3-5). In our present time, there are believers who suffer and die for their faith. There are many places in the world, including Sudan and most parts of the Middle East, where contemporary readers of First Peter live in circumstances much more similar to those of the original readers than it is the case with believers in North America and Europe (Marshal 1991:25). Persecution and suffering for being followers of Christ are still very much

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<sup>263</sup> Goppelt (1978:1-39) presents a very good survey of different views on these issues.

<sup>264</sup> A strong support for the actual view of suffering is provided in Marshal 1991, Kelly 1969, Selwyn 1964 and Cranfield 1950.



a living reality in our day. Trials and suffering still test the faith Christ's followers as fire tests gold. Jesus made it very clear that his followers will suffer persecution, suffering and rejection in the world (John 15:18-16:13, cf 2Timothy 3:12).

#### **6.5.4 FIRST PETER: CONSTRUCTING A BIBLICAL RESPONSE TO SUFFERING FOR BEING CHRISTIANS**

For Jesus, Paul, Peter and other New Testament writers, suffering just for being Christians is sure to come. Primarily, this suffering comes as a natural response of the world to the claims of Christ and Christian witness to them, in word and deed. Persecution did not evoke surprised reactions from early Christians. They were somewhat surprised when their witness did not evoke persecution, for when everyone spoke well of them, they knew something was amiss in their life and witness (Lk 6:26). The world always breathed persecution when they presented the claims of Christ. So they did not ask *why* they were persecuted but *how* do we make use of suffering to witness for Christ. As Walter Wink (1992:315) has said, when the believers suffered persecution for their faith in Christ their immediate concern was not *why* but *how long*: "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?"<sup>265</sup> (Rev 6:10). That was their response. The believers did not look for opportunities to suffer but they expected persecution and suffering to come from a hostile world, alienated from God and his reign. Their main concern besides *how long* was *what do we do now, how do we respond* to persecution and suffering, resulting from our faith in Christ, in a way that will bear witness to our message. They were fully aware of the fact that it had already been graciously granted to them not only to believe in Christ but also to 'suffer on his behalf'. To these believers, therefore, the question of the proper Christian response that promoted the gospel message of salvation and hope in the face of cruel suffering was much more important than *why* suffering should occur at all. It is this concern that we want to address in this section, building on First Peter 3:13-5:11. Our choice of this passage is purely based on the conviction that it is the most comprehensive New Testament text, dealing with the Christian response to suffering and persecution for faith in Christ.

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<sup>265</sup> On whether this prayer is an appropriate Christian response, contrasting sharply as it does with the prayers of Jesus on the cross and that of Stephen when he was being stoned, Robert Mounce has rightly argued that the idea underlying it is not revenge but vindication. He says, "This request does not arise from a personal desire for revenge, but out of concern for the reputation of God". See Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, pp. 158-9, in *THE NEW INTERNATIONAL COMMENTARY ON THE NEW TESTAMENT*, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1977.

Far from being a biblical theodicy, this passage offers an active, not an escapist response to suffering.

#### **6.5.4.1 SUFFERING FOR DOING GOOD**

As we examine this epistle, we deduce the following: First, the believer may suffer for doing what is good (3:12-4:6). Peter makes this clear from the outset, although his rhetorical question "who will harm you if you are eager to do good" seems to indicate the contrary (3:13). However, his own answer in the next verse (3:14) suggests that it is quite likely that one may do good and still suffer for it. What Peter emphasises is not that doing good will guarantee protection from suffering; he emphasises that it is better for the believer to suffer for doing good rather than evil. When that is the case, the believer has nothing to fear and is not frightened by anything or anyone. Instead, he/she is blessed because he/she is suffering after the example of Christ (2:21-23; 3:18). But if and when the believer suffers for doing what is good what should his/her attitude and response be? Peter is much more concerned with this. He suggests three things that should characterise the believer's response to suffering for Christ. First, his/her attitude is to be characterised by honouring Jesus Christ as Lord in his/her heart (3:15). This involves revering him even in the face of suffering and death since he is Lord both in life and in death. Another aspect of honouring him is that the believer does not disown him or his claims when he/she suffers. Second, his/her attitude should be characterised by being ready to answer anyone who inquires about the hope we have in Christ (3:16). This may be in private or before a court of law. It is to be done with respect and gentleness to the one who inquires. The giving of such a reason for our faith would largely involve a rational and intelligible account. In doing this, one needs to keep a clear conscience, putting to shame those who maliciously speak against our good conduct in Christ and silencing their slander. Third, his attitude should be characterised by sacrificial readiness to suffer doing what is good after the example of Christ (3:17-18). Peter contends that suffering for doing what is evil is not a Christian thing; it is retributive. But following the example of Christ, Peter argues that it is better to suffer for doing what is good rather than what is evil if this is the will of God. For Christ did suffer for no sin of his own; he suffered for others. In his suffering, he did not revile his killers; he forgave them. Building on this, Peter moves on to tell the believer to arm himself to suffer like Christ (4:1). This suffering has its ramification in dying to sin and living to do God's will and not one's own desires, which was unfruitful in the past (4:2-3). However, this very thing will lead to more



persecution, which those with whom the believer will part company will inflict since they are now deserted because of faith in Christ (4:4). In such an eventuality, the believer does not have to fight his own battle—God will do that on his behalf. He is ready to make the persecutors account for their deeds (4:4-6). From what Peter has said up to this point, the following implications may be drawn. In the first place, doing what is right for Christ may lead to suffering. Whatever good we may do as enabled by God's grace will contrast sharply with the evil present in the world and lead in that sense to persecution and suffering for the believer. Righteous living is always a threat to wicked living. Whenever the believer chooses to be different, he will for sure face opposition and persecution of some sort in the home, the workplace and the neighbourhood. This may take the form of ridicule, verbal abuse, slander, false accusations or even physical harm. Daring to be different has a price tag to it—persecution and suffering. Second, God may allow persecution and suffering to come to us in order to shake our false sense of security and comfort. This may sound unkind considering the severity of suffering. It may be hard to reconcile it with the love and power of God. Why must we suffer sorrow, distress, anguish and pain in order to come out of our comfort zones? Sometimes, it may be that persecution or suffering get our attention quicker than any other medium because it gets under our skin. Difficult situations in life, problems at the workplace, strained relationships in the family, failures in business and career, dwindling popularity and loss of possessions may all force us to re-examine our ways and focus in life. Through them we may come to realise that God is the source and centre of our life and that our relationship with Christ is much more invincible than everything else we possess. Third, suffering has a purifying effect on the life of the believer. More than once, Peter brings this to our attention (1:6-7; 4:1-2; cf. Job 23:10; Psalm 66:10; Proverbs 17:3). After going through the fire of suffering, we are never the same in our character and approach to life. Suffering humbles us and refines our character. Suffering reminds us that we are not in control and that we need God and other people to face life and its myriad challenges. In suffering, we may find God's purpose and plan for our life. As William Barclay has rightly observed there may be unpopularity, persecution, sacrifice for one's principles and deliberately choosing the difficult way of life, appropriating the necessary discipline and toil of Christian life and yet the believer's life has a certain blessedness that runs through it all (Barclay 1977:229). Only a refined character can discover this perspective. What then should be our response when we suffer? We suggest the following: First, when we suffer we should put our trust in God. Peter tells us that let those who suffer according to God's will commit themselves to their faithful

creator and continue to do good (4:19). Suffering generates a great amount of fear in us. It destabilises our life. Putting our trust in the one who took upon himself a suffering exceeding anything we will ever experience is our only help. He is the only one who shares our sufferings and hurts and nurses our wounds. He has been through it all and he is able to help us. Second, when we suffer we should see it as an opportunity to witness for Christ. That suffering may be a witnessing opportunity is attested to time and again in Peter (2:15-17; 3:15-17). Peter insists that by doing what is good even in suffering, the follower of Christ has a unique opportunity to tell others about Christ. In the history of the church too, many believers suffered and died for their faith in Christ, by their death winning many for the faith than they ever did in life. Indeed, only a few people will dispute the fact that the church of Jesus Christ experiences much more growth in times of persecution and suffering, than in times of peace and prosperity. The experience of the Sudanese church at this time of war and suffering, as we mentioned above, is a case in point. Finally, when we suffer we should know we are blessed. Peter attributes this blessedness in suffering to the resting of the Spirit of Christ upon those who suffer. He explains that those who now suffer for Christ's sake will be glorified with him when he returns (4:13). This blessedness includes all that we have discussed above.

#### **6.5.4.2 SUFFERING FOR BEING A CHRISTIAN**

Second, the believer may suffer for being a Christian (4:7-19). Peter tells his audience that the end of all things is near (4:7). This may mean all major events in God's plan of redemption have occurred and therefore all is ready for the return and rule of Christ (Grudem 1990:172). Because of this, Peter tells the believers to be clear minded and self-controlled. Thus Peter does not allow the believers to remain passive in suffering, but active. That the believers must be clear minded and self-controlled in order to lead a life of prayer and mutual love is being active, not passive in the face of suffering. The same is true of hospitality and purposeful use of spiritual gifts, which must continue in the community of faith even if it faces persecution and suffering (4:7-11). Being in suffering or living near the end time is no excuse for losing our mental or moral balance. We are not to throw up our jobs and daily concerns as some of the Thessalonians apparently did. We are not to give way to panic, undue excitement and emotionalism, but rather we are to learn to be sober and do our own business (Cranfield 1950:94). For Peter, therefore, suffering should not be allowed to stop the daily flow of the life of the Spirit in the community of faith. His motivation for this is that God may be praised



in all things through Jesus Christ (4:11). On returning to his main subject, after addressing these communal concerns, Peter makes a startling statement. He tells his audience that their experience of suffering is not strange or surprising. It is to be expected as characteristic of the Christian life in the world as Jesus has already mentioned (Mat 5:11-12; Mk 13:13; Jn 15:18-20; 16:33 and 1 Jn 3:13). Indeed, the believers should rejoice in it (4:12-13). Peter's reason for making this remarkable statement is twofold. First, participating in Christ's sufferings at the present time leads to being overjoyed when his glory is revealed. The believer is not only united with Christ in his death and resurrection, but also in the fellowship of his suffering and other aspects of life that he experienced (Grudem 1990:179). Second, the believer should regard his/her suffering a blessing. It is evidence that the Spirit of Christ rests on him/her, having been regarded worthy to suffer for the name of Christ. But the believer must not suffer for wrongdoing if he/she is not to be ashamed; he/she rather suffer for being a Christian, in which case he/she will praise God for bearing that name (4:16-17). For the second time in this chapter Peter speaks of the judgement that will come on those who persecute the followers of Christ (4:6,18). What does all this mean? What should our response be? Again, we may conclude the following: First, being a follower of Christ involves trials and suffering. The New Testament and the history of the church make this clear. In fact, being a Christian in the first centuries of the church was a matter of life and death. Living out the teaching of Christ has never been and will never be an easy task for true believers. People have always become Christians and still do so at a high cost—they suffer and die for their faith in Christ. Today there are believers who suffer and die for faith in Christ in many parts of the world. But in very general terms, the 21<sup>st</sup> century church is not accustomed to suffering. And this, as Robert Mounce has strongly put it, should be a matter of concern, not of self-praise and complacency. Because either the world has grown more tolerant than it was at the time of Jesus and the apostles or the 21<sup>st</sup> century church has failed to take the claims of Christ sufficiently serious so that there is no marked difference from the world, hence the lack of persecution. For the world cannot afflict or persecute its own (Mounce 1982:72-3). Second, believers are to rejoice when they suffer for being followers of Christ. Suffering for being followers of Christ as such stems from allegiance to his lordship and hence the cause for rejoicing. Rejoicing is in the fact that in sharing in the suffering of Christ now, the believer will also share in his glory when it is revealed. But it must be noted that suffering is not to be sought as an end in itself so as to be guaranteed sharing in the glory of Christ. That is to miss the point completely. Suffering for its own sake has no meritorious significance in the sense

of being salvific. It is a price the believer pays for being a follower of Christ, not for becoming one or else the grace of God is in vain. Thus, the ground of rejoicing in suffering is not in the act of suffering itself but in the Christ of suffering, who is exalted and honoured when we, by his grace, persevere in suffering. Third, believers should entrust themselves to God when they suffer. Those who suffer can confidently place their life in the care of God. He is faithful to keep all that is committed to him to the very end (Marshall 1990:158-9). This act of committing oneself to God is after the example of Christ, who in his suffering on the cross committed himself to his Father (Lk 23:46). To distinguish this act of entrusting oneself to God in suffering from being passive, Peter says that the continual doing of what is good must accompany it. For even when the believer does not counter violence with violence his/her act of praying for and blessing his/her adversaries is being active in suffering, not passive. This is what Peter means in citing the example of Christ. Finally, those who suffer should look forward to God's ultimate justice. The essence of this justice is that God will judge the persecutors of his people. Their persistence in inflicting suffering on God's people arises from their refusal to accept the claims of Christ. The suffering they inflict is an attempt to put off the light of the gospel or stop the followers of Christ from obeying him. This is what Saul of Tarsus tried to do before Jesus 'arrested' him on the Damascus road. Jesus told him in no uncertain terms that he was persecuting him by persecuting his followers (Ac 9:1-9). Thus, God's judgement on the persecutors is due to their refusal to obey the gospel and their deliberate choice to inflict pain and suffering on his people instead. However, his love for them is constant. It exceeds his wrath by far. If they turn to him as Saul did, he is ready to forgive and receive them.

#### **6.5.4.3 SUFFERING IS A TEMPORARY EXPERIENCE**

Peter brings his letter to conclusion by asserting that suffering is only a temporary experience (5:1-11). In this section, Peter first deals with order and relationships in the suffering church of Asia Minor. As a senior elder and 'witness of Christ's suffering', Peter is qualified to encourage and instruct the church on how to respond not only to suffering from without but also to strained relationships in the community (5:1-5). Peter instructs them to be humble and submissive to one another, since God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble (5:5-6). Both the young and the old must be self-controlled and extra alert as they resist the Devil in a spiritual warfare in which all the followers of Christ are engaged (5:8-9). Again, Peter seeks to remind his audience that life in the community must continue even in suffering. Suffering



should not be allowed to stop the flow of life and relationships in the community. Peter with a slightly different touch revisits his theme of suffering. He describes God as 'the God of all grace' (5:10). This either means 'the God from whom grace proceeds' or 'the God who grants grace' to his people in suffering and in other various situations of life or both. This God is the one who has 'called you to his eternal glory in Christ'. In this, a reference to salvation in Christ may be implied because in Christ the believer is predestined for eternal salvation. This is based on God's grace and mercy, not on individual merits. This 'God of all grace' is the one who is capable of sustaining the believer in the midst of unbearable suffering. 'After you have suffered for a little while' this God will act. 'After you have suffered for a little while' is a phrase that may imply both the temporal nature of suffering and the swift, sovereign action of God to bring it to an end. It does not minimise the cruelty and severity of suffering, but it tells us that suffering is only for a while. For no matter how intense and severe it may be, suffering will not last forever; it is but for a while.<sup>266</sup> However, for a person in the midst of suffering that 'little while' can seem an eternity, quite unbearable. Peter understands this but still encourages the believer that God himself is at work in his life. He goes on to list four things that God will do for the believer 'after they have suffered for a little while'. First, God will restore the believer. Why is this? Because suffering is an experience that makes us feel somewhat alienated from God and the community. In suffering, the sense of having been abandoned by God and fellow humans is real. Suffering under that aspect is an extremely lonesome experience that deprives us of joy and the taste for living. We therefore need to be restored to God and the community because the sense of abandonment and alienation are part of our experience of suffering. Second, God will make the believer strong. Again, God will do this because suffering weakens us. It weakens us spiritually, physically, and emotionally. In suffering, we become depleted in many ways. It is in this regard that God will strengthen and rejuvenate us by his love, expressed in his community. In practical ways we come to experience what it means to have others in the community carry our burdens. Third, God will make the believer firm. As fragile beings, we waver a great deal when we experience suffering. Doubt and uncertainty assail us. We are tempted to question and doubt the

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<sup>266</sup> John Wenham brings this point home when he writes, "the sum total of human misery is beyond computation, yet it is limited. When the torturer goes beyond a certain point his victim faints. Mental tension has its own breaking point. Famine will dull the senses. The ravings of delirium seem like a half-forgotten dream when the fever has passed. Even pain may induce a sort of numbness. The limit to the degree of suffering possible may seem high indeed, but for every man there is a providential 'Thus far, and no farther'...and there is a limit in time. Not only is it certain that this life will end, but it is certain that from the perspective of eternity it will be seen to have passed in a flash" (*The Goodness of God*, p. 77, Inter-Varsity Press, London, 1974).

goodness and the power of God in the severity of suffering and pain. We wonder if the suffering that has come upon us is due to our sin or failure. We ask 'why me God?' What have I done to deserve this? All this is wavering, not in itself an act of sinning, but nevertheless requiring to be made firm by God. Peter tells us that God will graciously do this 'after we have suffered a little while'. Finally, God will make the believer steadfast. This is related, in a sense, to being made firm. If being made firm is to put us in place after wavering, being made steadfast is to keep us from wavering. Suffering badly shakes us and destabilises our life. But God in his faithfulness and grace will see to it that it does not crush us. For he will not let us be tried beyond what he knows we can bear. What is more, he has promised to be with us in our suffering and trials (Isa 43:1-3). Through his unfailing love and grace, God will make us steadfast in suffering. This is why Peter does not hesitate at all to tell his suffering audience that "let those who suffer according to the will of God commit themselves to their faithful creator and continue to do good. For after you have suffered for a little while God himself will restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast" (4:19; 5:10).

In summary, the New Testament makes the following clear in regard to suffering for being a Christian. First, the Christian must expect to suffer. As Jesus made it clear, if they made him suffer, they will do the same to his followers. Secondly, in a world hostile to God and his purposes, suffering is inescapable. Some will suffer properly for doing what is wrong but others will suffer for doing what is right. The Christian should be in the latter category, not in the former. Thirdly, suffering will come as a test of faith, a fiery ordeal. Suffering is one among the circumstances of life, which provides a testing ground to prove a genuine faith. Fourthly, the Christian response to suffering even inhumane conditions is not violence but doing what is good. This is not being passive in the face of suffering but it is another kind of response. Fifthly, suffering is a common experience, a bond of Christian brotherhood. Peter tells us it is the experience of believers everywhere. Finally, suffering is defeated in Christ and it is a temporary experience. It does not weigh up against the glory that will be revealed in us. Suffering is here and yet it is vanquished by the cross of Christ (Ferguson 1972:92-5). Suffering remains unexplained. It is rooted in divine mystery and is profoundly human. God's redemption of the world employs suffering in its numerous forms to enable persons to recognise their own humanity and acknowledge their true selves. However, some suffering, by its very intensity, lacks a positive dimension, introducing destructive powers that ultimately triumph over the victims. This kind of suffering stretches faith to the limit.



Scripture does not deny or trivialise it. Yet, the biblical perspective on suffering moves beyond the tragedy of suffering and insists that evil is under the control of God (Crenshaw 1993:719). This is what the next section addresses.

## **6.6 INNOCENT SUFFERING: THE EXPERIENCE OF JOB**

Some call it suffering as a result of the sinful state of the world (Rodin 1997:9). Included in this category are natural disasters, suffering of children, physical and mental diseases. The victim suffers not because of what they have done but because of cosmic, unseen powers beyond his control. In the Bible, the book of Job deals with the problem of innocent suffering. We turn to it.

### **6.6.1 THE AFFLICTION OF JOB (1-2)**

The book of Job, which has been interpreted in general as a poetic disquisition on the theme of human suffering, is a fascinating story (Clements 1992:84). It relates highly dramatic events in the life of a man called Job who lived in the land of Uz.<sup>267</sup> This man is described as blameless, upright and God-fearing. He was a father of ten and a guardian of a large number of servants. His riches are immense, consisting of seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred oxen and five hundred donkeys. By both ancient and modern standards, Job is a wealthy man. What is more, Job regularly performed priestly duties on behalf of his family, fearing that his continually feasting children might have secretly cursed God. Thus, Job demonstrated his religious and moral integrity, fearing God and avoiding evil. His life is compatible with the law and the rule of God as known during his time. But all that is suddenly put in turmoil. A council convenes in heaven, where the 'sons of God' or angelic beings come to give reports of their work and receive instructions for further assignments.<sup>268</sup> One among these is Satan, a roaming and roving ambassador whose task it is to find fault and to prosecute those who do not toe the line. When God ask him if he had anything to report on the 'blameless and upright Job', Satan immediately goes into contention. According to him, Job's faithfulness and righteousness toward God are not disinterested. He charges that Job

<sup>267</sup> The exact location of the land of Uz is uncertain. However, scholars suggest three possible locations. These are Hauran, east of the Sea of Galilee, in modern Syria, Edom or Idumea, south of the Dead Sea and western Arabia or Saudi Arabia and Yemen (William Reayburn 1992:31).

<sup>268</sup> The phrase 'present themselves' expresses, in the words of Walter L. Michel, standing at attention of the officers of Yahweh in order to report to him and then receive instructions for their further duties (Michel 1987:17).

serves God for what he gets, not for who God is. His outward appearance may be good but his motivation for fearing God is suspect, suggests the adversary. As if to vindicate his malicious claim, Satan throws down the gauntlet to God: 'stretch out your hand and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face' (1:11). Putting everything Job had in Satan's hand, the LORD permits Satan but sovereignly limits his power to harm the person of Job. Leaving the presence of the LORD, Satan strikes all that Job had. Four fear-stricken messengers come to report to Job heartbreaking disasters, one after another. Everything, from his domestic animals, his servants to his children is lost in one fateful day. All of a sudden, 'the greatest man among all the people of the east' is reduced to nothing. Will he 'curse' God as Satan suggested or will he hold on to his faithfulness? Job holds on to his integrity. Tearing his robe in a characteristic Near Eastern mourning fashion, Job bows in worship and blesses the LORD who gives and takes away.

But more disaster is yet to come. Another council on another day convenes in the heavenly courthouse. Apparently disappointed but still maliciously tenacious, the prosecuting angel, Satan, maintains his early contention with a different touch. 'Skin for skin', he screams, 'for a man will give all he has for his own life' (2:4). Again, the LORD permits Satan to strike Job's body but not to take his life. Job is stricken with painful sores or boils. He sits among the ashes outside the city gates, a dwelling place of lepers.<sup>269</sup> Scraping himself with a broken pottery, Job still holds on to his integrity to the chagrin of his understandably frustrated and overwhelmed wife. She advises Job to 'curse God and die,'<sup>270</sup> the very thing that Satan desperately wants (2:9). Job vigorously rejects the idea, arguing that cursing God because trouble has come is a morally deficient response, only appropriate for fools. For the righteous, the art of knowing how to receive both good and bad from the LORD must be learned. Thus, Job, in the loss of his wealth and health, does not curse God but worships him.

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<sup>269</sup> T. H. Robinson argues that based on the symptoms suggested in 7:4-5, 14-15, Job's boils might have been a particularly severe type of leprosy (Robinson 1954:30).

<sup>270</sup> E. Dhorme reports that Job's wife's speech is prolonged in one biblical tradition as her name is given as Dinah in another. Here is what she is reported to have said to Job. "For how long will you exercise your patience saying: 'See, I will persevere a little longer, waiting and hoping for my redemption?' For consider, the memory of you has vanished from the earth, your sons and daughters are no more, those who were the pains and travail of my womb, and for whom I exhausted myself in vain. As for you, there you sit, your body rotting amid worms, and spending the nights in the open air. While I, wandering about as a slave, roaming restlessly hither and thither, from house to house, await the hour of the sunset that I may rest from my weariness and from sorrows which press upon me. Curse God and die" (Dhorme 1967:XIX).



### 6.6.2 JOB AND HIS COMFORTERS (3-31)

The news of Job's misfortunes and suffering spread quickly to his friends. Three friends, of distinguished calibre, come to offer him comfort and sympathy. Not able to recognise him when they see him from afar, the immensity of his suffering and pain deeply horrifies them and causes them to weep loudly. They sit for a week in dead silence, not knowing what to say to him or how to say it. After this, Job himself breaks the silence with an impassioned lament, setting off the first cycle of speeches. In his lament, he does not curse God but he curses the night of his conception and the day of his birth, comprehensively expressing his desperation and disgust at the gift of life itself (Eaton 1985:3). He wished he had never been conceived or born or that he had died at birth. Besides, Job wishes that he might die now if only to be spared the suffering that has befallen him. Job's lament contrasts sharply with the lament in the psalms, where the intention is to awaken the divine sympathy and enlist his help and deliverance from powerful foes, imagined or real (Psa 10:1-15; 13:1-6; 22:1-25). Claus Westermann<sup>271</sup> has categorised Job's lament as self-lament, a category which the cursing of the day of birth substantively dominates (Westermann 1977:38). But still Job's lament like that of the psalmist reveals the bitterness of the soul that results from the experience of pain and suffering. Job is a man in deep agony and he takes the courage to express it in lament. That elicits the first response from Eliphaz, probably the most senior of Job's friends (4-5). He begins to speak with considerable care, cautious not to offend his suffering friend. But his speech quickly degenerates into the common theological thinking of the time, namely that suffering is a retribution for sin. He contends that sufferings like Job's are not without a cause, which is nothing less than sin, a lot of all those born of women. Eliphaz bases his observations on experience and tradition. He ends his discourse with a call for repentance leading to restoration if Job will pay heed to it. Job replies that he is innocent (6-7). He refuses to buy into the retributive theology of his friends and maintains his right to plead with God to remember him in his suffering. Job paints a dark picture of the frailty of all human life. His own sufferings portray how wretched human existence can be in the world. Bildad speaks next, largely on the same lines as Eliphaz. The only difference between the two being Bildad's insensitivity as he defends the justice of God he thinks Job has violated in insisting on his innocence. Bildad argues that Job's sin has brought suffering to himself and his family.

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<sup>271</sup> Westermann actually thinks that lament comprises by the far the most formal element in the book of Job (1977:31).

His children, says Bildad, died because they sinned. If Job wants to be restored, he must repent now (8:4,18-22). In reply, Job concurs that God indeed restores those who repent but contradicts Bildad's theory of God's justice, arguing further that justice is not always the rule of thumb in real life. For in this life, suffering overtakes both the wicked and the righteous. If this is not from God's hand, then tell me where is it from? Job seems to challenge Bildad. Job then turns in lament to God after answering Bildad. Zophar is outraged by Job's assertion of his innocence, which seems to be an impious contradiction of the omniscient God in the eyes of Zophar. If Bildad is insensitive, Zophar is insensitively heartless. He tells Job that God has even forgotten some of his sins (11:6), implying thereby that his punishment should have been much more severe than it now is. He pointedly accuses Job of deception and folly (11:11-12). But like his other friends, he pleads with Job to repent in order to be restored (11:13-20). The words of Zophar infuriate Job and prompt him to tell all his friends that he is also as wise as they claim to be, only this time Job gives his friends a long lecture on the acts of God and the destiny of humans. He then turns to God in his now characteristic lament, depicting his suffering in agonising detail but still expressing hope that he will be vindicated ultimately even if God slays him now (13:13-18).

The second and third cycles of speeches (15-31) are basically made of the same arguments, with Job's friends trying to persuade him to accept that his suffering is due to his sin and that he should repent in order to be restored, and Job insisting on his innocence. However, his frustration and anger are more evident than ever before, being borne out of an unyielding resilience to maintain his integrity against the increasingly vigorous charges of his friends, almost to the point of being impious and arrogant to God himself. Consequently, Job's position and that of his friends remain as polarised as ever. The last speeches of Job catalogue the virtues of wisdom and how he applied them in his life before disaster overtook him. Thus Job swears his innocence and silences his friends into either unspoken disagreement or agreement. This we cannot tell for sure but Elihu's discourses seem to confirm that Job and his friends were irreconcilably deadlocked. Elihu intervenes to help Job and his friends reconcile their polarised stance in four speeches, not much different from the previous ones (32-37). Elihu summarises Job's position in 33:8-12 and contends that Job is wrong in claiming to be sinless. But as John Eaton has pointed out, Elihu in fact misunderstands Job's position. Job does not claim that he is sinless but that he is innocent of the offences that his friends consider to be the cause for his suffering (Eaton 1985:23). However, Elihu's great



contribution is his exposition of the greatness of God, expressed through his goodness and mighty acts, and how man should appropriately respond to it (36:16-23; 37:12-17).

### 6.6.3 THE LORD FINALLY SPEAKS (38:1-42:6)

Yahweh finally speaks to Job out of the storm. Some of what he says has been hinted at in Elihu's speeches. Many consider God's speeches to Job to be the highest point of the book (Williams 1978:59-72 and Alden 1993:367). Neither Job nor his friends expected God to speak, although Job has longed for God to speak if only to vindicate him. But God speaks not about the issues of authority, justice or why the righteous suffer, as debated by Job and his friends. Instead, we hear an outpouring of more than seventy questions directed at Job. Thus, Job's case for vindication is left in the background as God expounds on his greatness, mighty works and wisdom in the created order, albeit in a flood of questions (Alden 1993:368). Yahweh challenges Job to answer but he admits his ignorance and unworthiness before God and promises to speak no more (40:3-5). But God has not finished yet. He goes on to speak of great animals, Leviathan and Behemoth,<sup>272</sup> and ask Job if he can tame them. Job is finally brought to a place of acknowledging his ignorance. He confesses his unworthiness in repentance, having now known that God can do all things and that no plan of his can be thwarted. He has heard of God but he can now see him (42:1-6). Job has not known why he is suffering but he is content. His questions are not answered but they seem to have melted in the heat of God's discourse. God does not explain his actions but Job does not bother to inquire. God rebukes Job's friends for not speaking what is right of him as Job did. Is it not a bit ironic that Job is the one who is said to have spoken well when it seems that he was angry and impatient with God? What right thing did he speak of God when he seems to have bitterly complained all through? Why does God call him 'my servant Job' at least three times (1:8; 2:3; 42:8)? Job held on to God in his suffering even when he did not always feel his presence. He felt that God was hidden from him and still put his trust in him. His patience is expressed by the faith that he would one day see God even if his body wasted away. Job stubbornly insisted on his innocence, arguing that only God can tell him that his suffering was a just reward for his sin if he had really sinned.

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<sup>272</sup> What of creatures these were is a subject of debate among biblical scholars. Some identify them with the hippopotamus and the crocodile (Dhorme 1967:lix, Alden1993: 24) and others identify them with mythical marine monsters (Pope 1965: XXI). Whatever they may be, they represent the greatness of God's creation and Job seems to have known what they were and hence his awe when God speaks of them as part of his mighty acts.

Gerald Janzen has spoken of the patience of Job and his lust for life in the midst of suffering as the basis of his stubborn determination not to acquiesce in the false charges of his friends. Job, continues Janzen, did not give up his life but determined to persevere until God should respond to him. "This kind of patience and trust is not passive though it is a passion. It is an act of courage and creative affirmation in the face of all that threatens to empty life of its meaning and point. It is a responsive participation in God's passion which is God's creation and redemption of the world" (Janzen 1998:161). Through this patience, Job was able to speak honestly of God and of himself and in that way he spoke what is right about God. This is why, as we come to the conclusion of the book, Job's friends, 'the champions of orthodoxy' who sought to justify God at all costs even by misrepresenting him and by being heartlessly insensitive to their suffering friend, are sharply rebuked by God. As John Wilcox notes, the most plausible reading of God's rebuke to Job's friends is not so much for trying to uncover what lies beneath the surface of life but getting the surface wrong. What they say about the safety of the innocent and the wretchedness of the wicked is not true. The real world is not so neatly arranged like that (Wilcox 1989:179). But Job, the 'sinner', according to his friends, is right in asserting that the orthodox doctrine is wrong, at least in his case. The world is more complex than the orthodox doctrine holds. For there are times the innocent suffer as Job does and the wicked prosper or seem to. As such, the moral world order of the orthodoxy, in which the righteous always prosper and the wicked do not, collapses in the light of Job's experience. In refusing to endorse the prevailing doctrine of his friends and upholding his innocence, Job speaks well of God in his experience, an experience he refuses to falsify. Consequently, the one who is allegedly suffering for his wickedness is being asked by God to intercede for his friends if they are to be forgiven. Job obeys and he is restored to double of his former state, riches, family and a long life. No wonder God calls him "my servant."

#### **6.6.4 JOB'S RESTORATION: INNOCENT SUFFERING AND THE GOODNESS OF GOD**

Job is restored doubly to his former life. His person and theology have been refined in the fire of suffering. His story as a righteous man who suffers appalling and undeserved calamities has ended on a pleasant note. But what do we make of the fundamental concerns that this book raises in relation to the problem of innocent human suffering? What about the issues that Job's friends raise in regard to God, sin, justice and punishment? First, we note that the book of Job does not solve the problem of innocent suffering. Rather, it does deal with



apparent contradictions in our experience of God, as good and yet apparently indifferent in suffering, just and yet apparently slow to intervene when evil strikes. In the suffering experience of Job these contradictions come to the fore. The reality that God governs the world seems to come into direct clash with surging chaos and moral anarchy in creation. People do not always get what they deserve and some senseless suffering invades human destiny. The book of Job does not propound any explanation of this apparent conflict but it still affirms that the world is in the hands of a good God in spite of all that points to the contrary. In Job's speeches, as John Eaton rightly observes, all that seems to belie God's goodness is represented most frankly and the ultimate supremacy of good is not denied (1985:49). Secondly, Job affirms that suffering can be faced openly without losing one's convictions. In his protest, Job calls into question the claim that for all things under the sun there is a purpose, ordained from the hand of the God who guides the whole creation and shapes human existence (Milazzo1992: 120). He also protests against the shallow orthodoxy of his friends and maintains his innocence as he appeals to God for justice and vindication. For this honesty God does not condemn Job. Thus, the Book of Job seems to affirm that one may protest against innocent suffering as Job does and still be honest about his feelings and reactions to God. Such is the nature of honest faith in God, which is not just a well-rehearsed piety, blindly held to the bitter end at all costs but an honest engagement with God even in suffering. This kind of faith is a fatal trust in the God whose ways and purposes are not always easily discernable. Job's friends try to make this bitter truth attractive in a dishonest way. But Job refuses to accept this simplistic solution from his friends and appeals instead for redress from God, confident in his ultimate vindication. Having known the horror of suffering and evil, first hand, and yet without a trace of dishonesty or illusion, Job consciously chooses to stake his life on God, preferring to trust even if God kills him (13:15). Thus, Job's costly but honest faith triumphs in the teeth of savage and senseless suffering. Thirdly, the retributive theology of Job's friends misrepresents God's character and Job's position. Simply put, their theology advocates that suffering is always a result of sin. Job has sinned and God is punishing him for it. His suffering is a just retribution of his sin. Job's friends are thus ready to present well-drilled traditions and teachings to buttress their comfortable orthodoxy. They go out of their way to maintain their theological convictions by all means even if that means slandering or injuring a suffering friend. When they defend the justice and goodness of God they do so to the point that the God whom they purport to defend is rendered very defenceless and cruel. As Gustavo Gutierrez has forcefully argued, their logic allows no exceptions.

Because the ethical pattern they expound is a very simple one that can be applied in a highly individualistic way. And there flows its power (Gutierrez 1988:22). It was and still is the prevailing doctrine of the 'blessed and the prosperous', those who feel they are righteous because their material blessings confirm it. But one purpose of the book of Job is to challenge this conception and to show that it is inoperative and misleading in real life. The book shows beyond a shadow of doubt that there is such a thing as undeserved suffering and that it is not always true that if we are righteous we will necessarily prosper.<sup>273</sup> Suffering is not a virtue but there are many good people who suffer in this world while many evil people seem to prosper, although not for a long time. Fourthly, God reveals himself to Job as inexplicable in his wisdom, goodness and power but he does not explain his purposes or actions to him. God reveals himself as El Shaddai, a name occurring forty-eight times in the Bible and thirty-one times in Job. He does not address justice issues, which Job has raised as he pleaded his innocence in the face of false accusations of his friends and God's apparent injustice and silence. As Gerald Janzen rightly notes, what God addresses through a barrage of questions he poses to Job are issues in the domain of birth, life, primal nurture and care, which Job has raised in his lament and protest. By speaking of his created order, God implicitly tells Job that he cares for his creatures and that he is in control. The divine speeches show, therefore, that God is the creator who cares for his created order, who takes the risk to create a world whose vital forces enjoy enough freedom for the possibility of evil and who is profoundly opposed to wickedness, not with the force of a divine ruler who coerces goodness by a strict system of rewards and punishments but by truth (Janzen 1998:160).<sup>274</sup> For Job, such self-manifestation of God evokes wonder and self-surrendering adoration but it also presents him with the mystery of a world in which evil and suffering are beyond human explanation or control.<sup>275</sup> In our human limitation, we do not see deeply enough to know how or why God deals with the innocent, the upright, or the wicked the way he does (Wilcox 1989:175). Although the book

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<sup>273</sup> Because Job's friends did not read Job chapters 1-2, they did not grasp this concept. Unfortunately, many people today read these chapters and still miss the point altogether.

<sup>274</sup> John T Wilcox speaks of apparent irrelevance of God's speeches to issues raised in Job. He writes in that regard: "We expect God's message to settle matters. We heard from Job and from his critics; surely God will clarify issues, or reveal who has been right, or explain what must be done. But God's speeches seem, at least on their face, grandly irrelevant to all the issues of the book" (*The Bitterness of Job*, Michigan University, 1989, p. 119). Wilcox may be right, but the apparent irrelevance of these speeches speaks of the complexity of the problem of innocent suffering itself, which Job does not probe further after God speaks. Could it be that Job did see some relevance in God's speeches?

<sup>275</sup> In the words of Gerald Janzen, the divine speeches present Job with the mystery of a world charged with dynamic life forces that are beyond human explanation or control (See his '*Lust for Life and the Bitterness of Job*' in *The Journal of Theology Today*, vol. 55 no 2, pp. 152-62, July 1998).



of Job seems to indicate that both the innocent and the guilty suffer (Milazzo1992: 119), it leaves us in no doubt that it is worthwhile to be righteous and face innocent suffering than to be wicked. There is nothing to suggest in the book of Job that God does not require of man the kind of uprightness and morality that Job displays even though it does not guarantee immunity from suffering (Wilcox 1989:175).

## 6.7 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we have examined various ways the Bible views suffering. In the first place, we found that suffering sometimes comes as a consequent or wages of sin. Sinful acts such as wilful disobedience, rebellion and unfaithfulness are punished. This category is a main theme of the Old and New Testaments. God allows suffering and evil to come in response to specific sinful acts. Jesus in the story of the man born blind underscores the fact that suffering is not always a result of sin, thus contradicting a popular assumption of his time. We also saw that suffering may come as corrective and disciplinary measure from God. In order to correct and bring us into conformity with his will, God, as a good parent, will actively bring suffering. The difference between this category and the first one is that God purposefully brings and uses suffering to correct and discipline us. Similarly, there is a sense in which we bring suffering upon ourselves in the first category and God actively puts us through suffering in the second category. However, in each case, suffering results from our sinful acts and rebellion against God's love and grace. Thirdly, we found that Scripture clearly demonstrates that suffering will come as a test of faith. Here, neither chastisement nor sin is involved. The purpose and intent of testing faith is to build, strengthen and prepare us for greater use or service. It is a process of making and moulding us into the kind of people God would want us to be, a people to bring praise and honour to his name and blessing to others. Fourthly, we discussed at length the suffering, which comes as a direct result of being followers of Christ. From the teaching of Jesus, Paul and Peter, we found that following Christ involves suffering and trials. There is such a thing as 'the fellowship of Christ's suffering', for it is granted for the Christian not only to believe in Christ but also to suffer for his sake. Finally, we saw in the experience of Job that we may suffer innocently, as a result of cosmic powers beyond our control and as a result of living in a fallen sinful world. Suffering in this category befalls the righteous in spite of or even because of their uprightness. Contrary to the orthodoxy of Job's friends, there is no guarantee that we will not suffer because we are innocent or righteous or

that when we suffer it is because we have sinned. While it is generally true that God rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked, there are times both the righteous and the wicked suffer. As the experience of Job shows, the righteous may actually suffer because they are righteous while the wicked may seem to flourish, at least in the short term. But in all this, it is far more rewarding to be righteous and suffer innocently than to be wicked. Closely examined, the biblical perspective on suffering in very general terms does not solve the problem of suffering. It shows us that suffering is a reality to face, not to solve. However, in the cross of Christ suffering is dealt with and the provision on how to face it is made, so that the believer may triumph over it. In the cross, suffering is defeated and yet it is still with us. Its ultimate demise still awaits the eschaton when the victory of Christ over sin, death and decay shall be fully consummated. Biblical faith, then, has no final answer to the question why a good God made a world in which suffering and death exist. It rather lives in the hope that it shall not always be so. One day the suffering and death that have marked the creation from the beginning as the theatre in which the drama of redemption is played out will be overcome in the new creation (Jewett 1991:501). In the next chapter, we examine this and other biblical, theological images to anchor our response to suffering as a reality that we must still have to face even if we cannot solve.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

### FACING SUFFERING: CONSTRUCTING A BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL RESPONSE

#### 7.1 INTRODUCTION

In this final chapter, we attempt to construct a theological response to the problem of evil and suffering. In doing this, we argue that while all the views we have thus far examined offer various theological and philosophical explanations of evil and suffering, they do not provide the solution or the answer to the problem of evil and suffering. We maintain that in the final analysis there is actually no solution to the problem of evil and suffering in the sense that pain and suffering are totally and absolutely eliminated in this life. However, in the cross of Christ, we find a distinctively Christian answer to suffering in the sense that God has done something about human suffering and has thus provided a framework in which we can respond to suffering and transform it into some higher good in this life. Ultimately, in the context of this response, suffering and evil are defeated and yet they are still paradoxically here with us, a perspective that introduces us to the element of mystery in evil and suffering. The basic assumption of this response is that God does not cause our suffering and does not will our suffering. But he identifies with our suffering and works faithfully, everlastingly and infallibly to transform our suffering into the highest good possible or into a life lived within the realm of Jesus' resurrection (Inbody 1997: 188). Consequently, our response anchors in the biblical and theological images of the cross, community<sup>276</sup>, character<sup>277</sup> and hope. These images, we propose, are the framework in which a distinctively Christian response to suffering may be constructed. We must note that this response does not discard explanations

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<sup>276</sup> Richard B Hays uses the focal images of the community, the cross and new creation to govern the construal of NT ethics. In his own words, "these unifying images must be derived from the texts themselves...and they must be capable of providing an interpretive framework that links and illumines the individual writings (of the NT) (*The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, p. 5). My use of the images of the cross and community is in the context of our response to suffering, not of interpreting the NT or suffering but it does contain an interpretive element.

<sup>277</sup> My use of character is different from John Hick's 'vale of soul-making' which he uses as a reason suffering is permitted, that is to make character, but my argument is that suffering does something to character, not necessarily as the reason for which suffering is permitted but as an aftermath of suffering (Cf his *Evil and the God of love*, p. 289-97).

and views we have examined but it builds on them and perhaps go beyond them. Before we turn to these images, we will first attempt to integrate what we have thus far discussed.

## **7.2 PUTTING THE PIECES TOGETHER**

### **7.2.1 RESTATING THE CASE**

The so-called problem of evil is set in motion by the all crucial question: Why does God permit suffering and other forms of evil in the world if he is omnipotent, wholly good and loving? The essence of the problem may be stated as follows: if God is good, he cannot be all-powerful; if he is all-powerful, he cannot be a God of love. If he is all-powerful, wholly good and loving, why does he not remove suffering and evil? Thus, the basic assumption in this line of thought is that the fact of evil and suffering in the world is irreconcilable with the existence of and belief in a good, all-powerful God. In that sense, the problem essentially concerns those who believe in a personal God who cares for and loves his subjects. For others, as we mentioned earlier, the problem of evil is no problem at all since everything is but a manifestation of deity. To provide a solution, those who believe in a personal, relational God make various attempts to justify the ways of God, to make sense of their experience of suffering in relation to their belief in the God of love.

Generally, four attempts at a solution are made. First, evil is seen as non-being or absence of good. The contention of this view is, on the one hand, that God is the absolute reality and absolute perfection and on the other, evil is the absolute imperfection and therefore absolutely non-existent (Richardson 1983: 193). It does not exist; only the good does. It has no quality of being but only the quality of negation. It serves the good and shows its greater power in the negation of it. Since evil is nothing in itself, there is therefore no problem of evil. Alan Richardson notes that the perennial philosophy from Plato through Neo-Platonism to Thomas Aquinas held this view. Here, God is the source of all perfection and below him in the chain of being stretches orders of being less perfect and therefore less real than God himself is. Does evil then exist? It does but only as fullness necessary for the perfection of the whole, not as an entity on its own. Thus, according to this view, also known as monism, only God is real, evil is nothing less than an illusion. However, the difficulty with it is that it undermines itself by denying the very problem that it tries to solve. If evil or suffering is nothing but an illusion, what is the problem? Furthermore, monism blatantly disregards concrete accounts and real



victims of suffering, who encounter it practically in life as a reality, not an illusion. Second, evil is seen a result of a bitter struggle between two principles of reality, good and bad, light and darkness, matter and spirit or God and Satan. The good comes from God and evil comes from Satan and other powers of darkness. In this struggle human beings are not neutral. They are either on God's side or on the devil's side. Although this view maintains that the good principle or God will win ultimately, the battle seems to be undecided now, with the belligerents apparently on equal terms. That the struggle between these principles is on equal terms is shown by the fact that it still rages on with no outright winner. If the first view inflates the power of God, this view deflates it; it reduces God to the level of his creation. Consequently, God becomes a limited Being, who himself is in the process of overcoming the disorder of the universe of which he is a part (Richardson 1983: 194). The other difficulty with this view, also referred to as dualism, is that its apparent denial of the omnipotence of God does not offer a convincing solution to the problem at hand. However, the Biblical or Judeo-Christian tradition seems to affirm both dualism and monism in a certain manner. On the one hand, God is the sole and sovereign controller or ruler of the universe. As such, evil can only exist in the world either with his permission or for his purposes or both. There is no one besides him in power, honour and glory. But on the other hand, he seems to be in continual warfare with the forces of evil. Consequently, Jesus Christ had to come to destroy the works of the evil one and establish the kingdom of God. As may be evident in the gospel accounts of his earthly ministry, Jesus fought injustice, greed, cruelty, disease and sickness, suffering and pain and granted relief and deliverance to its victims. By these actions Jesus declared his enmity to evil or the devil as his and the Father's enemy. Thus, God is not the source of evil and it is difficult not to conclude that Satan is. Third, evil is regarded as firmly under the sovereignty of God, forming part of his eternal decrees. This view contends that God in his wisdom made righteous decrees and made things the way they are. Since God is God, humanity which is his creature has no right to dispute his wisdom. Barth's refusal to discuss evil as an entity on its own might initially have been influenced by his high view of the sovereignty of God. For him, discussing evil on the same footing with God elevates it to a level it does not deserve. Nevertheless, his treatment of evil remains by all standards outstanding and voluminous. As we noted earlier, the difficulty with this view is how human responsibility meaningfully relates to God's sovereignty to the point that God is absolutely sovereign without impinging on human responsibility and freedom and humans completely free so that their choices are not predetermined and therefore remain his sole responsibility.

Thus, there remains a perpetual tension between God's sovereignty and human responsibility that this view does not adequately deal with and of which the mystery of God's grace and of human suffering is a part. Finally, the moral view, which in contrast to the previous views, states that God is not powerless to remove evil but his love and righteousness limit him. This view contends that God cannot will the irrational because his character is truth and righteousness. He did not create robots but moral responsible agents, capable of choosing good or evil. God created humanity with the freedom to choose the true, the beautiful, the good and above all, to reciprocate the love he so generously lavished on him (Richardson 1983: 195). But humanity did not make this choice and pain, suffering and moral evil resulted. Moral evil and therefore sin is a result of human free choice. Thus, the problem of evil and suffering is ultimately a problem of humanity's existence; a problem of its being endowed with the power of choice. But there are still problems such as how we are to account for or explain the origin of the power to choose and the question of haphazard suffering or innocent suffering. However, the advocates of this view would contend that there is no such a thing as innocent suffering because all have sinned. As Emil Brunner puts it, we stand before the cross not as innocent or neutral spectators, who gaze into an abyss outside ourselves but we ourselves stand in the midst of the abyss. For the rift, which cuts through the world passes through us, leaving us with no claims of innocence whatsoever and with the knowledge that the only suffering which can be truly called 'innocent' is the suffering Jesus bore for us (Brunner 1952: 182). Furthermore, we live in a fallen world, a world ruined by sin, whose consequences are borne by all people. On the power of choice, they would say humanity could have chosen good if it so wished. We do the same; we still make terrible choices today even if we know the consequences. What is more, we would protest today in our society if anything or anyone interfered with our rights and freedoms.

With this in mind, we must still admit that these rational answers however plausible and logical they may be are only scratching at the surface and do not even give us a slight understanding of what evil is or how it is to be solved. The problem of evil and suffering is much more intricate than we can ever fathom or explain. For even as believers, when we look honestly into our own hearts we see both the reality of evil and our own need for the mercy and the grace of God. Deep down within us we know we are part of the problem of evil, as we also know the grace of God working in us and through us. Because of this, we believe, the reformers building on salvation history and creation had their focal point of theology in



justification by faith as their answer to the theodicy question. Emil Brunner essentially agrees with the reformers' position when he writes, "The right answer (to the problem of theodicy) is certainly one in which the problem is not *solved*<sup>278</sup>, but it disappears, because we see that the real solution lies in the acknowledgement of guilt and in the hope of redemption" (Brunner 1952: 180, 184). Echoing similar sentiments, Alan Richardson has succinctly concluded this position when he says: "The ultimate solution to the problem of evil must lie in the fact that the God who created the world is also the God who has redeemed it; the creator is himself in Christ the bearer of all creation's sin and suffering as he is the bringer of the redemption that shall be. But only the Christian can know that Christ has explained evil in the act of defeating it" (Richardson 1983: 196).

### 7.2.2 THE INCARNATION AS THE CHRISTIAN ANSWER

The above views attempt to give a rational explanation of the problem of evil and suffering. They endeavour to understand evil, try to shut it out or even master it (Peterson 1982: 11). But one theologian has suggested that since suffering is an inseparable part of the problem of evil, it cannot be abolished or explained; it must be faced (Tilley 1987: 362). However, even if that is granted, the Christian still has to battle with how suffering relates to his faith. What is the point in suffering? Is it God's will for him to suffer? If Christ in his death on the cross took his sin and sickness, why does he still suffer? How can he make sense of his faith in the severity of pain and suffering without denying his God? These are questions of a seeking heart, trying to come to grips with both the reality of God and of suffering in a dangerous world. Frances Young (1983: 555-6) has aptly summarised some possible answers to these questions in two diverse views<sup>279</sup>: The first is the acceptance of suffering, either as a disciplinary measure on God's part, or as the highest way of following or imitating Christ. This view asserts that suffering ennobles: no courage without suffering as its risk. Again, this view continues, suffering is good since its fundamental purpose is to act as a warning signpost so that preventative action is taken before some irreparable damage is done. Furthermore, according to this view, pain and suffering have an important role in the overall purpose of life, which is to produce free, mature persons able to overcome obstacles and foster moral qualities of the highest order. Above all that, this view concludes, suffering

<sup>278</sup> Italics are Brunner's. See his *Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption, Dogmatics*, vol. 2, p. 184.

<sup>279</sup> Whatever and however the modifications may be, all the views that we have examined fit in very general terms into this summary. So Augustine, the Reformers, the Enlightenment, Barth, Moltmann, Berkouwer and

stimulates love and compassion of a deeper quality both in those who suffer and those who try to alleviate suffering. The second view embodies the sense of outrage and anger that there should be suffering at all and attempts to eliminate it on the ground that its removal is God's redemptive will. This view strongly objects to the first view for its failure to explain irrational pain such as extreme nerve pain, mass suffering as distinct from individual suffering, haphazard and innocent suffering such as earthquakes, epidemics, birth defects, etc. It also argues that the outcome of suffering is both ambiguous and unpredictable—suffering may ennoble, but it sometimes embitters. More seriously, this view states that the first view does not do justice to the central focus of the Christian faith—the suffering of Christ on the cross for the purpose of taking away our suffering and pain.

As may be evident, these two opposite views tend to put one in an 'either/or situation'. Their inadequacy lies in their attempt to address a complex problem like the problem of evil and suffering in black and white. They assume too much as they try to explain everything in a problem about which too little can be surely pinned down. They seem to ignore particular contexts and victims of suffering by trying to provide for everyone straightjacket solutions to a complex problem. Consider someone who holds the first view, for instance in the situation of war and suffering in Sudan or elsewhere, telling the victims that it is God's will for them to suffer and that suffering has come upon them for the purpose of being ennobled so that they may acquire and foster high moral qualities. Or that they are suffering because suffering is the highest way of following and imitating Christ. It would still be very insensitive and absurd to tell them that their suffering is intended to stimulate love and compassion in them and in others. All these may well be true, but it is a very simplistic and an unfortunate way of explaining their complex circumstances. The holder of the second view also treads on dangerous grounds by assuming that suffering has ceased to be because it was taken care of at Calvary. It is true that Christ in his death on the cross took our sin, suffering and sickness. It is true that he took our infirmities and weaknesses on the tree and that by his wounds we are healed. But that does not mean we will never face suffering in this world. As the experiences of Paul, Timothy and Epaphroditus show (2 Cor 11: 16-12:10; Phil 2: 25-27, 1Tim 5: 23), we are not spared the heartaches and tragedies of life but we are given mercy and grace on account of Calvary to triumph through them, not apart from them. Thus the categorical answers that these two views give, run the risk of causing the victims more pain and



alienation from God, especially when what they promise to do fails to come about at the time of need. As Harold Kushner has argued such answers, when what they promise fails to come about, they lead us to blame ourselves to spare God's reputation. They implicitly require us to either deny reality or repress our feelings. In other cases, they either leave us hating ourselves for deserving it or hating God for allowing it to come upon us (Kushner 1981: 29).

### 7.2.3 THE INCARNATION AND THE MYSTERY OF SUFFERING AND EVIL

To do justice to the mystery of suffering and evil it is necessary, as Frances Young suggests, for these views to admit that there is much more to suffering that we do not know or cannot explain so neatly and categorically. Suffering is a real, not an imaginary problem; it is shrouded in mystery of which our redemption and existence are a part. In our existence as limited, finite beings, suffering and evil will always remain a mystery. In spite of our best theological and philosophical explications, this mystery continually eludes us. We may want good answers and explanations, but in the end we cannot find any. A deep mystery surrounds the origin of evil and suffering, a mystery from which the complexity of our existence and life on earth are inseparable. This is a grim reality that we must learn to live with if we cannot explain. We live in a fallen world where suffering and evil will unfortunately continue to be a part of life. At one point or another in this life, each one of us will have to go through some measure of suffering. The degree may vary and the circumstances may be different but we will all have to face suffering. There are no guarantees, as far as recent events in our world are concerned, that holocaust or genocide will not recur. May be not in the same fashion as it did in Nazi Germany or Rwanda or the Balkans or the Nuba Mountains in Sudan, but the potential is undeniably always there in us, in our hearts.<sup>280</sup> Thus a fundamental part of this admission is that sin and suffering are indications of what is radically wrong with our world and that God's saving action involves confronting what it is that is wrong (Young 1983: 356). In Christ the transformation and transcending of suffering can be effected and therefore a framework of responding to, not solving, the problem of suffering and evil is provided. Consequently, the Christian response to the tragedy of sin and suffering arises from a personal experience of the power of Jesus' resurrection to heal the alienating, self-centred forces in

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details remain diverse and irreconcilable among these views.

<sup>280</sup> I will never forget standing at one of the genocide sites in Ntarama, near Kigali, Rwanda, in May 2000. Here more than five thousand people were murdered in the sanctuary of a church, in the house of God. One of the survivors tried to console us not to cry. This was difficult to heed as we stood staring in dead silence at the skulls and the bones of the dead, still lying there more than six years after the massacre. The reality of evil and suffering was present with us and in us since the people who did this were just like us.

every human heart. This power enables the Christian to respond positively to suffering in his/her own life and that of others (Fatula 1987: 991). God in Christ identifies with us in our suffering, assuring us that suffering can be overcome and endured, even if it is not fully comprehended. Furthermore, as Tyron Inbody has stated, the Christian answer to the problem of suffering and evil is not only the identification of God with us in our suffering, but also the power of the resurrection, which transforms us and gives us hope in the place of despair, new life in the midst of death (Inbody 1997: 178). The power of Jesus' cross and resurrection gives us victory in suffering and his grace carries us through life's tragedies. The incarnation is the Christian answer to the problem of suffering. Tyron Inbody captures the sense of what we are trying to put across when he writes:

The answer (to the problem of suffering and evil) is Christmas, where God's power hits us with all the force of a hint; the cross, where God's power of identification endures all pain to the end; Easter, where life in all its travail is transformed into new life through the power of resurrection; and the kingdom of God, where the reign of God in the midst of suffering and evil is accomplished. If the cross and resurrection of Jesus is God's final answer to our travail, then suffering is surmounted by going through it to new possibilities of new life, and not around it. The courage that is given to faith in the presence of the crucified and resurrected Christ is the courage of acceptance, endurance, and transformation (Inbody 1997: 179).

The incarnation is thus the ground on which suffering can be overcome and endured. But it does not guarantee that the Christian will not suffer. It rather gives the promise of ultimate triumph over suffering through the power of Jesus' resurrection. It provides the believer with a powerful framework of responding to suffering now, not resigning to its inevitability but to the grace and transformation of Jesus' cross and resurrection. As we have already mentioned, the Christian is aware, in virtue of what Jesus taught, that suffering and pain cannot be eluded or eliminated in this life but that they can be transmuted and overcome through him; they can be responded to in a positive manner. Thus a devotional response to the suffering of Christ is one major characteristic of Christianity, capable of effecting transformation or transcending of suffering. In that sense, the incarnation permits the believer to see in the cross the very presence of God in the midst of suffering and sin of the world as well as his redemptive entering into and bearing of the consequences of evil in his creation (Young 1983: 556). This is what the cross entails as we examine below.



## 7.3 SUFFERING AND THE CROSS

### 7.3.1 THE PARADOX OF THE CROSS

Martin Luther King powerfully portrays the paradox of the cross when he writes:

Every time I look at the cross I am reminded of the greatness of God and the redemptive power of Jesus Christ. I am reminded of the beauty of sacrificial love and the majesty of unswerving devotion to truth. It causes me to say with John Bowring: In the cross of Christ I glory, towering o'er the wrecks of time, all the light of sacred story gathers round its head sublime. It would be wonderful were I to look at the cross and sense only such a sublime reaction. But somehow I can never turn my eyes from that cross without also realizing that it symbolizes a strange mixture of greatness and smallness, of good and evil. As I behold that uplifted cross I am reminded not only of the unlimited power of God, but also of the sordid weakness of man. I think not only of the radiance of the divine, but also of the tang of the human. I am reminded not only of Christ at his best, but also of man at his worst (King 1963: 45-6).

Emil Brunner also observes that if there were ever an event in which evil, innocent suffering, malice and human pain reached climax, it is the cross of Christ. For at the cross both the wrath of God on the one hand and his love and righteousness on the other are revealed. At the cross, it becomes evident that evil is that which God does not will and yet at the same time that which he has the power over to turn into an instrument of his saving work. In the cross, the mercy of God and his righteousness unite with his omnipotence and omniscience. The crucifixion of Christ is in one sense the act of God upon which the whole Christian faith rests and in another the most terrible scandal in the whole history of the human race. At the cross we are granted to have a glimpse into God's government of the world and into the impenetrable darkness which otherwise lies upon it (Brunner 1952: 180-3). The theology of the cross is thus a paradox that the Christian should gladly accept and live with. The cross is both a symbol of suffering and deliverance. It reveals both the wisdom and foolishness of God. To the ancient Greeks and the Romans, the cross constituted the weakness and the inability of the Christian God. They rejected the Christian message, precisely because of the cross. They could not perceive how an almighty God could die on a cross like a common criminal. But for the Christian,<sup>281</sup> as Paul writes, the cross is the power and the wisdom of God. Consequently, the theology of the cross is not a theology of impotence. Its apparent powerlessness is God's paradigm of a different mode of power. In the cross, God's power is the power of identification, participation, endurance and transformation. The theology of the

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<sup>281</sup> D A Carson notes that Paul in the Corinthians passage on the cross sets forth the only polarity of ultimate importance by saying that the message of the cross divides humanity into those who are perishing and those who are being saved (Carson 1993: 14).

cross is central to the Christian interpretation of and response to suffering. The cross is God's way of overcoming the destructive powers of evil in our world (Inbody 1997: 180).

How does the cross relate to suffering? First, the cross speaks of God's presence and participation in our suffering. Martin Luther King notes that God does not leave us in our agonies and struggles, but he seeks us in dark places and suffers with us and for us in our tragic prodigality (King 1963: 16). God does not observe our suffering from a safe distance, he comes down to us and participates in it. The cross is the supreme demonstration of God's solidarity with us in this world of suffering. In the cross, we see God allowing himself to suffer as we do, not because he was under some obligation or external pressure but because he lovingly wanted to. Thus the cross of Christ always stands as a solemn and powerful reminder that God was prepared to suffer in order to redeem the world and that he expects his people to share the same commitment and pain as they participate in the task of restoring this fallen world to its former glory (McGrath 1995: 15, 26). Second, the cross directs our gaze<sup>282</sup> from our lonely and morbid contemplation of our own anguish and suffering to the suffering and transforming God, who shares in our suffering (Inbody 1997: 180). The cross shows us how much God loves us. When we look at the cross, we realise at once that God gave his very best so that we may live. The death of Jesus Christ on the cross brings us face to face with the wonder of God's love for us so much that we are strengthened to face our suffering with courage and determination. By gazing at the cross, we find incredible power and courage to face the fear and the terror of suffering. Suffering, as Alister McGrath has observed, possesses a double cutting edge: the sheer pain of experiencing it and the unbearable intensity of what it may mean or imply (McGrath 1995: 68). Consequently, the prospect of facing or encountering it freezes and intimidates us. For all sorts of reasons, suffering frightens us. Likewise, what it may mean in terms of our relationship with God and others intensely instils fear in us. But the cross reminds us that its power has been broken and its sting has been blunted. Its presence in this life is still a fearful reality, but the cross reminds us that it will ultimately be defeated and eliminated. So when we look at the cross, we are reassured that suffering does not possess the power we think it has and that after all, it has some meaning in

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<sup>282</sup> That our gaze should be directed to the cross and not to evil has been powerfully dramatised by Walter Lowe using an illustration of a cobra and a rabbit. Lowe writes: "Remarkably, the cobra can devour a rabbit, even though the rabbit is faster. It does so because the moment they make eye contact, the rabbit is paralyzed. Trembling with fear, the victim stands frozen with fear as the snake slowly, rhythmically, closes the distance, and then, at its leisure, strikes". Lowe's point is that we too become paralyzed if we stare at evil too long (Lowe 1994: 211).



God's plan of salvation. In that regard, as Emil Brunner rightly asserts, it loses its negative character; it becomes a means by which God draws us to himself although via some paternal severity. This, says Brunner, is the greatest transformation possible in the sphere of human experience. For suffering becomes a positive instead of a negative principle even if its sting is not taken away or a desire for it is unrealistically fostered (Brunner 1952: 183). With that realisation, the cross becomes a symbol of God's victory over suffering and evil. This truth must be brought to bear on those who now suffer, although the modern conventional use of the cross as a widespread Christian symbol seem to undermine the harsh reality of suffering that the cross and the cross sayings in the NT convey. Third, the cross tells us that since God suffers with us and takes part in our suffering, we need to alleviate the suffering of others. The cross provides a real stimulus to alleviate the suffering of others because the suffering of any of God's people grieves his heart. By seeking to relieve the hardships of others in this harsh world, we are working to ease the suffering and the pain of God (McGrath 1995: 62). As we meet the practical needs of those who suffer, we portray and demonstrate the message of the cross to those who suffer. Our presence with and provision of the needs of those who are hurting assure the suffering that God has not abandoned them in their misery and pain. Any assistance that we extend to them speaks of God's presence and identification with them in suffering. Thus in the cross, we experience the practical love of God and work to express it to those who suffer. That God shares and participates in our suffering, is a comforting and encouraging message, considering that suffering is an extremely lonesome experience. In suffering, we feel abandoned by God and fellow human beings. But the cross reminds us that God is not only with us in suffering but also that he is the God of our suffering. He is the God who abides with the suffering and the weak.

Finally, the cross vividly reminds us that there is suffering in being Jesus' followers, that there is such a thing as 'the fellowship of his suffering' in this world. Both joy and suffering are integral parts of the Christian experience in the same manner that summer and winter are seasons of the year (Smith 1971: 92). The Bible clearly tells the believer that he/she is not excused from suffering with the rest of mankind just because he/she is a follower of Christ. As a matter of fact, Christians are promised additional suffering just for being Christians. There is a strong sense in which the Bible has always insisted that the cross we bear precedes the crown we wear and that being a Christian involves taking up one's cross, with all the suffering and difficulties that go along with it, and carry it until it leaves its marks on oneself

and redeems one to that more excellent way, which comes only through suffering (King 1963: 25). For in the cross lies the Christian's overwhelming and ultimate victory.

### 7.3.2 THE VICTORY OF THE CROSS

Furthermore, the cross conveys to us the message that God has done something about suffering and other evils that plague us in this life. On the cross, Christ won the victory over evil and suffering. He conquered the kingdom of this world and inaugurated the kingdom of the Father. Yet the full consummation of his victory is outstanding; it waits the future. Meanwhile, living in the '*time between the times*', we shall continue to face suffering as that which is defeated but is still here; evil as conquered but still plaguing us now. We shall continue to live under the power of the cross as those who are saved and are still being saved. In this tension of the '*already and the not yet*', both the present and the future are very real to us. In the cross, therefore, God has done something about suffering in the present and will do something about it in the future. The cross is thus a symbol of God's ultimate victory over sin and suffering. Therefore, "we see the cross as the magnificent symbol of love conquering hate and of light overcoming darkness" (King 1963: 46). Suffering may overtake us, persist in our situations, but it is a defeated evil, which, paradoxically, is still present with us. However, the cross of Christ will always stand as a powerful reminder that although suffering is still here with us, it is and will be defeated and that our God is present with us in our sordid circumstances. Thus a genuine response to the presence and the love of God as mediated by the cross has the power to release humanity from its chains and produce healing in suffering (Young 1983: 556). In addition, as we noted earlier, Scripture teaches us that the suffering we now face prepares us for the glory, which awaits us when suffering and evil shall ultimately be defeated. For now, however, "we must each share in Calvary and the cross, for only so can we share the glorious victory of the resurrection" (Tutu 1983: 74).

### 7.3.3 THE CROSS AND SUFFERING IN THE EXPERIENCE OF THE BOR DINKA

In the experience of the Bor Dinka people, the cross has become not only a symbol of regeneration, but also more importantly a tangible affirmation of Christ's presence in the midst of war and suffering. Emerging and evolving from traditional Dinka emblems of beauty and sophistication, social and spiritual authority, the Dinka cross appears in various shapes and designs with different uses and functions. It is used as a flag, as a symbol of Christian initiation, as a weapon against evil powers, as a memorial of Christ's sacrifice and,



significantly, as a concrete affirmation of Christ's presence in turbulent times (Nikkel 1997: 86). The Dinka cross as portrayed in the new Dinka songs combines, on the one hand, integral aspects of a highly Christocentric, biblical and evangelical theology, with messianic and eschatological emphasis, and on the other, concepts and imagery rooted in the Dinka traditional religious values. The cross, as the Dinka now understand it, speaks both of Christ's person and of his sacrificial death for us. There is therefore little distinction between Christ and his cross. The cross is seen as Christ himself. For many Dinka Christians in the ongoing Sudanese war, the cross embodies Christ and Christ embodies the cross (Nikkel 1997: 96). The cross is the presence of Christ amidst pain and suffering. In addition, as Marc Nikkel observes, the cross is seen as a source of protection and encouragement and as a proclamation of salvation and judgement. But the sphere in which the cross evokes the greatest exhilaration and even trepidation is its use as an invincible weapon against the *Jak* or evil forces. In this sphere, the cross has become for the Dinka Christian community a tool and an emblem of religious, social and cultural evolution (Nikkel 1997: 97-99). In the face of radical Islamic fundamentalism, the Dinka Christians have used the cross as a symbol of defiance and opposition. In the midst of the ongoing large-scale warfare, immense losses and displacement, the cross has become the most important emblem of hope and faith for the Christian community in their suffering. During the destruction of the Dinka ancestral homelands following the split in the ranks of the Southern liberation forces in 1991, the cross was the only item that the believers carried along with them wherever they went. In their most trying moment of loss, deprivation and suffering, the cross stood as a symbol of the presence of Nihalic, of the God who never abandons his people even in suffering and death. Amidst cultural fragmentation and socio-economic degeneration, the cross of Christ is virtually the only symbol of hope and unity, which draws disparate groups together, providing a solid basis for healing and regeneration of the war-torn communities of Sudan. The Christ of the cross is also the Christ of the suffering community. One songwriter speaks for the suffering Christian community in Sudan when he asks only to be allowed to carry the cross and follow Jesus to Golgotha. His request arises from the community's intimate communion with the Christ of the cross who is called upon to embrace as a parent.

We call and cry before you so that you would hear us, embrace us intimately for we are your children. Let us carry the cross and follow you. Let us be like Simon, the man of Cyrene, who followed you to the place of the skull (Golgotha) (John Chol Ater).

For the suffering church in Sudan, the message of the cross provides encouragement and hope. The cross speaks both of the presence of God in suffering and of the believer's determination to follow Christ all the way, even to the place of death.

Suffering and the cross are thus inseparably related. Only within the context of the cross is the basis of our response to suffering provided. As Ravi Zacharias correctly notes, when we come to Jesus at the cross, where love, holiness and suffering combine, we find both the answer to why we suffer and the strength to live in this mortal frame. When we come to the cross and from there live our lives for him; we make the extraordinary discovery that the cross and the resurrection go together (Zacharias 1998: 216-7). In the community of the cross we face suffering in the light of the cross and the resurrection. Thus a community that experiences the cross of Christ in suffering is capable of absorbing the suffering of its own. We therefore turn to the believing community as an essential part of the framework for our response to suffering.

## **7.4 SUFFERING AND COMMUNITY**

### **7.4.1 THE BASIS OF AND NEED FOR COMMUNITY**

If the cross provides the basis of a distinctively Christian response to suffering, the community provides the sphere and place for that same response to be genuinely Christian. Both are still inseparable in the context in which we are trying to discuss them. The community is because the cross is and the cross is because the community is. The cross embodies the community and the community embodies the cross. The community, in its corporate life, is called to embody an alternative order that stands as a sign of God's redemptive purpose in the world. It points to the concrete social manifestation of the people of God. The community expresses and experiences the presence of the kingdom of God by participating in the 'koinonia of the suffering of Christ' (Hays 1997: 196-7). The cross may be said to be the sign of God's redemptive purpose in the world. There would be no Christian community without the cross<sup>283</sup> but community in a non-Christian context can exist without

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<sup>283</sup> Richard Hays has argued to the effect that placing the community, the cross and the new creation in that order is theologically significant. He maintains that the community must precede the cross as God's design for covenant people, put in place before the NT writings. He places the cross in the middle as the pivot point of the eschatological drama. The new creation is placed last as a reminder of the future redemption of God. We argue to the contrary that the cross precedes the community as the basis on which the new creation and therefore community is built. It seems to us that the NT has it in that order (See Hays' *Moral Vision of the New Testament*, p. 198-9).



the cross. The Christian community is only capable of absorbing suffering because it draws its life and strength from the cross. Suffering would be unbearable without both. For us to be able to face and respond to suffering, we need the warmth and the love of the community of faith. Suffering is a very lonesome experience as we mentioned above and when we experience it we undoubtedly need a warm community to sustain us and help us absorb it. We all become vulnerable when we suffer and it is only the love, the sympathy or empathy and encouragement of God through others that may strengthen and help us to go through our predicament and hopefully come out on top. As John S Feinberg correctly notes, "suffering allows the afflicted person to experience the compassionate love of God through other believers. It allows the sufferers to understand experientially what it means to have one's burdens borne" (Feinberg 1994: 431). This is the task of a biblically functioning community of faith, a community that knows what it means to share in the *koinonia* of Christ's sufferings and without which suffering will be an extreme and unbearable tragedy.

But with the continuous rise of individualism in our world today, the community spirit is being rapidly undermined. Even in Africa where traditional community values are jealously held, we witness a colossal growth of individualism today. The notion of individual rights as opposed to communal rights is alarmingly on the rise. Thus, we constantly assert our rights, sometimes at the expense of our duties in the community. We easily forget that "in the context of the community we have not only the claims to our rights, but we also accept our duties" (Amaladoss 1994: 113). In the contemporary world, there is much talk about rights. We rarely hear of duties, because the spirit of individualism is more of a guiding principle today than the spirit of community (Amaladoss 1994: 114). The church must guard against falling victim to the spirit of individualism if it is to be a community capable of absorbing the suffering of God's people. It must learn what it means to suffer with those who suffer, working where possible to provide shelter, protection and encouragement to the needy and the suffering.

#### **7.4.2 THE ROLE OF THE COMMUNITY IN SUFFERING**

That we all need to be part of such a community for our own good and that of others, is a fact we hardly realise when everything is going well in our lives. But when tragedy strikes, one way or the other, sooner or later, we are made to realise that we are in need of others. To be sure, anyone who has ever fallen sick or has been bereaved or has lost property through some misfortune, knows how uplifting it is to have the community come to the assistance and

encourage him/her in a needy and desperate situation. Whatever form this assistance takes, it speaks of care and love from the community, which is truly appreciated by those who are suffering. It shows them that others care and are available for them at the time of need. When, for whatever reason, such assistance is lacking, the victims may be crushed by their suffering and misfortune and untimely sent to an early grave. But community warmth and love may avert this. How may a community do this? What are some practical ways in which the community may absorb the suffering of its own as well as those outside its bounds? First, the community provides encouragement from God's word. Scripture is undoubtedly a great source of encouragement when it is used in love and with compassion. It is God's word of comfort and assurance in the midst of loss and untold suffering. It is God's voice of love and grace in suffering, assuring the sufferer of God's very presence.<sup>284</sup> Many suffering people may find special help in the Psalms, the Book of Job, some prophets and the New Testament, particularly the passion narratives. In these, the struggle with God and with the reality of suffering and anguish is evidently borne out. Obviously, special care and a great measure of wisdom and sensitivity are needed when we use Scripture to bring encouragement to the victims. But some of the pitfalls to watch out for in this regard would be: Forcing the scripture down the throat of the sufferer; drawing hasty conclusions from Scripture as to possible reasons why suffering struck; or applying prophetic words from Scripture as explanation of what has happened. These run the risk of causing more pain to the ones for whom encouragement is intended. Having already been severely afflicted, this is the least the victims will need from the community. Second, the community prays incessantly with and for those who suffer. At the time of suffering, prayer is immensely important. There is no substitute for prayer as an outpouring of needs, emotions and feelings on the situation being faced. The community needs to pray that God will comfort, strengthen and help the victims in their misfortune. Sometimes, the miracle may not immediately occur after such a prayer. But the victims, as Harold Kushner notes, will discover people (community) around them, God beside them and strength within themselves to help them survive through the tragedy (Kushner 1981: 131). At times, it may be very difficult even to pray when much suffering is being experienced and both the community and the victims are overwhelmed, but there still

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<sup>284</sup> Robert Randall tells of the importance of being spoken to when one is in pain. He tells of how he and his wife in vain expected to hear a word of encouragement from their minister when their first daughter was born with brain damage. With good intentions, the minister just wanted to be with them in their pain but they expected him to tell them 'you are going to be okay. Things will work out fine. God will look after you'. However, there is a



remains no any other viable substitute for prayer. For prayer however feebly it is offered, changes situations otherwise unchangeable. Third, the community provides and maintains company and presence in suffering with the victims. One of the most difficult aspects of suffering is the sense of being abandoned by God and humans, which makes suffering a very lonely human experience. Sometimes, the sense of being alone in it all actually aggravates suffering. When no one from the community comes to see or be with the victims, loneliness and abandonment are heightened and chances of a speedy recovery from the tragedy are diminished. Rightly or wrongly, the absence of the community in the time of bereavement and suffering speaks to the victims of rejection, lack of love and care. People may have valid reasons for not appearing on the scene. It may be for the fear of saying or doing something rash and therefore causing more pain to the victims that some choose to rather stay away. But the suffering person may not know this. All he/she may know is that nobody came to see or visit him or her at turbulent times. For someone to be with them in their suffering is all they need. It is more valuable for them that someone is there even if they have nothing or little to say. Job's friends, as we noted early, said to Job all the wrong things imaginable at the time of his suffering and pain. They misunderstood, misrepresented and accused him of secret sins that led to his misfortune and suffering but at least they were there and that must be appreciated. Had they not been present, Job would not have expressed his feelings or articulated some of his wisest and theologically pregnant statements on suffering, faith and God. The book of Job would have been poorer without these sayings, which came about in Job's dialogue with his friends. We by no means encourage careless speaking with those who face suffering and evil; we are saying that as a community we need to be available and present with those who suffer. For our availability and presence speak to them of our love, sympathy and care. Finally, the community provides material assistance for those who suffer. Providing encouragement from the word, praying for and with those who suffer and being present and available for the suffering have their place, but practical actions must accompany them. As the old adage goes, 'actions speak louder than words'. This is even more applicable in the situation of suffering than in any other. The suffering person may very well hear more clearly the language of our actions than that of our words. It is in this regard that it may be absolutely necessary to speak less and act more when dealing with those who suffer. Is this not what the Bible alludes to when it says: "suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and

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delicate tension between when to speak and when not to speak or between what to say or not to say and hence the need for the guidance of the Holy Spirit (See Randall's *What People Expect From Church*, p. 37).

daily food. If one of you (plural, referring to the community) says to him, go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed, but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?" (Jas 2:15). It is no good. Words cannot be eaten or wrapped around a cold naked body. Practical action in a situation of suffering is an expression of God's love. For indeed, "if anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?" (1 Jn 3: 17). That is the big question. It is a question calling for deeds rather than just words. The love of God is clearly shown by deeds, since God so loved the world and gave his son (Jn 3: 16). Wise words may greatly encourage and comfort sufferers but they will do much more when practical actions accompany them. The two seem to be inseparable. What form should the material assistance of the community take? This should be left to the generosity and discretion of individual members of the community who offer to help. The needy will appreciate it. It is the meaning behind it, not the form it takes that encourages and comforts the sufferer, alleviating the pain.

In the warring and suffering Sudan, as we noted earlier, the significance of the church as community has increasingly gained acceptance. The war and suffering in Sudan seem to have redefined the role and the function of the church. Confined to the periphery in the past as a community of foreigners and of a few that had adopted their way of life, the church has now become a rallying point for many in their fight against war, injustice and suffering. The church has become and is increasingly becoming the centre of spiritual nourishment, social solidarity and ritual healing. Its role as salt and light in the society has increasingly gained respect and acceptance, especially in the South. It is with the people in the daily struggles of war and suffering, providing encouragement and guidance. The church has very little to offer in terms of material substance but its very presence with the people in their suffering is already much to offer. It has learned to pray and seek divine mercy in suffering, believing that divine deliverance and salvation will come in an answer to prayer. Thus when the community provides encouragement, prays with and for the suffering, consciously decides to be present with and available for the victims of suffering and evil and learns to be action-oriented, it will go a long way to absorb and alleviate suffering and pain. Such a community suffers with those who suffer and rejoices with those who rejoice. This is what the suffering church in Sudan has been and is still trying to do in the prevailing circumstances of war and tragedy. It may not have all the answers but its very presence with the people in suffering is an act of



character, a virtue that suffering develops and without which a community cannot fulfil its proper role.

## 7.5 SUFFERING AND CHARACTER

### 7.5.1 THE EFFECT OF SUFFERING ON CHARACTER

If the cross is the basis of a distinctively Christian answer to the problem of suffering and evil and if the community is the milieu in which a genuinely Christian response may be constructed, then the result of that response is the shaping of a distinctively Christian character. Character, as the sub-total of the mental and moral qualities that make a person who he/she is, and as the ability and moral strength to handle difficult and dangerous situations,<sup>285</sup> is closely related to suffering and to community. Suffering is surely not pleasant but it leaves indelible marks on our character. It either makes or breaks us, depending by and large on how we respond to or handle it. Suffering embitters some, leaving them in perpetual rage, hatred, violence, revenge and malice. It ennobles others, making them more loving, more forgiving, more reconciliatory, more understanding and more peaceable. Hence, suffering shapes character, either positively or negatively. In the context of the cross and the community, the question to ask is how should we respond to suffering, not why do we suffer. For the shape that our character takes greatly depends on how we respond to suffering, not on the explanation of why we suffer. Because our response to suffering is by nature almost always negative, we shall try to put more emphasis on how we should respond positively, bearing in mind the forming of our character and its effects on our lives.

### 7.5.2 SUFFERING AND CHARACTER FORMATION

The importance of character in the Christian walk and ministry cannot be gainsaid. As L. Gregory Jones has rightly observed, Christians are called to be people of character, nurtured by the word that journeys with us throughout the diverse contexts and experiences of life (Jones 1998: 69-76).<sup>286</sup> One of such life experiences is suffering. For our present purpose, we

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<sup>285</sup> This is my attempt to paraphrase the definition of character as rendered in the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*.

<sup>286</sup> For more on the importance of character as addressed in the context of Scripture and ethics see Stanley Hauerwas' *A Community of Character*, Jones and Fowl, *Reading in Communion* and Rasmussen and Birch, *Bible and Christian Ethics in Christian Life*.

ask: What does suffering do to character? How does suffering shape character? To answer these questions, let us examine the following:

First, suffering refines character. In Scripture, our life or character is likened to silver or gold containing dross and whose true precious value is only revealed after being refined in a furnace (1Pet 1: 6-7). The basic teaching of the Bible is that suffering leads to perseverance and perseverance to character and character to hope (Rom 5: 3-5). To refine character, suffering in the words of Alister McGrath "gets rid of the dross of all the worldly supports we foolishly invent for our faith" (McGrath 1995: 73). After being through the fires of suffering, our self-sufficiency, independence and selfishness are replaced with love, compassion and concern for others. We come to learn that our sole source of strength, sustenance and life is in God and not in what we have or who we are. We come to a place where we feel and understand the pain and the agony of those who suffer since we ourselves have been through it. Suffering brings us to the realisation that we live not in our own world, but in the world of God and other human beings. As suffering renews and refines our character, we come to admit and accept the fact that we cannot explain life or its complex mysteries but that by God's grace we can face it and live through it, one day at a time. Suffering shatters our notion that we are in control of the things and the world around us; it reminds us that we are vulnerable and fragile and therefore in need of God and other people. Sometimes when we suffer we gain a new perspective on life and we come to a place where we learn to appreciate so much that we used to take for granted. Desmond Tutu, after being diagnosed with prostate cancer and going through the suffering that the disease brings, sheds some light on this thought. He remarks,

Suffering from a life-threatening disease...helped me to have a different attitude and perspective. It has given a new intensity to life, for I realise that there is much that I used to take for granted—the devotion of my wife Leah, the laughter and playfulness of my grandchildren, the glory of a splendid sunset, the dedication of colleagues, the beauty of a dew-covered rose. I responded to the disease not morbidly but with a greater appreciation of that which I might not see and experience again. It helped me to acknowledge my own mortality, with thanksgiving for the extraordinary things that have happened in my life, not least in the recent times (Tutu 1999: 233).

Thus, suffering may be a sort of character school, at least for those whose character it has formed or refined. Suffering may not be indispensable for character formation, but when it does befall one it does not leave one's character untouched. The experiences of those who have suffered bear witness to this fact. Most of those who have gone through one or another form of suffering have something unique about their character. This is generally true whether



it is in the case of former prisoner and President Nelson Mandela, of South Africa or the Civil Rights leader Martin Luther King of the USA or the father of non-violence movement Mahatma Gandhi of India. In their various situations of suffering they had learned somehow that there is no growth without pain and conflict, and there is no loss which cannot lead to some gain in the final analysis (Pincus 1974: 275).

Speaking of the twenty-seven years of Mandela's incarceration and suffering and of how they related to his character formation, Desmond Tutu argues that Mandela's contribution to the good of South Africa and the world would not have been possible without this formation through suffering. Tutu further explains that the twenty-seven years behind bars, contrary to what many think, were not utter waste. They tempered Mandela's character and removed dross. Continues Tutu, "perhaps without that suffering he would have been less able to be as compassionate and as magnanimous as he turned out to be. And that suffering on behalf of others gave him an authority and credibility that can be provided by nothing else in quite the same way" (Tutu 1999: 40). Suffering formed his character and turned him into a fatherly figure and a world-renowned statesman.<sup>287</sup> One wonders what kind of a leader he would have been had assumed power in 1963? We suspect he would have been a very different person and his message would not have been national reconciliation but may be something much worse for South Africa and the world. Undoubtedly, his suffering refined his person and character.

Second, suffering disciplines and trains character. That life is sometimes tough and brutal makes it necessary for character to undergo some discipline and training. Out of this will come courage and determination to solidly and firmly face suffering. Scripture and life experience teach us that we will sometimes face troubles and tribulation this side of eternity. Without training and discipline of character, these tribulations and troubles can easily push us off the highway of life altogether. Following the example of Christ, it may sometimes be necessary for us to learn obedience through what we suffer. As F. F. Bruce notes, Christ set out from the start on the path of obedience to God, and learned by the sufferings which came his way in consequence just what obedience to God involved in practice in the conditions of human life on earth (Bruce 1984: 103). He did not, of course, have to suffer for his own sake,

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<sup>287</sup> For an alternative assessment of Mandela's and the ANC's performance since assuming power in 1994, see Jim Peron's highly critical book, *Die, the Beloved Country?* Writing from a liberal perspective, Peron severely criticises and indicts the ANC for what he sees as lack of proper market economic policies, corruption and new forms of racism.

but the things that came on his way as a human being resulted in his training and discipline as the perfect Saviour. It will be nothing less for us in the battle and the struggle of life. For us to be triumphant in the battles of life, we need discipline and training of character. A disciplined and trained character has a unique ability to face up and cope with the difficult situations of life. Exposed to and honed by these difficulties, it develops the tenacity and the resilience to tread the risky road of life without succumbing or retreating or resigning. As Alister McGrath has pointed out, suffering and afflictions hone our defences and strengthen our resolve to fight on against all the forces raging against us, forces which attempt to drag us back into the dusk of unbelief and lostness (McGrath 1995: 74). Patience, perseverance, compassion, self-control, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and kindness are all character qualities, which come about mainly through training and discipline. Suffering refines and trains character, preparing it to face up to and remain standing under the many challenges and threats of life without crumbling.

Third, suffering breeds humility of character. Unlike any other human experience, suffering brings us down to earth, reminding us that we, as human beings, are fragile and lowly in origin. When we suffer, we are made to realise that all we have, all we are, and all that we aspire to become are undeserved graces of God. Consequently, suffering realistically reminds us that our gifts, our talents, our achievements, our wealth or even our own very lives are not really rights but privileges that God graciously grants us for the purpose of serving him and humanity, created in his image. Suffering also reminds us that our destiny is in God's hands, not in ours. This perspective easily escapes our attention when we are well and strong. We naively think that we can cope on our own and are able in the same capacity to turn life into whatever we want it to be. But when suffering invades our supposedly safe territory, we are forced to retreat and accept the inevitable reality that we are actually weak, feeble and in need of someone or something greater than ourselves. Thus, as Alister McGrath correctly notes, "suffering humbles us. It reminds us that we do not have full control over our own situation" (McGrath 1995: 76). Suffering, in that sense, shatters our pride and self-dependence. It clearly brings home to us the bitter truth that life is much more than we can handle on our own. We need God's help to do this. No one understands this truth better than does the apostle Paul himself. During one of his missionary journeys in Asia Minor, he faced a great deal of suffering to the point of despairing even of life itself. He writes of that experience: "We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life itself.



Indeed, in our own hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not depend on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead" (2Cor 1: 8-9). For Paul, the point of despair is the beginning of faith and trust in God. Suffering and the threat of death push us into reliance on God, having come to the end of the rope. It is an unfortunate truth for human beings that the point of faith and reliance on God should begin when suffering and death threaten. As it were, human experience is such that humankind runs to God for refuge only when in trouble but seems to forget him when in peace and prosperity. One Sudanese victim of war and suffering said of her experience and faith: "In a bleak situation in which nothing is certain except death and suffering, we have learned that God is the only foundation on which we have rested our hopes and expectations".<sup>288</sup> She only came to this realisation after the war had displaced and separated her from her husband and two sons, to say nothing of the loss of her wealth and property. A youngster, who has not been in touch with his parents for nearly ten years, expressed the same sentiments rather stoically. He said, "I have been through much hardship and suffering well beyond my age and I have learned that faith in God can sustain you in the most horrible situations of life imaginable. It gives you an incredible strength and resilience to endure and survive. Without this, I would not be here today".<sup>289</sup> Although we cannot explain our tendency to earnestly seek God when we are in trouble and not in peace and prosperity, it seems that suffering and death remind us of our fragility and need of God. "Probably, more than anything else, suffering often brings home to us how powerless and helpless we are in the face of illness and death" (McGrath 1995: 77). Anyone who has ever been taken ill or experienced loss of a loved one or a friend understands what this means. Thus, suffering humbles us and painfully reminds us that we are fragile and mortal beings, in need of God's help in the rough and turbulent waters of life that daily threaten to daily us.

Fourth, suffering avails an opportunity for our character to be an example and encouragement to others who suffer or may suffer. Suffering is rarely a private occurrence. People know when we are sick, suffering or mourning a loss in our family. People watch and take notice of the way we react to hardship, illness, death or any other form of suffering (McGrath 1995: 78). Depending on how we react, people choose to follow or not follow our example when their turn to suffer comes. Consciously or unconsciously, people observe us in our suffering with the hope of finding something to imitate when suffering befalls them. That is one reason we as human beings love stories of resilience, survival, endurance and suffering; they capture

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<sup>288</sup> Related in a conversation with Mary Acol Deng, Narus, Sudan, August 1998.

our imagination. We want to hear these stories if only to find something to imitate, identify or measure our resolve with so that we know how to manage in case what happened to them happens to us. This is what makes personal stories or biographies so popular and even best selling. Who in the world does not love to read or hear the story of Terry Waite and his five-year detention and subsequent release from Lebanon or of Nelson Mandela's long walk from prison to the palace or of Martin Luther King and the struggles of the Civil Rights Movement against racial segregation in the United States or of Mahatma Gandhi and his civil disobedience and non-violent campaign against the British rule in India or of Richard Wumbrand and his long imprisonment in communist Romania for Christ's service? We greatly admire these mortals for the examples of courage, perseverance and determination they provide. When our turn to suffer comes, we try to follow their example of character. In Scripture, it is said of Christ that he suffered for us, leaving an example that we should follow in his steps (1Pet 2: 21). Thus with this 'cloud of witnesses' surrounding us, suffering is rarely a private matter. In that sense, it provides those who suffer with a unique opportunity to be examples of endurance, resilience, patience and faith. The church of Christ in the world has always recognised that both life and death provide opportunities to declare one's faith to the world. In that regard, suffering rather than stopping the affirmation and declaration of faith actually opens new avenues of doing the same. This is what the experience of the church in Sudan has shown to be the case. The Sudanese church living and witnessing in the cruel conditions of a prolonged war and suffering has developed character. Its overwhelming growth in these times of pain and death is a living testimony to the fact that the light of the kingdom cannot be put out by the winds of fear and suffering. Being a beacon of hope, solidarity and character in a wounded society, it has become a modern example of costly witness for the worldwide church of Jesus Christ. Its example as a shining light will find a place in the history and tradition of the church. Suffering has thus turned the Sudanese church into something it could never have easily become; it has become an example of a costly witness, character and encouragement in war and tragedy. In suffering and affliction, it has provided light and hope.

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<sup>289</sup> An interview conducted with John Deng Garang in 1995 at the Sudanese Refugee Camp, Kakuma, Kenya.



## 7.6 SUFFERING AND HOPE

### 7.6.1 THE BASIS OF OUR HOPE

The framework of a distinctively Christian response to evil and suffering is based on the cross, worked out in the community, resulting in character formation as it is lived out in a glorious hope. This hope together with love and faith forms modalities, which essentially describe Christian existence. This existence is built on Jesus Christ, the hope of glory. It is only in him that hope can be called realistic. Such hope alone, as Jürgen Moltmann, observes takes seriously the possibilities with which reality is fraught. It does not take things as they happen to stand or to lie, but as progressing, moving things with possibilities of change. It sees all reality, including the reality of suffering, and mankind in the hand of him whose voice calls into history from its end, saying loud and clear, 'Behold, I make all things new'. From this word of promise hope acquires the freedom to renew life here and now and change the face of the world (Moltmann 1965: 25-6). Without hope, suffering would paralyse us and inhibit our desire to be. Having hope as such presupposes that life is somehow worthwhile in the face of evil and suffering, despite the evidence to the contrary. Against all despair, in hope we see the light at the end of the tunnel. Hope tells us that something good will in the end come out of our suffering; that for us there is reason to live. For life—especially Christian life—is virtually impossible without hope. In hope we are saved (Rom 8: 24), hope does not disappoint us (Rom 5: 5), when everything else disappears into oblivion, only hope remains, with faith and love (1Cor 13: 13). We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure (Heb 6: 19). As Robert Jewett points out, hope is an anchor of the soul, not in the sense of guaranteeing the immortality of the soul but in the sense of providing a stabilising effect on the whole person; being a basis for mental health in a world that seems to defy sanity. It holds firm and safe when everything else deteriorates (Jewett 1981: 112).<sup>290</sup> Because we hope in the Lord, we will renew our strength, soar on wings like eagles, run and not grow weary, walk and not faint (Isa 40: 31). This blessed hope spurs us on to live a pure life as we wait for its fulfillment (Tit 2: 13; 1Jn 3: 3). As believers, we are called upon to be joyful in this hope and patient in affliction (Rom 12: 12). God is the God of all hope as Christ is the hope of glory (Rom 15: 13; Col 1: 27). What is more, hope is a central and fundamental

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<sup>290</sup> Jewett relates from the work of Viktor Frankl in the German concentration camp that the prisoners who gave up hope in the future or in some goal easily became subject to mental and physical decay. Thus, hope has a significant role in suffering and without it suffering will be unbearable. See Jewett's *Letter to Pilgrims*, New York: Pilgrim Press, 1981.

aspect of the gospel of the kingdom of God. As John de Gruchy tells us, the gospel holds out the promise of eternal life to believers, a life that neither death nor suffering can destroy (de Gruchy 1986: 228). Thus, in the face of suffering, the Christian lives in the hope that God's will shall ultimately be done on earth as it is in heaven, that the kingdom of God will be established as a new earth and a new heaven shall be ushered in, that the hope of the kingdom is a promise of peace, which God alone gives and that suffering itself and all that it inflicts will be defeated (de Gruchy 1986: 229). Thus, living in this hope also entails the promise of God's ultimate victory over the forces of estrangement, enmity and death. Such conviction of faith as well implies that the oppressors will not ultimately triumph over their victims (Lorenzen 1995: 274).

### 7.6.2 RELATING HOPE TO SUFFERING

Suffering and hope are interrelated. Alister McGrath observes that it is true in a particular sense that the only way that leads to hope passes through suffering (McGrath 1995: 80). Hope is sensible in the light of suffering and suffering meaningful and enduring in the light of hope. It is only those who suffer who can truly hope and only those who truly hope who can truly and realistically face suffering. Hence, suffering and hope are inseparably interconnected. But what is the foundation on which our hope is built? How does it relate to suffering as we now face it? As already noted, our hope is built on Jesus Christ and all that he did on the cross; it is based on Christ and his finished work. The cross tells us that suffering has been dealt with and that God does not abandon us in our suffering but is present and suffering with us. Our hope concurs and realistically maintains that although suffering is still a pertinent reality at the present, it is and will ultimately be defeated. Thus, hope lives between the '*already and the not yet*' or '*in the time between the times*' as some theologians have suggested (Hays 1997, Fee 1995). How does hope maintain itself, existing as it does in the tension of the '*already and the not yet*'? With its apparent eschatological overtones, how does hope face suffering in the now even as it anticipates the future? How does hope know what it looks forward to will come to pass? To respond, we first suggest that hope is inseparably connected to the unfailing promises of God. It is solidly based on the promises of God, validated by his oath (Bruce 1984: 131). Just as suffering is painfully real, so reliably real are the promises of God and the hope of eternal life. God promises that there will come a time when the dwelling of God shall be with human beings and he will live with them. They will be his people and he will be their God. A new order of things shall be ushered in; God



will wipe every tear from the eyes of his people. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or suffering. God will make everything new (Rev 21: 3-5). Our hope is thus pinned on the eternal order of things, where the promises of God will be made good to his people in perpetuity (Bruce 1984: 130-31). Meanwhile, it still gives the believer the unshakable hope to know that God has promised to be with us when we pass through the raging fires and through the deep waters of trials and afflictions (Isa 43: 2-3). It is his promise too that he will not forsake us but remain with us to the very end of time (Heb 13: 5; Mat 28: 20) and that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that awaits us (Rom 8: 18). Has there been precedence in time and history that God will do what he has promised? The answer is thankfully a resounding yes. In the words of Alister McGrath, "the death and the resurrection of Jesus, linked with the giving of the Holy Spirit, are pledges, sureties, and guarantees that what has been promised will one day be brought to glorious realisation" (McGrath 1995: 92). Thus, if Abraham rested his hope on the promise and oath of God, we have that and more to rest our hope upon: we have the fulfillment of God's promise in the exaltation of Jesus Christ and hence our hope is both sure and steadfast (Bruce 1984: 131).<sup>291</sup>

Second, and in relation to the above, hope participates in the present as it anticipates the future. Because hope now lives in the reality of the sure promises of God, it does not ignore the future. It is based on faith in the promises of God as linked to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Richard Hays underlines the absolute necessity of keeping the two together when he writes, "there is no authentic Christian faith without fervent eschatological hope and there is no eschatological hope without the resurrection of the dead" (Hays 1997: 262). Hope lives in that expectation as it does its best to face and challenge present difficulties. It does not hide its head in the sand like the proverbial ostrich; it fights and struggles with suffering and evil. Again, Alister McGrath provides some insights here when he writes: "The Christian hope ought to be a stimulus, rather than a sedative. It should spur us into action within the world, rather than encourage us to neglect it. By working to lessen the suffering of God's world and his people, we are easing his heartache over their pain" (McGrath 1995: 91). Hope fails the test of being Christian when it remains passive and indifferent to the present and its realities. Equally, it fails the same test, when it only becomes consumed with the present at the expense of the future. To be truly Christian, hope must participate in the present even as it

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<sup>291</sup> Thus George Wesley Buchanan comments that only "the Christians are the ones who can draw on the promise as affirmed with an oath. This provides a strong motivation to take advantage of 'the hope' that this promise would be fulfilled in their day..." See *To the Hebrews*, Anchor Bible, New York: Doubleday, 1972, p. 115.

anticipates the future. As K R Ross puts it, "Without any compromise of the ultimate object of our hope in the resurrection of the dead, we may take the hopefulness engendered by the raising of Jesus Christ to the business of transforming the world now in the direction of its promised future" (Ross 1990: 197-212). In that sense, hope in suffering sees the present in the light of the future and the future in the light of the present. As it were, it embraces the future without refraining from the present; it accepts the present without rejecting the future. At the same time, hope is here and also there; it is a present reality as well as a future reality. Paul Tillich, when speaking about the eschaton might have accurately described what we are saying here concerning hope. He remarks, "Past and future meet in the present, and both are included in the "eternal now". But they are not swallowed by the present; they (still) have their independent and different functions" (Tillich 1963: 395-6).

For the church in this current tumultuous time of war and suffering in Sudan, hope has been and still is very much alive. Wherever one meets people in the war-torn South Sudan, a powerful atmosphere of hope and expectation prevails. There is a strong optimism that freedom will be achieved sooner rather than later. Despite daily realities of war and suffering as manifested in hunger, displacement, continual aerial bombardment by the government war planes, disease and lack of basic services of life, hope still abounds. Many believe that the war will be over soon and that peace and prosperity will prevail again in this war devastated land. Thus, it seems that the large scale suffering of the Sudanese people ignites rather than dims their hope and optimism for freedom and a bright future. In fact, some fear that such high hopes and optimism may be a recipe for despondency if what people hope for fail to materialise in the near future. But it is still significant that a people who have struggled for so long and have been through so much suffering and pain are not bitter with God or themselves but hopeful and optimistic in spite of the prevailing tragic circumstances. Suffering has not 'killed' their faith in God or in themselves or in the future and destiny of their land. Rather, their fervent hope and faith are that the powers of estrangement, oppression, indignity and enslavement with which they have struggled for so long will be overcome and destroyed one day. This hope invigorates them to face the present bitter realities of suffering and war and enables them to envisage a bright future for which they are now prepared to live or die. Without this hope in the future, the present experience of suffering is pointless. This is because suffering is bravely borne and the future is expectantly envisioned only in the light of that hope. Truly, such hope does not disappoint us but it sustains us in the present cruel



conditions of war and suffering in Sudan. The optimism of faith in suffering and war in Sudan is that the God of all hope will now give us hope and peace in the future to come. For "however dismal and catastrophic may be the present circumstances, we know that we are not alone, for God dwells with us in life's most confining and oppressive cells" (King 1963: 95). That is our sure foundation and hope.

## 7.7 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

While the various theological and philosophical explications of the problem of evil and suffering must be retained, it turns out in the last analysis that the problem is actually insoluble. There is no solution to this problem in the sense of the total and complete elimination of evil and suffering, so that we do not suffer or even die in this life. In that sense the incarnation, which is the Christian answer, will not be a solution since we still suffer and die. But be that as it may, the incarnation still provides the only framework in which suffering and evil are dealt with and the hope of their complete and total elimination is held out. Therefore, the incarnation as an answer provides the milieu in which suffering in spite of its insolubility may be responded to or used for the highest possible good in this life. Thus, the incarnation is the basis of an appropriate Christian response to suffering. We propose that this response anchors in the biblical and theological images of the cross, the community, character and hope. The cross tells us that although suffering is still very much a present reality, God has done something about it and he will completely and totally eliminate it in the future. When in the severity of suffering we perceive God as absent and distant from us, the cross reminds us that he is present and suffering with us. The cross testifies to the fact that God knows and feels our pain and suffering. He sustains and strengthens us. He gives us grace to make sense of our experience. The cross reminds us that God is actively and lovingly working through our suffering for our good and for his glory.

The community absorbs our suffering and surrounds us with love and compassion in our pain and loss. In the community we practically experience what it means to have our burdens borne by others. Suffering being a devastatingly lonesome experience, we need the warmth and company of others in the community. Part of the feeling of loneliness in that regard comes from a terrible sense of having been abandoned by God and humanity. By providing spiritual, emotional, material and social support to those who suffer, the community reassures

the suffering ones that they are not alone in their pain and suffering. Consequently, within the sanctuary of a caring community, suffering will not quickly dispatch its victims to their untimely end.

Depending on how we respond, suffering makes or breaks us. Negatively or positively, suffering shapes our character. In that sense, suffering is somehow related to the process of human maturity and character development. Suffering may not be the only ingredient in this process, but it undoubtedly plays a major role in it. Those who have suffered in one way or another, display strong and mature character traits. Suffering seems to toughen and strengthen them in a very unique way. In that regard, suffering may be said to ennoble, although it may also embitter in another sense.

In facing the obvious mystery and cruelty of suffering and evil, the believer stands firm in the hope that they will ultimately be defeated in Christ. Suffering is not and will not always be the way God wanted things to be. In hope, we are reminded that there comes a time in which our tears shall be wiped from our eyes and all our pain and suffering completely eliminated. At that time, there will be no more crying or mourning or suffering or death. God will usher in a new order of things, as the current order of things shall have disappeared. The absolute surety of this hope is solidly based on the promises of the God who is ever present with us in our suffering. For the people of God, this hope participates in the present realities of life as it anticipates the glorious future that God promises. With this bright hope amazingly shining in our hearts, we can courageously face the thick darkness of evil and suffering and overcome the gloomy uncertainties of the present life. On the basis of this hope therefore we shall not fear, for he/she who fears suffering is already suffering from what he/she fears. This hope, which 'neither bodily or psychological suffering can destroy',<sup>292</sup> spurs us on to put our trust in God while we participate in and work through our pain and suffering, knowing that he will ultimately deliver us from our predicament.

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<sup>292</sup> Paul Tillich uses this phrase to describe what he called 'transcendent happiness', which according to him is inherent in 'the negation of the negative'. See his *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3, p. 403, Chicago University Press, 1963.



## GENERAL SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This dissertation examines suffering and God in relation to war in Sudan. Chapter one addresses the research plan and methodological issues, settling for an interpretive and comparative approach in which literature review and theological reflection play a major role. It also incorporates some aspects of social and qualitative analysis (Cooper 1984: 11). In using biblical literature, it follows the synchronic method, which deals with the biblical writings in their current form, as opposed to the diachronic method, which traces the development of individual writings in time (Matera 1996). Consequently, it employs conventional exegetical and hermeneutical methods to interact with the texts and make inferences from them, granting the texts authority in the mode they speak—as paradigm, principle, rule, symbol, story (Hays 1996: 291-99).

Chapter two places issues in context, dealing with the factors behind the protracted war and suffering in Sudan. This chapter argues that particular historical factors such as the cruel slave trade and its abiding legacy, perpetual exploitation of the south and the well intentioned but shortsighted colonial southern policies are behind the ongoing war and suffering in the country. This is in addition to an intricate combination of political, socio-economic and religious factors. Similarly, this chapter contends that it is only within the context of these factors that one can understand the ongoing long war and suffering in Sudan.

Chapter three investigates how the Christian people of Southern Sudan understand and interpret their experience of war and suffering in relation to their faith. Living in the upheaval of massive loss of human life, unprecedented erosion of communal values and abject poverty resulting from the virtual destruction of socio-economic infrastructure, the Sudanese Christians interpret their experience of war and suffering in varied ways. Of special note is the experience of the Nilotic Bor Dinka people (and possibly the Nuer) who interpret their suffering as God's judgement, allegedly resulting from the adamant refusal of their kinsmen to believe the gospel message during the missionary era. They base this interpretation on the 18<sup>th</sup> chapter of Isaiah. For them, the main teaching of this passage of Scripture is that the current war and suffering in Sudan have come about as the restorative judgement of God in order that they may renounce their ancestral divinities and receive the divine salvation available in Jesus Christ. Equally, they interpret the ongoing war and suffering as a direct result of a bitter

cosmic conflict between God and the evil forces of the *jak*, the ancestral divinities or spirits formerly venerated and worshipped in their traditional religions. Consequently, they perceive the invading Islamic forces from the north as the full reincarnation and re-embodiment of those cosmic evil forces that the God of the Bible or Jesus Christ is now contending against and hence the raging military conflict. Ultimately, they believe, Christ will win this war and deliver them in answer to the persistent prayers of his suffering people. Thus, it makes no difference in whatever way suffering is interpreted, because there is a strong belief that God will deliver the Christian community in the same manner that he delivered Israel from the Egyptian bondage as reported in the Exodus narrative. Subsequently, in spite of massive upheaval and tragedy, the image of God as judge and deliverer of his people has come to dominate the theology and practice of the suffering communities of Sudan. This is the dominant motif of more than 1,500 Bor Dinka new songs, mainly composed in the war and greatly enhancing and accelerating the gospel proclamation and church growth among them, even at these turbulent times of war, suffering, communal and cultural evolutionary transformation. They can easily identify with the nuances the songs express in their traditional thought patterns and thus the sense of their spontaneous acceptance and even ownership of the Christian proclamation.

Chapter four switches gears slightly and turns our attention to the problem of evil and suffering as explicated in Western European theological thought. This theological thought is deeply indebted to the Augustinian-Reformation heritage. It serves as a standard for what has traditionally been called 'classical theology'. In this, Augustine's free will defense, Luther's theology of the cross and Calvin's views on divine sovereignty and human responsibility are briefly explored. This chapter also examines the age of theodicies or the Enlightenment's optimism and the challenge it posed to the Augustinian-Reformation heritage. It concludes that Western European theological thought generally swings between monism and dualism, indebted as it were to the Greek philosophical heritage.

Somewhat closely related to four, Chapter five examines 'alternative theodicies' that came into being after the collapse of the optimism of the Age of Reason in the tumultuous events of the First and the Second World Wars. The thought of Karl Barth and Jürgen Moltmann is briefly investigated. It is an argument of this chapter that Barth, an ardent critic of the Enlightenment's ideals, essentially and creatively reinterpreted the Reformation heritage and applied it to the pressing issues of his own time. It is in that sense that his dialectic theology



of crisis may be regarded as a 'neo-orthodoxy'. In the same way, Moltmann's theology of the cross and hope may be a modern reinterpretation of Luther's theology of the cross. This chapter also looks at the praxis and advocacy of Liberation Theology, born and bred in the context of immense human suffering in Latin America. Liberation Theology undertakes to boldly reinterpret orthodox church doctrines and apply them to pressing basic human needs such as food, shelter and poverty as ordinary people experience them. C G Berkouwer's 'believing theodicy' is examined as a serious biblical and theological critique of Western forms of theodicy. Finally, this chapter looks at the problem of suffering from the African perspective and compares it broadly with the Western view. The African traditional thought primarily views suffering and evil as realities of life to face rather than explain. The opposite is generally true in Western thought.

Chapter six places the problem of evil and suffering in Biblical perspective. It identifies at least five ways the Bible describes or explains suffering. First, suffering and evil may come as a consequence of sin. It seems to be the basic idea in the OT that suffering or evil comes as a result of sin. Second, suffering may come as a corrective or disciplinary measure from God. In that regard, God actively executes this measure to draw his wayward children into conformity with his will and purpose. Third, suffering may be a test of faith or faithfulness. The apparent purpose of this testing is to establish, strengthen and promote the one under the test if and when he/she overcomes it. Fourth, suffering may also be a direct result of being a follower of Christ. This kind of suffering or persecution comes as the world's most natural response to the verbal or practical witness of Christ's followers. Finally, suffering, as the experience of Job shows, may be innocent or uncaused. This means that one may suffer, not because of what he/she has done wrong or have not done but because of some cosmic, invisible forces beyond his/her control. All this tells us that there is more to suffering and evil than we can ever be able to fathom or explain. It seems, there is a mystery at the root of evil and suffering. It is a deep mystery, to which the reality and the 'Godness' of God and our very existence are inextricably linked. To acknowledge this is to acknowledge God's infinity and our humanity.

The final chapter attempts to construct a Biblical and theological response to the problem of suffering and evil. It argues that suffering, in the final analysis, is insoluble if the solution means its complete and total elimination so that we no longer suffer or die in this life. In that sense, even the incarnation, which this chapter regards as the distinctively Christian answer, is

not a solution since Christians themselves still suffer and die here and now. However, it is a basic argument of this chapter that the incarnation still remains the only viable answer to the problem of suffering and evil, providing a solid framework in which the believer can positively respond to suffering and transform it into good in his/her own life and that of others. To effect this response, we have proposed the Biblical and theological images of the cross, the community, character and hope as the basis for transforming and transcending suffering and evil. In the cross we are reminded that we are not alone in our suffering. God is with us and is suffering with us. The cross tells us that God has done and will do something about suffering. The community helps us to absorb our suffering. By being present with us or by providing our emotional, psychological and spiritual needs, the community shares in our suffering and reminds us that we are not alone in our loss and pain. With the comfort that the cross and the community provide we can transform and transcend our suffering and become people of character. Whether we realise it or not, suffering leaves indelible marks on our character. Because we persevere in our suffering, we learn to be more loving, more compassionate, more understanding and more sympathetic with those who suffer since we have been through it ourselves. More than that, in Christ we live in the hope that suffering will ultimately be defeated. There shall come a time in which God will wipe all the tears from our eyes. There will be no more pain, suffering or death. With that hope, we are able to face suffering as that which is defeated and yet still is paradoxically here with us. Thus, living in the tension of '*the already*' and '*the not yet*', we face the present suffering with our eyes on the future, a future from which our present reality cannot be divorced. The incarnation is, therefore, the answer to the problem of suffering but it is an answer whose full consummation still awaits the future when this present order of things shall be replaced by a new dispensation of peace and everlasting life. In this light, suffering in spite of being unpleasant is bearable and transformable.

In the experience of the church in Sudan, the cross, the community and hope have become concrete symbols of the life of faith in war and suffering. Wherever people have received the message of the cross they became a living, vital part of the community and live in the fellowship of faith with the hope that war and suffering shall not always be the order of things but shall someday be overcome. The tragic war conditions have built character, giving many believers great appreciation of what they have and who they are as they take life one day at a time. They live out the riches of God's grace and mercy as they face each day in a country



where war and suffering have been the order of things for more than four decades now. The resilience and perseverance of the suffering church in Sudan seem to teach the universal church of Jesus to necessarily concur with what Phillips Brooks said many years ago:

Do not pray for easy lives; pray to be stronger people! Do not pray for tasks equal to your powers, pray for powers equal to your tasks. Then the doing of your work shall be no miracle but you shall be a miracle. Everyday you shall wonder at yourself, at the richness of life, which has come to you by the grace of God.<sup>293</sup>

With that grace we can live in the community of the cross, being people of character who are able to face suffering with the hope that firmly anchors the soul in the turbulent sea of life.

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<sup>293</sup> Quoted in John Feinberg's *Th Many Faces of Evil*, p. 346

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