

# **Survey of Theology 1.**

**The Doctrine of God**

# Outline

Is God male?

A personal God

Can God suffer?

The omnipotence of God

God's action within the world

The problem of evil

God as creator

The Holy Spirit

# Is God Male?

Language in Old and New Testaments intended as *analogy*: In saying “God is our Father,” the intention is that the human role of father can provide insights into the nature of God

Sexuality is part of the created order.

Hebrews never attributed sexual function to God (in contrast to the Canaanite fertility cults)

“God as mother” or “God as friend” can also provide insights into the nature of God.

# Is God Male?

Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, May 1373:

“I saw that God rejoices to be our Father, and also that he rejoices to be our Mother; and yet again, that he rejoices to be our true Husband, with our soul as his beloved bride. . . He is the foundation, substance and the thing itself, what it is by nature. He is the true Father and Mother of what things are by nature.”

# Is God Male?

God transcends the created order of  
sexuality, is neither male or female  
Personal roles such as father, mother, friend,  
husband, wife, can provide *by analogy*,  
insight into the nature of God

# A Personal God

In what sense can we say God is a person, or a “personal” God?

God is not the “impersonal” God of Aristotle or Spinoza:

- Aristotle: God is an utterly transcendent, perfect entity, eternally contemplating its own perfection and beauty
- Spinoza: God is a perfect being, and therefore cannot have passion, cannot love or suffer (for then God would then change, becoming “more” or “less” perfect).

# A Personal God

When we speak of God as “personal,” we mean a being with whom we can have a relationship that is *analogous* to the relationship we can have with human persons

# A Personal God

## “Dialogical Personalism”

In 1923, Martin Buber published *I and Thou* (the usual English translations of the German *Ich und Du*)

Two modes of experiencing / relating to the world:

- 1. Experience of an object = “**I-it**”  
Relation
- 2. An Encounter with Another = “**I-Thou**” or “**I-You**” Relation (“You” is the “You” of intimacy, which used to exist in English in the word “Thou”)

# A Personal God

## “Dialogical Personalism”

### “I-it” Relation:

- We objectify, conceptualize, fit into the “box of our understanding” that which we see, hear, etc (“it”).
- Impersonal
- The “normal” experienced world of space and time

# A Personal God

## “Dialogical Personalism”

### “I-You” Relation:

- The “You” can never be objectified, or “boxed” into our understanding. A “You” has no borders, cannot be measured. A “You” “fills the sky” of our mind's eye
- An encounter, a transitory event (the “event of relation”) which is mutual and reciprocal
- Can be called love
- Comes to us by grace

# A Personal God

## “Dialogical Personalism”

A “person” then is someone with whom we can have an “**I-You**” relationship. The person of an “**I-You**” encounter cannot be “objectified,” or “boxed-in,” turned in “content.” A person of an “**I-You**” encounter is a *Presence*, is *Presence* as power.

# A Personal God

God:

- A being with whom we can have an “**I-You**” relationship
- Buber: God is:
  - the “Absolute You”
  - the “You” which by nature can never become an “It.” God is a being who escapes / transcends all attempts to objectify / describe.
- God is an active presence, an active subject, revealing God’s self in human history and in personal relationships, not an “It” waiting to be discovered and examined.

# Can God Suffer?

*Classic Greek understanding of God:*

- God is perfect. Perfection understood as *static*:
  - any change is a move either away from or towards perfection
- God is therefore also unchanging and impassible (incapable of suffering or pain)
- Christians theologians of the patristic and medieval periods accepted this view of God

# Can God Suffer?

Anselm of Canterbury:

- we can *experience* God as compassionate, but the *emotion of compassion* is not part of God's divine being
- language of *love* and *compassion* are *figurative* when applied to God

Thomas Aquinas:

- God's mercy is an *effect* of God's actions towards sinners; God does not *feel* sorrow over the misery of others

# Can God Suffer?

Articles of Religion (p. 867 Book of  
Common Prayer)

- “There is but one living and true God, everlasting, without body, parts, or passions; of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness. . .”

# Can God Suffer?

20<sup>th</sup> Century saw a radical change in this view of in God. Reasons:

- 1. Need to respond to **protest atheism**
  - an intensely moral form of atheism that refused to accept idea of a God immune to the suffering of for example, an innocent child
- 2. Rediscovery of Luther and his **“theology of the cross”** (God who is hidden in suffering)
- 3. **History of dogma movement** and appreciation of how Greek ideas had influenced early Christian theology

# Can God Suffer?

20<sup>th</sup> Century saw a radical change in this view of in God. Reasons:

- 4. **Process theology** (God has limited himself to persuasion of the processes of creation and is a fellow sufferer)
- 5. Fresh **Old Testament studies** showing how the God of the Old Testament shared in the suffering of God's people
- 6. Idea that **love** requires some mutual sharing of feeling.
  - an “impassible love” immune from being emotionally affected by the beloved is not truly love

# Can God Suffer?

Jürgen Moltmann's *The Crucified God*  
(1974): a God who cannot suffer is not  
perfect, but *deficient*:

“A God who cannot suffer is poorer than any human. For a God who is incapable of suffering is a being who cannot be involved. Suffering and injustice do not affect him. And because he is so completely insensitive, he cannot be affected or shaken by anything. He cannot weep, for he has no tears. But the one who cannot suffer cannot love either. So he is also a loveless being.”

# The Suffering of God

Kazoh Kitamori *A Theology of the Pain of God* (1946): God can give meaning and dignity to human suffering only because God is also in pain and suffers.

# The Omnipotence of God

“I believe in God, the Father almighty. . .”

- almighty = Latin *omnipotens*

Does the omnipotence of God mean God  
*can do anything*? Then there are  
problems:

“If God were good, he would wish to make his creatures perfectly happy, and if God were almighty, he would be able to do what he wished. But the creatures are not happy. Therefore God lacks either the goodness, or power, or both.”

- *The Problem of Pain*, C. S. Lewis

# The Omnipotence of God

God *cannot* do anything:

- God cannot do anything logically impossible
- God cannot do anything against the nature of God (for example, to lie, subvert justice)
- God can make decisions that limit the possibilities of what God can do

# The Omnipotence of God

**The Two Powers of God** (Duns Scotus and William of Ockham, 13<sup>th</sup> century)

1. **The Absolute Power of God:**

- God is confronted by an array of possibility and can choose any of them

2. **The “Ordained” Power of God**

- Once God chooses a possibility and actualizes it, other possibilities disappear. God’s choices can limit God’s options and hence God’s power.

# The Omnipotence of God

The **“Ordained” Power of God** is the power of God after God’s *divine self-limitation*.

# The Omnipotence of God

## Kenoticism

**Kenoticism:** The particular *divine self-limitation* and *divine “self-emptying”* (Greek *kenosis*, an emptying) of God taking on human form in Jesus explored particularly in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

- *Philippians 2:6-7*: “Jesus, though he was in the form of God. . . emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.”

# The Omnipotence of God

Dietrich Bonhoeffer *Letters and Papers  
from Prison:*

“God lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us. . . . The Bible directs us to God’s powerlessness and suffering; only the suffering God can help.”

# God's Action Within the World

Four views of how God acts in the world:

1. Deism
2. Thomas Aquinas: God acts through secondary causes
3. Alfred North Whitehead: Process Theology
4. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin: Point Omega

# God's Action Within the World Deism

God is the watchmaker; the world the watch. God created a rationale and ordered world, completely autonomous and self-sufficient. Once set in motion, no further action need from God

# God's Action Within the World

## Thomas Aquinas: God Acts Through Secondary Causes

Example: quality and beauty of piano music at a concert.

- *Primary Cause*: the gifted pianist with the ability to play the piano beautifully
- *Secondary Cause*: the piano

The primary cause (the gifted pianist) must work through the secondary cause (the piano) to achieve the effect they desire. If the piano is horribly out of tune . . . .

# God's Action Within the World

## Thomas Aquinas: God Acts Through Secondary Causes

Aquinas: God is the primary cause of everything, but has chosen to work *indirectly* through secondary causes. (i.e. “delegating” divine action)

- God might try to move a human will in order to help an ill person
- Suffering and pain are due to the imperfection and fragility of the secondary causes through which God works

# God's Action Within the World

## Alfred North Whitehead: Process Theology

- Process / change is the fundamental basis of reality (not matter, substances, essences. . .)
- Reality is composed of building blocks of processes called “actual occasions,” or “actual entities,” each with a certain degree of freedom to develop and influence adjacent processes
- God is the permanent, imperishable background of order for the developing processes

# God's Action Within the World

## Alfred North Whitehead: Process Theology

- God can act to influence and persuade the processes, but cannot violate the rules governing the processes.
- God can try to persuade the murderer not to kill, but ultimately cannot violate the murderer's "free will."
- God can try to persuade the processes of nature involved in an avalanche, but ultimately cannot violate the rules of nature's "free process"

# God's Action Within the World

## Alfred North Whitehead: Process Theology

- God both influences processes and is influenced by the processes. God is thus “a fellow-sufferer who understands” (Alfred North Whitehead)

### *Criticisms of Process Theology:*

- too radically compromises the transcendence of God
- hard to find the God of the Old Testament in the God of Process Theology

# God's Action Within the World

## Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's Point Omega

- Universe is an *evolutionary* process constantly moving towards states of greater complexity and higher levels of consciousness
- There are no radical discontinuities or innovations in this evolution. There is a “biological layer” inherent in the fabric of universe, a “rudimentary consciousness” in all physical matter (“there is a Within to things”) that is the basis for the development of life and consciousness

# God's Action Within the World

## Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's Point Omega

- “Critical points” of transitions include emergence of life on earth, emergence of human consciousness
- The universe's evolution is ascending towards **Point Omega**, which is both:
  - a union with God
  - the “force” attracting the evolutionary process
- God is at work both
  - within the process of evolution
  - as the “attractive” force drawing the process to its divine goal and fulfillment

# The Problem of Evil

*The problem of evil = Theodicy:*

How can we reconcile:

- the goodness of God and of God's creation
- the omnipotence of God

with:

- the existence of evil and suffering in the world?

# The Problem of Evil

Irenaeus of Lyons:

- world is a “vale of soul-making.”  
Human beings are incomplete and to grow must participate in the world, freely responding to God’s call by choosing between good and evil.
- evil thus a necessary presence in the world to allow human development

Criticisms:

- appears to lend dignity to evil
- what of evil that destroys rather than advancing human growth (Hiroshima, Auschwitz)

# The Problem of Evil

St. Augustine of Hippo:

- evil not a created entity/substance, but is rather a *defect of being* (like a hole in a shirt, tree rot, blindness in an eye)
- these defects arise as a consequence of “free will,” from human beings willfully turning away from that which will ultimately make us happy
- thus evil is a side effect of giving “free will” to the creation

# The Problem of Evil

Radically limit the omnipotence of God, as in  
Process Theology:

- God can only persuade and influence the processes of the world, acting within the “rights” and “freedoms” of the processes
- God tries to persuade the processes for the best possible outcome, but a bad outcome can still result
- God, having done his best to persuade the process for a good outcome, is
  - not responsible for a bad outcome
  - does not desire or even tacitly accept the bad outcome

# The Problem of Evil

Radically limit the omnipotence of God, as in  
Process Theology

Criticism: A God robbed of this much power  
would cease to be God.

# The Problem of Evil

A Theology of Silence:

The answer of some Jewish theologians to question of trying to justify God in face of suffering.

- “If I were to know him, I would be him”  
(old Jewish saying)
- Quote the scripture following the report of death of Aaron's two sons killed by divine fire: “And Aaron was silent.”  
(Leviticus 10:3)

# The Problem of Evil

Hans Küng: there is no satisfactory explanation to theodicy:

“... suffering, -- excessive, innocent, meaningless suffering, both individual and collective -- cannot be understood theoretically, but can only be lived through. For Christian and Jews there is only a practical answer to the problem of theodicy.”

# The Problem of Evil

Message from Job:

- In the last resort, God is incomprehensible to human beings
- Human beings are given the possibility of showing trust in this God
- God also respects human protest against suffering (“protest theodicy”)

# God as Creator

God as Creator a major theme of the Old Testament:

- opening 2 chapters of Genesis
- Job 38:1-- 42:6

Challenge of *Dualism* clarified the theology of God as Creator in the early church.

Gnosticism proposed two Gods:

- supreme God of the spiritual realm (redeemer God)
- lesser, inferior God (“the demiurge”) who created the imperfect and evil material world (the God of the Old Testament)

# God as Creator

Against *Dualism*, early Church affirmed doctrine that:

- God is creator of both spiritual world and material world (of “heaven and earth” in the Creed)
- God created everything out of nothing (*ex nihilo*). There was no “pre-existent material” that God fashioned as best God could into the material universe

# God as Creator

## *Implications:*

- Creation is not God. God chose to bring into being that which is not God, that which is wholly Other
- God has authority over Creation
  - Creation does not belong to human being; rather humans beings have been given *stewardship* over creation: implications for ecology
- Though “fallen” through sin, Creation remains God’s good creation and capable of redemption
- Creation has a meaning and purpose. Augustine: “You made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.”

# The Holy Spirit

Steps in the theological understanding of

God in the early church:

- recognition of the full divinity of Jesus
- recognition of the full divinity of the Holy Spirit
- development of the full doctrine of the Holy Trinity

# The Holy Spirit

Images of the Spirit (Hebrew *Ruach*) found in Scripture:

1. Spirit as wind.

- calls to mind surging energy of the “Lord of Hosts,” the dynamism of God
- God experienced not only as judge, but as one who refreshes the chosen people

# The Holy Spirit

Images of the Spirit (Hebrew *Ruach*) found in Scripture:

## 2. Spirit as breath

- God is the one who brings life. God brings Adam into life by breathing on him. The bones in the Valley of the Dry Bones (Ezekiel 37:1-14) come to life when breath enters into them

## 3. Spirit as charism

- “charism” = filling of an individual with the Spirit of God
- wisdom, leadership, prophecy endowments of the Spirit

# The Holy Spirit

St. Augustine's theology of the Holy Spirit as the **Bond of Love**

- suggested there are “triadic” traces of the Trinity in the human soul: For example:
  - *triad of self-knowledge* (memory, understanding, will)
  - *triad of self-love* (Lover, Beloved, Love)
- Taking “God is love” (1 John 4:8, 16) literally, proposed that:
  - *within the Trinity*: the Spirit is the Bond of Love between the Father and the Son
  - *within the church*: the Spirit is the Bond of Love between God and believer, and between believers

# Primary Reference

Chapter 9 “The Doctrine of God” in: **Christian Theology. An Introduction. Third Edition.**  
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Oxford, 2001