

COMPARATIVE STUDY OF
CHRISTIAN, JEWISH, AND ISLAMIC THEODICY

by

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B.S., Clemson University, 1982

A THESIS

Submitted to the faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
MASTERS OF ARTS IN RELIGION
at Reformed Theological Seminary

Charlotte, North Carolina
May 2011

Accepted:

ABSTRACT
Comparative Study of
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This paper will compare the theology of suffering/theodicy in Islam, Christianity and Judaism to determine if Christianity has a unique theology of suffering that responds more effectively to the human condition. The comparison of the three Abrahamic faiths is intentional as each one developed in interaction and contrast to the other two. Comparative studies of the three together should reveal interesting insights. The lack of a single shared sacred text lends itself to making comparisons using the positions of notable theologians rather than reference to the respective sacred texts. This also avoids dealing at length with the issue of how each of the religions views the sacred texts of the others. The comparison will focus first on the theodicy of three theologians from the similar time/context of the 12th and 13th centuries. These theologians include Thomas Aquinas, Moses Maimonides, and Al Ghazali. This will form our comparative view of classical theological positions. I will then compare three modern popular positions in the writings of Randy Alcorn, Benjamin Blech, and Mohammad Al-Sha'rawi. One final aspect of research will focus on comparing the classical and popular positions of the three faiths with the individual/personal expressions of those positions in the responses of Jews, Christians, and Muslims to the issue of suffering and evil in the world.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

To my wife Cindy who has supported me through all our years of marriage and ministry. She has proven over and over what Proverbs 18:22 says, “He who finds a wife finds a good thing and obtains favor from the LORD.”

CONTENTS

| | |
|--|------|
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENT | iv |
| TABLES | vii |
| ABBREVIATIONS | viii |
| Chapter | |
| 1. INTRODUCTION | 9 |
| 2. METHODOLOGY | 12 |
| 3. CLASSICAL/HISTORICAL CHRISTIAN THEODICY OF THOMAS AQUINAS | 32 |
| 4. CLASSICAL/HISTORICAL JEWISH THEODICY OF MAIMONIDES | 49 |
| 5. CLASSICAL/HISTORICAL ISLAMIC THEODICY OF AL-GHAZALI | 64 |
| 6. COMPARISON OF AQUINAS, MAIMONIDES, AND AL-GHAZALI..... | 80 |
| 7. MODERN/POPULAR THEODICIES OF RANDY ALCORN, BENJAMIN BLECH, AND MUHAMMAD AL-SHA'RAWI WITH COMPARISON TO THE RESPECTIVE CLASSICAL/HISTORICAL THEODICES..... | 103 |
| 8. COMPARISON OF MODERN CHRISTIAN, JEWISH, AND ISLAMIC THEODICIES | 136 |
| 9. INDIVIDUAL RESPONSES TO THEODICY | 147 |
| 10. CONCLUSION..... | 161 |

Appendix

| | |
|-------------------------------|-----|
| Original Questionnaire..... | 166 |
| Transcript of responses | 168 |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY..... | 192 |

TABLES

| Tables | Page |
|---|------|
| 1. Comparison of Theodicy in Aquinas, Maimonides ,and Al-Ghazali..... | 81 |
| 2. Comparison of Theodicy in Alcorn, Blech ,and Al-Sha'rawi | 137 |
| 3. Summary of Individual Responses | 149 |

ABBREVIATIONS

CG Summa Contra Gentiles

GP Guide for the Perplexed

ST Summa Theologica

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This paper will use multiple perspectives to compare theodicy in Islam, Christianity and Judaism. One key goal is to evaluate whether Christianity has a unique theology of suffering that responds more adequately to the human condition. I will also look at what processes occur moving through time from more classical/historical theological positions toward modern/popular and individual views of theodicy. Theodicy is an issue with which all religions wrestle. They do so typically by trying to reconcile the presence of evil and suffering with God's omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence. It is probably no accident that evil and suffering has been, and remains one of man's great questions. Genesis launches the history of mankind with God stipulating that only one thing was forbidden to man in the garden, "but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."¹

One of the greatest challenges the church faces is increasing contact with other religions through globalization. This is especially the case in connection with Islam where the church is largely unprepared to deal with the challenge because of a lack understanding of Islam. Muslims, however, are generally quite well prepared to give an apologetic rebuttal to the claims of Christianity. The west has focused more on honing its theological positions

¹ Genesis 2:17.

in mainly internecine discussions. Especially in reformed circles, there is a great need to develop systems for comparing religions that honor our reformed traditions, and at the same time fairly compare and contrast our positions with other religions. The church needs this as it comes into greater contact with Islam and other religions so that the church has an apologetic that can adequately defend and advance our faith without compromise.

The comparison of the three Abrahamic faiths is intentional because each one developed in interaction and contrast to the other two. Comparative studies of the three together should expose interesting insights by revealing the boundaries forming positive space and negative space between them. The lack of a single shared sacred text lends itself to making comparisons using the positions of notable theologians rather than reference to the respective sacred texts. This also avoids dealing at length with the issue of how each of the religions views the sacred texts of the others.

The comparison will focus first on three theologians from the similar time/context of the 12th and 13th centuries and their reflections on theodicy coming out of a synthesis of a number of earlier sources. These theologians include Thomas Aquinas, Moses Maimonides, and Al Ghazali. I will use several primary texts from each.² This will form our comparative

² For Aquinas we will primarily use his largest work, *Summa Theologiae*. As the title indicates, the Summa was to be a "summing up" of all Christian theology. We also use his smaller theological work *Summa Contra Gentiles*. We will also refer to *De rationibus fidei contra Saracenos, Graecos et Armenos ad Cantorem*. This is a more personal communication written to the a churchman in Antioch during the fall of the Crusader rule in the Middle East. For Al-Ghazali we will refer mostly to *Deliverance from Error*, his autobiography that also spells out a great deal of his final matured theology. We will also use a *Letter to a Disciple*. This is a personal communication where Al-Ghazali is explaining

view of classical/historical positions among the three Abrahamic faiths. I will then compare three modern/popular positions in the writings of Randy Alcorn, Benjamin Blech, and Mohammad Al-Sha'rawi.

In any religion, there are the espoused formal or normative positions on various topics and there are the fuzzy boundaries of belief and practice held by groups and individuals within the overall tradition. One final aspect of research will focus on comparing the classical and popular positions of the three faiths with the individual/personal expressions of those positions in the responses of Jews, Christians, and Muslims to the issue of suffering and evil in the world.

his overall theology and Sufi way. For Maimonides we will use *Guide for the Perplexed*. The guide for the perplexed is his seminal work expounding how the Law and philosophy connect and was written to one of his students to remind him of Maimonides' overall teaching. We will also refer to the *Letter to Yemen*. This was written to a Jewish community in Yemen undergoing considerable stress from outside pressure to convert to Islam and from internal issues raised by a false messianic claimant.

CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY

There are several methods for developing comparative studies of religions. These have developed mostly in liberal circles. A basic definition for all of them is “the examination, in a unified work, of sources from at least two distinct religious traditions addressing an aspect of religion common to the comparands.”³

Freidenreich categorized comparative methods into four broad types “comparative focus on similarity’, ‘comparative focus on difference’, ‘comparative focus on genus-species relationship’, and ‘the use of comparison to refocus’.”⁴ I will take some time to outline and critique the various methods before explaining the methodology that I have decided to use.

Comparative studies focusing on similarities can take the form of merely listing similarities between religions or they can go on further to assert some connection of identity, or historical, or conceptual development. These sorts of comparisons often downplay the nuanced differences in similar aspects of different religions. It is also hard to demonstrate that there are conceptual or historical connections between similarities and comparisons tend to rely on simply stating the possibility of such connections using the similarities themselves

³ M. David Freidenreich, “Comparisons Compared: A Methodological Survey of Comparisons of Religion from 'A Magic Dwells' to a Magic Still Dwells,” *Journal of the North American Association for the Study of Religion* 16 (November 1, 2004) : 81.

⁴ Ibid.

as demonstration that there are connections. It is true that religions develop in relation to one another but finding the exact connection between them is often a matter of conjecture.

Comparative studies that focus on differences can also take the form of presentations of differences without comment or analysis. This form is often used in efforts to promote interfaith dialogue where the goal is, “recognizing that ‘bridges of mutual understanding’ must be built over a chasm of mutual unintelligibility.”⁵ Any comparison of this type without some sort of analysis does little to advance understanding. Analysis of differences can also be done against the background of some third element that is similar across religions. Karen Armstrong in “The Battle for God” follows this form. She uses the concept of fundamentalism as a background for comparison of a variety of religions, including Islam and Christianity. Historical context or root conceptual connections can also serve as a background element. Again, as with comparisons of similarity, it is hard to demonstrate the connections between the differences observed in relation to background elements and a great deal of conjecture comes into play.

Some comparative works explore the relationship of general aspects of religion with similar yet distinct manifestations. This type of comparison is analogous to scientific taxonomy where individual species are placed in larger units such as genus, family, and class. The examination of the individual species is intended to “shed light on an entire class of phenomena, including species that are not examined in these works.”⁶ These studies

⁵ Ibid., 85.

⁶ Ibid., 89.

typically take a bottom up approach and lump all religions together into a single genus where there are corresponding similarities. Some typical genus divisions are “orthopractical/ethnic religions . . . along with the, ‘orthodox and missionary religions’.”⁷ One problem is that there tends to be artificiality in grouping of species under a certain genus or family simply because of outward similarities. This sort of connection has often proven false in the biological realm as deeper analysis of the grouping of species often reveals surprising connections that outward characteristics belie. This comparative method also relies on a good deal of conjecture about connections and groupings.

There is a fourth methodology, comparison to refocus, which seems better structured to deal with some of the general criticisms of other methods of comparative religion. This method takes “another approach to the comparison of religion, one in which the scholarly ‘action’ takes place outside of the inter-religious space of comparison and is embedded firmly in one religious tradition or another.”⁸ The comparative study acts as a lens to examine the observer’s own tradition. The comparison provides “a new perspective on the tradition being examined, to raise new questions or offer new possible ways of understanding the target tradition.”⁹ As a result scholars can enter into what is termed as an imaginative process — specifically looking at their own religion using the lens of comparison with other religions. This “enables the scholar to comprehend what would otherwise be

⁷ Ibid., 90.

⁸ Ibid., 92.

⁹ Ibid., 91.

incomprehensible”¹⁰ As in the other methods there can be a degree of conjecture that takes place in the analysis but because the analysis focuses within one tradition the emphasis is weighted toward developing self-reflective questions and is subsequently less prone to conjecture about possible connections.

The assumption underlying most of the methods is that the researcher will set aside his own biases, step out of his own context, and examine the religions in question from a neutral or tolerant perspective. This perspective is described as the space between the religions. Using this neutrality, the researcher is supposed to discover what is good in other religions and what is common between different religions. This idea of objectively examining something as deeply rooted as religion does not seem realistically achievable. Adopting even the required neutral stance would skew the perspective of the observer when encountering the intolerant and non-neutral aspects of religions.

Comparative religious studies have also “drawn sharp criticism from postmodernist circles for its association with the colonial enterprises of Western scholarship.”¹¹ Postmodern critics have “asserted that the comparison of religion is inherently flawed because of its emphasis on similarity and minimization of differences between religious traditions, as well as its failure to consider religious phenomena in their original contexts.”¹²

¹⁰ Ibid., 94.

¹¹ Ibid., 80.

¹² Ibid.

Another issue that one must deal with in all forms of comparison is how much context to take into account. In general, “the more context one considers the less similar the comparands become.”¹³ The history and interactions both within and between religious communities plays a critical role in the actual meaning given to what might appear from a distance as a common religious component. Many elements of context impinge on these common components and often result in very different interpretations across religions. For instance, in the context of the Islamic community there is a principle of abrogation or *naskh* that has become an established part of their hermeneutics. *Naskh* is “the principle by which certain [later] verses of the Koran abrogate (or modify) others [earlier], which are then called *mansūkh* (‘revoked’).”¹⁴ A comparison between Islam and another religion using verses supporting the comparison only in earlier portions of the Koran, without presenting them in the light of later verses that modify their meaning, would ignore an important aspect of context and lead to erroneous comparisons.

An additional issue in comparative religion analysis from the standpoint of broader academic circles, is that protestant/evangelical comparisons have a tendency to focus on differences with a goal to prove the superiority of the protestant/evangelical position. As evangelicals, we do believe our truth to be divine in origin; however, there can be a great difference in the tone and approach of comparison depending on whether one take his stance as theological positivists or theological realists. The theological realist believes he holds

¹³ Ibid., 94.

¹⁴ *The Concise Encyclopedia of Islam* (1991), s.v. "Naskh." by Cyril Glasse.

absolute truth but not that he has mastered it. There is an inherent humility in his approach. The theological positivist feels he holds and has mastered truth and so he can sit in judgment of others. The realist sees himself and his religious community as moving forward in a dynamic hermeneutical spiral with growth in both his understanding and his application of the absolute truth of God's unchanging divine revelation. The positivist sees his position as more static and linear.

Regardless of the limitations and which method one decides to use as the overall template for a comparative study one could at least agree with Freidenreich that, "the comparison of religion—whether focused on similarity, difference, or both—produces data of interest to the scholar."¹⁵

My research design will combine aspects of the comparison to refocus method, symphonic theology, and contextual research. "The choice of a method embodies a variety of assumptions regarding the nature of knowledge and the methods through which that knowledge can be obtained, as well as a set of root assumptions about the nature of the phenomena to be investigated."¹⁶ I have chosen this combination as those best representing my own assumptions about the nature of religions and truth as well as serving the goals I have for this study.

¹⁵ Ibid., 91.

¹⁶ Thomas G. Cummings, *Doing Research That Is Useful for Theory and Practice*, The New Lexington Press Management and Organization Sciences Series, (Lanham, MD.: Lexington Books, 1999), 233.

The comparison to refocus method will provide direction for my study. I will look at things from the Christian perspective, seeking a better understanding of Christianity's teachings on the subject of theodicy, and suffering. My goal will be to compare Christianity itself with Islam and Judaism but the focus of my study is actually Christianity with the comparisons to Islam and Judaism serving as the lens to provide different perspectives. This fits well with a presuppositional position. It does not require some sort of contrived impartiality but allows one to operate from the "belief over which no other takes precedence... our belief in Him and His Word."¹⁷ Another advantage is that my approach moves away from using conjecture to establish connections or to classify religious phenomena. This method also offers more promise in terms of advances in understanding along the lines of the paradigm shift model of Thomas Kuhn. This type of study would also provide a significant motivation to engage others in honest dialogue between differing religions. Each participant would enter into the dialogue to gain a better understanding of their own religious position rather than simply seeking similarities and common ground compromise positions. My research design, while cognizant of a number of methods of comparative religion and issues with these methods, rejects the relativistic stance normally taken in the methods. I would also reject the postmodern denial of absolute truth and reliance on a tolerance that embraces all religions because they "are merely cultural

¹⁷ John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P & R Publishing, 1987), 125.

preferences, since no one can know religious truth.”¹⁸ I assume that “God's instruction in the Bible, combined with His work to transform us, can be the foundation for a biblically-based ‘critical’ approach to society.”¹⁹ The ultimate focus of my study then is not the space between Christianity and Islam or Judaism, but Christianity itself.

I will use the four point structure outlined by Poythress in his work on “Symphonic Theology,”

1. Use of a variety of perspectives to examine a topic or a doctrine.
2. Preemption method of argument (using the other person's strong point).
3. Dissolution of poorly posed questions and debates that are based ultimately on semantic questions.
4. Enrichment by reconciliation of opposite emphases.²⁰

Two types of comparisons will provide the variety of perspectives from which I will examine theodicy and suffering. Within each religion, I will also be making comparisons between a classical/historical theological position, a modern popular one, and individual positions. Between the religions, I will compare each of the classical/historical positions of three well-known theologians from the 12th and 13th centuries. I will then compare three modern popular authors, one from each religion. I will also compare the individual responses

¹⁸Ibid., 155.

¹⁹Vern Sheridan Poythress, *Redeeming Sociology: a God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2011), 248.

²⁰ Vern S. Poythress, *Symphonic Theology: The Validity of Multiple Perspectives in Theology*, (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P & R Publishing, 2001), 78.

of Jews, Christians from a Jewish-background, Christians, Muslims, and Christians from a Muslim-background through individual interviews.

I will use Poythress' preemptive method of argument by highlighting and using for inter-religious comparison, each religion's strongest positions. In terms of dissolution, I will set aside those positions for inter-religious comparison that are similar but simply reworded versions of the same position. For instance, Aquinas, al-Ghazali, and Maimonides were each interacting with and attempting some level of integration with Aristotelian philosophy. In this respect, I expect to find a number of similar positions taken as each one attempt this in reference to the same Greek philosophy.

I will seek to find enrichment of our own Christian perspective by reconciling opposites found especially vertically between the layers of the study within Christianity because:

when multiple perspectives are legitimate, they are intrinsically harmonizable, because there is only one God, and one world that God has made. The diversity of languages and diversity of cultures are like perspectives through which people understand God and the world. The differences in language and culture are not merely to be homogenized, as if they were trivial. But neither are they in tension, at least if all the people involved are in contact with the truth. This kind of diversity enriches the body of Christ. What kind of diversity are we talking about? In the body of Christ diversity does not mean a shallow 'tolerance' of all kinds of differences. That is, we do not follow those postmodernists who have given up because they think that no one can know the truth. Rather, because God has blessed us through Christ, and has given us his word and his Spirit, we do know truth, including truth about God and about his moral standards. At the same time, we can grow by adding more truths to what we

know and by knowing truth more deeply. We grow partly through learning from others, as is described in Ephesians 4:11—16:²¹

I also expect to be able to find some level of reconciliation of opposites not only in the comparisons within Christianity but also in the comparisons of Christianity to Judaism and Islam because of an underlying unity that flows from common grace. As Poythress describes it,

We are to strive through the gospel to bring genuine reconciliation to people groups through cultural unity in diversity and diversity in unity. We replicate in human beings the glory of the unity and diversity in the Godhead. This unity in diversity offers an answer that differs from other common answers abroad today. Our answer differs from forced uniformity, which some people think they can attain through autonomous reason. That hope for uniformity is the answer associated with what has been called “modernism.” Our answer also differs from the popular recipe of tolerance, which celebrates diversity but gives up on universal truth.²²

The tone of the comparison will also follow the balance described in Poythress’ symphonic theology. “Love is one of the bonds that creates enjoyment of diversity and unifies us in the midst of diversity. If we love, we exercise patience in listening to others and trying to understand them, and then we learn more of the truth that they have grasped. On the other hand, genuine love also implies being willing to protect others from false teaching, which corrupts people’s minds and lives. In this process the Bible guides us, just as Paul gave

²¹ Vern S. Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language —A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2009), 149.

²² Poythress, *Redeeming Sociology*, 107.

inspired guidance to Timothy and expected that he would be able to tell the difference between true and false teaching.”²³

I am also mindful that as a Westerner, I have had to wrestle very little with the issues of suffering and evil compared to many of my brothers and sisters in the majority world. I have a very limited personal perspective on the topic of suffering. Like most Westerners, I have lived a life of safety, comfort, and relative ease that even the wealthiest of Christians in the 12th and 13th centuries could not have imagined. Bringing that perspective into comparison with followers of Christ and fellow human beings across the boundaries of time and culture will help open new perspectives on this topic. Seeing suffering through the eyes of a 12th Century Jewish scholar or a modern Muslim Egyptian scholar or an African Christian pastor will help to begin to see questions on suffering probably not yet acknowledged. In this respect the comparison, both vertical and horizontal, will allow me to start to see things through another pair of eyes and function “as a scholarly lens, not an end unto itself.”²⁴ The variety of perspectives, both the historical and the individual interviews, will provide a more global perspective to counter the criticism of excessive association with Western scholarship. It also takes seriously the idea that “The unity in the body of Christ implies not isolation of various indigenous theologies but cross-cultural appropriation,

²³ Poythress, *In the Beginning*, 149.

²⁴ Freidenreich, *Comparisons Compared*, 94.

Europe to Africa, Africa to Asia, Asia to Europe, and so on. Otherwise, we are denying the unity of the one faith (Eph. 4:5).”²⁵

There are a number of reasons I am making the comparison between Christianity and both Judaism and Islam. One of the reasons is that all three religions come out of a common root in a near Middle Eastern context in that all trace their origins back to Abraham. They all developed historically in interaction, reaction, and in conflict with each other. This interaction, reaction, and conflict is part of the historical context important in the development of all three and in many ways, that interaction, reaction and conflict continues through to our present day. In addition, scholarly circles recognize that the three “form a unique arena for comparative study.”²⁶ In the area of comparisons, Islam and Judaism together share more similarities than Christianity. They “stand closer together than either does to ...Christianity... in their conviction that law embodying public policy as much as theology sets forth religious truth.”²⁷ Comparing Christianity to both Judaism and Islam should then put Christianity in more stark contrast and provide a richer field of comparison for a study than comparing only Christianity with one other religion.

The structure of the data collection for my research will use elements from contextual research including: “A set of levels of analysis . . . a clear description of the process or

²⁵ Poythress, *Redeeming Sociology*, 105.

²⁶ Jacob Neusner and Tamara Sonn, *Comparing Religions Through Law: Judaism and Islam* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1999), 23.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 24.

processes under examination . . . a motor, or theory, or theories to drive process . . . vertical analysis linked to . . . horizontal analysis”²⁸ I have identified three levels of analysis. The first is the examination of classical/historical theological positions on theodicy/suffering in the writings of Thomas Aquinas, Moses Maimonides, and al-Ghazali. The second is the examination of three modern popular works including Randy Alcorn’s “If God Is Good: Faith in the Midst of Suffering and Evil.”, Benjamin Blech’s “If God Is Good, Why Is the World so Bad?” and, Mohammad Al-Sha'rawi’s “Good and Evil.” The third level will be qualitative responses concerning the issues of theodicy/suffering from Christians, Jews, and Muslims as well as Jewish and Muslim-background believers.

My analysis will include both horizontal as well as vertical analyses. I will analyze horizontally by making inter-religious comparisons of the Christian, Jewish, and Islamic positions in each level including the classical/historical, the modern/popular, and the individual positions. These horizontal comparisons between the religions are not a dialogue seeking for common ground. In comparing Christianity and Islam for instance, I am not seeking “a patchwork of partial *Qur’anic* and Biblical references designed to give an *illusion* of commonality”²⁹ My point of reference will not be the space between the three religions. My point of reference and the focus of my comparative analysis will be Christianity, so that I am instead, seeking a dialogue with Islam and Judaism that does not

²⁸ Cummings, *Doing Research*, 238.

²⁹ Sam Solomon and E Al Maqdisi, *A Common Word: The Undermining of the Church* (Charlottesville, Va.: Advancing Native Missions, 2009), xiii.

give in to “*public quiescence*”³⁰ but still holds to the “*recognition of the ‘sacred’ within different*”³¹ religious communities. I will also analyze each religion vertically comparing their own classical/historical theology with their own modern popular theology and their own individual responses. I will also discuss how these vertical comparisons within each religion compare/connect between the three religions, a sort of horizontal comparison of the vertical comparisons.

There will be “two processes under examination.”³² The first is the development of the classical orthodox theological positions of the three religions and the use of these positions in modern popular works. I will describe the combinations of these as the espoused theological position of each religion. The second process examined is the theology in practice as revealed in the interviews with individuals. In their responses, I will be looking for four things: correspondence to the espoused theological positions of their own religion, correspondence to the espoused theological position of another religion, a mixed response combining positions of more than one religion, or an innovative response. In the interview process, I will also expose members of each religious community to the strongest positions of

³⁰ James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York, N.Y.: Basic Books, 1991), 321.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 322.

³² *Ibid.*

the other religions (without identifying them as such) and see which if any of the positions resonates more with the individuals perceived needs.

One of the purposes of my conclusion will be to delineate a theory of what drives the processes as found through the comparative study. My theory is that all the religions will present some common positions on the topic of theodicy/suffering. I also assume that there will be some unique positions that find no corresponding similar position between the religions. I believe that there will be gaps between the different levels in each religion, especially between the individual responses and the classical/modern theological positions. I assume that individuals will chose positions not necessarily based on their own religious community traditions but rather positions correspond to some deeper more universal element in the individual. In other words, I will seek to verify my theory that positions on suffering correspond to some deeper universal element in the individual, rather than just the traditional positions held by their religious communities, using the data from my study.

I recognize that I must necessarily limit the scope of my research to only one central theological tradition in each religion. Each religion has a wide diversity of theological positions varying from those that I will consider. For instance, my focus will be on traditional Sunni theology since it represents “the largest group of Muslims . . . often known as ‘the orthodox’”.³³ The Shiite branch of Islam would be an interesting addition to the study because it takes a redemptive interpretation of the death of *Husayn*, in contrast to the Sunni.

³³ Glasse, *The Concise Encyclopedia of Islam*.

Shiite “tradition takes the paradigm of the Abrahamic sacrifice, applies it to the foundational narrative of Shiite Islam [the death of *Husayn*], and through a unique innovation equates the martyrdom of *Husayn* with the sacrifice of the redemptive offering in place of Abraham's son.”³⁴ This particular aspect has the potential to reveal some interesting interconnections of Islam and Christianity in that it “may have also served as a [Muslim] response to the Christian understanding of the crucifixion as the perfected Abrahamic sacrifice.”³⁵ However, in order to maintain a moderate length paper I will limit my study to the central points of theology of Sunni Islam, Orthodox Rabbinic Judaism, and Orthodox and Conservative Evangelical Christianity. As a further limit, I assume that each particular author/theologian that I study are representative, not of every position in their respective tradition, but of a significant portion of that religious tradition. In my discussions therefore, when I speak of the position of a particular religion, I am actually referring solely to the position of the theologians representing those religions in this study.

In the interview process, I am making several assumptions. Those that I interview will answer honestly and validly, and what they tell me is what they intend for me to understand. I limit my direct interviews to those individuals that I can interview in either English or French, both languages that I can use without a translator serving as an intermediary. I will have several colleagues also interview individuals in other languages and provide their

³⁴ Reuven Firestone, “Merit, Mimesis, and Martyrdom: Aspects of Shi’ite Meta-Historical Exegesis on Abraham's Sacrifice in Light of Jewish, Christian, and Sunni Muslim Tradition,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, (1998) : 110.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 111.

responses in English. I include in my interviews at least two individuals in each of the following categories: western Christian, non-western Christian, Christian from a Muslim background, Christian from a Jewish background, Jewish, and Muslim. I record responses in writing with the responses included in the appendix. I followed the Reformed Theological Seminary *Protocol for the Protection of Human Rights in Research* in the presentation of the individual responses. I identify each individual as to their religion and general location but do not identify them by name or exact location. An example would be, person 1 is a Muslim man from the Middle East. My sampling is not intended to be a statistical random sample. It is a purposeful sampling to provide a spectrum of responses, though not all responses. It is not intended to cover every category of persons in each religious group. For instance, I am not intending to include an equal number of male and female respondents. The responses of the individuals only represent their own personal understanding of their religion's positions and their personal reaction to the issue of theodicy/suffering. My questionnaire will be prepared after I complete the review of the classical and modern layers of my study. I will present a short narrative describing a situation of significant suffering. I will ask the respondents open-ended questions such as, "What is happening in this story?" Based on that response, I will ask further open-ended questions to help the respondent express their understanding of God's involvement in the situation and how the respondent would expect a person to respond. After that I will give each respondent a list of positions from all three religions without identifying the source and ask them to interact with those positions.

In terms of language, my assumption is that “language is not a permanent barrier, blocking access to truth and to reality, but rather is a means that provides such access.”³⁶ All peoples and cultures have both good aspects reflective of our creation in the image of God as well as sinful aspects reflective of the fall and corruption. The measure is the Word of God. I “recognize that language as a vehicle for communications has become corrupted to a degree . . . [and] that false religion, in particular, corrupts both culture and language.”³⁷ As such, I reject the modern western philosophical reliance on “the analysis of natural language to arrive at universal truths.”³⁸ My “optimism is in the power of the gospel and the fact that through the power of the gospel both culture and language are capable of redemptive transformation.”³⁹ There is a reality behind all cultures and their religions. They are not merely manifestations of evolutionary adaption of humans to their environment. I do not hold to an instrumentalist’s view of non-commensurability that cultures are self-contained and are not judged by others, nor can they judge others. I hold that all cultures stand under the judgment of God.

The reason I am focusing on the topic of theodicy and suffering is that it is a central issue in the area where I minister, in the context of Muslims and Jews. All those coming to Christ in these contexts experience some level of suffering and persecution for their religious

³⁶ Ibid., 152.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., 152.

faith, in addition to the “normal” suffering that man experiences simply because we live in a fallen world. There is also an inherent level of suffering in any missionary endeavor and “a price has to be paid ‘because of the magnitude of differences in culture and in language, achieving peace between different people groups is not easy. Peace can come through the power of Christ and His gospel. But it comes at a price. The price is the shedding of ‘the precious blood of Christ’ (1 Pet. 1:19). Followers of Christ also pay a price in their own way, because each one must give up his pride.”⁴⁰ Even outside the missionary context one could say that the “Bible’s answer centers on Christ and on his suffering. And Christians must suffer in serving him.”⁴¹ It is my assumption that since God used suffering so centrally in redemptive history, that our reaction to suffering is rooted deeply in our creation and transcends cultural and religious boundaries. For this reason, suffering has served throughout history as a primary reference point for all religions in terms of an apologetic for the defense of their respective beliefs. Typically, this reference point is the ultimate demonstration of suffering in the martyrdom of individuals for their respective faiths.

My goal in this comparative study then is not to simply list, categorize, or even analyze connections and associations of different aspects of each religion’s positions in an unbiased fashion. I am an evangelical believer who holds to the inerrancy and infallibility of the Bible. I believe that the Bible is the Word of God and as such must inform our evaluation and analysis of all aspects of life. My hermeneutical principle is that of a theistic critical

⁴⁰ Ibid., 154.

⁴¹ Poythress, *Redeeming Sociology*, 106.

realist in that I believe we grow in our understanding and knowledge of the truth of God through a growing understanding of its application to all of life in a progressive process that includes interaction with the Word, our culture, our individual personality, and our community. I believe that our understanding is enriched by our contact with multiple perspectives of those outside our own immediate context. That interaction, even when it is with error and heresy, provides a platform for our better understanding the truth. In this sense, the whole of God's creation can be seen as a lens through which we are brought into reflection on the Word of God and the lens through which the Word of God is focused on creation. In this respect, dialogue with others outside our context helps us better understand God's Word. This better understanding of God's Word is the ultimate goal of my study.

CHAPTER 3

CLASSICAL/HISTORICAL CHRISTIAN THEODICY OF THOMAS AQUINAS

Thomas Aquinas was the “greatest scholastic theologian.”¹ He wrote extensively in his attempt to integrate Christian theology with “Aristotelian thought that came to Western Europe through Muslims in Spain.”² Aquinas sought to bring about a thorough integration of Christian theology and philosophy and “show how *theologia* could be a *scientia*”³ He was not, however, merging Christian theology with Greek philosophy, but was using “philosophical inquiry to articulate one’s received faith, and in the process extending the horizons of that inquiry to include topics unsuspected by those bereft of divine revelation.”⁴

Aquinas had numerous interactions with the work of Jewish and Muslim theologians. He paid close “attention to the writings of Moses Maimonides (1135-1204), a Jew, and Ibn Sina [Avicenna] (980-1037), a Muslim.”⁵ Aquinas had a less direct interaction with al-Ghazali’s work. Historians identify Al-Ghazali’s “influence upon St. Thomas through his

¹ J. H. Y. Briggs, *Introduction to the History of Christianity: First Century to the Present Day* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 292.

² Ibid.

³ David Burrell, “Thomas Aquinas and Islam,” *Modern Theology* 20, (2004) : 72.

⁴ Ibid., 71.

⁵ Ibid., 71.

teacher , Albertus Magnus(1201–1280), and his contemporary, Raymond Martin (d. 1285).”⁶ Martin spoke Arabic and had thoroughly studied al-Ghazali and was “a link between Christian Europe and Al-Ghazali”⁷ Aquinas’ attitude could be described as follows:

Aquinas respected “Rabbi Moses” and Avicenna as fellow travelers in an arduous intellectual attempt to reconcile the horizons of philosophers of ancient Greece, notably Aristotle, with those reflecting a revelation originating in ancient Israel, articulated initially in the divinely inspired writings of Moses. With Maimonides and Avicenna his relationship was more akin to that among interlocutors, and especially so with “Rabbi Moses”, whose extended dialectical conversations with his student Joseph in his *Guide of the Perplexed* closely matched Aquinas’ own project.⁸

In Aquinas’ effort to integrate Christianity and philosophy, he “received help from thinkers in the Jewish and Muslim traditions: from Maimonides, the very strategy itself; and from the *Liber de causis*, [an Islamic transformation of Proclus, translated to Latin from Arabic] a philosophical focus on faith in divine unity [*tawhîd*].”⁹ While he respected his Jewish and Muslim counterparts, his interaction with Jews and Muslims was not a dialogue to seek common ground. He pursued interaction without seeking compromise in his own theology, for example, he adapted the position on creation that Avicenna developed, based on *Liber de causis*, by “assimilating creation to processions within a triune God.”¹⁰

⁶ S.M. Ghazanfar, “The Economic Thought of Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali and St. Thomas Aquinas: Some Comparative Parallels and Links,” *History of Political Economy* 32 (2000) : 863.

⁷ M. Saeed Sheikh, *Islamic Philosophy* (London: Octagon Press, 1982), 109.

⁸ Burrell, Thomas Aquinas, 71.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 82.

¹⁰ Ghazanfar, *History of Political Economy*, 82.

Aquinas develops much of his theodicy in terms of the philosophical arguments of natural theology. Elements run throughout a number of the sections of his major works. His thought processes are rigorous and he lays out an incredible amount of detail in a systematic way while keeping consistency within major themes. Some major themes in Aquinas are that God exists, that He and all He has created is good, and that He governs all things toward an ultimate end that is also good.

Concerning the nature of evil, Aquinas held that all things were good and that evil was only the privation of good. This is a core Christian concept also seen in Augustine. Evil is not a positive entity and it “cannot signify a certain existing being, or a real shaping or positive kind of thing . . . it signifies a certain absence of a good.”¹¹ Aquinas differentiates moral and natural evil and explains how they are both present in what is essentially good by nature of its creation. Moral evil “is present in a natural good . . . in the sense of a being in potency.”¹² Therefore, there is potential for evil but it always is a potential that exists in something that is good by nature of its creation. A natural evil is the “privation of form . . . present in matter which is good”¹³ Aquinas states that things are either corruptible or incorruptible and the “perfection of the universe requires them both: likewise some that can cease to be good, and in consequence on occasion do. Such a defection from good is

¹¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*. I, 48, 1, *ad.* (work will hereon be cited as *S.T.*)

¹² Thomas Aquinas, *Contra Gentiles*. III, 11, 7. (work will hereon be cited as *C.G.*)

¹³ *Ibid.*

precisely what evil is.”¹⁴ He also states that good always continues in any being as “Evil cannot destroy good altogether.”¹⁵

The operation/cause of evil is likewise always based in a good. According to Aquinas, all things seek after a good natural desire, direction, or appetite. Natural things, without will, “never fail to follow the order to the end which is prearranged for them.”¹⁶ An example is a stone that falls when not supported. The stone is following its own natural direction. That falling is natural and good. All things that have a will, always also seek after some good according to their desires. He explains how desires can at times drive voluntary beings toward evil. “No one would desire evil, not even indirectly, unless the concomitant good were more desired than the good of which the evil is the deprivation.”¹⁷ In other words, even when men perpetrate evil on others they are seeking something good for themselves. With these concepts in mind Aquinas says, “evil is caused only by the good”¹⁸ because “every cause is either matter, or form, or agent, or end”¹⁹ and all these are in and of themselves good. “So evil cannot be the cause of anything. Therefore, if anything is the cause of evil, it

¹⁴ *S.T.*, I, 48, 2, *ad.*

¹⁵ *S.T.*, I, 48, 4, *ad.*

¹⁶ *C.G.*, III,1, 5.

¹⁷ *S.T.*, I, 19, 9, *ad.*

¹⁸ *C.G.*, III,10, 1.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

must be caused by the good.”²⁰ Aquinas speaks even of demons in this fashion saying that they “cannot be naturally evil”²¹ in respect to their creation. They, like fallen men, may choose an evil deprivation of something good and pursue it. They do so like men out of free choice because they seek something, “not as evil [directly], but accidentally, as connected with some good.”²² So man and demons are sources of evil by their choices within their own domains. This, however, is not through some essential aspect of their created nature. It is also not through a direct desire for evil, but through a distorted desire for something that falls short of a good that is desired. This concept seems a bit counter intuitive but is very much in keeping with the biblical narrative of the fall. Man was deceived and began to desire the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil was created by God and was good. The serpent used a subtle twisting of the truth to deceive man. Man ate from it because he believed it was good. In this respect the man, the tree, and even the direction of the desire were all good. In spite of these all being good, man’s choice fell short of the good that God had intended for man in prohibiting him from eating from the fruit of the tree, and produced evil. This illustrates that evil is a much more pernicious thing than we typically envision. It also explains the capacity for man as the source of increasingly greater evils.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ *S.T.*, I, 63, 3, *ad.*

²² Ibid.

Aquinas states that God knows all things both good and evil. “Therefore, since the nature of evil is the privation of good, God through the very fact of knowing good, also knows evils; just as darkness is known through knowing light.”²³ God not only knows all things, but He alone governs all things. Aquinas argues very strongly against any idea that there are elements that God does not govern. “Foolish therefore was the opinion of those who said that the corruptible lower world, or individual things, or that even human affairs, were not subject to the Divine government.”²⁴ Aquinas clearly posits God as governing all things, but he divides that governance into two elements, the design of government, and the execution of the design. “As to the first [design], God governs all things immediately: as to the second [execution], he governs some things through the mediation of others.”²⁵ Aquinas uses this dividing line to explain that God is not the author of evil but also to make it clear that nothing, even the things executed through the mediation of others, is outside the governance of God. “There is nothing that either desires or is able to oppose this supreme good. There is, then, a supreme good that rules all things mightily and disposes them sweetly, as is written of divine wisdom.”²⁶ The direction of God’s governance flows from His nature, which is good. God’s wisdom, goodness and sovereignty superintend even evil such that “all

²³ *S.T.*, I, 14, 10, *ad.*

²⁴ *S.T.*, I, 103, 5, *ad.*

²⁵ *S.T.*, I, 103, 6, *ad.*

²⁶ *S.T.*, I, 103, 8, 3.

things work together for good.”²⁷ Because of this, God’s government is the “best kind of government.”²⁸ God’s means of governance is that He “disposes them sweetly.” By this, Aquinas insists that God’s rule of all things does not negate freewill:

It is erroneous to say that God's fore-knowledge and ordination imposes necessity on human acts; otherwise free will would be removed, as well as the value of taking counsel, the usefulness of laws, the care to do what is right and the justice of rewards and punishments... For he orders things the way he acts on things; his ordination does not violate but brings to effect by his power what he planned in his Wisdom.²⁹

Aquinas also explains that God’s rule is carried out in volitional beings in three ways. Some beings in reflection of the image of God are “rulers of themselves... they submit to God’s divine rule in their own ruling...to the achievement of their ultimate end...”³⁰ Other beings that are devoid of understanding “do not direct themselves to their end, but are directed by others.”³¹ Other beings are corrupted and suffer some defect in themselves but even here that defect works some other good, and “these corruptible bodies are perfectly subject to His power”³²

²⁷ Romans 8:28.

²⁸ *S. T.*, 1, 103, 4, *ad.*

²⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *De Rationibus Fidei Contra Saracenos, Graecos Et Armenos Ad Cantorem Antiochenum [REASONS FOR THE FAITH AGAINST MUSLIM OBJECTIONS (and one objection of the Greeks and Armenians) to the Cantor of Antioch]*, trans. Joseph Kenny (Washington, D.C.: Dominican House of Studies, *n.d.*), 10.

³⁰ *C.G.*, III, 1,4.

³¹ *Ibid*, III.1.5.

³² *Ibid*, III. 1.6.

On the issue of fate, Aquinas explains how the Christian view of providence is not the same as men's belief in fate. He says some refer to fate as the control of things by celestial bodies, and some use fate to describe divine providence. He explains how some use the word fate to describe events that have already happened and appear to be part of some divine plan, and says that we cannot abandon the concept that things happen under the rule of some order, as that would cause us to abandon the idea of providence itself. However, "since we should not even have names in common with unbelievers, lest occasion for error could be taken from the association of names, the name fate is not to be used by the faithful lest we appear to agree with those who have held a wrong opinion about fate."³³

Aquinas saw a "special problem in the suffering of innocent or just people." He discusses this in his commentary on Job with a special focus on the issue in chapter 10. Aquinas feels that to deal with this special problem, one must maintain reason. Aquinas states Job's presupposition that men are either innocent or unjust, and that God is the author of their punishment. He then says that, "Man must know the cause of his punishment, either to correct himself or to endure the trials with more patience."³⁴ Aquinas explains that Job's suffering is not the result of some evil entity that has reign over the earth. He also says that Job is not suffering unjustly "by God persecuting him on a false charge, nor by God looking

³³ Ibid, III, 93.6.

³⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *The Literal Exposition on Job: A Scriptural Commentary Concerning Providence*, trans. Anthony Damico (Atlanta, Ga: Scholars Press, 1989), 10.1.

for a fault, nor by God punishing sins, nor by God enjoying the punishments.”³⁵ Aquinas concludes that the cause of Job’s suffering still remains in doubt and the ultimate solution is that there has to be another life where the just are ultimately rewarded and the wicked ultimately punished. “If this position is not posited no cause can be given for the suffering of the just who certainly sometimes are troubled in this world.”³⁶

The concept of a punitive judgment and reward in a life to come develops in all three monotheistic religions. Both Old and New Testament scriptures support this concept. “Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt.”³⁷ Outside the Abrahamic religions, there is no presupposition of one life and then judgment.

Aquinas presents most of his discussion in terms of philosophical reason interwoven with theology to give man a way to understand evil and suffering. For instance, in his commentary on Job, the “whole intention of this book is directed to this: to show that human affairs are ruled by divine providence using probable arguments.” Maintaining reasoned perspective is imperative in the face of suffering. “But when reason remains rightly ordered amid tribulations, one submits himself to God and expects the cure to come”³⁸ One of the key points in how man is to face apparent evil and suffering is by a reasoned knowledge

³⁵ Ibid., 10.3.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Daniel 12:2.

³⁸ Ibid., 10.1.

that all things are under God's providence and all things ultimately reach their providential end. Aquinas explains that this providential "end of all things is a good."³⁹ Aquinas goes on to explain since God himself is the ultimate good, that the other sense of the end of things is God Himself. "So, all things are ordered to one good, as their end, and this is God."⁴⁰ This he says is in keeping with what Scripture says "in Proverbs (16:4) : "God made all things for Himself"⁴¹

In part two of Aquinas' major work, *Summa Theologiae*, in question 38 Articles 1-5, he talks about five ordinary remedies of sorrow or pain. He suggests that pleasure, tears, sympathy of friends, contemplation of the truth, and bodily rest and recovery all help to assuage pain and sorrow. Good pleasures are a natural cure for sorrow and pain, as rest is a cure for weariness. Tears allow us relief, because when our sorrows do not find expression outwardly, we tend to focus more on them. We are encouraged and unburdened when we see our friends sharing our sorrows. For Aquinas, the contemplation of the truth is the greatest of all pleasures and it naturally assuages sorrow and pain. Anything that helps the body recover helps us deal with pain and sorrow. Aquinas also suggests that proper perspective is important and that perspective is that, "sorrow or pain is not man's greatest evil."⁴² This all

³⁹ *S.T.*, III.16.4.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, III.17.2.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, III.17.10.

⁴² *Ibid.*, II, 39, 4, *ad.*

flows naturally from his focus on the essential goodness of God and the consequent goodness of creation. A good creation is a natural remedy for sorrow and suffering.

Is this reasoned understanding satisfactory? Are we able to say, “Now it is clear to me why there is evil in the world; now I have the explanation.” Herbert McCabe suggests that it is not satisfactory and that providing a fully satisfactory response to evil was not Aquinas’ goal. McCabe says, “so Saint Thomas’ account of evil . . . does not seek to explain evil in the world. When we speak of God we do not clear up a puzzle, we draw attention to mystery.”⁴³ It is in this mystery that Aquinas reaches out beyond philosophical reason to revealed truth. The concept of mystery, here, is the New Testament concept of something hidden from reason alone that is only understandable by God’s revelation to man. It is not the concept of the mystery religions or of the Gnostics’ hidden or esoteric knowledge. Aquinas recognizes this limit of reason in the opening of the *Summa*, “certain truths which exceed human reason should be made known to him by divine revelation.”⁴⁴ Both Cornelius Van Till and Francis Schafer have discussed the limits of reason in connection with faith. Faith is not simply rational in the sense that it is a deduction reached by human reason alone. We cannot take credit for having reasoned out all the aspects of our faith. On the other hand, faith is not irrational. It is in Aquinas’ reaching out to truths of divine revelation that he finds

⁴³ Herbert McCabe, *God and Evil: In the Theology of St Thomas Aquinas* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010), 128.

⁴⁴ *S.T.*, 1.1.1.

a more satisfactory answer for the problem of evil. “But God did give an answer and his answer was Christ.”⁴⁵

In *De Rationibus Fidei* Aquinas writes to an unknown churchman in Antioch who has asked for help in responding to questions from Muslims as well as Greek and Armenian Orthodox. The churchman asks “for moral and philosophical reasons which the Muslims can accept.”⁴⁶ Aquinas explains that he will respond but that the churchman “should not try to prove the Faith by necessary reasons . . . as our Faith cannot be proved by necessary reasons, because it exceeds the human mind.”⁴⁷ Aquinas adds that while it cannot be proved by necessary reasons, that “because of its truth it cannot be refuted by any necessary reason.”⁴⁸ The letter then focuses less on philosophical reasoning and more on things “we believe in . . . only because they are revealed by God.”⁴⁹

This letter was written in 1264 sometime between the 7th and 8th Crusades when Christendom was losing its foothold in the Middle East and the situation for Christians there was tenuous. While the letter focuses on an apologetic defense, its tone expresses pastoral concern and offers hope for Christians in that precarious context. “Our hope is directed to

⁴⁵ Louis De Wohl, *The Quiet Light: A Novel about Thomas Aquinas* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996), 276.

⁴⁶ Aquinas, *De Rationibus Fidei*, 1.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

two things: (1) what we look forward to after death, and (2) the help of God which carries us through this life to future happiness merited by works done by free will.”⁵⁰

In chapter 7 Aquinas responds to Muslim ridicule of the Christians’ belief in a redemptive aspect in the incarnation and death of Christ. “They [Muslims] also ridicule our saying that Christ the Son of God was crucified for the salvation of the human race (Qur’ân 4:157-8), for if almighty God could save the human race without the Son’s suffering he could also make man so that he could not sin.”⁵¹ Aquinas explains that Christ suffered according to His human nature not His divine nature. In this God chose “the most fitting way of acting, even if he could have acted otherwise”⁵² He explains that all he says is based on the presupposition that God’s providence is controlling and preserving the nature of things and at the “same time mercifully providing man a saving remedy in the incarnation and death of his Son.”⁵³

The incarnation and suffering of Christ was expressly “to repair the fall of man . . . to serve as a remedy for sin.”⁵⁴ Not only did it do this, it also confirmed truth by contrasting the power of Christ against a backdrop of Christ’s suffering and weakness. “So to make the

⁵⁰ Ibid., 1.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid., 7.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

work of divine power apparent, he chose everything that was rejected and low in the world”⁵⁵

Part of the reparation of the fall of man includes dealing with man’s tendency toward “cleaving to bodily things and neglecting spiritual goods.”⁵⁶ So the example of Christ’s suffering allows man to “consider temporal goods or evils as nothing, lest a disordered love for them impede them from being dedicated to spiritual things”⁵⁷ It also allowed them to “learn not to trust proudly in themselves, but in God.”⁵⁸ In this vein Aquinas explains how Christ,

led a poor life to teach us to despise riches. He lived without titles or office so as to withdraw men from a disordered desire for these things. He underwent labor, thirst, hunger and bodily afflictions so that men would not be fixed on pleasure and delights and be drawn away from the good of virtue because of the hardships of this life. In the end he underwent death, so that no one would desert the truth because of fear of death. And lest anyone fear a shameful death for the sake of the truth, he chose the most horrible kind of death, that of the cross. Thus it was fitting that the Son of God made man should suffer and by his example provoke men to virtue, so as to verify what Peter said (1 Pet 2:21) : ‘Christ suffered for you, and left an example for you to follow in his steps.’⁵⁹

As to the necessity for a remedy for sin, Aquinas explains that all sin is an offense against God and as such “is somehow an infinite offence.”⁶⁰ Because of this, a mere man

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

would not be able to satisfy the just penalty of an infinite offense. “Therefore, there had to be a man of infinite dignity who would undergo the penalty for all so as to satisfy fully for the sins of the whole world. Therefore the only-begotten Word of God, true God and Son of God, assumed a human nature and willed to suffer death in it so as to purify the whole human race indebted by sin.”⁶¹

So that we understand suffering in a redemptive sense, Aquinas explains that the disciples of Christ should also expect the same elements found in Christ’s life to be evident in their own. In suffering and following Christ’s example, the disciples will be encouraged not to cling to temporary things. “In order to train his disciples to despise the present goods of this world and to sustain all sorts of adversity even to death, there was no better way than for Christ to suffer and die. Thus, he himself told them (Jn 15:20) : "If they persecuted me, they will persecute you too."⁶² The disciples own sufferings and weaknesses will also confirm truth by providing a contrast to the power of the Spirit at work in their ministry.

Aquinas writes,

The same reason of Providence which led the Son of God made man to suffer weakness in himself, led him to desire his disciples, whom he established as ministers of human salvation, to be abject in the world.” Sending them to work for the salvation of men, he commanded them to observe poverty, to suffer persecutions and insults, and even to undergo death for the truth; this was so that their preaching might not seem fabricated for the sake of earthly comfort, and that the salvation of the world might not be attributed to human wisdom or power, but only to God's wisdom and

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

power. Thus they did not lack divine power to work miracles as they appeared abject according to the world.⁶³

Aquinas ties together his view of providence and evil with his view of Christ's redemptive incarnation and suffering. This argument seems to be the point Aquinas turns to in order to provide a foothold of hope for Christians in the face of suffering and evil. "You see now," said Thomas, "suffering means sharing with Christ. If you love Him . . . how can you renounce suffering? No lover will renounce the pain of his love."⁶⁴ The Christian's suffering can be seen then as a reflection of Christ's suffering in a providential sense in the context of the church's mission.

On December 6, 1273, Aquinas had an experience that brought his writing career abruptly to an end. Aquinas died only a few months later in early March 1274, while traveling to the second Council of Lyon. Little is actually known about the experience. At any rate, he stopped writing, leaving the *Summa Theologiae* incomplete, in the midst of its Third Part, a discussion of the sacrament of penance. The most common information reported is that during the "Feast of Saint Nicholas, something happened during the celebration of Mass. The result was that he decided to write no more."⁶⁵ Some scholars conjecture that Aquinas suffered a stroke during the mass. Others simply attribute a vision that he may have had during the mass to his sudden cessation of writing. Unfortunately there

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ De Wohl, *The Quiet Light*, 277.

⁶⁵ Fergus Kerr, *Thomas Aquinas: A Very Short Introduction* (New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press USA, 2009), 19.

is nothing written by Aquinas between the time of his sudden cessation of work on the *Summa* in December and his death the following March that sheds much light on this. His secretary Reginald of Piperno, is reported to have asked why he had stopped writing his great *Summa Theologiae*? The answer Aquinas gave was ‘I cannot do any more . . . Everything I have written seems to me as straw in comparison with what I have seen.’⁶⁶ Aquinas gave no further information and the actual details remain an intriguing mystery.

⁶⁶ James Ginther, *The Westminster Handbook to Medieval Theology* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), x.

CHAPTER 4
CLASSICAL/HISTORICAL JEWISH THEODICY OF MAIMONIDES

Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon was known by Rambam, his Hebraic acronym, and by the Arabic name Mūsā ibn Maymūn, as well as by his Latinized name Moses Maimonides. He is “considered one of the greatest codifiers [of Mosaic Law] and philosophers in Jewish history.”¹ He lived from 1135 until 1204. He grew up in Andalusia, immersed in a wide variety of cultural and religious elements including Islam, Arab culture, as well as Greek philosophies. The time in which he lived was at the “height of the twelfth-century Andalusian Aristotelianism.”² It was a time of great “depth of learning, cultural sophistication, and comprehensiveness, embracing biblical and Talmudic studies, linguistics, poetry, philosophy, and science.”³ During times of stability, the family lived as “courtier-rabbis, masters of tradition [even Arab cultural elements such as poetry] and experts in secular knowledge.”⁴

The family experienced both a deep level of integration in Arab culture, as well as exclusion, as stability gave way to a time of upheaval brought on by the advent of the

¹ Moses Maimonides, *Rambam: Selected Letters of Maimonides: Letter to Yemen: Discourse on Martyrdom*, trans. Avraham Finkel (Scranton, PA: Yeshivath Beth Moshe, 1994), vi.

² *Ibid.*, 4.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Joel L. Kraemer, *Maimonides: The Life and World of One of Civilization's Greatest Minds* (New York: Doubleday Religion, 2008), 45.

“fundamentalist Almohad movement.”⁵ The Almohad movement opposed more open Islamic culture and sought to restore a version of Islam, based on the Qur’an and Islamic Law in North Africa and Andalusia. Maimonides lived both in harmony and in tension with the Islamic community. One of his earlier works was the *Epistle on Forced Conversion*, which he wrote after his family was forced to flee Andalusia.

“Aristotle, al-Fārābī and the Kalām theologians”⁶ were among those who had a significant intellectual influence on Maimonides. Maimonides was well acquainted with Arab theologians and wrote “classical Arabic for a Muslim audience, as in his medical writings, and used Judeo-Arabic when writing for his coreligionists”⁷ Maimonides had a significant knowledge of the works of Averroes “and recommended them to his own pupil Joseph ben Judah”⁸ His only son, Abraham was “devoted to Sufism, which some scholars suggest may have influenced Maimonides in later life.”⁹ Al- Fārābī is the Arabic philosopher “most cited in *The Guide*.”¹⁰

Al- Fārābī argued that religion is subordinate to philosophy, seeing the former as a tool or ‘handmaiden’ for the latter.”¹¹ Maimonides appears to have attempted to apply this theory

⁵ T. M. Rudavsky, *Maimonides*, (Malden, MA.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 2.

⁶ Rudavsky, *Maimonides*, ix.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

in detail to Judaism by integrating into his worldview elements of Judaism, Arabic culture, and Greek Philosophy. “From the Greeks he took his philosophy, from the Arabs his rhetorical forms, he took from the Bible the knowledge of who he truly was”¹² In his introduction to the *Guide* he explains,

I feel assured that those of my readers, who have not studied philosophy, will still derive profit from many a chapter. But the thinker whose studies have brought him into collision with religion, will, as I have already mentioned, derive much benefit from every chapter.¹³

The most difficult moment of Maimonides’ life came with the loss of his brother David. His brother had supported the extended family through trading. David along with much of the family fortune was lost at sea. Maimonides suffered a self-described mental and physical breakdown:

the most terrible blow which befell me . . . was the death of the most perfect and righteous man, who drowned while traveling in the Indian Ocean. For nearly a year after I received the sad news, I lay ill on my bed struggling with fever and despair. Eight years have since passed and I still mourn, for there is no consolation.¹⁴

This event would be a repeated reference point for Maimonides’ reflection and writing on the nature of evil and suffering. "Aristotle sees no difference between the falling of a leaf or a stone and the death of the good and noble people in the ship."¹⁵

¹² Ibid..

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Moses Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed (Barnes and Noble Library of Essential Reading) (BandN Library of Essential Reading)*, trans. M. Friedlander (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2008), III.17. . (work will hereon be cited as *G.P.*)

My overview of Maimonides' positions is taken largely from two of his works, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, and the *Letter to Yemen*. The *Guide* was written for a former student, Joseph ben Judah who left not having completed his studies. Maimonides also wrote *The Guide* for a larger audience "to show Jews that they should study philosophy to deepen their faith" ¹⁶ The Epistle to Yemen was for a besieged population facing threats of forced conversion, "a community in crisis, battered by outside forces." ¹⁷ "The purpose of the letter was to provide hope" ¹⁸

In regards to the nature of evil, Maimonides says that God is not the author of evil, "it cannot be said of God that He directly creates evil, or He has the direct intention to produce evil: this is impossible." ¹⁹ Maimonides held that evil flowed from two elements. First, a Neoplatonic concept "that all corruption, destruction, or defect comes from matter." ²⁰ Second, he then modified this with an added position that "all evils are negations." ²¹ Maimonides sees all of creation as good, even the material element, "low as it in reality is, because it is the source of death and all evils, is likewise good for the permanence of the Universe and the continuation of the order of things . . . consequently the true work of God is

¹⁶ John Wright and Jason Byassee, *What Christians Can Learn: Islamic Wisdom*, The Christian Century (May 15, 2007), 27.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁸ Rudavsky, 3, 4.

¹⁹ *G.P.*, III.10.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, III.8.

²¹ *Ibid.*, III.10.

all good, since it is existence."²² For Maimonides God's connection to evil is only indirect. Since evil is a negation "the action of an agent cannot be directly connected with a thing that does not exist"²³

Evil flows out of the negation of good but in man the negation is primarily a lack of wisdom. "All the great evils which men cause to each other because of certain intentions, desires, opinions, or religious principles, are likewise due to non-existence, because they originate in ignorance, which is absence of wisdom."²⁴ God's providence guides and directs things toward the good but the "numerous evils to which individual persons are exposed are due to the defects existing in the persons themselves We complain and seek relief from our own faults: we suffer from the evils which we, by our own free will, inflict on ourselves and ascribe them to God, who is far from being connected with them!"²⁵ God is not so much punishing man for sin as it is the lack of human perfection that brings evil on the person. "Moral virtues such as righteousness turn out to be necessary but not sufficient for human perfection"²⁶ What is necessary is an intellectual perfection that is an overflow of the Divine intellect. Man obtains this when focused on God. Evil "only attends to those who

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., III. 11.

²⁵ Ibid., III.12

²⁶ Rudavsky, *Maimonides*, 146.

withdraw their attentions from God”²⁷ because “providence withdraws from him during the time when he is occupied with something else.”²⁸

Maimonides does not see God’s indirect connection as limiting either God’s power or God’s knowledge. “I do not ascribe to God ignorance of anything or any kind of weakness.”²⁹ Maimonides bases this on the equivocal nature of the divine, the inability of humans to understand God, and the inadequacy of any comparison between human and divine. He says we cannot “compare the manner in which God rules and manages His creatures with the manner in which we rule and manage”³⁰

In terms of God’s omniscience, Maimonides states “God knows everything, and that nothing is hidden from Him.”³¹ He also takes a compatibilist approach to God’s knowledge saying,

His knowledge, may he be exalted, that a certain possible thing will come into existence, does not in any way make that possible thing quit the nature of the possible. On the contrary, the nature of the possible remains with it, and the knowledge concerning what possible things will be produced, does not entail one of the two possibilities becoming necessary . . . God knows “with one knowledge the many and numerous things.”³²

²⁷ Ibid., 148.

²⁸ *G.P.*, III.51

²⁹ Ibid., III. 17.

³⁰ Ibid., III.23.

³¹ Ibid., III.16.

³² Ibid., III.20

Again Maimonides holds this position in light of the equivocal nature of the divine essence so “that the knowledge attributed to this essence has nothing in common with our knowledge, just as that essence is in no way like our essence.”³³

In terms of God’s omnipotence, Maimonides does limit God’s power but only in the sense that he does “not ascribe to God the power of doing what is impossible.”³⁴ In part 3.15 of *The Guide* Maimonides lists five things as impossible. God cannot violate the law of non-contradiction, transmute substances, bring into existence another God, annihilate Himself, or become a body. Maimonides explains that man can imagine things that are not possible and our ability to imagine them does not mean that God should be able to do them or that if God cannot do them that his power is limited. “One imagines a thing and considers it possible, another is at liberty to assert that such a thing is impossible by its very nature . . . [this] does not imply weakness in God, or a limit to His power”³⁵.

In section 3.15 of *The Guide*, Maimonides specifies five theories of providence. There is the Epicurean concept that there is “no Providence at all for anything in the Universe.”³⁶ There is an Aristotelian providence described as, “one part of the Universe owes its existence to Providence, and is under the control of a ruler and governor, another

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., III.15.

³⁵ *G.P.*, III.15.

³⁶ Ibid., III.17.

part is abandoned and left to chance.”³⁷ There is the Muslim Ashariyah version of total direct providence in which all things are “either necessary or impossible.”³⁸ There is the Muslim Mu'tazila theory that “Man has [limited] free will... and all acts of God are due to wisdom; no injustice is found in Him, and He does not afflict the good.”³⁹ Then there is the Jewish Mosaic view of “man's perfectly free will . . . [with all suffering and reward] . . . distributed according to justice; they are the result of strict judgment that admits no wrong.”⁴⁰

Maimonides' view is actually a modification of the Mosaic view merged with elements from the Aristotelian view. The higher orders of the universe are under God's providential control and “in the lower or sublunary portion of the Universe Divine Providence does not extend to the individual members of species except in the case of mankind.”⁴¹ He sees providence and divine intellect as connected:

Divine Providence is connected with Divine intellectual influence, and the same beings which are benefited by the latter so as to become intellectual, and to comprehend things comprehensible to rational beings, are also under the control of Divine Providence, which examines all their deeds in order to reward or punish them.... All other things are "entirely due to chance It may be by mere chance that a ship goes down with all her contents, as in the above-mentioned instance, or the roof of a house falls upon those within; but it is not due to chance, according to our view, that in the one instance the men went into the ship, or remained in the house in the other instance: it is due to the will of God, and is in accordance with the justice of His judgments, the method of which our mind is incapable of understanding I

³⁷ Ibid., III.17.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

hold that Divine Providence is related and connected with the intellect, because Providence can only proceed from an intelligent being, from a being that is itself the most perfect intellect.⁴²

Maimonides finds no special issue in the suffering of the righteous. The book of Job holds no incomprehensibility for him. “If you pay to my words the attention which this treatise demands, and examine all that is said in the Book of Job, all will be clear to you, and you will find that I have grasped and taken hold of the whole subject; nothing has been left unnoticed.”⁴³ He sees the book of Job as an allegory that presents the different views of providence. Maimonides sees Satan as representing the “principle either of privation or a representative of matter, or both.”⁴⁴ He identifies each person with one of five positions on providence. Eliphaz represents “Epicurean . . . chance”⁴⁵ Bildad represents a “simplistic reading of the [Mosaic] law”⁴⁶ Zophar represents the Mu’tazilite position that “God does not afflict the righteous and Job’s lot will be balanced by reward in the next life.”⁴⁷ Elihu represents “Asharite fatalism.”⁴⁸ And finally, Job represents Maimonides’

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., III.23.

⁴⁴ Rudavsky, *Maimonides*, 146.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 147.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 147.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

position, which is an amalgam of the Mosaic and Aristotelian positions where man is saved from his suffering by two things, “understanding and perseverance.”⁴⁹

Maimonides’ concept of providence is then not directly connected to moral standing, but to the degree to which the individual has developed his intellect in connection with the divine intellect. “It is remarkable in this account that wisdom is not ascribed to Job. The text does not say he was an intelligent, wise, or clever man; but virtues and uprightness, especially in actions, are ascribed to him.”⁵⁰ Moral virtues such as righteousness turn out to be “necessary but not sufficient for human perfection: intellectual virtue is required as well for human perfection, which leads to providential care.”⁵¹ The necessity of human intellectual perfection, the equivocal nature of God, and the inability that this creates for man to understand God allows Maimonides to escape what for most is the perplexing question of the suffering of the righteous. For Maimonides, the main lesson of the book of Job is not God’s providence, but the “error of imagining His knowledge to be similar to ours, or His intention, providence, and rule similar to ours.”⁵²

Maimonides’ answer to human suffering and evil then lies in our drawing close to God because it allows us to develop perfection in the intellectual realm. So he explains,

When we see that some men escape plagues and mishaps, whilst others perish by them, we must not attribute this to a difference in the properties of their bodies, or in

⁴⁹ Ibid., 148.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 146.

⁵¹ Rudavsky, *Maimonides*, 146.

⁵² *G.P.*, III.23.

their physical constitution, ‘for by strength shall no man prevail’; but it must be attributed to their different degrees of perfection, some approaching God, whilst others moving away from Him. Those who approach Him are best protected.⁵³

A man who has developed this intellectual perfection only suffers when he turns his focus away from God. “Hence it appears to me that it is only in times of such neglect that some of the ordinary evils befall a prophet or a perfect and pious man: and the intensity of the evil is proportional to the duration of those moments, or to the character of the things that thus occupy their mind.”⁵⁴

According to Maimonides, men must also realize a certain perspective in order to have peace in this world relative to evil. We must realize we are often the source of our own suffering. “We complain and seek relief from our own faults: we suffer from the evils which we, by our own free will, inflict on ourselves and ascribe them to God, who is far from being connected with them!”⁵⁵ We should also realize that there is not as much suffering in the world as we seem to think there is. “Men frequently think that the evils in the world are more numerous than the good things”⁵⁶ This error comes because we focus on just one person or one perspective which is usually our own. Maimonides says, “An ignorant man

⁵³ Ibid. III.18.

⁵⁴ Ibid., III.51.

⁵⁵ Ibid., III.12.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

believes that the whole universe only exists for him; as if nothing else required any consideration.”⁵⁷

The main problem that faces man in the issue of evil and suffering then is the development of his intellect. “Divine Providence is proportional to the endowment of intellect, as has been mentioned above. The relation of Divine Providence is therefore not the same to all men; the greater the human perfection a person has attained, the greater the benefit he derives from Divine Providence.”⁵⁸ A significant problem in Maimonides view, and one he recognizes, is:

There is a considerable difference between one person and another as regards these faculties, as is well known to philosophers. While one man can discover a certain thing by himself, another is never able to understand it, even if taught by means of all possible expressions and metaphors, and during a long period; his mind can in no way grasp it, his capacity is insufficient for it.⁵⁹

Maimonides concedes that the masses do not have the intellect necessary to access the more esoteric levels of knowledge. In writing *The Guide*, Maimonides intentionally “employs a hermeneutic method to hide his views”⁶⁰ from those who are not intellectually astute. He believes that “like the Scriptures, the *Guide* contains a multitude of hidden secret meanings and that only the philosophically astute individual will be able to decode

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid., III.18.

⁵⁹ Ibid. I. 31.

⁶⁰ Rudavsky, *Maimonides*, 31.

Maimonides' true views"⁶¹ This idea of a higher and lower level of meaning is one of Maimonides' themes. He believes that the masses can only see and understand the lower level or exoteric meaning in both Scripture and Maimonides' own writing.

The *Epistle to Yemen* stands out in contrast, in that Maimonides appears to adopt a different approach from his usual emphasis on intellectual perfection. This may be because Maimonides is offering a more direct encouragement to the Yemenite Jews, because of their dire circumstances, or because he does not feel they are able to attain to his normal higher more esoteric views. He first addresses the issue of a false Messiah that has arisen in their midst and then holds out the "suffering of the Yemenite Jews as a prefiguration of the coming of the [true] Messiah."⁶² This concrete hope of a Messiah is in contrast to his typical Messianic view of a more abstract and natural transition to a Messianic age. He also contradicts his own injunction in the same letter against setting a time for the advent of the Messiah, "Our sages have discouraged the calculation of the time of the coming of Mashiach May people that calculate the final redemption meet with adversity."⁶³ Despite this injunction, he offers encouragement by sharing his own calculation that the Messiah would appear "in the year 4976 of Creation."⁶⁴ This is about 40 years after the Letter to Yemen was

⁶¹ Ibid., 11.

⁶² Rudavsky, *Maimonides*, 4.

⁶³ Moses Maimonides, *Rambam: Selected Letters of Maimonides: Letter to Yemen: Discourse on Martyrdom*, trans. Avraham Finkel (Scranton, PA: Yeshivath Beth Moshe, 1994), 42.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 52.

written in 1172. He says, “This is the most dependable of all calculations that have been made about the coming of Mashiach.”⁶⁵ He says he is doing this even though he has spoken out against making such calculations in order to keep people from “falling into despair, thinking that his coming is in the distant future.”⁶⁶

To the Yemenite Jews, he offers encouragement and promises in the midst of their suffering rather than pointing them to the possibility of something that would allow them to escape suffering. “Don’t be frightened by the power of our enemy and the helplessness of our people. “These trials are meant to test you and to prove your faith and your love [of God].”⁶⁷ Rather than say their suffering is because they have taken their eyes off God or have failed to attain some sort of intellectual development, he says they “should rejoice in the fact that we have suffered misfortune, lost our wealth and possessions and were driven into exile. All these hardships are a source of distinction and honor Whatever losses we suffered through these disasters are counted as a burnt offering on the altar.”⁶⁸ He gives this instruction and promise to those who are under pressure to convert to Islam,

[G]ive no thought of being separated from family and friends or being concerned with loss of income. Such deprivations are only a small sacrifice and a trifle [we can offer] to the King of kings, the Holy One⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Ibid., 52.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 19.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 24.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 25.

So rather than maintain consistency with his own theodicy, Maimonides sets the Yemeni Jews' particular suffering in context of a cosmic struggle where God is focused on Israel in the midst of nations that are seeking their destruction.

Whether it is divine wisdom attained through closeness to God, or a perspective that places our suffering in the context of a divine cosmic plan, Maimonides' solution for man's suffering because of evil is a knowledge rooted in man himself. This knowledge produces a certainty in the face of evil. "When we know this we shall find everything that may befall us easy to bear; mishap will create no doubts in our hearts concerning God, whether He knows our affairs or not, whether He provides for us or abandons us."⁷⁰

⁷⁰ *G.P.*, III.23.

CHAPTER 5

CLASSICAL/HISTORICAL ISLAMIC THEODICY OF AL-GHAZALI

Al-Ghazâlî (c.1055–1111 A.D.) was one of the most prominent and influential philosophers, theologians, jurists, and mystics of Sunni Islam. He has sometimes been “acclaimed in both the East and West as the greatest Muslim after Muhammad.”¹ Historians generally divide his life into four periods, the early years 1058-1085, a public decade 1085-1095 of teaching in Baghdad, crisis and withdrawal 1095-1106, second public period 1106-1109, final years 1109-1111. He was born in the city of Tus in the Khorasan province of Persia. He and his brother were sent by their uncle, after the death of their father, to the city of Gurgan in present-day northern Azerbaijan to study Islamic jurisprudence. He later studied under Al-Juwayni, a Sunni Shafi'i hadith legal jurist and Ash'arite theologian.

Ghazali's career in theology and jurisprudence coincided with the rise of the Seljuq dynasty. This was a time “when Sunni theology had just passed through its consolidation and entered a period of intense challenges from Shiite Ismâ'îlite theology and the Arabic tradition of Aristotelian philosophy (*falsafa*).”² Ghazali came under Seljuq patronage and was installed in the newly founded Al-Nizamiyya seminary in Baghdad. In the consolidation of their empire the Seljuq dynasty sought to promote a particular “school of law – Shafi'ite,

¹ W. Montgomery Watt, *The Faith and Practice of Al-Ghazali, Oneworld Classics in Religious Studies* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2000), 13.

² *Medieval Islamic Civilization: Routledge Encyclopedias of the Middle Ages*, s.v. “Ghazali,” by Frank Griffel.

and a specific form of orthodox Sunni theology –Ash’arite”³ Ghazali taught a combination of legal theory and theology while in his post in Bagdad.

The first area that shaped Ghazali’s thinking was the Shafi’i position on the law. The Shafi’i espoused, “the rigorous use of analogy (*qiyas*), arrived at through intellectual effort (*ijtihad*), and were critical of ‘belief based on authority, or *taqlid* . . . [and] also excesses of ‘personal opinion’ (*ra’y*)”⁴ Shafi’i were also generally critical of *kalam* or theological disputes that were also controversial in the larger Islamic context. Muslims that were more traditional believed that Islamic jurisprudence was the proper focus for study. “Neither scripture nor sacred tradition, they would say, provides for this mode of discourse [*kalam*]”⁵ They saw theological debate as presumptuous, if not downright reprehensible. The founder of the Shafi’i school of law had said, “My verdict on the people of *kalam* is that they should be beaten with whips and the soles of sandals, and then paraded through all the tribes . . . while it is proclaimed of them, ‘Such is the reward of those who forsake the Qur’an and sunna and give themselves up to the *kalam*.’”⁶ In his usual style Ghazali took a more nuanced view of *kalam* and wrote,

³ Eric Ormsby, *Ghazali, Makers of the Muslim World* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2008), 4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁶ Ignaz Goldziher and Bernard Lewis, *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law (Modern Classics in Near Eastern Studies)*, Princeton, N.J (J.: Princeton Univ Pr, 1981), 110-11.

Kalam is not an end in itself and it is error to think that the mere engagement in it constitutes the experientially religious or that it is always needed for attaining salvation in the hereafter. Its role is very much akin to that of the armed guards protecting the pilgrims' caravan against bedouin marauders. It is needed, but only as a means to an end. Again, it is like medicine, which at times is certainly needed. But when not needed, or when needed, but not properly administered, it can be very harmful.⁷

A second area that shaped Ghazali's thinking was the Ash'arite school of theology, which had developed since 935 into the dominant school of Sunni theology. The Ash'arite school held to a radical cosmological determinism known as occasionalism where:

in each moment God assigns the accidents to bodies in which they inhere. When one moment ends, God creates new accidents. None of the created accidents in the second moment has any causal relation to the ones in the earlier moment. If a body continues to have a certain attribute from one moment to the next, then God creates two identical accidents inhering in that body in each of the two subsequent moments. Movement and development generate when God decides to change the arrangement of the moment before. A ball is moved, for instance, when in the second moment of two the atoms of the ball happen to be created in a certain distance from the first. The distance determines the speed of the movement In every moment, God re-arranges all the atoms of this world anew and He creates new accidents—thus creating a new world every moment⁸

In connection with their radical determinism, the Ash'arite also held to some significant limitations in the area of human reason. They held that God's will established all things including moral truths. In this sense,

neither good nor evil could be said to exist objectively. God is the creator of moral values; He defines justice as He wills. What He does is perform, just and good and

⁷ Michael E. Marmur, "Ghazali and Ash'arism Revisited," *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 12 (2002) : 91.

⁸ Frank Griffel, *Al-Ghazali's Philosophical Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 2009), 126.

right, however questionable it may appear to us. Truthfulness is not intrinsically good nor is lying bad. They are good or bad because God has determined them so.⁹

According to this, the knowledge of moral truths must be obtained through revelation not through natural reason. Human reason in and by itself was not capable of establishing with absolute certainty any truth-claim. While Ghazali does make use of the logical constructions of human reason he clearly felt that “reason could not be regarded as autonomous”¹⁰ both as an Ash’arite and even extending into his views as a Sufi.

The third aspect that shaped Ghazali was Sufism. Sufism was a fairly well developed eight-century movement of ascetics given to fasting, prayer, meditation and voluntary poverty. Ghazali’s writings draw on Sufi literature including many “pithy anecdotes of these [Sufi] saints.”¹¹ His father and his main teachers in the areas of theology and Islamic jurisprudence were all followers of Sufism.

Ghazali is somewhat different from the typical Sufi mystic though because “Sufism, for him, wasn’t an exclusive course; rather, it provided a method for integrating all significant knowledge under a single over-riding concept.”¹² That concept was the importance of an inner spiritual life. Ghazali’s specific focus in this was “how an ordinary life might be lived in accord with the highest spiritual principles . . . even how an ordinary

⁹ Ormsby, *Ghazali*, 14-15.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹² *Ibid.*, 42.

life must be so lived.”¹³ He saw no contradiction in his role as jurist with his Sufism, and “in his Sufi treatises, his most persuasive strategy relies neither on emotional appeals nor on appeals to mystical experience, but on logical methods and rational proofs.”¹⁴

Ghazali had a complex relationship with Greek philosophy. He is considered by some to have ended philosophical reflection in the Islamic world through his attacks on philosophy such as *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*. He focused his study on a philosophy that was “resolutely Aristotelian, though modified by the Neo-Platonic tradition”¹⁵ Even though he attacked philosophy he also concluded it was useful in some ways and adopted “its methods, most especially the reliance on demonstrative proof, in the form of syllogisms.”¹⁶ He saw this as offering the “possibility of a higher and more compelling discourse than that provided by [methods of] Kalam.”¹⁷ He also concluded that if used improperly philosophy could be dangerous. He describes philosophy as containing, “evil and mischief”¹⁸ and found

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 15.

¹⁶ Ibid., 16.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Abu Hamid Muhammad Al-Ghazali, *Deliverance from Error: Five Key Texts Including His Spiritual Autobiography, Al-Munqidh Min Al-Dalal*, 2d ed., ed. Ilse Lichtenstadter (Louisville, KY.: Fons Vitae, 2004), 70.

it “inadequate to satisfy my aim fully . . . [because human] reason alone is incapable of fully grasping all problems or of getting to the heart of all difficulties.”¹⁹

After nearly ten years of teaching at Al-Nizamiyya, Ghazali went through a dramatic crisis. Ghazali had experienced a previous crisis of doubt early in his career. At that point, “reliance on reason had led him to a ‘disabling crisis of skepticism.’”²⁰ This later crisis was different. Ghazali described it in his autobiography, *Deliverance from Error*, as a crisis “not caused by doubt . . . but by something more devastating: he had discovered the truth but could not act on it. He was effectively paralyzed by the truth.”²¹

Ghazali felt that Islam consisted primarily of two linked elements, knowledge and action. In his *Letter to a Disciple* he makes the often quoted statement, “knowledge without work [action] is insanity, and work [action] without knowledge is vanity (literally it cannot be).”²² Following his combined studies of jurisprudence, theology, and philosophy, he had finally come to accept Sufism as the ultimate path to truth. The problem he found was he could not bring himself to act on this knowledge because it would entail the renunciation of his prestige and position. He felt paralyzed and described this time dramatically:

I became certain that I stood on the brink of a crumbling bank and on the verge of falling into the fire [hell] unless I set about mending my ways...One day I would

¹⁹ Ibid., 71.

²⁰ Ormsby, *Ghazali*, 13.

²¹ Ibid., 1.

²² Henry Scherer, “Al-Ghazali's Ayyuha 'l Walad: Letter to a Disciple” (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1933), 71.

firmly resolve to leave Baghdad...and another day I would revoke my resolution. I would put one foot forward and the other backward. Mundane desires began tugging me with their chains to remain as I was while the herald of faith was crying out; Away! Up and Away! Only a little is left of your life and a long journey lies before you! All the theory and practice in which you are engrossed is eyeservice and fakery. If you do not prepare now for the afterlife when will you do so? And if you do not sever these attachments now, then when will you sever them?²³

Ghazali entered into such a deep state of anxiety over this situation that eventually in “July 1095 . . . he experienced a sudden breakdown. He could neither eat nor sleep . . . and eventually he lost the power of speech.”²⁴ This actually became a breakthrough for Ghazali and he felt that God had brought about paralysis of his tongue so he could not teach and said this “made it easy for my heart to turn away from fame and fortune, family, children, and associates.”²⁵ He left Baghdad on the premise he was going on pilgrimage to Mecca. He instead visited Jerusalem, Syria and eventually Mecca before returning to his home in Tus where he spent nearly ten years largely in isolation except for small groups of students/disciples. He later returned to teaching in a more public role in a seminary for two years but again left and returned to his home in Tus where he died two years later in 1111.

Ghazali describes himself as an adventurous soul in search of truth where he found it and “daring in mounting from the lowland of servile conformism to the highlands of independent investigation.”²⁶ Throughout his life, he demonstrated a willingness to explore,

²³ Al-Ghazali, *Deliverance from Error*, 79.

²⁴ Ormsby, *Ghazali*, 1.

²⁵ Al-Ghazali, *Deliverance from Error*, 80.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 79.

and then reject, as well as integrate, aspects of positions that differed from his own. While he largely rejected Mu‘tazilite theology, which placed greater confidence in human reason, he accepted and applied their principle of “drawing inferences about the invisible from the visible.”²⁷ While he rejected reliance on human reason, in philosophy he found the “intellectual structure and framework of his mystical treatises, and specially of the *Ihya* [considered his most significant work], but theology supplied the foundations.”²⁸ In his integration of theology, jurisprudence, philosophy, and Sufism Al-Ghazali aspired to be the “‘Renewer of Religion’ for his own century.”²⁹

He spent time countering the Ismâ‘îlites who “openly challenged the authority of Sunni theology, claiming its religious speculation and its interpretation of scripture was arbitrary.”³⁰ The Ismâ‘îlites claimed that “no rational argument is more convincing than any of its opposing rational arguments, [and only] the divinely guided word of the Shiite Imam conveys certainty.”³¹ While rejecting this form of guidance from a divinely inspired Imamate, Ghazali accepted guidance beyond reason from gnosis:

To the objection [Ismâ‘îlite] that this position where the determinist, the follower of free will and the believer in acquisition hold doctrines that are true in one respect, yet fall short of the truth is contradictory, Ghazali gives a version of the story of the blind men of Hindustan who sought to know the elephant and could do so only through

²⁷ Ormsby, *Ghazali*, 39.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 46.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

³⁰ Griffel, *Al-Ghazali's Philosophical Theology*, 35.

³¹ Ormsby, 52.

touch. Each described the elephant in terms of the part he touches. All described what is partially true. Only the seeing can give a more comprehensive account. Similarly the truth [according to Ghazali] of the question of human choice in relation to divine power can only be known fully through gnosis.³²

In this mixture of elements from different systems, Ghazali sought to define the boundaries of belief and unbelief and what should and should not be tolerated. He “clarifies that only teachings that violate certain ‘fundamental doctrines’ (*usûl al-‘aqâ'id*) should be deemed unbelief and apostasy. These doctrines are limited to three: monotheism, Muhammad's prophecy, and the Qur’anic descriptions of life after death.”³³

His position on the nature of evil is reflective of the Ash’arite position, though he slightly modifies it. The Ash’arite position was that “neither good nor evil could be said to exist objectively. God is the creator of moral values; He defines justice as He wills. What He does is perforce, just, good, and right, however questionable it may appear to us. Truthfulness is not intrinsically good nor is lying bad. They are good or bad because God has determined them so.”³⁴ The Ash’arite position stood in contrast to the Mu’tazilite position which held that everything that existed had some “*raison d’être* . . . ultimately beneficial for human beings.”³⁵ Each thing on earth is fundamentally good in some way though we may not recognize it. “The Ghazalian position offers no such assurance. The good is good, the imperfect is imperfect, to be sure, and there may be reasons for this, but the

³² Marmur, “Ghazali and Ash'arism Revisited, 109.

³³ Griffel, *Al-Ghazali's Philosophical Theology*, 109.

³⁴ Ormsby, *Ghazali*, 14-15.

³⁵ Eric L. Ormsby, *Theodicy in Islamic Thought: The Dispute Over Al-Ghazali's* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984), 225.

reasons are, finally, provisional. Good and evil, perfect and imperfect, depend upon God's will. We have no assurance that they will remain as they are at this moment, or that they will be ultimately explicable to human reason."³⁶

In terms of the Ash'arite view, in the final analysis the cause of evil is simply an outworking of the will of God. Ghazali agrees with this but also integrates the Sufi concept of the self in the cause of sin. "For Ghazali, as for earlier Sufis, the self is the seat of lust and greed and rage. It craves only satisfaction of its appetites, yet remains insatiable, But it also gives us courage, energy, and audacity."³⁷ The self then is not bad in an absolute sense and includes a mix of good and evil qualities. "In every man there is a mixture of these four principles – I mean the divine and the diabolical and the feral and the beastly . . ."³⁸ He explains that the divine is a "wise man . . . repelling the craftiness and cunning of the devil."³⁹ The feral is a "pig [that] is appetite . . ."⁴⁰ The beastly is a "dog [that] is anger."⁴¹ The diabolical is a devil that "stirs up the desire of the pig and anger of the beast."⁴² Desire plays a significant role in the cause of evil as well as the solution for it:

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ormsby, *Ghazali*, 125.

³⁸ Al-Ghazali, *Deliverance from Error*, 321.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

We do evil because our desire ‘gets the better of us.’ In men of true learning though, evil is done “only by way of a slip...for true learning is that which leads to the knowledge that sin is a deadly poison and that the afterlife is better than this life. And anyone who knows that will not barter the better for something inferior.”⁴³

In terms of the relationship of evil to God’s knowledge and governance, we have already stated that the Ash’arites posited occasionalism as a “frank ascription to God of evil as well as of good”⁴⁴ They did this because they would affirm no limitations in terms of God’s knowledge or governance. It seems that for the most part Ghazali accepted this including the occasionalist cosmology. He clearly rejected any limits to God’s knowledge and was adamant that the philosophical position that God’s knowledge included “universals but not particulars”⁴⁵ was one of the top three heresies that flowed from philosophy. The problem in pinning down Ghazali’s position is in his writing about secondary causality where he “seems to reject it in certain passages [as did the Ash’arites] and in others, slyly, to admit it.”⁴⁶ In *Deliverance from Error*, he states that “nature is totally subject to God Most High: it does not act of itself but is used as an instrument by its Creator. The sun, moon, stars, and the elements are subject to God’s command: none of them effects any act by and of itself.”⁴⁷ But in *Incoherence of the Philosophers* he sarcastically writes,

⁴³ Ibid., 98.

⁴⁴ Ormsby, *Theodicy in Islamic Thought*, 25-26.

⁴⁵ John L. Esposito, ed. , *The Oxford History of Islam* (New York, N.Y: Oxford University Press, 2000) , 283.

⁴⁶ Ormsby, *Ghazali*, 83.

⁴⁷ Al-Ghazali, *Deliverance from Error*, 66.

If one denies that the effects follow necessarily from their causes and relates them to the will of their Creator, the will having no specific designated course but capable of varying and changing in kind, then let each of us allow . . . if someone leaves a book in the house, let him allow as possible its change on his returning home into a beardless slave boy.⁴⁸

Overall, Ghazali seems to support the occasionalist idea that rejects secondary causality but with some nuances. Ormsby provides a plausible explanation that resolves the apparent contradictions in his writing by saying that Ghazali is speaking to two positions. One is the Ash'arite position that what "we think of as causality is nothing but "God's habit" (or 'custom')."⁴⁹ The other position is that of the philosophers' causality where "effects occur because they 'emanate from the bestower of forms' and those who maintain that they come about 'necessarily and by nature.'"⁵⁰ The resolution is:

[Ghazali is not trying] to disprove secondary causality definitively, nor to prove the operation of 'God's habit,' but to demonstrate that neither can be established with complete certainty. His object is to upset confident assumptions, to startle lazy thinking, to shatter conformism. It represents a strategic deployment of doubt in the search for what can be known. In other words, it isn't so much causality that Ghazali finds problematic as the element of indwelling necessity in the presumption.⁵¹

In general, it is hard to find any special issue that Ghazali wrestles with in his theodicy. He does not for instance find the question of why the righteous suffer to be a troubling issue. If anything is an issue for him, it seems to be that he strongly opposes any implied necessity

⁴⁸ Ormsby, *Ghazali*, 82.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 86.

that impacts the freedom of God's will. His theodicy and his overall theology can be summed up in one of his famous dictums, "What He wills, is; what He does not will, is not."⁵² This central focus of God's will carries over into his view of spirituality and how man can deal with life, including facing the suffering in the world that arises from apparent evil.

Ghazali's prescription for man follows several steps and represents the integration of his overall experiences and understanding of Islamic jurisprudence, theology, philosophy, and his view of the way of Sufism. Elements of this prescription run consistently through his works but their integration occupies his later works and is especially evident in *Ayyuha 'L-Walad, A Letter to a Disciple*. This is one of his last books, "written to a learned disciple, himself fully informed in the various disciplines of learning"⁵³ This disciple is now old and facing his approaching death. Ghazali's letter to this disciple reveals his "convictions as to wherein lies the value of knowledge . . . his interpretation of the meaning of Sufism . . . his conclusions as to the superiority of the practice of the "way", rather than indulgence in ecstasy" ⁵⁴ It explains Ghazali's "ideal for an inner religious life issuing in the fruitage of good works . . . far removed from formalism in worship and the acceptance of a stereotyped creed."⁵⁵ It presents the thought of "al-Ghazali in its maturity . . . religion as the

⁵² Ormsby, *Theodicy in Islamic Thought*, 261.

⁵³ Scherer, *Al-Ghazali's Letter to a Disciple*, 15.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

expression of man's inner being, 'more than Law and more than Doctrine: it is the Soul's experience.'"⁵⁶

The first step for Ghazali is acquiring true knowledge of God's will in both commands and prohibitions. However, knowledge alone is not sufficient and it has to be combined with doing (action) God's will. He describes this combination:

O youth, so it is essential that your word and deed be in agreement with the law, since knowledge and work without emulation of the law-giver is a delusion. And it is essential that you be not deceived by the ecstatic utterances and vehement cries of the Sufis, because walking this road is by struggle and cutting off the lusts of the soul and killing its desires with the *sword* of discipline, not by vehement cries and idle words. And know that the loosened tongue and the veiled heart filed with negligence and lust, is the sign of misery, so that if you do not kill the fleshly soul with sincere struggle, you will not quicken your heart by the lights of knowledge.⁵⁷

The second step is developing trust in God (*tawakkul*). This comes out of acting on true knowledge and is even more critical in the face of misfortune. "Even if I can't believe that God intends all that befalls me, if I act as if I believed that, I may come to find myself on the first precarious rung of that infinite ladder of trust which leads ultimately to love."⁵⁸

Ghazali explains that acting as if I trusted God in the face of misfortune is an opportunity for development of more trust:

And you asked me about trust : it is that you seek to fortify your belief in Allah the Exalted as to what he has promised: that is, that you believe that what he has fated for you will come to you without fail, although anyone in the world endeavors to prevent

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 62.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 131.

it; and what is not written for you, you shall not attain, though all the world help you.⁵⁹

Through acting on knowledge, trust develops to the point that one can say “There is nothing in possibility more wonderful than what is.”⁶⁰ Trust grows to the point where it “cuts off my covetousness of all else except He.”⁶¹

In this way, trust eventually develops into love, which is a heart that seeks God above all else. “It is the heart which knows God, which draws near to God, which strives for God, which speeds toward God and which discloses what is in and with God”⁶² This is “the highest stage of spiritual development . . . [where] the lover realizes that only one true Beloved exists To reach this realization, the sly self must be outwitted and brought to heel; this is the proper function of the intellect.”⁶³ Ghazali teaches that all love amounts to selfish love but he says, “The object of striving must be to realize a love that is not self-interested. Through knowledge and practice of the virtues we may come to this realization, but the way is complicated, not only by our own faults, hesitations, and failures but by the very nature of love.”⁶⁴ Love is an experiential thing similar to the sense of taste, which is beyond human capacity to explain. Love is one of the things that Ghazali says has to be experienced to be understood:

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ormsby, *Ghazali*, 132.

⁶¹ Scherer, *Al-Ghazali's Letter to a Disciple*, 65.

⁶² Al-Ghazali, *Deliverance from Error*, 309.

⁶³ Ormsby, *Ghazali*, 126.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 138.

And know that certain of your questions which you asked me cannot be answered in writing and in speech: if you attain that state you will know what they are; and if not, knowing them is impossible; for they are known by experience, and whatever is known by experience cannot be described in words, as the sweetness of the sweet or the bitterness of the bitter cannot be known except by experience.⁶⁵

For Ghazali the evil and suffering of the world were a fact of God's will. God's will was to be unimpeded by any sort of necessity. This left no recourse other than that evil and suffering would be a place for the Muslim to press forward in obedience to God's will toward the development of trust and eventually love. This acceptance of evil as directly part of God's will intriguingly also created for Ghazali the idea of a best of all possible worlds:

Though Ghazali opposes the suggestion of any necessity at work within the divine nature, such that He "must" be generous, nevertheless, he adopts certain key points here and employs them in his own way: not only the concept of divine generosity itself but even certain turns of phrase, such as the imputation of "hoarding." By this is meant that if God had not produced the best world possible, He could be accused of "hoarding" a better one.⁶⁶

In this best possible world "the sum of happiness is that man make meeting with God Most High his goal, and the House of the afterlife his abode, and this life his inn [stopping place], and the body his mount, and the members his servants."⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Scherer, *Al-Ghazali's Letter to a Disciple*, 62.

⁶⁶ Ormsby, *Ghazali*, 74.

⁶⁷ Al-Ghazali, *Deliverance from Error*, 319.

CHAPTER 6

COMPARISON OF AQUINAS, MAIMONIDES, AND AL-GHAZALI

The comparison of Aquinas, al-Ghazali and Maimonides is the first horizontal level of comparison in my thesis. As I have stated in the methodology section, the comparisons serve as a lens to help us explore Christianity's view of theodicy. My purpose is not to find flaws in the other religious positions, but to use their positions to gain new perspectives that we can apply to help deepen and broaden our own Christian theodicy. This would of course include our overall apologetic. I will largely keep my comparisons to those between Christianity and the other two religions. I will at times point out comparisons between Judaism and Islam only when they add additional perspective on something relative to Christianity. As stated before, when I speak of comparisons of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, I am referring to comparisons of the positions of the theologians examined, not all positions of these religions.

I am using elements from Poythress' *Symphonic Theology* as I make these comparisons. This includes the "variety of perspectives . . . the other person's strong point . . . the dissolution of poorly posed questions and debates that are based ultimately on semantic questions . . . [and] enrichment by reconciliation of opposite emphases."¹ As I walk through each topic, I will structure the comparison to look at areas where Christianity seems, or is similar to, Judaism and Islam, but will look deeper at how they are or are not similar. I will bring up any unique points that each religion has offered in an area of theodicy. Finally, I will look at areas where Christianity is in opposition to Islam and Judaism.

¹ Vern S. Poythress, *Symphonic Theology: The Validity of Multiple Perspectives in Theology*, (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P & R Publishing, 2001), 78.

Table 1. Comparison of Theodicy in Aquinas, Maimonides ,and Al-Ghazali

| Topic | Aquinas | Maimonides | Al-Ghazali |
|------------------|--|--|---|
| Nature of evil | All things are good. Evil is the deprivation of good. | Evil flows from inherent corruption in material things and deprivation of good. | Only that which God declares evil is evil. |
| Cause of evil | All things move toward their created purpose (good). Evil caused by volitional beings seeking good disproportionately. | All things move toward their creational purpose. Evil is caused by man’s ignorance and lack of intellectual attainment. | The decree and divine will of God is the direct cause of evil. |
| God’s knowledge | God knows all things but his knowledge does not remove contingency. | God knows all things but his knowledge does not remove contingency. | God knows all things. This imposes necessity and contingency is an illusion. |
| God’s Governance | God controls all things directly in the design and indirectly in execution of that design. | God controls higher things. Lower things are chance. Man has free will to direct himself. He benefits from providence only by attaining intellectual perfection in closeness to divine intellect. | God controls all by the continual recreation. God’s control is consistent by habit not by a necessity such as goodness. Man has an illusion of freedom. |
| Special Issues | Suffering of the innocent is a special issue that is a not fully understandable. It may have its solution in reward in the afterlife. | There are no special issues. The suffering of the innocent is because moral attainment is necessary but not sufficient for providential care. God’s equivocal nature makes a complete understanding impossible. | No special issue except to remove the possibility of any sort of necessity being imposed on God. God’s will creates the best possible world. |
| How man responds | A reasoned perspective on evil and recourse to natural remedies to alleviate suffering. Identifying with Christ in his suffering drives us toward spiritual things and confirms and strengthens truth. | Reasoned perspective that there is less evil than we think, and “I am not the center of the universe.” Providence is accessed by intellectual attainment in connection with the divine intellect and focus on God. | Acquiring true knowledge of God’s will in commands and prohibitions. Acting on this to develop trust in God. Trust then developing into love for God. |

In Table 1, I have attempted to capture in a simple short format the overall direction each theologian takes in that area. There are limitations in how much can be included in such a summary, and some of the nuances of their positions may not be evident in the table itself.

In terms of summarizing their positions, I would offer the following descriptions as a way to view the core and key ancillary points of each man's theological system. For Aquinas, the core of his position is the necessary goodness of God, and in turn the necessary goodness of God's creation, following with the necessary goodness of God's providential governance of creation. In this sense, good flows from God to all things and in turn, all things move toward an ultimate good. Reinforcing this core aspect is the plan of God in Christ's incarnation and suffering in order to bring about the greater good of redemption. For Maimonides, his teaching centers on wisdom and the divine intellect. It is in this that man finds providential protection, but only to the degree that he is in contact with it. The history of the nation of Israel, and God's activity relative to it, reinforces this core aspect. For Ghazali, the core aspect is the raw will of God with nothing impinging on it. This is reinforced by the Sufi way; seeking the knowledge of God's will, combining that knowledge with action, action in the face of suffering leading to trust, and finally trust develops ultimately to a self abandoning love of God.

Of the three men's positions on theodicy, Aquinas and Maimonides seem to hold more similarities than either do with the al-Ghazali. Given the common roots of the Old Testament, which both Judaism and Christianity hold to be sacred scripture, it is not

surprising that they have many elements in common. The commonalities, however, in Christianity and Judaism seem to be in what could be termed structural areas. Jacob Neusner has described the correspondences of similarities and differences between Judaism and Christianity using this concept of structural and functional categories. He sees the comparisons between Christianity and Judaism as “traits of commonality (ordinarily: structural) and disagreement (commonly: functional).”² The structural areas include basic cosmological aspects and the functional areas include largely man’s activity and responses. While Christianity and Judaism have more similarities in structural areas, Judaism and Islam have more similarities in functional areas. This functional similarity developed even though Ghazali’s positions in the structural areas stand out almost in complete opposition to the positions of both Aquinas and Maimonides. Islam and Judaism then seem to converge more in functional areas while Christianity stands out from the other two in the functional areas. This reinforces Neusner’s concept that Islam and Judaism are functionally similar whereas Christianity and Judaism are structurally similar. This is an interesting observation in itself. It makes sense on some levels because Islam and Judaism share a more direct focus on social order, which Christianity tends to approach indirectly. The historical development of Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism from a common first and second temple Jewish root would lend itself also to the two having more structural similarities. The development of very different functional approaches between Rabbinic Judaism and Christianity is also

² Jacob Neusner and Bruce Chilton, *Jewish-Christian Debates* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 18.

understandable if we view the event of the incarnation as the demarcation of the split. Each group moves from a root of common structural elements toward very different functional views as each embraces or rejects the concept of the incarnation. This aspect is clear even in Maimonides when he describes what he sees as the limits to God's power. The five things that Maimonides says are impossible for God (cannot violate the law of non-contradiction, cannot transmute substances, cannot bring into existence another God, cannot annihilate Himself, cannot become a body) could be easily construed simply as reactions against the Christian doctrine of the incarnation. This is especially so, since one would think that events in Exodus such as the Nile being turned to blood would readily be seen as an act of transmutation of a substance. It is also interesting that with so many structural differences between Islam and Judaism, that they seem to converge in the functional areas. "Why should the two religions [Judaism and Islam] concur on so many fundamental propositions concerning the form that religion should take in the here and now or ordinary life? It is because of the character of the revelation—Torah, Quran—that each means to realize in the social order."³

Is the focus of Judaism and Islam on the legal regulation of day-to-day life enough to account for the functional convergence of Judaism and Islam from diverse structural positions? Christianity admittedly has less focus on regulation per se of daily life, but there is enough teaching on the topic in scripture, that one would think Christianity would not set

³ Jacob Neusner and Tamara Sonn, *Comparing Religions Through Law: Judaism and Islam* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1999), 324.

itself so far apart from Judaism in its functional views. The implications of the incarnation should be explored further in a deeper comparison of its impact on the divergence of Christian and Jewish functional areas. It would be especially useful to trace the topic of the incarnation back from the well-developed view in mature Christianity to Nazarene Judaism, and if possible back into messianic concepts from first and second temple Judaism. Comparing that then to the development of the views of Rabbinic Judaism would provide some very interesting insights.

Another fascinating point comes up in the similarities between Ghazali's and Maimonides' concern to firmly establish God's transcendence. Even with the common focus in Islam and Judaism on transcendence, Maimonides and Aquinas still share more common structural categories in their respective theodicies. One would think that the focus on God's transcendence over time would create a convergence in the structural elements in Judaism and Islam. This focus on God's transcendence does seem to contribute to the common divergence from Christianity in the functional areas. It further lends credence to the idea of the centrality of the incarnation as the main demarcation for the development of Christianity in contrast to Rabbinic Judaism as well as Islam. Neusner points out that it is largely in the functional areas that Judaism and Islam "share fundamental notions of how a believer is to relate to God."⁴ In this, we see more precisely, where the most radical change occurred in Christianity's overall system of theology. It is not in the structural areas that it shares with

⁴ Jacob Neusner, Sonn Tamara, and Jonathan E. Brockopp, *Judaism and Islam in Practice: A Sourcebook* (London: Routledge, 2000), 72.

Judaism but in the functional and relational areas that Christianity is set apart. In a general sense, Christianity diverges from Judaism in its functional and relational areas from a common structural position. Islam and Judaism on the other hand converge in the functional areas but seem to do so from very distinct structural positions. This undoubtedly says something about the nature of the processes at work in the development of each of the three religions.

In the first area of comparison, Aquinas and Maimonides both see the nature of evil as largely a deprivation of good. Neither holds that evil is a positively created or willed entity connected directly to God. Evil is essentially a lack of good as darkness is an absence of light. Maimonides only slightly differs in adding to this his Neoplatonic concept that corruption inherently flows from the material nature of the world. Maimonides moderates his view on this, however, to the point that his position is very similar to that of Aquinas. He says that even though the material element, “is the source of death and all evils, [it] is likewise good for the permanence of the Universe and the continuation of the order of things . . . consequently the true work of God is all good”⁵

Ghazali, in opposition to both Aquinas and Maimonides, sees evil as being both directed and defined by God’s will. He even goes to great lengths to attack the idea of secondary causality. He argues against the philosophers’ idea of causality because it

⁵ *G.P.*, III.10.

“renders miracles impossible and so is not only wrong but heretical.”⁶ We should keep in mind though, that his goal in all this is not so much to ascribe evil to the nature of God, as it is to keep the will of God free from all constraint. He seeks to avoid, what is for him “a dangerous autonomy; a world in which necessity inheres in the nature of things and infringes divine agency and compromises omnipotence.”⁷

Maimonides, like Ghazali, also seeks to guard an element that he sees as imperative. This is not the complete freedom of God’s will but the equivocal nature of God. Maimonides seeks to protect the equivocal nature of God in how he treats God’s attributes. “Every attribute predicated of God either denotes the quality of an action, or--when the attribute is intended to convey some idea of the Divine Being itself, and not of His actions--the negation of the opposite.”⁸ Even the negative attributes, he is careful to explain, are not really descriptions of God’s nature. “Negative attributes, on the other hand, do not, as regards the essence of the thing which we desire to know, in any way tell us what it is, except it be indirectly...”⁹ This is not an issue for Aquinas. He says, “The use of concrete and abstract names in God is not in any way repugnant.”¹⁰ He also believes God is self-limiting based on

⁶ Eric Ormsby, *Ghazali, Makers of the Muslim World* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2008), 77.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁸ *G.P.*, I.58.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *S.T.*, I. 32, 2, *ad.*

God's own character. He explains this, however, with some guards against the idea of natural constraints on God's will, but readily limits God's will on the basis of aspects internal to the divine essence, such as wisdom. The end in this, as is consistent for Aquinas, is divine goodness where:

God does not act from natural necessity, but that His will is the cause of all things . . . There is nothing in the divine power which is not in the order of the divine wisdom. . . the whole idea of order which a wise man puts into things made by him is taken from their end . . . when the end is proportionate to the things made for that end, the wisdom of the maker is restricted to some definite order . . . divine goodness is an end exceeding beyond all proportion things created.¹¹

Aquinas' focus and insistence on the goodness of God, and the inherent goodness of creation, seems to be one of the unique foci in his theodicy. A number of comments I came across in my research on Aquinas' theodicy seem to belittle this concept, that all things are essentially good, as a very weak or trite explanation. When the idea is applied directly to specific instances of extensive evil or suffering, it can seem to fall short of a reasonable explanation. However, when placed conceptually within the framework of both creation in general, and the centrality of Christ's incarnation, suffering, and redemption, essential goodness provides a very cogent overall basis for general theology and especially theodicy. It also provides a solid basis for man's hope in the face of apparent evil. We should be careful in our frequent emphasis on teaching the doctrine of the fall and total depravity that we do not lose some of the proper Christian emphasis on essential goodness. The essential goodness of creation and even the Thomistic concept that man creates evil as he seeks good

¹¹ *S.T.*, I. 25, 5, *ad.*

actually accentuates the pernicious nature of the fall and total depravity. This also seems a very realistic view of the nature of evil when taken in light of the Genesis account of the fall. Man seeks something that seems good, but in the end result in incredible evil.

Aquinas and Maimonides both hold that man is the cause of evil not God. Aquinas sees this occurring as man seeks good for himself out of proportion to consideration for his neighbor. Maimonides has a similar view but places more emphasis on ignorance and the lack of intellectual attainment as the root cause of man creating evil. It is striking that Maimonides does not seem to see his emphasis on the need for intellectual attainment, in light of the Genesis account of the fall where evil begins with man seeking the knowledge of good and evil. For Aquinas and Maimonides both, man seeks what is good but causes evil, and it is only their root causes that are different. Al-Ghazali stands out against both Aquinas and Maimonides again, in that for him, God is the ultimate cause of evil. For Ghazali, man only has an illusion of free will since all his actions are predetermined.

None of the three theologians has much, if any, emphasis on Satan as the cause of evil. It is not that they ignore Satan or demons but there is no real mention of them as the source behind evil in the world. It will be interesting to see how modern theologians position Satan. The fact that Satan does not take a central position as the cause of evil for any of the three is striking, in that it places the responsibility for evil, in the Christian and Jewish systems, principally on the shoulders of man. From a Christian perspective, considering anything except mankind as the principle source of evil weakens the concept of the fall and total depravity. While this is the case, it is not uncommon to hear Satan regularly blamed much

more directly from our pulpits as the principle cause of the poor state of the world. Satan does not create anything, including evil. He deceives man, but man bears the vast majority of blame for evil and suffering in the world.

All three theologians hold that God knows all things in detail and from an eternal perspective, which does not limit God's knowledge at all. Aquinas and Maimonides do not see God's knowledge as eliminating contingency or imposing necessity. They both feel this position is logically necessary to give meaning to ethics and to provide true value in seeking counsel and wisdom. In the area of contingency, Ghazali again holds a position in opposition to both Aquinas and Maimonides. He firmly states that God's knowledge imposes necessity on things and, similarly to free will, that contingency is an illusion. The scope of my study did not allow me to explore how Ghazali's position on the lack of contingency influenced his views in the area of Islamic jurisprudence. It would be interesting to explore that area, since the other two theologians felt so strongly that without real contingency ethics and daily wisdom would be undermined. From an apologetical standpoint, it would seem that Christianity could take improve its apologetic relative to Islam, by emphasizing the true value of scriptural guidance in the face of real contingency. The reformed faith establishes both the sovereignty of God and contingency. This insures the value of law and ethics and, at the same time, establishes that all is moving in God's will toward His good, determined end.

In terms of God's government, all three theologians hold that God controls higher-level things such as the movement of celestial bodies. Ghazali holds that God's control

extends from there, all the way through to every detail of creation, and is direct to the point of a moment-by-moment recreation of all things according to the will of God. Maimonides and Aquinas see differentiation in the degree and mode of God's control beyond the higher-level. The idea of occasionalism seems to be the most striking difference in Ghazali's overall theodicy. It admittedly removes some of the elements of difficulty in explaining the nature of evil and suffering. The problem is that it does so by presenting a view of the nature of God that the other two theologians roundly rejected, that God was the source of evil. It may be worthwhile to explore the use of theodicy in general in Christianities' apologetic before the Muslim world. One of the earliest written Christian apologetics to Islam actually begins its defense of Christianity based on Christian theodicy. This is in a 7th century work ascribed to Saint John of Damascus known as *Dialogue Between A Christian And A Saracen*.

Maimonides feels that God's direct control practically ceases after the higher-level. Events on earth are not under God's direct control, except when he intervenes in the miraculous through direct actions. Natural events proceed normally from chance and man directs his own actions by his own free will. He says if a ship sinks in a storm, it is not the will of God that causes the ship to sink. It is simply a matter of chance. Men who take passage on that ship do so by their own choice and free will. While holding to chance events and man's free will, Maimonides does say that the will of God still acts so that some do, and others do not, take passage on the ship. He establishes the connection of God's will to the free choices of men through the instrument of divine intellect. If a given individual had developed sufficient intellectual perfection, they would have known not to choose passage on

that particular ship. Providence then protects men because providential protection flows from the divine intellect that guides men in their choices. One would suppose that those who died on the ship that sank did so according to a more punitive aspect of the will of God because they did not have sufficient access to divine intellect. That lack of access to divine intellect could stem from a moral flaw, which is necessary but not sufficient for intellectual attainment, or from turning away from God, which cuts man off from the flow of divine intellect. In either case, the will of God is fulfilled in conjunction with the free will of man and the chance nature of natural events. This focus on divine intellect or wisdom seems to color a great deal of Maimonides' thinking.

Aquinas' view of God's governance inserts a space between the will of God and the execution of God's will. Aquinas sees God's will as controlling the overall plan, but says that often in the execution, God uses secondary causes. These secondary causes are through agents that have free will. The desires and appetites that are part of their created nature guide them. In this way, they carry out God's plan and His will, not as the result of a connection to divine intellect or through forced determination, but simply because they follow the ends for which they were created. Overarching this concept is the central tenant that good is the end for which all things were created. In some ways, Aquinas' focus on essential goodness seems to fit more with the secular humanists' view of man's goodness and potential than what we typically think of as the Christian view of man. It is, however, a concept of essential goodness integrated in a thoroughly Christian construct. Returning more to the Thomistic emphasis on essential goodness may allow Christianity to better speak to the secular world.

Only Aquinas finds an issue of special concern in his theodicy. This is the suffering of the innocent or righteous. He looks especially to the case of Job and finds in this difficult to understand. It is puzzling since God is somehow involved and man somehow is subject to what seems to be unjust suffering. Aquinas ultimately looks to a solution to this issue in a possible reward in the afterlife. This idea of reward in the afterlife also finds a place in Ghazali's theodicy and to a much lesser degree in Maimonides. The greatest difference is that neither Ghazali nor Maimonides sees any great issue or difficulty posed by the suffering of the innocent or righteous. For Ghazali, it is all part of the will of God, and suffering and evil serve simply as a place where knowledge, action, and trust find a greater test than in normal circumstances. For Maimonides it is also easy to understand how the righteous can suffer. They suffer when they take their eyes off God, which cuts them off from divine intellect. They also suffer when they fail to reach the degree of intellectual perfection necessary to connect them to that aspect of divine intellect that would have protected them.

While Christianity can certainly identify with the importance of wisdom in day-to-day life, Maimonides' concept seems to develop out of a much deeper integration of Neoplatonic concepts into his Jewish system of theology. The idea of emanations of a divine element is certainly Neoplatonic in origin. Maimonides positions them as emanations of divine intellect rather than divine essence. Since he also has the concept of exoteric and esoteric teachings, this is likely one of the more esoteric elements and not surprisingly, Maimonides' teaching was highly controversial during its early dissemination. Maimonides eventually found a central place in Jewish thought, and it will be interesting to see if some of these more esoteric

elements carry through to modern works of Jewish theodicy. The degree to which he was able to integrate such a clearly Greek philosophical concept might well be a word of warning to Christian theologians as we look at the historical development of Christian theology. Are there elements of worldly philosophical thought alien to scriptural concepts that have crept into our day-to-day theology? Have we absorbed concepts foreign to the scriptures in appropriate ways?

In terms of solutions for man in the face of suffering, all three theologians feel that perspective is important to man when he is facing evil and suffering. Since man is a rational being, it is not surprising that the idea of rational perspective finds importance in all three religions. Each one, however, shapes the idea of perspective differently in keeping with the core focus of their theodicy.

Ghazali focuses on orienting man around his concept of the Sufi way. The perspective that is important is to see suffering primarily as a test of man in his putting God's will into action, and trusting God regardless of the circumstances. Ghazali sees life as more or less a continuous test whether we are in the midst of blessing or difficulty. Both blessing and difficulty have their particular challenges. The one can distract, as well as the other, from the focus on following the Sufi way. The key for Ghazali is to stay focused on the Sufi chain of the knowledge of God's will, putting that will into action, and developing trust.

Maimonides' approach is to encourage man to have a reasoned perspective about suffering and to see that, relatively speaking, there is not nearly as much suffering as we

seem to think. When we do suffer, we should also have the perspective that there are greater things going on and that we are not the center of the universe.

Aquinas naturally turns to creation itself as part of the solution for man when he faces suffering. This aspect does not seem to play as much a part for Ghazali and Maimonides. Since, for Aquinas, creation is by its nature good, it naturally provides recourse for man to help deal with suffering. In counter balance to this though, he also says that we should see that suffering drives us away from things of the world and toward spiritual things.

All these perspectives are actually reasonable, even when viewed within Christian theology alone. This became apparent for me as I found a very natural affinity to all three teachings in this area of the prescribed perspectives. The human need for a logical explanation of evil and suffering seems universal. These ideas then about perspective may have more to do with the human need for logical reflection than the validity of the actual theologies of the respective faiths. This becomes more apparent in the comparison of the three religions than it probably would have in a simple comparison of just two of them. While these perspectives are compatible, even within their respective theologies, it may behoove us as Christians not to rely too heavily on these sorts of responses to evil and suffering without tying them more closely to positions that are unique to Christian theodicy. It is all too easy to begin to let a more “folksy” sort of wisdom about life take a central position in our teaching, than it may be to bring people struggling with suffering into contact with a more definitively Christian concept of essential goodness and the incarnation. We

owe those to whom we minister to access to the distinctives of the Christian faith, more than simple humanistic concepts.

It is in the area of man's response to suffering that Aquinas brings up a position unique to Christianity. This is in direct personal identification with someone else in their suffering, this being Christ. This is the aspect that Aquinas looks to when he writes his letter to the Cantor of Antioch. Aquinas links identity of the Christian in his suffering to Christ's suffering in His redemptive mission. The idea that suffering gives strength and power to the truth of an outwardly focused message and mission is an aspect that seems to be completely lacking in both Ghazali and Maimonides. Admittedly, there is an element of identification with another's suffering in the Shiite tradition. I do not have time to explore that in detail in this study but the elements there are also very distinct from the Christian concept. Identification with Christ fits well, though, with Aquinas' central theme of the goodness of God as the driving force of his whole system of theology. The recent reemphasis on the centrality of Christ and the gospel in preaching and teaching lends itself to more consciously and consistently linking our teaching on suffering to this overarching redemptive nature of God's whole plan.

Another overall similarity between Jewish and Christian thought is that both Aquinas and Maimonides hold that creation flows from goodness. They hold different views about the nature of goodness, however. Maimonides sees it as an attribute of God's action. He includes it in the thirteen attributes of mercy or *shelosh-'esreh Middot*. "Only the thirteen middot are mentioned, because they include those acts of God which refer to the creation and

the government of mankind.”¹² He explains how these are not attributes as we normally think of them in that whenever, “any one of His actions is perceived by us, we ascribe to God that emotion which is the source of the act when performed by ourselves.”¹³ Aquinas, on the other hand, sees goodness as part of who God is, not simply the way we describe God’s acts. “God alone is good essentially . . . whatever belongs to others accidentally belongs to Him essentially . . . and He is not directed to anything else as to an end, but is Himself the last end of all things. Hence it is manifest that God alone has every kind of perfection by His own essence; therefore He Himself alone is good essentially.”¹⁴ Even though there is similar structural element, on a deeper inspection, it becomes apparent that the outward similarity in describing creation as flowing from goodness diverges again on the basis of the transcendence of God. This again indicates the centrality of the incarnation as a point of demarcation for Christianity.

Another observation that I found remarkable was the differences in internal consistency and orderliness in the three views of theodicy. Ghazali’s theodicy is by far the most internally consistent. He follows the same concepts he lays down in his larger works in the more specialized and focused works. For instance, his *Letter to a Disciple* lays out the same structure and prescribes the same course of actions for his friend in the face of near death as you find in his other works. Maimonides and Aquinas, when writing to people in

¹² *G.P.*, I.54.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *S.T.*, I,6, 3, *ad.*

similar difficult circumstances, do not seem to follow so nearly closely the overall pattern they lay down in their larger works. In Maimonides' *Letter to Yemen* he shifts his focus far more to the historic actions of God, which is in some senses normal for him, but he goes on to hold out hope based on an actual prediction of a near return of the Messiah. This clearly contradicts his other stances relative to even his general messianic concept. You can find, however, an excuse for this in Maimonides' own system of higher esoteric concepts and lower exoteric concepts. It may be that he simply does not believe those he is writing to in Yemen are capable of grasping his higher concepts so he simply offers them encouragement in the more exoteric level. The internal consistency for Ghazali seems to stem from his frank ascription of evil to the will of God and then to a single-minded focus on the will of God as the center of all his thinking. Christian and Jewish thought are unwilling to accept God as the author of evil. This unwillingness to ascribe evil to God seems to create much messier systems of theodicy. It leaves Aquinas with a frank admission of puzzlement relative to the suffering of the righteous. In this respect, though, I do not think that the Christian position is necessarily weaker because each of the men in question had to resort to something beyond human reason ultimately, no matter how uncluttered and tightly woven their theological systems were.

This resorting to something beyond reason is also a commonality that stands out in Aquinas, Ghazali, and Maimonides. Their reaching out beyond reason becomes evident somewhat in their writing. Maimonides sets up a clear system of exoteric and esoteric thought. He looks to emanations of divine intellect as the solution for his theodicy. Ghazali

ends his Sufi way with the development of a love that cannot be described but must be “tasted.” Aquinas arrives at a point of incomprehensibility in solving the issue of the suffering of the innocent. There are limits to man’s reason and each theological system eventually reaches those limits and must resort to things beyond reason. We should not shy away from the New Testament concepts of mystery beyond human reason inherent in Christian theology as if it were some weak point to be skirted. At some level, man knows that his reason is limited and the New Testament concept of mystery still holds a legitimate place. In addition to the common recourse to things beyond reason, it was striking that each of the theologians encountered a crisis in their lives. The nature of the crisis, and the outcome of the encounter with it sheds light on their theological perspectives.

Maimonides experienced crises in the death of his brother David. He falls into utter despair and becomes physically ill for a full year. He admits also that he never fully recovers from this crisis. In his later life, he turns away from his study, reflection, and writing because he is forced to focus on earning a living as a court physician in Egypt. In some of his later personal letters, he complains that he cannot even find a spare moment to read and study anything except medical works. In the aftermath of his brother’s death and loss of the family fortune, Maimonides spends the majority of the rest of his life only able to carry out the basic requirements of daily Jewish religion. He never seems to find significant opportunity to consecrate to the study and reflection he says are necessary to develop intellectual perfection. The loss of freedom to pursue thought and reflection seem to be part of the ramifications of evil and suffering that Maimonides does not seem to have anticipated. An adequate Christian

theodicy should directly deal with the limitations that evil and suffering may impose on our own religious life.

Ghazali's crisis stems from his inability to combine the knowledge of God's will with action. This revolves initially largely around his need to reject the acclaim and status that were inherent in his position as a professor of Islamic law and theology. He struggles for six months. Finally, it is physical paralysis that makes him unable to continue in his position as a teacher and frees him to pursue the path of acting on what he knows is God's will. He views this as a gift from God in the face of his own inability. He then spends nearly ten years in isolation and relative obscurity but returns for a short hiatus of public teaching before again abandoning public life. Throughout Ghazali's thought, the goal is the last step of the Sufi way, the love of God. This last step though is indescribable. His neat theological system finds no easy answers in the end. He only finds an analogy in the concept of taste, and the fact that one can taste something, but one cannot adequately describe that taste to another in words. His *Letter to a Disciple* seems almost tragically to point his dying friend to something he can neither describe nor explain how to obtain. His theological system seems to come to this abrupt breakpoint partly because of the very orderliness that typified it from the beginning. There seems to be something in man that realizes a need for solutions external to himself, even as he creates a worldview meant to be more autonomous.

Aquinas' crisis comes only a few months before his death. There is very little that describes the nature of the crisis or of Aquinas' life and thinking afterward. The most telling thing is that whatever Aquinas experienced it did not lead to a time of transition or struggle,

it led to an abrupt and incisive change. The great scholastic theologian literally dropped his work on the *Summa Theologia*. According to at least one credible report, he saw what had been his life's work as nothing more valuable than straw, compared with what he had experienced in the Mass of Saint Nicolas. Unfortunately not much more is known, as he died from a fall as he was making his way to a Papal convocation a few months later. It would be extremely enlightening to find out more about Aquinas between the time of the crisis and his death. It is evident at least that Aquinas' crisis led to an abrupt change, and immediate change, whereas the crises of Ghazali and Maimonides left them struggling forward in their search. Perhaps it is only the short time that Aquinas lived that lends itself to the seemingly more dramatic nature of change brought about by his crisis. He simply left all and followed whatever path had been laid out for him in his mysterious experience in that mass. This points to the power and central significance of the incarnation and the risen Christ. In all of Christian thought and life:

The story of the church since the apostolic age is not materially different from that which preceded it. It is still the story of the risen Lord in the midst of his church, saying "fear not" (Rev. 1:17, 20). This fellowship with Christ strengthened the martyrs, comforted the discouraged, and made the faith real to multitudes. One reads of broad Christian experience in the *Confessions* of St. Augustine, in Bonaventure's seraphic vision, in the religious orders, and in the sects and mainstream of the church. It lies behind the ringing challenge of the youthful Athanasius in *The Incarnation of the Word of God*, and behind the ecstasy which made Aquinas lay down his pen with the remark, "All that I have written seems to me like so much straw compared to what I have seen and what has been revealed to me."¹⁵

¹⁵ M. Eugene Osterhaven, *The Faith of the Church: A Reformed Perspective on Its Historical Development* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982), 196.

I will next look at three modern theologians writing on about their Christian, Jewish and Islamic theodicies on a more popular level. I will compare each of these vertically with the concepts held respectively by Aquinas, Maimonides, and Ghazali. I will also compare them horizontally with each other as I have done with the theologians from the classical period.

CHAPTER 7

MODERN/POPULAR THEODICIES OF RANDY ALCORN, BENJAMIN BLECH, AND MUHAMMAD AL-SHA'RAWI WITH COMPARISON TO THE RESPECTIVE CLASSICAL/HISTORICAL THEODICES

This comparison will look at all three modern theodicies written for popular audiences. This chapter will also include the vertical intra-religion comparison between the three modern theodicies with the respective classical/historical theodicy. The movement of the comparisons toward the more popular works is intentional in that I will move from this to the next level, which includes individual responses to the issues of evil and suffering. I am moving from the historical more academic perspective to a modern popular perspective and will end with individual perspectives.

The first theodicy covered is that taken from Randy Alcorn's book, *If God is Good Why do We Hurt*. Alcorn represents a mainstream evangelical Christian perspective. His background is that of a pastor in a community church, and a Christian activist. He is the founder and director of Eternal Perspective Ministries, which is "dedicated to teaching biblical truth and drawing attention to the needy and how to help them."¹ He received his BA in Theology from Multnomah Bible College and an MA in Biblical Studies from Western Seminary. He is a best-selling author of over 30 books. His popularity and his general evangelical orientation make him a very likely candidate for a wide variety of Christians to

¹ Randy Alcorn, "About Randy," Eternal Perspective Ministries, <http://www.epm.org/about-randy/> (accessed February 22, 2011).

see him as an authoritative source from whom to develop their own position. He describes his book as being for those who, “long to make sense of the evil and suffering in this world . . . [are] seeking answers to a philosophical problem . . . want to be prepared to face [suffering] . . . need comfort.”²

Alcorn largely sees the nature of evil as being rooted in the choices of volitional beings. He does not fully hold to the Thomistic formulation that evil is essentially the absence of good. “Evil is more than merely the absence of good: it's the *corruption* of good, like rust on metal or cancer in the cells of a living body.”³ While defining corruption initially in these more natural terms Alcorn sees it essentially as an act of the will in rebellion against God. “When we examine the Bible's perspective on evil, we learn that its essence is a refusal to accept the true God as God. Instead, evil elevates someone or something else in God's place. This is an act of idolatry and rebellion against God.”⁴ Alcorn also does not make any statement in support of Aquinas' concept that evil comes from an over-desire for something that is essentially good. Alcorn defines rebellion and concurrent evil simply as “anything that violates God's moral will and therefore displeases him.”⁵ Alcorn also links evil and

² Randy Alcorn, *If God Is Good: Why Do We Hurt?*, (Portland: Multnomah Books, 2010), 5.

³ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

suffering in that “suffering follows evil as a caboose follows an engine.”⁶ This includes not just suffering that comes from corrupted volitional acts but also extends to natural events because the “initial moral evil loosed ever-expanding suffering.”⁷ In this particular book, Alcorn also does not develop any idea of secondary causality nor of distancing God’s sovereignty from evil as Aquinas is careful to do. He simply states that “God is not the author of evil, but he is the author of a story that includes evil.”⁸

So Alcorn traces the cause of evil back to one central element, “the first human sin, when Eve and Adam disobeyed God.”⁹ This “initiated sweeping consequences, including a curse on the natural world.”¹⁰ Out of this Alcorn describes two types of evil. “We can therefore think of moral wrongdoing as *primary evil* and suffering as *secondary evil*. Secondary evils are *things that happen to us* that we don't like: they're caused by primary evils, which are *things we do* that God doesn't like.”¹¹ So all evil and in turn all suffering flow from man’s sin. Even “natural disasters can be traced to humanities’ moral fall . . . their rebellion against Him has brought a curse to earth . . . disrupting natural forces.”¹² Alcorn

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 14.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 9.

¹² Ibid., 15.

does not hold quite as simplistic an explanation for natural calamities as it appears. He extends the issue of human sin to something that exacerbates the suffering of people and something that also inclines them away from the wisdom to avoid natural calamities:

Fatalities in natural disasters can multiply because of morally evil human actions. Wisdom can also be a factor. People frequently build houses in areas known to be vulnerable to floods, landslides, wildfires, tornadoes, and earthquakes. Some perish when they refuse warnings to vacate their homes.¹³

This idea of a corrupt world where sin flows through to creation itself seems quite different from Aquinas' concept of the overall basic goodness of all things that carried over from creation and the essential goodness of its Creator. At first glance, Aquinas' position can seem counterintuitive but it does provide more continuity with the original creation and explains effects of a fall that include deeper more pernicious aspects of sin and corruption in the world than the more simplistic/moralistic explanation offered by Alcorn. In Alcorn's world, one might think that it is simply a matter of making choices more in keeping with God's moral directives. In Aquinas' world, even our seeking to do good could end in evil because of the effects of the fall. Aquinas' view is also more in keeping with an Augustinian approach that also held to an essential goodness of creation and that evil was "the absence or privation of good."¹⁴

Alcorn does make one caveat to man's sin being the universal cause of evil. "Some evils appear so horrible as to defy all natural explanation. Modern human *history*, decade

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ John Bowker, *Problems of Suffering in Religions of the World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 86.

after decade, has chronicled brutal, calculated, unwavering wickedness—so extreme that I believe its source can only be supernatural.”¹⁵ These extreme evils, he says, point to the reality of “supernatural good and evil, testifying to the invisible realities of God and Satan.”¹⁶ While ascribing some level of evil and suffering to supernatural causes, Alcorn does not go into any detail in ascribing evil to Satan. He also makes specific mention of the danger of dualism as an unviable alternative to a truly Christian theodicy. “Subtle forms of such dualism exist even among some Christians. They believe that though God may win in the end, Satan has so much power and brings so much suffering and evil that God simply cannot stop him, at least for now.”¹⁷ In comparison, it is interesting given the nature of the age in which he wrote, that Aquinas makes even less mention of a connection to Satan and supernatural sources for evil in his discussion of theodicy.

Alcorn teaches that God knows all things from eternity. “Adam and Eve's sin did not take God by surprise. Though evil had no part in God's original creation, it was part of his original plan.”¹⁸ He argues against the ideas of open theists who limit God’s knowledge when they assert that, “God does not and cannot know in advance the future choices human beings will make.”¹⁹ Unlike Aquinas, Alcorn does not take much time to discuss how God’s

¹⁵Alcorn, *Why Do We Hurt?*, 30.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 17.

¹⁸ Ibid., 13.

¹⁹ Ibid., 21.

knowledge impinges on contingency. In a larger work, *If God Is Good: Faith in the Midst of Suffering and Evil*, he simply says, “God knows everything including every contingency.”²⁰ In that book, he also explains the debate between Luther and Erasmus. He essentially agrees with the bondage of the will in anything pertaining to salvation while allowing for legitimate choice in other areas.

God’s unlimited knowledge is from an eternal timeless perspective and Alcorn explains the importance of that for man. “We are limited to time: God is not. From the perspective of a timeless God, the distant future —when justice is fully granted and evil and suffering are gone—is as real as the present.”²¹ God’s eternal perspective should bring us comfort and increase our trust in God because it can make sense of things we cannot. “We can be taken by surprise, but God cannot. This should encourage us. I find it easier to trust a God who has known about a tragedy all along—and planned in advance how he’ll use it for his glory and for our good—than one who only just found out about it.”²² So it is based on God’s sovereignty and wisdom that Alcorn says we can be confident that, “short-term suffering and evil can sometimes accomplish long-term good.”²³ Aquinas in contrast focuses more on the essential goodness of God as the source of our confidence. This actually seems

²⁰. Randy Alcorn, *If God Is Good: Faith in the Midst of Suffering and Evil* (Portland: Multnomah Books, 2009), 174.

²¹ Alcorn, *Why Do We Hurt?*, 5.

²² *Ibid.*, 23.

²³ *Ibid.*, 5.

like a more satisfactory foundation for our trust than Alcorn's focus on sovereignty. It derives from a more fundamental and teleological reason for our confidence than sovereignty, and is probably more distinctly Christian thought. Looking at this from the perspective of symphonic theology, the two approaches do actually complement one another. Perhaps the best option would be to go further and build our trust in God based on all his attributes.

Alcorn clearly holds that God is not limited in his power. God is sovereign and His "sovereignty means that everything always stays under God's rule: nothing happens without either his direction or permission."²⁴ Alcorn also talks about God "restraining a great deal of evil until the moment he brings final judgment."²⁵ He does not go as far as Aquinas in establishing any parameters for God's sovereignty such as dividing plan and execution. He simply leaves the distinction less defined other than his reference to "direction or permission."²⁶ Alcorn also attacks the ideas of process theologians who see God as changing and evolving along with creation and not interceding and governing only "indirectly through gentle persuasion,...never by coercion... and never violates nature's laws by performing miracles."²⁷ In some ways, Alcorn seems to prefer a stronger direct connection between God and all causality than Aquinas' more refined concept of the gentle governance of God.

²⁴ Ibid., 28.

²⁵ Ibid., 32.

²⁶ Ibid., 28.

²⁷ Ibid.

Alcorn does not allude to any special issues in the area of suffering except perhaps our limited ability to understand evil and suffering. He expresses both his own limitations in understanding as well as resultant limitations to some conclusions that might be drawn from his position on the direct connection between man's sin and evil and suffering:

That's why our grasp of why God has permitted certain evil and suffering is often as unclear to us as it was to a righteous man in the Bible named Job, who suddenly lost all his children, wealth, and health. Job's friends thought they had his suffering all figured out—it must be God's punishment for his sin. Likewise every time a disaster hits some part of the world, certain people are sure they know why, despite the fact that the Bible tells us that for now many bad things happen to God's own people and many good things happen to evil people.²⁸

In this, it seems his concern is mostly a pastoral one more than trying to tie up possible philosophical or theoretical loopholes in his position.

Alcorn spends a great deal of time working through man's response and especially related to the perspective necessary for man to be able to adequately face evil and suffering. Given the popular nature of the book, his pastoral history, and even the stated goal of his organization, this more practical focus is understandable. The first thing needed is wisdom. Alcorn says this “begins with the humility to say: *there's a great deal about this I don't understand.*”²⁹ Another key thing in facing evil and suffering is our perspective of God's love. People tend to doubt “God's love when terrible things happen to them . . . because we define love in superficial ways, setting us up to question God in hard times.”³⁰ It is important

²⁸Ibid., 41.

²⁹ Ibid., 6.

³⁰ Ibid., 25.

to know that God intends to use suffering and evil in our lives positively. “God still intends to accomplish much in each of our lives. In his love and wisdom, he knows suffering is sometimes the best means to conduct this work. Our God-given humanity necessitates this process by which we mature and grow in humility, perspective, and faith.”³¹ This seems to be more in keeping with an Irenic theodicy where sin and evil is placed in the context of the need for human improvement and development. I do not think Alcorn intends this. He simply focuses more on the practical pastoral reasons for people to find hope in the midst of suffering. The direction that he takes in this, as well as using sovereignty as the primary basis of our confidence, moves him, however, away from a more central Augustinian perspective that is more distinctly Christian.

Like Aquinas, Alcorn also prescribes a number of remedies including; “look to God’s promises for comfort Anticipate God’s rewardLighten the load through prayer. . . . Share your life with others who suffer . . . deepen the reservoir you draw from in your daily life study God's attributes (sovereignty, omnipotence, justice, patience, grace).”³² Modern evangelical readers possibly resonate with these more “spiritual” things. Aquinas bases his remedies in his concept of the essential goodness of creation, and thus includes remedies that some modern evangelicals might construe as more broadly natural or even carnal.

³¹ Ibid., 26.

³² Ibid., 47-49.

In both Alcorn and Aquinas, Christ has a central place. The last chapter of Alcorn's book is very reminiscent of Aquinas' position on the centrality of Christ's suffering in *De Rationibus Fidei*:

Why did Jesus do it? Why did he suffer the relentless beatings, then hang on the cross for six hours rather than six seconds or six minutes? Partly because it reminds us that suffering is a process. God doesn't end our suffering as soon as we would like. He didn't end his Son's suffering as soon as he would have liked. We stand in good company. God doesn't merely empathize with our sufferings. Because Jesus is God, what Jesus suffered, God suffered Christ's sacrifice addresses the very heart of the problem of evil and suffering. And one day it will prove to have been the final answer.³³

Alcorn's overall position on evil and suffering is similar to Aquinas but his greatest difference is that he seems to arrive at it from a different starting point. For Aquinas, the starting point is the essential goodness of God and the subsequent goodness of all creation. Alcorn's starting point seems to be that God is trustworthy. One might not necessarily link trustworthiness to goodness, but it was clear in Ghazali's theodicy that trust can be an important component even without considering God's goodness as essential. The fact that Alcorn does not start with necessary goodness perhaps also leads him to his view that evil is rooted in a more positive concept of corruption. That positive concept of evil may also play into his directly linking evils, such as natural disasters, to man's sin. You certainly can find instances where God's judgment of sin takes the form of some sort of "natural disaster," such as the biblical account of the flood. My concern with Alcorn's more direct linking of sin and natural disasters is not to negate the biblical teaching of God's judgment. Alcorn himself

³³ Ibid., 52-53.

even cautions against assuming we know that some particular sin caused some particular natural disaster. My concern is that we do not oversimplify our view of sin or evil in a way that might seem more orthodox from today's evangelical perspective than Aquinas' more complex construct of goodness. This actually has the danger of leading us to a simplistic view where sin and evil is far less insidious and destructive. It also strays from the historic Augustinian positions from which the reformation developed.

Both Aquinas and Alcorn find elements in evil and suffering to be incomprehensible. Alcorn finds some evil and suffering to be so extreme that it can only be considered supernatural. Aquinas finds the suffering of the righteous and the story of Job to be impenetrable to human reason alone.

Both Aquinas and Alcorn have Christ as a central point of reference for their theodicy. Aquinas brings it up less frequently in his main writings as he is building a system of Christian philosophy through extensive minute details of logical arguments. As already seen, when Aquinas is relating to a fellow Christian in dire circumstances, Christ takes a central role in the definition of the problem of evil and the response. The life, suffering and death of Christ is also central to Alcorn's understanding of the ultimate source of a Christian's trust in God. Christ's incarnation impinges on the prescribed reasoned perspective needed by those suffering to the point that it eclipses reason itself and provides "understanding" where none is possible:

There was a time when I could not fully accept any explanation I didn't fully understand. But because Jesus willingly entered this world of evil and suffering and didn't spare himself, because he endured the worst for my sake and yours, he has

earned my trust even for what I can't understand. When it comes to goodness and evil, present suffering, and eternal joy . . . The first word, and the last, is Jesus.³⁴

Rabbi Benjamin Blech is an orthodox rabbi. He has been a Professor of Talmud at Yeshiva University since 1966 and is a prolific author of books on Judaism and the Jewish people. Blech wrote, *If God is so Good Why is the World so Bad?* as a counter point to conservative Rabbi Harold Kushner's book. "Since the appearance of the now world-famous book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, countless people have asked me to explain: Does God run the world or doesn't He? Do bad things happen randomly, as Kushner maintains, or is there a plan and a design to the events of our lives?"³⁵ His focus seems to be a concern for the practical implications in the lives of his congregants. So writing on a popular level, he does not build a carefully laid theology/philosophy as was the case for Maimonides. He instead begins with questions and responses related to the human side of the equation. This may also reflect Judaism's orientation that stresses "norms of behavior as much as of belief"³⁶

Blech does not spend a great deal of time, as a result, on establishing details related to the nature or cause of evil. In this respect, he only expresses two things about evil. First, he

³⁴ Ibid., 53.

³⁵ Benjamin Blech, *If God Is Good, Why Is the World so Bad?* (Deerfield Beach, Fla.: Simcha Press, 2003), 10.

³⁶ Jacob Neusner and Tamara Sonn, *Comparing Religions Through Law: Judaism and Islam* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1999), 23.

wants to counter the idea that God is not in control, and to do so discusses two attributes of God's nature to describe the derivative sources of our understanding of good and evil:

In this most basic expression of monotheism, the very struggle of man to understand the apparent contradiction of good and evil is addressed and answered. God is one, but He has two different attributes.... God is known alternatively as *Adonay* (translated Lord) and *Elohim* (translated God), depending on his function and the nature of His relationship at that particular moment. There are times that He appears to us as a loving father, exuding goodness and mercy. . . . But there are other times when He appears to us as a tough judge meting out justice according to His law and punishing us for our infractions. Then His name is Elohim. 'God, stern disciplinarian and unforgiving ruler of the universe.'³⁷

Second, Blech does not elaborate a great deal, but he does connect evil to man. He says Judaism rejects the Christian concept of original sin but that "the world has become corrupt and is no longer a paradise because of the people in it"38 The nature of man's corrupting effect is based in man's failure to live up to his God given responsibility. Blech describes this failure using an illustration from the life of Moses:

To help Moses grasp the reasons for the presence of evil on Earth, God tells him to stand 'alongside Me.' This phrase echoes a similar idea from Genesis when man is first created in the image of God. Man is given a role to play in completing God's work commensurate with his greatness. He is told that he stands as a partner alongside God up above; he is not a passive observer down below Just as God is a creator. So too is man. Indeed, man is a co-creator with God, a partner in the completion and perfection of the world.³⁹

Man's failure in this responsibility is the fundamental thing that, if anything, seems to be the cause of evil and suffering. "So the evil in the world only points up the work we still have to

³⁷ Blech, *If God Is Good*, 20.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 56.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 46.

do. Evil is a manifestation of a world that is still incomplete, waiting for man to do his part and finish the job.”⁴⁰

There is no real discussion of evil relative to natural events or disasters and disease. They are simply a fact of existence. So at most, there is a basic idea that evil is still very much a part of God’s plan and our understanding of it is derived from two attributes of God’s nature but that man is the primary cause of evil in his failure to do his part. There is a bit of an idea of incompleteness in the world, but nothing as clear as Maimonides’ concept of deprivation of good. There are also a few statements that the world is corrupt, “the good deserve a Garden of Eden, and since this world isn't paradise, they should not be here.”⁴¹ Blech again does not develop this nearly as much as Maimonides’ concept of the inherent corruption of the material. The lack of development in both, however, might be due to his accommodation to his audience rather than any real differences between Blech and Maimonides.

In terms of God’s knowledge, Blech does not spend a great deal of time elaborating his theology. He is clear, though, that there are no limits to God’s knowledge, and that it extends to details, not just the macro level. “Yes, God knew every address, every resident. In that immense display of His power to change history [in the Exodus], He also demonstrated

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., 56.

the most intimate kind of caring. He intervened not just to save a people, but to rescue six hundred thousand individuals”⁴²

Blech does not develop the concept of the connection between God’s knowledge and the actualization of reality to any great degree. He does take the same position as Maimonides and limits the connection so that contingency is still a reality. “God's knowledge doesn't create reality: it only foretells it. For man to achieve spiritual greatness, it isn't enough for God to know that he could theoretically pass a test. Until a demonstration of faith is actually performed, it remains no more than potential.”⁴³

In terms of God’s governance, Blech introduces his book as a counter to Kushner’s view that God wasn’t in control. He says, “God is all-powerful. He is the author of history—and His divine maxim is not ‘mind your own business.’”⁴⁴ He also rejects any notion of dualism. “Judaism sees Satan as a servant of God whose function is to set up choices between good and evil so that we can exercise our free will.”⁴⁵ He does establish a qualification to God’s omnipotence. It is not a limit to God’s power per se, but a self-imposed limit for a purpose. “At times God may willfully limit His power to act in order to grant us free will, but He is never weak or impotent.”⁴⁶ This caveat then becomes the basis

⁴² Ibid., 22.

⁴³ Ibid., 104.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 22.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 19.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 21.

for a number of things. It establishes man's free will as a valid contingency, as a gift from God's love, and as the context for man's learning:

So this is the decision that God has made at the very beginning of creation. He will let us fall so we can learn to walk. He will hover over us, He will protect us, but He will not smother us. He will be there directing, guiding, helping, but not controlling. To love somebody means letting that person be himself or herself. The name for that aspect of God's love, for that gift which He gave humankind so that we could be ourselves, is free will.⁴⁷

He gives an example of how this works out in practical terms in a description of two possible options in the case of murder,

The man who commits murder is clearly exercising his free will. The man who kills accidentally is not. Indeed, the original Hebrew phrase that is translated as "accidentally" literally says, God brought it to his hand. It is only the death by accident that is the will of God; death by intentional murder is not.⁴⁸

This division of events into those willed by God and those not willed by Him, but allowed, flows with Blech's view of contingency and with the Jewish orientation toward law and justice. The main issue for Jewish theodicy that arises is a question of justice in the murder of an innocent person. Blech anticipates this, though, and continues to build his case:

I call this the principle of greater priority. God's priority is that man should have free will. But that should not suggest that ultimately God's wishes will be thwarted or that injustice will rule the world, because God has a way of working everything out in the end.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Ibid., 32.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 34.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 35.

Before giving us the solution to the issue of justice, Blech adds some caveats to his principle of greater priority:

If human history on a grand scale is involved, if survival of the universe is involved, if the survival of the Jewish people is involved, if an upright person whom God needs for some part of His divine plan is involved, then God *will* intervene. God will split the Red Sea, make the sun stand still and even let people jump over mountains.⁵⁰

This leads then to one of Blech's greatest issues and indeed one of the central issues for Jewish theodicy. It is the issue of the holocaust. One of the great questions that arises out of the holocaust is the question of justice, "Could 6 million men, women and children possibly have deserved such a fate? Were they all so evil? Even the children?"⁵¹ Blech's solution is in God's insuring an eventual balance. He explains how God did intervene to save some, even with miracles like jumping over a mountain, but then explains that for those cases where God did not intervene, God now owes men a debt to completely balance the scales of justice. "God did not save everybody in the Holocaust. That is true. He did not make miracles all the time, nor for everyone. But whoever died has made a withdrawal from the bank, and God owes those people nothing less than their lives."⁵² So how is it that God can pay this debt? Blech uses a more mystical side of Judaism as the solution:

If the good should have lived longer and are killed by the action of man God will give them more life to fulfill all that they would have done had they lived. "To illustrate, the Kabbalah even identifies for us some of the transmigrations, explaining who people we recognize from Biblical stories turned out to be in another life. And so it

⁵⁰ Ibid., 39.

⁵¹ Ibid., 23.

⁵² Ibid., 38.

tells us that Abel came back as Moses. And Cain also came back for a second time, as Aaron, the brother of Moses.⁵³

Blech spends a good bit of time explaining man's response to evil and suffering. As seen in the other authors, he offers both prescriptive responses as well as a necessary perspective for man to adequately respond to evil. His prescription for man's response includes two sides. The first side is that "when we see other people suffer, we must withhold Judgment. We must give them the benefit of the doubt, because we do not know why this is happening to them."⁵⁴ The second side is that "if we are the ones suffering, we are obligated to engage in sincere introspection. Could this hurt be a message from God?"⁵⁵ Blech then spends considerable time throughout his book guiding the reader through the process of introspection and determining the nature of the message from God. He describes seven principles for the process of introspection. The principle of preciseness shows us God is active in something. What is too farfetched to be coincidence, must be nothing other than divine intervention. The principle of rebuke tells us the suffering has some identifiable purpose. "God inflicts some forms of pain on us out of love for the purpose of discipline, for our own good."⁵⁶ The actualization principle, borrowed from Nachmanides, tells us the trial is from God because until someone has "experienced his trials and lived through them, his

⁵³ Ibid., 61.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 31.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 95.

capacity for faith and loyalty was only potential.”⁵⁷ The education principle, borrowed from Maimonides, tells us that God is using the trial for others, “to demonstrate to the rest of the world the possibilities of human perfection, the spiritual heights flesh and blood could achieve.”⁵⁸ The humility principle tells us that God is teaching us humility through the trial. “When one is on top of the world and not open to hearing God, suffering brings the message of humility, precisely because it is such a humbling experience.”⁵⁹ The atonement principle shows us that God may be spending his anger on a lesser thing to preserve something greater. There is a well-known Yiddish saying. *Oy, zol zein a kapparah!* (Let it be an atonement!) Maybe something worse was deserved, but thankfully that more terrible thing didn’t happen.”⁶⁰ The trade-off principle is that one is given suffering here so there will be reward in eternity. “You are better off getting punished for your transgressions in this world and getting rewarded for your good deeds in the next.”⁶¹ The appreciation principle tells us that trials are so we will appreciate what we have earned through them. “You can’t truly appreciate anything if you have not worked for it and acquired it through hardship. Only then can you say: This is mine. This is my insight. My land. My place in the next world.”⁶² Blech

⁵⁷ Ibid., 104.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 109.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 114.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 118.

⁶¹ Ibid., 120.

⁶² Ibid., 125.

recognizes that even with deep searching some things are ultimately unexplainable. He quotes a Talmudic passage to support this that says, “It is not in our hands to grasp why the wicked are at ease or why the good suffer.”⁶³ Many of these principles of self-searching can also be construed to be necessary perspectives on suffering. They and the process of introspection fit well either directly or indirectly with Maimonides’ emphasis on wisdom.

In the face of our inability to understand some things, Blech says the “bottom line, then, is that with all of our answers, we still need faith to permit us to maintain our belief.”⁶⁴ This faith “is rooted in the conclusion of an intellectual quest.”⁶⁵ He says that in spite of the evil in this world, and our inability to understand all of it, this faith, “affirms God because the reasons for belief in God based on His goodness far outweigh the need to reject Him because of the things we don't understand.”⁶⁶

Blech does reach out beyond this more reasoned faith to two things that are more mystical as a way to point people to hope. The first is a messianic hope. “In the days of Messiah, we will be able look at *everything* that ever happened before throughout the course or all time, from the *aleph* or Adam through the *daled* or David, and together with God, we too will be able to proclaim that the world is not only good but indeed very good”⁶⁷ The

⁶³ Ibid., 131.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 132.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 132.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 48.

second is a mystical esoteric meaning built into scripture that he describes in chapter 16, which is entitled *A Meeting with a Mystic*. In this chapter he describes his encounter with a “saintly scholar” in Israel who shared a numerological system hidden in the scriptures that explained major events including the one most perplexing for Jewish theodicy, the Holocaust. This is similar to Maimonides inclusion of a messianic hope and of his overall system of esoteric versus exoteric meaning.

Blech builds his theodicy based on God’s strict justice. God’s strict justice treats the righteous more harshly than we would expect but also gives those deprived of justice an ultimate balance even if it means giving them life again. Blech’s system also insists on the unity of God similar to Maimonides but with less emphasis on the equivocal nature of God. He actually mentions the goodness of God a significant number of times. Like Maimonides, he relies on reason and an intellectual development in his process of introspection. There is less indication that man can escape suffering but it is implied in some of the introspective process. In this area, Blech’s book more resembles Maimonides’ *Letter to Yemen*. Blech may indeed hold to many of the other areas developed by Maimonides but is not spelling them out in his book, which is intended as encouragement for the average reader. Like Maimonides, Blech also reaches out to a more mystical system. For Blech, this includes the Kabbalah’s transmigration of the soul, a future messianic resolution of things, and an esoteric message in the Pentateuch. Overall, Blech stays well within the parameters of Maimonides’ theodicy while adapting it to his modern popular audience.

Shaykh Muhammad Mutawalli al-Sha'rawi was educated in the Egyptian Azharite [official Egyptian] education system. In 1936, he enrolled in the Faculty of Arabic Language in al-Azhar University. Subsequently, he became part of the Azharite teaching system. He was sent by al-Azhar to Saudi Arabia to teach at King Abd al-Aziz al-Su'ud University in Mecca. He then returned to Egypt in the early sixties and worked in several Azharite positions. Starting in 1975, he appeared in the weekly television program Nur `Ala Nur. His teaching style was engaging and oriented toward popular understanding. He retired from the formal Azharite teaching career in 1976. In the same year he was appointed by president Sadat as a minister of Waqf [responsible for religious endowments]. He stayed in that position for two years. In 1980 he started his famous Friday lessons on Egyptian television. He focused on Qur'an commentary/interpretation and attracted large audiences probably “unparalleled by any contemporary Azharite.”⁶⁸

Al-Sha'rawi's starts with the premise that man is not able on his own to define the nature of evil. We simply define what is enjoyable as good, and what is not, as evil but the reality is, “it is impossible to define good or evil by subjective criteria since they will inevitably be deficient and self-centered and will not recognize where the reality of good and

⁶⁸ Shaykh Muhammad Hisham Kabbani, “The As-Sunnah Foundation of America Unity, Knowledge and Understanding for the Muslim Community,” (1911 - 1998). www.sunnah.org/history/Scholars/Shaarawi.html (accessed February 28, 2011).

evil truly lies.”⁶⁹ He further explains that goodness is part of a created balance of good and evil in all things,

Allah Almighty has set up a delicate balance for everything that happens in existence. The first thing that Allah set up is the balance of goodness in existence. Goodness lies in the fact that a thing correctly fulfills the function for which it was created. That is why there are natural laws to ensure that man fulfills his function. If man violates these laws, denies them and fails to follow them his life becomes corrupt and filled with misery and evil and the goodness in it is lost.⁷⁰

Good is then ultimately what God defines as good. God directs us to good and away from evil by his will stated as lawful or unlawful respectively. “The unlawful and lawful are so by His authority alone and are something which He alone can ordain.”⁷¹ Our knowledge of this comes via messengers:

Therefore it is clear that the mercy of Allah Almighty necessitates that human life should have begun on the earth with a Messenger because only they can convey from Allah what He wants us to know: that He is Allah, the Creator who brought everything in existence and that He has appointed for us a particular way of life that we should follow.⁷²

He also adds that good is “what takes you successfully to a goal beyond which there is no ‘after.’”⁷³ An example of this ultimate good “is Eternal bliss after which there is nothing else;

⁶⁹ Mohammad M. Al-Sha'rawi, *Good and Evil*, 2d ed. (London: Dar Al Taqwa Ltd, 1994), 2.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 17.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 39.

there is nothing ‘after’ the Garden.”⁷⁴ The ultimate defining element of good and evil is God’s will. “If you make it [everything in the world] subject to Allah’s Guidance it is good. If you remove it from the sphere of Allah’s influence, it is evil.”⁷⁵ In all these respects, Al-Sha’rawi’s theodicy is very similar to al-Ghazali’s view of the nature of evil.

The cause of evil for al-Sha’rawi is clearly linked to man’s free will and choices that are not in conformance with the will of God. “Corruption comes about because man was given freedom of choice to do or not to do and began to corrupt existence while claiming to be putting it right.”⁷⁶ In terms of the origin of flawed choice, he says man starts with an uncorrupted nature. He is “born a Muslim... with an unspoiled natural form following the upright *deen* [submission to the will and rule] of Allah.”⁷⁷ Corruption enters when man makes choices that are in opposition to God’s will. He does this through a wrong use of the intellect, which is a “special quality that Allah Almighty has singled out for man alone.”⁷⁸ Man misuses this gift of intellect when he creates his own definitions of good. He connects

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 41.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 9.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 3.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 5.

that misuse to ignorance and to “someone who desires a personal limited benefit”⁷⁹ He also connects it to disbelief which is the “summit of evil in this world.”⁸⁰

The other corrupting aspect is the influence of other people, “namely the child's family who shift the child from the *deen* of the natural form on which Allah created him to what they themselves believe.”⁸¹ The initiation of evil and corruption is situated in the children of Adam where “the first of the seeds of evil in existence came to be planted as we know from the story of Qabil and Habil (Cain and Abel) which Allah Almighty relates to us. This evil occurred because Qabil diverged from the Right Path and killed someone whom Allah had made inviolate without having a legal right to his life.”⁸² In his focus on God’s will he also links corruption to “destroying both knowledge and action.”⁸³

Therefore, in the definition of corruption, there are some similarities to al-Ghazali in the focus on the will of God and the connection of knowledge and action. The difference arises when al-Sha’rawi interposes human free will as the immediate cause of evil and clearly moves away from al-Ghazali’s occasionalism. Al-Sha’rawi seems to intentionally separate himself from occasionalism in saying “there is in reality no separation between events:

⁷⁹ Ibid., 69.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 71.

⁸¹ Ibid., 3.

⁸² Ibid., 14.

⁸³ Ibid., 5.

events are connected, causes and effects are interconnected. Causes lead to effects If causes are corrupt they can only have corrupt effects”⁸⁴

Al-Sha’rawi does not go into much detail on the knowledge of God. He simply says that God’s knowledge “encompasses all things.”⁸⁵ He is not completely clear about the impact of God’s knowledge on contingency. He clearly rejects occasionalism but he indicates that God’s knowledge sometimes leads God to intervene with a view to good or harm. “Allah knows that a man will be tyrannical, inordinate and unjust. By his mercy, He wants to save this man from a terrible punishment so he takes away sovereignty (rulership) from him to save him.”⁸⁶ “Sometimes Allah blesses an unbeliever in order to increase him in sin and disbelief because if He had denied him that blessing he might have woken up and repented.”⁸⁷ Al-Sha’rawi moves away from Ghazali’s removal of all contingency but still allows God to intervene to bring about his ultimate will even when man’s free will is interposed in causality. You could construe from this that his position is that immediate contingency is allowed but ultimate contingency is not. That tension seems to have entered into Islamic theodicy at least partly because of the move away from the rigorous and absolute reference to God’s will that al-Ghazali carried through his whole theodicy.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 45.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 45.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 48.

God's governance seems at first to be clearly described as omnipotent without reservation. "Allah Almighty does not desire anyone to help Him look after His creation for He has the power to do all things. He is the All-powerful over all His creatures."⁸⁸ Further definition seems to limit the areas where God fully exercises his omnipotence to the "higher realms of existence, regarding which human beings have no choice. There we will find the most perfect order and the intricacy The sun, the moon, the stars, the planets, the air, and all the things which are not subject to man's will on the earth perform their tasks"⁸⁹ This hedging of total omnipotence seems to be necessitated to make an allowance free will. It also seems not well defined with some contradicting points. This may be necessitated by factors similar to those that impacted the position on contingency. God is ultimately all-powerful while he is not always immediately all-powerful. Having made the will of God the ultimate focus and found a necessity to interpose the free-will of man, it makes sense that there would now be some areas of tension in Islamic theodicy that were lacking in al-Ghazali's more straightforward system of a pure focus on the will of God.

There really are no special issues that al-Sha'rawi focuses on. He does focus on the will of God as al-Ghazali did, but not in the same way as al-Ghazali who limits any sort of necessity from being imposed on God's will. There is a subtle shift in his focus. It is most noticeable when you compare al-Ghazali's maxim, "whatever he wills is and whatever he

⁸⁸ Ibid., 12.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 13.

does not will is not”⁹⁰ with al-Sha’rawi’s version, “whatever He wills, He brings it into existence. If He does not will, He removes it.”⁹¹ Now God is removing whatever he does not will rather than it simply never existing at all. He does come back to two things relative to God’s will repeatedly in his book; the limits of human reason and the need for a messenger to compensate for limited human reason. Here he says,

It is not possible for us to know the requirements of Allah and how we should worship Him and what will please Him and what will make Him angry by means of the intellect alone... Therefore it is clear that the mercy of Allah Almighty necessitates that human life should have begun on the earth with a Messenger because only they can convey from Allah what He wants us to know: that He is Allah, the Creator who brought everything in existence and that He has appointed for us a particular way of life that we should follow.⁹²

While Sha’rawi moves away from Ghazali’s occasionalism and focus on pure unobstructed will of God he does stay in the same Ghazalian way of life. This includes the importance of knowledge, and action based on that knowledge that comes from revealed truth through the messenger of Islam, not human reason.

Al-Sha’rawi explains a necessary perspective and the way that man is to respond, built around his overall theme of the limits of man’s reason and need for a message. The perspective starts with man’s limited reason and ties an attitude of trust to accepting what cannot be understood. “We cannot always judge events by their surface appearance since we

⁹⁰ Eric L. Ormsby, *Theodicy in Islamic Thought: The Dispute Over Al-Ghazali's* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton Univ Press, 1984), 261.

⁹¹ Al-Sha'rawi, *Good and Evil*, 60.2.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 16-17.

do not see the entire picture. We must simply accept the fact that all that comes from Allah is good without us necessarily knowing the wisdom in it.”⁹³ This is similar to Ghazali’s emphasis on trust. The difference is that it is not trust juxtaposed purely against the absolute will of God. Al-Sha’rawi refers trust to the will of God but he also refers it to justice. This justice entails all of life in a “balance which accords justice in every instance.”⁹⁴ He does not discuss this balance of justice at length but does not attempt to distance it as some sort of necessity that is imposed on God’s will. Justice seems to enter again because of the introduction of things that are outside the will of God. Al-Sha’rawi refers to three events in life:

Events in life . . . fall into three main categories . . . those concerning which you have neither power nor choice . . . They are the decrees of Allah Almighty . . . events which happen to you through other people . . . thirdly, there are also events in which you do exercise choice which first and foremost concern Allah’s Guidance given to you.⁹⁵

The first are under absolute control of the decree of God. The second two seem to be under the control of man’s free will. With the introduction of free will outside the immediate control of God’s will there is a need for justice in the equation for trust. God has to make right those things that he has allowed outside his will. Al-Sha’rawi does not develop this at all, but it is the logical conclusion one can draw from his formulations of God’s governance and the way he speaks about man’s response in things like trust.

⁹³ Ibid., 43.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 61.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 41-42.

A string of perspectives is developed throughout the book. The first is an eternal perspective because “people fail to understand the true meaning of life. That is because, with very few exceptions, people make life in this world the be all and end all of everything.”⁹⁶ The second is “Allah Almighty puts His slaves to the test with both good and evil in this world, i.e., by what they believe is good for them, and what they believe is evil for them”⁹⁷ The third is one of his overall themes of the necessity of a messenger and message. The fourth links the message with action leading to the ultimate eternal goal. “Living by the laws of Allah brings you nothing but good. Rejecting the Laws of Allah brings you nothing but evil. ‘There is no good in any good which leads to the Fire and no evil in any evil which Leads to the Garden.’”⁹⁸ Surrounding these perspectives are the concepts of man’s limited ability to understand and his need for a revealed message to guide him.

There are two sides to man’s prescribed response to evil and suffering; that which he is to do and that which he is to avoid. He is to “greet the decree of Allah with pleasure and thankfulness”⁹⁹ The attitude is to be one of trust even when understanding is not possible. The nature of the response is to be stoical acceptance where “we do not receive them (evil or good) with either excessive sorrow or joy.”¹⁰⁰ This attitude of trust is

⁹⁶ Ibid., 1.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 28.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 11.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 29.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 66.

juxtaposed against what Al-Sha'rawi describes as the ultimate evil. "The summit of evil in this world is disbelief. There is no greater evil to be found than that because there is no sin greater than disbelief. An unbeliever has committed something which causes Allah to exclude him from His mercy."¹⁰¹ The main thing man is to avoid is disbelief. Al-Sha'rawi links disbelief with the delusion that man can function based on his own reason independently from God. "Delusion is the beginning of disbelief . . . Allah Almighty desires to protect his slaves from delusion and from distance from Him."¹⁰²

Al-Sha'rawi is focused on the will of God like al-Ghazali, but his orientation to it is changed by the interposition of contingency based in man's free will. He does prescribe the same knowledge followed by action and trust as Ghazali. He does not spell this out as clearly and concisely as Ghazali but the same elements are evident. He seems to stop, though, at the idea of trust. He does not even mention the idea of developing the love of God. The closest he gets is his saying, "Allah desires to protect his slaves . . . from distance from Him."¹⁰³ His emphasis on the limits of man's reason seem to preclude both man's independent reasoning as well as reaching out beyond reason to Ghazali's inexplicable "taste" of the love of God. Man is left with a focus on the garden as the ultimate goal. "Good

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 71.

¹⁰² Ibid., 60.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

is in reality what takes you successfully to a goal beyond which there is no 'after' This is Eternal bliss after which there is nothing else; there is nothing 'after' the Garden.”¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 39.

CHAPTER 8

COMPARISON OF MODERN CHRISTIAN, JEWISH, AND ISLAMIC THEODICIES

The comparison of Alcorn, Blech, and al-Sha'rawi is the second horizontal level of comparison in my thesis. The direction of the comparison as stated before is as a lens to help us refocus on our understanding of Christianity's view of theodicy. In this, I will again largely keep my comparisons to those between Christianity and the other two religions. I will at times point out comparisons between Judaism and Islam only when they add additional perspective on something relative to Christianity. As I refer to Christianity, Judaism, and Islam I am again not referring to all possible positions but to those espoused by the authors examined.

I am using the same elements from Poythress' *Symphonic Theology* as I make these comparisons. As I walk through each topic, I will again structure the comparison to look at areas where Christianity seems or is similar to Judaism and Islam but will look deeper at how they are or are not similar. I will be looking for patterns of similarity and differences and any anomalies that point to internal or external incongruities. I will bring up any unique points that each religion has offered in an area of theodicy. Finally, I will look at areas where Christianity is in opposition to Islam and Judaism.

In starting this section as before, it will be helpful for the reader to have a table that briefly summarizes the main positions of Alcorn, al-Sha'rawi, and Belch. Table 2 summarizes their positions under the same topic headings used throughout the review of the theodicies.

Table 2. Comparison of Theodicy in Alcorn, Blech ,and Al-Sha'rawi

| Topic | Alcorn | Blech | Al-Sha'rawi |
|------------------|--|--|--|
| Nature of evil | Evil is a corruption of Good | Evil is derived from two attributes of God: Loving Father and stern Judge. | God defines good/evil. Good fulfills God's will. Nothing beyond that. |
| Cause of evil | Man's sin (rebellion against God & failure to keep moral law) causes evil including natural events. Extreme evil has supernatural source. | Man is the cause. No inherited corruption only failure to live up to his responsibility alongside of God to rectify an imperfect world. | Man's free will corrupts the world: God defines/creates evil/good. Man corrupts other men. Ignorance in seeking selfish benefits |
| God's knowledge | God knows all things from eternity including contingencies, which are present except in things pertaining to eternal salvation. | God knows all things in detail. Contingency is not eliminated except in special circumstances such as survival of the Jewish people, etc. | God knows all things. Contingency is not eliminated by God's knowledge but there are boundaries to it that are not well defined. |
| God's Governance | God is unlimited in his power and controls all by direction or permission. | God is unlimited in his power. Man has free will so he can learn and grow. | God is unlimited in his power. Higher things are perfectly subject to his power. Man has free will |
| Special Issues | Limitations of human reason to understand evil and suffering. | Holocaust and the question of justice. | Limits of human reason that require a messenger. |
| How man responds | Perspective is important. Humility to admit limited understanding connected confidence in God's control. Suffering necessary environment for our progress. Other remedies: prayer, sharing with others, study of God's attributes. | Two sided response. Do not judge others who are suffering. Deep introspection when we suffer to discern the message. Ultimate balance of justice in messianic advent, or in transmigration of the soul. Hope in esoteric meaning of scripture, showing God is really in control. | Perspective includes limited human reason & need for a messenger. Life is not the end, the garden is the end. Evil and good from God are both a test. Response: accept both evil and good in trust. Avoid disbelief. |

In terms of summarizing their positions, I would offer the following descriptions as a way to view the core and key ancillary points of each man's theological system. For Alcorn, the core of his position is harder to discern than in Aquinas. The center seems to be man's rebellion against God and God's law. Surrounding man's rebellion and ensuing corruption is God's sovereign ability to use even that corruption for good and our progress. Alcorn repeatedly points his readers to man's sin and God's trustworthiness. "Suffering reminds us of life's brevity and our closing window of opportunity to get right with our Creator and trust him"¹ Alcorn clearly connects Christ's incarnation and suffering as an example of God's trustworthiness. "Jesus willingly entered this world of evil and suffering and didn't spare himself, because he endured the worst for my sake and yours, he has earned my trust."² For Al-Sha'rawi the core of his teaching is the will of God. Surrounding that is our knowledge of God's will through his messenger, combined with doing God's will in belief, regardless of how our limited reason might interpret events. "Allah desires to arm us with belief against the events that hem us in Allah has put good into this thing which we dislike . . . Furthermore . . . there can be evil in things we treat as good."³ The center of Blech's theodicy is man in his co-responsibility with God. In this, man "has the opportunity to have

¹ Randy Alcorn, *If God Is Good: Why Do We Hurt?*, (Portland: Multnomah Books, 2010), 16.

² *Ibid.*, 59.

³ Mohammad M. Al-Sha'rawi, *Good and Evil*, 2d ed. (London: Dar Al Taqwa Ltd, 1994), 68.

a hand in perfecting the world.”⁴ Surrounding this are two attributes of God: loving father and stern judge. These attributes shape how we understand suffering. Beyond aiding our understanding, these two are also reflected in man’s two-fold response to suffering: compassion for others when they suffering, but rigorous introspection and examination of ourselves when we suffer.

In terms of similarities, the three theodicies seem to have converged somewhat from what was observed with Aquinas, Al-Ghazali, and Maimonides. Alcorn’s Christian theodicy has lost some of the distinctiveness that Aquinas’ repeated insistence on essential goodness provided. Al-Sha’rawi’s Islamic theodicy has lost some of the distinctiveness of Al-Ghazali’s occasionalism and repeated insistence on the absolute unimpeded will of God. It is also harder to discern and discuss the structural/functional similarities and differences since all three works are much less extensive, and their positions not nearly as well developed as in the classical/historical theodicies. Blech, for instance, does not even cover the basic cosmological issue of the nature of evil. One must concede some of the indistinctness is because none of these works was developed to the degree of meticulous detail that was common with Aquinas, Ghazali, and Maimonides. The modern authors also are not attempting to build a detailed philosophical system that is compatible with their religious positions. It is notable also that neither Alcorn nor Al-Sha’rawi cites classical sources whereas Blech repeatedly cites both Talmudic sages in general and Maimonides particularly. In this respect Blech has stayed closer to his historical roots among the three modern authors.

⁴ Benjamin Blech, *If God Is Good, Why Is the World so Bad?* (Deerfield Beach, Fla.: Simcha Press, 2003), 46.

In terms of convergence, there are several areas where it has occurred. All three theodicies now posit man and in some respect free will as the central cause of evil. For Alcorn it is free will expressing itself in rebellion against God Himself and God's law. For Al-Sha'rawi it is free will expressing itself by going the way of human reason rather than obeying God's will. For Blech it is man's free will expressed in a failure to live up to his responsibility to rectify an imperfect world. God's knowledge and the position of contingency also have converged with all three theodicies now having similar positions. God knows all and there is some level of contingency bounded by certain limits, albeit slightly different limits for each author. For Alcorn free will and contingency exist except in things pertaining to eternal salvation. For Al-Sha'rawi free will and contingency exist in events concerning "Allah's guidance"⁵ where man exercises choice. For Blech free will and contingency exist except in special circumstances where God will intervene to preserve His overall plan. God's governance similarly has converged with all three theodicies including omnipotence limited in some way by man's free will. Alcorn, like Blech, attacks the idea of a God limited in power as promoted in Rabbi Harold Kushner's book, *When Bad Things Happen to good People*. "Our culture's eroded view of God prepared the way for the book's staggering success. People welcomed a kindhearted God who would stop anything bad from happening to us if only he could."⁶

⁵ Al-Sha'rawi, 42.

⁶ Alcorn, *Why Do We Hurt?*, 21.

In terms of special issues, there is also some convergence with both Alcorn and Al-Sha'rawi now seeing man's limited understanding as a recurring issue. For Alcorn, Job is no longer a puzzle as to why the righteous suffer but more a part of the question of "why our grasp of . . . suffering is unclear to us."⁷ On the Jewish side, the Holocaust stands out as a unique special issue for their current theodicy. This is not so much that it brings new questions to the broader discussion of evil and suffering. It is more that the intervention of the Holocaust in Jewish history becomes central in Jewish theodicy, in its impact on their view of the centrality of God's historical activity/care centered on the Jewish nation. It also brings into question some of the historical perspectives of Maimonides such as there being very little actual suffering.

Each of the three authors' perspectives and prescriptions for human response is another area of similarity. All three seem to have a sort of commonality about them. By that, I mean that Blech and Al-Sha'rawi both present perspectives and even prescriptions that would be quite acceptable if placed in the context of a Christian discussion of evil and suffering. They are unique to some degree and do fit with their respective Islamic and Jewish theodicies but none seemed strikingly unique to Islam or Judaism. For instance, Al-Sha'rawi's main advice to see both good and suffering as being used as a test from God would likely be acceptable to Christians in general. His advice to respond to suffering with an attitude of trust and to avoid unbelief would also be acceptable in a Christian context. Blech's description of God's two attributes of loving father and stern judge would also likely find ready acceptance in a

⁷ Ibid., 41.

Christian audience. His advice to show compassion to others who are suffering but to self-examination when we suffer would also be acceptable to a Christian audience. These human response areas were also similar in certain ways in the works of Aquinas, Ghazali, and Maimonides. They all had a sort of common human appeal to them. However, in the historical/classical theodicies they had more uniqueness aspects and were more tightly connected with unique positions of their respective theodicies. Aquinas' points stood out the most because of the centrality of essential goodness in his theodicy.

In terms of unique positions there are few if any that really stand out among the three modern popular works. Alcorn's work stands out far less than Aquinas' work did from the respective Islamic and Jewish positions. It is not that Alcorn does not come across as distinctly Christian, he does. He just no longer builds his theodicy from a foundation identifiably unique to Christianity. He does return to the person of Jesus frequently in his explanation of evil and is unique in that respect, as was Aquinas. Aquinas seems to start, though, with the unique foundation of essential goodness. Alcorn starts with our corruption and God's ability to redeem that and returns to that most frequently. Alcorn's main point is Christian in its context but not uniquely Christian as a general concept without the essential goodness of the nature of God driving it.

Alcorn does not completely ignore the goodness of God. His discussion of it, however, does not seem to emphasize as much the aspect that makes the Christian idea unique. Alcorn and Al-Sha'rawi refer to good using a very similar structure. Both say that God is the source of all good. "All that comes from Allah is good."⁸ "God is the Greatest

⁸ Al-Sha'rawi, 72.

Good as well as the source of all lesser goods.”⁹ Both say that our view of what is good and what is evil may be at odds with how God defines them. “The decree of Allah is always good even if it appears to us in our narrow view and limited knowledge to be evil.”¹⁰ “To say that God is good is not to say God will always appear to be good . . .”¹¹ They both say that all that God does is good. The difference between them is that Alcorn does refer a few times to God as good, whereas Al-Sha’rawi never does this, and only says what God does or wills is good.

Alcorn’s final chapter is titled *Jesus the Only Answer Bigger Than the Questions* so, as I have said, Jesus is not at all absent. Alcorn simply seems to have moved away somewhat from the more uniquely Christian foundation of essential goodness. It is possible that Alcorn’s purpose and audience shapes his writing in this direction. Is he assuming that his audience has some familiarity with Christian foundational doctrine and he is attempting mostly to focus on the human side to encouragement them? That is possible, but there is also the noticeable convergence of basic concepts with those of the Islamic and Jewish positions. Again, I am not saying that Alcorn has lost all Christian distinctness. Even with the convergence, there are still elements that distinguishes each of their positions. For instance, even though all three now see man as the primary cause of evil, each of them see man as the

⁹ Blech, 24.

¹⁰ Al-Sha'rawi, 42.

¹¹ Blech, 24.

cause for slightly different reasons. The question still arises, why has the convergence taken place at all? Why has the tone of the works become less unique?

I can see several possible reasons. One is that all three works were written for popular audiences as “pastoral” encouragement rather than for theological precision. The other may be that over time, each of the religious communities have interacted in a process of convection that has influenced the others, so that they have given up some of their uniqueness and adopted positions that are increasingly similar to one another. This second possible reason is one that religions will probably continue to experience to an even greater degree because of the pressures of globalization, which increase inter-religious interaction. Another possibility that springs to mind is something that might be occurring in the internal processes of each religious community. I am reflecting on this especially in the Christian community. In my research for starting this paper, the lack of interaction with other religions in conservative evangelical circles was striking. Much of our theological reflection seems to be intra-faith discussions between differing Christian positions. Most evangelical works on other religions are more or less one-sided critiques of the other religion’s shortcomings and differences. It makes one wonder if the church has lost some understanding of the uniqueness of Christianity through excessive internecine interaction. Alcorn even brings this up indirectly in his book by saying at one point. “Sometimes the very familiarity of the gospel story prevents us from understanding its stunning nature.”¹² Is it time for the church to engage the world at large more intentionally? Could it help us avoid losing sight of the

¹² Alcorn, *Why Do We Hurt?*, 21, 51.

truly unique elements of Christianity? It would certainly be in keeping with the historic view of apologetics as a defense of the faith, both from an internal, as well as external, perspective.

In a number of instances, Alcorn brings up a point that was originally found in Ghazali's Islamic theodicy. This is the "best world" concept:

Although this world is far from the best it could possibly be, its present condition may indeed be the best way to achieve the best possible world. A world that had never been touched by evil would be a good place, but would it be the best place possible? If we acknowledge, for example, that evil and suffering often bring out significant human virtues, we must answer no.¹³

Alcorn early on in the book discusses how man often believes he could have designed a world better than God did. They would simply eliminate all evil and suffering. He then asks us to imagine a world without suffering and evil. He says the ultimate result is not the best possible world because in:

[N]ot permitting the problems, you have taken away the solution. You have taken away Jesus. There would be no God-man, no incarnation, no need for incarnation. No First coming, no Second Coming. No New Heaven and New Earth, only the same old one continuing forever. That's not all. You have taken away God's grace.¹⁴

So redemption rather than God's will as the overarching story is what makes this present world, including evil and suffering, the best possible scenario.

The only other aspect that seems unique among the three authors is that Blech is the only one who refers to any great degree to anything beyond the grasp of human reason. Blech points his readers to a messianic hope, a transmigration of the soul, and to a hidden esoteric

¹³ Ibid., 27.

¹⁴ Ibid., 11.

message in the Pentateuch. There is no mysterious “taste” of love reminiscent of Ghazali at all in Al-Sha’rawi. There is no reaching beyond reason that was seen in all three classical/historical authors. Alcorn’s overall tone is geared toward a worldview that will “credibly explain the way things are and offer persuasive reasons for believing in a hopeful future?”¹⁵

The only aspect in Alcorn’s work that is truly in opposition to the other two authors is the incarnation, life, death, suffering and resurrection of Christ. This is brought up throughout the book as one of the keys to our understanding suffering. While I feel Alcorn strays from the more unique Christian foundations, he does stick close to Christ as the metanarrative through which our limited understanding of evil and suffering is resolved. The final word for Alcorn is “Jesus Christ’s death on the cross is God’s breathtaking answer to the question, “why don't you do something about evil?”¹⁶

¹⁵ Al-Sha'rawi, 18.

¹⁶ Alcorn, *Why Do We Hurt?*, 51.

CHAPTER 9

INDIVIDUAL RESPONSES TO THEODICY

This chapter presents the responses of individuals to the question of theodicy. Each respondent was presented a very short story about suffering adapted from the biblical story of Job, and placed in a more modern and neutral setting, without any reference to God or Satan. After reading the story, the individuals interacted with the following five questions: What do you think happened to this man? What role did God play in all this? What could this man have done to avoid such calamity? How should he have responded to it? How would you respond in such a situation? The following eight statements were then presented and the respondents were allowed to choose ones that seemed to best state their overall views, and if they desired, they added comments:

- 1) God was punishing this man for some sin in his life even if it was not obvious to the man or others.
- 2) God was testing this man and trying to build something in his life that could not be done any other way.
- 3) God had little to do with the man's actual suffering. These are simply things that can happen to anyone.
- 4) If the man had more wisdom, he could have avoided at least some of these sufferings.
- 5) The man should simply accept this as God's will and learn to trust God in these things.
- 6) These things will turn out for good eventually in either this life or the next. If you think this is so what will assure that this is the case?
- 7) Through these terrible things, this man will learn, about himself and God, things he could learn in no other way. This is hard but it is an opportunity for this man to grow spiritually.
- 8) How he responds to these sufferings may be used in other people's lives to point them to God.

These statements represented key Christian, Jewish and Muslim positions taken primarily from the theologians covered in this study without referencing them as such. The statements

are purposefully vague enough that individuals from any of the three religions might select them depending on how they viewed them. God's punishment is mainly an Islamic viewpoint but also was described by Maimonides as a simplistic Mosaic interpretation. God's testing of man is generally central to mainly Islamic theodicy. That God had little to do with suffering is a more atheistic orientation that is not from any of the three religions. Man's need for wisdom is primarily a Jewish position from Maimonides. That man should simply accept the suffering is more of an Islamic position of their overall concept of submission. That things will turn out for good is largely a Christian perspective. That man can learn and grow is chiefly a Jewish position but also reflective of Irenaeus' Christian theodicy versus the more traditional Augustinian Christian theodicy. In Irenaeus' theodicy, man is created an "imperfect, immature creature who was to undergo moral development and growth"¹ in "a world of mingled good and evil as a divinely appointed environment for man's development toward perfection."² In Augustinian theodicy, evil is the "consequence of the misuse of freewill, which appears in the rebellion of the angels and in the 'original sin' of Adam God permitted it, because it was still in his control, and because it was better to bring good out of evil than to preclude evil from existing."³ An individual's suffering helping others is more Christian in orientation.

1. John Bowker, *Problems of Suffering in Religions of the World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 85.

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*, 85-86.

Table 3. Summary of Individual Responses

| Statements Type | Total | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|-------|---------|---------|---|---|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---|---|----|-----|
| Atheist oriented | 2 | | | | | 1 | 1 | | | | | | | | |
| Islamic oriented | 18 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 2 | | 2 | 1 | 1 | 3 | |
| Christian oriented | 12 | | 2 | | | 1 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 1 | | | 2 | |
| Jewish oriented | 10 | | 2 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | | | | 2 | | | 1 | 1 |
| Statement/ Respondent | Total | JB C | JB C | J | J | MB C | MB C | MB C | MB C | MB C | MB C | M | M | CW | CNW |
| God was punishing this man for some sin | 5 | | | 1 | 1 | 1 | | | | | | | 1 | 1 | |
| God was testing this man. | 7 | 1 | 1 | 1 | | | | 1 | 1 | | 1 | | | 1 | |
| God had little to do with the man's actual suffering.. | 2 | | | | | 1 | 1 | | | | | | | | |
| If the man had more wisdom he could have avoided at least some of these sufferings. | 3 | | 1 | 1 | 1 | | | | | | | | | | |
| The man should simply accept this as God's will and learn to trust God in these things. | 6 | | | | | 1 | 1 | | 1 | | 1 | 1 | | 1 | |
| These things will turn out for good eventually in either this life or the next. | 5 | | 1 | | | | 1 | 1 | | 1 | | | | 1 | |
| Through these terrible things this man will learn and grow spiritually. | 8 | | 1 | 1 | | 1 | 1 | | 1 | | 1 | | | 1 | 1 |
| How he responds to these sufferings may be used in other people's lives. | 6 | | 1 | | | 1 | 1 | | | 1 | 1 | | | 1 | |

Note, JB = Jewish Background, MB=Muslim Background, C=Christian, J= Jewish, M=Muslim, W=Western, NW= Non-Western, Statements are color coded, Purple=Jewish oriented, Red=Christian oriented, Green=Islamic oriented.

In analyzing the responses, I will look at four areas. These include correspondence to the espoused theological position of their own religion, correspondence to the espoused

theological position of another religion, mixed responses, and innovative responses. I will look first at the responses from the six individuals who are simply Jewish, Muslim or Christian. I will then look at the responses of the eight individuals who were Jewish background Christians and Muslim background Christians. Table 3 includes a summary of their responses.

There are 14 responses in total. Appendix 1 includes a copy of the original questionnaire, and English transcripts of the actual responses. These are from a purposeful sample that includes individuals who are from the following backgrounds: Jewish, Jewish background-Christians, Muslims, Muslim background-Christians, a Western Christian, and a Non-western Christian. The distribution is not equal among the three religions. This is partly because my work and ministry connects me with more people of Muslim backgrounds so eight of the 14 responses are from Muslim backgrounds. There are two responses each from people who are identified as simply Jewish, Muslim, and Christian.

Both of the Jewish interviews included responses and choices of statements typically seen in Judaism. There were Talmudic references and as well as references pointing to Maimonides' concept of the inherent corruption of the material world. There is mention of the idea of transmigration of the soul. This is not a concept found in Maimonides but one that developed later in Kabbalistic literature. It is something mentioned in Blech as part of general Jewish thinking. In their selection of statements, they chose statements that were largely Jewish in their orientation and explained the one statement on testing in a more Jewish orientation. Neither selected statements that were Christian in their orientation. They

show very close correspondence to the espoused positions of the Jewish religion. The two individuals were trained rabbis, so one would expect them to be very well acquainted with the main orthodox Jewish views. Neither offered responses that would be more typical of the other religions and neither offered responses that were innovative. Both men showed a reserved but confident ability on their own part to face similar suffering.

The two Muslim respondents provided responses that were very much in line with the espoused positions of Islam. The general tone of one response was very fatalistic and the other was fatalistic but with an animistic undertone. The animistic undertone comes out in the focus on the negative effect of one of the suffering man's relationships. He points to that as the source of the suffering when he says, "one thing that found its way into all this... it is necessary to know all our relationships and control everything." While this more animistic response is a bit innovative relative to the Islamic sources I have examined it is actually a common accommodation of Islam to animistic cultures. This individual is from a Sufi brotherhood that has integrated the Sufi concept of divine emanations into their animistic culture. Therefore, while it appears to be somewhat innovative it is very much in keeping with folk Islam's integration of the animistic concepts of the emanating effects of evil power and the need to control one's world. Both responses, though, corresponded well to the overall parameters of Islamic theodicy. Neither of the men selected a statement or responded in a way that brought out any Christian perspective. Both men responded relatively confidently in their ability to respond to similar suffering, one from a fatalistic perspective and the other from the same mixed with his animistic worldview.

The two Christians' overall responses were much in line with the espoused positions of Christianity. The response of the Western Christian is more detailed with many references to his sources. The response of the non-Western Christian was more experience oriented. The Western Christian was much more confident in his ability to face suffering. He actually seemed to be the most confident of all the respondents in his ability to face suffering. He said, "I believe I would be able to do just that." He also interestingly selected all statements except the atheistic one and the one oriented toward Judaism's wisdom. His responses did provide explanations of why he selected the statements. For instance, he chose the more Islamic statement about God testing the man. He also explained elsewhere by saying, "Satan wanted to afflict the man to prove that he was only praising God in good times...Perhaps God decided to bless him with the opportunity to praise His name through the storm." He then quotes 2 Corinthians 4:10, "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed . . . so that the life of Jesus may also be manifesting in our bodies." The non-Western Christian chose the statement about the man learning and growing through the suffering. He explained that the main thing the man learned was that God was sovereign. He goes on to tie this, though, to the man having "learned to lovingly fear God and know Him in intimate way as never before. God gave him an opportunity to get closer to Him and worship Him with all he has." The statement on learning reflects more of the Jewish position on theodicy, but the explanation given focuses more on the Christian idea of intimacy with God. The Western Christian is one of the only three Christians to reference Jesus or Christ in his responses. Both

respondents fit into overall Christian theodicy, neither offers responses from the other religions without explaining them, and neither offers an innovative response.

The two Jewish background Christians offered responses that were Christian but also showed some influence from their Jewish backgrounds. One chose, for instance, the need for wisdom but explained it as a more pragmatic need rather than a spiritual principle. One referenced only Old Testament verses and even states, “This is a Jewish approach.” One chose the more Christian statements as well as other less Christian statements but added Christian oriented explanations. Neither man offers an innovative view outside a broadly Christian perspective. One does refer to avoiding sin because “sins open for the Devil free access to the person.” There might be some dualistic ideas underlying that statement, although nothing else in the interview would indicate such. Dualism is not a Jewish concept at all and is rejected by Maimonides and Blech. Alcorn rejects it as well but says, “Subtle forms of such dualism exist even among some Christians.”⁴ It is interesting given their Jewish backgrounds that both men reference Jesus and that they are among only three of the respondents that did so, the other being the Western Christian. Both of them also offered positive but reserved responses in how they might respond to similar suffering.

The responses from the Muslim background Christians are most numerous for the reasons I have mentioned. Being more numerous, more variability is evident in the responses. There are also more evident influences of Islam. Two of the respondents selected

⁴ Randy Alcorn, *If God Is Good: Why Do We Hurt?*, (Portland: Multnomah Books, 2010), 17.

the statement that God had little to do with the suffering and a third did not select the statement but actually said it in his other written responses. One wonders if these particular respondents have rejected the Christian perspective on God's governance in reaction to the more fatalistic Islamic view of it. This should be the subject of further research. The statements selected by them tended to come from both the Christian and Islamic oriented ones. Only one of the Muslim background Christians chose just the two more Christian statements without choosing any of the Islamic oriented ones. Three of them reference Romans 8:28 in their responses even with the Islamic influences evident. Their responses show a range from very strong Islamic influence with Christian caveats, to the one that is more solidly Christian in its perspective. Their responses are all tempered by the Christian idea that "He is with us in spite of our difficulties" rather than the more raw Islamic idea that God is transcendent and that life is in a more one-sided test from God. None offer innovative responses and even though folk Islam is prevalent in their locations, none show in their responses that they have carried animistic influences into their Christian worldview. They also, as a group, show the least confidence in how they would be able to respond to suffering themselves. One had the most pessimistic of all responses, saying they would feel, "Desperate . . . I may in a moment of total despair commit suicide." One could describe their overall positions as Christian but with clear Islamic influences.

What conclusions can be drawn from the individual responses? First, it must be recognized that the sampling is too small to draw any hard and fast conclusions oriented to the statistics of the responses. The observations are not generalizable beyond the respondents

themselves. The nature of the survey is not geared toward statistical analysis of a large random sampling. That would be an interesting endeavor but the length and depth of my thesis did not lend itself to such extensive field research. It is possible to look at the overall tone of the responses, draw some suggested general conclusions, and raise some questions that might be further explored.

First, it is striking that none of the Jewish or Muslim respondents selected Christian oriented statements or made Christian oriented responses of any kind. This does not suggest the idea that the Christian redemptive concept of suffering finds a general universal human appeal. The sampling was probably too small, however, to make this observation in any categorical sense. As Christians, we do tend to think that because our theology finds resonance with our own hearts that it must find resonance with the world at large. It may be, as would be agreeable from our own theological position, that the work of the Holy Spirit is first necessary for man to be drawn to the God initiated redemptive work of Christ.

In addition, it is notable that three of the Christian respondents did not select either of the two more Christian oriented statements. It is also notable that among the Muslim background Christian respondents that their answers had an overall Islamic tone to them. This shows the strong influence of Islam in those coming from that background. It also points to the strong need for Christian education on all levels among those coming from an Islamic background. The need for Christian education for all levels has been a factor that can be noted in various periods throughout Church history as the gospel spreads to new peoples. Half of the respondents were in leadership positions in Muslim background Christian

churches so their continued Islamic oriented views are not simply a matter of having little exposure to Christian perspectives. One would expect the leaders even in that group to provide much more decidedly Christian responses. Their responses were also very short compared to the Western Christian. The Western Christian was a younger believer with no formal theological training. Seeing his extensive responses in comparison to the shorter responses of the others provides some contrast that points even more to the need for Christian education efforts for the church around the world and especially in the Muslim world.

The fact that many Christian respondents selected a variety of statements that did not include the two more typical Christian viewpoints without any explanation is interesting. I did not have the advantage of seeing similar responses of converts to Islam or to Judaism from Christian backgrounds and those types of responses may have shown similar mixing of perspectives. Some of the respondents from non-Christian backgrounds did provide more solidly Christian responses. Much more research would be needed to determine what exactly was deficient, if anything, in the Christian education of those still showing such strong influence from their previous religion. The nature of the interviews themselves may not have allowed the respondents to fully explain their views. In any case, it seems again this points to a need for more thorough Christian education around the world.

The degree of confidence or lack of confidence in one's ability to respond to suffering was also interesting. The younger Western Christian showed a lot more confidence in his ability to respond appropriately. The other Christians showed varying levels of confidence but none was so fully sure they could respond well to suffering. Does this indicate perhaps a

need in the West for more learning as well? There seems to be plenty of academic knowledge. However, the church in the west has lived through nearly four hundred years of Christian history with little or no persecution in the West. Our quality of life has risen to historically unprecedented levels. Has the church begun to expect this as the norm? It certainly is not the norm for the church over time or in other parts of the world. Does the western church also need to validate the Christianity it knows against the more harsh realities of life outside the relative comfort of the West?

Another element that is interesting is that when respondents select statements that better fit another religion they are often able to explain how that fits into their own religious position. My experience as I worked through the various authors was that I could have easily adapted much of what they said to my Christian belief structure. Many times, it was easy to take an Islamic or Jewish point and filter it through my own Christian context. This allowed me to see how one could easily acquire other positions and perspectives. It also seemed evident historically that there was some of this inter-religious borrowing going on. That is the positive side that is brought out in Poythress. The negative side is in a growing tendency, especially in the West, where some Christians have begun to say that Christianity is not unique. Mark Siljander makes this claim in his book, *A Deadly Misunderstanding*. "Islam and Christianity were not simply overlapping ideas. They were not merely compatible. In the

most central sense, they were one continuum.”⁵ Miroslav Volf goes even further in *Allah a Christian Response* and says,

Christians and Muslims worship one and the same God, the only God. They Understand God's character partly differently, but the object of their worship is the same. I reject the Idea that Muslims worship a different God than do Jews and Christians.⁶

I think what may be partly happening in this is that people are finding how easily one can adapt other religious points into the Christian context, and are mistaking that for an underlying equivalence in the core of the religions. This may arise from ignoring the overall hermeneutical framework wherein each religion determines a more precise meaning of words and concepts that may seem outwardly similar between religions. It may also occur due to the fuzzy boundaries of language where an inherent “imprecision in language arises because the boundaries of the meaning of a word are not fixed with perfect precision.”⁷

Overall, it can be seen in our responses that Jews see their world through Jewish perspectives, Muslims see their world through Islamic perspectives, and Christians coming from those varied backgrounds see their world through a melding of Christian perspectives with certain elements carried forward, or perhaps reacted against, from their religious background. A need to strengthen Christian education for the global church is evident. None

⁵ Mark D. Siljander, *A Deadly Misunderstanding: A Congressman's Quest to Bridge the Muslim-Christian Divide* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 110.

⁶ Miroslav Volf, *Allah: A Christian Response* (New York: Harper One, 2011), 44.

⁷ Vern S. Poythress, *Symphonic Theology: The Validity of Multiple Perspectives in Theology*, (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P & R Publishing, 2001), 64.

of the respondents reaches more deeply into the unique foundational areas that give the Christian perspective its true distinctiveness. Other than the few references to Jesus, their responses are more functional and many include functional responses that could be included in any of the three religions. This actually mirrors Alcorn's book. It lacks much discussion of the deeper foundational elements of Christian theodicy and focuses heavily on the human response and functional areas. There may also be an almost upside-down view of how worldview functions at work. That is reflected in some of Alcorn's opening statements. "The way we view such suffering will radically affect how we see God and the world around us."⁸

Even the Western Christian's response shows more focus on functional areas and does not mention essential goodness in any of his responses. He also chose almost all the responses since he can adapt them into his Christian perspective. Lastly, the Western Christian is the most confident in his ability to respond to even Job-like suffering. There seems to be a need to ground the church in more understanding of how Christianity differs foundationally from other religions. That foundation must then be linked to how the Christian is to function but the underlying reasons should be clearer. It is not enough to stop there with a theoretical knowledge. That knowledge has to be put to the test. There is also a need especially in the west, to link our Christian learning to life and action, because the western church is probably not prepared as well as it thinks to face the realities of life outside our more unique and artificial western sphere of comfort. More of the non-Western

⁸ Alcorn, *Why Do We Hurt?*, 17.

respondents gave unsure answers as to how they would respond to Job-like suffering. Is that because they have seen or experienced suffering on a level that the western church has avoided? Our relative comfort and security is a blessing in one sense but it leaves us vulnerable. Having our understanding rooted largely in “head knowledge” may make us vulnerable because the “problem of evil and suffering is the most common reason people give for not believing in God.”⁹

⁹ Ibid.

CHAPTER 10

CONCLUSION

The goal of my study was to compare Christianity with Islam and Judaism but the focus of my study was Christianity. The comparison to Islam and Judaism served as the lens to provide different perspectives to refocus on Christian theodicy. I examined historical/classical theodicy, modern/popular theodicy and individual theodicies. In these, I was looking for both the unique and common elements and how they changed across the levels examined. In Aquinas, there was a unique focus on the essential goodness or omnibenevolence of God. In Maimonides, there was a unique focus on divine wisdom/intellect or omniscience. In Ghazali, there was unique focus on the unimpeded will or omnipotence of God. There were some common elements in the functional area of human response to suffering in the historical/classical theodicies but each prescribed some distinct human responses. Each theodicy also admitted a need to reach out beyond human reason in some way.

The modern/popular positions shifted somewhat. Alcorn moved away from Aquinas' focus on essential goodness of God and instead focused on God's sovereign ability to resolve suffering and God's subsequent trustworthiness. He also moved away from some of the limitations to reason acknowledged by Aquinas. Blech shifted away from Maimonides' focus on wisdom and divine intellect to more focus on man's co-responsibility with God to resolve imperfections in the world. Blech also adopted mystical elements such as transmigration, which were not evident in Maimonides. Al-Sha'rawi shifted from Ghazali's

raw unimpeded will of God, to the will of God mitigated by areas of man's free will. He also no longer acknowledged the need for the mysterious indescribable "taste of love" of Ghazali. All three modern/popular positions focused more on functional areas of human response. The modern/popular positions were also not as unique in the areas prescribed for human response to evil and suffering. Therefore, in the modern/popular theodicies I found that changes had occurred in the positions of each religion, all three were less unique, started their theodicies from a different foundation, and were more focused on human response than the classical/historical positions examined. Therefore, I did find gaps between the classical/historical positions and the modern/popular ones.

In examining individual theodicies, I found that individual theodicies correlated well with those of their religious community. Christians, Jews, and Muslims all held positions in keeping with the overall espoused theodicy of their religious community. None of the Jewish or Muslim respondents, for instance, gave responses that indicated any affinity for a Christian theodicy. Christians coming from Muslim or Jewish backgrounds showed a mixture of Christian oriented theodicy and the theodicies oriented toward their Jewish and Muslim background communities.

One purpose of the study was to evaluate whether Christianity had some unique theology of evil and suffering that would respond more adequately to the human condition. I did not see evidence of this in this study. Perhaps in an expanded study some such element would be evident. Or perhaps, as I have already stated, the regenerative work of the Holy Spirit is first necessary for man to be drawn to the God initiated redemptive work of Christ.

Augustine and Aquinas held to this concept in the maxim of *Credo ut intelligam*, “that in order for any person to know anything, he must begin by believing something I believe in order that I may understand.”¹

There were no universal elements that individuals were drawn to and their views reflected some mix of their present as well as past religious communities. In the studies of the historic theodicies, there was a universal appeal to things beyond human reason. That did not carry forward completely into the modern theodicies or individual responses. If anything could be considered universal, it was that theodicy is an important and often difficult issue for all three religions and for all individuals.

What are some of the conclusions that can be drawn for the Christian community? Theodicy is an important issue. The church needs to be prepared in our a priori knowledge as well as experientially to deal with evil and suffering. It would be useful to try to recapture the unique elements of God’s essential goodness from the historical roots of Christian theodicy. The church must not shy away from positions where there is an inherent need to go beyond human reason to reach out to the mystery of God’s revelation. The church ought to also make use of Christian theodicy in our apologetic to defend the faith and to reach out to those of other religious communities.

1. Ronald H. Nash, *Faith and Reason: Searching for a Rational Faith* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1988), 88.

The field of comparative religion is one that seems to offer a rich field of study in theology. It is a field of study that has not been exploited to a great degree in evangelical and reformed circles. Approaching it from our presuppositional positions with a view to use it to advance our understanding of Christianity seems well worth the effort. This is especially so as the world undergoes further convectional pressures from globalization and religions come into closer contact with each other. The church must be ready to defend our faith not only by internal refining of our doctrinal positions but also by actively engaging in intra-religious examination. There are a number of additional studies suggested by this study. Comparisons of other areas of theology between the three closely related Abrahamic faiths would prove illuminating in defining our own positions and preventing our sliding across some of the fuzzy boundaries of syncretism. Expanded depth of study in the same area of theodicy could explore a larger sample population to find more trends and patterns in how individuals see the issue of suffering and evil. A more detailed study through history of the transitions that led the religions away from the more unique positions held in the historical/classical formulations would give insight into the sorts of interactions that have shaped our modern/popular positions. In all of these, comparisons of more than just two religions in one study will provide a richer contrast to reveal patterns and anomalies.

Evil and suffering is part of the reality of the universal human experience. The church will continue to need to develop an understanding of evil and suffering. Even after two thousand years of church history, there is much in the reality of evil and suffering that leaves us with uncertainty. What is certain:

[I]s that we may always live aware that God is near and present with us and that this life is an utterly new life for us: that there is nothing that is impossible for us anymore because there is nothing that is impossible for God; that no earthly power can touch us without God's will, and that danger and urgent need can only drive us closer to God. What is certain is that we have no claim on anything but may ask for everything; what is certain is that in suffering lies hidden the source of our joy, in dying the source of our life; what is certain is that in all this we stand within a community that carries us. To all this, God has said Yes and Amen in Jesus. This Yes and Amen is the solid ground upon which we stand.²

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 8) :515.

APPENDIX
ORIGINAL QUESTIONNAIRE

Story

He was honest inside and out, a man of his word, who was totally devoted to God and hated evil with a passion. Many people considered him truly blessed. He had a large family and was very wealthy. Without warning, however, he lost everything. His children all died when an earthquake destroyed the home where they celebrating a holiday together. A short time later he found that his wealth had been destroyed through frivolous investments by an unscrupulous businessman he had entrusted with managing his estate. He fell ill, perhaps from the stress of all this, and was struck with a terribly painful disease. After all this, his wife who had always outwardly admired and expressed love for him began to turn away from him and even despised him in his loss. He was left with nothing. Only a few friends came to him and tried to comfort him but they only made his misery worse by pointing to things in his life that might have led him to such a terrible place.

What do you think happened to this man?

What role did God play in all this?

What could this man have done to avoid such calamity?

How should he have responded to it?

How would you respond in such a situation?

Mark with an x any of the following that seem to describe your views. (add comments if you want to clarify why you choose the ones you have)

___ God was punishing this man for some sin in his life even if it was not obvious to the man or others.

___ God was testing this man and trying to build something in his life that could not be done any other way.

___ God had little to do with the man's actual suffering. These are simply things that can happen to anyone.

___ If the man had more wisdom he could have avoided at least some of these sufferings.

___ The man should simply accept this as God's will and learn to trust God in these things.

___ These things will turn out for good eventually in either this life or the next. If you think this is so what will insure that this is the case?

___ Through these terrible things this man will learn about himself and God things he could learn in no other way. This is hard but it is an opportunity for this man to grow spiritually.

___ How he responds to these sufferings may be used in other people's lives to point them to God.

TRANSCRIPT OF RESPONSES

Respondent 1: Russian background Messianic Jewish Believer/Rabbi from Israel.

What do you think happened to this man?

It is clear that the situation speaks about Job. Such people are many. When suddenly comes to misfortune, or even what the big problem and people can not understand why all this happened. He was in shock . . . but if this man is living faith, then he comes to answer, the speaker "God gave - God has taken." Of course on top can be a lot of emotion, a lot of bitterness. Clearly, that would just not stop the pain.

What role did God play in all this?

I form the light and create darkness: I make peace and create evil: I the Lord do all these things. (Is.45: 7)

In Hebrew, this verse says "make Shalom and do evil." God allows a person's life Shalom and Evil. It somehow affects its interior and proper human behavior affects the world. This is a Jewish approach to the situation of Job. God allows all this. Same way God is a part of what happen.

Could this man have avoided such calamity, and if so how?

Not to do sins, because sins open for the Devil free access to the person. Every person may ask mercy from God . . . This is we study in Jesus prayer "Our Father". More people can not do for that to protect themselves.

How should he have responded to it?

We know how to answer Job - God gave, God took, and his name will be blessed. How is he able to say so after all this, I do not understand in human way. May be God gave him for that strength. Or God had such big place in Job, and he said so.

How would you respond in such a situation?

God forbid, what would it happened. I think no one can foresee and suggest how he could do in this situation . . . a wise man in Proverbs said: "Do not let me be rich or poor, that I had not lifted my self, or had not begun to steal." This man "was not sure about his future conduct, and relied on God's mercy."

Mark with an x any of the following that seem to describe your views. (add comments if you want to clarify why you choose the ones you have)

God was testing this man and trying to build something in his life that could not be done any other way.

Respondent 2: Russian background Messianic Jewish Believer from Israel.

What do you think happened to this man?

I have no idea. (It is like Job's story, so without cheating and tell you what I know from that story I must stop here).

What role did God play in all this?

He watched it, planned it, orchestrated and is planning some great good to come of it.

Could this man have avoided such calamity, and if so how?

No. Or mostly no.

How should he have responded to it?

Easy to say, but he should have postponed all his questions until much latter time time when presumably they can be answered.

How would you respond in such a situation?

One hopes in a similar way I suggested that he should have responded before.

Mark with an x any of the following that seem to describe your views. (add comments if you want to clarify why you choose the ones you have)

X_God was testing this man and trying to build something in his life that could not be done any other way.

X__If the man had more wisdom he could have avoided at least some of these sufferings.

(INVESTMENT WITH BAD INVESTOR.... Well.... Perhaps)

X__These things will turn out for good eventually in either this life or the next. If you think this is so what will insure that this is the case?

Is Jesus suppose to be somewhere in the answer?????

X__Through these terrible things this man will learn about himself and God things he could learn in no other way. This is hard but it is an opportunity for this man to grow spiritually.

Opportunity.... Yes. It could also kill the man... spiritually. □

X__How he responds to these sufferings may be used in other people's lives to point them to God.

Respondent 3: US Orthodox Rabbi

What do you think happened to this man?

He is suffering terribly and undergoing a great trial like Job.

What role did God play in all this?

These events, in fact all events, are not random, they are decided upon and given to us by God.

What could this man have done to avoid such calamity?

Maybe yes, maybe no. It depends on the reasons behind this.

How should he have responded to it?

The gemara (Brachos 5a) tells us that if one sees that afflictions are befalling him he should deeply investigate his actions . . . and if he has investigated and found nothing wrong he should attribute to the vitiation of Torah study . . . and if he attributes it and found nothing he should know that these are afflictions of love.

How would you respond in such a situation?

I would enter a time of very deep and serious introspection and investigation. For most people it is likely we will find something that we are doing that requires rectification - are we guilty of *lashon hara* [gossip that entails telling truth but to hurt or harm] in some degree or another? Are we totally innocent of saying God's name in vain - do we focus every time we recite a blessing?

Mark with an x any of the following that seem to describe your views. (add comments if you want to clarify why you choose the ones you have)

X God was punishing this man for some sin in his life even if it was not obvious to the man or others.

We know that sometimes a soul is sent down to this world to rectify a sin in a previous life time. We simply cannot perfectly know our "pre-history".

X God was testing this man and trying to build something in his life that could not be done any other way.

And even if there is no specific "complaint" against a person, he may still be too attached to this world and the Almighty may be doing him a great kindness is detaching him a bit and letting him refocus his priorities on the spiritual and eternal instead of the physical and mundane and temporal.

X If the man had more wisdom he could have avoided at least some of these sufferings.

This is possible and it has been suggested that one who cannot find a cause for his sufferings is because he is insufficiently attuned to Torah sensitivities and hence he should attribute his failure to find a cause to his lack of Torah knowledge.

X Through these terrible things this man will learn about himself and God things he could learn in no other way. This is hard but it is an opportunity for this man to grow spiritually.

There may exist even great Torah scholars and righteous men of whom there is no complaint.

It may be just that God, in His infinite wisdom wants to generate more reward for them than their "earned" merits would call for and He gives afflictions in this world to generate timeless reward in the next.

Respondent 4: Orthodox Rabbi, Israeli

What do you think happened to this man?

This seems to be the story of Job that pictures for us tremendous loss.

What role did God play in all this?

Nothing happens to us by chance.

What could this man have done to avoid such calamity?

No, I do not think that there is a way to avoid all suffering in this world. In fact, the Sages teach that suffering is normally a positive thing as it alleviates some (or all) of the punishment in the World to Come

How should he have responded to it?

I think that for most people trying to identify a particular sin with a certain suffering is futile as we are not of the spiritual level to be able to understand what corresponds to what, but there are certainly a few individuals in the world whose intense spiritual standing gives them insights that others do not have.

How would you respond in such a situation?

I won't really know unless it happens to me.

Mark with an x any of the following that seem to describe your views. (add comments if you want to clarify why you choose the ones you have)

These are possible but not certain.

God was punishing this man for some sin in his life even if it was not obvious to the man or others.

If the man had more wisdom he could have avoided at least some of these sufferings.

Respondent 5: Muslim Background Believer from North Africa.

What do you think happened to this man?

He has been destroyed

What role did God play in all this?

Just watching

Could this man have avoided such calamity, and if so how?

No

How should he have responded to it?

I don't think he could response in any other way than this way

How would you respond in such a situation?

Feel miserable; I may lose faith in God

I would feel it is a punishment

I may ask why this happened to me and not to the others, who are not honest, not men of

God.....

Desperate

I may in a moment of total despair commit suicide

Mark with an x any of the following that seem to describe your views. (add comments if you want to clarify why you choose the ones you have)

God was punishing this man for some sin in his life even if it was not obvious to the man or others.

God had little to do with the man's actual suffering. These are simply things that can happen to anyone.

The man should simply accept this as God's will and learn to trust God in these things.

Through these terrible things this man will learn about himself and God things he could learn in no other way. This is hard but it is an opportunity for this man to grow spiritually.

How he responds to these sufferings may be used in other people's lives to point them to God.

Respondent 6: Muslim Background Believer from North Africa.

What do you think happened to this man?

He lost his life and not knew the solution

What role did God play in all this?

Nothing

Could this man have avoided such calamity, and if so how?

No

How should he have responded to it?

He would continue to devote to God.

How would you respond in such a situation?

I would say to God: “Why did these things happen to me?” and I will ask Him for His help.

Mark with an x any of the following that seem to describe your views. (add comments if you want to clarify why you choose the ones you have)

God had little to do with the man’s actual suffering. These are simply things that can happen to anyone.

The man should simply accept this as God’s will and learn to trust God in these things.

These things will turn out for good eventually in either this life or the next. If you think this is so what will insure that this is the case?

“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” Rom 8: 28

Through these terrible things this man will learn about himself and God things he could learn in no other way. This is hard but it is an opportunity for this man to grow spiritually.

How he responds to these sufferings may be used in other people's lives to point them to God.

Respondent 7: Muslim Background Believer from North Africa.

What do you think happened to this man?

Tragically wounded, he didn't understand why this happened although he is Devoted

What role did God play in all this?

No role

Could this man have avoided such calamity, and if so how?

No

How should he have responded to it?

To trust God more

How would you respond in such a situation?

I will blame God and I will ask Him help

Mark with an x any of the following that seem to describe your views. (add comments if you want to clarify why you choose the ones you have)

God was testing this man and trying to build something in his life that could not be done any other way.

These things will turn out for good eventually in either this life or the next. If you think this is so what will insure that this is the case?

Rom 8: 28 "We know that in all things God works for good with those who love him,d those whom he has called according to his purpose."

Respondent 8: Former Imam, Muslim Background Believer from West Africa.

What do you think happened to this man?

A great misfortune has come to this man.

What role did God play in all this?

God's role in all this is to assure the survival of this man.

Could this man have avoided such calamity, and if so how?

There is nothing he could do to avoid this.

How should he have responded to it?

I should have responded that it was the will of God.

How would you respond in such a situation?

I would have begun to doubt the existence of God.

Mark with an x any of the following that seem to describe your views. (add comments if you want to clarify why you choose the ones you have)

God was testing this man and trying to build something in his life that could not be done any other way.

The man should simply accept this as God's will and learn to trust God in these things.

Through these terrible things this man will learn about himself and God things he could learn in no other way. This is hard but it is an opportunity for this man to grow spiritually.

Comments

Through this test God shows us that He is with us in spite of our difficulties and what he has in store for us is greater in comparison to the riches of the earth.

Respondent 9: Muslim Background Believer from West Africa.

What do you think happened to this man?

He experienced a great misfortune, suffering without parallel.

What role did God play in all this?

God permitted this misfortune in this man's life. God also was helped and supported this man so that he could endure this misfortune and suffering.

Could this man have avoided such calamity, and if so how?

The man could do nothing in order to avoid the calamite.

How should he have responded to it?

His response should be to morn and bear any wrong toward others the only other alternative is to believe God had abandoned him.

How would you respond in such a situation?

If this happened to me, I would pray and put myself in God's hands.

Mark with an x any of the following that seem to describe your views. (add comments if you want to clarify why you choose the ones you have)

God was punishing this man for some sin in his life even if it was not obvious to the man or others.

I do not believe that this man is being punished for some sin.

__ God was testing this man and trying to build something in his life that could not be done any other way.

It is certain that God used this for good even if we cannot understand it.

__ God had little to do with the man's actual suffering. These are simply things that can happen to anyone.

No it is God's permissive will that allowed these things to happen.

__ If the man had more wisdom he could have avoided at least some of these sufferings.

There is no wisdom that could have helped this man avoid this.

__ The man should simply accept this as God's will and learn to trust God in these things.

The man should accept this but that does not exclude that he should also express his feelings.

X These things will turn out for good eventually in either this life or the next. If you think this is so what will insure that this is the case?

Yes because in Romans 8:28 it says that all things work together for good to those who love him and are called according to his purpose

X How he responds to these sufferings may be used in other people's lives to point them to God.

I believe this man's experience is helpful for others especially the world in which we live today.

Respondent 10: Muslim Background Believer from Central Asia.

What do you think happened to this man?

He was being tested by God

What role did God play in all this?

God wanted to see the strength of His faith and test it

Could this man have avoided such calamity, and if so how?

No, God knows what we need and He brings it into our lives to test us

How should he have responded to it?

Accept it as God's test and responded by faith

How would you respond in such a situation?

Things like this have happened and we (me and my husband) have seen them as opportunities to grow and to see God's hand at work in our lives. We need to accept such events and believe that they will make us stronger

Mark with an x any of the following that seem to describe your views. (add comments if you want to clarify why you choose the ones you have)

God was testing this man and trying to build something in his life that could not be done any other way.

The man should simply accept this as God's will and learn to trust God in these things.

Through these terrible things this man will learn about himself and God things he could learn in no other way. This is hard but it is an opportunity for this man to grow spiritually.

How he responds to these sufferings may be used in other people's lives to point them to God.

Respondent 11: Muslim from Central Asia.

What do you think happened to this man?

God was working in his life.

What role did God play in all this?

God was in charge of all of this. God can do anything that He wants. Who are we to questions God?

Could this man have avoided such calamity, and if so how?

No one can avoid the will of God. There is nothing good or bad that someone can do to avoid the plan of God in ones life.

How should he have responded to it?

He should accept what happened as the work of God.

How would you respond in such a situation?

Life happens and we just need to accept what happens. There is no control that we have over these things.

After this conversation he explained that he really had no idea what he was talking about and didn't know if he was giving the right answers and that I should talk with a Mulla about these things.

Mark with an x any of the following that seem to describe your views. (add comments if you want to clarify why you choose the ones you have)

The man should simply accept this as God's will and learn to trust God in these things.

Respondent 12: Muslim from West Africa.

What do you think happened to this man?

I think that this man had been cursed by God seeing how he had entered into relationship with an unscrupulous man who wasted his fortune.

What role did God play in all this?

God plays a role of the supreme chief over all beings on the earth.

Could this man have avoided such calamity, and if so how?

He should have managed his fortune and his family with faith without mixing it with anything.

How should he have responded to it?

Given that these things happened this man must repent.

How would you respond in such a situation?

In the face of such a situation, I would have tried to control my relations with those around me in the knowledge that God is the master of everything on earth. I would put my trust in God and be sincere in my relations with others.

Mark with an x any of the following that seem to describe your views. (add comments if you want to clarify why you choose the ones you have)

God was punishing this man for some sin in his life even if it was not obvious to the man or others.

When we look at this man's life regarding his relationship with God and others we see he measured up positively. He was pious. Even with all the positive qualities that everyone knew this man had, we see one thing that found its way into all this; that is the unscrupulous manager who wasted his fortune with frivolous investments. In reading all these considerations, we see it is necessary to know all our relationships and control everything that man does on the earth. God knows all our desires because he is underneath all things. In addition, it is through circumstances like these that man can know the real nature of his friends.

Respondent 13: US Christian.

What do you think happened to this man?

If this situation is what happened with Job, then it sounds like Satan wanted to afflict the man to prove that he was only praising God in the good time and would curse God and die during affliction. Perhaps God decided to bless him with the opportunity to praise His name through the storm. 2 Corinthians 4:8-10 it says “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed... so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies”.

What role did God play in all this?

God does not cause us to sin. However, He uses sin to His glory. God uses the brokenness of this world and creation and He uses our sins to bring us to justice and also to bring us closer to Him. In Job, Satan is the one that takes away everything from Job and afflicts him but he has to come before God first for permission, which He gives. C.S. Lewis in “Mere Christianity” talks about how when things go poorly in this life and we experience the brokenness of this world, it is a reminder that we were not made for this world and so that we put our hope “...not what is seen but what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary but what is unseen is eternal” (2 Cor 4:18). If it was not for afflictions, we would have no reason to look forward to Christ’s return. So although God may not have directly caused this man’s afflictions, we can see from Job that He at least gave his permission but through this He gives the man the opportunity to turn to Him, trust that this is for his best good and for the most Glory of God, and he is able more than ever to put all hope fully in the return of Christ and the righting of all of brokenness of this world.

Could this man have avoided such calamity, and if so how?

The man could not really have done anything to avoid this calamity. He was born into this broken world where all of creation is groaning to be made right with the creator and the way it was intended to be at the beginning of time. Maybe the man is somewhat stubborn and does not want to let go of control and trust God and God is using this to help him with that but that is not so much in the man’s control.

How should he have responded to it?

He should seek God through it all and praise Him to the glory of His name. It is not going to be easy and as a human he will be struggling with why God will do this but that is ok. If you look at David in Psalms, half of it is him crying out “why?” but he is faithful to the Lord through it all, trusting He has a purpose through it for his greatest good to God’s greatest glory.

How would you respond in such a situation?

I believe I would be able to do just that. I am sure I would struggle and wish for death at times and wonder why God is afflicting me and those around me. However, despite not fully understanding it, I would trust that His will is greater than mine and that although forgiven through Christ, I am still sinful and sin deserves the wrath of God. However, God is good and we are to praise Him through all circumstances. Just look at Paul. He was stoned a few times, thrown in prison a whole lot, beaten, shipwrecked, and many other things but was still able to praise God through it and bear witness to His name.

Mark with an x any of the following that seem to describe your views. (add comments if you want to clarify why you choose the ones you have)

God was punishing this man for some sin in his life even if it was not obvious to the man or others. (God has both passive wrath (giving us over to our sinful desires) and active wrath (affliction and natural disasters) which are because of the brokenness of this world and our turning from God. This is seen in basically all of Israel's history)

God was testing this man and trying to build something in his life that could not be done any other way.

The man should simply accept this as God's will and learn to trust God in these things.

These things will turn out for good eventually in either this life or the next. If you think this is so what will insure that this is the case? (2 Cor 4:17)

Through these terrible things this man will learn about himself and God things he could learn in no other way. This is hard but it is an opportunity for this man to grow spiritually.

How he responds to these sufferings may be used in other people's lives to point them to God.

Respondent 14: African second generation Christian.

What do you think happened to this man?

Assuming that this devoted Godly man who hate evil is been allowed by God to be tested by evil to show whether or not his motives for worship or serving God is pure. It is also an invisible spiritual battle that goes on in this world over those who choose to be honest and hate evil. This man is not victime since he is god fearer instead this happened to him to show the limitations of Human outside of God. I will compare this story to the Life of Job in the Old Testament and say that God may allow people to be tested so that they can demonstrate their dedication to Him and their will for their Lives.

What role did God play in all this?

He allow all this to happen to this Man for a reason. 1- to show His power 2- Show His wisdom

God show that He is the creator and the giver of all things. He is all knowing and all powerfull He permits all suffering to come upon this man, but His plans and purposes are Just and Unquestionable.

Could this man have avoided such calamity, and if so how?

This man could not avoid such calamity because Human in this world do not have wisdom to understand things of God and cannot see the whole picture of God's plan for their lives, and cannot comprehend the judgement of God who cause things to happen because of His good purpose for His creation. To do otherwise will only show Human ignorance before God

How should he have responded to it?

He should have prayed for God's mercy and show his total dependence upon God's grace.

How would you respond in such a situation?

I will avoid to dictate to God how to take care of my situation even when it seems hard and beyond comprehension. I will conclude that God's judgment upon my life is better than mine but cryout for His mercy and grace.

Mark with an x any of the following that seem to describe your views. (add comments if you want to clarify why you choose the ones you have)

Through these terrible things this man will learn about himself and God things he could learn in no other way. This is hard but it is an opportunity for this man to grow spiritually.

Our very life and the air we breath as well as all we have belong to God. And God can decide to take it away any time. He is sovereign. And so this situations teaches this man that everything he own belong to God and not to him. God is the owner and he is the manager. He learned to lovingly fear God and know Him in intimate way as never before. God gave him and opportunity to get closer to Him and worship Him with all he has.

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