Issues and Approaches in Contemporary Theological Thinking about Evil

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Evil, Prayer and Transformation

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Abstract: Analytic theodicy commonly suggests an overarching reason why a benevolent, omniscient and omnipotent deity permits the quantity and intensity of suffering in our world. This is often couched in terms of freedom of belief or action, or some other variation of the claim that suffering is “worth the price.” I argue that not even the hope of post-mortem consolation could adequately compensate any individual for the inevitable loss of everything which makes, or might have made, life in this world worth living. By contrast, transformational theodicy argues that suffering is an unfortunate by-product of our evolving world. All living things are connected to other living things by means of networks, symbolised for John Hick by Indra’s Net. Divinity is both the force which brought about the beginning of the universe and sustains its continued existence and an objectively existing standard of goodness which is manifested in varying degrees throughout our world, metaphorically conceived in terms of non-binary personhood. It casts light on human endeavours and provides a source of power on which humankind may draw by means of prayer or meditation to influence the networks of living things in order to prevent or alleviate suffering and promote the flourishing of living beings.

Keywords: analytic problem of evil, existential problem of evil, theodicy, divine attributes, Indra’s Net, prayer, meditation, transformation

1 Introduction

In this article, I argue that a theodicy need not attempt to discover why a benevolent deity who is both omniscient and omnipotent permits the quantity and intensity of suffering which we find in our world. Instead, it might aim to show how Divinity, an objectively existing standard of goodness, metaphorically pictured in terms of non-binary personhood, casts light on our human endeavours and provides a source of energy upon which humankind may draw by means of prayer or meditation in order to exert a positive influence on the network of living things. I employ some ideas derived from the Hindu/Buddhist concept of the Net of Indra, supported by recent discoveries in plant neurobiology of previously unknown – or, at least, poorly understood – communication between plants and other sentient beings, and by research in the field of psychology on the phenomenon of emotional or social “contagion.” If there is such a network, it might be possible, as John Hick suggests, to use it to focus on the needs of living beings,¹ thereby “contributing a small drop to that ocean of light and love which sustains all constructive and beneficial activity in this world.”²

1 By “living beings” I mean predominantly “sentient beings.” I note, however, that some – e.g. Card – have argued that “intolerable harm” may be suffered by “many kinds of life, including non-sentient nature – plants, species, biotic communities, and ecosystems” (Card, “Environmental Atrocities and Non-Sentient Life,” 23–4).

2 Hick, *The New Frontier of Religion and Science*, 186.

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2 Rejecting analytic theodicies

Theodicies of the first kind, which attempt to explain why a deity who is good, all-knowing, and all-powerful might allow evils such as disease and destruction, or religion- or race-driven atrocities, are much discussed by analytic philosophers of religion. They commonly suggest an overarching reason why God allows such evils. This reason is often couched in terms of freedom of belief or action and the hope of a better life after death, or some other variation of the claim that at least some aspects of life in a world containing suffering are “worth the price.” Christopher Hamilton argues that philosophers who adopt such a strategy do not take seriously the unspeakable quantity of suffering in our world. As an example, he cites Richard Swinburne’s claim that he feels “*considerable initial sympathy*” with the judgement that God has, in allowing evils such as the Black Death, the Lisbon earthquake, the Holocaust, or Hiroshima, “overdone it.”³ Hamilton suggests that anyone who claims only “initial” sympathy with Holocaust victims has “no understanding of the issue at all.”⁴ We might recall here the teaching of Emmanuel Levinas who argues that, although we may choose to see our own suffering as some kind of adventure, justifying our neighbour’s pain is “the source of all immorality.”⁵

Dostoyevsky’s Ivan Karamazov famously rejected a ticket to heaven purchased with the suffering of innocent children,⁶ but I would argue that it is not only extremes of suffering which cannot be justified by hope for the hereafter. I would suggest that the faint hope of post-mortem consolation does not constitute adequate compensation for the sum of every episode of suffering which we experience in this life, including, at the end of life, the inevitable loss of everything which we find life enhancing. This might include our relationships, our work or other life projects, aesthetic pleasures such as those we might derive from the visual arts or music, our homes and treasured possessions or, for those who lack these things in this life, the hope that they might eventually be attained. Even if it is possible to construct a coherent account of life after death – whether this is construed in terms of bodily resurrection or survival of a disembodied soul – such accounts, particularly in the Christian tradition, are often “shadowy”; they lack the kind of detail which might reassure us of the continuation or attainment of happy relationships, meaningful activity, aesthetic pleasure, and a sense of locational “belonging.” When we do find accounts of post-mortem existence which include descriptions of such things – some Islamic accounts of paradise, for example – we encounter, again, the problems concerning coherence and justification which, perhaps, the “shadowy” accounts of an afterlife were designed to avoid.

3 Alternative theodicies

One way to avoid the “compassionless theodicy” problem is to re-vision the God of classical theism. If God lacks one or more of the attributes of benevolence, omniscience, or omnipotence, the need for theodicy of the first kind falls away. The attributes of the God of classical theism are derived from the scriptures of the Abrahamic faiths, and we find in those scriptures a God whose goodness, knowledge, and power far outshine the goodness, knowledge, and power of humankind. But we do not find there a God who knows our future choices and has the power to prevent our moral mistakes.

Some argue for a concept of Divinity without attributes. For example, Paul Tillich argues for the transcendence of all forms of theism on the grounds that God is not “a being,” one being among others who is just part of the whole of reality. Rather, God is “beyond the ontological elements and categories

³ Hamilton, “Philosophy and Religion, Hope and Rapture,” 129.

⁴ Ibid., 130.

⁵ Levinas, “Useless Suffering,” 378.

⁶ Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, Book 5, Chapter 4.

which constitute reality;” God is “being-itself.”⁷ For Tillich, God understood as “a being” is “all-powerful and all-knowing” and, as such, is understood as “the invincible tyrant, the being in contrast with whom all other things are without freedom and subjectivity.”⁸ This, he suggests, is the God whom Nietzsche thought must be “killed because nobody can tolerate being made into a mere object of absolute knowledge and absolute control.”⁹ By contrast, Tillich argues, the experience of “absolute faith” draws on the power of being-itself, and it is that power which enables us to accept every aspect of the human condition and from which we derive “the courage to be.”¹⁰

Others argue for revised interpretations of God’s attributes. For example, Hans Jonas¹¹ and David Griffin¹² argue for a God who is good but has limited power and changes as the world changes, and this idea has been developed by womanist theologians such as Monica Coleman.¹³ Thomas Jay Oord proposes that God’s primary attribute is that of “uncontrolling love.” In his “essential kenosis” model of divine providence, he suggests that “kenosis,” a term used by Paul in his letter to the Philippians to describe Jesus Christ,¹⁴ is best understood as referring to “self-giving and therefore others-empowering love.”¹⁵ On this model, God’s power is persuasive; God encourages right action¹⁶ but has no knowledge of the future evils caused by empowered creatures, organisms, or natural processes and cannot intervene in order to prevent them.¹⁷

Although the “problem of evil” which analytic theodicies were designed to address no longer arises if Divinity lacks both knowledge of the future and absolute power, evil and suffering persist. The resources of religion therefore have been and remain important for those attempting to address the “existential problem of evil” – i.e. the problem of how to avoid, come to terms with, or transform suffering in ourselves and others. For example, John Shelby Spong argues that some evil is unavoidable; it is an unfortunate by-product of evolution which shows that humankind is still a “work in progress.”¹⁸ Pierre Hadot recommends spiritual exercises to enable us to transcend our individuality and thereby to become less anxious about our individual concerns.¹⁹ And Coleman argues for “creative transformation,” the way in which we “work with God to implement God’s ideals in the world.”²⁰ These ideals are concerned with “survival, quality of life, and justice in every context” and although womanist theologians begin with the experiences of black women, they are concerned with the whole of humankind as well as with the natural world upon which humanity depends.²¹

4 A hybrid theodicy

The position which I want to develop here takes some of its inspiration from attempts to re-vision the concept of Divinity and from associated strategies for addressing the existential problem of evil in order to transform the existence of living beings.

⁷ Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, 178.

⁸ Ibid., 179.

⁹ Ibid., 179.

¹⁰ Ibid., 179.

¹¹ Jonas, *Mortality and Morality*.

¹² Griffin, *Reenchantment Without Supernaturalism*.

¹³ Coleman, *Making a Way Out of No Way*.

¹⁴ 2:4–13.

¹⁵ Oord, *The Uncontrolling Love of God*, 159.

¹⁶ Ibid., 179.

¹⁷ Ibid., 172.

¹⁸ Spong, *A New Christianity for a New World*, 157.

¹⁹ Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 93–101.

²⁰ Coleman, *Making a Way Out of No Way*, 86.

²¹ Ibid., 94.

But it also retains a concept of Divinity which has elements in common with the God of classical theism and analytic philosophy. It is, however, one which holds that the accounts of Divinity which we find in the scriptures of the Abrahamic faiths are records of human attempts to understand that which is, in some respects, beyond human comprehension. It is also influenced by the tradition of pragmatism which runs from C. S. Peirce and William James through to the liberation theologies (including womanist theologies and feminist philosophies of religion) of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Although, for Tillich, “absolute faith” is not without content, its content is the “God above God.”²² He dismisses as “irrelevant”²³ forms of theism which do not say what they mean when they use the name of God. These, he argues, are commonly accepted by people who “cannot stand a world without God” and “need some of the connotations of the word God;”²⁴ they therefore regard the name of God as “a poetic or practical symbol.”²⁵ It seems to me, however, that the concept of a “God above God” is just as difficult, if not more so, to understand. It is also difficult to reconcile with the accounts of Divinity which we find in the scriptures and liturgies of the world’s religions.

Research on the key features of growing and declining Protestant churches in Canada carried out by David Millard Haskell, Kevin N. Flatt, and Stephanie Burgoyne suggests that growing churches are predominantly theologically conservative.²⁶ This implies that human beings find it difficult to conceive of a God without goodness, wisdom, power, and agency, and that they do “need some of the connotations of the word God.” But Haskell, Flatt, and Burgoyne also suggest that the key difference between conservative and liberal believers lies in the strength of their beliefs and that liberals, too, can experience growth if they are “firm and clear in their religious convictions.” It might therefore be possible to re-envision the concept of Divinity in such a way that we can sidestep the classical, analytical problem of evil while maintaining “firm and clear” belief in key elements of the classical concept of God.

The hybrid theodicy for which I argue here also acknowledges the existence of various strategies for addressing the existential problem of evil which may be found in the work of philosophers writing “continental-style” philosophy. Although some of these, such as Hadot, refer to spiritual exercises as a means of implementation, in this article, I offer an interpretation of prayer which avoids common objections to belief in the efficacy of petitionary prayer and supports the claim that prayer should be regarded as part of a rational response to the existential problem of evil.

5 A concept of Divinity

Divinity, then, may still be regarded as good, wise, powerful, and personal.

Divinity may be thought of as wise in a sense suggested by Don Cupitt. In *Taking Leave of God*, he argues that, in the Bible, God’s knowledge is predominantly morally relevant knowledge. We should therefore understand divine omniscience not as the ability to know everything about the past, present, and future but as the light shed on our moral shortcomings by the “religious requirement” which prompts us to change for the better.²⁷ Divinity is not a conscious mind, analogous to a human mind, but it can be understood as a mind in a metaphorical sense insofar as our moral mistakes, once made, cannot be undone and persist as a form of judgement, unless they are nullified by means of forgiveness. It is this knowledge which, in a sense, watches over us and, perhaps, prevents at least some of the evil deeds for which we might otherwise be responsible.²⁸

²² Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, 176.

²³ Ibid., 178.

²⁴ Ibid., 176.

²⁵ Ibid., 177.

²⁶ Haskell, “Liberal Churches Are Dying” and Haskell et al., “Theology Matters.”

²⁷ Cupitt, *Taking Leave of God*, 85–6. Divinity is no longer described as the “religious requirement” in Cupitt’s later work.

²⁸ A longer summary and assessment of Cupitt’s argument may be found in Burns, “Divine Wisdom,” 58–1.

Divinity describes both the force which brought about the beginning of the universe and sustains its continued existence and an objectively existing standard of goodness which, as Iris Murdoch has suggested,²⁹ is reflected in varying degrees in the examples of goodness which we see around us.³⁰ Divinity is a source of power because we need both the force which propels and promotes existence and the standard of goodness which, following Murdoch, functions as a magnetic force and empowers our attempts to prevent and overcome evil and suffering for ourselves and others. As the standard of goodness, Divinity is both beyond the world and in it but is not yet fully realised in the world. It is this standard which we need to identify, and whose power we must harness in order to work together for the benefit of all living beings.

Divinity construed in this way is also a person or personal in a metaphorical sense because goodness, wisdom, and power, as well as other divine attributes, are attributes of persons. In particular, like persons, Divinity is an agent of change. Clearly, Divinity lacks other attributes which persons commonly have, and possesses some attributes, such as omnipresence, which persons do not have. But if it is possible to say to a human person “You are my rock” and to mean by it something which we can understand, it is also possible to say “Divinity is a person, or personal” and convey truth, even if Divinity is not a person who is in every respect like human persons.

Divine personhood is commonly assigned a male gender because, for many centuries, it was thought that a person must be either male or female, and this has caused particular difficulties for womanist theologians³¹ and feminist philosophers of religion.³² It is now understood, however, that human persons are not only male or female but may be both or neither. Thus, it might now be appropriate to say that Divinity is a metaphorical non-binary person.³³

6 Transformational theodicy

I suggest, then, that Divinity is good, wise, powerful, and omnipresent and may be conceived of in terms of gender-neutral personhood. Xe (a gender-neutral pronoun) is not able to create a world without evil, the unfortunate by-product of our evolving world to which we contribute, but Xe is able to provide humankind with a force for good, manifested in varying degrees throughout our world, on which we can draw to influence the underlying networks by means of which all living things are connected to all other living things.

These networks are symbolised for Hick by Indra’s Net. The story of Indra’s Net is first found in Hinduism’s *Atharva Veda* (c 1200–1000 BCE),³⁴ but also appears in the later *Avatamsaka Sutra* of Mahayana Buddhism (written sometime after 100 BCE), and is mentioned many times in the literature of the Hua-yen school of Chinese Buddhism (seventh century CE). According to the story, in the heavenly dwelling place of the god Indra there is a net which extends infinitely in every direction and has a jewel at every knot. In each jewel, every other jewel is reflected, and each reflection reflects every other jewel. The process of reflection is therefore infinite.³⁵

Rajiv Malhotra suggests that the meaning of the simile is not that all the individual, independently existing parts of the universe are somehow linked together, but rather that the existence of each individual

²⁹ Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*.

³⁰ For more on how these two aspects of Divinity might be held in tandem, please see Burns, “How to Prove the Existence of God: An Argument for Conjoined Panentheism,” 5–21.

³¹ E.g. Coleman, *Making a Way out of No Way*.

³² E.g. Anderson, *A Feminist Philosophy of Religion*, and Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*.

³³ An earlier and more extensive discussion of the nature of divine personhood may be found in Burns, “Classical and Revisionary Theism on the Divine as Personal”, 151–65.

³⁴ Malhotra, *Indra’s Net*, 4.

³⁵ Cook, *Hua-yen Buddhism*, 2.

part depends both upon the whole and upon all the other parts; without the whole, or the sum of all the other parts, no individual part could exist.³⁶ Hick suggests that, as a consequence of this universal interdependence, all human beings are “linked together at a deep unconscious level in a network of interdependence in which we are all the time influencing and being influenced by others’ thoughts and, even more, emotions.”³⁷

For Hick, evidence for this network of influence is provided by impressive examples of extrasensory perception (ESP), but further support for this ancient theory might be offered by recent research on non-verbal communication in animals and plants, and on the psychology of emotional or social contagion.

7 Plant communication

Malhotra suggests that forests embody many of the qualities of the Net of Indra. In a forest, “thousands of species of animals, plants and microorganisms exist in a state of mutual interdependence.”³⁸ At any level, a microcosm is always connected with its macrocosm; there are many “worlds-within-worlds” which are never separate from each other. All the parts of a forest are able to adapt in order to live more fruitfully with each other, and newer forms of life are constantly incorporated into it.

Although the popular book by Peter Tomkins and Christopher Bird *The Secret Life of Plants* has been criticised on the grounds that “it consists almost exclusively of bizarre claims presented without adequate supporting evidence,”³⁹ there is, nonetheless, scientific evidence that trees and other plants use a variety of methods to communicate both with each other and with other sentient beings.

In the field of plant neurobiology, “communication” may be defined in at least two ways – as “a behaviour that provides information from a sender to a receiver”⁴⁰ or as a receiver’s response to “a communicative trait.”⁴¹

Richard Karban argues that there is scientific evidence that plants communicate in the first of these senses, “signalling to remote organs within an individual, eavesdropping on neighbouring individuals, and exchanging information with other organisms ranging from other plants to microbes to animals.”⁴²

H. Martin Schaefer and Graeme D. Ruxton argue, however, that plant communication should be defined in the second sense because there are at least some cases in which, although we can measure the receiver’s response, we cannot be sure that the information received was intentionally sent. For example, the dove which acts on the information that the saguaro fruit of the giant cactus is a good source of nutrients is not receiving from the cactus the message “I am good to eat” because consumption of the fruit by the dove is detrimental to the seeds of the cactus fruit. But Schaefer and Ruxton suggest that, even if we do not know the nature of the information which is conveyed during communication, we can measure the effectiveness of communication by observing the reaction of the receiving individual or individuals. For example, there is communication between a plant and its pollinator if, by means such as the interaction of shape and/or biochemistry with the “visual, olfactory, acoustical, and gustatory receptors of pollinators,” a characteristic response in the pollinator is somehow brought about.⁴³

Whether or not the definition of communication includes intentional signalling by the sending organism, it is clear that science is gradually providing us with a much better understanding

³⁶ Malhotra, *Indra’s Net*, 4.

³⁷ Hick, *The New Frontier of Religion and Science*, 185.

³⁸ Malhotra, *Indra’s Net*, 8.

³⁹ Galston, “The Unscientific Method”, quoted in Chamovitz, *What a Plant Knows*, 99; see also Karban, *Plant Sensing and Communication*, 3.

⁴⁰ Karban, *Plant Sensing and Communication*, 4.

⁴¹ Schaefer and Ruxton, *Plant-Animal Communication*, 2.

⁴² Karban, *Plant Sensing and Communication*, 1.

⁴³ Schaefer and Ruxton, *Plant-Animal Communication*, 2.

of the ways in which receiving plants or animals acquire from “sending” plants, whether or not the sending is intentional, information which is relevant to their own subsequent behaviour. Such communications may occur when there is only one kind of receiving organism (as when, for example, figs are pollinated by particular fig wasps), or when there are many possible types of receiving organism. (There are some plants for which there are more than a hundred species of possible pollinators, for example.)⁴⁴

Plant communications also provide examples of sensing and communication which far exceed the abilities of humankind. For example, Karban notes that some plants provide insect pollinators with the opportunity to “perceive elaborate visual signals in the ultra-violet range called nectar guides that are invisible to humans.”⁴⁵

Thus, some support for the notion of Indra’s Net may be provided by Malhotra’s example of the interrelatedness of the parts of a forest, and by our developing understanding of plant communication methods which suggests that there might be further methods of communication which are still poorly understood. Prayer, I would contend, might be one of these.

8 Emotional contagion

In this section, I argue that the phenomenon of emotional or social contagion, employed in its most positive manner, might be the means by which those who pray or meditate communicate with the spiritual network of religious practitioners in order to bring about benefits within the Net of Indra of which they are a constituent part.

An early account of emotional contagion may be found in Hume’s *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739) in which he acknowledges that “the minds of men are mirrors to one another” because emotions are “reflected” backwards and forwards.⁴⁶ Lou Agosta suggests that, even if we do not yet know the nature of it (mirror neurons exist in monkeys but not in human beings, for example), human relatedness suggests that there must be an “implementation mechanism” to account for “emotional contagion, contagious laughter, motor mimicry, and subtle forms of synchronization of bodily gestures.”⁴⁷ He argues that, even if the idea is mythical, “the entire human being is one giant, ultimate mirror neuron.”⁴⁸

Elaine Hatfield, John T. Cacioppo, and Richard L. Rapson observe that “people do tend automatically to mimic or synchronize with the facial expressions, vocal expressions, postures, and movements of those around them,” and that “people tend to experience emotions consistent with the facial, vocal, and postural expressions they adopt.”⁴⁹ They argue that evidence from “a variety of disciplines, including animal research, developmental psychology, clinical psychology, and social psychology”⁵⁰ as well as the performing arts and historical records shows that “people may indeed catch the emotions of others in all times, in all societies, and, perhaps, on very large scales.”⁵¹

The effects of emotional contagion are sometimes negative – as in, for example, the multiple suicides in the town of Palo Alto described by Lee Daniel Kravetz⁵² – and might be a contributory factor in the explanation of superstitious religious belief. For example, in the seventeenth century, John Trenchard

⁴⁴ Ibid., 224.

⁴⁵ Karban, *Plant Sensing and Communication*, 15.

⁴⁶ Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 365; quoted in Agosta, *A Rumour of Empathy*, 14.

⁴⁷ Agosta, *A Rumour of Empathy*, 14.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 14.

⁴⁹ Hatfield et al., *Emotional Contagion*, 5.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 5.

⁵¹ Ibid., 127.

⁵² Kravetz, *Strange Contagion*.

argued that superstitions were “communicable contagions” caused by “noxious effluvial material,” the effect of which is to “create whole communities” of people with “similarly deranged brains.”⁵³

The effects of emotional contagion can also, however, be more positively employed. Hatfield, Cacioppo, and Rapson argue that the attributes of those who are likely to catch others’ emotions include the ability to:

1. Focus their attention on others.
2. See themselves and others as interrelated.
3. Read others’ “emotional expressions, voices, gestures and postures.”
4. “[M]imic facial, vocal, and postural expressions.”
5. Be aware of their own emotional responses.
6. React emotionally.⁵⁴

Hatfield, Cacioppo, and Rapson do consider briefly the question of whether emotional contagion can occur in large social interactions, such as one might find at a religious revival meeting.⁵⁵ The other examples given imply that the phenomenon is largely employed for pernicious purposes, but I would suggest that there might be a more positive application, of which prayer or meditation might be one example.

9 Prayer as a form of positive emotional/social contagion

Thus, in prayer, we focus our attention away from ourselves as individual selves and see ourselves and all other parts of the universal network as interrelated. Although, like the cells in the human body, each jewel in Indra’s Net is continually being replaced,⁵⁶ in prayer or meditation it can “forget” itself and realise that it is the Net.⁵⁷ In focusing our attention on the universal network, we influence and are influenced by the emotional expressions of others by means of the words we choose, the tone of voice and posture we adopt, and, perhaps, our facial expressions. Prayer therefore brings about communication in both the first and second senses since it is a behaviour that sends information to a receiver but also prompts the receiver’s response in the form of actions which contribute to a beneficial transformation of the universal network.

An earlier version of such an interpretation of religious belief and the practice of prayer may be found in a 1904 paper by Ralph Barton Perry. Perry suggests that conversion to the belief that “God, in the long run, means kindness by you” is inspired “not by reasoning, but by all the powers of suggestion that personality and social contagion can afford.”⁵⁸ Subsequently, someone who lives in “an atmosphere of kindness” will “instinctively endeavour to propagate it,”⁵⁹ and his power “is that of one who works in an environment that reinforces him.”⁶⁰ So, Perry argues, religion “stimulates [life purposes] [...] by the same means that works in all corporate and social activity. And to work with the universe is the most tremendous incentive that can appeal to the individual will.”⁶¹ For Perry, the function of a priest is “to suggest the living presence of God,”⁶² and the association of this suggestion with prayer and “the general atmosphere created by the meeting together of a body of disciples” will serve to confirm this suggestion.⁶³

⁵³ Day, “The Sacred Contagion,” 151.

⁵⁴ Hatfield et al., *Emotional Contagion*, 182.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 205.

⁵⁶ Malhotra, *Indra’s Net*, 5.

⁵⁷ Loy, “Indra’s Postmodern Net,” 503.

⁵⁸ Perry, “The Religious Experience,” 761.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 762.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 762.

⁶¹ Ibid., 762.

⁶² Ibid., 763.

⁶³ Ibid., 763.

10 Avoiding common philosophical difficulties

Responses to some of the most common philosophical difficulties with the notion of petitionary prayer might therefore look something like this:

1. Why is it necessary to tell the Divine what we need if the Divine already knows?

The purpose of petitionary prayer is not to tell an omniscient being something which Xe already knows but to influence the interdependent network and prompt responsive action, and to be influenced by the network and to act in response.

2. If the Divine already knows what we need, why does the Divine not provide it without being asked?

The Divine “knows” what we need in the sense that our needs have the potential to be made known to the network by means of prayer, but, in the manner of the Prayer of St Teresa of Avila (1515–1582), God has “no hands but yours; no feet but yours.”⁶⁴

3. Does the Divine provide for the needs of those for whom no one prays?

If the actions which are the consequences of our prayers are to make a difference to a person or situation, we cannot say that what subsequently happens to that person or situation would have happened even if we had not prayed. This is why prayer is so important.

4. How can we be sure that an apparent answer to prayer would not otherwise have happened?

We cannot – just as we cannot be sure that we would have reached our destination sooner if we had taken an alternative route. We can only hope that our prayers do make a difference.

5. Why are some prayers apparently unanswered?

We need to pray for people and situations in which there is at least a small chance that human intervention might make some beneficial difference. There is no point in praying for rain unless we think there is some chance that, as a consequence, someone will hire a plane and seed the clouds at the appropriate location.

11 Objections

Here, I consider briefly four possible objections to the position outlined in this article.

The first objection is that what I am commending to you is a form of syncretism, and that one might therefore ask how the use of imagery derived from Hinduism and Buddhism can be imported into a concept of prayer found primarily in the Abrahamic faiths.

One possible response might be to say that Indra’s Net is a striking way to draw attention to a feature which many religions have in common. In Christianity, for example, we find the idea of Christians as different but equally important parts of the Body of Christ.⁶⁵

Second, does this understanding of prayer as transformation of the network of living things not require us to modify the concept of Divinity beyond recognition?

I have suggested that we can preserve a concept of Divinity which has at least some of the key attributes of classical theism, but that the manner in which those attributes might be interpreted is constrained by rationality. For example, if we pray for someone who is sick and they subsequently die, we might reasonably conclude that, whichever way in which we attempt to explain the concept of Divinity, it clearly is not the kind of thing which has the power, in every situation, to prevent untimely death. Therefore, any “answer” to prayer can only be described in terms of the way it changes us, and the changes which we, as human beings, make to a situation as a consequence of the prayer.

⁶⁴ Saint Teresa of Avila, “Prayer of Saint Teresa of Avila.”

⁶⁵ I Corinthians 12:12–31; Romans 12:3–8.

A third objection might be that this model of prayer is applicable only to corporate prayer since it is only when praying with others that we have an opportunity to influence and be influenced by others.

In response, we could say that, even when alone, we are rarely entirely disconnected from the rest of humankind. We might be influenced by means of television, radio, books, and the Internet and, while most of us are unlikely to appear on television, most of us do have a variety of means by which we can influence others, even when others are not physically present. Writing might be regarded as a form of prayer, for example.

The fourth objection is concerned with truth. How do we know that this description of prayer and its “mechanism” is a true account?

We cannot be certain of this (and a degree of faith is therefore required), but the account which I have offered avoids common objections to belief in petitionary prayer and provides a coherent account of the role which prayer can play in helping us to prevent or alleviate suffering.

12 Conclusion

In this article, I have recommended a concept of Divinity which is derived from but not entirely dependent upon classical analytic concepts of God and enables rational commitment to a form of religious belief which offers meaning and purpose, even in the midst of great suffering. Prayer and meditation form a central part of the practice of religion, particularly as a means of addressing the existential problem of evil, but there are philosophical problems with the notion of petitionary prayer which are difficult to resolve. I have suggested that petitionary prayer might be understood as a means by which humankind can draw on the power of Divinity to connect with the network of interdependence of which every part of the universe, including every human person, is a part, in order to promote the flourishing of living things, particularly those who suffer. Our developing understanding of hitherto-unknown methods of communication, including, perhaps, the notion of emotional or social contagion, employed in its most positive sense, might help us begin to make sense of the mechanism which enables this connection to occur, and which helps us to work together for the common good. Prayer, then, is a rational response to the existential problem of suffering which has the potential to bring about positive transformation.

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