

## Theism, theodicy and Christology

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**Abstrak.** Theisme atau percaya kepada Allah adalah tantangan bagi manusia. Artikel ini membahas persoalan tentang keterkaitan antara Allah dan manusia dalam tiga fase. Masing-masing memberikan sumbangsih pemikiran mengenai fokus kristologi yang komposit dan paling sering menimbulkan dilema bagi seseorang, khususnya ketika teisme secara intensif muncul di dalam dilema ini, yaitu tentang penderitaan. Hal tersebut merupakan konteks yang tak dapat dihindari dan menjadi forum pembahasan mengenai theodicy (kedaulatan Allah) dan ateisme.

**Key words:** theism, theodicy, Christology, Atheism, suffering, flipside, Deus absconditus

**Abstract.** Theism or believing in God is a peculiar challenge for humanity. This article engages the issue of God and human contingency in three phases, each contributing to a composite christological focus concerning the most pervasive and enduring dilemma for people, especially when theism is intentionally raised within this dilemma, which is suffering. This is an inevitable context and intense forum for theodicy and atheism alike.

### God who would be the devil

God is sovereign in giving and also taking away. God, whose creation can terrify even as it invokes wonder, is the author of ways that are inscrutable. Consistent with biblical testimony, the Book of Job also articulates many perennial dilemmas for theism: Is God's sovereignty providential? Are the sufferings of righteous people justified? If so, why does God either permit or inflict suffering, seemingly without explicit justification?

Job's theologically motivated friends offer various expressions of theodicy or defence of God that presume to explain dilemmas peculiar to theism. In particular, they berate Job for questioning God over the absence of explanation for his trials. Job's friends offer their defences of God in seeking to mitigate the absence of a justifying word from God amid his incomprehensible adversity. While a medley of theological explanations is gratuitously offered, God remains silent. For Job, the meaning of adversity remains opaque; the value of righteousness languishes in ambiguity. God's purpose is hidden, despite his friends' attempts to conceal the sheer affront to piety that such opacity represents.

When God finally speaks, it is concerning creation, offering this possibility for understanding—creation can invoke astonishment and gratitude, without giving further enlightenment. Does God as creator remain hidden as to righteousness before ambiguous issues of human life, amid creation's terrifying powers and awesome beauty? Is God only begun to be known in a strange wrestling that is only clarified by trusting a vocative word? The dramatic story of Job finally

compels its actors to silence. It awaits another story that speaks good news of God's disclosure in justifying our existence as gift, for gratitude amid creation and life engaged in unambiguous righteousness.

Theodicy, as a defence of God in the face of human suffering, remains a cul-de-sac for theistic confidence. Unless God who *forms light and darkness, creates weal and woe and kills to make alive* is known as redeemer, as disclosed by a story of sustained intimacy that culminates in humility within our humanity, the thought of God amid life's vicissitudes can only invoke terror. As the source of law that accuses and author of existence burdened with trauma and death, what Luther describes as a *hidden God (Deus absconditus* after Isa. 45:15), could seem to be a source of evil instead.

While in biblical testimony, God encountered by Israel in discipline is experienced as terror and disaster through foreign invasion and exile, the gospel is contiguous with a sustained narrative of providential *loving-kindness* that is finally expressed within our humanity as *Emmanuel, God with us*. By contrast to this testimony of strange humility, which invokes *ears to hear* in its only meaningful reception, dualistic solutions are scripted into theistic responses to life's dilemmas—God is cast on the side of theoretical goodness, with actual adversity cast on the side of evil. Without the paradox of God disclosed by narrative intimacy in anticipation finally of christological disclosure, any relationship cast between goodness and God will be ambiguous. In the absence of God's word or promises becoming flesh, God could be conflated with adversity and perceived personally as divine assault.

As *Deus absconditus*, God's goodness is hidden; amid contradictions of human dignity, our conjectures offer no clarity. In exposure to traumas of existence, how would we know whether God as unknown is not our accuser—too elevated to be contested, impervious to questioning and inexorable in pursuing an intention that defies our logic? This is a dilemma for theism (though not for pantheism, which makes everything divine, alleviating any issue). How in relation to theism then, is God's sovereignty perceived amid life's vicissitudes?

God as unknown, as merely a focus of speculative conjecture, also bears the blame for our variegated troubles. This is a particularly modern issue concerning theism and its flipside in a-theism.

Within the rhetoric of theism, God can be cast in fearful transcendence as a prosecutor, persecutor or tormentor and so within atheism, be aligned with terror in enmity toward humanity. God could be cast as the devil. Within modernity, theism struggles to sustain theological assertions of God's benevolence in the face of atheism's charge that God represents a suppression of our freedom as the arch rival of human dignity. In this way, theism's God is *God who would be the devil* (a variation on Luther, Ps. 117).

Theodicy is a theistic problem and a catalyst for many to decide against God as no other than "the devil" in causing or permitting unconscionable suffering. Whatever theistic piety might presume, we could only know God is not the devil by a christological word that speaks otherwise than our self-justifying conjectures.

Luther articulates the disclosure of God's goodness in Christ, without whom, God can only remain *Deus absconditus*. This reflects his theological

understanding of God—what God is apart from Jesus Christ, as unknown, could also be deemed the devil. Apart from the word of God interpreted christologically, God is hidden and effectively, at least to human perception, the devil!

Perceptions of God, without any christological underpinning to engage adversity as an affront to human dignity, are haunted by a thought that God might be the antithesis of everything God is supposed to be. Theism, with its contorted theodicies by which the absence of God from human adversity is rationalised and excused, lacks what is disclosed through inklings in Israel and finally by *foolishness* of Christ crucified—the vulnerability of God amid human suffering that is met with creativity in the word of God. God speaks by a word of intentional movement toward us!

By focus on “stuff” that *cannot see, hear or speak* (a prophetic definition of idols), we become like the things in which our lives are invested. Within the possibilities and ambiguities of freedom, we can obscure a vocative capacity for response to our ultimate other and through self-elevation, turn an abundance of good things into instruments to consolidate our existence. In this way, extravagant generosity in creation no longer speaks with generosity. It becomes an arena of contest, even terror, as individuals and tribes attempt to control the elemental or “stuff” in anxious self-preservation before nature’s violence, the competitive anxiety of others and finally, the threat of nothingness.

Theism cannot address this scene, for God as unknown is also unknown as to overture concerning our fragile existence. Yet God disclosed in humility, vulnerability and acquainted with our dilemmas and traumas does address everything in this scene. This distinguishes christological faith from theism or belief in a Supreme Being without reference to Christology.

God is hidden, inasmuch as God conjectured within theistic speculation and atheistic caricatures of theism, is not God of biblical testimony. God construed according to our self estimation is invariably skewed according to our self-justification. By demanding or resisting a divine persona pitched to civic utility or private piety, we miss the point entirely. As hidden, God is revealed in such a way that theistic speculation, even as piously motivated, will not recognise where God has chosen to be known. God hidden and so potentially confused with the devil is an issue of conjecture about God, without any means of knowing otherwise.

If according to biblical testimony, God is sovereign, in what way then, is this sovereignty expressed concerning human existence?

### **Why God is also left handed**

If *God will have mercy on whom God will have mercy*, we might assume that God is arbitrary and therefore unjust. Yet the story of God in biblical testimony reiterates a crucial theme—*God resists the proud and gives grace to the humble*. Where hubris or arrogant pride is present, generous mercy is not comprehended. This is intrinsic to a seemingly arbitrary resistance to Pharaoh portrayed by Paul. (Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, which the following elaborates)

Pharaoh is not a neutral figure in biblical narrative. He represents everything that is opposed to God and flaunted in proud arrogance or hubris. Pharaoh is a tyrant who terrorises a foreign people. Pharaoh is an architect of genocidal

policies. He is no more neutral than Stalin or Hitler could be deemed neutral figures in history. That God resists Pharaoh in a determination *to have mercy on whom God will have mercy* is neither arbitrary nor unjust.

It is the character of God to show mercy in hearing the cries of those under duress, having no one to turn to but God. Scripture also articulates the inevitable outcome of arrogant self-elevation—resisting the mercy of God, such hubris is resisted by God. If God resists hubris, this does not indict the mercy of God; people are given over to what they choose to embrace—their hubris. In this way, it can be said that God hardens what is of itself being hardened in choices informed by hubris. If there is always a possibility of turning from hubris to God’s mercy, there is also a proud determination compounded by choices in a refusal to turn.

God favours what is consistent with mercy and so resists what is contrary to mercy as contrary to the will of God to be wholly characterised by mercy. God *resists the proud and gives grace to the humble* because it is consistent with God’s character to do so. Biblical testimony conveys this in narrative cameos and psalms in a refrain that is etched into the memory of Israel as a lesson learnt in trauma and joy. For willing recipients of biblical testimony, this is also now a familiar story of the strange “left hand” of God.

Even as Pharaoh is given over to arrogance, he never ceases being of use to God in the same way the Babylonians were instrumental in exiling Judah and so fulfilling God’s discipline of a called people. This is the will of God performed by the left hand of God. Yet Babylonian arrogance within this instrumentality is also their undoing, even if their actions fulfilled the will of God (Isa. 47).

Pharaoh assumes a luciferous role of self-elevation to the point of inhumanity, yet he is also corralled within the purpose of God in doing so. Pharaoh cannot escape the purpose of God, even as he defies it. Pharaoh acts for evil but God, in liberating a chosen people from Egypt, transforms such defiance into an event of salvation in formation of a nation of testimony to righteousness.

The left handed will of God is beyond human contest, yet it is played out within human engagement toward the humility of trust in the righteousness of God who alone saves in mercy.

Pharaoh resists mercy and so is resisted by God; in his arrogance, he is a vessel of wrath in the left hand of God. Yet Pharaoh is also regarded with great patience. As volitional, Pharaoh has time and opportunity to accept another possibility other than any forged in hubris. This is always a scene set for repentance and no one, not even Pharaoh, is exempt from its possibilities or neglect.

Objection to *God having mercy on whom God will have mercy* assumes that compassion is a limited commodity to be divvied out according to our criteria and calculation. Yet God’s mercy exceeds our assumptions and purview. Even Pharaoh has other possibilities—he can repent. That Pharaoh will be Pharaoh is not God’s doing, even if God gives freedom to people within which they can accept or resist the will of God. Pharaoh, in the freedom to be Pharaoh, is legitimately a focus of God’s just will and purpose. Once Pharaoh’s heart is hardened in resistance to God, he can do nothing but be provoked to further hardness by the character of God to favour in mercy, those who have nothing to

commend them. These represent an affront to Pharaoh and he seeks to destroy them.

God's mercy provokes jealousy within Pharaoh as too, anyone who strives to be exalted above others is incensed that someone should be privileged with unmerited favour. We readily resist such favour as unfair. This is a constant refrain in biblical testimony—by grace, the *lowly, least or last* are elevated in the face of jealous pique (remember the *vineyard labourers*). Such resentment is transparent as pride mingled with anxiety in seeking to secure identity and futurity.

Pharaoh is corralled into doing within his hubris what he is determined to do, yet this is wholly of his own doing. In this way, his heart is hardened within the will of God to be sovereign in mercy. This is the unique paradox of God's sovereign grace and human freedom everywhere present in biblical testimony. By a word otherwise than arrogant assertions and their presumed possibilities, God favours ignominious slaves in Egypt in the face of Pharaoh's seeming insurmountable power and grandeur. Having made cruel choices against a people called in grace, Pharaoh's utility use as *clay in the potter's hands* is already determined by freely chosen resistance to the will of his maker.

God is the source of our existence as the focus of faith that ascribes veracity to God in the word of grace. Trust in the word of God is life-giving in recognition that this word speaks truly concerning our existence, while also exposing self-justifying pursuits other than possibilities articulated by the word of God. By our temerity, we conflate hubris with anxiety to give effect to folly, which is experienced as wrath in the demise of well-being. By our choices, we can propel ourselves into a cul-de-sac of self-destruction (Rom. 1). The reflexive demise of which the prophets and psalmists variously warn is *recoil—I will make your deeds recoil upon you*. Warning implies the real possibility of disaster and also the possibility of turning away from disaster.

God cannot be blamed for the recoil that reality as righteous brings against fallacious choices. In the strange wisdom of God, the left hand of God, such recoil also serves the will of God, even as we remain culpable for our choices. Judas' betrayal is no less heinous because it advanced the will of God. Judas can make another choice. His actions are not determined as if God's possibilities from Gethsemane to resurrection will not occur without him. If not Judas, another will invariably choose betrayal and its disgrace in determined idealism or self-interest.

Unrighteousness is not given legitimacy because God's resistance to it confirms God's righteousness. This would be like a convicted robber pleading exemption for confirming the legitimacy of laws against theft. God is not impeached by human temerity. In sovereign grace, God will always resist human hubris, which grasps at self-standing existence and so is contrary to grace. To experience the reality of God's patient grace by contrast to self-elevation means relinquishing our pride within the deference of trust. The word of gospel declares God's generosity to all humanity. Appeals to intrinsic just-deserts are contrary to grace, whether these are presumed and claimed by tribal inheritance, political rhetoric or religious privilege. Vociferous assertions of just-deserts are impervious to generosity and so any sense of gift.

### **Theism, theodicy and atheism**

Atheism rejects belief in God because it is contrary to human freedom and dignity. If God is the final source of human meaning, our freedom and therefore dignity in the midst of life is ultimately subsumed within the sovereign will of God. This may be an issue with theism but not with Christian faith. In theism, the will of God is either cast without latitude or moderated in contested interpretations of divine demand and its expression within human life. This perennial and often very public tension within theism—between divine demand and assertions of human freedom—is dismissed by atheism in defence of humanity against theism, especially suffering humanity in the midst of life. This represents a crisis for theism.

Assertions of God's sovereignty, without Christology, are invariably met with atheism's assertion of complete freedom from "God," with theism defending God's transcendent freedom in response. Within christological focus, God in Christ exhibits complete vulnerability before human freedom, for the sake of our dignity in genuine freedom amid the contrary and knotty vicissitudes of life. Inklings of God's vulnerability in patient loving-kindness are exhibited in Israel's story. In Christ, God becomes wholly vulnerable before human freedom.

While theism provokes the hostility of atheism and its defence of human dignity apart from God, Christology maximises human dignity that is located in God's "strange" but sovereign freedom in the vulnerability of love.

Theism reflects a need for divinity that is distinguished from the conditions of human existence, especially suffering and death. As the antithesis of change and demise, an ideal toward which humans can aspire and seek solace is established in theism's transcendence. In this, God and flight from human existence represent the same thing. God's intimate involvement in human life and suffering makes no sense to theology that preserves some form of theism as a focus of spiritual ascent away from the flux of life and the reality of suffering and death (Moltmann).

Theism speaks of God by analogy in reading and conjecturing divine reality from human phenomena. God is either the perfection of human ideals or the antithesis of any human weakness. Yet such reading can yield another possibility—atheism instead of theism, as nothing is read clearly from human phenomena, except humanity. Theism cannot be confirmed by its use of analogies. Atheism is a response to theism's assertions. For atheism, human suffering only compounds the implausibility of theism.

Post enlightenment challenges to cultural theism were variously articulated in this way: because there is suffering, either God refuses to eliminate suffering and is therefore unloving or God is unable to eliminate suffering and is therefore impotent. Articulating a theodicy is a crucial issue for theism. In defending God against atheism's protests concerning human suffering, theism assumes that God has a case to answer. For Christian faith, God has no case to answer; God cannot be indicted and human freedom is also affirmed.

People in their freedom inflict suffering on one another. If nature causes harm, it does so as it provides a consistent environment within which people can make responsible decisions. According to the gospel, God in Christ has wholly

identified with human life, especially the extremities of human suffering. The cross also exposes humanity's possibilities—in their freedom, people can attempt to destroy exemplary goodness. This phenomenon can recede and advance in ambience and influence within human life, sometimes to the point of exhibiting a sense of pure evil. In their freedom, people can diminish and even destroy their own dignity.

If religious theism—with its claims to speak for the providence of God—is burdened with the defence of God in the face of suffering, Christian faith negates any need for such defence. In Christ, God is exposed to the depth of human suffering and shows that death and the anxious, self-preserving, abusive and violent activities of people in living toward death, are not the last word on human life. In Christian testimony, God disclosed in Christ crucified is otherwise than either the focus of atheism's protests against theism or the defensiveness of theism in response. After all, within theistic conjectures, who or what is being defended? From what experiences of human life must we flee to embrace theism's solace?

Theism's defence of God is irrelevant to Christian faith. By contrast to theodicy, God in Christ is the supreme advocate for human dignity and effectively so, as the source of life instead of self-destructive anxiety before a looming horizon of death. God gives freedom for the possibility of love. This includes choosing to diminish the suffering of others, whether their suffering is caused by a misuse of freedom or the biological limits of human life. Even within the irreversible experiences of time, human life can be renewed inwardly, even as it appears to be diminished by age.

In Christian witness, the sovereignty of God amid human life is christological and pneumatological as present by generosity and veracity.

Suffering, as intrinsic to our creaturely frailty, has crucial significance within Christian faith; it is not an aspect of existence we must flee by advocating theism's perfect solace beyond life. Death and every increment toward death expressed in anxious conflict, demise and suffering is real within human experience. Yet God in Christ experiences death succeeded by life to offer the redemptive possibility of not being corralled within this inexorable horizon of demise. Resurrection is God's imprimatur on the dignity of free and righteous life amid human conflict and suffering.

Because religious theism cannot adequately answer for human suffering, atheism is inevitable. Unlike assertions of theism, in which divine reality and solace are established beyond change and suffering, people can choose to suffer for a purpose. In this way, humanity surpasses "God"—that is, any divinity of theism. This sentiment is now an implicit modern assumption expressed by marginalizing religion or the claims of theism. (Moltmann)

In Christian testimony, God who has demonstrated a capacity for suffering is otherwise than atheism's exploitation of theism's failure in the inseparable relationship between theism and atheism.

In theism, God is conceived by analogies made from human life; presumed adjudications on the accuracy of such analogies are without adjudication. Accordingly, atheism is whispered within every assertion of theism, atheism remaining theism's inevitable flipside (Pascal).

Being haunted by atheism, modern rationalist theism opts for a minimalist view of God who is conceived in utility terms as useful enough not to be critiqued out of existence altogether. Utility theism (with discreet ritual appendages and mystical generalities linked to cultural and seasonal rhythms) is permitted for civic ends, while advocates of such theism seek only to present a small target to the animosity of atheism. Utility theism is anaemic as alien to God disclosed through Jesus Christ in New Testament testimony (Jüngel).

Theism offers what cannot be known; its theodicies are therefore meaningless within conjectures made about God as divorced from pervasive human experience of fragility and suffering. Theodicy or the defence of divinity is foreign to biblical testimony in which God, in patient and vulnerable love that culminates in christological focus, speaks into our fallible and mortal existence, not by speculation but tangibly, by grace and invitation to intimacy.

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Three phases offer a composite christological perspective and so Christian response to the problem suffering is for theism and the antipathy this difficulty evokes from atheism. The distinctive focus on God in Christian testimony is inseparable from the paradoxical disclosure of God *for us, with us*, amid the vicissitudes of human life, in unequivocal generosity and veracity in Jesus Christ.

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