



GOD, SUFFERING, AND CERTITUDE: FROM TRANSCENDENCE TO IMMANENCE

Deus, sofrimento e certeza: da transcendência à imanência

Paul K. Moser *

Abstract: Philosophy of religion suffers from inadequate attention to the specific moral character of a transcendent God worthy of worship. This deficiency often results from an unduly abstract conception of a transcendent God, including correspondingly abstract notions of divine goodness and power. A Christian approach to God has a unique solution to this problem, owing to its understanding of Jesus Christ as the perfect human representative of God's moral character or personality. This article identifies some important consequences of this perspective for divine emotion and suffering and for human relating to God in a fitting manner, including for human certitude about God's existence. It also identifies how philosophy of religion can be renewed, in its relevance, by its accommodation of divine redemptive immanence and suffering. In a fitting relation to God, God respects free human agency by not coercing any human will to yield to God or even to receive salient evidence of God's reality. The article considers this prospect. In particular, what if God does not impose a divine self-manifestation on humans but instead has them *allow* or *permit* it? This would entail that God does not stalk humans coercively with regard to their decisions about God's existence. An important issue would concern how we humans allow or permit God to emerge as self-manifested (as God) in our experience, thereby expressing God's unique moral character in our experience. If Jesus and the New Testament offer any clue, we would allow divine self-manifestation to us in allowing a morally relevant kind of death-and-resurrection in our lives, that is, a kind of dying into life with God. This article explores

* Professor do Departamento de Filosofia *Loyola University*, Chicago, USA. Artigo recebido a 21/03/2017 e aprovado para publicação a 03/08/2017.

that clue in connection with redemptive suffering, transcendent and immanent. It explains how such divine self-manifestation can underwrite certitude about God's existence, courtesy of interpersonal evidence from God. Such evidence is no matter for mere reflection, but instead calls for *imitatio Dei* as the means to participate in God's moral character and redemptive suffering.

Keywords: Moral character of God. Redemptive suffering. Certitude. Transcendence. Immanence.

Sumário: A Filosofia da Religião manifesta uma atenção inadequada ao caráter especificamente moral de um Deus transcendente digno de culto. Esta deficiência resulta com frequência de uma conceituação indevidamente abstrata da transcendência de Deus, à qual corresponde uma noção igualmente abstrata da sua bondade e poder. A abordagem cristã de Deus tem uma solução única para esse problema em função de sua compreensão de Jesus Cristo como a perfeita representação humana do caráter ou personalidade moral de Deus. Este artigo identifica de maneira justa algumas consequências importantes desta perspectiva, quanto ao sentimento e ao sofrimento divino e quanto à relação do ser humano com Deus, incluindo a certeza humana acerca da existência de Deus. Ela também indica como a Filosofia da Religião pode ser renovada em sua relevância por sua integração da imanência redentora e do sofrimento divino. Numa relação apropriada com Deus, Deus respeita a livre operação humana, ao não coagir a vontade humana a ceder a Deus ou mesmo a receber uma evidência óbvia de sua realidade. O artigo considera esta perspectiva. Em particular, que pensar se Deus não impõe aos seres humanos uma auto-manifestação divina, mas em vez disso deixa que eles a permitam. Isto implicaria que Deus não acossa coercitivamente os seres humanos a respeito de suas decisões sobre a existência de Deus. Uma questão importante seria como deixamos ou permitimos que Deus emerja como auto-manifestado (como Deus) em nossa experiência, expressando assim o caráter moral único de Deus em nossa experiência. Se Jesus e o Novo Testamento oferecem alguma chave, permitiríamos a manifestação divina a nós, ao aceitar uma espécie moralmente relevante de morte-e-ressurreição em nossas vidas, i.e., uma espécie de morte para vida com Deus. O artigo explora esta chave em conexão com o sofrimento redentor, transcendente e imanente. Explica como esta auto-manifestação divina pode assegurar a certeza a respeito da existência de Deus, a cortesia de uma evidência interpessoal da parte de Deus. Esta evidência não é uma questão de mera reflexão, mas, pelo contrário, chama à *imitatio Dei* como a maneira de participar no caráter moral e no sofrimento redentor de Deus.

Palavras-chave: Caráter moral de Deus. Sofrimento redentor. Certeza. Transcendência. Imanência.

Philosophy of religion suffers from inadequate attention to the *specific* moral character of a God worthy of worship. This deficiency often results from an unduly abstract conception of a transcendent God, including abstract notions of divine goodness and power. A Christian approach to God has a unique solution to this problem, because it understands Jesus Christ as the perfect human representative of God's moral

character. The apostle Paul speaks of Jesus as “the image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15), and the writer of the epistle to the Hebrews refers to him as “the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being” (Heb. 1:3). In John’s Gospel, Jesus remarks: “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). Such passages have led Michael Ramsey to comment that “God is Christlike and in him is no un-Christlikeness at all” (1969, p. 98). We shall identify some important consequences of this perspective for divine emotion and suffering and for our properly relating to God, including our having certitude about a transcendent God who seeks redemptive immanence among us.

What if God does not impose a divine self-manifestation on humans but instead has them *allow* or *permit* it? This would entail that God does not stalk humans coercively in their decisions regarding God’s existence. How, then, would we allow God to emerge as self-manifested (as God) in our experience, thereby expressing God’s unique moral character in our experience? If Jesus and the New Testament offer a clue in their portrait of *imitatio Dei*, we would allow divine self-manifestation to us in allowing a morally relevant kind of death-and-resurrection in our lives, that is, a kind of dying into life with God. We shall explore this clue in connection with redemptive suffering, divine and human. We should not proceed just *a priori* here. Instead, we should attend to relevant evidence from specific religious experience. We will do so in connection with some biblical reports of divine intrusions in human experience. These reports earn their keep abductively, by their explanatory value for our overall experience; so, we need not treat them as automatically having authority or even credibility.

God and Redemptive Compassion

Jesus Christ manifests a moral personality that, if representative of God, points to a divine moral character exhibiting a specific kind of goodness and power. This divine goodness and power include *redemptive compassion*, *mercy*, or *sympathy* toward others. (I use the terms “sympathy,” “compassion,” and “mercy” interchangeably.) Redemptive compassion is a kind of goodness and power central to what various New Testament authors call *agapē* and ascribe to God in a distinctive way. It differs from *mere* compassion in that it is *redemptive*, being aimed, self-sacrificially, at what is morally and spiritually *good* and even *best* for a person, including the reconciliation needed by that person toward God and other people.

Let’s think of sympathy as one’s feeling or suffering with a person in something that person feels or suffers. For instance, in sympathy, I can join with a person in his or her feeling the pain of losing a child. Such sympathy would differ from “empathy” if the latter is one’s simply un-

derstanding a person's feeling without joining in it. Redemptive sympathy has one self-identify with the feeling of a person *for that person's moral or spiritual good or benefit*. So, not just any self-identifying with a person's feeling will qualify as redemptive.

The Hebrew Bible portrays God as compassionate in such passages as the following: "The Lord will ... have compassion (*yitnehām*) on his servants, when he sees that their power is gone, neither bond nor free remaining" (Deut. 32:36). "The Lord will vindicate his people, and have compassion (*yitnehām*) on his servants" (Psalm 135:14; cf. Psalm 103:13). In addition, Hosea 11:4 gives an unmatched portrait of divine compassion toward Israel: "I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love (*'ahābāh*). I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them." This is redemptive compassion, aimed at what is morally and spiritually good for its recipients.

The New Testament offers clear statements of God's mercy toward humans. Paul refers to God thus: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies (οἰκτιρῶν)" (2 Cor. 1:3). Similarly, the epistle to the Ephesians speaks of "God, being rich in mercy (ἐλέει), because of his great love (ἀγάπην) with which he loved us" (2:4). These references to God as merciful fit with the remark of Jesus in his Sermon on the Plain: "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful (οἰκτιρῶν)" (Luke 6:36). Here, too, the divine mercy is redemptive, being anchored in *agapē* that seeks human well-being in relation to God and others.

The New Testament characterizes Jesus as sympathetic toward others, for divine redemptive purposes. The epistle to the Hebrews states: "We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin" (Heb. 4:15). Mark's Gospel illustrates this sympathy of Jesus in action: "He saw a great crowd; and he had compassion (ἐσπλαγχνίσθη) for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd" (Mark 6:34). In addition, Matthew's Gospel represents Jesus as citing Hosea 6:6 in this command: "Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners" (Matt. 9:13). Jesus represents God's redemptive mercy among humans, in attitude and action toward others.

Leonardo Boff notes that "for Jesus, evil does not exist in order to be comprehended [or, explained], but to be taken over and conquered by love" (1978, p. 119). We may say the same for God and for suffering, and we may understand love here as the divine compassionate *agapē* that self-sacrifices for the good of others. Divine compassion arises from divine *agapē* that is passionate about moral and spiritual goodness among humans. The divine passion for such goodness emerges throughout the biblical writings, and is particularly clear in divine wrath (ὀργή) and judgment (cf. John 3:36). Wrath is, by nature, passionate, but divine wrath is not uncontrolled rage;

it has a definite purpose or intention, in accordance with divine *agapē*. Jesus acknowledges his Father as having unique knowledge of the time of the final judgment and thus as having a unique supervisory role in judgment, even if the Son of Man has a more direct role (see Mark 13:32; cf. Matt. 24:36, John 5:22).

We cannot retain the biblical God if we dispense with divine wrath and judgment. We then would disable God's passionate *agapē* toward humans, particularly in wrath and judgment. If God is inherently loving, in all divine attitudes and actions, then divine wrath and judgment do not occur apart from divine *agapē* but cohere with it. Without divine passion, divine *agapē* and wrath would have a kind of personal *apathy* or indifference in God foreign to typical biblical reports about them. They are, however, anything but personally apathetic in God and Jesus. Divine *agapē* excludes volitional and emotional apathy toward the people loved, and includes self-identification with them in fitting volitions, affections, and actions. One result is God's sharing in the suffering of those who suffer, including in the passion of Christ.

The Hebrew Bible suggests that people can *grieve* God: "How often they rebelled against him in the wilderness and grieved him in the desert!" (Psalm 78:40; cf. Isa. 63:10). It thus suggests that people can bring about suffering for God by their frustrating God's redemptive intention for them. The same suggestion emerges in the New Testament: "Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption" (Eph. 4:30). To be grieved is to undergo suffering, owing to the felt frustration of what one seeks. If God failed to undergo such suffering, God would lack personal commitment to the divine redemptive goal for humans. The resulting personal apathy would block God from having compassionate love toward humans. The being called "God" then would be morally defective from the divine standpoint of moral perfection and worthiness of worship.

Perfect *agapē* in a world of personal conflict will be "suffering love" in many situations, given one's frustrated goals for the good of other persons and the resulting grief for one. This would apply to God and to humans committed to a life of perfect *agapē* in interpersonal relationships. If God is inherently loving toward morally imperfect humans, suffering as grief will be part of God's own psychological and moral character. Such suffering as grief will underlie a divine offer of forgiveness to humans doing wrong, and related suffering will underlie the human reception of forgiveness as a means to reconciliation with God.

Even if God is not causally responsible for all suffering, God as Lord over all intentionally would *allow* all of the suffering that occurs. In addition, it would be perverse if human suffering had no purpose but God could stop it. God could allow suffering in order to participate in it somehow

and thereby to redeem it by bringing good out of it. God's own suffering in general would be a self-chosen limitation, and not a case of a greater power imposing suffering on God against what God allows. So, divine suffering would not threaten God's lordship. Instead, God's lordship would supply a rationale for divine and human suffering, even if humans, given their cognitive limitations, do not fully understand it.

The suffering of Jesus and the evil inflicted on him by humans can illustrate how God can redeem suffering and evil. H. Wheeler Robinson explains: "The evil [of the Cross] was permitted to triumph over the good that the evil might show its own nature and its utter futility when matched with the good. The Cross was a focal point of victory wrought by the goodness of Jesus against the evil of the world, though at a spiritual cost which we cannot measure" (1939, p. 169). Given this kind of redemptive transformation, according to Robinson, "the Cross of Christ shows us that the order of [God's] spiritual world reverses that of the physical. It moves not from life to death, but from death to life" (1939, p. 174). Divine redemption thus undermines selfish human power to make room for life-giving divine power, even in the midst of suffering and death. Without causing evil, God can have "the creation subjected to futility" in its satisfying humans and their quest for power, and this futility can serve a redemptive purpose even when it yields human suffering (see Rom. 8:20–21).

The divine pattern of redemption that moves passionately from death to life finds its high point in the death-and-resurrection of Jesus, but this is not its only manifestation. It recurs wherever divine redemption is at work. Michael Ramsey thus proposes that "the Christlikeness of God means that [Christ's] passion and resurrection are the key to the very meaning of God's own deity.... The self-giving [in] the suffering love were not ... mere incidents in the divine history" (1969, pp. 99–100). Why, however, is *this* the pattern for divine redemptive self-manifestation, when something less severe is preferable to us?

The answer is in the ultimate motive and goal of divine redemption: *self-sacrificial agapē* among persons in relating to God and others, as something needed for meeting and living with God. John's Gospel represents Jesus as saying: "God so loved (ἡγάπησεν) the world that he *gave* (ἔδωκεν) his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (John 3:16). Similarly, Paul remarks that God "did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up (παρέδωκεν) for all of us" (Rom. 8:32), and that "God proves his love (ἀγάπην) for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us...." (Rom. 5:8). The writer of 1 John concurs: "God's love (ἀγάπη) was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice (ἱλασμόν) for our sins" (1 John 4:9–10). We thus

should consider the sacrificial suffering of Jesus as reflecting the sacrificial suffering of *God* in sending Jesus to die for us. To say that God is love, then, is to say that God is self-sacrifice for good.

God's giving his unique Son for the sake of our having life with God is inherently self-sacrificial love for us. Christ's self-giving death-and-resurrection offer a distinctive model for the unique divine love at work for humans. Such love calls for the end, the death, of all competing human power, for the sake of lasting human life in *God's* power. Paul identifies the divine aim in limiting human power in ways that involve suffering in human life: "We have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us" (2 Cor. 4:7). Regarding one case of suffering, Paul puts the divine aim thus: "We felt that we had received the sentence of death so that we would rely (πεποιθότες) not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead" (2 Cor. 1:9). This divine aim concerns what we ultimately *trust*: God or ourselves. Human power that opposes or otherwise competes with divine power faces God's self-sacrificial love that calls for a re-ordering of typical human priorities, including what and how we trust and love. This requires death to old ways for the sake of new, divinely empowered ways. Our ultimate self-trust should give way to ultimate trust in God, and our self-inadequacy in suffering can encourage us to welcome this shift.

God is not just intellect and will. A God of redemptive sympathy would be *passionate*, because *compassionate*, about the redemption of humans and hence *emotion*-motivated toward them. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus attributes redemptive emotion to his Father: "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure (εὐδόκησεν) to give you the kingdom" (Luke 12:32). Jesus claims that his Father is pleased or *delighted* in offering his kingdom to the followers of Jesus. God's being thus delighted has an emotional component irreducible to something intellectual or volitional. Some things, then, give emotional delight to God, and a divine offer of redemption to humans is one such thing, according to Jesus. Since Jesus ascribes redemptive emotion to God, we should give serious consideration to an emotional aspect of God's personality. The apathetic, emotionally empty god of Parmenides, Plato, and Aristotle, among others, is not the God of Jesus.

Divine emotion does not entail divine irrationality, unrighteousness, empty sentimentality, or condoning of unrighteous behavior. Instead, it passionately motivates divine wisdom, righteousness, and corrective judgment of unrighteousness. Divine emotion also provides an opportunity for compassionate interpersonal relationships between God and humans. We will not be able to receive compassion while relating to God if God is emotionally empty. In that case, such a relationship will be emotionally one-sided at best and hence thin with regard to passionate motivation. If, however, God is redemptively passionate, we have a personal standard and

source of proper motivation in passion. We then should relate to God in conformity to God's emotional and volitional character as presented and recommended by God. We thus would die to our own anti-God passions and volitions to live anew with God's.

God's goal for redemptive suffering would be for it to prompt us to meet God and to let God in to our lives, eagerly and cooperatively, and perhaps more deeply. God then would be our co-sufferer as Lord who can redeem our predicament, bringing life from our dying and death, in fellowship with us in suffering. It is noteworthy that in his immense suffering, Job received the (difficult) prize of meeting God and being instructed by God. Self-identifying with us in our suffering, God would manifest self-sacrificial *agapē* that invites reciprocity on our part. In reciprocity, we would identify with God's moral character, in *imitatio Dei*, by offering ourselves cooperatively to God. Responding cooperatively to God's suffering with us, we could share, if more deeply, in God's life of ongoing self-sacrifice for the redemption of all willing people. Job appears to have moved in that redemptive direction.

Human Redemptive Compassion: Imitatio Dei

If self-sacrificial suffering love toward others is inherent to God's moral character, and if we are (commanded) to imitate God's moral character, then we should exemplify self-sacrificial suffering love for others. A certain kind of human suffering thus will represent God's moral character and advance redemptive good among humans. The death-and-resurrection of Christ remove some of the mystery of human suffering, and offer a model for human redemption and for our properly relating to God and others, in redemptive suffering (see 1 John 4:10–11).

Mark's Gospel suggests the model: "[Jesus] called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it'" (Mark 8:34–35; cf. Luke 14:27). Matthew's Gospel similarly represents Jesus: "Whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it" (Matt. 10:38–39; cf. Luke 9:23–24, John 12:25–26). People "take up their cross and follow [Jesus]" when they are willing to yield everything they are and have to God's call on their life, as a self-sacrifice to God for the sake of life with God. This is the decisive attitude displayed by Jesus in Gethsemane, in yielding to God's perfect will after initial hesitation (Mark 14:36). Gethsemane is thus not only for Jesus but also for his disciples.

Paul suggests the death-and-resurrection model: “[We are] always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus’s sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh” (2 Cor. 4:10–11). Paul thus suggests that the sufferings of Christ are somehow ours too: “As we share abundantly in Christ’s sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too” (2 Cor. 1:5, RSV). Similarly: “I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church” (Col. 1:24). Somehow our suffering can extend the redemptive efficacy of Christ’s suffering. “We are saved,” H. R Mackintosh notes, “only as in spirit we join ourselves to [Christ’s] act [of self-sacrifice] and suffering. There was a spirit [of self-sacrifice] in it which must become our spirit if we are to be [children] of God” (1927, pp. 228–29). This fits with the blunt remark of Jesus: “Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:27).

Paul links suffering and resurrection power: “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead” (Phil. 3:10–11). Sharing in Christ’s suffering is not an end in itself but a way to reconciled, resurrection life with God. Paul recommends resurrection life *now*, not just for the future: “We have been buried with him [Christ] by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.... You must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 6:4, 11; cf. Col. 3:1). Paul endorses being “alive to God” now and “walking in newness of life” now, even if their full realization awaits future bodily resurrection. He associates the newness of life to Christ’s being “raised from the dead by the glory of the Father,” thus suggesting a kind of (spiritual) resurrection for humans now. This resurrection renewal of living through dying is “day by day” now: “Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure” (2 Cor. 4:16–17). We have, then, an endorsement by Paul of the death-and-resurrection model for our relating to God and suffering.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer has captured part of the death-and-resurrection model:

The cross is laid on every Christian. The first Christ-suffering which every man must experience is the call to abandon the attachments of this world. It is that dying of the old man which is the result of his encounter with Christ. As we embark upon discipleship we surrender ourselves to Christ in union with his death—we give over our lives to death. Thus it begins; the cross is not the terrible end to an otherwise god-fearing and happy life, but it meets us at the beginning of our communion with Christ. When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die (1937, p. 99).

The call to “come and die” is, as the resurrection component of the model suggests, a call to die in order to enter *life* with God in Christ. Bonhoeffer comments: “If we lose our lives in his service and carry his cross, we shall find our lives again in the fellowship of the cross with Christ” (1937, p. 101). Omitting the goal of new life with Christ would distort the redemptive model beyond recognition. A proper theology of the cross is a theology of *Christ* crucified, and this Christ is now the *risen*, living Christ. When Paul reports that he was determined to know nothing among the Corinthians except Jesus Christ and him crucified (1 Cor. 2:2), he means the *risen*, *living* Christ, who is no longer on the cross or dead.

Identifying Paul’s own spiritual experience, Douglas Dales refers to suffering that is “an experience of the utter barrenness, futility, and horror of spiritual death which threatens the very meaning of human life and personal existence and the value of human relationships” (1994, p. 17). He notes, however, that this is not beyond redemption into life with God. In redemptive suffering, he adds, “a deep work of life-giving love is being accomplished [by God], which constitutes the mystery of the church’s existence, the source of the true power of the Spirit at work in her for the life and deliverance of [hu]mankind and the created universe” (1994, p. 18). Even if human suffering brings a felt sense of abandonment by God, as it did in Jesus’s cry of dereliction (Mark 15:34), its divine purpose can be the opposite: to promote life in self-giving love from God for humans. Redemptive suffering can bring the priority of the value of such divine love into focus for humans, but that focus is not automatic in all human suffering.

The present story about God and humans could lack a foothold in one’s experience. One then will be unmoved by it, because it will strike one as just another theoretical proposal. Jon Sobrino thus remarks: “The crucified God is not a phenomenon that can be approached through theoretical concepts, but [instead] through practical concepts; it is not a case for theo-logy but for theo-praxis.... What this crucified God reminds us of constantly is that there can be no liberation from sin without bearing of sin, that injustice cannot be eradicated unless it is borne” (1993, p. 246). We may say the same about human suffering and the bearing of it, and thus offer an approach beyond theo-praxis: namely, theo-*pathos*. In response to God, we thereby approach God via a notion of perfectly compassionate, self-sacrificial *agapē* toward all persons, *as we participate* in such *agapē* offered to us. Our salient experiential evidence of God can arise from our cooperative participation, because this is where we can meet God, thus enabling our redemption beyond our thinking about it.

A proper understanding of a God worthy of worship must be through a notion of perfect *agapē*, including compassionate, righteous love inherent to God’s moral character. This notion involves *pathos* as well as volition,

praxis, and thought. We will understand a compassionate God properly only if we have felt compassion in relating to God, and not just an idea of it. Otherwise, we will have at most a sketchy intellectual understanding, and not a felt understanding of the kind suited to a compassionate God. We must participate in God's compassionate self-giving to understand God properly as fully compassionate. Such participation, according to 1 John 4:8-11, is likewise required for our knowing God.

H. R. Mackintosh has identified an obstacle:

The great reason why we fail to understand Calvary is not merely that we are not profound enough, it is that we are not good enough. It is because we are such strangers to sacrifice that God's sacrifice leaves us bewildered. It is because we love so little that His love is mysterious. We have never forgiven anybody at such a cost as His. We have never taken the initiative in putting a quarrel right with His kind of unreserved willingness to suffer. It is our unlikeness to God that hangs as an obscuring screen impeding our view, and we see the Atonement so often through the frosted glass of our own lovelessness. And the one cure for that is just to let God's own Spirit of love, clear [in] light and truth because of love, fill our hearts and clear our vision (1938).

Redemptive self-sacrifice is the chasm between God and us. Redemptive suffering that reflects God offers us a felt opportunity to let God in, that is, to die to our selfish power in order to live with and for God, including for the divine power centered in *agapē* (see 2 Cor. 5:14–15). It thus enables us to cooperate firsthand with divine redemptive immanence.

God's redemptive power intentionally seeks among humans an *agapē* relationship of obedient fellowship with God, after the model of Jesus in Gethsemane. (Philippians 2:8 identifies the similar role of Christ's obedience to God in the crucifixion.) Such obedient fellowship begins with a divine challenge, perhaps in human conscience and in suffering, to conform to God's moral character and will, particularly divine *agapē* for others. In responding cooperatively, one makes oneself available to the characteristic power of God and thereby gains access to the divine power to kill, and thus to die to, the selfish tendencies within oneself (Rom. 8:13). This is part of "taking up one's cross" and "being crucified with Christ" (Gal. 2:20) as a way to life with God. It is a way to participate, obediently, in the immanence among us of a transcendent God. The writer of the epistle to the Hebrews remarks even of Jesus: "Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered" (Heb. 5:8). Other humans have no reason to expect an exception from this kind of challenge in their suffering.

We are to participate obediently in the redemptive project of God and Jesus, even when our comprehension is incomplete and our suffering is extreme. Faith in God is self-sacrificial like that, as shown by Job, Paul,

and even Jesus in their cries of frustration, perplexity, and even felt abandonment by God. We thus should not expect to have a theodicy that fully explains God's specific purposes in allowing suffering. Even if we had one, we often would be inclined to desire, if not demand, alternatives that omit the suffering. It is doubtful, in any case, that all human suffering is redemptive, even if God intends it to be. Still, given suitable evidence, we reasonably can trust the goodness of the God who allows suffering and seeks our redemption.

If God works all things for good in redemptive suffering, we have a felt opportunity from God in such suffering. A divine purpose in one's redemptive suffering is to challenge one to (deeper) self-offering to God, even if other divine purposes are unknown by one. This purpose aims to advance one's lasting life in fellowship with God, including in suffering, as one allows oneself to be convicted by God of self-inadequacy in life. While not yielding a theodicy for all suffering, this does provide a *relational opportunity* for all redemptive suffering: one's beginning or deepening a cooperative relationship with God (on the latter relationship, see Moser 2017). One can stifle this opportunity by ignoring or resisting it, or, alternatively, one can undergo dying into life with God. Such dying is convictional and practical, and not merely reflective. We do not kill a malignancy, even within ourselves, just by thinking about it. Instead, we actively engage it to disable it and remove it. As for its victims, we identify with them to save them from it. This is our struggle to cooperate with self-sacrificial love from God toward others in suffering.

In the end, we have a Gethsemane opportunity that can lead to our being crucified and raised with Christ, under divine power. If that is the only way to meet and live with God, it puts redemptive suffering in a context that is life-enhancing and at odds with despair. Its challenge is for us to let God be our redemptive co-sufferer as Lord. Why, however, should we acknowledge the reality of that challenge, including the reality of a God seeking to be a co-sufferer with humans as their Lord? This question needs an answer if the present story is to be compelling for humans.

Certitude about God

We need to identify how the redemptive suffering of God bears on one's knowing God and on divine transcendence. Sobrino remarks: "Part of God's greatness is his making himself small [in the cross of Christ]. And, paradoxically, in this plan of his of taking on what is small God makes himself a greater mystery, a new and greater transcendence, than the stammered definitions of human beings" (1993, p. 249). At a minimum,

we should expect one's evidence about God's reality and purposes to be the kind of evidence characteristic of a redemptive personal agent rather than a logical or mathematical argument. In particular, we should expect a self-sacrificial God of suffering love to conjoin divine transcendence with stooping low in immanence among us, for the sake of our redemption. This stooping low would not be a law of nature, but instead would be a gift of grace chosen by God but unmerited by us. In addition, we should expect its seeking to involve us as participants in its redemptive suffering, in keeping with *imitatio Dei*.

Being *sui generis*, God could not accomplish redemptive immanence just by proxy, because a mere proxy would fall short of God's unique moral character. As a result, God would *self-manifest* among us, at least if we are open at all to divine redemption, and this self-manifestation would not coerce our decisions regarding divine reality. God would honor human agency in this area for the sake of genuine interpersonal relationships that can be redemptive for humans who cooperate with God and are willing to be reconciled to God. The suppression of human agency in coercion here would omit the inherently personal component needed for human cooperation and reconciliation with God.

In seeking redemptive immanence among us, God could self-manifest God's moral character, including divine *agapē* to us, in our conscience. Human conscience serves well here, because we can be convicted in conscience in a manner that moves us, if with redemptive suffering, toward eager participation in God's self-manifested moral character. It can be a place of felt and lived conviction, so long as we cooperate with the conviction offered in conscience. Mackintosh has identified God's effort in conscience via the risen Jesus, in a manner that goes beyond historical considerations:

Like any other reality He can be kept out of consciousness by the withdrawal of attention. But once He has got in, and, having got in, has shown us all things that ever we did, He moves out of the past into the field of immediate knowledge and takes the central place in the soul now and here. It is plain that at this point a living conscience about sin is crucial. Jesus must always remain a historical externality to the man who will not admit Him to the moral sense (1911, p. 443).

Here, again, the story does not include divine coercion of our decisions regarding divine reality. We can reject the divine challenges in conscience and thereby sustain our status quo, despite God's aim to convict us toward a new direction for our lives. We thereby would frustrate God's intended redemption of us.

A God who is Lord, as one who can guide with authority, would seek to *lead* us toward eager and sympathetic cooperation with God, including cooperation with divine *agapē* toward others. Our conscience could be an

effective means of this leading, as we allow ourselves to be convicted by its deliverances from God. Paul identifies one's being thus led as central to one's being a child of God: "All who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God" (Rom. 8:14). In his thinking, to cooperate with God is to be led by God's Spirit, in obedience to God.

One's being led by God's Spirit, as suggested, is not a matter of divine coercion of one's decisions. Instead, it depends on one's *allowing* a conviction or a deepening conviction toward welcoming God's character of divine *agapē* in one's own life. The process of one's being led in deepening *toward this goal* is a sign of personal or intentional guidance in one's life, rather than just something impersonal within one. The writer of 1 John suggests this process in terms of one's *being perfected* in love by God (1 John 4:17–19). The process is a sign of God's being Lord actively in one's life, given God's unique character of *agapē*, and it thus is the kind of interpersonal evidence of God we should expect. Such experiential evidence is morally robust and stands in sharp contrast to much relatively abstract evidence in philosophy of religion, philosophical theology, and natural theology.

Identifying unique (but widely neglected) interpersonal evidence of God, Paul states that "hope [in God] does not disappoint us, because God's love (*agapē*) has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us" (Rom. 5:5). Paul would say the same about faith in God, and he has in mind experiential evidence from God, in self-manifested *agapē* that does not cognitively disappoint us but sustains us as we cooperate with God. This is evidence suited to interpersonal certitude about God's reality. Such evidence represents God's moral character that is to be the focus of *imitatio Dei* as a means of human transformation and redemption. So, it is intended for more than human reflection; it aims to guide a human life.

John's Gospel suggests a key connection between coming to know about God's reality and being cooperative toward God's will, in a remark it attributes to Jesus: "Anyone who resolves to do the will of God will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own" (John 7:17). One's volitional attitude toward God's will, in this perspective, can figure directly in one's knowing regarding God. So, one's intellectual stance toward God does not exhaust the story about one's evidence and knowledge concerning God. This is no surprise if evidence from God is to be redemptive for humans. In that case, we will be expected to allow the relevant evidence to transform us morally as persons toward God's moral character, for the sake of a reconciled interpersonal relationship with God (on such a relationship, see Moser 2017).

God's self-manifestation to humans amounts to God's *self-authentication* to them. If God's moral character is unique, God will need to present that

character to humans for an adequate authentication for them of its reality. Alternative presentations, including philosophical and theological arguments of various sorts, will fall short of the divine character in question, and thus leave people with an inadequate portrait of God. As a result, some of the Biblical writers present God as swearing by himself, on the ground that God could find no one greater (or even equally adequate) to swear by (Heb. 6:13; cf. Gen. 22:16). This view does not entail that a religious experience, a religious argument, or a religious book self-authenticates God. Instead, it entails that *God*, as an intentional agent with causal powers, can self-authenticate God's reality and character to humans. This would occur in the self-presentation of God's moral character to humans, at God's discretion and timing. We should not expect divine self-manifestation to humans to be under the control of humans regarding its content or timing.

Nothing would require, with any plausibility, that God self-manifest to humans at all times or even to all humans. God, as perfectly good, would self-manifest for good divine purposes, and certain times in a human life may not be opportune for those purposes. For instance, a human may be too distracted at some times to entertain in any serious way a divine self-manifestation. In addition, some humans may not be prepared to handle divine self-manifestation in a good way at all. They may be opposed to the prospect of a divine intervention, and even divine existence, in a way that would only be intensified by a divine self-manifestation. As a result, God could hide from such people, so as not to alienate them further from God. Such divine hiding could be for redemptive purposes, in allowing people more time to become prepared for a divine self-manifestation. Various Biblical writers affirm divine hiding of this kind (for details, see Moser 2008; 2017, chap. 3.)

A personal encounter with God's self-manifestation yields not objective certainty but at most *interpersonal certitude*. Such certitude depends on one personal agent's relating to another personal agent with salient, or definite, interpersonal evidence, but not necessarily to all personal agents. Its salient evidence and assurance for one agent do not automatically generalize to such evidence and assurance for all relevant agents, even all agents who reflect carefully on the matter. As suggested, God can hide, at least for a time, from some personal agents who are not prepared to receive God's self-manifestation in the way it is intended. So, evidence and assurance from a personal encounter with God are not automatically generalizable to all relevant inquirers about God. Some inquirers can have evidence, assurance, and certitude regarding God that other inquirers lack, and this is no strike against God's goodness.

Objective certainty, such as that stemming from a mathematic proof, would require an evidential basis readily available to all capable inquirers,

but God's self-manifestation, given its redemptive intent, is not public or universal in that way. Instead, it is selective in timing and scope for redemptive purposes, being sensitive to the receptivity of humans who would respond positively, negatively, or with indifference. If a person is opposed to any divine intervention or to divine existence itself, perhaps out of fear of losing autonomy (see Nagel 1997, p. 130), God could choose to refrain from self-manifesting to that person, at least until an opportune time. The evidence from the self-manifestation of this kind of elusive God, then, does not reduce to the kinds of arguments found in traditional natural theology (on which, see Moser 2010, chap. 4). Those arguments offer a kind of static evidence (however questionable) that does not intentionally bob and weave in the way a redemptive God does out of sensitivity to human receptivity. They thus illustrate a key difference between propositional evidence in arguments and interpersonal evidence from divine self-manifestation. A redemptive God would work with the latter evidence but have no requirement to use the former.

From Transcendence to Immanence

God's leading of humans can include human suffering, even suffering we cannot fully explain in terms of specific divine purposes. Such leading would follow God's own redemptive suffering, in its immanence in redemptive suffering with humans. It thus would include *imitatio Dei* for cooperative humans, even if one's being led by God does not include one's knowing that one is so led. (One may not have formulated the story yet as having *God* as its guide.) Human suffering, however, is not always an obstacle to our experiencing or knowing God, even if it is in some contexts. It can be, in certain contexts, an avenue needed to encourage our allowing God to lead us, if more deeply, in a filial relationship of obedience to God, including for the sake of other people.

Two factors are noteworthy. First, our suffering can be our way of sharing in God's redemptive suffering; it thus can be, as suggested, a form of *imitatio Dei* or, more specifically, *participatio Christi* (on the latter, see Mackintosh 1909, Redman 1996). It thereby can encourage our being led to willing conformity to God's self-sacrificial character of redemptive love. In doing so, it can invite the submission of our will to God's perfect will, after the model of Jesus in Gethsemane. Second, our suffering can be a means to have our knowledge of God based on our felt need of God, rather than being just theoretical toward God. In that case, our knowledge of God can be felt by us to be existentially vital rather than optional for our lives, thus going beyond reflective theology and even theo-praxis to theo-pathos. As a result, our commitment to God could be felt to be indispensable for our

lives, and not just an intellectual matter of a convenient insurance policy or an intriguing belief.

Our suffering can manifest our self-inadequacy in flourishing in life, and thus prompt us to let God in to our lives as the Lord who can guide us toward flourishing. Boff connects a refusal of our self-inadequacy with sin:

Sin is the basic refusal to accept the human condition, with its limitations and its consciousness of its limitations (the source of ontological suffering and pain). Sin is the attempt, absurd because impossible, to effectuate one-self – to be what humans can never be: their own fundament, absolutely *in-dependent*: their own creators” (1987, p. 127).

He adds that sin is a separation from God in its refusal of dependence on God. If we assume that we can be adequate in a flourishing life without God, we will lack a strong incentive to consider dependence on God. God then will seem optional at best for us. Faith in God will have the same fate. Our seeking God then will become casual at best and perhaps non-existent. In that case, we will lack the kind of felt need appropriate toward a redemptive God worthy of worship.

Our self-inadequacy for flourishing in life looms large over us, particularly in our suffering, and it can extend even to our response to God. As David E. Jenkins remarks: “To know God is to know also the inadequacy of our response to and readiness for both the relationship which he offers and the commitment which he requires.... We are obliged ... to express our dependence and seek for a continuing repentance” (1976, p. 81). So, at best, we endure and depend imperfectly. We cannot make our response to God perfect at will, just as we cannot make our suffering perfectly redemptive. Our own power does not deliver in that perfect way, even if it enables us to receive imperfectly what God offers perfectly in redemption.

Our cooperative power, even if imperfect, can be crucial to our redemption. Indeed, in honoring human agency, God would enable this remarkable human power: We humans must *allow* divine redemptive immanence in our lives. It thus does not come by the coercion of our decisions regarding God’s existence. We might say, then, that the divine move from transcendence to redemptive immanence in human lives is partly up to us. This would not be to say that the Christian incarnation *among* humans is partly up to us. Instead, it would be to say that divine intervention within a person’s life would be partly up to that person’s allowing it. God would allow such human freedom to sustain human agency in the presence of divine redemptive immanence. (For a related view, in connection with Jesus, see Boff 1987, pp. 63–65.)

I have suggested that the direction of the divine move from transcendence to redemptive immanence finds its model in the crucifixion and resurrec-

tion of Jesus. In this model, the move is cruciform and resurrectiform for the sake of ending one kind of power (selfishness before God) to make room for another kind of power (life-giving *agapē* before God). Redemptive immanence, then, is all about a special transfer of power from God to humans, and this transfer will not come just by divine transcendence. It must be realized among and within humans, if redemption is to be real. Its gist includes a transformation from volitional separateness to cooperative togetherness for good, including good interpersonal relationships involving God and humans. This is no small task or quick fix, given human freedom and human weakness of various sorts. So, the process is ongoing and marked by imperfections. Even so, God's redemptive challenge of us has no equal for a good, adventurous life. We should strive, then, not just to think about it, but also to cooperate with it, come what may. In doing so, it can become a felt reality for us, despite our ongoing suffering and our eventual dying. In that case, divine transcendence will find its counterpart in redemptive immanence that underwrites, via *imitatio Dei*, interpersonal certitude regarding God's reality. In accommodating such immanence, philosophy of religion will take on a needed specificity that makes it more compelling for many human lives. This will be an overdue renewal of philosophy of religion.

References

- BOFF, Leonardo. 1978. *Jesus Christ Liberator*, trans. Patrick Hughes. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
- _____. 1987. *Passion of Christ, Passion of the World*, trans. Robert Barr. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
- BONHOEFFER, Dietrich. 1937. *The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. R.H. Fuller. London: SCM Press, 1959.
- DALES, Douglas. 1994. *Living through Dying: The Spiritual Experience of St. Paul*. Cambridge, UK: Lutterworth Press.
- JENKINS, David E. 1976. *The Contradiction of Christianity*. London: SCM Press.
- MACKINTOSH, H.R. 1909. "The Unio Mystica as a Theological Conception." *The Expositor* 7, 138–55.
- _____. 1911. "History and the Gospel." *The Expositor* 8, 434–49.
- _____. 1927. *The Christian Experience of Forgiveness*. London: Nisbet.
- _____. 1938. "An Indisputable Argument." In Mackintosh, *Sermons*, pp. 171–79. Edinburgh: T&T Clark.
- MOSER, Paul K. 2008. *The Elusive God*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- _____. 2010. *The Evidence for God*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- _____. 2017. *The God Relationship: The Ethics for Inquiry about the Divine*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- NAGEL, Thomas. 1997. *The Last Word*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- RAMSEY, Michael. 1969. *God, Christ, and the World*. London: SCM Press.
- REDMAN, Robert. 1996. "Participatio Christi: H.R. Mackintosh's Theology of the Unio Mystica." *Scottish Journal of Theology* 49, 201–22.
- ROBINSON, H. Wheeler. 1939. *Suffering: Human and Divine*. London: Macmillan.
- SOBRINO, Jon. 1993. *Jesus the Liberator*, trans. Paul Burns and Francis McDonagh. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.

Endereço:

Professor Dr. Paul Moser
Department of Philosophy
Loyola University
Crown Center 3rd Floor
1032 West Sheridan Road
Chicago, IL 60660
USA
pmoser@luc.edu