

**Response to Mark S. M. Scott's "Theorizing Theodicy in the Study of Religion"**  
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Lord, the sea is so big and my boat is so small.  
(Breton fishermen's prayer)

Mark S. M. Scott's essay "Theorizing Theodicy in the Study of Religion" raises important questions about scholarly treatments of theodicy. He rightly points both to the importance of a well-developed theoretical framework for such work and to the relevance it should have to lived experience, in both instances against what he describes as "mere" theoretical and philosophical speculation (see p. 20, *et al*). This approach promises a much-needed balance between speculative scholarship and human experience, but the limitations of the present essay preclude Scott's illustrating fully his proposal that narrative is one method by which we might consider the micro (individual and particularized) level of theodicy, as opposed to the macro level to which he points as predominant. In the process, Scott seems to speak from a fundamentally historical and social scientific perspective, but his discussion opens up a space (to use his metaphor) within which he might fruitfully explore the theological and philosophical resources that he de-emphasizes here.

As a theologian working in the Christian tradition, I both appreciate new paradigms that illuminate human meaning-making (p. 13) and have reservations about Scott's broadly critical treatment of philosophical and theological approaches to the problem. In this brief response, I focus on a few of the key questions that I think may offer fruitful ground for further conversation around Scott's project: How accurately does the definition he offers for *theodicy* reflect the scholarly

phenomenon he critiques? Who are these naval gazing theoreticians who are so out of touch with lived experience? And finally, in what ways might Scott strengthen the analogically informed paradigm he offers as a more “robust” alternative to treatments of theodicy that he describes as “theoretically underdeveloped and stalled in old paradigms” (p. 20)?

Scott develops a new theoretical paradigm for theodicy – *theodicy as navigation* – within which theodicy “becomes a much more layered enterprise than the mere philosophical resolution of a logical problem” (p.20). He articulates his paradigm as analogical narrative. However, he does not establish a distinction from historically similar analogies of navigation and journey.<sup>1</sup> Christians,<sup>2</sup> for example, not infrequently quote the short prayer I cite above in the context of suffering that threatens meaning-making. A popular corollary is C. S. Lewis’ *Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. Classically, a ship in full sail is a traditional symbol of the church, hearkening back to the flood and the unpredictably stormy Sea of Galilee. I also wonder to whom Scott refers as thinking “theodicy is done in a vacuum by disinterested scholars” (p. 17). As Scott points out, those who “construct” (presumably, “do”) theodicy, by definition have a religious commitment (n. 26, p.17), so hardly seem disinterested. Similarly, Scott might usefully clarify what is at stake in his approach to defining *theodicy*, which he bases on the etymological roots of the word itself (rather than the construction or activity the term signifies).

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<sup>1</sup> *Horror* is my term, after Marilyn McCord Adams, whom Scott cites, n. 3.

<sup>2</sup> While Scott makes clear that he considers meaning-making/theodicy an “innate” human endeavor, one that arises in some form across religious traditions, his essay strikes me as peculiarly Western, even Christian, in its timbre. Indeed, three of the theological sources on whom he relies are Marilyn McCord Adams, Paul Tillich, and David Tracy – all Western, Christian theologians.

Accordingly, he defines theodicy as “the vindication of divine justice in light of the existence of evil” (n. 2, p. 1), later adding that it also refers to “the preservation of religious worldviews” (p. 16). Christian theodicy, however, most often engages a more complex problem than the “vindication” of God, articulating and confronting a thicker conjunction of justice, mercy, goodness, love, and omnipotence. This more robust definition is significant, among other reasons, because process theologians and others approach theodicy by reconsidering God’s omnipotence, which largely shifts the question away from divine justice relative to the existence of evil.<sup>3</sup>

I am more troubled, however, by an ambivalence towards common believers and a relatively thin narrative foundation for Scott’s central constructive point: his “theodicy as navigation” analogy. Scott correctly “problematizes” Weber’s elitism (n. 7, p. 3), but goes on to narrate believers’ meaning-making efforts as arising in the service not of meaning, but of religion itself, surely a less sophisticated enterprise (to use Scott’s term). Setting aside non-believers’ strategies for making meaning in the face of evil, he evokes the turbulent waters of a storm, representing the chaos that Scott considers synonymous with evil. Believers (whether heroically or not is unclear) insist on continuing to crew their imperiled, storm-tossed ship (religious beliefs), resolutely steering by the navigational aids (compass/sacred text, map/theology, and seafaring knowledge/tradition) that somehow - inexplicably, it seems to me – remain useful, even as the ship is otherwise “adrift”. They refuse to

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<sup>3</sup> Scott notes that his essay grows out of the first chapter of his dissertation, and I sympathize with the difficulty of presenting such an ambitious project in relatively few pages. Nonetheless, he has provided the essay in its present form as the basis for our discussion, and my response assumes that he considers it an at least sufficient explication of his proposal.

abandon ship (which the analogy seems to suggest might be a feasible alternative), instead making for the calm water or safe harbor (here functionally identical) of “a meaningful ‘space’” (p. 15).

Scott’s perceived need to interpret the symbolic “meaning” of his analogical elements suggests that the narrative may not offer as rich and dynamic an alternative to “mere philosophy” as Scott hopes. As my parenthetical annotations illustrate, I find myself seeking a more satisfying version, one that addresses questions such as these: Wouldn’t a ship adrift in a storm batten its hatches and wait it out? Can a ship that is adrift also be navigable and underway? What is the meaning of the sea itself? Let me make explicit that these are serious questions, from someone who takes narrative and analogy very seriously, the kinds of questions that the most successful narratives answer intuitively, in a way even the least sophisticated reader can hear.

I encourage Scott to devote less attention (here, 60 % of his essay) to the survey of literature that provides his theoretical framework and to engage further philosophy and theology. Adams, Tillich, and Tracy, whom Scott respects, are under-exploited here. Catherine Keller offers a nuanced reading of chaos.<sup>4</sup> There is a long theological and philosophical tradition, theoretical and analogical, of God’s hiddenness.<sup>5</sup> Finally, philosopher Jonathan Lear’s *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*<sup>6</sup> (Harvard, 2008) is a robust synthesis of the theoretical sophistication and experiential resonance for which Scott rightly advocates.

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, *Face of the Deep* (Routledge, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Pseudo-Dionysius and Luther.

<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope*