

# THEORIZING THEODICY IN THE STUDY OF RELIGION

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In this paper<sup>1</sup> I develop a theoretical paradigm for understanding how theodicy functions in religion.<sup>2</sup> While treatments of the problem of evil abound in religious studies, they often lack sure theoretical footing.<sup>3</sup> Before we can productively interpret specific responses to evil and suffering, we need to begin with a general sense of the task of theodicy. Following several seminal theorists in the study of religion, I argue that theodicy, at its core, is the attempt to create and sustain meaning in the face of evil. Religion, J. Z. Smith avers, constructs “worlds of meaning” where we “choose to dwell” by negotiating meaningful spaces that affirm the coherence of our existence.<sup>4</sup> Theodicy, as we will see, attempts to carve out these spaces when evil engulfs us and threatens to destroy our sense of cosmic orientation. Thinking about *theodicy as navigation* underscores the experiential dynamic of theodicy: it is, at bottom, an intellectual and existential journey whereby we recover or reinforce meaning amid the storms of suffering that beset us personally and collectively. Hence, to grasp the inner workings of theodicy, we have to attend to its underlying narrative, a narrative shaped by particular experiences and worldviews. I will argue that we need to refocus our analysis of theodicy from the macro level (global approaches) to the micro level (particular theodicies).

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<sup>1</sup> I first developed these ideas in Chapter 1 of my dissertation *Cosmic Theodicy: Origen on the Problem of Evil* (Harvard University Dissertation, 2008). My thanks to David Carrasco for inspiring me and his other doctoral students to “find an analogy” for our research. Thanks also for embodying what it means to be an academic mentor.

<sup>2</sup> The term “theodicy” is a compound of two Greek words: *theo/j* and *di/kh*, i.e., “God” and “justice,” which was transliterated into the French word *théodicée* (German: *Theodizee*) by Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716) in his *Essais de Théodicée sur la bonté de Dieu, la liberté de l’homme, et l’origine du mal*. Theodicy is the vindication of divine justice in light of the existence of evil. On the category of theodicy, see William Fulton, “Theodicy,” *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, Volume 12, ed., James Hastings (NY: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1961), 289.

<sup>3</sup> Marilyn Adams points out that there are numerous ways to configure the problem of evil: logical, evidential, moral, practical, and existential, among many others (*Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God*, [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999], 7-16). We should not restrict our analysis to the logical problem of evil.

<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith, *Map is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 290-1.

## THEODICY AS MEANING-MAKING

### *Max Weber: Theodicy and the Problem of Meaning*

Before we discuss the heuristic potential of the concept of *theodicy as navigation*, we must begin with its logical starting point: the concept of *theodicy as meaning-making*. We begin with Max Weber, whose delineation of “the problem of meaning” (*das Problem der Bedeutung*) sets the stage for the concept of theodicy as meaning-making. According to Weber, religion posits that “the world order in its totality is, could, and should somehow be a meaningful ‘cosmos.’”<sup>5</sup> With varying degrees of sophistication, religion explains reality within its own distinctive interpretive frameworks rather than leaving it unexplained. As religious worldviews became increasingly rational, the need to explain the “‘meaning’ of the distribution of fortunes” took on greater urgency.<sup>6</sup> Weber frames the problem of evil around the ethical dilemma of the suffering of the good and the prosperity of the wicked. We expect the good to prosper and the wicked to suffer, but the world does not evince a symmetrical correlation between goodness and prosperity on the one hand and wickedness and suffering on the other. With the rise of reason, Weber argues, the inequities of the world came into sharper relief: “Individually ‘undeserved’ woe was all too frequent; not ‘good’ but ‘bad’ men succeeded” (275). In other words, Weber argues that as religion evolved from “primitive” to “rational,” the problem of suffering and injustice came into sharper relief, thereby activating various theodicies. In their distinctive ways, the religions of the world—both theistic and non-theistic—address this incongruity by enfolding it within a larger meaningful matrix.

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<sup>5</sup> Max Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, trans., H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (London: Routledge, 1991), 281, 353.

<sup>6</sup> Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, 275.

An “inner need” impels religious intellectuals<sup>7</sup> to overlay their experience with meaningful paradigms<sup>8</sup>: “The intellectual seeks in various ways, the casuistry of which extends into infinity, to endow his life with a pervasive meaning, and thus to find unity with himself, with his fellow man, and with the cosmos” (125). For the intellectual, then, the experience of the cosmos sparks a crisis of meaning when traditional worldviews lose their plausibility: “It is the intellectual who transforms the concept of the world into the problem of meaning” (125). The disenchantment of the world engenders a vacuum of meaning: a void that calls out for new paradigms. Whereas in the past the belief in magic would explain “the world’s processes,” in the present, with the rise of scientific explanations, these world processes “no longer signify anything” (125). The absence of inherent cosmic significance, then, gives rise to the impulse to superimpose meaning: “As a consequence, there is a growing demand that the world and the total pattern of life be subject to an order that is significant and meaningful” (125). We can call this order a theodicy, which he discusses in an essay on “Theodicy, Salvation, and Rebirth.”

Weber defines the problem of theodicy as reconciling the “world’s imperfections” with the prevailing “god-concept” of particular religions (138). While he acknowledges that the problem of theodicy confronts both polytheistic and monotheistic religion, he argues that it poses a greater threat to monotheistic religions: “But the more the development tends toward the conception of a transcendental unitary god who is universal, the more there arises the problem of how the extraordinary power of such a god may be reconciled with the imperfection of the world that he has created and rules over” (139). Thus, despite his monotheistic bias, he affirms the pervasiveness and

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<sup>7</sup> We must problematize Weber’s elitist conception of the “religious intellectual,” which wrongly presupposes that less sophisticated believers do not wrestle with the problem of evil. Berger points this out, as we will see.

<sup>8</sup> Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, trans., E. Fischoff (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 124.

plurality of the problem of theodicy: “The resultant problem of theodicy is found in ancient Egyptian literature as well as in Job and in Aeschylus, but in very different forms” (139). Any “meaningful order,” even an “impersonal and supertheistic” one, must integrate evil within its religious worldview, Weber rightly argues, despite his misguided theory of the progression of religion.<sup>9</sup> Unchallenged, the “problem of theodicy” erodes our confidence in the conceptions of divinity espoused by religion, Weber found:

Indeed, a recent [before World War I] questionnaire submitted to thousands of German workers disclosed the fact that their rejection of the god-idea was motivated, not by scientific arguments, but by their difficulty in reconciling the idea of providence with the injustice and imperfection of the social order.<sup>10</sup>

At the heart of Weber’s three pure types of theodicy—predestination, dualism, and karma—and all their permutations and variety, lies the “inner need” for meaning, a position adopted by Peter Berger and Clifford Geertz in their grounding of theodicy in “the need for meaning” and the “quest for lucidity,” as we will examine below.<sup>11</sup> The problem of meaning, which concerns the need for cosmic orientation and significance, transmutes into the “problem of theodicy” when focused through the lens of suffering. When the imperfections of the world collide with our god (or world-)-concept, to use Weber’s categories, the problem of theodicy emerges as a species of the problem of meaning. These three types, then, attempt to re-inscribe meaning into the world.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The need to find meaning in suffering is constitutive of religion in all cultures, including “primitive” and “archaic” cultures, according to Mircea Eliade. Like Weber, he notes that the theodicies developed in these cultures vary, although they share the underlying concern with meaning: “Naturally, the motifs that yield a justification for suffering and pain vary from people to people, but the justification is found everywhere...But the important point for us is that nowhere—within the frame of the archaic civilizations—are suffering and pain regarded as ‘blind’ and without meaning” (Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return: Cosmos and History*, trans., Willard R. Trask [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005], 98).

<sup>10</sup> Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, 139.

<sup>11</sup> Mircea Eliade argues that humans typically ascribe “transhistorical meaning” to the terror of history in order to “justify” it so that they may endure it (*The Myth of the Eternal Return*, 151).

<sup>12</sup> On Weber’s three “pure types,” see the concise treatment by Daniel Pals, *Eight Theories of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 171.

*Peter Berger: Theodicy and the Need for Meaning*

In his book *The Sacred Canopy* Peter Berger characterizes religion as the human activity of world-construction and world-maintenance, that is, as the attempt to build a “meaningful world” to stem the tide of chaos.<sup>13</sup> He defines religion as a cosmological framework that meaningfully integrates and interprets our experiences, especially our “anomic” experiences of evil: “Religion is the human enterprise by which a sacred cosmos is established. Put differently, religion is cosmization in a sacred mode” (25). Before beginning his chapter on “the problem of theodicy,” Berger develops his definition of religion by highlighting its relationship to the ubiquitous reality of chaos: “It is well at this point of the argument to recall the definition of religion used a little earlier—the establishment, through human activity, of an all-embracing sacred order, that is, of a sacred cosmos that will be capable of maintaining itself in the ever-present face of chaos” (51). For Berger, then, religion orients us in a world that defies rationality. It creates a “nomos” that protects our sacred worldviews against the onslaught of chaos: “[E]very nomos is an area of meaning carved out of a vast mass of meaninglessness, a small clearing of lucidity in a formless, dark, always ominous jungle” (23). The task of religion, then, inherently involves theodicy, since the threat of “chaos,” a metaphor for evil, constantly impinges on our “sacred canopies,” that is, our meaningful constructions of reality. Fundamentally, then, religion, and its “socially established nomos,” functions as a “shield against terror” (22). At the heart of religion, Berger avers, is the need to

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<sup>13</sup> Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor Books, 1990), 26.

orient ourselves in a world where suffering threatens to dismantle our deeply embedded theological worldviews and plunge us into a state of “meaninglessness.”<sup>14</sup>

Berger defines theodicy as the affirmation of the “sacred order of the cosmos” despite the “anomic forces endemic to the human condition”: “An explanation of these phenomena in terms of religious legitimations, of whatever degree of theoretical sophistication, may be called a theodicy.”<sup>15</sup> These anomic phenomena, including suffering, evil, and death, must be explained, he argues, within meaningful frameworks of varying levels of intellectual complexity. Berger stresses that we cannot restrict theodicy to complex philosophical and theological approaches to the problem of evil. Rather, when we broaden our vision of theodicy to encompass all explanations of suffering, we see that all strata of society employ theodicy:

The illiterate peasant who comments upon the death of a child by referring to the will of God is engaging in theodicy as much as the learned theologian who writes a treatise to demonstrate that the suffering of the innocent does not negate the conception of God as both all-good and all powerful. (53)

For Berger, then, theodicy consists of preserving meaning in the face of experiences that potentially undermine the “sacred canopy” that religion establishes to ward off terror: “Theodicy proper...[is] the religious legitimation of anomic phenomena” (55). It is an effort at “world-maintenance” by relocating anomic events within “an all-embracing fabric of meanings” that defuse their potential cosmos-destroying force (54).

Our innate “need for meaning” underwrites Berger’s conception of theodicy (56). He says that we can endure self-denial, illness, exploitation, and death, but we “cannot accept meaninglessness” because it destroys the cosmic framework that constitutes our

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<sup>14</sup> The concept of orientation takes center stage in Charles H. Long’s definition of religion: “For my purposes religion will mean orientation-orientation in the ultimate sense, that is, how one comes to terms with the ultimate significance of one’s place in the world” (*Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religions* [Aurora, Colo.: Davies Group, 1999], 7).

<sup>15</sup> Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 53.

identity (56). According to Berger, theodicy seeks to restore meaning, not happiness (58). This is not to say that those who suffer do not seek happiness and reprieve from suffering. Rather, it highlights the human need to know the meaning behind suffering, that is, to know *why* we suffer: “If a theodicy answers, in whatever manner, this question of meaning, it serves a most important purpose for the suffering individual, even if it does not involve a promise that the eventual outcome of his suffering is happiness in this world or the next” (58). At the heart of theodicy, according to Berger, lies the human impulse to restore meaning when evil shakes our religious foundations.

Berger also notes the social impact of theodicy. It serves, he argues, to explain and consequently to justify social inequalities: “One of the very important social functions of theodicies is, indeed, their explanation of the socially prevailing inequalities of power and privilege” (59). According to this view, theodicy legitimizes and justifies the existing institutional, cultural, and economic disparities in society. These theodicies function “*both* for the powerful *and* the powerless, for the privileged *and* for the deprived” because they provide a meaningful “place” for both groups in their *nomos* for society (59). Ultimately, theodicy reinforces social inequalities by justifying the current power relations and by providing meaningful accounts for their respective positions in the social hierarchy: “Put simply, theodicies provide the poor with a meaning for their poverty, but may also provide the rich with a meaning for their wealth” (59).

Berger, then, underscores the social function of theodicy. If religion strives to construct a plausible “sacred canopy,” then theodicy becomes absolutely central to the viability of religion: “Our purpose has been accomplished if we have indicated the centrality of the problem of theodicy for any religious effort at world maintenance” (80).

In response to the Weberian problem of meaning, especially in light of the injustices of the world, religion employs theodicy as a means of constructing inhabitable “worlds of meaning” (J.Z. Smith) or “sacred canopies” (Berger) within which believers find shelter from the meaning-destroying potential of evil and suffering.

*Clifford Geertz: Theodicy as the “Quest for Lucidity”*

We can further enrich our concept of theodicy as meaning-making by examining another classic theorist in the study of religion: Clifford Geertz. In his justly famous essay “Religion as a Cultural System,” Geertz explores the “cultural dimension of religious analysis,” defining culture as “an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols,” in this case, religious symbols.<sup>16</sup> We will focus our analysis on Geertz’s conception of meaning and how religion constructs and sustains meaningful symbolic networks. Like Berger, Geertz recognizes the innate human desire for meaning, especially amid suffering. Moreover, like Berger, he sees that religion seeks to establish a plausible and authoritative “cosmic order” that orients human existence: “The notion that religion tunes human actions to an envisioned cosmic order and projects images of cosmic order onto the plane of human experience is hardly novel. But it is hardly investigated either...” (90). Religion, then, generates cosmic schemes that enable believers to “make sense” of the world and their experiences. As long as the conceptual, moral, and existential integrity of the cosmic order remains intact, religion accomplishes its aims. When disaster strikes, however, it strains its symbolic networks, often to a breaking point. In these cases, religion must restore cosmic meaning through theodicy.

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<sup>16</sup> Clifford Geertz, “Religion as a Cultural System” in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, Basic Books, 1973), 89.

Before we outline Geertz's understanding of the problem of evil, we must briefly discuss his famous (or, according to some, infamous) definition of religion. Geertz defines religion (with the important caveat that "definitions establish nothing") as:

A system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic (90).<sup>17</sup>

In this landmark definition, Geertz accents what I call the "cosmic hermeneutics" of religion, that is, the process whereby religion "reads" meaning into the structure and dynamics of the world. Religious symbols provide a sense of orientation, to use Charles Long's useful definition of religion as "orientation in the ultimate sense, that is, how one comes to terms with the ultimate significance of one's place in the world."<sup>18</sup> In the definitions of religion employed by Geertz and Berger, the operative word is *order*. Religion creates the space for a sacred mode of existence by transposing the unintelligible to the intelligible and the meaningless to the meaningful. In short, religion filters the disorder of our experiences through a comprehensive conception of the divine order of the cosmos that purifies these experiences from any trace of unintelligibility. According to Geertz (quoting Salvador de Madariaga), religion is based on "the relatively modest dogma that God is not mad," which suggests that the world must have some coherence, even when our experience suggests otherwise (99).

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<sup>17</sup> This definition has been critiqued by Talal Asad and others because of its emphasis on belief over praxis (thus evincing a modern "Western" Protestant bias) and because it implies that religion is a "transhistorical and transcultural phenomenon" (28), that, like an essence, can be defined in abstraction from its specific historical location: "My argument is that there cannot be a universal definition of religion, not only because its constituent elements and relationships are historically specific, but because that definition is itself the historical product of discursive processes" (*Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* [Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1993], 29). See his analysis and critique of Geertz's definition of religion on pages 27-54.

<sup>18</sup> Long, *Significations*, 7.

Geertz locates the problem of evil<sup>19</sup> in the “gap between things as they are and as they ought to be” (106). The gap or distance between the world as it “is” and the world as it “ought” to be leads to a “bafflement” that cries out for explication. It raises, Geertz says, “the dim, back-of-the-mind suspicions that one may be adrift in an absurd world,” suspicions that prompt us to search for ways to re-establish meaning (102). Theodicy closes this gap by formulating a symbolic account of the world that “will account for, and even celebrate, the perceived ambiguities, puzzles, and paradoxes in human experience” (108). Following Weber, he glosses the problem of evil as “The Problem of Meaning” (104, 108-9; note the emphatic use of the uppercase) that arises from the “strange opacity” of the evil and suffering of the world (107-8). Religion, with its diverse symbol systems, domesticates the opaque features of the world by integrating them within “an authoritative conception of the overall shape of reality” that enables us to understand and endure suffering (104).

If the proposition “God is not mad” constitutes the theological ground for religion in general and theodicy in particular, then the “quest for lucidity” constitutes its anthropological ground, according to Geertz. Theodicy, in this view, is an intellectual “quest” for meaning against the meaning-defying forces of chaos. Geertz appeals to Langer to express our deep need to comprehend the world: “[Man] can adapt himself somehow to anything his imagination can cope with; but he cannot deal with Chaos” (99). Chaos, in both ancient and modern discourse, symbolizes the destructive forces of evil. For Geertz, chaos assails human existence on three fronts: “At the limits of his

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<sup>19</sup> While at one point Geertz avers that the problem of suffering naturally transmutes into the problem of evil, he later conflates the two categories by arguing that they are essentially the same. Although his distinction between the problem of suffering and the problem of evil is not very helpful or coherent, his emphasis on the need to interpret existence through the lens of meaningful symbolic systems does deepen our understanding of the task of theodicy (Geertz, “Religion as a Cultural System,” 104-108).

analytic capacities, at the limits of his powers of endurance, and at the limits of his moral insight” (100). These limits mark the frontiers that outstrip our cognitive and emotional abilities and challenge our (often tacit) belief that “life is comprehensible and that we can, by taking thought, orient ourselves effectively within it” (100). The “deep disquiet” that issues from the three fronts of chaos occurs because evil and suffering, at least *prima facie*, “lack not just interpretations but *interpretability*,” i.e., they confound our explanatory resources (100). To remedy this disquietude we must adjust our symbolic frameworks of meaning. The “quest for lucidity,” which originates from “the rush of metaphysical anxiety that occurs when empirical phenomena threaten to remain intransigently opaque,” grounds the project of theodicy (101). We cling to the belief in divine sanity despite all evidence to the contrary. Consequently, we presuppose cosmic intelligibility and look for ways to explain suffering and to integrate it within a meaningful symbolic nexus. As meaning-centered beings, we are not content to dismiss suffering as a surd aspect of existence. We are unsettled by the unexplained:

But it does appear to be a fact that at least some men—in all probability, most men—are unable to leave unclarified problems of analysis merely unclarified, just to look at the stranger features of the world’s landscape in dumb astonishment ...Any chronic failure of one’s explanatory apparatus, the complex of received culture patterns (common sense, science, philosophical speculation, myth) one has for mapping the empirical world, to explain things which cry out for explanation tends to lead to a deep disquiet. (100)

Paul Tillich’s reflections on the “anxiety of meaninglessness”<sup>20</sup> enriches Geertz’s notion of the “deep disquiet” that underwrites theodicy. Tillich’s account of this anxiety illuminates both Berger’s “need for meaning” and Geertz’s “quest for lucidity”:

The anxiety of meaninglessness is anxiety about the loss of an ultimate concern, of a meaning which gives meaning to all meanings. This anxiety is aroused by the loss of a spiritual center, of an answer, however symbolic and indirect, to the question of the meaning of existence. (47)

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<sup>20</sup> Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952). Tillich distinguishes between fear and anxiety. Whereas fear “has a definite object, which can be faced, analyzed, attacked, endured,” anxiety lacks a proper object, since its only object is “the negation of every object” (36).

The experience of unjust suffering engenders “the threat of nonbeing” that undercuts our “spheres of meaning” by calling into question the cogency of these meanings (46-7). When the “answer” that formerly satisfied the question of the meaning of existence fails to explain experiences of suffering, the anxiety of meaninglessness overtakes us and arouses Geertz’s sense of deep disquiet. Without meaningful answers to the question of suffering we risk losing our humanity: “Man’s being includes his relation to meanings. He is human only by understanding and shaping reality, both his world and himself, according to meanings and values” (50). Theodicy, then, is the endeavor to restore the meaningful moorings of our humanity. It is, in Tillich’s philosophical theology, the effort to restore the meaning of our existence in the wake of the loss of our “spiritual center,” a loss that triggers the “anxiety of meaninglessness” and drives us toward theodicy.

We have been developing a theoretical paradigm for understanding the task of theodicy. Three categories have dominated our analysis: “cosmic order,” “orientation,” and “meaning.” From Weber we learned that “man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun” and that theodicy responds to the problem of meaning.<sup>21</sup> From Berger we learned that theodicy acts as a “shield against terror” that preserves meaning. From Geertz we learned that theodicy endeavors to reinforce or re-establish the system of symbols that enables us to meaningfully interpret our existence. Hence, “the inner need for meaning” (Weber, Berger) and “the quest for lucidity” (Geertz) underwrites the ubiquitous religious impulse to still the “deep disquiet” (Geertz) or “the anxiety of meaninglessness” (Tillich) that overtakes us when evil punctures our sacred canopies, destroys our system of symbols, and confounds our spheres of meaning, resulting in the loss of our ultimate orientation (Long/Tillich).

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<sup>21</sup> Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture,” in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 5.

## THEODICY AS NAVIGATION

From our survey of these major theorists in the study of religion on the problem of evil we have developed a conception of *theodicy as meaning-making*. Although this model gives us a good starting point for thinking about theodicy in religious studies, it lacks a certain conceptual agility. In this section we will construct a more robust model that refines and expands upon the initial model by taking its three controlling concepts, viz., “cosmic law,” “orientation,” and “meaning,” and combining them with a fourth key concept: “journey.” Thinking about *theodicy as navigation* accents its dynamic and subjective character: it is indelibly linked to our narratives. Thus, my paradigm moves beyond the “what” of theodicy (viz., meaning-making) to the “how” (viz., navigation). Moreover, it strategically shifts our focus from the macro to the mirco level of analysis, thereby suggesting new trajectories for research in theodicy in religious studies.<sup>22</sup>

What, then, do I mean by *theodicy as navigation*? Imagine a ship caught in a violent storm at sea. Tossed by the winds, buffeted by waves, and taking on water, the ship finds itself in utter peril—on the brink of total destruction. In order to salvage the ship the crew must find its bearings and sail for calm waters. But the ferocity of the storm has left the crew disorientated and taken the ship off course, leaving it adrift at sea, barely able to stay afloat. Since they cannot navigate by the stars, they must use the

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<sup>22</sup> David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroads, 1981). Tracy argues for the heuristic value of the analogical method in systematic theology, but they equally apply to scholars of religion: “The theologian, as theologian, develops a properly reflective language of critique and participation by means of the articulation of theological *concepts*... Two major conceptual languages have served as principal candidates for this task in theology: analogical and dialectical languages... The first of these languages, analogy, is a language of ordered relationships articulating similarity-in-difference... A principal aim of all properly analogical languages is the production of some order, at the limit, some harmony to the several analogues, the similarities-in-difference, constituting the whole reality” (408). Later he discusses the importance of the “analogical imagination” in explicating theological concepts: “The analogies will bring to expression some production by means of a theological analogical imagination: a production produced by the power of an analogical imagination released by the religious event and reflected upon by the critical powers of each theologian. The power of an analogical imagination as imagination was honored by Aristotle in his famous dictum: ‘to spot the similar in the dissimilar is the mark of poetic genius’” (410).

resources they have on board to travel to safety. Thus, with a variety of navigational instruments in hand, they begin to traverse the perilous waters, a journey that will strain the nerves of the crew and the sturdiness of the ship. At stake in the journey is the integrity of their ship and their lives. The crisis of the storm, the impulse to salvage the ship, and the journey toward safety constitute the core elements of the analogy.

This imaginative scenario provides a compelling analogy for the project of theodicy. David Tracy argues that analogies locate “similarities-in-difference” that enable the scholar to illuminate difficult concepts.<sup>23</sup> Let us begin, therefore, by explicating the major analogues between the imperiled crew on the ship beset by the storm and the disillusioned believer confronted by evil. First, let us examine the meaning of the storm. The storm that besieges the ship represents evil and suffering. In the terms of our theorists, it represents the “anomic” experiences (Berger) that challenge their “system of symbols” (Geertz) and thereby engender the “problem of meaning” (Weber). The storm represents the “chaos” (another metaphor for evil) that threatens an ultimate sense of order (Berger/Geertz) and orientation (Long) and thereby creates the “anxiety of meaninglessness” (Tillich). We see chaos symbolized as turbulent waters in the ancient Near East, for example, in the creation story in Genesis 1:1-2:3, the Babylonian *Enuma elish* (Tiamat), and the Ugaritic god Yamm (literally: “sea”) in the Baal cycle.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, a “storm” metaphorically expresses suffering in common parlance, as when we say we are “going through a storm” or “drowning” in a crisis. Thus, the storm—with its turbulent waters—symbolizes the chaos or evil that confronts religion.

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<sup>23</sup> Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, 408.

<sup>24</sup> See Bernard Batto, *Slaying the Dragon: Mythmaking in the Biblical Tradition* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992). “In the ancient Near East there were two primary, equally powerful symbols of chaos. One was the primeval flood or ocean, frequently portrayed as a dragonlike monster; the other was the barren desert, sometimes portrayed as a dreadful land beast” (47, Cf. 76).

Next, the imperiled ship in our analogy represents the “world of meaning” (Smith) the believer inhabits, described variously by our theorists as “sacred canopies” (Berger), “webs of significance” (Geertz/Weber), “ultimate orientation” (Long), and “spheres of meaning” (Tillich). These constructions of ultimate reality reinforce the “cosmic order” that overlays life with various patterns of meaning. When events occur that defy integration within these patterns of meaning, the viability of religion comes into question. As the turbulent waters of the storm threaten the integrity of the ship, so unjust suffering jeopardizes the tenability of religious belief when beset by the evil of the world. More broadly, then, the ship represents the core, orientating worldviews and values of believers, which they strive to secure in the face of the problem of evil.

The crew of the beleaguered ship represent believers who seek to salvage their beliefs (the ship) when confronted with the problem of evil (the turbulent waters of the storm). They must utilize the distinctive resources of their ship, viz., their compass (sacred texts), maps (theology), and knowledge of the sea (tradition) to direct their vessel to safe harbors. Rather than abandoning the ship they must work to save it from demise, since without its protection they would be engulfed by the sea. Likewise, believers engaged in theodicy refuse to abandon their religious worldviews and theological presuppositions because they provide them with a meaningful “space” within which to live. Since each ship traverses different waters (because there are many different problems of evil) and carries different crewmembers, they necessarily employ different resources to sail to safe shores, as we will discuss momentarily.

The calm waters or safe harbors represent the successful integration of these meaning-defying experiences into the believers “world of meaning.” Put differently, they

symbolize the believer's successful restoration of meaning in the aftermath of his or her encounter with unjust suffering. In our analogy, the ship journeys through the storm to calm waters where the wind and waves (evil and suffering) no longer threaten to capsize it (i.e., to "shipwreck" his or her beliefs). The calm waters or safe harbors do not represent the absence of further "storms" or confrontations with evil and suffering; rather, they represent the believer's ability to integrate these experiences within a broader horizon of meaning. The problem of evil does not lose its existential and intellectual force once believers successfully integrate it into their belief system. It continues to be problematic, but it loses its ability to disillusion them. While they may not have "solved" the problem of evil in a formal philosophical sense, they have nonetheless "resolved" it by enfoldng it within a meaningful religious framework.

The final part of the analogy incorporates the concept of journey. Theodicy involves an interpretive movement from the crisis of evil to intellectual and existential resolution. Just as sea-farers must navigate through the storm, so believers must embark on an intellectual voyage from disillusionment to integration. The journey through the storm represents explorations in theodicy. Sailors unwilling to succumb to the waves must make the harrowing journey through the turbulent waters using the navigational instruments available to them. Likewise, believers unwilling to abandon their beliefs must find ways to reconcile evil and suffering with their religious worldviews using their instruments: scripture, theology, and tradition. The intellectual journey, i.e., the believer's attempt to give meaning to suffering, takes center stage in this approach to theodicy. While the end goal of all theodicy is the same, viz., the vindication of God and/or the preservation of religious worldviews, the means to this end vary. Each religion

will approach the problem of evil and theodicy differently, given its distinctive beliefs and practices.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, since religion is not a monolithic category, we can expect to find countless varieties of theodicy within each religion. For all, however, the encounter with suffering, either personally or intellectually, moves believers to confront evil and integrate it into their “worlds of meaning” or ultimate sense of reality.

Lastly, the concept of journey accents the narrative aspect of theodicy. Narrative, in our paradigm, has two levels. In the first place, it denotes the subjectivity of the person engaged in theodicy. Theodicy is not done in a vacuum by disinterested scholars but by religiously invested and historically, socially, and theologically situated persons.<sup>26</sup> By understanding their irreducibly unique location and experiences, that is, by understanding their “story,” we gain a better purchase on the inner dynamics of their theodicy. At bottom, theodicy is a deeply personal struggle to make sense of suffering. Hence, in order to understand theodicy, we must view the people navigating through the problem of evil in all their complexity. This holistic approach reflects the confluence of forces that shape a person and his or her theodicy. Our theoretical paradigm *theodicy as navigation*, therefore, attends to the narrative aspects of theodicy through the concept of journey, i.e., the personal experience of suffering and the effort to render it meaningful. Thus, while our paradigm focuses on the intellectual journey, it does not bracket the intellectual from the emotional and spiritual dimensions of theodicy. We must move, then, from a macro to a micro level of analysis where we study not theodicy types but

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<sup>25</sup> On the question of how the different world religions respond to the problem of evil, see the following: John Bowker, *Problems of Suffering in Religions of the World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970); William Cenkner, ed., *Evil and the Response of World Religion* (St. Paul, MN: Paragon House, 1997); and Jacob Neusner, ed., *Evil and Suffering* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1998).

<sup>26</sup> We must distinguish between the study of theodicy and the construction of theodicy. One can analyze theodicy without religious commitments, but one cannot construct theodicy without religious commitments, since theodicy consists of the justification of God or religious worldviews from a religious perspective.

individual theodicies, which converge and diverge from these typologies in significant ways.

Narrative, in the first place, fixes our gaze on the person doing theodicy and alerts us to the complex internal and external factors that inform the construction of theodicy. Additionally, however, narrative points to the story's power to imbue suffering with meaning. As we see from the Book of Job, a story can provide indispensable orientation for those who hold it in high regard and for whom it resonates personally. Archetypal stories that give meaning to suffering, like the story of Job, can help the believer come to terms with evil and suffering. Hence, two operative narratives underwrite the journey of theodicy: the personal narrative and a meta-narrative or archetypal story. From the former we learn how identity and context inform the construction of the theodicy. From the later we learn how stories or meta-narratives function as a lens through which religious persons insert themselves into maps that become the territory within which they journey from crisis to resolution through the reinscription of meaning.

Finally, the analogy of theodicy as navigation opens new vistas for theorizing the ritual dimension of theodicy. Coming to terms with the incongruity between the world as it is and the world as we think it ought to be is not simply an intellectual exercise. It involves the whole person in their engagement with the reality of suffering, especially through ritual.<sup>27</sup> Ritual, conceived not as reflecting or reinforcing social cohesion, but as a dynamic response to the fractured, broken, and fragmented state of lived experience, creates an illusory world for us to

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<sup>27</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 65: "Ritual is a means of performing the way things ought to be in conscious tension to the way things are in such a way that this ritualized perfection is recollected in the ordinary, uncontrolled course of things."

live.<sup>28</sup> Through ritual we find ways to “endure” the tragedies of life, not through dispassionate and detached intellectual resolution, but through ritual activity.<sup>29</sup> Robert Orsi moves in this direction when he proposes “replacing the meaning-making subject with a more tragic figure”<sup>30</sup> who strives to find meaning within and through “wounding”: “Meaning making begins in wounding, and the process of meaning making is wounding.”<sup>31</sup> In ritual we create meaningful spaces to inhabit that do not shelter us from the storms of life as much as they help us navigate through them, that is, they help us live with and within suffering by superimposing an “as if” or “illusory” world over the “as is” or “real” world.<sup>32</sup> Theodicy, then, has a cognitive and ritual dimension. Research on the ritual aspects of theodicy has been sparse and under-theorized.<sup>33</sup> While we have focused on the cognitive aspects of theodicy, we recognize the possibilities of the analogy of navigation for thinking about theodicy through the lens of ritual theory.

### CONCLUSION:

As we have seen, there is no “one-size-fits-all” theodicy: different people will find different approaches more compelling than others, depending on their religious background and theological presuppositions.<sup>34</sup> My theoretical paradigm *theodicy as*

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<sup>28</sup> Adam B. Seligman, et al, *Ritual and Its Consequences: An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 26-32. “By emphasizing ritual as subjunctive, we are underlining the degree to which ritual creates a shared, illusory world. Participants practicing ritual act as if the world produced in ritual were in fact a real one. And they do so fully conscious that such a subjunctive world exists in endless tension with an alternate world of daily experience (25-6). Although I agree with their emphasis on action over intellectual coherency, ritual may nevertheless reflect and reinforce these worldviews, either discursively or nondiscursively. The authors are overcorrecting previous meaning-centered construals of ritual.

<sup>29</sup> Geertz, “Religion as a Cultural System,” 100.

<sup>30</sup> Robert A. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious World People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 170.

<sup>31</sup> Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 145.

<sup>32</sup> Seligman, *Ritual and Its Consequence*, 20, 25-6.

<sup>33</sup> For a recent contribution in this area, see Mark S. M. Scott, “Journeys in Grief: Theorizing Mourning Rituals,” *Arc, The Journal of the Faculty of Religious Studies* (Fall 2009): forthcoming.

<sup>34</sup> Sarah K. Pinnock expresses this point well: “There is no single uniform appropriate faith response to suffering and evil, nor should there be. Responses to evil and suffering take on different configurations appropriate to different religious communities, given the complex dynamics of coping with evil” (*Beyond Theodicy: Jewish and Christian Continental Thinker Respond to the Holocaust* [Albany, NY: SUNY, 2002], 144).

*navigation* conceives of theodicy as the pursuit of cosmic coherence and personal meaning in the face of evil. Instead of searching for global theodicies, it attends to individual responses to evil: no two experiences of suffering are identical, nor are any two approaches to the problem of evil. When we conceive of theodicy as a quest for meaning through the storms of suffering, it takes on a whole new complexion. It becomes a much more layered enterprise than the mere philosophical resolution of a logical problem. When seen in the light of navigation, we begin to find theodicy everywhere, and it becomes a productive lens through which we can understand the various ways believers strive to make sense of suffering. The study of theodicy in religion has been theoretically underdeveloped and stalled in old paradigms. My paradigm seeks to provide a theoretical enrichment that will have heuristic value for the study of theodicy in multiple religious contexts by charting a new course forward: from the global to the particular; from the abstract to the concrete; and from the exclusive realm of philosophy and theology to the sphere of religious studies, with its distinctive interpretive categories.