

Divine Hiddenness

New Essays

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What Is the Problem of the Hiddenness of God?

PETER VAN INWAGEN

What indeed? One possibility is that the words ‘the problem of the hiddenness of God’ are simply another name for the problem of evil: The world is full of terrible things and we observe no response from God when these terrible things happen – the heavens do not rain fire on the Nazis, the raging flood does not turn aside just before it sweeps away the peaceful village, the paralyzed child remains paralyzed. And in the works of some writers, it is hard to separate the problem of divine hiddenness and the problem of evil. But if the problem of divine hiddenness just *is* the problem of evil – well, there already exist many discussions of this problem, and I do not propose to add to their number in this essay.

I think, however, that the problem of Divine hiddenness (whatever exactly it may be) is not the same problem as the problem of evil, for we can imagine a world in which the problem of divine hiddenness pretty clearly does not arise and in which the problem of evil is no less a problem than it is in the actual world. Imagine, for example, that to every Jew who was to perish in the Holocaust there had come, a few weeks before his or her death, a vision of a seraph, a being of unutterable splendor, who recited Psalm 91 in Hebrew – and then vanished. The doomed recipients of these visions, comparing notes, found that the visions were remarkably consistent. Learned Jews understood the seraph’s words perfectly. Less learned Jews recognized the psalm and understood bits and pieces of it, just as they would have if they had heard it recited in a synagogue. Others, less learned still, recognized the language as biblical Hebrew, and said things like, “It sounded like poetry – maybe a psalm.” A few wholly secularized Jews did not even recognize the language, but gave an account of the visual aspect of the apparition consistent with everyone else’s, and said that the apparition spoke to them in a language they did not understand. (But those victims of the Holocaust who were not Jews according to the Law but were Jews according to the Nazi Race Laws did not experience the vision at all; some of them, however, experienced other visions, of a kind I will describe in a moment.) There were, then, these visions, but that was all. Nothing else happened: Not a single life was saved, not a single brutal incident was in any way mitigated. With the exception of the visions, the Holocaust proceeded

exactly as it did in the actual world. And let us further imagine that many other victims of horrendous evil in our imaginary world, victims of horrendous evils throughout all its recorded history, have received, shortly before their final suffering and death, analogous or comparable “signs” in the form of visions incorporating religious imagery – every victim, in fact, who belonged to any cultural tradition that provided religious images he could recognize and interpret. It would seem that in this imaginary world, the problem of evil is no less pressing than it is in ours, but “the problem of the hiddenness of God” does not arise. Or at least we can say this: If the existence of the visions is generally known among the inhabitants of the imaginary world, writers of the sort who in our world speak of “the hiddenness of God” will not use that phrase (they will perhaps speak instead of the “passivity of God”).

The problem of evil and the problem of the hiddenness of God are, therefore, not identical. But is the latter essentially connected with suffering and other forms of evil? Would, or could, this problem exist in a world without suffering? I think that trying to answer this question will help us understand what the problem is. Let us imagine a world without suffering – not a world in which everyone enjoys the Beatific Vision, but a world that is as much like our world (as it is at present) as the absence of suffering permits. I will call such a world a “secular utopia,” because my model for this world is just that future of gleaming alabaster cities, undimmed by human tears, that secularists yearn for.

In the world I imagine, human beings are benevolent and nature is kind. There is no physical pain, or very little of it (just enough to remind people to take care not to damage their extremities). There is no premature death, whether by violence, accident, or disease. There are, in fact, no such things as violence and disease, and accidents are never very serious. (The inhabitants of this world all enjoy a vigorous old age and die peacefully in their sleep when they are well over a hundred years old – and the fear of death is unknown.) No one is a cripple or mentally retarded or mentally unbalanced or even mildly neurotic. There is no racial prejudice or prejudice of any sort. No one is ugly or deformed. Everyone is provided with all the physical necessities and comforts of life – but great wealth and luxury are as unknown as poverty. Consumer goods are produced in a way that does no violence to nature: the human and non-human inhabitants of the world live in perfect harmony.¹ Everyone has interesting and rewarding work to do, and this work is appropriately rewarded with respect and, if appropriate, admiration. No one covets anyone else’s possessions. There is no lying or promise-breaking or cheating or corruption – there is in fact nothing for anyone to be corrupt *about*, for there are essentially no government and no laws and no money. If there is any unhappiness in this world, it arises only in cases like these: Alfred has fallen in love with Beatrice, but Beatrice is in love with Charles; Delia has

devoted her life to proving Goldbach's Conjecture, and Edward has published a proof of it when Delia had a proof almost within her grasp. And even in such cases, everyone involved behaves with perfect rationality and complete maturity, thereby keeping the resulting unhappiness to an irreducible (and usually transient) minimum.

Now let us suppose that, as in our world, some people believe in God – in a necessarily existent, omniscient, omnipresent creator and sustainer of the world. (The theists of our invented world would have trouble formulating the concept of “moral perfection” – but, if you could get them to understand it, they wouldn't hesitate to ascribe moral perfection to God, too.) And, as in our world, some people believe there is no such being. Could someone in this world, perhaps one of its atheists, raise the problem of divine hiddenness? Perhaps we can imagine a brief dialogue in which the problem is raised, a dialogue “purer” than any that could be imagined to take place in our world, purer because neither of the participants has ever known or heard of any horrendous evil.

Atheist: This God of yours – why does he hide himself; why doesn't he come out in the open where we can see him?

Theist: Your question doesn't make any sense. God is omnipresent. That is, he is totally present everywhere and locally present nowhere. A thing is locally present in a place (that is, a region of space) if it occupies or takes up or fills that place. And God occupies neither any particular place (as does a cat or a mountain) nor all places (as the luminiferous aether would, if it existed). He is totally present everywhere in that the totality of his being is reflected in the sustaining power that keeps every spatial thing everywhere in the physical universe in existence from moment to moment. Similarly, we might say that Rembrandt is locally present nowhere in “The Night Watch”² and totally present in it everywhere. (But the analogy is imperfect, since the human figures and inanimate objects and spatial relations in the painting are fictional, whereas the ones in the physical universe are, of course, real.) Only a locally present thing can reflect light, and thus only a locally present thing can be visible. Only a locally present thing can exclude other things from the space it occupies, and thus only a locally present thing can be tangible. Someone who wants God to ‘show Himself’ just doesn't understand the concept of God. Asking for that is like demanding that Rembrandt “show himself” in a painting. The complaint, “I can't find God anywhere in the world” is as misplaced as the complaint ‘I can't find Rembrandt anywhere in the painting.’

Atheist: Well, if he can't show himself by being present in the world, why can't he show himself by his effects on some of the things that *are* present in the world?

Theist: You haven't been listening. Everything in the world is his “effect.” He “shows himself by his effects” in the world just as Rembrandt “shows himself by his effects” in The Night Watch.

Atheist: That sounds good, but I wonder if it's any more than words. What I want is not "general effects" but, if I may coin a phrase, "special effects." Given your picture of God's relation to the world, everything will look just the same whether or not there is a God – wait, stop, don't tell me that that's like saying that "The Night Watch" will look the same whether or not there is a Rembrandt! I couldn't bear it. Let me put the problem this way. I have bought one of the modal telescopes invented by the great metaphysicist Saul Kripke, and I have looked into other possible worlds. In one of them I caught a glimpse of the following argument, in a book by a man named Thomas Aquinas (evidently a sound atheist like myself):

Objection: It is, moreover, superfluous to suppose that what can be accounted for by a few principles has been produced by many. But it seems that everything we see in the world can be accounted for by other principles, without supposing God to exist. For all natural things can be accounted for by one principle, which is nature; and all voluntary things can be accounted for by one principle, which is human reason or will. Hence, there is no need to suppose that a God exists.

Surely this argument is unanswerable? Surely one should not believe in the existence of an unobservable entity unless its existence is needed to explain some observed phenomenon?

Theist: So what you are looking for is a particular event, an event that is not caused by any human action, whose occurrence resists any natural or scientific explanation, and which is evidently the work of someone trying to send human beings a message or signal whose content is that there is such a being as God. How about the stars in the sky re-arranging themselves to spell out 'I am who am'? Would that be satisfactory?

Atheist: It would.

Theist: You don't want much, do you? But it happens I can supply what you want. My own religion is called Julianism, after its founder, Julia, the great prophetess and author of *The Book of Julia* and the forty volumes of sermons we call *The Words of Julia*. Julia's message was so important that God granted her three times a natural span of life, as a sign of his special favor and to ensure that her teachings would have a chance to put down deep roots. Julia lived 326 years. And every physiologist agrees that it is physiologically impossible for a human being to live 326 years. Therefore, Julia's preternaturally long life must have been a sign from God.

Atheist: Well, that would be pretty impressive if it actually happened. But when did Julia live, and how do you Julianists know that she really did live that long?

Theist: Julia lived about two thousand years ago. We know of her long life and lots of other things about her because the facts of her biography are meticulously set out in the Holy Records of the Julian Church, which originally derive from the testimony of eyewitnesses.

Atheist: Forgive me if I'm skeptical. Stories can become distorted as they pass from mouth to mouth. As stories are passed from one teller to another, people unconsciously fill in or change minor details in the story. These minor

distortions can accumulate, and, given long enough, the accumulation of minor distortions can change a story till it's no longer really the same story. We know that this happens. Just last month, there was a rumor in Neapolis of a terrible tragedy somewhere in Asia – a woman had actually lost a *finger* in an industrial accident! The whole town was in an uproar. But when the dust settled, it turned out that what had really happened was that the Asian woman had got her finger badly mauled in a piece of machinery while she was daydreaming. The finger, of course, healed perfectly within a week. Now since we know from experience that stories can become distorted in this fantastic way – the very idea of someone's losing a finger! – and since we know from experience that no one in our modern record-keeping era has lived even 150 years, the most reasonable thing to suppose is that, although Julia may indeed have lived to be remarkably old, she certainly did not live to be 326; the reasonable thing to suppose is that what experience tells us often happens happened this time (that is, the story grew in the telling; it certainly had plenty of time to grow) and that what experience tells us never happens did not happen.

Theist: What you are saying seems to come down to this. You demand that God, in order to make his existence believable, cause some particular, unmistakable sign to occur somewhere in the world of space and time. But when you hear a story of some event that would have been such a sign if it had actually occurred, you refuse, on general epistemological grounds, to believe the story.

Atheist: My position is not so extreme as that, or so unreasonable as you make it sound. Take your first, hypothetical example. If the stars in the sky were suddenly rearranged so as to spell out 'I am who am', I'd believe in the existence of God then, all right. That would be a good, clear case of what I'd call "God's coming out of hiding." In such a case, God would be making it evident to human beings that Reality contained another intelligence than human intelligence – and not just any kind of intelligence, but an intelligence grand enough to be a plausible candidate for the office "God." And, obviously, this – or something along the same lines – is what such a grand intelligence would do if it wanted us to believe in it. If, *per impossibile*, the figures in "The Night Watch" were conscious beings and aware of (and only of) the objects in their little two-dimensional world, what reason could they have for believing in Rembrandt but something he put specially into the painting that was not a part of the natural order of things in the painting (his signature, perhaps). If he didn't do that, how could he blame the denizens of "The Night Watch" for not believing in him?

Theist: Let me make two points. First, these signs you want God to place in the world would have to recur periodically, or, after a few generations had passed, people like you would say that the stories about the signs had grown in the telling – perhaps from the seed of an astronomical prodigy that, remarkable as it was, had some purely natural explanation. Secondly, even the "I am who am" story wouldn't make the existence of *God* evident to a sufficiently determined skeptic – for even the (apparent) rearrangement of the stars could be the

work of a lesser being than God. We can imagine no sign that would *have* to be the work of a necessary, omnipresent, omnipotent being. Any sign you might imagine you could also imagine to be the production of a contingent, locally present being whose powers, though vastly greater than ours, are finite. I should expect that someone like you would say that if two hypotheses explain the data equally well, and if they are alike but for the fact that one of them postulates an unobservable infinite being and the other an unobservable finite being, one should always prefer the latter hypothesis, since it does the same explanatory work as the former, but is, literally, infinitely weaker.

Atheist: Well, perhaps you're right when you say that to be convincing the signs would have to recur periodically. I don't see why I shouldn't ask for that, and I don't see that it will weaken my argument if I do. And the more I think about it, the more inclined I am to accept your second point as well. Your argument has convinced me of something you didn't foresee: that you theists have imagined a being whose existence no one could possibly rationally believe in, since the hypothesis that He exists is necessarily infinitely stronger than other hypotheses that would explain any possible observations equally well. And if you haven't "imagined" Him, if He really does exist, even *He* couldn't provide us – or any other finite beings He might create – with evidence that would render belief in Him rational. If He exists, He should approve of me for not believing in him, and disapprove of you for believing in Him.

Let us at this point leave our dialogue and the secular utopia in which it was imagined to occur, and return to the real world. The lesson of the dialogue is that in a world that lacks any real suffering, the problem of the hiddenness of God is a purely epistemological problem, or a cluster of epistemological problems: Can one rationally believe in God in a world devoid of signs and wonders? Under what conditions would it be rational to believe a story that reports signs and wonders? Could any possible sign or wonder or series of signs and wonders make it reasonable to believe in a necessarily existent, omnipresent, omnipotent Creator and Sustainer of the world of locally present things?

These epistemological questions obviously have the same force in the real world as in our secular utopia. We might say that in the real world, the problem of the hiddenness of God has two aspects, a moral aspect and an epistemic aspect. But it would be better to say that there are two "problems of the hiddenness of God": a moral problem and an epistemic problem, or a cluster of moral problems and a cluster of epistemic problems. The cluster of moral problems is collectively called the problem of evil. The cluster of epistemic problems, I have laid out in the above dialogue. I have said that I shall not in this essay discuss the problem of evil. But I want to draw some analogies between the two problems, for they are similar in logical structure. Each is the problem of meeting a challenge to belief in the existence of God that has the general

form, “If there were a God, the world would not look the way it does.” In the case of the problem of evil, the challenge takes this form: It tells us that if there were a God, we should not see certain things that we do see: vast amounts of horrendous suffering. In the case of the epistemic problem, the challenge takes another form: It tells us that if there were a God – at any rate, a God who cared whether we believed in him – we should see certain things that we do not see: signs and wonders. (Or at least that challenge is one part of the epistemic problem; as we have seen, there is also the problem whether even repeated, ubiquitous signs and wonders would be sufficient to render belief in God rational.) Since the two problems are similar in logical structure, it is natural to wonder whether the techniques that theists have used to respond to the problem of the presence of evil could be applied to the problem of the absence of signs and wonders. The main technique that Christian philosophers (and Jewish and Muslim philosophers) have used in their treatments of the problem of evil is that of story-telling: They tell stories that fall under two headings, *defense* and *theodicy*. A “defense” in the weakest sense in which the word is used is an internally consistent story according to which God and evil both exist. Sometimes the following two requirements are added: The evil in the story must be of the amounts and kinds that we observe in the actual world, and the story must contain no element that we have good scientific or historical reasons to regard as false. A theodicy is a story that has the same internal features as a defense, but which the theodicyist, the person telling the story, puts forward as true or at least highly plausible. Students of the problem of evil will know how this story-telling technique has been applied by various authors and the kinds of problems and arguments it has generated.

I want to suggest that the epistemic problem be approached in the same way. Christian philosophers – or other theists who are philosophers – should meet the challenge raised by the absence of signs and wonders in the following way: They should tell stories that entail the following proposition:

The world was created and is sustained by a necessary, omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent, morally perfect being – that is, by God. There are rational beings in this world, and God wants these beings, or some of them at some times, to believe in his existence. The world is devoid of signs and wonders – of “special effects.” Or if the world contains any such events, they are so rare that very few people have actually observed one or even met anyone who claims to have observed one. (In the latter case, among those people whom God wants to believe in his existence are many of the people who are distant in space and time from any of the very rare signs and wonders.)

Such stories, of course, must be internally consistent, and they will certainly be of more philosophical interest if they contain nothing that is known to be false on historical or scientific grounds. Philosophers who present such stories may present them as defenses or as theodicies, according to their philosophical

purposes, just as in the analogous case of the problem of evil. (The root ‘-dicy’ in the word ‘theodicy’, when this word is used in connection with the epistemic problem, may be taken to refer to what may be called God’s “epistemic justice”: For many will argue, with our imaginary other-worldly atheist, that it would be “epistemically unjust” of God to expect us to believe in his existence without evidence – ‘evidence’ being appropriate signs and wonders.)

In discussions of the problem of evil, the kernel of every defense and every theodicy is a *reason* (or a set of reasons), God’s reason or reasons for permitting the existence of evil. So it should be with discussions of the epistemic problem: The kernel of every defense and every theodicy should be a reason or reasons, God’s reason or reasons for not providing the human species (some of whom, at least, he wishes to believe in His existence) with ubiquitous signs and wonders.

I will not in this essay attempt to construct a defense or a theodicy. I will say just two things; I will give two pieces of advice to anyone who sets out to construct a defense or theodicy. First, note that the proposition: *God wants people to believe in His existence* does not entail the proposition: *God wants people to believe in His existence and He does not care why anyone who believes in Him has this belief*. The former proposition, in fact, is consistent with the proposition that God would value the following states of affairs in the order in which they are presented:

- (1) Patricia believes, for reason A, that God exists.
- (2) Patricia believes that God does not exist.
- (3) Patricia believes, for reason B, that God exists.

It is, for example, consistent with God’s wanting Patricia to believe in Him that He regard (1) as a good state of affairs, (2) as a bad state of affairs, and (3) as a bad state of affairs that is *much* worse than (2). (And this would be consistent with reason B’s being an epistemically unobjectionable reason for belief in God: reason B might be, from the point of view of someone interested only in justification or warrant, a perfectly good reason for believing in the existence of God.) And this is no idle speculation about a logical possibility. Most theists hold that God expects a good deal more from us than mere belief in his existence.³ He expects a complex of things, of which belief in his existence is a small (although essential) part. It is certainly conceivable that someone’s believing in him for a certain reason (because, say, that person has witnessed signs and wonders) might make it difficult or even impossible for that person to acquire other features God wanted him or her to have.

My second piece of advice is directed at Christian philosophers who attempt to construct defenses and theodicies. I recommend serious and sustained reflection on the possible meanings of two texts: Luke 16:31 (“If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be persuaded

if someone should rise from the dead”), and John 20:29 (“Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are they who, not seeing, believe.”).

The burden of this essay is this. I recommend thinking of “the problem of the hiddenness of God” not as a single problem but as two distinct problems, a moral problem – what has always been called the problem of evil – and an epistemic problem. But I have argued that the two problems are similar in their logical structure, and I recommend that, because of this similarity, theists who attempt to solve the epistemic problem employ the same methods and techniques – *mutatis mutandis* – that theists have generally employed in their attempts to solve the problem of evil.

Notes

1. Those who think that the sufferings of nonhuman animals that are unrelated to the acts of human beings are relevant to “the problem of the hiddenness of God” should feel free to imagine that our invented world is one in which animals in the state of nature never suffer. It is not easy to imagine in any detail a biologically rich world without animal suffering unless one imagines it as a world of ubiquitous miracles – a world in which, for example, fawns are always miraculously saved from forest fires. The imaginer had better take care to make these miracles “unnoticeable,” at least in those epochs in which there are human beings to notice them, for if the ubiquitous miracles were *obviously* miracles, this would defeat our purpose in trying to imagine a utopia in which “the problem of the hiddenness of God” could be raised.
2. In our secular utopia, Rembrandt has apparently painted a picture called “The Night Watch” that is not the picture that actually bears that name; there would of course be no such thing as an armed company of men in the secular utopia.
3. James 2:19: “You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and they shudder.”

The Silence of the God Who Speaks

NICHOLAS WOLTERSTORFF

Silence is of many sorts. There's the silence of the countryside on a still winter's night, when all the animals are sleeping and all the insects hibernating. There's the silence of Amsterdam on the eve of the fifth of May, when the entire old city halts for fifteen minutes to memorialize those who fell in the war and were silenced. There's the silence of the mute, and the silence of rocks, hills, and valleys. There's the silence in music, silence as essential to the music as the sounds. There's the silence of the audience chamber when the imminent entrance of the queen is announced. And there's the hush of the cosmos that the psalmist enjoys when he announces: "The Lord is in his holy temple, let all the earth keep silence before him."

The silence of which I will be speaking is unlike all of those. It's the silence of the biblical God – the biblical God being a God who is not only capable of speaking but has on many occasions spoken. More specifically, I will be speaking of the *biblical* silence of the biblical God. The biblical silence of God is the nonanswering silence of God. It's like the silence of the parent who doesn't answer when the child asks "Why? Why did it happen? Where were you?" It's the silence which the poet of Psalm 83 pleads with God to break: "O God, do not keep silence; do not hold thy peace or be still, O God!"

1. Biblical Silence

The Bible – both the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Bible – represents God as having spoken. In addition, there's a long tradition within both Judaism and Christianity of regarding the Bible itself as a medium of divine speech. When I began composing this essay, I had just finished putting the final touches on a book of philosophical reflections on the claim that God speaks. *Divine Discourse*, I titled it. I argued that if we take speaking to consist in the performance of what J. L. Austin called *illocutionary actions*, then there is nothing incoherent or impossible in the claim that God speaks – that is, *literally* speaks. Nothing incoherent or impossible in the claim that God performs such actions as commanding, assuring, promising, asserting, and so forth. The silence of God is not an ontologically necessitated silence. It's not like the silence of the

rocks and the hills, of which it is only metaphorically true that they speak. If God were impersonal – the “ground of being” or something of that sort – then God’s silence would be ontologically necessitated. The silence of the biblical God is the silence of a God who speaks.

Though the biblical God – by which I mean, God as represented in the Bible – though the biblical God does indeed speak, nonetheless, on most matters, God chooses not to say anything. Most matters God leaves it to us to find out about, by observation and inference. And that’s wonderful. Who wants to be told everything? The silence of God – the *biblical* silence of God – does not consist in the fact that on many matters, God says nothing.

The biblical silence of God is the failure or refusal of God to answer a question put to Him. Though not the failure or refusal to answer any question you please, however. Some of the questions put to God are questions which, given what God has already said, are misguided questions. Questions that one wouldn’t ask if one has heard and genuinely listened to what God has already said. The biblical silence of God is the nonanswering silence of God in the face of those questions which take into account what God has already said.

There are many such questions, and of many sorts. I shall focus all my attention on just one sort. The sort I have in mind are questions which we find ourselves incapable of answering on our own. At least, we have been unsuccessful thus far in answering them on our own. Yet they are questions to which the person who believes in the biblical God wants an answer with all one’s soul. They are questions which, unanswered, put biblical faith at risk. The risk has proved too great for many; faith has succumbed. Yet God does not answer the questions. Strange and disturbing. Though one poses the questions in the context of having listened to God, to ask them is to find oneself standing alongside the psalmist before the non-answering silence of God.

2. Locating the Silence

Let me begin by locating the sort of questions I have in mind, thus locating the silence. Strange forked creatures, we human beings: animalic persons, personic animals. Persons indeed, but also animals. Animals indeed, but also persons: creatures endowed with consciousness and free agency, reflective of God, meant to enjoy and tend the earth and to live in fellowship with other persons, both those of our own kind and God. Placed in a spatio-temporal physical world along with lots of other forms of life, including other kinds of animals.

Upon inspecting this curious forked creature which he had made, God pronounced the workmanship good; by which God no doubt meant, in part, that our design-plan was a good one for our situation. Inspection completed and passed, God sent us on our way with various instructions for conduct, and a blessing: May you flourish, said God. May you flourish as a species. When

one reads the report of God's blessing of humanity in the context of the other Genesis blessings, that's the natural interpretation. But as the Bible proceeds it becomes clear that the Genesis report of God's blessing of humanity had a latent meaning. What God had in mind was not just that we flourish as a species but that we flourish as individual members of the species. That we each live until "full of years" – the three score years and ten built into our design plan; and that during those years we flourish. Flourish *qua* the animalic persons, the personic animals, that we were created as being. And flourish in the earthly and social environment in which we have been placed. In Genesis, God was not pronouncing a blessing on disembodied souls about to enter an immaterial heaven.

But things have gone awry, terribly awry, with respect to God's creating and providential intent for these creatures. The divine experiment has not worked out: the experiment of creating this species of forked creatures, placing and maintaining the species in this physical universe along with other forms of life, giving the species instructions for conduct, and doing this creating and maintaining with the intent that each member of the species should flourish on earth in society until full of years. The blessing has not been fulfilled. Some do not flourish; some do not live until full of years; some neither flourish nor live until full of years.

Prominent among the things which have gone awry in human existence are life duration and suffering. The lives of many do not endure as they were meant to endure. And suffering does not serve the function it was meant to serve. Neither do affection and volition function as they were meant to function; they do not measure up to God's instructions. But on this occasion, I shall concentrate on the malfunctioning of suffering.

To see in what way suffering malfunctions, we must reflect on the nature of suffering and on its *proper* function. For it does indeed have a proper function. In turn, to reflect on those matters we must attend to a dimension of our constitution so deep and pervasive that neither ordinary speech nor the language of psychology and philosophy provide us with a conceptuality apt for describing it. My best will thus be fumbling. Let me take *joy*, or synonymously for my purposes, *delight*, as the opposite of suffering.

Built into the constitution of all of us are two distinct systems of suffering and delight. "System" is an inept word for what I wish to point to; but I can think of none better. One of these systems pertains to experience; the other pertains to belief. Let me begin with that system of suffering and delight which pertains to experience.

Pass quickly before your mind's eye samples of human experience in all its rich variety: sensations, moods, perceptions, emotions, desires, pains, believings, and so forth. And then notice this fundamental fact about our way of having such experiences: Though some are such that our having them is a matter of indifference to us, many are ones we *like* having, and many others

we *dislike* having. Many of our experiences are, as it were, valorized, charged – some positively, some negatively – while others remain neutral, with the charges coming in varying degrees of intensity, from intensely positive to intensely negative. There is thus in the life of each of us a continuum of valorization, with each of our experiences having a place on the continuum. As one moves out from the neutral center toward the positive end, one reaches a point where everything beyond is experienced joyfully. As one moves out from the neutral center toward the negative end, one reaches a point where everything beyond is experienced sufferingly.

Physical pain, for example, is experienced by most of us most of the time with a negative charge. When that charge is sufficiently intense, we experience it sufferingly; we suffer from the pain. Apparently, though, there are cases in which even fairly intense physical pain is experienced with a positive charge. I do not have in mind those cases in which a person puts up with some pain – may even be glad to have it – because she believes that some good will ensue; such cases bring belief into the picture, and we will get to that shortly. Rather I have in mind those cases in which the person just likes having the pain. This makes clear that we must beware of identifying strong negative valorization with pain. Though we sometimes speak of suffering as pain, to speak thus is to speak metaphorically. A good deal of suffering, even of experiential suffering, has nothing to do with pain; witness those who suffer from mental depression. And conversely, as we have just seen, pain can be experienced with a positive rather than a negative charge.

We regularly speak of someone suffering *from* the pain, of someone's suffering being *caused by* mental depression, of someone getting delight *from* the music, and so forth. In short, we regularly use causal language, and causal-sounding language, to describe the relation between suffering or delight, on the one hand, and the experience of pain, mental depression, or hearing music, on the other. But we must not think of the connection between suffering or delight, and some experience, as the connection of efficient causality; for the suffering which we describe as "caused" by pain is not a sensation *in addition to* the pain sensation, causally evoked by it. The only sensations are the pain sensations. When the operative system is the experiential system, then suffering and joy are, as it were, adverbial modifiers of the states and events of consciousness which are the experiences. They are not distinct experiences but *ways of having* experiences. Pain and depression are among the experiences that we normally have sufferingly; the perception of art and the taste of good food are among the experiences that we often have joyfully. Suffering is an existential No-saying to some experience; delight, an existential Yes-saying.

What I have been describing thus far is just one of the two systems of suffering and delight which I claimed to identify in us human beings – the *expe-*

riential system. Let us move on to consider the other system – that which pertains to belief, the *belief* system. When I learned of the death of my son, I was cast into suffering. What caused my suffering was not his death; for in the interim between his death and my learning of it, I did not suffer. What caused my suffering was my coming to believe that he was dead. If things had gone in the opposite way, if I had come to believe that he was dead when he was not, then too I would have been cast into suffering by my belief that he was dead, not by his death; for in this case there would not even have been his death. So our beliefs have the power of casting us into suffering; and they have that power whether or not they are true.

Yet what I suffered over was not the experience of my actively believing that my son was dead; it was, rather, that my son was dead. And that was not an experience of mine. It wasn't even an object of my experience; it was something of which I had only a belief. It's *what I believed to be the case* that I suffered over, not my experiential state of *believing* it. I suffered over that which was the content of my belief, namely, that my son was dead, not over my believing it. The suffering which occurs when the experiential system is operating is the suffering which consists of sufferingly having some experience. By contrast, the suffering which occurs when the belief system is operating is an emotion caused by coming to believe something, the emotion having as its object that which one believes to be the case.

It's true that there are cases in which we sufferingly or joyfully experience a believing. People wracked by religious doubt who finally come to believe confidently in their salvation not only rejoice over their salvation; they also experience rejoicingly their confident believing. But my case was not like that. My suffering was not my existential No-saying to my *believing* that my son was dead, but my existential No-saying to his being dead.

We are all created with these two systems of valorization. They're part of the design plan of our constitution. And in all of us, this part of our design plan gets activated by our life in this world. Sometimes my throat does actually feel unpleasantly parched. Sometimes I do actually feel unpleasantly hungry. Sometimes I do actually feel a distinctly unpleasant burning sensation in my finger. Just as one cannot imagine a human being whose constitution does not incorporate those two systems, so one cannot imagine a human life here on earth in which these two systems of our constitution are not activated in such a way as to yield not only positively but negatively valorized experiences, and beliefs concerning occurrences about which the person feels negatively.

And now for the point about proper functioning. Being constituted as we are in this regard serves our flourishing as animalic persons in the world in which we are placed. That we need water, food, and intact flesh if we are to remain alive is a direct consequence of our animalic constitution. Accordingly,

it's conducive to our endurance as animalic persons that we have feelings of thirst when in need of water, feelings of hunger when in need of food, feelings of pain when our flesh gets burned, and that we experience these sensations negatively. In some cases we experience them with such intense negativity that we *suffer* from parched throat sensations, *suffer* from hunger pang sensations, *suffer* from burn sensations. Our endurance as animalic persons would be vastly more precarious than it is if we didn't experience thirst, hunger, and the pain of burned flesh, or if we didn't experience them negatively.

The examples I have given, of the proper functioning of unpleasantness and suffering, were all taken from the animalic side of our existence; examples of the same point from the personal side of our existence can also easily be given. Our dislike of loneliness leads us to establish families and communities. Our dislike of intellectual bewilderment leads us to pursue knowledge. Our dislike of disappointment over unachieved goals leads us to try harder. And our dislike of a wide range of things makes them candidates for functioning as means of appropriate punishment and chastisement.

The conclusion is unavoidable that suffering in particular, and negative valorizations in general, often serve our flourishing as the animalic persons that we are. Of course the person suffering doesn't *like* the suffering. But that's exactly the point. We draw back from the experiences we dislike, do what we can to alleviate and forestall them. It's the combination of our being so constituted as to feel pain upon being burned and our not liking that pain which makes it much easier for us to survive than would otherwise be the case; witness the precarious existence of those rare human beings who do not feel such pain. The suffering serves our flourishing.

Dislike and suffering are existential No-saying to that from which and over which we suffer. But when a human being placed in this world has a constitution which includes such capacities for existential No-saying as ours typically does, we must pronounce a judgmental Yes on that aspect of our constitution itself. For we cannot imagine creatures such as ourselves flourishing, or even surviving, in environments such as ours without such capacities as we have for existential No-saying. Part of what God found good about the way God created us was surely that we were capable of suffering. The point is made with poetic eloquence by Karl Barth in his discussion of *das Nichtige*:

We must indicate and remove a serious confusion which has been of far reaching effect in the history of theology. . . . [T]here is a positive as well as a negative aspect of creation and creaturely occurrence. . . . Viewed from its negative aspect, creation is as if we were on the frontier of *das Nichtige* and orientated towards it. Creation is continually confronted by this menace. . . . Yet this negative side is not to be identified with *das Nichtige*, nor must it be postulated that the latter belongs to the essence of creaturely nature and may somehow be understood and interpreted as a mark of its character and

perfection. . . . [I]n creation there is not only a Yes but also a No; not only a height but also an abyss; not only clarity but also obscurity; not only growth but also decay; not only opulence but also indigence; not only beauty but also ashes; not only beginning but also end; not only value but also worthlessness. . . . [I]n creaturely existence . . . there are hours, days and years both bright and dark, success and failure, laughter and tears, youth and age, gain and loss, birth and sooner or later its inevitable corollary, death. . . . Yet it is irrefutable that creation and creature are good even in the fact that all that exists in this contrast and antithesis. In all this, far from being null, it praises its Creator and Lord even on its shadowy side, even in the negative aspect in which it is so near to *das Nichtige*. *Church Dogmatics* III/3, pp. 296–7.

All true. Yet to say it once again, things have gone terribly awry with respect to the function of suffering in our lives – and with respect to life duration. It was and is the intent behind God’s creation and maintenance that with the constitution God gave us we would each and all flourish until full of years in the environment in which God placed us. But with reference to that intent, things have gone terribly awry. Sometimes a person’s constitution itself becomes disordered in such a way that the person doesn’t flourish; one lives in severe depression or intractable pain. More often, the fit between our constitution and our environment does not serve our flourishing. The food I need to maintain my animal existence isn’t available; so I die long before full of years, suffering intensely from starvation. You fall. If you merely break an arm, that doesn’t significantly inhibit your flourishing, since the break soon heals and the suffering caused by the break nicely exemplifies the design plan functioning properly. Life would be far more precarious than it is if breaking bones produced no pain. But if your fall brings about your early death, I can expatiate as long as I have breath on the fact that this is just a natural consequence of your doing what you did with the animal body that you have in the physical universe which is ours; that doesn’t address the fact that things have gone awry with reference to God’s intent that you should live until full of years. Again, rather than flourishing in the company of your fellow human beings you may be subjected to indignity and even torture. Your human constitution operating in your social and physical environment does not bring about your flourishing until full of years.

The divine experiment has not worked out: the experiment of creating these forked creatures with the constitution that they have, placing them in this physical and social situation, and doing that, as well as maintaining and instructing them, with the intent that each and every one should flourish until full of years. Suffering and life duration have gone agonizingly awry with reference to that intent.

Why have they gone awry? The very speech of God invites us to pose the question. Invites us to pose the question for this case and for that case; and for all the cases in general. Why was the life of this person snuffed out when young? Why did that person suffer years of intractable suffering that not only

went beyond all proper functioning but from which nothing redemptive could any longer be extracted? Why all this brevity of life and why all such suffering? But no answer is forthcoming. Listen as we may, we hear no further speech. Only silence. Nonanswering silence.

3. Objection: The World has Been Misdescribed

Most philosophers and theologians in the Christian tradition would deny that I have rightly located the silence of God. My location of the silence is predicated on the claim that things have gone awry with reference to God's creating and maintaining intent – in particular, that suffering and life duration have gone awry. They would insist that that is not so.

Some would say that I have misdescribed the world. I said that in this world of ours we are confronted – not just now and then but over and over – with malfunctioning suffering and suffering which we prove incapable of making redemptive. The tradition of “soul making theodicy,” initiated by Irenaeus, would deny this. Let me quote Calvin as an example. He says in one passage that

Whether poverty or exile, or prison, or insult, or disease, or bereavement, or anything like them torture us, we must think that none of these things happens except by the will and providence of God, that he does nothing except with a well-ordered justice (*Institutes* III,viii,11).

Coming to the surface in this passage is Calvin's inclination toward radical occasionalism – toward the view that God is the only true causal agent in reality. As to the character of God's agency, Calvin was persuaded that God acts always out of justice or love. Thus we get this other passage:

All the suffering to which human life is subject and liable are necessary exercises by which God partly invites us to repentance, partly instructs us in humility, and partly renders us more cautious and more attentive in guarding against the allurements of sin for the future (Commentary on Genesis 3:19).

The thought is clear: All suffering is sent by God. Partly out of retributive justice, but mainly *out of love*. Suffering is God's gift to us: God's medicine, God's surgery. We don't like the medicine and the surgery; who does like medicine and surgery? But suffering is for our moral and spiritual welfare. It prods us, provokes us, into reorienting and deepening our moral and spiritual selves. The experience of suffering may even, in mysterious ways, provide us with the material *necessary* for such deepening. As I put it in a passage in my *Lament for a Son*:

Suffering is the shout of 'No' by one's whole existence to that over which one suffers – the shout of “No” by nerves and gut and gland and heart to pain, to death, to injustice, to depression, to hunger, to humiliation, to bondage, to abandonment. And some-

times, when the cry is intense, there emerges a radiance which elsewhere seldom appears: a glow of courage, of love, of insight, of selflessness, of faith. In that radiance we see best what humanity was meant to be. . . .

In the valley of suffering, despair and bitterness are brewed. But there also character is made. The valley of suffering is the vale of soul-making (96–7).

Soul-making theodicy points to something deep and true. Yet if we judge ourselves answerable to the biblical speech of God, then we cannot accept its claim that, with reference to God's creating and maintaining intent, suffering and life duration have not gone awry in our world – cannot accept its assumption that only our affections and volitions have gone awry. It may well be that the suffering of a parent over the death of a child provides opportunity for the spiritual growth of the parent, or that the wrong-doing of the parent merits some suffering. But what about the child? What about the benediction God pronounced over the child: May you flourish until full of years? Or to move to a totally different scale: It may well be that the suffering of the survivors of the Jewish Holocaust provided an opportunity for their spiritual growth, or that their wrong-doing merited suffering. But what about the victims? What about the benediction God pronounced over each and every one of them: May you flourish until full of years?

Soul-making theodicy speaks only of the survivors, not of the victims. Either that, or it links victims with survivors by saying that the chastisement or opportunity for spiritual growth provided to the survivors outweighs in its goodness the evil of the early death and suffering of the victims. In so speaking, it displays its obliviousness to that “each-and-every” note in the biblical speech of God. The biblical God is not a nineteenth century English utilitarian concerned only with the greatest flourishing of *the greatest number*. The God who kills children for the sake of the chastisement or spiritual growth of parents, the God who kills millions of Jews for the sake of the chastisement or spiritual growth of the survivors, is a grotesque parody of the biblical God. And should someone suggest that the early death of the child represents the punishment of the child for the child's own sins, and that the early death of the victims of the Holocaust represents the punishment of the victims for the victims' own sins, we must, emboldened by God's own book of Job, reject this suggestion as blasphemy against the justice of God and grotesquely libelous of those we loved.

4. Objection: The Divine Intent Misdescribed

To suggest that God trades off the suffering and early death of victims for the opportunity provided to survivors for chastisement or spiritual growth is to imply that I have not so much misdescribed the world as misdescribed the

divine intent. Probably that is the more common objection to the picture I have drawn.

The most common form of the objection holds that it is essential to distinguish between, on the one hand, God's creating and maintaining intent, and on the other hand, God's desires. Nothing goes awry with reference to God's intent. Yet it would be profoundly mistaken to say that God is indifferent as between a life of seventy seconds and a life of seventy years, indifferent as between a life of malfunctioning and unredemptive suffering and a life absent of such. God desires, for each and every human being, that that human being flourish on earth in the community of persons until full of years.

From this point onward, the objection is developed along two distinct lines. Call the one, the *Leibnizian* position. The Leibnizian holds that what must be distinguished from God's creating and maintaining intent is God's *ceteris paribus* desires. With reference to God's intent, everything happens exactly as God's plans: early death, unredemptive suffering, everything. Nonetheless it remains true that God desires, *other things being equal*, that each human being flourish on earth in the community of persons until full of years. But other things are not equal – so much so that it's not possible for God to bring about a world in which that *ceteris paribus* desire is satisfied for each and every human being. We can be assured that in choosing to create this actual world, from among all possible worlds, God was choosing the best possible – or if there isn't any best possible, that God was choosing as good a world as any. But the only reasonable conclusion, given the nature of God and the way the world is, is that any such world incorporates trade-offs; not even God can achieve everything that God desires, other things being equal. That's why we cannot equate what God desires *ceteris paribus* with God's creating intent. Though suffering and life duration certainly go awry with reference to the former, nothing goes awry with reference to the latter.

Call the other way of developing the objection, the *free will* position. The person who embraces this position holds that suffering and life duration, and other things as well, go awry with reference to God's *actual* desires, not just with respect to God's *ceteris paribus* desires. Not, though, with reference to God's creating and maintaining intent; on this central point he agrees with the Leibnizian. The root of the disagreement between the two lies in the fact that the person espousing the *free will* position holds – as the name suggests – that human beings are created capable of free agency. There are, in turn, two different ways of working out the free will position, depending on whether one holds that God can and does know in advance what agents will freely do in such-and-such situations, or denies that.

The *Molinist* holds that God does know this; and that God uses that knowledge to select, from among all the possible worlds, this actual world of ours to create and maintain. Everything happens according to the foreknowledge of God. But not everything happens because God brings it about; some of it

happens because of the free agency of created persons. Though God knew in advance what Hitler would freely do, nonetheless it was not God who perpetrated the holocaust but Hitler, along with his henchmen and underlings. And God profoundly disapproved of Hitler's actions. With reference to God's desires and commands for those creatures capable of free agency, volitions and affections have gone profoundly awry; as the consequence of that, in turn, very much suffering and life duration have gone awry. Yet nothing has gone awry with reference to God's creating intent. For as on the Leibnizian position, the only reasonable conclusion, given the nature of God and the world, is said to be that God at creation was confronted with no option but to make trade-offs. Among the good-as-any worlds available to God for creating, there was none in which it was both true that human beings were free to make significant choices between good and evil, and true that each and every human being flourished on earth in the community of persons until full of years. The course of the world makes clear that God regards free agency as something of enormous value. But the fact that God tolerates the evil of our choices for the sake of our freedom by no means implies that God approves of that evil. God disapproves of it: *actually* disapproves of it, not just *ceteris paribus* disapproves.

The Bañezian, by contrast, denies that God could know in advance what a person capable of free agency would freely do in such-and-such a situation. Accordingly, assuming that God does sometimes allow persons capable of free agency actually to act freely, we cannot think of this actual world of ours as selected by God from among all the possible worlds. Its realization does not represent the unfolding of a plan chosen by God before the foundations of the world. That's not to say that the world as it develops is constantly surprising God; though one cannot know what an agent *will* freely do in such-and-such a situation, often one can know what he or she is *likely* to do. Nonetheless, whereas providence on the Leibnizian and Molinist views consists basically of maintenance, on the Bañezian view it requires a considerable degree of intervention if God is to bring about as good a world as any that God is capable of bringing about. The counterpart to God's creating intent in the Leibnizian and Molinist views is, in the Bañezian view, the combination of God's creating and providential intents. By reference to that intent, nothing goes awry – even though very many of the actions of free agents and the consequences thereof go radically contrary to God's actual desire and command.

Three ways of working out the same idea: Though things go awry with reference to God's desires and commands, nothing goes awry with reference to God's creating and maintaining intent. The history of the world simply exhibits the trade-offs already built into the divine intent.

But if we judge ourselves answerable to the biblical speech of God, we can no more accept this position than that of soul-making theodicy. Again it is especially the "each-and-every" note in God's self-characterizing speech

which goes unheard – or perhaps in this case not so much unheard as consciously rejected. Let's be sure that we rightly hear that "each-and-every" note. There's no problem, as such, with trade-offs in the life of a single person: no problem as such with the fact, for example, that I suffer from the consequences of my own free agency. I say, "no problem as such"; as a matter of fact, the suffering caused by physical and mental disease in our world often goes far beyond what could possibly be redemptive. The problem inherent in the Irenaean position, as in the Leibnizian articulation of it, is that the divine intent is regarded as using the suffering and early death of *one* person as a means for the chastisement or spiritual growth of *another*; and the problem inherent in the free will position is that the divine intent is regarded as allowing the suffering and early death of *one* person as a means for the chastisement or spiritual growth of *another*; and the problem inherent in the free will position is that the divine intent is regarded as allowing the suffering and early death of *one* person for the sake of the unencumbered free agency of *another*. It is this using of one person for the good of another that the person who judges himself or herself answerable to the biblical speech of God cannot accept as belonging to the divine intent.

Or, given the working of laws of nature in our world and the consequences of free agency, must we concede that God doesn't really pronounce over each and every person the creational and providential benediction: May you flourish on earth in the community of persons until full of years? Must we concede that that's an unsustainable interpretation of the biblical speech of God – for the reason that that benediction could not possibly be fulfilled in a world with free agency and laws of nature such as ours, and that God would know that, and accordingly would not pronounce such a benediction?

I think we should not concede this. It's thinkable, indeed, that a lot more knowledge about laws of nature than we actually have might force us to make that concession, as would a lot more knowledge about the relation between divine and human agency. But in our current state of relative ignorance, there is, so far as I can see, no such rational compulsion. Though the point is certainly relevant: a fundamental principle for the interpretation of divine discourse is that God does not say what entails or presupposes falsehood.

The root of the difficulty, for the person who judges himself or herself answerable to the biblical speech of God, is that the God of the Bible has told us too much. If we hadn't been told that it was God's intent that we should live until full of years, then no problem. If we hadn't been told that it was God's intent that we should flourish, then no problem. If we hadn't been told that it was God's intent that we should flourish here on earth in the community of persons, then no problem. If we hadn't been told that it was God's intent that each and every one of us should flourish until full of years, then no problem. It's the speech of the biblical God that leads us to see that

suffering and life-duration have gone awry with reference to God's creating and maintaining intent. If we could dispense with answering to that speech, it would be possible to devise a point of view which fits together such suffering and brevity of life as we find in our world with the divine intent; many have done exactly that.

5. Living in the Silence

Suffering and life duration have gone awry with reference to God's creating and maintaining intent. To acknowledge that is to have the question well up irresistibly: Why? Why this untimely death? Why that unredemptive suffering? Why any untimely death and why any unredemptive suffering?

We cannot help but ask. Yet we get no answer. None that I can discern. We confront nonanswering silence. We confront the biblical silence of the biblical God. We shall have to live in the silence.

What will such living be like? If we have all this while judged ourselves answerable to the speech of God in determining the questions we put to God, then we shall likewise judge ourselves answerable to the speech of God as we live in the silence of God.

In the first place, we shall endure in holding on to God, and shall engage in the practices of devotion whereby such holding on is accomplished, expressed, and nurtured.

Secondly, we shall join with God himself in keeping alive the protest against early death and unredemptive suffering. Till breath dies within us we shall insist that this must not be. We shall reject all consolation that comes in the form of urging us to accept untimely death, all that comes in the form of urging us to be content with unredemptive suffering. We shall endure in our existential No to untimely death; we shall forever resist pronouncing No on our existential No to untimely death. We shall endure in our existential No to unredemptive suffering; we shall forever resist pronouncing No on our existential No to unredemptive suffering. In the stories we tell of humanity's dwelling on earth, we shall not forget untimely death and unredemptive suffering; We shall keep the memory alive so as to keep the protest alive. And in the stories we tell of our own lives, we shall not disown our suffering but own it. There will be more to our stories than that; but there will be at least that.

Thirdly, we shall hope for the day, await the occasion, and seize the opportunity to own our own suffering redemptively. We shall struggle to wrest good from this evil – "to turn it to our profit" – while still saying No to untimely death and unredemptive suffering.

And lastly, whenever and wherever we spot an opening, we shall join the divine battle against all that goes awry with reference to God's intent. We shall join God in doing battle against all that causes early death and

all that leads to unredemptive suffering: disease, injustice, warfare, torture, enmity. The self-characterization of the biblical God is not that of a God who passively accepts things going awry with reference to his intent but that of a God who does battle; and is not that of a God who weakly struggles in a failing cause but that of a God whose cause will triumph. It is in that cause that we shall join, as God's co-workers. In his discussion of *das Nichtige* Karl Barth makes the point far more eloquently than I myself could possibly make it:

The incredible and real mystery of the free grace of God is that He makes His own the cause of the creature. . . . There is a grain of truth in the erroneous view that in virtue of His Godhead God himself has absolutely done away with *das Nichtige*, so that for Him it is not only *das Nichtige* but nothing. In Him there is room only for its negation. And as the Creator He has effected this negation once and for all. In creation He separated, negated, rejected and abandoned *das Nichtige*. How, then, can it still assail, oppose, resist and offend Him? How can it concern Him? But we must not forget the covenant, mercy and faithfulness of God, nor should we overlook the fact that God did not will to be God for His own sake alone, but that as the Creator He also became the covenant Partner of his creature. . . . Why is this so? Because, having created the creature, He has pledged His faithfulness to it. . . . That is to say, He whom *das Nichtige* has no power to offend is prepared on behalf of His creature to be primarily and properly offended and humiliated, attacked and injured by *das Nichtige*. . . . Though Adam is fallen and disgraced, he is not too low for God to make Himself his Brother, and to be for him a God who must strangely contend for his status, honor and right. For the sake of this Adam God becomes poor. . . . He lets a catastrophe which might be quite remote from Him approach Him and affect His very heart. . . . He does this of His free grace. For He is under no compulsion. He might act as the erroneous view postulates. He might remain aloof and detached from *das Nichtige*. . . . He might have been a majestic, passive and beatific God on high. But He descends to the depths, and concerns Himself with *das Nichtige*, because in His goodness He does not will to cease to be concerned for His creature. . . . He would rather be unblest with His creature than be the blessed God of an unblest creature. He would rather let Himself be injured and humiliated in making the assault and repulse of *das Nichtige* His own concern than leave His creature alone in this affliction. . . . There are few heresies so pernicious as that of a God who faces *das Nichtige* more or less unaffected and unconcerned and the parallel doctrine of man as one who must engage in independent conflict against it. *Church Dogmatics* III/3, 356–60

I add, in closing, that it is at the very point on which Barth speaks so eloquently that biblical faith is most severely tried. Is it really true that God will win? Can we trust the struggle's outcome when we don't know the struggle's cause? Or wouldn't it help to know the cause?