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## **Divine Impassibility: A Definition And Defense**

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DIVINE IMPASSIBILITY: A DEFINITION AND DEFENSE

A Thesis Presented to the Faculty of  
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Master of Arts

By  
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## Chapter One Introduction

The doctrine of divine impassibility has fallen on hard times in recent years. After serving as a mainstay in Christian theology from the days of the church fathers through the nineteenth century it was largely abandoned in the twentieth century, becoming almost as widely rejected as it had once been accepted. There were a number of reasons for this development: the rise of process theology, the Hegelian influence that held sway over many continental theologians, the historical “Hellenization thesis” proposed by Adolf von Harnack at the turn of the twentieth century, the concerns about theodicy which arose following two horrific world wars, and the rise of sympathy as an ethical necessity<sup>1</sup> all made significant contributions to this decline.

This thesis will focus on defining the doctrine of impassibility and defending it against some of the objections which have arisen from many sides. Positively, divine impassibility will be defined as God’s being beyond suffering in his nature and unable to be coerced by anything outside of himself. It does not deny the existence of something analogous to an emotional state within God, but it does deny this state can be changed by anything that is not God. God exists in a perpetual state of impassible joy and invites humanity to be caught up in God’s joy and experience it for themselves.

One category of objection centers around Christology. If the incarnation and crucifixion of Christ is to be significant theologically, then (even if the two natures

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<sup>1</sup> This is an oft ignored but significant influence on the rejection of divine impassibility. Jennifer A. Herdt, “The Rise of Sympathy and the Question of Divine Suffering,” *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 29, no. 3 (2001): 367–399 makes a strong case for this move as highly influential among the eighteenth century Anglican theologians who were among the first to reject impassibility.

remain distinct without confusion) the divine nature must truly experience what it is to be human, which includes undergoing passions. Further, due to the centrality of the crucifixion of Christ to the faith, God must really and truly suffer in that moment. Most passibilists argue for an interpretation of the cross which locates divine suffering not only in the second person of the Trinity who is crucified, but also in the Father. The Father, who has been Father from all eternity, suffers the loss of the Son. This is not only a loss of Godself, but also creates a crisis of identity for the Father as he loses the one whose relation causes him to be known as “Father.”<sup>2</sup> The response to the Christological question will focus on the exemplary early theological work of Athanasius and Cyril of Alexandria in formulating the *communicatio idiomatum*, which offers an explanation of how Christ could be both the impassible God and fully human. This formulation will also solve the question of suffering in the incarnation: because of the communication of idioms between the two natures of Christ, Cyril’s declaration can be affirmed: the Logos suffered impassibly.<sup>3</sup> Rather than devote an entire chapter to this question, it will be treated along with the definition of impassibility given in chapter one.

While it would be impossible to answer each individual criticism of the doctrine, there are three other key categories of objections which will be answered in the study. The first category is theodicy. Critics of impassibility insist no coherent explanation for the suffering and evil in creation can exist if God does not suffer alongside creation. This view is presented in Jürgen Moltmann’s *The Crucified God*, one of the most influential twentieth century works promoting divine suffering. Moltmann, a former German soldier

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<sup>2</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, trans. by John Bowden and R.A. Wilson (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 151-153; 203-206.

<sup>3</sup> Cyril, *Third Letter to Nestorius* 6.

in the Second World War, could not fathom the existence of an impassible God in the world after seeing his hometown destroyed by Allied bombs and the horrors his countrymen exacted on the Jewish people in the holocaust. In the face of the suffering and horror wrought in his creation throughout history, the only adequate response in this view is to posit a God who is experiencing suffering alongside creation. There can be no solution to the problem of evil if God is impassive and therefore indifferent to the pain of humanity. The theodicy question will be answered by examining what happens when suffering becomes an integral part of God's love; that is, if God becomes something he is not through an encounter with suffering, suffering logically becomes a necessary part of history. Gone is the doctrine of evil as *privatio boni* (privation of the good)—if suffering is necessary for God, it becomes a necessary aspect of reality and therefore God is the author and even foundation for evil's existence. So, rather than saving theodicy, the suffering of God turns God into the reason for humanity's pain.

The second category of objection is the historical critique. This objection, in some of its simpler formulations, commits the genetic fallacy. It claims the concept of divine impassibility originates in Greek philosophy and therefore cannot be of use in Christian theology. The claim that impassibility originated in certain Greek schools does not necessarily entail it is incommensurable with Christian theology if impassibility is a valid category to express certain ideas present in Christian theology. However, if the doctrine of impassibility represents a corruption of the original "pure" gospel preached by Jesus which was corrupted in some subsequent point in the history of the church (as Harnack claimed), it must be rejected as incompatible with authentic Christianity. Therefore, the witness of the early church fathers (and indeed, almost all medieval and early modern

theology) regarding divine impassibility stems from this corruption of the gospel. The historical critique has largely been rejected in recent years, following the work of scholars like Paul Gavrielyuk, David Bentley Hart, Jaroslav Pelikan, and Thomas Weinandy. Despite their convincing work, there are still many who peddle some form of the “Hellenization thesis.” Thus, the thesis will survey the influence of the Hellenization thesis in the work of notable theologians and respond to a more recent instantiation of this historical objection in Greg Boyd’s two-volume *Crucifixion of the Warrior God*.<sup>4</sup>

The third category of objection concerns the possibility of God’s love and relation to creation. For God to be truly loving, he must be moved to experience emotions by things his people do. How could humans talk of God being delighted or disappointed in them if they cannot cause any change in his emotions? After all, the human love for another is accompanied by feelings. If God’s emotions remain untouched by human efforts to please or human failures to remain faithful, God is not truly loving. Not only is such a God incapable of loving, it seems that there is no real relationship between the impassible God and creation. Relationality, like love, requires one party to be able to act upon the other. So, it is argued, the impassible God cannot be the God of the Christian message because the God described in Scripture *is* love. This objection will be answered through an appeal to the metaphysics of participation, wherein everything that exists does so through a gracious donation of being from God. God is the source of all being, and as such nothing can exist without God’s act of imparting existence upon it. Thus, as Augustine said, “[God is] more inward than my most inward part and higher than the

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<sup>4</sup> Gregory A. Boyd, *The Crucifixion of the Warrior God: Interpreting the Old Testament’s Violent Portraits of God in the Light of the Cross*, vol. 2, *The Cruciform Thesis* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017).

highest element within me.”<sup>5</sup> God’s ubiquity and status as the one who is pure act with no passive potentialities precludes an understanding of him as a distant, impassive observer. This study will engage each of these objections, taking one or two representatives of each critique and answering their primary objections with an emphasis on how the objections either misconstrue the doctrine or can be resolved through a more careful formulation.

### Theological Foundations

An important distinction to be made in this discussion is the one drawn by Brian Davies between “classical theism” and “theistic personalism.”<sup>6</sup> Classical theism is exemplified in the Christian tradition by figures like Athanasius, Augustine, Anselm, and Thomas Aquinas and in other religious and philosophical traditions by Plato, Plotinus, Maimonides, Avicenna, and Averroes, among others. Classical theism conceives of God as the metaphysically ultimate source of all being (comporting with the Christian doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*), the one who is identified with being-itself, and the source of all being. Further, this God is metaphysically simple, timeless, immutable, impassible, omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent. The transcendentals of truth, goodness, and beauty do not merely describe God; God is the source and standard of each, and as such all truth, goodness, and beauty on earth point back to God. For the Christian classical theist, God is love (1 Jn. 4:7, 16), but God is also truth, goodness, and beauty. The confession “God is good” does not attribute goodness to God as a characteristic but identifies goodness itself as an essential aspect of his nature. This thesis will defend the

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<sup>5</sup> Augustine, *Confessions* 3.6.11.

<sup>6</sup> Brian Davies, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 9.

classical theist position on divine impassibility and attempt to show how impassibility follows as a natural corollary from the other assertions about God's nature found in classical theism.

Theistic personalism, in opposition to classical theism, is a broader category encompassing a variety of positions. It includes analytic philosophers of religion like William Lane Craig and Alvin Plantinga, who deny certain classical doctrines like divine simplicity or timelessness but retain belief in divine omniscience, omnipotence, and qualified immutability. It includes the "openness of God" (open theist) camp who view God as time-bound and deny he knows all things.<sup>7</sup> It also includes process theologians and philosophers who conceive of God essentially as a human writ large, lacking omniscience, omnipotence, and full perfection.<sup>8</sup> Significantly, theistic personalism conceives of God not as being-itself but as a being existing on a similar ontological plane as humanity. God is the most powerful, glorious, and benevolent being in existence but is still a being. Richard Swinburne, a theistic personalist, describes the theist's understanding of God as "something like a 'person without a body.'"<sup>9</sup> While this may be a fitting colloquial description for God, such a definition (which characterizes the theistic personalist position) cannot conceive of God as "being-itself," leaving it at odds with classical theism.

The central issue for many theistic personalists regarding classical theism, particularly analytic philosophers of religion, is the doctrine of divine simplicity. Based

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<sup>7</sup> Some open theists deny omniscience, while others affirm God knows all things that *can be known* but deny that future free actions of individuals cannot be known.

<sup>8</sup> While process theology is a form of theistic personalism, it will not be addressed in this project due to the radical difference between classical and process theisms (see The Direction of the Study section.)

<sup>9</sup> Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 1.

on the personalist identification of God as a being whose inner life and relationality can be conceived of in the same way humans can, the idea of a God who is simple—devoid of parts both physical and metaphysical—seems incoherent. Alvin Plantinga exemplifies this in his discussion of divine simplicity. He argues divine simplicity entails that God “is a property,” but because a property could not have “created the world [or] be omniscient,” God cannot be simple.<sup>10</sup> This sort of approach to the classical doctrine renders simplicity untenable. Due to the interdependence of the divine attributes in classical theism, the rejection of simplicity leads to a rejection of many other classical attributes, including impassibility. It is less common for classical theism to be rejected with impassibility as the catalyst for such a rejection,<sup>11</sup> but those who reject simplicity often come up with subsequent arguments to attack impassibility.

This discussion also raises the difficult question of the relation between language and being. The theistic personalist would conceive of being as univocal: attributes can be predicated of God in the same way they are to humans. To say, “God loves me” and “John loves me” expresses the same phenomenon. God loves just like John loves, albeit in a perfect way. Classical theism, on the other hand, understands being as analogical. There are similarities between the way God loves and the way John loves, but they are not the same thing. Because God is the ineffable and infinite source of all being, unchanging, and existing timelessly, humans cannot predicate attributes of him in precisely the same way because God does not interact with and relate to the world in the same way humans do. This study will engage in talk about God from this analogical

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<sup>10</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1980), 47.

<sup>11</sup> However, it is not uncommon. Such rejections usually come from those who, like Moltmann, cannot conceive of an impassible deity in a suffering world.

position, employing the important work of Erich Przywara in his influential work *Analogia Entis* and its subsequent interpreters.

### The Direction of the Study

This study will assume the existence of God and the significance of rightly understanding the doctrine of divine impassibility for a coherent theology. It will not assume the truth of the classical view of God and will work to display the superiority of such a system. However, it will assume the coherence of the doctrines entailed by classical theism (i.e. divine simplicity, immutability, impassibility, and so on) cohere with one another *if* the foundational assumptions of classical theism are correct.

One significant limitation placed on the scope of the study will be in the selection of interlocutors. Although process theology is a significant voice in opposition to divine impassibility, no process theologian will be engaged at length on these chosen objections. Due to the large gulf between process thought and classical theism, there are too few points of contact to create meaningful dialogue on one issue. Since process theism entails a rejection of simplicity, immutability, timelessness, omniscience, and omnipotence, its proponents are less than ideal as interlocutors. The study will concern itself only with theologians who deny impassibility but still wish to maintain a belief in other attributes affirmed by classical theism, such as omnipotence or omniscience.

Further, the chapters on key objections will be limited to one or two main proponents of the objections. Other scholars can be included as supplementary material—such as in the chapter on the historical question, where contemporary theologians will be included to explore the ways Harnack’s nineteenth century thesis still influences

theology—but the main points of the arguments will derive from the work of one or two scholars. The representatives chosen will be major voices in the conversation whose work is widely read and frequently employed in the (im)passibility debate. Some preference will be given to more recent voices in the conversation, but because the debates around impassibility were most prevalent in the latter half of the twentieth century (following the publication of Moltmann’s *Crucified God*), some of the major works studied will be from that era.

### Methodology

The methodology for gathering data in this study will largely entail the use of historical and contemporary primary sources. Secondary sources will be used on occasion, particularly for the chapter on the historical question due to the wide-ranging discussion on the topic in the last 120 years of scholarship and the large scope of the question. Because the historical argument does not identify the “Hellenization” of Christian theology with any one consistent time or figure, the use of exclusively primary sources is difficult. The core arguments of the project in favor of divine impassibility will be relatively original, not relying exactly on any one figure for their formulation. Relevant discussions by theologians who affirm impassibility will be used to supplement the arguments given, but no one scholar will be relied on exclusively.

## Chapter Two Defining Impassibility

It is important to begin with a definition of impassibility, as the assumption of a shared meaning between writer and reader is fraught with danger. This is particularly true in conversations regarding divine impassibility, as the term has held a variety of meanings in its usage by various adherents and detractors<sup>1</sup> sometimes even including, of all things, passibility.<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this project, impassibility will be defined as God's being beyond suffering, God's ability to act without coercion from subjects who are not God, and God's freedom from being affected by evil. This definition intentionally avoids the language of God's "inability" to suffer or his "inability" to be acted upon by creatures. As will be explored later, this definition neither entails a statuesque immobility within God's being nor an inability to act upon creation. Additionally, it does not deny something analogous to an emotional state in God. Indeed, impassibility here affirms that within God's being there is a state of unsurpassable bliss, a transcendent joy and perfect peace that can only belong to the source of all being, truth, goodness, and beauty. God is eternally pleased in himself through the relation between the triune persons and eternally delights in the goodness of his own creation, a goodness to which he directs all things. It does, however, serve as an assurance that when we discuss God, we are speaking of one

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Creel identifies eight distinct usages of the term "impassibility" in Christian and non-Christian thought and notes his list might not be exhaustive. See Creel, *Divine Impassibility: An Essay in Philosophical Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 3-9.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Castelo's chapter in a recent "four views" book on impassibility sets out to defend a "qualified impassibility," but the doctrine as he describes it entails God willingly entering into give-and-take relationships with humans. See Castelo, "Qualified Impassibility," in *Divine Impassibility: Four Views of God's Emotions and Suffering*, ed. Robert J. Matz and A. Chadwick Thornhill (Downers Grove: IVP, 2019), 53-74.

who is decidedly not us.<sup>3</sup> Divine impassibility serves to secure God's good purposes as creator: no force can act upon God in a way that misdirects him from achieving his good ends for creation.<sup>4</sup> God's nature is untouched by evil, and as such is untouched by the sufferings of creation.

### Who (or What) is God?

A defense of impassibility must include an understanding of who God is.

Returning to the discussion from the introduction regarding classical theism and theistic personalism, classical theism holds God to be ontological ground for all that exists.

Rather than the largest and most powerful being among the many created beings, God is being itself. This is expressed well by Robert Sokolowski in his summary of Anselm of Canterbury:

(God plus the world) is not greater than God alone; or:  
(God plus any creature) is not greater than God alone.<sup>5</sup>

God is entirely self-sufficient and would be as deserving of glory if there were nothing at all in existence, or if there were only angels, or if there were angels and animals but no humans. Far from denigrating God's relation to creation, this is a revelation of God's love for it. On this account, creation is entirely gratuitous, done without compulsion out of God's love. As Sokolowski asserts, it does not imply a lack of care but an overflow of love, something done entirely for its own sake and not as a means to some end (such as

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<sup>3</sup> D. Stephen Long, *Speaking of God: Theology, Language, and Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 181.

<sup>4</sup> David Bentley Hart, *The Doors of the Sea: Where Was God in the Tsunami?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 72.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason: Foundations of Christian Theology* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), 8.

God's personal fulfillment), an outpouring of love that culminates in his entering that creation through the incarnation.<sup>6</sup>

God must, of course, be understood through his revelation in Scripture and the Incarnation: God is the God revealed in Jesus. However, God's otherness from humanity forces us to temper efforts to assume the incarnation entails God as merely the ultimate person. Perfect, omnipotent, and omniscient, but still interacting with the world in a strikingly similar manner to creatures: feeling sad or angry at the failures or betrayals of his people and being (for some) surprised at the faith or lack thereof displayed by creatures. Such concepts have biblical warrant,<sup>7</sup> but have been typically understood as anthropomorphic, necessarily read in light of texts like Numbers 23:19, 1 Samuel 15:29, 1 John 1:5, and James 1:17 that tend to point to the classical conception of God.

### Impassibility and the Doctrine of God

In order to establish a coherent understanding of divine impassibility, it is important to connect impassibility to the larger doctrine of God. The doctrine is frequently treated by its detractors (and occasionally, supporters) as a standalone proposition regarding God's ability or inability to suffer. When examined this way, it can easily be construed as a wicked declaration of God's indifference towards the plight of humanity. This perspective is misguided but understandable if impassibility is not elucidated in connection to other aspects of the divine nature. A proper defense of impassibility recognizes that, while divine suffering is necessary under the framework of theistic

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<sup>6</sup> Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason*, 9.

<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., Genesis 6:6, Exodus 32:10-14; Deuteronomy 9:8; Jeremiah 18:8, 26:19, 32:29; Amos 7:3, 9.

personalism with its similarities between the experience of God and creatures, classical theism rejects this notion because of the vast difference between the ways finite creatures experience the world and the way God does, as the infinite source of all and being itself.

For instance, impassibility can be viewed as a natural corollary of the divine attributes. God's simple nature, as the one who is existence itself, a single motion of pure act, demands an imperviousness to any external force acting upon God in order to misdirect God from his intended ends. His immutability demands an immutable emotional state as well. If God is unchanging, his emotional state must be one that cannot be disturbed by creaturely foibles. If God is timeless, existing in the one "eternal now" with all of history simultaneous to him, passibility would entail God constantly being buffeted by not only the highs and lows of what humans consider the "present" but of all history.

One of the most significant fundamental concerns of the classical doctrine of God is the notion of God's simultaneous transcendence and immanence. God is, as Augustine says, *interior intimo meo et superior summo meo* ("more inward than my most inward part and higher than the highest element within me").<sup>8</sup> God is not a discrete object in the universe, occupying the same ontological space as creation, but as the source of all being transcends a division between existence and nonexistence. God's being is not simply necessary because he is everlasting or invulnerable to nonexistence, but it is purely actual

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<sup>8</sup> Augustine, *Confessions* 3.6.11. Translation in Augustine, *Confessions: A New Translation*, trans. Henry Chadwick, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 43.

and infinite, “the ‘is’ both of the ‘it is’ and ‘it is not.’”<sup>9</sup> God is not transcendent by “negation of the opposite” but by surpassing any dialectic between such negations.<sup>10</sup>

An important aspect of the discussion around divine transcendence is the distinction made by Kathryn Tanner between “contrastive” and “noncontrastive transcendence,”<sup>11</sup> which others have referred to as “noncompetitive transcendence.”<sup>12</sup> She begins by noting the problems philosophers (particularly Post-Socratics) found with the prior Greek philosophy as well as Greek and Roman religion: there is a univocity of being present between divinity and humanity. Divinity is a sort of being different from others but “within the matrix of the same cosmos.”<sup>13</sup> The divine shares characteristics with the human/created realm, with the characteristics merely enhanced in the divine realm.<sup>14</sup> Greek philosophy, on the other hand, set divinity in opposition to the natural world. This was done because the univocity between humanity and divinity made it difficult to posit the divine as the source of all—the divine merely worked with the already-present created world.<sup>15</sup> However, this created a problem: as particular philosophers work to make God (or divinity) transcendent, they subsequently make him less and less involved in the world. This is because a primarily “contrastive” definition of

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<sup>9</sup> David Bentley Hart, “Impassibility as Transcendence: On the Infinite Innocence of God,” in *The Hidden and the Manifest: Essays in Theology and Metaphysics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 168.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>11</sup> Kathryn Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny or Empowerment?* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 37-48.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Barron, “The Metaphysics of Coinherence: A Meditation on the Essence of the Christian Message,” in *Exploring Catholic Theology: Essays on God, Liturgy, and Evangelization* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2015), 34.

<sup>13</sup> Tanner, *God and Creation*, 39.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 39-40.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

transcendence was used by Hellenistic philosophers: divinity was defined in opposition to the physical realm. So, whereas the physical world is defined by “becoming, uncertainty, and instability,” the divine world is “a realm of eternal, changeless intelligibility.”<sup>16</sup> This extreme separation made interaction between the two realms nearly impossible and led to a circumstance in which the work of the divine was done through intermediaries—or, in some circumstances, the divine created only the greatest intermediary being and was no longer involved in the world at all.<sup>17</sup>

Plotinus approximates the “non-contrastive” approach best among Greek philosophers by combining univocal and contrastive speech about God in order to express transcendence and divine involvement, but such an ad hoc approach is untenable.<sup>18</sup> Christian theology offers a solution to the Greek dilemma through the proposition of non-contrastive account of divine transcendence. God’s engagement in the world only varies inversely with his transcendence when God and the world are considered in contrast. The Christian solution to the dilemma came through the non-contrastive usage of terms that, under a Greek schema, were contrastive terms. Such terms include ingenerate, immutable, simple, and most significant for this study, impassible.<sup>19</sup> The Christian understanding of divine transcendence moves beyond the duality of contrast and

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<sup>16</sup> Tanner, *God and Creation*, 40.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 43-45.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

univocity by recognizing that God transcends “all oppositional contrasts” of relations between creatures, “including that of presence and absence.”<sup>20</sup>

God is thus utterly distinct from the world as its transcendent source, but not in the contrastive manner expressed by the Greek philosophers of old. The Christian understands God as radically distinct from the world, as “otherly other;”<sup>21</sup> she recognizes that “God differs differently;”<sup>22</sup> that “God is not so much somewhere else as somehow else.”<sup>23</sup> God is not a being but being itself, and so “does not destroy the natural necessities of things he becomes involved with, even in the intimate union of the incarnation.”<sup>24</sup> As Sokolowski says:

The reason the pagans could not conceive of anything like the incarnation is that their gods are part of the world, and the union of any two natures in the world is bound to be, in some way, unnatural, because of the otherness that lets one thing be itself only by not being the other. But the Christian God is not a part of the world and is not a “kind” of being at all. Therefore the incarnation is not meaningless or impossible or destructive.<sup>25</sup>

The noncompetitive transcendence of God is feasible only if God is the “fecund provider of *all* that the creature is in itself,”<sup>26</sup>—if all the goodness which exists in the creature is a gift of God. The creature’s goodness does not compete with God because God operates on a separate level, so to speak, from humanity. Because of this, statements like “in him

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<sup>20</sup> Tanner, *God and Creation*, 56-57.

<sup>21</sup> Kathryn Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity, and the Trinity: A Brief Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 12.

<sup>22</sup> Henk Schoot, *Christ the ‘Name’ of God: Thomas Aquinas on Naming Christ* (Leuven: Peeters, 1993), 144.

<sup>23</sup> Robert Barron, “To See According to the Icon of Jesus Christ: Reflections on the Catholic Intellectual Tradition,” in *Exploring Catholic Theology*, 66.

<sup>24</sup> Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason*, 35-36.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>26</sup> Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity, and the Trinity*, 3.

we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28) and “all that we have done, you have done for us” (Isa. 26:12b) reveal something of God’s activity in the world. God’s acts do not compete with human acts, so his agency is not mutually exclusive with human agency.<sup>27</sup>

A contrastive model of transcendence in the Christian context often strays into theistic personalism: God and creatures “compete” for space. Since the classical Christian understanding of transcendence is no longer emphasized by theistic personalists, the demand for divine involvement in creation that is a corollary to the Christian confession necessitates a univocal understanding of being between divinity and humanity. As such, the doctrine of creation for many theistic personalists includes God moving aside or “contracting” to make room for creatures who are not God.<sup>28</sup> As Thomas Weinandy argues, the patristic writers utilized impassibility in their theology precisely to offer an account of the biblical notion of divine “otherness.”<sup>29</sup> David Bentley Hart identifies the patristic understanding of impassibility as the “great discovery” of the Christian tradition as it reveals the “true nature” of God’s transcendence.<sup>30</sup> Impassibility also serves to protect God’s involvement in the world—if impassibility is a way of expressing God’s imperturbable inner peace, it explains how God can be so intimately involved with creation without losing the peace and joy central to his nature. Even as he acts to heal, to

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<sup>27</sup> This does not implicate God in evil. The assertion here is that God can accomplish his good ends through the work of humans, and it is not wrong to assert that God has worked in the actions of his people. However, it does not follow that God is not implicated in every human act, as the evil is an example of creaturely rejection of and turning away from God.

<sup>28</sup> See comments on Moltmann’s doctrine of creation in chapter 2 below.

<sup>29</sup> Thomas Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), 199.

<sup>30</sup> Hart, “Impassibility as Transcendence,” 169.

cleanse, to empower his creatures, God is spared from corruption by the evils in the world. Because God transcends all human suffering and cannot be adversely affected by an encounter with it, he is most able to overcome it. Far from making God aloof and uninvolved, as its critics claim, impassibility allows God to be more radically involved than any suffering person could be.<sup>31</sup> His impassibility prevents “any force, pathos, or potentiality interrupting the perfection of his nature or hindering him in the realization of his own illimitable goodness, in himself and in his creatures.”<sup>32</sup>

### The Analogy of Being and Impassibility

The question of language about God is a broad one that cannot be fully explored in this project. However, it is important to understand the place of the *analogia entis* (analogy of being) in this discussion. Despite the ontological difference between humanity and God, there are things that can be truthfully said of God. Although it is impossible for humans to fully know the nature of God, certain things can nevertheless be predicated of him: love, goodness, truth, mercy, justice, holiness. However, because God is infinite and simple, he does not exist as a being like humans simply magnified to a greater degree of power and perfection. God’s transcendence places him on a separate ontological plane from humanity. Thus, the language used to speak of God must be analogical. Language of God’s goodness, for instance, cannot be univocal with humanity as the goodness that exists in people is tempered by sin, and cannot measure up to the

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<sup>31</sup> Paul L. Gavriluk, “God’s Impassible Suffering in the Flesh: The Promise of Paradoxical Christology,” in *Divine Impassibility and the Mystery of Human Suffering*, ed. James F. Keating and Thomas Joseph White (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 140-141.

<sup>32</sup> Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 72.

fullness of the good. It cannot be equivocal, because there is an obvious sense in which the goodness of humans corresponds to and is dependent upon the goodness of the creator. As such, there is an analogical correspondence between these attributes of humanity and God. These attributes must be understood both as essential and proper to God. God does not possess goodness to a greater degree than humans, or even to the greatest possible extent. God simply *is* goodness itself. It is the same with love, truth, justice, and God's other attributes. There is, as Hart says, "an infinite interval" between God and creation, not because God is ontologically distant but because God is "infinitely more" than creation. Therefore, theology utilizes analogy to attempt to bridge that interval of which "God himself is the distance."<sup>33</sup> This is, it should be noted, not a mere metaphysical exercise but an outworking of the logic implicit in the Christian claim that God is the creator *ex nihilo* and therefore the source of all being.<sup>34</sup>

The above discussion reflects the determination of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) which has been influential on the development of the *analogia entis*—particularly in the work of the Jesuit theologian Erich Przywara (1889-1972)—that for any similarity between creator and creature, there must be recognized an "even greater dissimilarity" (*maior dissimilitudo*).<sup>35</sup> It recognizes that the creature is completely groundless, receiving its "essential groundedness" from God alone, the source of all being.<sup>36</sup> Since God is the

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<sup>33</sup> David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 300-301.

<sup>34</sup> David Bentley Hart, "The Destiny of Christian Metaphysics: Reflections on the *Analogia Entis*," in *The Hidden and the Manifest: Essays on Theology and Metaphysics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 97.

<sup>35</sup> Constitution II, Fourth Lateran Council. Erich Przywara, *Analogia Entis: Metaphysics, Original Structure, and Universal Rhythm*, trans. John R. Betz and David Bentley Hart (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 234.

<sup>36</sup> Przywara, *Analogia Entis*, 235. See also Hart, "The Destiny of Christian Metaphysics," 99.

source of being, humans—and all of creation—are entirely dependent on God, not only for imparting being, but for continually holding them in existence. Being is not a category of which God and creation are two instantiations. Instead, God is to be identified with being, so that any univocal understanding of being cannot be applied to both humans and God.<sup>37</sup> The creature possesses being and so participates in God’s being, not (returning to the above discussion of transcendence) in opposition to God but subsumed under him as possessing the being which is God. Even being, the most basic of predications, must be understood analogically between God and humans because humans exist as finite instances of being while God is the totality of being itself.<sup>38</sup>

The loss of the *analogia entis* has been quite problematic for theology in the last few centuries. As a result, theology vacillates between the alternatives of God as “pure identity” and “pure dialectic.”<sup>39</sup> God becomes either one who looks entirely humanlike (theistic personalism) or becomes the “Wholly Other,” entirely unknowable and impossible to describe in human terms.<sup>40</sup> The first option represents a univocal approach to being while the latter takes an equivocal approach. D. Stephen Long traces this dichotomy to the problem of language and history—that is, the recognition by theologians (due in large part to the influence of Ludwig Feuerbach) that language about God must be placed in a historical context. Since there exists no impartial, universal position from which to engage in theological talk, all God-talk must be understood in its historical context. This argument, as Long notes, does not follow, since it begins by

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<sup>37</sup> Hart, “Destiny of Christian Metaphysics, 99.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.; Long, *Speaking of God*, 15.

attacking universalizing statements and concludes with a universalizing assertion, but its influence remains widespread in theology.<sup>41</sup> Such an approach to theological terms—like impassibility—leads theologians to dismiss such notions as Hellenistic corruptions.<sup>42</sup> The analogical approach mediates between these positions, recognizing that God, as the source of all that exists, must both allow for some analogue with creation and be distinct from it due to the nature of his creative transcendence.

For discussions of impassibility, analogy is an important tool to recognize that God, as the source of all and the transcendent creator, does not interact with the world in the same way as humans. God’s actions, coming from timeless eternity and being experienced in the present, may appear to humans as God’s reactions, as him being moved from favor to anger or vice versa, but these can only be applied to God analogically.<sup>43</sup> Anselm offers a prayer in his *Proslogion* pondering the strangeness of this notion:

But how are You at once both merciful and impassible? For if You are impassible You do not have any compassion; and if You have no compassion Your heart is not sorrowful from compassion with the sorrowful, which is what being merciful is. But if You are not merciful whence comes so much consolation for the sorrowful?

How, then, are You merciful and not merciful, O Lord, unless it be that You are merciful in relation to us and not in relation to Yourself? In fact, You are [merciful] according to our way of looking at things and not according to Your way. For when You look upon us in our misery it is we who feel the effect of Your mercy, but You do not experience the feeling. Therefore You are both merciful because you save the sorrowful and pardon sinners against You; and You are not merciful because You do not experience any feeling of compassion for misery.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Long, *Speaking of God*, 14.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 15. This notion will be explored further in chapter 3.

<sup>43</sup> This relates closely to questions of Scriptural interpretation that will be addressed in chapter 3.

<sup>44</sup> Anselm, *Proslogion* 8.

This passage has been taken by many opponents of impassibility as expressing the impossibility of God being both impassible and merciful. Anselm believes both, but according to such opponents he is merely clinging blindly to the Greek metaphysics he has inherited while unwittingly exposing a fatal flaw.<sup>45</sup> However, while Anselm is expressing a difficulty for human perception, he is not delivering a fatal blow to impassibility. For one, this is not a denial of something analogous to an emotional state in God. As Katherin Rogers argues, God cannot be “infect[ed]” by human sufferings nor moved to greater joy because God possesses an imperturbable and infinite joy within his being, and it cannot be disturbed by anything outside of God even as he acts in the world to heal, forgive, and save.<sup>46</sup>

### God’s Goodness and Evil

The full implications of God’s relation to evil will be explored further in the discussion of impassibility and theodicy.<sup>47</sup> However, it is important here to discuss the nature of evil in relation to God. As discussed above, the source and definition of goodness, truth, and beauty is the good God who created all things by his might and wisdom. Since God is perfect and the creator of all that is, creation and existence are good, as the creation account repeatedly affirms (Gen 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). If all

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<sup>45</sup> Such analyses can be found in John B. Cobb, Jr. and David Ray Griffin, *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1976), 44-45 and Philip Clements-Jewery, *Intercessory Prayer: Modern Theology, Biblical Teaching, and Philosophical Thought* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), np.

<sup>46</sup> Katherin A. Rogers, *Perfect Being Theology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 51.

<sup>47</sup> See chapter 2.

that is created is good and God is goodness and being itself, the source of everything that is, God cannot be the author of evil.

This has been resolved in the Christian tradition, most notably in Augustine, by understanding evil as *privatio boni*, the privation of the good.<sup>48</sup> Evil, then, is not a “thing” in the way good is. Good is a substance, the very substance of God. Evil is a privation of the good. It has no ontological substance—to declare otherwise would be to make God the author of evil. Evil is a product of the will, a turning back of the created being towards the nothingness from which it was created and away from the source of goodness that called it forth.<sup>49</sup> It is a movement from the goodness and light of the creator towards the ever-present darkness of nonbeing. As Hart puts it, evil is “a kind of ontological wasting disease”<sup>50</sup> that corrupts the *telos* of the will (and the world) from its natural inclination towards the good. Augustine notes this in his discussion of the sexual escapades of his youth. He attributes his promiscuity before becoming a Christian to a good desire—namely, the desire to love and be loved. However, his mind was befuddled by “carnal concupiscence” so that he could not differentiate between “love’s serenity” and “lust’s darkness,” and was led into sin.<sup>51</sup> This entails, it should be noted, that God can still know evil. Since God fully knows what it is to be good, he can also understand evil as a privation of that good.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Augustine, *Confessions* 7.18-21.

<sup>49</sup> Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 73.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>51</sup> Augustine, *Confessions* 2.2.

<sup>52</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 1.14.10.

### Impassibility and the Incarnation

All discussion of impassibility is for naught if it cannot be accounted for in the incarnation, life, and passion of Jesus. The work of Athanasius and Cyril, both bishops of Alexandria, will be helpful in this regard. An important consideration for this conversation concerns the full divinity of Jesus. If he is “light from light, true God from true God,”<sup>53</sup> he cannot be lacking in any aspect of divinity when he becomes incarnate. If it were possible to ascribe an attribute to God but not Jesus, then God in his fullness did not become human. It may be possible to say that *something* divine became human, but not that God became human. This understanding is exemplified by contemporary kenoticists who claim Philippians 2 demands the Logos lose some aspects of divinity in the “self-emptying” act of becoming human.<sup>54</sup> While it may be a compelling explanation of the full humanity of Jesus, it leaves open the question of his full divinity. If Jesus abandons some aspects of what it is to be God in the incarnation, how can he be *fully* God? Further, if one person of the Trinity can abandon some aspects of God, this seems to suggest that, at least for a time, the divine Word’s nature differed from that of the Father and Spirit.

This argument is hardly new in the Christian tradition. The Arians employed similar arguments, and the tradition has had an answer since (at least) the time of Athanasius. The divine nature did not change to become flesh; it assumed humanity into

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<sup>53</sup> “The Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed,” in *Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition*, vol. 1, Jaroslav Pelikan and Valerie Hotchkiss, eds. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

<sup>54</sup> See, e.g., C. Stephen Evans, “Kenotic Christology and the Nature of God,” in *Exploring Kenotic Christology: The Self-Emptying of God*, ed. C Stephen Evans (Vancouver: Regent College, 2010).

God.<sup>55</sup> The incarnation was an assumption of humanity taken on by the Logos rather than a metaphysical change by the Logos into humanity. The Word, whose “generation was impassible, everlasting, and appropriate to God,” lost nothing of his nature when he came to earth.<sup>56</sup> Following this tradition Augustine notes regarding the language of Christ’s self-emptying, “what then does it mean, ‘he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave’? It means he is said to have emptied himself out by accepting the inferior, not by degenerating from equality.”<sup>57</sup> The emptying is one of taking on the inferior human nature, not of losing any aspect of the divine nature.

The interpretation of Philippians 2:5-11 was a significant issue in the fourth century debate between Cyril of Alexandria and Nestorius. The key issue for them is the referent of Paul’s statement “he emptied himself.” For Nestorius, the one who is emptied is the “passible man indwelt by the Word.”<sup>58</sup> For the Word to be “emptied” would lead naturally to the Word being passible, as he would somehow take part in the man’s suffering, which would preclude him from being true God. Cyril, on the other hand, held the kenotic act as necessarily referring to the Word. The Word “took flesh of the holy Virgin...underwent our human birth and came forth as a man from woman without abandoning what he was but remaining...God, that is, in nature and truth.”<sup>59</sup> Of course, following earlier Christians (including Athanasius), this did not entail a change in the

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<sup>55</sup> Athanasius, *Epistle to Epictetus*, 8-9.

<sup>56</sup> Athanasius, *Oration Against the Arians* 1.28.

<sup>57</sup> Augustine, *Ennations in Psalmos* 74.5, trans. in Hart, “No Shadow of Turning,” 64.

<sup>58</sup> Paul L. Gavriluk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God: The Dialectics of Patristic Thought*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 151.

<sup>59</sup> Cyril of Alexandria, *Third Letter to Nestorius* 3.

divine Word. He remains “unchangeable and immutable... even when a baby... he still filled the whole creation as God and was co-regent with his sire.”<sup>60</sup>

When the Word took on flesh, impassibility was an integral part of its composition. The redemption of humanity by the Logos who becomes incarnate is an important theme for Athanasius. Christ comes to redeem our human nature and unite it to the divine, and as such moves us from corruptible and mortal to incorruptible and undying. He says, “For no longer according to... Adam do we die; but henceforward our origin and all infirmity of flesh being transferred to the Word, we rise from the earth, the curse from sin being removed, because of Him... [who became] a curse for us.”<sup>61</sup> He goes on to cite 1 Peter 4:1 (“Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh”) and explain how Christ can change, suffer, and live a fully human life. Christ’s birth, afflictions, limited knowledge, and other creaturely occurrences are proper to his human nature, but not to his divine. The sufferings and changes can be said to happen to the Word because they are “proper to the flesh” and a body “is proper to the Savior.”<sup>62</sup> Athanasius can even go so far as to claim that the Word undergoes death.<sup>63</sup> He notes that Christ remained in the grave three days to prove his death was a true one.<sup>64</sup> And the Word, while remaining impassible in his nature, is not harmed or diminished by sufferings, but takes them up

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<sup>60</sup> Cyril, *Third Letter to Nestorius*..

<sup>61</sup> Athanasius, *Orations*, 3.33.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.34.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.42.

<sup>64</sup> Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* 5.26.

into himself and thus “obliterat[es] and destroy[s] them,” offering humanity a chance to gain impassibility and thus be eternally free from suffering and death.<sup>65</sup>

The weeping, exhaustion, and suffering of Christ show the human nature of Jesus but do not denigrate the divine. If he did not display the passible nature of a human, it would be possible to speculate he was not fully human, and if he is not fully human, he cannot be the one who redeems human flesh. The Impassible One took on a passible nature but was not overcome by it; instead he redeemed it. Athanasius says, “what the human Body of the Word suffered, this the Word, dwelling in the body, ascribed to Himself, in order that we might be enabled to be partakers of the Godhead of the Word.”<sup>66</sup> The Arians, Athanasius says, point to these instances of passibility to argue against the divinity of the Son, but ignore such statements as “the Father and I are one” (Jn. 10:30). Thus, the position that makes the most sense of what Jesus claimed about himself and the accounts of him in the Gospels is the orthodox position of Athanasius.<sup>67</sup>

The *communatio idiomatum* has come to refer to the way aspects of the human and divine natures of Christ can be attributed to the single person of Christ and thus to God. Oliver Crisp offers a succinct definition:

The attribution of the properties of each of the natures of Christ to the person of Christ, such that the theanthropic person of Christ is treated as having divine and human attributes at one and the same time, yet without predicating attributes of one nature that properly belong to the other nature in the hypostatic union, without transference of properties between the natures and without confusing or

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<sup>65</sup> Athanasius, *Orations* 3.34.

<sup>66</sup> Athanasius, *Epistle to Epictetus* 6.

<sup>67</sup> Athanasius, *Orations*, 3.55.

commingling the two natures of Christ or the generation of a *tertium quid* [third sort of thing].<sup>68</sup>

Though he sometimes speaks of the Word undertaking the passion as an example for humans of how to live and serve,<sup>69</sup> Cyril clearly believes suffering can be in some way predicated of the Word through communication with the human nature of Christ. His view is similar to that of Athanasius: he holds strongly to the impassibility of the Word in its nature but believes that the Word takes on suffering in an impassible way in the crucifixion. The Word “makes the passible body his very own” and because of this, can be said to suffer “by means of something naturally passible,” and as such is worthy of being called “Savior of all.”<sup>70</sup> The Word suffers in the manner which it is proper (his human nature) and is impassible in the manner in which it is proper (in his divinity). Suffering can still be predicated of the Word because of his intimate uniting with the human nature but cannot be ascribed to the divine nature.<sup>71</sup> Though he acknowledges its imperfection, Cyril offers an analogy of fire heating iron; the iron takes the heat into itself, and if it is struck, the material is altered. However, the nature of the fire remains unchanged. So it is with the divine Word: it is taken into the human nature, and when the human nature is beaten and suffers, the impassible Word remains unchanged.<sup>72</sup>

Athanasius and Cyril maintain throughout their works that the Word did not suffer in the incarnation. This is important for the contemporary debate around divine suffering

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<sup>68</sup> Oliver Crisp, *The Word Enfleshed: Exploring the Person and Work of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016), 115.

<sup>69</sup> Cyril, *Festal Letter Seven*.

<sup>70</sup> Cyril, *A Defense of the Twelve Anathemas Against Theodoret*.

<sup>71</sup> Cyril, *A Defense of the Twelve Anathemas Against the Bishops of the Diocese of Oriens*.

<sup>72</sup> Cyril, *Unity of Christ*, 130-131.

and especially the categories that are often placed on these early church writers, such as “biblicists,” “philosophers,” “theopaschites,” and “impassibilists.”<sup>73</sup> These categories are often applied to authors but are truly misnomers. Nestorian attempts to hold absolute impassibility were driven by the exegetical concern to maintain a real division between Creator and creature, while Cyril’s explanation of the Word’s impassible suffering is an attempt to give a Christian account of divine involvement.<sup>74</sup> Hart’s perspective is helpful for relating these concepts to the contemporary milieu. He points to Cyril’s affirmation of the impassible God as present “in the crucified body claiming the sufferings of his flesh as his own impassibly.”<sup>75</sup> Statements like this, Hart argues, should be understood not as paradoxes but as simple formulas that explain the scriptural narration of Christ’s gift of salvation. It holds that God in his nature did not change at all in the incarnation. If such a change were to occur within God in the incarnation, God did not become human. It could not be said that the fullness of deity dwelt bodily within Christ if he did not possess the fullness of God’s nature. Cyril repeatedly affirms that God did not lose or alter his nature in the incarnation. Instead, the human nature was added to the divine nature so that God could appropriate the “weakness and poverty” of the human nature in the salvation of humanity.<sup>76</sup>

Though the exact mechanics of the hypostatic union between human and divine natures cannot be known, it is not an incoherent notion. Since God is not an object in the universe or a being among other beings, he is not transformed into a human at the

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<sup>73</sup> Gavriilyuk, *Suffering of the Impassible God*, 159.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Cyril, *Third Letter to Nestorius* 6.

<sup>76</sup> Hart, “No Shadow of Turning,” 64.

incarnation. Instead, as “the being of everything,” God is made known to the world in the one human who most displays what it is to be human—to bear the image of God.<sup>77</sup> The appearance of God in the flesh is merely the manifestation of the infinite divine image in the form of the finite divine image.<sup>78</sup> As Benjamin Myers notes, in classical Christology the two natures of Christ retain a distinctiveness from one another while still participating in the other’s properties. Without compromising humanity, Christ is “filled with divine life,” and without compromising divinity and impassibility, Christ is “able to enter the privation of death.”<sup>79</sup> Because of this, it can be truly said that God suffers and dies without the divine nature being changed by it. Death is a phenomenon of the finite, and as such cannot harm the infinite God—as Gregory of Nyssa notes, it is easier for the divine nature to touch death without experiencing harm than it is for a human to touch water without harm.<sup>80</sup> Because of this, God assumes the human nature in the incarnation, uniting the infinite divine nature with the human.<sup>81</sup>

There remains a question of compatibility between attributing impassibility and passibility to the person of Christ. This apparent contradiction has been noted by several critics of impassibility who claim it is impossible for a being to be simultaneously passible and impassible.<sup>82</sup> Timothy Pawl offers a rejoinder to such claims: whereas it is

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<sup>77</sup> Hart, “No Shadow of Turning,” 65.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Benjamin Myers, “The Patristic Atonement Model,” in *Locating Atonement: Explorations in Constructive Dogmatics*, ed. Oliver D. Crisp and Fred Sanders (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 73.

<sup>80</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Catechetical Oration*, quoted in *ibid.*, 75.

<sup>81</sup> Myers, “Patristic Atonement Model,” 75.

<sup>82</sup> See, e.g., Richard Cross, “The Incarnation,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology*, edited by Thomas P. Flint and Michael Rea. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 470-471.

incoherent to attribute impassibility defined as a thing being incapable of suffering “under any circumstances” to the person of Christ,<sup>83</sup> there is an alternative way of understanding impassibility in the incarnation that does not suffer this incompatibility. If impassibility is understood as “having a nature that is not causally affectable,” and passibility as “having a nature that is causally affectable,” the problem is solved.<sup>84</sup> The conciliar attribution of two natures in one person makes the predication of impassibility and passibility to the same person coherent.

### Conclusion

Impassibility has been a significant aspect of theological reflection since the days of the early church. It has held an important place in both the doctrine of God and the debates around Christology, and its import can be felt on many other areas of theology, such as divine transcendence. Though it has been widely maligned in recent centuries, a proper understanding of the term reveals many such criticisms to be unfair caricatures of a crucial doctrine. The remaining chapters of this work will turn to such criticisms in more detail and offer an answer to them utilizing the foundational insights of this chapter.

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<sup>83</sup> Timothy Pawl, *In Defense of Conciliar Christology: A Philosophical Essay*, Oxford Studies in Analytic Theology (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 194.

<sup>84</sup> Timothy Pawl, “Conciliar Christology and the Problem of Incompatible Predications,” *Scientia et Fides* 3 no. 2 (2015): 101.

### Chapter Three The Theodicy Question

One major concern for those who insist upon suffering as essential to God's nature is the question of theodicy. A scene from Elie Wiesel's *Night*, a memoir of his experience as a Jew in the Holocaust, serves as a reference point for many such passibilists. Wiesel describes the execution of a child in Auschwitz, hung until death by Nazi captors:

“Where is God? Where is He?” someone behind me asked...

For more than half an hour he stayed there, struggling between life and death, dying in slow agony under our eyes. And we had to look him full in the face. He was still alive when I passed in front of him. His tongue was still red, his eyes not yet glazed.

“Where is God now?” And I heard a voice within me answer him: “Where is he? Here he is—He is hanging here on this gallows...”<sup>1</sup>

#### Jürgen Moltmann's Theodicy

In commenting on the above passage, Jürgen Moltmann declares that “any other answer [than Wiesel's] would be blasphemy.”<sup>2</sup> In the face of the evils of the world: murder, abuse, theft, exploitation, neglect, sexual assault, torture, and hate, the only answer that can be offered to those who are suffering is that God too suffers their pain. They are not left alone in the world, no matter how deeply they feel their sorrow, because God feels it. God anguishes over their pain, deep within his very being. Under this course of thought, the cross of Jesus is the suffering God's message to humanity, a definitive

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<sup>1</sup> Elie Wiesel, *Night*, trans. by Stella Rodway (New York: Avon Books, 1969), 76.

<sup>2</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, trans. by John Bowden and R.A. Wilson (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 274. For Moltmann, Wiesel's statement here offers license for passibility, but in reality, it is a statement of the end of Wiesel's belief in God. God was not suffering with the boy, Wiesel's faith in him was dying. As such, Moltmann's interpretation here is a misinterpretation of a passage that ends with the very conclusion against which Moltmann is working.

declaration of God's intimate love for those he created. Jesus identifies himself with the godforsaken on the cross, to the point of being "cut off" from the Father and descending to the depths of God-forsakenness, suffering death and loss.<sup>3</sup> Through this suffering, God enters into the darkness of humanity to offer rescue to those long crushed under the weight of the evil in the world.

Before arriving at the cross, however, Moltmann's theodicy begins with creation. The cross is the central point of this creation, but there is a reason for the evil in the world that can be understood as a corollary of the nature of God's creative act. The Father loves the Son so much that his "self-communicating love" for the Son allows him to be opened to "the Other" and so "becomes creative," by means of the Holy Spirit.<sup>4</sup> The world is created by an outpouring of love by the triune God: rather than working to create the greatest possible world, God contracts into himself and fashions the world from nothingness. For Moltmann, "nothing" functions in a strange way: "nothing," is, in fact something. It is the space created when God withdraws himself to make room for something not-God, and it is this space God begins to fashion into creation.<sup>5</sup> God "[lowers] himself into his own impotence" by allowing himself to be withdrawn from the space where creation is made.<sup>6</sup> He opens himself up to the possibility of that which is not-God to reject its creator. This is a requirement for mutual love: the beloved must be able to reject the love offered by the lover. Creation is "open" and can possibly become better or

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<sup>3</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God*, trans. Margaret Kohl (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980), 83.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 111-113.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

worse through the course of decisions made by free creatures.<sup>7</sup> Evil can exist because the space which is not-God allows for decisions to be made in contradiction to God's will. God loves and cares for the creation, but it has the freedom required by love to reject his love and the duty to reciprocate that love.

After creation comes the event of the cross, the central event in the history of God. Moltmann understands the abandonment felt by Jesus as an experience that occurs within God. As the Word of God in flesh, Jesus is a member of the Godhead and therefore his feeling of abandonment at the hands of his Father is horrifically painful and frightening. Because of the nature of this occurrence, not only does Jesus suffer in the crucifixion, but the Father does as well. The suffering of God the Father of Jesus is qualitatively different from the suffering of the Son but is a terrible suffering all the same. The Son suffers the loss of the Father, and the Father suffers the loss of the Son, an integral part of the being of God. Not only does the Father suffer the loss of the Son with whom he has shared eternal communion, but the Father loses a sense of identity. When the Father whose Son was eternally begotten suffers the death of that Son, the Father's sense of identity is thrown into crisis.<sup>8</sup> God takes the judgement for sin humanity rightly deserves on himself, suffering the fate humanity deserved.<sup>9</sup> At the cross, the nothingness of creation is subsumed into the person of God. In Jesus' death, God "revealed himself and constituted himself in nothingness."<sup>10</sup> God not only withdraws at creation to allow for "the Other" to

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<sup>7</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *Religion, Revolution, and the Future*, trans. M. Douglas Meeks (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969), 35.

<sup>8</sup> Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 151-153; 203-206.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 218.

be called forth from nothing, but he also enters into that nothingness, bringing it into the triune life and incorporating it into his eschatological victory.<sup>11</sup>

Crucial to Moltmann's understanding of the suffering of Christ on the cross is the cry of dereliction recorded in Mark 15:34: "At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"<sup>12</sup> This cry, for Moltmann, signifies an event of "God against God" as the Father abandons Jesus to his fate. Trusting the efforts of the historical-critical method, Moltmann posits this saying as an authentic rendering of the crucifixion. He assumes Markan priority, speculates embarrassment among the early Christians by the idea of Jesus being given up by God, and posits that later gospel traditions tempered the words of Jesus on the cross. Therefore, he assumes Mark's account to be the earliest and most accurate tradition of Jesus' words from the cross. The assumption that Mark captures the authentic words of Jesus leads Moltmann to conclude that Jesus truly experiences God-forsakenness on the cross, a true loss of Christ from the Godhead.<sup>13</sup> The resurrection is then a reuniting of the Son to God as God overturns the condemnation placed on Jesus by his accusers and vindicates his life and teachings.<sup>14</sup> Although Jesus is quoting the opening line of Psalm 22, a lament that ends in a resounding word of praise for God and trust in his coming salvation, Moltmann rejects the notion that these words are a sign to the

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<sup>11</sup> Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 218.

<sup>12</sup> All Scripture quoted is from the New Revised Standard Version.

<sup>13</sup> Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 146-147. As Bruce Marshall notes, this confidence in the ability of the historical-critical method to offer support for "theologically basic results" is not considered nearly as well-founded today as it was when Moltmann initially wrote *The Crucified God*. Marshall, "The Dereliction of Christ and the Impassibility of God," in *Divine Impassibility and the Mystery of Human Suffering*, ed. James F. Keating and Thomas Joseph White (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 248n1.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 166-168.

people that Jesus is invoking the psalm to express hope in God. He argues that the invocation of the psalm cannot point to hope because there is a deliverance from death recalled at the end of the psalm, but no such deliverance occurs at Golgotha. The cross represents the greatest example of divine suffering and it is the place where God is constituted as God. In his suffering and the enmity incurred between the divine persons, he is fully revealed as the God who suffers. He comes in the most unexpected way—rejected, god-forsaken, condemned to die as a criminal—and his greatness is revealed in his rejection, the kenotic act of allowing himself to be killed on the cross.<sup>15</sup>

The crucifixion is, for Moltmann, the answer to the “protest atheism” offered by Voltaire and Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s fictional Ivan Karamazov. Protest atheism insists the existence of a good God cannot be reconciled with the evil in the world. For Moltmann, “the only way past protest atheism” is to insist upon the God as the one who suffers on the cross.<sup>16</sup> The interplay of the Father and the Son sharing in suffering in their own unique ways shows that “God and suffering are no longer contradictions... but God’s being is in suffering and the suffering is in God’s being itself, because God is love.”<sup>17</sup> This is best shown by the cry of dereliction from the cross. This is where God is revealed, with the cry from the cross revealing God as himself god-forsaken, the deepest possible identification with the sufferer who above all suffers a loss of God.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 205-206.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 227.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

Because the Son is not spared but is “given up,” the godless can find themselves reconciled to God.<sup>19</sup> The trinitarian being of God shares in the sufferings of Jesus, taking on death so humans could face death in the confidence death would not separate them from God. Even more, the experience of death on the cross makes it possible for Christ to be the foundation of the new creation in which God will make all things well within God’s being and in creation. Just as the eschatological working of God in raising Jesus “blotted out and replaced the historical action of man in his crucifixion,”<sup>20</sup> the eschatological working of God will overcome the evils of the world and bring them under God’s redeeming power.

For Moltmann, one can only love inasmuch as one suffers. So, if God failed to suffer when humanity suffered, God would be less than the human who feels the pain of his fellow.<sup>21</sup> If God is our Father, then God must feel the pain of humanity the same way a good human parent would be agonized over the hurt of her child. If a parent were entirely unaffected by her child’s suffering a serious injury, it would rightly call into question that parent’s love for the child. It would be monstrously callous to remain impassive under such circumstances. As such, an answer to Moltmann’s critique must establish both an alternative understanding of love that does not necessarily include co-suffering and a definition of impassibility that does not implicate God as an aloof observer to the pain and suffering of his creatures. The following sections will examine some flaws in

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<sup>19</sup> Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 82.

<sup>20</sup> Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 189.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 229-230.

Moltmann's formulation before moving to a constructive proposal for an alternative to his theodicy.

### Problems with Moltmann's Theodicy

Setting aside the questions of tritheism<sup>22</sup> and other concerns with Moltmann's schema outside of theodicy, the suffering of God perspective does hold some emotional appeal. However, it does not seem to truly answer the problem of evil. It might be pleasant to imagine God feeling pain like humans do at the suffering of a friend or family member, but it does not explain evil's existence. What comfort is it that God self-flagellates alongside suffering humanity? Consider a man walking in the woods who accidentally steps into a bear trap. As he remains in the trap, his leg torn and ruined, his father comes along. In answer to the trapped son's cry for help, the father hurries to the closest bear trap he can find and intentionally steps on that trap. He is then with his son in his suffering, feeling every bit of the son's agony. What comfort is there for the son in his father's suffering? It would be perverse to demand another feel our suffering to truly love us. Even if we consider God as suffering in a different way—looking down on our pain

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<sup>22</sup> In *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 83, Moltmann states, "on the cross the Father and the Son are so deeply separated that their relationship breaks off." If this is the case, it seems indisputable that there are three gods being described. Moltmann attempts to explain this by appealing to the Holy Spirit as the mechanism connecting the Father and Son as each person gives Jesus up in a simultaneous movement because the Son is offered "through the eternal Spirit" (Heb. 9:14). This contradicts his account of the divine unity, where the Father, Son, and Spirit are united through *perichoresis* (the mutual indwelling of the divine persons), *Trinity and the Kingdom*, 149-150. For if the Father and Son are cut off from one another but remain united through the link of the Spirit and of their common purpose, the only place to locate this "cutting off" seems to be ontological. If ontological separation is possible, it seems there is not a true unity among the godhead. Further, *perichoresis* itself in the social trinitarianism of Moltmann and others is incoherent in that it identifies a relation among the persons as beyond human comprehension but still relies on human relationship to describe the perichoretic relationship, then encourages humans to emulate that perichoretic bond in their relationships. The circular logic here makes the entire system seem untenable. See Karen Kilby, "Perichoresis and Projection: Problems with Social Doctrines of the Trinity," *New Blackfriars* 81 (2000): 442.

and feeling something akin to the human experience of sympathetic suffering—what relief is that knowledge? Perhaps the suffering of God would be more comforting under a process scheme, where God is impotent to counter evil in the world and can only respond with the helpless co-suffering of a human whose loved one is suffering. Moltmann, however, does not take such a route. As will be explored below, the existence of a suffering God is far from comforting if its full implications are realized.

When it comes to the important “cry of dereliction,” a distinction must be made, as Bruce Marshall suggests, between the aspects of humanity “God the Son becomes in order to transform [them], and what he becomes in order to destroy [them].”<sup>23</sup> There are aspects of the post-fall human state that Christ takes on in order to purify them, and those he takes on to reject and demolish. Following Cyril of Alexandria, Marshall identifies Christ becoming flesh (Jn. 1:14) as an instance of the former category and Christ becoming “sin” (2 Cor. 5:21) or “a curse” (Gal. 3:13) for humanity as belonging to the latter.<sup>24</sup> In taking on death, Jesus does not undergo divine abandonment: he undoes it. The cry of Jesus on the cross is on the behalf of those for whom he has suffered, the ones for whom he became flesh. The question becomes a rhetorical one—humanity now, through “their Eucharistic share in his life-giving flesh” belongs to Christ and as such can by no means suffer God-forsakenness any longer.<sup>25</sup>

Additionally, the writings of Athanasius on the cry of dereliction can offer a supplement to the impassibilist understanding of the cry of dereliction. Of course, for

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<sup>23</sup> Marshall, “The Dereliction of Christ,” 255.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 256.

Athanasius the cry is not an event within God. Beyond this, Athanasius argues, the cry is not a tale of despair: the cry was answered! The shaking of the earth, rending of the curtain in the temple, and the return of many people long-dead signify God's answer to the cry. God answers the question "Why have you forsaken me?" with an overturning of the earth. His answer is, "I have not."

For behold when He says, 'Why hast Thou forsaken Me?' the Father shewed that He was ever and even then in Him; for the earth knowing its Lord who spoke, straightway trembled, and the veil was rent, and the sun was hidden, and the rocks were torn asunder, and the graves, as I have said, did gape, and the dead in them arose; and, what is wonderful, they who were then present and had before denied Him, then seeing these signs, confessed that 'truly He was the Son of God.'<sup>26</sup>

Impassibility remains significant as it prevents Jesus from being overcome by the despair, pain, and fear that are inherent to his human nature but have no place in his divine nature. Christ came in a body like ours to redeem our bodies, and the divinity at work within him allowed him to bring humans into divinity. The impassible Word allows Jesus to be healed from his sufferings by divinity. He suffers on behalf of humanity, but his impassible nature allows him to keep and assume humans; even those who humiliate, mock, and injure him.<sup>27</sup> His impassible suffering allowed people a chance to gain impassibility and immortality and be preserved forever incorruptible.<sup>28</sup>

Further, there is a significant problem with the idea of a God who suffers, especially if that suffering is considered essential to God's nature. The flaw in this schema is ably drawn out by David Bentley Hart in his discussion of Moltmann's (among others') understanding of a suffering God. If God, as Moltmann insists, can only love

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<sup>26</sup> Athanasius, *Orations Against the Arians* 3.56.

<sup>27</sup> Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* 8.54.

<sup>28</sup> Athanasius, *Orations*, 3.58.

inasmuch as he suffers, evil is a necessary aspect of God's love. However, if this is the case, the love with which God creates the world is an imperfect love, as God has not had occasion to suffer prior to the creation of the world. That is, unless one wishes to posit evil and suffering as an eternal part of God's nature (a concept much more disturbing than the idea of an uncaring and uninvolved God, and an entirely untenable position for a Christian to hold). To put it differently, the suggestion of evil as an essential part of God's plan gives evil an ontological status for which God, as the creator of everything, is culpable. Beyond this, God would be so dependent upon evil that it would make up an aspect of his being.<sup>29</sup> If God's love requires suffering to be perfect, suffering and evil must be an aspect of God's nature—and must be so forever. Otherwise, the removal of this ingredient that perfects the divine love would return from perfection to imperfection. Therefore, in the eschatological coming of God's new creation, evil is not a privation to be banished by the permeation of everything with divine goodness but an integral part of God's very being.

This problem is not solved by suggesting the interweaving and overcoming of evil in the eschaton. For a God who is shaped by evil—who requires evil to fulfill or perfect some aspect of his being—entails evil as an aspect of God's great "odyssey towards himself."<sup>30</sup> All evil things, from the death and torture of children to the diseases which cripple, maim, and kill are part of God's journey to completeness. Additionally, the problem is not solved by suggesting that God comes into his fullness through the incarnation in Jesus. Such an understanding would still necessitate the interwoven

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<sup>29</sup> David Bentley Hart, "Impassibility as Transcendence: On the Infinite Innocence of God," in *The Hidden and the Manifest: Essays in Theology and Metaphysics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 186.

<sup>30</sup> Hart, "No Shadow of Turning," 53.

contingencies that constitute the world and life around Jesus. These are all necessary aspects of the course Jesus' life takes, and so become concretized by the absolute coming into his perfection through that life.<sup>31</sup> As such, the evils of the world before and during the life of Jesus would be necessary, implicating God in great historical evil and tragedy just to allow him to enter into full perfection. As Hart says, it would be quite dreadful if, "in our eagerness to find a way of believing in God's love in the Age of Auschwitz, we should in fact succeed only in describing a God who is the metaphysical ground of Auschwitz."<sup>32</sup>

The suffering of Jesus on the cross is not an instance of God relinquishing power to allow the world inside his being to destroy him but rather a great and resounding divine victory. On the cross, the divine Son can be said to truly suffer, but that suffering is impassible—not in the sense that it is not truly experienced as a product of the *communicatio idiomatum*, but because the suffering and evil do not enter into or leave an indelible mark on the being of God. God takes on suffering and abolishes it, for in the infinite wellspring of divine peace, power, and love, suffering and evil are utterly powerless. On the cross, evil and death and suffering are rejected by God, cast down and overcome. They are exposed for the meaningless, empty perversions of goodness that they are. And yet, because of the *communicatio idiomatum*, much of what Moltmann and others wish to say about the cross is revealed as true. The sufferings of the human nature of Jesus cannot be confined to his humanity because experience occurs in one's person

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<sup>31</sup> Hart, "No Shadow of Turning," 53-54.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

rather than in one's nature.<sup>33</sup> Thus, the suffering of the person of Jesus the Christ is the suffering of God's Word. As Cyril expresses, on the cross God is "in the crucified body claiming the sufferings of his flesh as his own impassibly."<sup>34</sup> This point is well made by Michael Ward, when he points to the flaw in the contemporary advocacy for divine suffering—if Christ suffers "in his divine nature *simpliciter*," the suffering engendered would not be one of nearness to humanity but an "ontologically unique and remote kind of suffering."<sup>35</sup> For God to suffer as God would be an experience as alien and inexplicable for us as the nature of God is unknowable, and would provide no answer to human suffering. The one who suffers and dies on the cross is a member of the Holy Trinity who suffers just as humans do, as proclaimed in the canons of the Second Council of Constantinople.<sup>36</sup>

### An Impassibilist Alternative to Moltmann's Theodicy

In offering an alternative to Moltmann's theodicy, a logical answer from one who holds impassibility is that there is no theodicy, not if theodicy is understood as an attempt to rationalize evil. It is something of a truism in training ministers and counselors: one should never try to explain suffering to one who is in the midst of it. However, this is

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<sup>33</sup> Hart, *Doors of the Sea*, 75-76; *Beauty of the Infinite*, 358-359.

<sup>34</sup> Cyril of Alexandria, *Third Epistle to Nestorius* 6, in *Cyril of Alexandria: Select Letters*, ed. and trans. Lionel R. Wickham (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983), 21.

<sup>35</sup> Michael Ward, "Theopaschitism: Is Jesus Able or Unable to Suffer in His Divine Nature?" in *Heresies and How to Avoid Them: Why it Matters What Christians Believe*, ed. Ben Quash and Michael Ward, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), 68-69.

<sup>36</sup> Canons of Constantinople II, 10: "If anyone does not confess that our Lord Jesus Christ who was crucified in the flesh is true God and the Lord of Glory and one of the Holy Trinity: let him be anathema." As Marshall points out, Moltmann erroneously claims such a teaching was rejected (*The Crucified God*, 228) when in fact it is proclaimed as dogma. See Marshall, "The Dereliction of Christ," 249n3.

typically offered before launching into an explanation of why God could hypothetically allow the existence of evil. Perhaps God has some greater purpose for evil that humans cannot understand, or the current reality represents the greatest of all possible worlds.<sup>37</sup> Perhaps God allows evil so that he can use it to form his people through suffering—after all, this suggestion has Scriptural warrant (Rom. 5:3-5; Jas. 1:2-3; 1 Pet. 2:19, 3:8-22).

An important distinction should be made between suffering and evil. The two are by no means mutually exclusive, but neither are they to be entirely identified with one another. While evil causes suffering (one can argue the finer points of whether *every* act of evil causes suffering or not, but it can be accepted as a general rule), suffering is not always caused by evil. A person who trains hard for something, particularly physically, can undergo suffering, but the suffering is not caused by evil. In such a circumstance, this suffering has at its root a good—the attempt to become healthy and promote life, or to indulge in leisure. Further, it should be affirmed that God can and does bring goods even from evil (cf. Ro. 8:28; Gen. 50:20). However, this affirmation is a far cry from implicating God as intending evil. If God is goodness itself and evil the privation of the good, evil cannot be implicated as positive aspects of God's purposes and plans but instead are accidents and utilized in the work of God as accommodations to the finitude and sin of humanity. Certainly, evil is *allowed* by God and can be redeemed by God, but it is not of God and is contrary to his purposes for his good creation.

Evil is a product of the will, a turning back of the created being towards the nothingness from which it was created and away from the source of goodness which

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<sup>37</sup> See e.g. G.W. Leibniz, *Theodicy*, trans. by E.M. Huggard, ed. Austin Farrer (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1985); John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978).

called it forth.<sup>38</sup> It is a movement away from “the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change,” (Jas. 1:17) towards the ever-present darkness of nonbeing. The substance of evil is a “[twisting] away” of the will from God, who is the will’s “highest substance.”<sup>39</sup> This applies most obviously to those evils inflicted by humans on other humans and the world at large, but can also be applied to natural evil. There is certainly biblical precedence for an understanding of natural evil as a result of cosmic warring between the powers of this world—not “powers” in the abstract, but the “powers and principalities” as individually conscious spirits with intentions for good or evil.

Pagan converts in the early church did not merely leave behind the panoply of gods to which they were once devoted but underwent a process of vigorous rejection of these gods as evil. The catechist would renounce their previous gods as false, but not as nonexistent. They were “demons, malign elemental spirits, occult agencies masquerading as divinities, exploiting human yearning for God, and working to thwart the designs of God, in order to bind humanity in slavery to darkness, ignorance, and death.”<sup>40</sup> The world is held captive by the “ruler/god of this world” (Jn. 12:31; 14:30, 2 Cor. 4:4), under the influence of “the evil one” (1 Jn. 5:19) as well as “dominions” and “powers” (1 Cor. 2:8). These forces are not only human rulers but also spiritual ones—in the Jewish Apocalyptic tradition, “archons”—who were celestial governors of nations and who, though

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<sup>38</sup> David Bentley Hart, *The Doors of the Sea: Where Was God in the Tsunami?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 73.

<sup>39</sup> Augustine, *Confessions* 7.22.

<sup>40</sup> David Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies* (New Haven: Yale, 2009), 113.

sometimes worshipped as gods, were only creations of the one God.<sup>41</sup> The cosmos is enslaved to these malign forces, and it is only freed through the victory that comes with the advent of Christ on earth. His conquest of evil and death through the resurrection allowed the world to be set free from their influence. This victory was accomplished by the resurrection, but will be truly consummated at the end of all things when Christ subjects everything under his feet and hands it over to the Father, after which God will be “all in all” (1 Cor. 15 25-28).

Such an enchanted view of the cosmos seems out of place for moderns who predominantly view the universe as mechanistic and devoid of the influence of such deities.<sup>42</sup> However, such a view coheres with the Christian vision of a good God and a fallen world. This understanding explains the occurrence of so-called “natural evils” (though they are anything but natural) in God’s good creation. They are not caused by God but by the corrupted wills of those cosmic forces acting upon creation.

There exists in Christian thought a conception of the will as comprised of two parts: the natural and the gnostic wills. The natural will is directed towards humanity’s natural end: that is, towards God. The creation naturally is drawn towards the good which is its *telos*. The gnostic will is that deliberative aspect that allows for choice between the pursuing or abandoning the goodness towards which the natural will is drawn. Maximus the Confessor, a key figure in the theological understanding of the will, declares the evil to be “nothing else than this difference of our gnostic will from the divine [natural]

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<sup>41</sup> Hart, *Atheist Delusions*, 114.

<sup>42</sup> For more on the problems brought on by the mechanistic view of nature, see chapter 3 on the historical question.

will.”<sup>43</sup> While some might argue that God could not create a will that is independent of his own, or acts without God as its primary mover,<sup>44</sup> such assertions rest on a theological mistake. The assumption that human wills cannot be created as independent from God’s will rests upon an insufficient view of divine transcendence—it is as logically cogent to suggest God can create wills that are not his as it is to suggest God can create beings that are not God.<sup>45</sup> While God’s will is one and simple, like his being, the wills of his creatures are composite and, though dependent on him for existence, can operate outside of and against his will. Just as the ultimate goal of contingent beings is participation in God’s infinite being, the aim of the finite wills is conformity to the infinite will.<sup>46</sup> Maximus cites God’s impassibility in his understanding of the will’s being drawn towards God. Because God is unmoved by suffering or pathos, the will can be drawn towards him. The purpose of human freedom is finally the relinquishing of that freedom to God in love.<sup>47</sup>

Evil, as a product of the corrupted will, must thus be understood as entirely antithetical to God. Any attempt to “make sense” of evil in the face of God is a misguided one: evil has no being of its own, no natural place within the order of God’s good creation. Moltmann’s theodicy fails because ultimately it makes God not only responsible for suffering, but also makes every act of evil and suffering necessary parts of history.

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<sup>43</sup> Maximus the Confessor, *Opuscula* 3.56B.

<sup>44</sup> Some forms of Thomism and Calvinism profess such understandings. See, for example, Thomas M. Osborne Jr., “Thomist Premotion and Contemporary Philosophy of Religion,” *Nova et Vetera* 4 no. 3 (2006): 607-631. Osborne provides a defense of God’s “premotion” and offers several competing views of divine providence and human freedom from the larger Thomistic world.

<sup>45</sup> Hart, “Impassibility as Transcendence,” 181.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 180-181.

<sup>47</sup> Maximus the Confessor, *Ambiguum* 7.

This (unintended but inevitable) notion must be rejected as fundamentally opposed to the Christian understanding of a God who is love. The cross is not an expression of God's eternal suffering nature; it is the repudiation of everything that has tarnished his good creation from the beginning. Evil is not a part of God's plan to be understood, but an error made by creation that must be overcome and *was* overcome by the saving life, death, and resurrection of Christ. Any attempt to reconcile evil with God's existence through attributing inexplicable suffering to the divine nature is misguided. It is an attempt to make sense where none can be found: evil is not a thing to be reconciled with God's existence because evil is its antithesis and comes about through the rejection of God by the misdirection of the will from its natural end.

It is important at this juncture to offer a definition of love in contrast to that of Moltmann. Modern assumptions about love frequently categorize it as a passion to which we are roused, and this is especially true in his schema. If his assertion that one can only love inasmuch as one suffers is false, an alternate understanding of love must be offered. Further, the alternate definition must be one with some corollary to human love. Otherwise, the Christian exhortation to love one another would be meaningless. The command to love would be incoherent if no corollary existed between God's love and humanity's love.

Impassibility (*apatheia*) was brought into Christianity by the patristic writers not simply as an aspect of divinity but also as a virtue. It shared the name of a Stoic virtue, but its Christian understanding was altered radically. While the Stoic *apatheia* was a mere idleness of the will, a refusal to allow the storms of life to buffet one's emotions, the Christian *apatheia* was a cultivation of love and charity. This comes from the Christian

God, who, as the possessor of all goodness, is devoid of anxiety, anger, or suffering. A Christian who masters this virtue is one who has conquered all passions and as such becomes love: “a single inexorable motion of utter *agape*.”<sup>48</sup> The one who loves in this way is free to love all things as a reflection of the divine Word who formed them, without any passions or worries to distract them. Love is not a reaction, it is “the possibility of every action, the transcendent act that makes all else actual; it is purely positive, sufficient in itself, without the need of any galvanism of the negative to be fully active, vital, and creative.”<sup>49</sup> This leads to an understanding of divine love as “infinite openness” between the members of the godhead, a constant giving of love and joy between the impassible natures of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.<sup>50</sup> The persons, sharing in the beauty and goodness of the divine nature recognize this beauty and find supreme delight in one another, the satisfaction of the wholly good recognizing the wholly good.<sup>51</sup> As such, God possesses a perfect inner peace that cannot be disturbed and needs neither evil nor suffering to complete it; nothing can change it or add to it. God is sufficient within himself and thus creation is an outpouring of the sheer joy that eternally exists within God.<sup>52</sup> Human love is simply a reflection of this perfect divine love. God’s impassible and transcendent love is the source in which our own love “lives, moves, and has its being.”<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Hart, “No Shadow of Turning,” 55.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 60-61.

<sup>51</sup> Augustine, *On the Trinity* 6.10.11.

<sup>52</sup> Hart, “No Shadow of Turning,” 61.

<sup>53</sup> Hart, “Impassibility as Transcendence,” 169.

The implication of impassibility as an aspect of divine love offers an important corrective for human love. An imitation of the impassibility of God allows us to rid our love of the imperfections that come along with human finitude.<sup>54</sup> The human condition—finite, fallen, and embodied—entails love as a feeling. Our movements require emotiveness because we do not possess ultimacy or immutability: we must undergo the movement from potency to act, as we lack the pure actuality of God’s being. Because of these things, we are moved to love rather than existing in the constant and perfect state of loving ourselves (for God, the *perichoresis* between the divine persons) and loving others (for God, created things) with an unchanging love. Because of our finitude and imperfection, we can be moved to greater or lesser love while God remains constant. However, because human love is derivative of the divine love, there is yet an analogical connection between our love and God’s.

### Conclusion

Moltmann has hardly been alone in his use of divine passibility as a basis for theodicy. Many have followed his insistence upon the suffering God as the answer to the presence of great suffering in the world. However, such an uncritical insistence upon divine suffering has had unintended but unacceptable consequences. The presence of evil and suffering as constitutive aspects of the divine being eternalize them in the nature of God and thus in the life of the world to come. Rather than a world where every tear will be wiped away, it will be a world built upon the tears of history. For the God here displayed is one whose identity is established in the marches of history, who becomes

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<sup>54</sup> Thomas Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), 159.

something new through contact with evil and suffering and therefore makes them historically essential as part of the divine becoming. Instead, Christians must turn to the God of impassible love, the one who exists eternally as love, sharing the divine love between the persons of the Trinity and pouring out that love in the act of creation. This God is eternally who he is, and evil has no part in his being. This is the God who can be trusted to overcome evil as he presses into the world, subjugates the wicked powers who are in rebellion, and becomes “all in all” (1 Cor. 15:28).

## Chapter Four The Historical Question

The influential work of Adolf von Harnack (1851-1930) suggested a corruption of early Christian theology by the influence of Greek philosophy. Despite convincing criticisms to the contrary, many modern theologians have championed this thesis of dogmatic corruption. Few doctrines have come under as much criticism as a result of this theory than the doctrine of divine impassibility. Although Harnack's thesis includes many other doctrines, including the divinity of Christ and other assumed attributes of God in ancient Christian thought, none have become the target of theological ire as much as impassibility. Its rejection has become so widespread among modern theologians that the passibility of God has been dubbed a "new orthodoxy."<sup>1</sup> The ubiquity of Harnack's influence on this doctrine is startling; it is rare that any theologian, no matter his or her perspective on impassibility, discusses the doctrine without mention of its Hellenistic influence, even if Harnack is not mentioned specifically. This chapter will examine Harnack's contribution and the ways its influence can still be seen in contemporary discussions of impassibility. It will then seek to defend the use of impassibility by the early church and answer a contemporary iteration of Harnack's thesis.

Harnack's views on the Greek influence on early Christian theology is most developed in his 7-volume *History of Dogma*. Succinctly, his thesis is: "Dogma in its conception and development is a work of the Greek spirit on the soil of the Gospel."<sup>2</sup> A Liberal Protestant heavily influenced by his movement's Kantian view of reason and

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald Goetz, "The Suffering God: The Rise of a New Orthodoxy," *Christian Century* 103 (1986): 385.

<sup>2</sup> Adolf von Harnack, *History of Dogma*, vol. 1 (London: Williams and Norgate, 1894), 17.

Jesus,<sup>3</sup> Harnack conceived of the theology of the early church as a philosophically impressive but ultimately doctrinally unfaithful movement away from the simple message of Jesus. This gospel message proclaimed by Christ, according to Harnack, had to do entirely with God and nothing at all with Jesus.<sup>4</sup> The message of Jesus was a simple one of the fatherhood of God to humanity and of the “new epoch” God is bringing about through him: it had no metaphysical element whatsoever.<sup>5</sup> Though Harnack identifies Paul as the primary culprit in removing Judaism from its “mother-soil” and transporting it to “the broad field of the Greco-Roman empire,” he does not fault Paul for this because the Gospel was meant for all of humanity, and as such necessarily included the massive world power that was Rome.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, Paul was protected from the Hellenization which plagued later Christian thought because his preaching of Christ crucified and his doctrine of justification were irreconcilable with Greek philosophy.<sup>7</sup> Harnack acknowledges the writings of the New Testament are all in some ways touched by the Hellenizing influence in the ancient world; this is exemplified by the New Testament books written in Greek. Indeed, he claims the Gospel cannot be fully understood if it is conceived narrowly as solely rooted in Judaism. However, he maintains Greek thought does not form the presuppositions of the Gospel or the text of the New Testament.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Gerald O’Collins, *Christology: A Biblical, Historical, and Systematic Study of Jesus*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 221.

<sup>4</sup> Adolf von Harnack, *What is Christianity?*, trans. Thomas Bailey Saunders (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957), 144.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

<sup>7</sup> Harnack, *History of Dogma* 1:57.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:48n49.

The Hellenization Harnack condemns began in the second century, as the evangelical enthusiasm of the early church waned in subsequent generations. As is natural, over time the initial fervor of a group wavers and this led to the church bringing Greek ideas into the fold as it developed doctrines. The church severed its bonds with Judaism and was susceptible to whatever sought to take hold of it. The towering influence of Greek thought led to the Hellenization of the church. Because of this, Harnack boldly asserts “the influx of Hellenism, of the Greek spirit, and the union of the Gospel with it, form the greatest fact in the history of the Church in the second century, and when the fact was once established as a foundation it continued through the following centuries.”<sup>9</sup>

Harnack conceived of the infiltration of Greek thought in several phases. The first of these came around the year 130 with Greek philosophy coming “straight into the centre” of Christianity. Greek philosophy without the baggage of mythology and religious practices entered Christianity first, but was not alone for long. It was followed in the next century by Greek “mysteries” and “civilization” that begin to impact Christianity. Finally, by the fourth century, Harnack claims, Hellenism “as a whole and in every phase of its development was established in the Church,” including polytheism and Greek myth.<sup>10</sup>

An important movement towards Hellenization came from the early Christian apologists adopting Greek Logos metaphysics and relating them to Christ. Unable to pass by the “treasure” of Greek thought, early apologists adopted Greek philosophy and culture, especially Platonism, including the Greek notion of an “active central idea” which was intimately involved in the creation of the world. The apologists came up with the

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<sup>9</sup> Harnack, *What is Christianity?*, 199-200.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 201.

formula “the Logos=Jesus Christ,” and altered the Johannine Logos-Christology. John, for Harnack, used the Logos metaphor as a mere “predicate” rather than “the basis of every speculative idea about Christ.”<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, the early Christians were not faithful to this Johannine practice. Harnack does not hold this movement as the equalization of Christian thought with Greek philosophy as the first Christians certainly had a different conception of the Logos than the Greeks.<sup>12</sup> However, this identification of an aspect of Greek philosophy with Christianity established Christianity as a school of philosophy in direct competition with the schools of Greek philosophy.<sup>13</sup>

William V. Rowe identifies this form of Hellenization as one of two primary types in Harnack’s thought. This form, which took place with the early apologists and led down the road to “Dogmatic Christianity,”<sup>14</sup> is the “positive identification.”<sup>15</sup> According to Rowe, Harnack perceives the New Testament conception of the Messiah as the Word of God as different from the conception of the Messiah as the Logos. While the New Testament teaching is certainly a doctrine, the identification of Jesus with the Logos is more than that; it is an identification of the “*character* of the religious teaching of the Gospel with the *character* of Greek philosophy.”<sup>16</sup> The “negative form” of Hellenization came through Christianity’s clashes with Gnosticism. Christians were combating the

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<sup>11</sup> Harnack, *What is Christianity?*, 202-203.

<sup>12</sup> Harnack, *History of Dogma*, 1:21.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:15.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> William V. Rowe, “Adolf von Harnack and the Concept of Hellenization,” in *Hellenization Revisited: Shaping a Christian Response within the Greco-Roman World*, ed. Wendy E. Helleman (Lanham: University Press of America, 1994), 80).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid* (emphasis in original).

Hellenization which Gnosticism would have brought to the faith, but, ironically, they were fighting against an influence already present in theology.<sup>17</sup> Harnack identifies the beginning of the Catholic church with the conflict against Gnosticism. The early church worked to keep “Dualism and the acute phase of Hellenism at bay,” but through creedal commitments and confessions which resulted from this era, the Church became more like the Hellenism it opposed.<sup>18</sup>

This infiltration of Hellenism into the Church caused four important and harmful changes. 1) The Hellenization of Christianity led to a loss of “freedom and independence” in religious matters and forced assent to creeds. 2) Hellenism forced Christianity to become primarily about doctrine, which made it much more complicated than the religion of simple persons it was at its inception. 3) The church became an independent institution, and a powerful one at that. 4) The Gospel was no longer proclaimed with as much passion and as the good news as it once was; fear played a much larger role in the Church.<sup>19</sup>

Harnack’s thesis has come under significant criticism, but it is beyond the scope of this project to discuss all of these rebuttals.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Rowe, “Adolf von Harnack and the Concept of Hellenization,” 82-83. Cf. Harnack, *History of Dogma* 1:224-228.

<sup>18</sup> Harnack, *What is Christianity?*, 207.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 210-214.

<sup>20</sup> For critiques of Harnack’s thesis which are not discussed in this chapter, see Jean Danielou, *Gospel Message and Hellenistic Culture* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1973); Paul Gavriluk, “Harnack’s Hellenized Christianity or Florovsky’s ‘Sacred Hellenism’: Questioning Two Metanarratives of Early Christian Engagement with Late Antique Culture,” in *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 54 (2010): 323-344; Aloys Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, vol. 1, *From the Apostolic Age to Chalcedon (451)*, trans. John Bowden (Atlanta: John Knox, 1975); Wolfhart Pannenberg, “The Appropriation of the Philosophical Concept of God as a Dogmatic Problem of Early Christian Theology,” in *Basic Questions in Theology*, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 119-183; Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition*, vol. 1 *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971).

The brief overview does not include Harnack's specific discussion of impassibility. This is because, despite the influence his thesis has held over the doctrine, Harnack does not mention impassibility in his evaluation of Christian doctrine's Hellenization. He does mention it briefly in tracing the development of dogma, but does not offer an evaluation of the doctrine.<sup>21</sup> He does claim that the doctrines of God in early centuries turned "Christianity [into] a deistical religion for the whole world,"<sup>22</sup> and would have undoubtedly condemned impassibility along with the other church doctrines which find analogues in Greek philosophy. However, Harnack does not explicitly condemn the doctrine in his writings.

His ideas have left an indelible mark on subsequent theologians, in no aspect more than impassibility. T.E. Pollard summarizes this position well, denouncing the patristic impassibility a "particularly striking illustration of the damage done by the assumption of alien philosophical positions when they are applied to Christian theology."<sup>23</sup> Many scholars have concurred with Pollard's assessment, leading to the modern situation in which affirmation of God's suffering is nearly ubiquitous. There are still, however, a number of voices speaking out strongly against the theory of the Greek corruption of early Christian theology.

The argument in favor of the "Hellenization thesis," particularly with regard to impassibility, has been laid out helpfully by Paul Gavriluk:

1. Divine impassibility is an attribute of God in Greek and Hellenistic philosophy.

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<sup>21</sup> Harnack, *History of Dogma*, 5:244-247.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:224.

<sup>23</sup> T.E. Pollard, "The Impassibility of God," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 8 (1955): 356.

2. Divine impassibility was adopted by the early Fathers uncritically from the philosophers.
3. Divine impassibility does not leave room for any sound account of divine emotions and divine involvement in history, as attested in the Bible.
4. Divine impassibility is incompatible with the revelation of the suffering God in Jesus Christ.
5. The latter fact was recognized by a minority group of theologians who affirmed that God is passible, going against the majority opinion.<sup>24</sup>

This chapter will respond primarily to the first and second points, while the third and fourth points are addressed elsewhere in this project. The fifth point will not be addressed as it proves little without the support of the prior four points. The discussion will begin with an examination of those who have accepted Harnack's thesis in some form and their usage of it in defending divine passibility before moving to a response to their claims.

#### Proponents of the Hellenization Thesis

Jürgen Moltmann is one significant figure who has invoked the influence of Greek philosophy against impassibility. Though he cites Harnack on a few points in his *Crucified God*, he does not do so to support his attack on impassibility. However, the influence of Harnack's thesis is obvious. Moltmann clearly blames Platonic influence for the encroachment of Greek philosophy on theology for the doctrine of impassibility, calling for Christianity to permanently abandon the God of Plato for the Father of Jesus. He does give credit to the early church in a place where Harnack would not, calling the doctrine of the Trinity an idea which "breaks the spell of the old philosophical concept of God."<sup>25</sup> In his later work, Moltmann criticizes an aspect of Harnack's thesis, specifically his claim

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<sup>24</sup> Paul L. Gavrilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God: The Dialectics of Patristic Thought*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 5.

<sup>25</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, trans. by John Bowden and R.A. Wilson (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 215.

that the Gospel had nothing to do with the Son but only with the Father. For Moltmann, this is clearly untrue based upon Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom.<sup>26</sup> For all this, Moltmann still denounces impassibility along Harnackian lines, contrasting the Greek definition of deity with the Christian. With Christ's passion at the center of the Christian faith, he argues, how can God be said to not suffer?<sup>27</sup>

Another voice in support of some aspect of Harnack's thesis is American Lutheran theologian Robert Jenson. In the first volume of his *Systematic Theology*, Jenson offers several criticisms of the Greek influence on early Christianity. He does criticize Harnack's perspective on the early church, accusing him of so emphasizing the impurity of the Gospel after the first century that he unwittingly leaves himself (following his argument to its logical conclusion) unable to understand the pure Gospel.<sup>28</sup> However, he follows Harnack's condemnation of Greek theology, accusing the early church of being too eager to avoid the "foolishness" of the cross described by Paul (1 Cor. 1:18-29), and in this eagerness perverting key aspects of the New Testament.<sup>29</sup> Jenson carries this over into his discussion of impassibility, calling the doctrine alluring but "deeply alien" to the Christian faith, an illegitimate holdover from the early church adoption of Platonism.<sup>30</sup>

Contemporary Evangelical theologian Greg Boyd has given his own version of the Hellenization thesis. Boyd does not target the earliest days of the church as Harnack does,

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<sup>26</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God*, trans. by Margaret Kohl (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), 62-71.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>28</sup> Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, *The Triune God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 24.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

but rather focuses his ire on later figures in church history. His primary targets are Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. He calls the line of reasoning which led to conceiving of God as impassible to be “in keeping with the ancient Greek philosophical tradition,” the adoption of which by Augustine was “one of the greatest missteps in the history of western philosophy.”<sup>31</sup> Strangely, he places the blame for this move at the feet of Augustine, ignoring the numerous other figures in the early church who utilized such terms in their reasoning.<sup>32</sup> However, his greatest attention is given to the Aristotelian conception of God found in the works of Thomas Aquinas.<sup>33</sup> He criticizes Thomas for adopting the Aristotelian conception of “the ground of being,” and calls this an illegitimate starting point for a doctrine of God. Thomas and the Thomistic tradition are blamed for “preventing revelation from speaking” and instead coming up with definitions for God from outside the Christian faith.<sup>34</sup> He argues that if Aquinas had begun thinking of God as love rather than the “ground of being,” he never would have conceived of an impassible God.<sup>35</sup> Further, if the medieval church had looked to the cross for their understanding of God, they would have viewed God’s love as necessarily suffering love

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<sup>31</sup> Gregory A. Boyd, *The Crucifixion of the Warrior God: Interpreting the Old Testament’s Violent Portraits of God in the Light of the Cross*, vol. 2, *The Cruciform Thesis* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017), 670.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. The move to blame Augustine for theology’s “fall” into Hellenistic philosophy is common among the Open Theist camp to which Boyd belongs. See John Sanders, “Historical Considerations,” in *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 80-85. Though Sanders notes that classical attributes were present in earlier figures, the bulk of the blame is still placed at Augustine’s feet. It is understandable, if misguided, for those who adhere to Open Theism would wish to target Augustine. Open Theism is largely an evangelical reaction to the influence of Calvinism on contemporary evangelical theology, and Augustine was quite influential on Calvin and thus mainstream evangelical theology.

<sup>33</sup> Boyd, *Crucifixion of the Warrior God*, 652-663.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 663-667.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 672.

rather than “reason alone,” and there would be no problem of “ascribing a love-motivated change to God” that needed to be overcome.<sup>36</sup>

### The Christian Doctrine of Impassibility

Much of recent scholarship stands against these assertions. Robert Sokolowski notes the Christological heresies rejected by the early church were a rejection of precisely what those who accept Harnack’s thesis accuse the early church of. These proposals were rejected to resist the influence of pagan religion on the Christian faith. The notion that the early controversies represent “just an importation of Hellenistic thought-patterns into Christianity” represents a failure “to take seriously the need to distinguish the Christian faith and its theology from simply natural religion and philosophy.”<sup>37</sup> While the main focus of the early church was on understanding the identity of Jesus, their doctrine of God and the relationship between God and the world were formed alongside it. In the understanding of how God related through the world, the church came to an understanding of a God who was not a part of or dependent on the world but who yet entered the world to redeem it.<sup>38</sup> The rejected heresies only told part of this story. Arianism, for example, agreed that God was not a part of or dependent on the world but did not hold that God in his fullness entered the world. The God who is transcendent yet immanent, impervious to evil and pain, and enters the world in Jesus Christ is not the God of the philosophers or one from the pagan pantheons but the God of the Christian story.

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<sup>36</sup> Boyd, *Crucifixion of the Warrior God*, 670.

<sup>37</sup> Robert Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason: Foundations of Christian Theology* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), 36-37.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

An important observation, Gavriilyuk notes, is the diverse accounts of divine emotion present in ancient Greek philosophy. While the topic is often treated by passibilists as if it were monolithic in ancient Greek philosophy, this is not supported by the evidence. Employing the examples of the Epicureans, Middle Platonists, and Stoics, Gavriilyuk notes there were extreme differences in conception of divine emotion between these three representative schools. Additionally, Gavriilyuk establishes that although impassibility did become widely accepted among the later Platonists, impassibility was only applied to God in a highly technical aspect in the writings of Aristotle and in seed-form in the pre-Socratic Anaxagoras but did not hold the same meaning as the modern conception of the term. It did not appear as an attribute of God in the pre-Socratics (excepting Anaxagoras), Plato, or the Stoics.<sup>39</sup> As such, divine impassibility could not have been taken over from the ancient Greeks, as is commonly claimed.<sup>40</sup> In fact, Aristotle's successors in the Peripatetic school came to accept the importance of well-controlled feelings (*metriopatheia*), a distinction of which the early Church was aware.<sup>41</sup> Even the Stoics, with whom the elimination of passions is most closely associated, recognized value in *eupatheiai*—good emotions.<sup>42</sup> The Fathers of the Church were unable to import the idea from Greek philosophy at large because there was not consensus in Greek philosophy to import—they would not have recognized a distinction “between the

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<sup>39</sup> Gavriilyuk, *Suffering of the Impassible God*, 34-35.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 35. See e.g. Moltmann, *Crucified God*, 267-268.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 26-27.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

involved God of the Bible and the uninvolved God of the Hellenistic philosophers.”<sup>43</sup> Additionally, Gavriilyuk draws out the patristic intention of the doctrine as an “apophatic qualifier” used to protect the transcendence and the propriety of the emotional state of the God of Scripture.<sup>44</sup> The Christian God, in contrast to pagan gods, was free from “envy, lust, and all selfish desires,” preserving a contrast between creator and creature.<sup>45</sup> The church was further able to maintain the dialectic of God as like humanity in one way (“possessing certain emotionally coloured characteristics”) but entirely unlike humans in another (impassible).<sup>46</sup>

While it is a convenient polemic to employ against proponents of impassibility, the accusation of Greek corruption of early Christian theology becomes increasingly difficult to sustain in the face of the evidence. For one, engagement with Greek philosophy can already be seen in the text of the New Testament itself. The Logos Christology of John, despite Harnack’s refusal to stomach a connection with the Greek philosophical Logos, is quite clearly utilizing that already-existing phenomenon to describe Christian theology. Additionally, Paul offers an implicit approval for the use of natural theology in his discussion in Romans 1 as well as his Areopagus speech in Acts 17. While Barth’s famous “Nein!”<sup>47</sup> might echo in our ears in response to such a claim, it seems clear that Paul is employing natural reason in both instances. The extent to which God can be known through nature in Romans 1 may be debated, but Paul is clear God can in some sense be

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<sup>43</sup> Gavriilyuk, *Suffering of the Impassible God*, 36.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 47-63.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>47</sup> Karl Barth, *Nein!: Antwort an Emil Brunner* (München: C. Kaiser, 1934).

known. Finally, the (admittedly debated) Platonic influence on the author of Hebrews shows a canonized instance of engagement with Hellenistic philosophy.<sup>48</sup> Of course, such instances do not sacralize the entirety of the pre-Christian schools of philosophy, but they do offer precedence for careful and nuanced engagement with modes of thinking that are not Christian in origin.

In addition, the prospect of impassibility as a late infiltration of the pure Christian thought introduced in the second century is dubious. Ignatius of Antioch writes in his letter to Polycarp of the “impassible one” who became passible for the sake of humanity.<sup>49</sup> Early church tradition names as Ignatius a acolyte of the apostle John, but even if this is inaccurate, he was born in the first century (ca. 50 AD), placing him in close chronological proximity to the apostles and those to whom they preached. If not John, it is still likely he learned under those who were taught by the apostles or missionaries they sent out. If the notion of an impassible God were completely antithetical to the revelation

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<sup>48</sup> The debate over this matter has largely emphasized the Jewish apocalypticism which could explain the seemingly Platonic overtones of Hebrews. However, the Greek influence on the rhetorical style of the letter coupled with passages that closely resembles Platonic notions points strongly to some Greek influence on the author. Of course, an influence of Platonism is not mutually exclusive with the influence of Jewish apocalypticism; indeed, many of the church fathers borrowed concepts from both. As this chapter argues, the use of such concepts does not entail a capitulation to alien systems—these appropriations must be evaluated to see how closely they adhere to a Christian understanding of reality. For the Hellenistic influence on the author’s rhetoric, see David A. deSilva, “How Greek Was the Author of ‘Hebrews?’” in *Christian Origins and Greco-Roman Culture: Social and Literary Contexts for the New Testament*, Early Christianity in Its Hellenistic Context vol. 1, Stanley E. Porter and Andrew W. Pitts, eds. (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 634-645. For the influence of Platonism in particular, see Gregory E. Sterling, “Ontology Versus Eschatology: Tensions Between Author and Community in Hebrews,” *The Studia Philonica Annual* 13 (2001): 190-211; James W. Thompson, “What Has Middle Platonism to do with Hebrews?” in *Reading the Epistle to the Hebrews: A Resource for Students*, edited by Eric F. Mason and Kevin B. McCrudden (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), 31-52; Thompson, *The Beginnings of Christian Philosophy: The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Washington, DC: The Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1982); C.J. de Vogel, “Platonism and Christianity: A Mere Antagonism or a Profound Common Ground?” in *Vigiliae Christianae* 39 (1985): 1-62.

<sup>49</sup> Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to Polycarp* 3.

of God expounded in the apostolic witness, it would be quite surprising to find one so close to the apostles invoking the doctrine.<sup>50</sup>

### The God of the Machine

For a movement purportedly attuned to the historical influences overshadowing the early Christian doctrine of God, the modern wave of theistic personalists does not give much credence to the historical influences coloring their own thought. Two such influences will be explored here: the rise of modern science and the influence of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel on theology.<sup>51</sup> The first is an under-explored aspect of the turn toward theistic personalism—specifically, the loss of teleology in modern sciences. This has been a topic of some recent debate in the philosophy of science, even from non-theistic philosophers.<sup>52</sup> One of the most significant alterations in the course of modern science was the loss of certain forms of causality. Prior to the modern era, much of humanity’s understanding of the world relied on the Aristotelian notion of the “four categories of causality,” namely material, formal, efficient, and final causation.<sup>53</sup> Briefly, these entail

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<sup>50</sup> There is some discussion as to the exact meaning of *apatheia* in Ignatius’ writing and whether he believes God is *essentially* impassible or merely impassible by his place in heaven. See Johnathan Bayes, “Divine ἀπάθεια in Ignatius of Antioch,” *Studia Patristica* 21 (1987), 27-31. However, it is clear that he does invoke impassibility to describe God’s nature and evinces a high Christology in doing so.

<sup>51</sup> The influence of modern science and Hegelian philosophy will be explored in this chapter, but a third issue is the rise of sympathy as a virtue. This will be explored in the fourth chapter for its influence on the concern to secure to divine relationality.

<sup>52</sup> See Thomas Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinist Conception of Nature is Almost Certainly False* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>53</sup> David Bentley Hart, *The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss* (New Haven: Yale, 2013), 54.

1. The matter from which a given thing is created, including “prime matter” from which everything is created (material cause).
2. The form which makes a material into the type of thing—such as chair or cup—that it is, including the traits of that material (formal cause).
3. The agent who “brings form and matter together in a single substance,” such as the chairmaker or potter (efficient cause).
4. The ultimate goal or end of that thing, such as supporting a human or containing water (final cause).<sup>54</sup>

There was also, Hart argues, a fifth cause present in Christian metaphysics that he terms the “ontological cause.” This cause is the cause of everything, solely able to create *ex nihilo* and upon which all contingent things rely at every moment for their being.<sup>55</sup> As the scientific method developed, the notions of formal and final causation were set aside due to the inability to investigate such things empirically. Instead, nature can be investigated through a mechanical lens, with the scientist attending to the practical ordering of disparate components and movements of the world. However, what began as a matter of simple practicality lead to formal and final causation being eliminated entirely from the prevailing view of the world, rather than simply set aside for the sake of scientific investigation.<sup>56</sup> As such, God became, even in the minds of some Christians, something of a “supreme external efficient cause,” more compatible with the notion of a demiurge.<sup>57</sup>

After this turn, the entire view of the universe was considerably altered for many. No more was the world the dwelling place of a God who was both *interior intimo meo* and *superior summo meo*. Under the old schema, all of creation was a sort of theophany, a

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<sup>54</sup> Hart, *The Experience of God*, 54-55.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 56-58.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

revelation of the God who continually holds it in existence. After the causal shift, the world became the product of a great mind who untied disparate parts and set them into motion.<sup>58</sup> The first views the world “as a reflection of God’s nature, open to transcendence from within” while the latter views it as “a reflection only of divine power, and as closed in upon itself.”<sup>59</sup> Further, there was a move made in the Enlightenment period and modernity to reject the use of revelation in discussing the philosophy of God. As Janet Martin Soskice notes, this was not done by non-believers; instead, many theologians and Christian philosophers were leading the charge, believing that the use of reason could offer a stronger defense of the faith. Instead of securing the biblical God through the use of reason, however, the attempt to locate God through purely human knowledge instead undermined the notion of transcendence in Christian theology and thus led to “a collapse of religious language into effective univocity.”<sup>60</sup>

Due to these factors, the conversation between Christian and atheist in the modern period shifted from diametrically opposed positions to what amounted to a pair of different atheistic visions of the world.<sup>61</sup> Since neither truly understood God in the sense of the eternal, timeless, transcendent source of being as classically conceived, it was easy for God to become just one more optional piece of the cosmic puzzle rather than its ultimate ground. Certainly, most theistic personalists do not conceive of God as a demiurge, but the

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<sup>58</sup> Hart, *The Experience of God*, 58-59.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>60</sup> Janet Martin Soskice, “Naming God: A Study in Faith and Reason,” in *Reason and the Reasons of Faith*, ed. Paul J. Griffiths and Reinhard Hütter (New York: T&T Clark, 2005), 243.

<sup>61</sup> Hart, *The Experience of God*, 61.

thinking which removed God from his place as the transcendent creator and sustainer gave rise to such alternative conceptions of God.

### The Influence of Hegel

Another important factor in this discussion is the way modern theology has been influenced by Hegel's philosophical work. While the influence of Greek philosophy has been maligned by the theologians mentioned above and many others, the Hegelian influence on modern theology has been largely ignored. Some scholars have noted the influence of Hegel on the theologians who followed him, but those who criticize the early church for being influenced by its philosophical milieu have not taken steps to examine the influence of Hegelian and process philosophy on their own work—it is likely an unconscious bias for many, coming down through Hegelian-influenced theologians like Karl Barth, Jürgen Moltmann, Wolfhart Pannenberg, and Paul Tillich. Some scholars have noted this influence in criticizing the theistic personalist camp, but there has not been a great deal of attention paid to the topic.<sup>62</sup>

The renaissance of trinitarian theology in the twentieth century, though sometimes attributed to its novel expression in the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher, was largely due to Hegel's "setting the stage," as the key figures largely speak negatively of Schleiermacher's formulations.<sup>63</sup> Hegel's criticism of the *Actus Purus* of Thomas Aquinas and demand for a greater dynamism within the being of God has become quite influential

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<sup>62</sup> One significant example traces the Hegelian influence on contemporary theology through Hans Urs von Balthasar's response to Hegel. See Cyril O'Regan, *Anatomy of Misremembering: Von Balthasar's Response to Philosophical Modernity* (Chestnut Ridge, NY: Crossroad Publishing, 2014).

<sup>63</sup> Samuel M. Powell, *The Trinity in German Thought* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001), 258.

in modern times, as seen particularly in the work of those passibilists mentioned above. Additionally, Hegel's insistence on the life of God as "lived out through the life of the world" is a common assumption in contemporary theology.<sup>64</sup> The importation of this alien philosophy into theology gives little pause to those who denounce the patristic usage of philosophical terms despite its widespread and under-acknowledged influence.

### The Question of Scripture

In the years since Gavriilyuk's *Suffering of the Impassible God* was published, passibilist theologians have found less recourse in the Hellenization thesis of their forebearers. Many now acknowledge that the situation in early Christianity was not nearly as simple as the vision set out by previous theologians (as summarized by Gavriilyuk above). However, there has been another argument built in place of the previous one—that is, that the early church was too influenced by philosophy in their exegesis of Scripture. Under this reading, the early Christians may have redefined rather than adopted uncritically philosophical concepts like impassibility, but their concern for the concepts was still illegitimate as it was driven by philosophical motives. Rather than focusing on the cross, such theologians charge, the early church sought to present an intellectually acceptable philosophical system, and this betrayed the uniqueness of the Christian revelation.<sup>65</sup> This section will turn briefly to the question of theology and exegesis, specifically in relation to the question of God's impassibility. Such a question can be—and is—itsself the subject of numerous books. As such, this section will merely bring into

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<sup>64</sup> Stephen R. Holmes, *The Quest for the Trinity: The Doctrine of God in Scripture, History and Modernity* (Grand Rapids: IVP Academic, 2012), 186

<sup>65</sup> See e.g. Gregory A. Boyd, *The Crucifixion of the Warrior God*, 663-676.

question some of the exegetical assumptions made by those who use Scripture as a proof against divine impassibility.

Primarily, such studies engage with the question of divine im/passibility without stating the way in which Scripture is being used. Often, such criticisms launch into polemic against the impassible God without offering a coherent doctrine of Scripture.<sup>66</sup> As such, many discussions between passibilists and impassibilists regarding the Scriptural witness resort to the question of anthropomorphism—or, more exactly, anthropopathism. Impassibilists claim Scriptures like those that depict God suffering, changing his mind, and being moved to anger or joy are accommodations of God to humanity, just as the discussion of God’s finger writing the ten commandments (Ex. 31:18), or God “coming down” to survey the goings-on at the tower of Babel (Gen. 11:5), or God walking in the garden (Gen. 3:8) are anthropomorphic, since elsewhere Scripture attests that “God is spirit” (Jn. 4:24). While this is a legitimate course to pursue, the argument has reached something of a stalemate, with an insistence from the passibilists that depictions of God’s emotions should be taken literally as a separate phenomenon and the impassibilist insisting it should not. Those defending impassibility insist such arguments could easily be used to defend God as embodied while those defending passibility insist the overwhelming biblical evidence supports divine passibility and to deny such a notion is to blatantly reject the testimony of Scripture.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> One notable exception is John C. Peckham, *The Love of God: A Canonical Model* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2014) which devotes a chapter to the use of Scripture in his understanding. This work is not solely against impassibility but does contain a criticism and rejection of the doctrine.

<sup>67</sup> This can be seen in the presentation and responses in James E. Dolezal, “Strong Impassibility,” *Divine Impassibility: Four Views of God’s Emotions and Suffering*, ed. Robert J. Matz and A. Chadwick Thornhill (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2019), 13-52.

There are several observations to be made here that may be able to break the stalemate between the two. To begin with, there are two distinct approaches to Scripture undertaken without a recognition of the differences. The passibilist camp generally views Scripture as expressing God's relation to creation in a fairly straightforward way—so, when God is said to be angered or saddened or move to rejoice at the actions of his people, such events are understood as indicating real changes which take place within God's person. Not only do the authors of Scripture reveal the workings of God in relation to persons, but they communicate who God is in himself. Understanding Scripture as inspired by God grants this notion credibility, as God could conceivably reveal himself as he is to the authors of Scripture. However, it must be asked if this is precisely what Scripture is seeking to do. It does not seem apparent that this is the case. Scripture appears to be not so much a metaphysical textbook explaining the intricacies of God's nature as it does an account of God's relation to his people. To illustrate this, we can observe a lack of consistency on the possibility of God changing within the text of Scripture itself. God is said both to repent (Gen. 6:5-7, 1 Sam. 15:11) and to be incapable of repenting (1 Sam. 15:29).<sup>68</sup> To claim one clear biblical teaching on the matter fails to recognize the diverse witness of Scripture. These images are useful in the context of the narratives in which they appear for communicating truths about human experience and interaction with the divine. So also are notions of God grieving at the sin of his people or being moved to joy at their repentance.

Of course, there *are* metaphysical and theological claims to which the Christian view of God and the world must adhere: God created everything *ex nihilo*, sin entered

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<sup>68</sup> Gavriilyuk, *Suffering of the Impassible God*, 38.

God’s good creation, God loves his creation, God became incarnate through Jesus, God will secure a eschatological victory over evil through the work of the Son and Spirit, to name a few. However, this does not entail that each account given of God is an insight into the precise metaphysical being of God. A story or poem can contain truth in the ultimate sense even if it does not provide an entirely accurate description of what occurred historically. As Robert Barron has said, asking the question, “is Scripture true?” is akin to asking, “is a library true?”<sup>69</sup> The latter question is incoherent on its face because it cannot be answered in the same way for the entirety of a library. Books of fiction are clearly not “true” in sense that they tell of events that happened in history, but they can be true in the sense that they disclose truths about the world and about reality—the goodness of sacrifice, the pain of loss, the joy of attaining a goal to which one has worked diligently. Poetry works in a similar way. The history section of the library may be able to be measured on its historical truth or falsity, but that also insinuates a modern understanding of history-telling in which the ultimate goal is to recount events precisely as they occurred.

The Bible can be viewed as a library of inspired texts—indeed, for much of Christian history (due primarily to the limitations of manuscript technology) the Bible *was* passed down as a library, or at least as a multivolume collection of texts.<sup>70</sup> Though the current single-volume nature of Scripture is a boon in many ways, from availability for the laity to the convenience in transporting it to the mission field, it can lead Christians to understand the Bible not as a collection of texts by various inspired authors but as one text

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<sup>69</sup> Robert Barron, “Stephen Colbert, Ricky Gervais, and the Debate About God,” Word on Fire Show (MP3 podcast), February 21, 2017, accessed January 20, 2020, <http://wordonfireshow.com/episode63/>.

<sup>70</sup> Joseph K. Gordon, *Divine Scripture in Human Understanding: A Systematic Theology of the Christian Bible* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2019), 174.

delivered from heaven, written by the finger of God. Instead, Scripture should be viewed in its proper place: poetry as communicating divine truth in poetic form, prophecy as communicating God's will for how his people should conduct themselves, history as a—particularly Ancient Near Eastern—description of past events. For instance, though many passibilists would maintain that the depictions of God as embodied in the Old Testament are metaphorical,<sup>71</sup> it is likely that their view was not shared by ancient Israel.<sup>72</sup> If we can acknowledge that the Israelites likely conceived of God as corporeal but we can now acknowledge that their understanding was limited or flawed, it does not seem unreasonable to assume they conceived of God in passibilist terms but we can understand God as impassible. It is not a denigration of the biblical authors to make this suggestion, particularly since they are not attempting to offer a metaphysical description of God's nature. Most importantly for this project, encounters between God and humanity should be understood as humans attempting to communicate an interaction between the infinite and the finite, as imperfect humans expressing an encounter with the inconceivable, ineffable, transcendent creator God. The God expressed here is one who exists in eternity and acts in temporal moments.<sup>73</sup> As such, discussions of God changing his mind or being moved to this or that emotion by the actions of creatures should not be taken as literal depictions of what occurs within God. This is not to say that nothing about God can be gleaned from

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<sup>71</sup> See, e.g., John C. Peckham, "A Qualified Passibility Response," in *Divine Impassibility: Four Views of God's Emotions and Suffering*, 42-46. For an account of divine passibility which also defends divine corporeality, see Marcel Sarot, *God, Passibility and Corporeality* (Kampen, The Netherlands: Kok Pharos, 1992). Sarot's account is more of a philosophical approach to the question of divine corporeality, but he does acknowledge the testimony to God's embodiment in the Hebrew Bible (see pp. 209-210).

<sup>72</sup> See Benjamin D. Sommer, *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 1-10.

<sup>73</sup> This will be explored further in the next chapter.

these passages. On the contrary, descriptions God refraining from destroying Israel or becoming angered at sin serve to underscore his great mercy or the seriousness of sin.

Understanding the theological consequences of the biblical account can be taken to establish the truth of impassibility from the text of Scripture. For instance, the nature of creation *ex nihilo* makes certain demands on the understanding of God. The notion that God creates everything from nothing leads to an affirmation of divine simplicity, as the reliance on discrete parts would make God reducible to those parts and would set those parts of God as responsible for the creation of the world.<sup>74</sup> Creation *ex nihilo* recognizes what Sokolowski refers to as “the Christian distinction,”<sup>75</sup> expressed in the course of Christian theology through the centuries. This distinction centers around what is referred to above as God’s “noncompetitive” or “noncontrastive” transcendence—the notion that God is not merely to be understood as being transcendent in opposition to the world (i.e. unchanging vs. changing) but being altogether beyond such opposition. This God creates the world without use of intermediaries, because he is *interior intimo meo et superior summo meo*. He can be involved in the most minute and intimate aspects of creation while withholding himself from being tarnished by its sin. Non-Christian philosophy need not be cited to affirm this notion—in fact, this was put forth by Christians to solve a problem that pagan philosophy could not! The noncompetitive transcendence of God is demanded by the Christian story in which God is intimately involved in his creation and ultimately becomes part of it in order to redeem it. The God who can “become part of the world... without disrupting the integrity of the world,” must be a God who is not “one of the kinds

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<sup>74</sup> This is argued capably in Chance Juliano, "Divine Simplicity as a Necessary Condition for Affirming Creation Ex Nihilo" (master's thesis, Abilene Christian University, 2019).

<sup>75</sup> Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason*, 21.

of being in the world.”<sup>76</sup> The confession of the incarnation is foundational for establishing a God who is impassible, as impassibility protects the noncompetitive transcendence of God.

Another place that leads to an understanding of the nature of God as defined in this project is in the giving of the divine name. When God speaks to Moses from the burning bush, he offers the name YHWH: “I AM WHO I AM” (Exod. 3:14). The tradition of the divine name as a source for theology is strong in the Christian tradition, appearing in the work of theologians such as Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius, and Thomas Aquinas.<sup>77</sup> For them, the divine name was an insight into who God is: he is being itself. To say “God exists” is redundant: God is, by definition, existence itself.<sup>78</sup> From this understanding flows the classical understanding of God: simple, immutable, impassible, omnipresent, transcendent. Eternity also follows naturally if God is who he is.<sup>79</sup> Thus, when Jesus claims, “before Abraham was, I AM,” (Jn. 8:58) he claims the divine name and its prerogatives. Contemporary scholarship, however, has argued against this understanding. Finding warrant for theology proper in the divine name draws accusations of “Platonizing”<sup>80</sup> the text, allowing ancient philosophy to shift the meaning from a promise

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<sup>76</sup> Sokolowski, *God of Faith and Reason*, 123.

<sup>77</sup> See Augustine, *On the Trinity* 5.2.3, *Of True Religion* 49.97; Pseudo-Dionysius, *On the Divine Names* 1.6, 2.1; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 1.13.11.

<sup>78</sup> This is particularly clear in Thomas.

<sup>79</sup> Augustine, *True Religion* 49.97.

<sup>80</sup> Franz Rosenzweig, “A Letter to Martin Goldner,” in *Scripture and Translation*, ed. Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, trans. by Lawrence Rosenwald and Everett Fox (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 191.

of God's faithful presence with Israel to "a metaphysical definition in the abstract of God's essence."<sup>81</sup>

However, as D. Stephen Long argues, there is much more to the tradition of the divine names than unthinking deference to the Platonic milieu. In fact, those who read the theological tradition of the divine names in such a way are themselves standing within a tradition of interpretation which fully accepts the Hellenization thesis—a problematic position, as this chapter has already shown.<sup>82</sup> As Long notes,<sup>83</sup> Augustine himself speaks against this Hellenizing accusation. Augustine claims he once thought of God in Aristotelian categories but was freed of this when he became a Christian.<sup>84</sup> The usage of the divine name here is invoked to protect *against* Aristotelian categories: Augustine holds that God's essence is his existence, which means God cannot have attributes in an Aristotelian sense.<sup>85</sup> Indeed, as Michael Allen has shown, Augustine's analysis of the

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<sup>81</sup> Clark H. Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 116. Incidentally, Pinnock's distinction between "metaphysical definition in the abstract" and a promise of God's presence is a false one. For the involvement of the classical God, see chapter 4 below.

<sup>82</sup> D. Stephen Long, *Speaking of God: Theology, Language, and Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 188. There is further an issue in identifying the features drawn from the divine name as "attributes." Soskice has argued that the shift caused by modernity has changed features like impassibility, simplicity, omnipotence from "names of God" to "attributes of God." Under a premodern method, these functioned as names of God, consequences of God being the I AM. Viewing these features as names rather than attributes leads one to a healthy apophaticism that does not presume to speak too much of God. The post-Enlightenment mind seeks to lay hold of and describe God purely through the use of reason, which elevates reason far beyond its proper place. See Soskice, "Naming God," 243-249.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 194-195.

<sup>84</sup> Augustine, *Confessions* 4.16.29. "Thinking that absolutely everything that exists is comprehended under the ten categories, I tried to conceive you also, my God, wonderfully simple and immutable, as if you too were a subject of which magnitude and beauty are attributes. I thought them to be in you as if in a subject, as in the case of a physical body, whereas you yourself are your own magnitude and your own beauty. By contrast a body is not great and beautiful by being body; if it were less great or less beautiful, it would nevertheless still be body. My conception of you was a lie, not truth, the figments of my misery, not the permanent solidity of your supreme bliss. You had commanded and it so came about in me, that the soil would bring forth thorns and brambles for me, and that with toil I should gain my bread."

<sup>85</sup> Long, *Speaking of God*, 195.

divine name is closely attentive to questions of narrative theology and apophaticism. These gleanings are quite like the readings several biblical scholars—from diverse backgrounds and theological commitments—have offered of Exodus 3:14.<sup>86</sup>

In addition, Catholic theologian Thomas Weinandy offers several “bridges” from Scripture to the patristic doctrine of God in his work *Does God Suffer?* After a chapter on the Old Testament God’s relation to impassibility, Weinandy examines two key bridges: the New Testament text and Philo of Alexandria.<sup>87</sup> Though Philo’s interpretation of the Old Testament was very influential on patristic thought, Weinandy’s exposition on the bridge from the New Testament is more relevant to this project. In his examination of the New Testament, Weinandy draws on passages like Paul’s exposition on natural theology in Romans 1 and Paul’s speech in the Areopagus in Acts 17 as well as Paul’s contrast of the false pagan gods with the reality of the one true God in 1 Corinthians 8. Additionally, he draws on the words of Jesus in the Gospels, such as when he calls the Father good (Matt. 19:17; Mk. 19:18; Lk. 18:19) and perfect (Matt. 5:48) and exhorts his followers to imitate this perfection. These interactions provide a bridge from the New Testament to the philosophical conception of God and legitimize the theology of the patristics which follow these lines of thought. Of course, the patristics did not uncritically accept these conceptions. The idea of God as creator “baptized” Platonism, and therefore while the Fathers maintained their perception of God as Other and so affirmed their version of

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<sup>86</sup> Michael Allen, “Exodus 3 After the Hellenization Thesis,” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 3.2 (2009): 179-196. See especially pp.185-194. Some biblical scholars he notes who draw similar conclusions to Augustine’s include Donald Gowan, *Theology in Exodus: Biblical Theology in the Form of a Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 76-97; Brevard S. Childs, *Exodus: A Critical and Theological Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1974,) 46-89; and Michael Fishbane, *Text and Texture: Close Readings of Selected Biblical Texts* (New York: Schocken, 1979), 67.

<sup>87</sup> Thomas G. Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2000), 69.

impassibility, they also conceived of God as personal and intimately involved with his creation.<sup>88</sup>

### Conclusion

Harnack's thesis has been widely discounted by much of the recent work done in historical theology, but its influence can still be seen today. It appears in a number of theologians who continue to criticize the influence of Greek philosophy on early Christian theology. This assertion has several problems, including the way it depicts the view of divine emotions in Hellenistic philosophy. Further, the underlying philosophical influences of modern theologians, such as the shift brought about by the Enlightenment and the influence of Hegel, are largely ignored. Finally, the method such theologians use to read Scripture has significant difficulties due to a lack of recognition both of the diverse ways God is portrayed in Scripture and the exegetical strategies employed. For these reasons, among others, Harnack's thesis and its subsequent theological inheritors fail to strike a blow against divine impassibility.

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<sup>88</sup> Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 69-73.

## **Chapter Five**

### **The Relational Question**

An important criticism of impassibility is the insistence by its detractors that it makes God's relation to the world and its inhabitants impossible. If God is radically transcendent of the world and cannot be moved by the actions of humans, how can he be said to be in relationship with individual persons or communities like Israel or the church? Further, if God does not feel emotions like humans do, how can there be any relation between God and humanity? In relationships, humans experience pleasure, disappointment, excitement, sorrow, and a variety of other emotions due to the actions of others. If God does not suffer these, it is argued, a relationship with him bears little difference from a relationship to a beautiful statue. We can admire its beauty and grandeur, but it is stoic and immobile in response. This chapter will examine some under-explored aspects of the conversations around impassibility and God's relation to the world before laying out the objection and formulating a response.

#### A Case of "Impassible" Human Action

The case of Jo Cameron might be a useful one in understanding the how one can be relational without enduring the other's suffering. Cameron, a retired schoolteacher in Scotland, displays what can be understood as very close to a human expression of impassibility. Of course, this is not to say her experience is the same as God's—this work has cautioned against such an understanding of God. However, her case is a significant analogue for this phenomenon. Cameron is one of the rare individuals in the world who cannot feel physical pain. However, in contrast to others who cannot feel physical pain,

she is largely immune to emotional distress as well. Rather than becoming a moral monster—as personalists describe the notion of an impassible God—Cameron is, by the account of those around her, a remarkably kind, patient, and compassionate person. She does not lose her temper, she is not prone to emotional distress in the face of pain—she knows pain, she says, as an abstract notion, but has not experienced it. But she knows when others are in pain and makes it her responsibility to help them. When her son suffered serious injuries following an assault at a bar, she recalls thinking “Oh, God, I hope he doesn’t die” but after getting into the car to drive the roughly 130 miles to the hospital where he had been taken, she was not “fretting;” her only thought was “We’ve got to get to him, he needs me.”<sup>1</sup> This is not to assert that God experiences relationships in this way, but it certainly runs counter to the passibilist assertion that God must suffer in order to be in relationship with humanity.

### Impassibility and the Rise of Sympathy

Jennifer A. Herdt traces the beginning of divine sympathy—the concept of God as co-sufferer with humans—to the Cambridge Platonists in the seventeenth century.<sup>2</sup> The shift had previously been recognized as a primarily (and almost exclusively) Anglican phenomenon at its inception<sup>3</sup> but Herdt was among the first to trace its influence to specific persons. She initially focuses on the influential Cambridge Platonist Ralph

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<sup>1</sup> Ariel Levy, “A World Without Pain: Does Hurting Make Us Human?” *The New Yorker*, January 13, 2020, accessed January 18, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Jennifer A. Herdt, “The Rise of Sympathy and the Question of Divine Suffering,” *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 29 no. 3 (2001): 369-370.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Bauckham, “‘Only the Suffering God Can Help’: Divine Passibility in Modern Theology,” *Themelios* 9 (1984): 6.

Cudworth (1617-1688) who postulated divine sympathy as a counter to Thomas Hobbes's mechanistic universe.<sup>4</sup> His efforts to oppose the materialism of Hobbes on one hand and the dualism of Descartes on the other led him to posit divine sympathy as the link between God and his creation, especially humankind.<sup>5</sup> Cudworth implied in some places that God is unchanging, and the various ways a person experiences God are a matter of that person's heart. Thus, the unchanging God could be a comforter to the faithful Christian but a terror to the sinner.<sup>6</sup> However, Cudworth ultimately went beyond such an understanding. He championed God's "vitall [*sic*] sympathy" with "all that came out from him" over against those "Dry speculators" who would posit "Apathy in the Deity" and thus "make God no better than a marble Statue."<sup>7</sup>

The attempt to balance a God who possessed this sympathy with the need to maintain God's transcendence as the one who sovereignly upholds creation forced Cudworth into a series of compromise and contradiction.<sup>8</sup> In contrast to his arguments against apathy in God, he denied God's sympathy entailed passion stirred by anything outside of God but was instead an "active perception of his own Energy."<sup>9</sup> In other words, God (as being-itself) was stirred by his own presence in creation. Thus, he was not acted on by something other than himself, but instead was a passive actor only in relation to himself. This is a creative solution that attends to concerns of passibilists and

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<sup>4</sup> Herdt, "Rise of Sympathy," 370.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 370; 374-381.

<sup>6</sup> Ralph Cudworth, Unpublished Manuscript #4980, British Library, London, 210, quoted in *ibid.*, 380.

<sup>7</sup> Cudworth, Unpublished Manuscript #4980, 211, quoted in *ibid.*, 380.

<sup>8</sup> Herdt, "Rise of Sympathy," 381.

<sup>9</sup> Cudworth, Unpublished Manuscript #4980, 212, quoted in *ibid.*, 381.

impassibilists, but it greatly blurs the line between creator and creature.<sup>10</sup> His efforts to properly delineate this understanding led Cudworth to defend an idea of the world as an emanation of God rather than something fashioned from nothing.<sup>11</sup> This naturally led to a univocity between God and the world, limiting divine transcendence and reviving the problems already solved by God's noncontrastive transcendence.<sup>12</sup>

Many Latitudinarian divines studied under the Cambridge Platonists and carried their ideas into the academy and the Anglican church, leading to the rise of "sympathy as a morally important concept."<sup>13</sup> Not only did Cudworth's use of "sympathy" mark a theological turn, it also marked a turn in the English language, though not one as exclusive to him as his theological move. While "sympathy" was originally used to express "a hidden affinity between things" and to "explain their mutual influence," its use to express an experience entering into another's sufferings can only be traced back to 1662.<sup>14</sup> With such a heritage, it is no surprise that Anglican theologians were among the first to reject divine impassibility in favor of a suffering God.

### The Criticism

Francis House offers a fairly succinct proposal of the "involvement" criticism in examining a series of poets and artists who found impassibility as a "barrier" to belief in

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<sup>10</sup> Herdt, "Rise of Sympathy," 382.

<sup>11</sup> Cudworth, Unpublished Manuscript #4980, 211; #4979, 135; #4980, 210, quoted in *ibid.*, 382.

<sup>12</sup> Herdt, "Rise of Sympathy," 383.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 371.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 372. Cf. *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, vol. 17 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 460. It should be noted that the *OED* makes reference to an alternate but similar definition of sympathy used in 1600 that approximates "compassion," but this definition still lacks the "fellow-feeling" Herdt identifies in Cudworth's writings.

God.<sup>15</sup> There is some overlap between the criticisms on offer here and those in the theodicy question. However, in keeping with the question of this chapter the framing here will focus on divine action in the world than on the question of theodicy. House cites voices both inside and outside the church in their full-throated rejection of the aloof deity he believes impassibility entails. Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth*, though it does not mention impassibility, clearly reflects the doctrine in her writings as she rejects a God who is "untouched" by human suffering in the wake of the horrors of World War I.<sup>16</sup> Within the church, Geoffrey Studdert-Kennedy in his poem "High and Lifted Up," rejected the "stained-glass window representations" of an "aloof" God reigning over the world.<sup>17</sup>

Following William Temple, House calls for a destruction of the "idol" of "Aristotle's 'apathetic God'" that has held a tight grip on the minds of Christians.<sup>18</sup> The solution to this misguided belief is an understanding of God's love as "self-giving sacrificial love."<sup>19</sup> This sort of God can break the barrier to belief and leave behind the notion which was "taken-over from non-Christian philosophy."<sup>20</sup> There is also a pastoral component to his understanding, as he believes that the movement into understanding God's love as self-giving and sacrificial would offer a challenge to Christians to live into the self-giving love of God. Not only would it remove a barrier to belief, adopting this

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<sup>15</sup> Francis House, "The Barrier of Impassibility," *Theology* 83 no. 696 (1980): 409-413.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 409.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 414.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

new notion of divine love would engender a greater commitment to the task of Christian living in the world.<sup>21</sup>

Kenneth Surin offers another example of this position, expressing deep concerns over the activity of an impassible God:

For the notion that God can only experience the sufferings of his creatures indirectly is incompatible with the fundamental Christian assertion that God is love. All real responding must involve sympathetic relationship; otherwise we would be justified, like Dostoevsky's Ivan Karamazov, in 'handing back our tickets' (to heaven) to this deity. God, in the role of passive onlooker, was *absent* in Auschwitz or Cambodia. The very principle of the incarnation — that God became *man* — presupposes that God can experience suffering.<sup>22</sup>

For Surin (and many others) the notion of a God who does not suffer is the understanding of a God who does not love and is unconcerned with the goings-on in his creation. An impassible God is so unworthy of devotion that one can righteously refuse entry into heaven—one should refuse the gift of eternity from this God, much less offer this God worship. Is there any recourse for a proponent of impassibility in the face of these accusations? Perhaps Surin's own dilemma can help guide the answer to this objection: "Either, God, if he loves us, must participate in our destinies; or, he is perfect, in which case this participation (so it is alleged) cannot be real."<sup>23</sup> Can an impassible God participate in the course of human life?

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<sup>21</sup>House, "The Barrier of Impassibility", 415.

<sup>22</sup> Kenneth Surin, "The Impassibility of God and the Problem of Evil," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 35 no. 2 (1982): 98.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

### The Involvement of the Classical God

In answering the question of the impassible God's involvement in the world, it is helpful to turn to some of the other aspects of classical theism with which impassibility is intertwined. Though not all who hold to impassibility would accept the other core tenants of classical theism,<sup>24</sup> most do, and the action of the impassible God on the world as defended in this project is related to these other facets of the classical God. One significant aspect of the classical tradition in this respect is the notion of participation. The metaphysics of participation insist that, because God is the source of all being and the transcendent one who is *interior intimo meo* and *superior summo meo*, everything that exists relies on God not only for the beginning of its existence but to continually hold it in existence. There is an "ontological dependence" on an external source and each thing has its existence "*with and indeed after and in pursuit of, another... [it is] by virtue of something other than itself.*"<sup>25</sup> This understanding allows finite things to maintain their integrity without capitulating to a framework in which there exists some space independent of God.<sup>26</sup> Participation has significant implications for theology as it offers support for the notion of *theosis*: the ultimate end of a person—indeed, of all things—is in God. As Augustine says at the start of his *Confessions*, "you have made us for

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<sup>24</sup> For example, Richard Creel defends impassibility but takes an open theist position on divine knowledge. See Creel, *Divine Impassibility: An Essay in Philosophical Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), particularly pp. 88-101.

<sup>25</sup> David C. Schindler, "What's the Difference? On the Metaphysics of Participation in a Christian Context," *The Saint Anselm Journal* 3.1 (2005): 1.

<sup>26</sup> John Milbank, Graham Ward, and Catherine Pickstock, "Suspending the Material: The Turn of Radical Orthodoxy," in *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, ed. John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward (London: Routledge, 1999), 3.

yourselves, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”<sup>27</sup> The *telos* of a human person is to move from the participation in God shared by all by virtue of existence to a participation in the triune God through the Christian life. For the purpose of this topic, however, it is the divine participation in the world that is more important. This notion supports God’s involvement in the world as it asserts not that God is far off and removed from the world but that every being by its very existence is in some way participating in God. The loss of this understanding of God and the world—whether it stems, as the proponents of Radical Orthodoxy suggest, from the work of Duns Scotus and William of Ockham<sup>28</sup> or at some later point—made the classical understanding of God much less viable.

Herbert McCabe, attempting to recover this notion, gives a strong alternate account of God in the world. He begins by briefly answering the question of the “Greek influence” on Scripture in a similar vein as I have above but with a specific link to the questions of interest to the Ancient Jewish mind. These are the questions of “what” and “why”: “what does it *all* mean?” and “why *anything* instead of nothing?”<sup>29</sup> These questions are characteristically Jewish, and do not concern the Greeks. Aristotle, for instance, did not have a notion of creation as such since he believed the matter from which the material world was fashioned was eternal and did not believe the universe had a temporal beginning.<sup>30</sup> There is no conception of a creation *from nothing* in his thought.

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<sup>27</sup> Augustine, *Confessions* 1.1.

<sup>28</sup> Milbank et. al, “Suspending the Material,” 5-6. Scotus is often blamed by those in the Radical Orthodox camp for many of the problems in modern theology his univocal understanding of being.

<sup>29</sup> Herbert McCabe, “The Involvement of God,” in *God Matters* (London: Continuum, 1987), 41.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 41-43. See Aristotle, *Physics* 8.1.

As McCabe observes, the usage of Aristotelian (or Platonic, or Stoic) concepts by Christians does not entail that Aristotle would approve of everything Christian authors say, any more than Marx would approve of everything liberation theologians using Marxist categories would say.<sup>31</sup> The God of Augustine and Aquinas is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob because they sought to understand God in a way that could give full force to the implications of the biblical account—a God who was involved in the world and yet was the creator *ex nihilo*. God’s participation in the being of persons as the transcendent and immanent one solves this dilemma.

Though many suggest sympathy as an essential aspect of a proper response to suffering, it is (as has been expressed in multiple places above) misguided to apply this requirement to the responsive love of God. One reason for this is that the one who displays sympathy or compassion is always removed from the suffering to which he or she is responding. The sort of “suffering with” another that is encouraged for humans is never a true involvement in the suffering of the other person, but instead a capacity to have an awareness of the person’s pain as well as feelings of pity and concern.<sup>32</sup> This is not the case for God. Our attempts at sympathy or compassion are ever only attempts to act in one moment as God acts in every moment: fully united with the life of the sufferer.<sup>33</sup> Since God is the creator and sustainer of all, he cannot be so removed from the

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<sup>31</sup> McCabe, “The Involvement of God,” 43.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 44-45.

sufferer as to undergo something like sympathy. Sympathy is too distant for God. God “has no need of compassion... he is ‘closer to the sufferer than she is to herself.’”<sup>34</sup>

This notion can be extended from compassion to serve as a rule for “all experience and learning.”<sup>35</sup> Humans, McCabe argues, are ignorant if we do not learn, but the same is not true for God. God is not an individual who is subject to experience: this would put him in some way dependent on the thing acting upon him for his experience. But acting as creator adds nothing to God—it is an act of almost pure altruism for God, excepting that the “goodness God wills for his creatures is not a separate and distinct goodness from his own goodness.”<sup>36</sup> God is “at the heart of every creature” and as such cannot be “other” to humans in the same way they are to one another.<sup>37</sup> E.L. Mascall expresses a similar understanding:

God is immanent in the depth of the soul and it is there that he is to be found, But he is immanent there, not as contained in it, but rather as containing it; not in the sense that he is limited and restricted by man, but in the sense that man, at the very root of his being, is altogether dependent upon God. God, then, is immanent, but the unveiling of this immanent God is not the work of man.<sup>38</sup>

Thus, it is both true that suffering is foreign to God’s nature and that God must be more intimately involved in the suffering of his creatures than they ever could be with one another.<sup>39</sup> Beyond this, however, God does enter the world through the incarnation.

McCabe views the Chalcedonian definition as an essential confession for God’s

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<sup>34</sup> McCabe, “The Involvement of God,” 45.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>38</sup> E.L. Mascall, *He Who Is: A Study in Traditional Theism* (London: Longman, Greens & Co, 1943), 147.

<sup>39</sup> McCabe, “The Involvement of God,” 46.

involvement in the world. God does not suffer along with humanity—instead he suffers as a human. The suffering of God is not that of divinity suffering in a removed way but a suffering that enters the suffering of humanity fully and yet, as the impassible God, is entirely unblemished by it. The God who is eternally who he is, perfect in every way, present fully in every moment and in all existence, also became incarnate and suffered *as a human*. There is no greater involvement in the pain of the world than that of the classical Christian God.<sup>40</sup>

Another aspect of the classical understanding of God that is important for action in the world is God’s eternity, and it offers a further explanation of how an impassible God can act in the world. Boethius offers the classical definition of divine eternity: “the whole, simultaneous and perfect possession of boundless life.”<sup>41</sup> There is a significant issue in modern discourse around divine eternity, as much of (particularly analytic) philosophical theology treats God’s eternity as a sort of “temporal moment devoid of duration” rather than “a timeless fullness of presence.”<sup>42</sup> In other words, the critic of divine eternity treats God’s eternity as confined in time, just a time separate from what humans experience. Divine eternity does not entail, as detractors allege, that all moments must be simultaneous with one another if they are simultaneous for God because time is present to the infinite and transcendent God in a radically different way than for finite creatures.<sup>43</sup> We can comprehend this in a limited sense—the day of my baptism and the

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<sup>40</sup> McCabe, “The Involvement of God,” 46-51.

<sup>41</sup> Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy* 5.6.

<sup>42</sup> David Bentley Hart, *The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss* (New Haven: Yale, 2013), 137.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

1963 March on Washington are both in some sense present for me now in that I am thinking of them both, but they are not thus chronologically concurrent.<sup>44</sup>

Eleonore Stump has worked to provide an understanding of how an eternal and impassible God can work in the temporal world through examining the narrative of Jonah, where God converses with Jonah (Jonah 1:2; 4:2-4, 9-11), causes a fish to swallow and then spit out Jonah (1:17; 2:10), declares judgement on Nineveh (3:4), relents of his judgement (3:10), and causes a plant to rise and wither (4:6-7). This is a great deal of action and involvement in the world—how can a God outside of time break into the world like this? How can the immutable and omniscient God be said to change his mind? Anthropomorphism is, of course, in play here. Stump, however, offers an understanding of how God could be experienced by Jonah as acting in these ways.

Stump begins with a helpful analogy about a two-dimensional creature inhabiting a two-dimensional world from Erwin Abbot's story *Flatland*:

In *Flatland*, one of these two-dimensional creatures, a sentient square, comes into conversation with a sentient sphere, who is an inhabitant of a three-dimensional world. The sphere has a terrible time explaining his three-dimensional world to his new friend, the two-dimensional square. As *Flatland* presents things, there is more than one mode of spatial existence for sentient beings. There is both the Flatland two-dimensional mode of spatial existence and the three-dimensional mode of spatial existence. That the sentient sphere is in the three-dimensional space does not mean that the sentient square of Flatland is really somehow three-dimensional or that the square's mode of spatial existence somehow really has any of the three-dimensional characteristics of the sphere's mode of existence. In the story, the two spatial modes of existence...are both real; and neither is reducible to the other or to any third thing.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Hart, *The Experience of God*, 138.

<sup>45</sup> Eleonore Stump, *The God of the Bible and the God of the Philosophers*, The Aquinas Lecture, 2016 (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2016), 59-60.

This understanding provides a helpful analogue to divine eternity. For the classical tradition, temporal and eternal “modes of duration” are included in reality and are not reducible to each other or a third thing. However, it is possible for those in these differing modes to interact with one another.<sup>46</sup>

In offering a solution to this dilemma, Stump notes that because God’s eternal existence includes a limitless and atemporal presence, God’s relation to things in time must entail simultaneity. She invokes the notion, which she developed with Norman Kretzmann, of “ET-simultaneity,” which is “simultaneity between what is eternal and what is temporal.”<sup>47</sup> Because those operating in time and in eternity have separate modes of existence, the ET-simultaneity “will be neither reflexive nor transitive.”<sup>48</sup> As such, two (or more) events in time may be ET-simultaneous with one eternal event without entailing ET-simultaneity with one another.<sup>49</sup> To illustrate this point, Stump returns to the Flatland example: if the entirety of Flatland were “finite and linearly ordered with an absolute middle,” it would be possible for all of Flatland to appear before a human who could then observe every point along the linear plot, and “all of Flatland could be *here* at once.”<sup>50</sup> But it would not be the case that all of Flatland is “*here*” for an inhabitant of Flatland—one small part of Flatland could be *here* for its resident while the entirety of Flatland is *here* for the human observer. Just as Flatland in this example is

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<sup>46</sup> Stump, *God of the Bible*, 60.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

“metaphysically smaller” than human reality, our reality is metaphysically smaller than the infinite eternity in which God exists.<sup>51</sup>

Thus, God can act timelessly at time  $T_1$ , which is ET-simultaneous for him, in order to have his purpose occur in the world. However, since all times are simultaneous for God, God can also act at a prior time  $T_2$  to bring about an effect in the world at time  $T_3$  and fulfill his purposes.<sup>52</sup> This follows with the notion of divine simplicity and the understanding of God’s being as one pure divine act. This act, like the divine essence, can be analogized as a pure beam of light refracted through a prism and appearing throughout time as God’s speech, God’s guiding of the world, and God’s self-disclosure. These would all serve as manifestations of the one divine act.<sup>53</sup> This act is a perfect willing of the course of the world, into which is woven the free decisions of creatures. The story of Jonah is helpful for explaining how God acts in this way. God, existing in the eternal now, is ET-simultaneous with every moment in Jonah’s life. Because of this, God’s one divine act can place a conversation with Jonah on the day he commissions his mission to Nineveh at time  $T_1$  while also conversing with Jonah as he sits under a withered plant at time  $T_2$ . Both are aspects of the one divine act by the God who is always eternally present in the lives of his creations.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Stump, *God of the Bible*, 62.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 67-70.

<sup>53</sup> The light-prism analogy is common in expressing the perception of the simple God by humans. See James E. Dolezal, *All That is in God: Evangelical Theology and the Challenge of Classical Christian Theism* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2017), 76. Mascall employs another illustration to make the same point. He describes a group of blind men touching an elephant and coming away with different notions of what the elephant is based on what part they touch without realizing that each are part of one large elephant. See Mascall, *He Who Is*, 118-119.

<sup>54</sup> Stump, *God of the Bible*, 72-75.

## Conclusion

This understanding of all being existing by a donation of being from God and God as eternally present in each moment gives rise to a greater involvement than any understanding of God as time bound. The God who knows his children in their present but also knows them and is ET-simultaneously present to their infancy and death and each moment in between can love greater than the God who does not know what his child will become in the future. This God can make the promise:

Listen to me, O house of Jacob,  
 all the remnant of the house of Israel,  
 who have been borne by me from your birth,  
 carried from the womb;  
 even to your old age I am he,  
 even when you turn gray I will carry you.  
 I have made, and I will bear;  
 I will carry and will save.  
 (Isaiah 46:3-4)

He can make this promise because he is present in the moment of the promise, in the moment of each Israelite in the womb, and at the end of their lives when they are old and gray. He is there and he is intimately involved.

God's involvement and presence is in no way that of a distant observer. Impassibility does not make God uninvolved and unresponsive, if it is connected to a larger, fuller doctrine of God. In isolation, certain understandings of the doctrine may give this impression. However, connecting them to the full confession Christians wish to make about God reveals such critiques to be strawmen against a full understanding of impassibility. The doctrine is one that does not preclude God from being fully present—but it does prevent him from being altered or otherwise injured by an encounter with the world's evil. Because of his impassibility God is present and involved, but never injured.

As Ron Highfield has put it: “Because God’s hands are not busy wiping his own tears, they are free to wipe away ours.”<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Ron Highfield, *Great is the Lord: Theology for the Praise of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 389.

## Conclusion

The primary aim of this work has been to establish a definition of divine impassibility which could then be defended against several objections which have arisen in recent decades. Towards this end, impassibility was defined as God's being beyond suffering, being free from being acted on by creatures, and being free from the influence of evil. This definition did not exclude something like an emotional state in God or his ability to act in the world, but it recognizes evil has no ontological status and God is free from being diverted from bringing about his good ends for the world. Impassibility was also connected to the larger doctrine of God, including the notion of God's simultaneous transcendence and immanence, which is crucial for this project. The role of impassibility in the incarnation of Jesus was also examined, and it was argued that God does indeed suffer on the cross through the *communicatio idiomatum*—not as God, but as a human.

The second chapter took up the theodicy objection, which demands that God suffer with humanity in order to make sense of the world's evil. This was answered through elucidating the disastrous implications of God's love being forged through commerce with evil, offering an understanding of the world's evil which does not implicate God in the evil actions of creatures, and offering an alternative understanding of love which does not include fellow-suffering. The third chapter examined the historical objection, which names impassibility as a corruption of Christian theology by Greek philosophy. This was answered by pointing out some of the historical errors made by proponents of this Hellenization thesis and by giving an alternate understanding of Scripture and its interpretation to those who accuse the early Christians of being too "Greek" in their reading of Scripture. The fourth chapter took up the question of God's

involvement over against those who insist impassibility makes God distant and uninvolved in creation. This was answered through an appeal to the metaphysics of participation and through an understanding of how an eternal God can act in the world.

This study has not answered every possible objection to the doctrine of divine impassibility, but it has answered some important contemporary objections. Those in the camp of process theology were not addressed in this discussion, and their understanding of divine passibility would raise some objections other than the ones addressed here. However, the doctrine as expressed in this project is, I believe, sufficient to withhold objections from that camp as well as it is the ultimate form of theistic personalism—rejecting traditional notions of omnipotence, omniscience, and eternity so as to make God a powerful but not all-powerful creature.

The only question that remains, it seems, is whether Dietrich Bonhoeffer's declaration, "only a suffering God can help,"<sup>1</sup> holds true. From the arguments already laid forth in the second chapter regarding suffering divinity, the proper answer seems apparent. When one calls upon God for rescue from suffering, she is not hoping for someone to come down and suffer alongside her—particularly not if (as David Bentley Hart argues) God is the ontological ground of her suffering. Instead, she is calling upon the one who, as creator and sustainer of all that is, dwells constantly and personally within and around her, is intimately aware of her suffering and can, whether it be now or at the end of all things, rescue her from that which is causing her to suffer, all without disturbing the transcendent perichoretic peace which he perpetually enjoys within his own being. This is the beauty of the gospel: God can overcome, God has overcome, and

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<sup>1</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Eberhard Bethge, ed. (New York: Collier, 1971), 361.

God will overcome. God does not need to come down to suffer alongside us; we need to be drawn up to him to share in his impassible peace and unending joy.

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