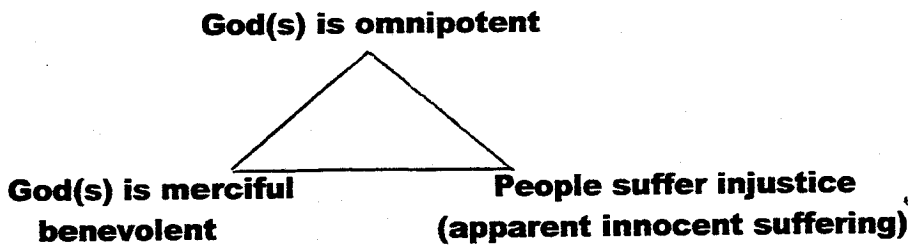


# **THE THEODICY PROBLEM: The Issue of Divine Justice**

## **(Why do the good/innocent suffer?)**

Theodicy, derived from two Greek words, one for God (Theos) and one for justice (Dike), poses for us and for all religions the question, "Why do apparently innocent people suffer and die in a world where we presuppose the existence of God or gods or divinity which act (or acts) to establish justice on earth?" Dr. Robert Oden presents this problem by first discussing what he calls a "Tri-lemma", the three poles of which present a challenge in which each pole is opposite the other two.



This three-pointed diagram helps us ask appropriately the question: Can we say at the same time that "Yes, there is a God(s)" and "Yes, innocent people suffer, there is injustice"? Because if we believe there is a God who is omnipotent, why does this God not omnipotently prevent all injustice? Or because if we believe there is a God(s) who is merciful, why does this God(s) grant mercy to some but not to others who suffer innocently?

We all experience or have experienced people suffering who did not, we think, deserve to suffer. There is for example the hundreds of thousands who suffered and died in the December tsunami in southeast Asia. There are the 3000 who died in the 9/11/01 tragedy in NY, PA and Wash. D.C. There are the 263 who died in the Oklahoma City bombing. There are thousands dying annually in car crashes, and many more dying annually of cancer who committed no death-warranting crimes. Innocent people die every day. As a song says, "the good die young and the evil die old". Thus if we do believe in the existence of God or gods, the problem arises concerning why the God we believe in does not prevent such deaths from ever happening among the good and prevent anyone from doing evil ever.

Every major religion has as one of its dogmatic claims that there is justice in the world, that if understood correctly that there is no such thing as innocent suffering. More about such dogmas in a moment. But given such dogmas in these religions, are such dogmas pious frauds or rosy fictions in the face of contrary evidence when our experience tells us that innocent people do suffer and die undeserved deaths? Behind this question is a prior question: "does human experience support or invalidate religious dogma?" This leads us to reflect that some scholars argue that this issue and these questions point to the real causes

for religion as such. They argue that all religion comes from human attempts to answer this theodicy problem: why does evil prosper and good fail? Some would further argue that all religion is rosy and fraudulent since it tries to present an obvious contradiction: the presence of an omnipotent or merciful God along with the experience of innocent suffering. These opponents of religion say religion and experience do not match, that our experience tells us that innocent people do suffer, therefore there must be no God(s). There are many studies that conclude that the one thing that turns more people away from religion is their belief that their religion does not correspond to their experience. They experience innocent people suffering and needlessly dying, therefore they conclude there must be no God(s).

The major religions have five basic answers to these arguments.

**1. NO GOD:** You cannot reconcile belief in a divinity and injustice: therefore there is no God(s). This is a “dog-eat-dog” world where the fittest survive irrespective of belief in any divinity. They recently use the experience of the Holocaust and the deaths of 5 - 9 million Jews (including 2 - 4 million children) in World War II as proof that there could not possibly be any God.

**2. DUALISM:** The experience of innocent suffering proves there are good gods and bad gods. Yes, there is a powerful, benevolent deity, but since there is also innocent human suffering there are also malevolent, malignant evil forces that cause such suffering which are opposed to the benevolent God(s). This may be the most rational explanation, and is seen in ancient gnosticisms. It is seen in the Christian argument that Satan causes people to suffer in a way contrary to what God wants.

**3. ALL ARE GUILTY:** This argument says that there really is no such thing as innocent human suffering, since people who suffer did in some clear or unclear way still deserve punishment. It may only appear on the surface that people who suffer may be innocent. This is the argument behind the Christian concept of original sin, promulgated by St. Augustine and Christian theologians who followed him.

**4. SUFFERING IS EDUCATIVE..IT EXISTS FOR A REASON:** This argument says that people suffer for a reason, to be taught something. Christianity says that you cannot reach salvation on your own, that suffering teaches us complete dependence upon God for our salvation. Suffering teaches us that we are not self-sufficient, self-salvific. We all depend upon the mercy of God for our salvation.

**5. SUFFERING IS TEMPORARY:** Christianity presents the experience of suffering as brief, given the reward of salvation in eternity with the Lord in heaven where there is no suffering at all because heaven is where God's will is perfectly done at all times. Any religious system that talks about punishment and reward in the afterlife exemplifies this answer. Religious Taoism, Judaism and Islam present

**similar arguments. This answer also works for Hinduism and Buddhism with their karmic reincarnational systems.**

**The second and fourth answers above may be seen in the Book of Job. Here Satan is a powerful force that argues with God and is granted some control over Job's circumstances. Job's resulting suffering brings three friends to spout standard theological explanations for his suffering, amounting to; "Job, you did something very wrong and brought this suffering upon yourself." Job's many responses to their explanations in effect tell them, "Look, your standard theological explanations don't fit my real experience here. I remain faithful to the Lord no matter what you say." In the end God replies to the entire situation by restoring Job's health and resources and reminding him and his friends that his ways are beyond human understanding. Hence, all of Job's suffering are a lesson in God's mysterious, omnipotent, just power. The book of Job defends divine justice.**

**St. Paul (via Martin Luther and John Calvin) uses answers 2,3,4 and 5. Paul in Romans 8 describes suffering as educative, as producing endurance, which produces character which produces hope. He also argues that Christians suffer because their Lord suffered on the Cross. He argues in Romans 9 that there is no injustice on God's part. God is always just, and so is merciful to those to whom He is merciful, and He is merciful to those who trust in Him. In other words God justifies those who put their faith in Christ. Christianity thus says (using Luther's words) "He who has hope is saved." Buddhism says quite the opposite, "He who has lost all hope is saved."**

**Hinduism's description of the law of Karma according to Max Weber, presents the most logical answer to the theodicy problem. It says that every human action determines everything about your future existence. This is so because every action (karma) is either good or bad. Suffering today is due to our having done something bad in the past. The law of Karma is impersonal and very thorough. Therefore Hinduism argues that there is no such thing as innocent suffering, since all suffering is due to some past bad action, whether in this lifetime or in some previous life before the person was reincarnated into this life which is now suffering.**