

Negative theology and meaningless suffering

Abstract: This paper attempts an exploration of the limits of our capacity to weave suffering into patterns of meaning. I try to show that something like an apophatic moment in our response to some kinds of suffering is both necessary and difficult to sustain. From this emerges a question about the relationship between this ‘something like apophasis’ before suffering, on the one hand, and unknowing in face of the mystery of God, on the other. I argue against a tendency in some modern theology to elide one into the other-- against a tendency to absorb the ‘mystery of suffering’ into the ‘mystery of God.’ The paper concludes with the suggestion that in order to avoid such an elision, and other forms of false reconciliation with suffering, Christian theology needs to maintain a commitment to a future-oriented eschatology, a real –if unimaginable-- eschatological hope.

Keywords: Suffering, Apophatic Theology, Impassibility, Passibility, Eschatology, Hope, Mystery

Something like an apophatic moment in our response to some kinds of suffering is both necessary and difficult to sustain. In what follows I will try to explain this claim, make a case for it, and explore its significance.¹

The words ‘something like’ play a serious role here. The aim of what follows will be to propose a comparison of one thing, the sense of bafflement, the experience of running up against the limits of what we can say and know in relation to some suffering, with another thing, the ‘unknowing’ of God-- and not to propose an identification of the two. The relationship between them, however, bears exploration, as does in particular the temptation to elide the one with the other.

In relation to this symposium’s theme, my aim is not to explore how Christian theology, as negative theology, is able to bring distinctive gifts to the political domain, but something more modest. The aim is to develop an understanding of how Christian thought,

¹ I am grateful to the sisters of Congregation of La Retraite—Ireland UK, whose support for study leave facilitated the writing of this paper, and whose conversations underpin some of the thinking within it, even if in ways which might not immediately be apparent. I am also grateful to those who have heard or read the paper and probed its logic, including colleagues at the Rome Symposium, colleagues and students in the Durham Theology and Ethics Seminar, Paul Murray and Susannah Ticciati. They have helped in a variety of ways, even if I have not been able to rise to all of the challenges they raised.

when properly “negative,” limited, “apophatic”² in relation to suffering, can avoid some of the political *pathologies* into which it might otherwise be drawn.³

What follows is deliberately framed in terms of reflection on the broad and vague category of suffering rather than as a reflection on tragedy, or trauma, or disability, or the Holocaust⁴, even though in connection with each of these there is a more readily available, already well stocked, philosophical or theological conversation. All of these conversations have some bearing on what I will be reflecting on here, but none of them can quite provide the context for the somewhat general reflections I will attempt here.

I

A first approach to the theme—the necessity of something like an apophatic moment in our response to suffering-- is by way of contrast: I will begin with consideration of a theological reflection on suffering where the “apophatic” moment, or “apophatic” sensibility, is missing.

Thomas Weinandy’s *Does God Suffer?* is an important and valuable book. It makes a case against passibilism (the thesis that God suffers) which is clearly ordered, carefully argued, and comprehensive. It offers readers a thorough grasp of the “new orthodoxy” of passibilism, of the ways in which it is unsuccessful in what it sets out to do, and the ways in which it entails a really radical, wide-ranging revision—and also misapprehension-- of a traditional understanding of God. It serves as the definitive critical examination and rebuttal of modern passibilism.

In the final chapter of *Does God Suffer?*, however, the same clarity, order and comprehensiveness which are such positive features of much of the book seem to lead it astray. On my reading, at least, this chapter —“Suffering in the Light of Christ,” -- strikes a false note in relation to the concrete experience of suffering. The reader who reaches this final chapter might even start to feel the pull, after all, of passibilism—if the approach to human suffering set out here is really the only alternative.

² In what follows, I will use quotation marks around ‘apophatic’ in order to avoid a too frequent repetition of the cumbersome ‘something like apophatic’.

³ Paul Murray construes systemic theology as a discipline which, among other things, diagnoses and seeks to cure pathologies within the life of the church. Whether or not I am exactly fulfilling his understanding of the task of theology here, I am influenced by his formulations. For a full account of Murray’s understanding of theology, see, *inter alia*, ‘Engaging the Church’ in Mike Higton and Jim Fodor, eds, *The Routledge Companion to the Practice of Christian Theology* (London: Routledge, 2014).

⁴ It seems necessary to use the word ‘Holocaust’ here, in spite of its well-known problems, simply because it is the term around which ‘post-Holocaust’ theology has coalesced.

Weinandy's aim in the chapter is to examine "the meaning of all human suffering in the light of the gospel"⁵. Its first part is devoted to two general truths: first, that "all who suffer are united, to a greater or lesser extent, to the risen Christ"⁶; and secondly, that the risen Christ, as head of the body of the Church, is suffering in the sufferings of all who suffer: 'While Jesus is gloriously risen, and thus beyond sin and death and so evil, yet as head of his body which is still suffering under the constraints of sin, evil, and death, he too, as the head, is still, in some real sense, suffering.'⁷ In the second part of the chapter, Weinandy then turns to 'some specific types of suffering and the various Christian responses to them.'⁸ Here we find four subsections: we suffer as a result of our personal sin; we suffer as we 'groan' in the difficult process of struggling to be set free of our personal sin; we suffer as the Father disciplines and educates us, in tests and trials, enabling our spiritual growth and the display of our 'true metal'; and we suffer as a result of the sins of others. There are in each case proper Christian responses: the suffering caused by our personal sin should trigger repentance; in our groaning, we must continue to fight the good fight, not lose heart, and take consolation from the fact that Christ groans with us and our groaning is not in vain; in trials and tribulations we should respond with 'courage, patience, fortitude, and love,'⁹ standing firm without fear and in hope; when suffering stems from someone being sinned against, we must forgive and we must act to remove evil that causes suffering, even at the cost of making ourselves vulnerable to those who do evil.

Weinandy's theme of union in suffering with the risen Christ is interesting, if a little elusive.¹⁰ It is the second half of the chapter where a problem emerges. And even here there is no *particular* proposal put forward by Weinandy that could lightly be denied by a Christian theologian. Every component in his subdivision of the sources of suffering and the appropriate responses to it is anchored in Biblical texts, and is set out in a way consonant

⁵ Weinandy, *Does God Suffer* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 244. The sentence in fact continues on to a second half: 'and more specifically the Christian experience and interpretation of human suffering from within the context of sharing in Jesus' death and resurrection.' As I read it, this 'more specifically...' is not intended as an indication that Weinandy intends to offer something *less* than, something more *restricted* than, an account of 'the meaning of all human suffering in the light of the gospel.' The 'more specifically...' is rather as an indication of the shape his understanding of 'the meaning of all human suffering' will take. It does not, in other words, diminish the scope and ambition of the chapter, which is to examine the meaning of all human suffering.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 246, emphasis omitted.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 252.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 262.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 270. This list is embedded in a description of that which we admire in others as they face affliction and hardship.

¹⁰ Weinandy himself is aware of its elusiveness: 'I must admit that this is a mystery that I am not sure I fully understand, not in the sense of comprehending it, for no Christian mystery can be fully comprehended, but in the sense that I don't even know fully what the mystery is' (252, n18).

with, and recognizable from, tradition. And in connection with each of these components, there are situations where using his analysis and adopting the response he commends may well be exactly the right thing to do.

The problem is not, then, with what Weinandy says, but with what he fails to say, and what he fails to say in particular about the *limits* of the relevance and reach of what is set out. The positive, confident quality of the chapter's language is nowhere counterbalanced by any suggestion that there might be some kinds of suffering for which no account of a purpose can be found, which go beyond our capacity to explain or find meaning in. Weinandy gives the impression of offering a map of the terrain, with the kinds of suffering, the meaning and significance of the various kinds, and the desired ways of responding laid out.¹¹ He does not claim to be absolutely comprehensive, but he writes as though knowing his way around this territory, so that one might expect anything not already covered to require only a slight addition to or elaboration of the 'framework'.

One does not have to think very hard or look very long to come upon situations where this framework begins to be inadequate. In the case of a bereaved parent, who loses a child to, for instance, climbing accident or illness, the reader will immediately be able to rule out three of Weinandy's four categories—their suffering is not principally caused by their personal sin, nor by the 'groaning' of their efforts to overcome sin, nor by someone else's sin. So it can only, it seems, within his framework, belong in the trial and testing category. Now, while it may not be *false* to say that in her suffering the parent has the opportunity to display courage, patience, etc., or that her suffering can be the means to 'heroic sanctity,' it seems a distraction from, an evasion of, the reality of the situation and what is most pressing in it, to bring these points to the fore. More generally, the language in which Weinandy frames his analysis, language of offering an 'adequate and realistic description and explanation'¹², of understanding the causes and meaning of suffering, of the 'many, and often inter-related, purposes' it serves, all seems ill-fitting, inappropriate, in relation to a case like this. Particularly disturbing is the way in which throughout his discussion of this sub-category of suffering, Weinandy keeps returning to the biblical

¹¹ Weinandy does make reference to John Paul II's *Salvific Doloris* and its characterisation of suffering as a mystery, but he moves quickly from this reference to his broad explanation of the types of suffering. The 'mysterious' quality of suffering does not actually play any role in his thought; it is given no weight in his exposition.

¹² *Ibid.*, 262. To be fair, Weinandy is really only claiming to offer something that is 'more adequate' than that offered by the passibilists. But overall his is a rhetoric of confidence; it is not balanced by, say, any suggestion that it might still overall remain more inadequate than adequate, or by any questioning of whether adequacy is in fact possible.

language of discipline: his framework seems to suggest that in relation to suffering which does not come under one of the other three sub-categories (consequence of personal sin, side-effect of the struggle to be liberated from sin, consequence of the sins of others), we have no choice but to reflect on the nature of divine discipline.

Thinking about his framework in relation to the Holocaust—something the book in some sense actively invites—is particularly unsettling. Weinandy has, earlier in the volume, named the Holocaust as the ‘icon’ of suffering for our time: part of his argument in this chapter is that the consistent focus on the Holocaust and other examples of unjust suffering of the innocent which characterizes the thought of passibilists leads to an oversimplified understanding of suffering, for suffering is not, as a matter of fact, always caused by injustice. On his map, nevertheless, the Holocaust and other instances of unjust suffering still retain a place—they are to be understood as a subset of the kinds of suffering caused by the sin of others. Once again the language shaping his discussion—the language of understanding the meaning, of adequate and realistic description and understanding, of the multiple purposes served by suffering, sits very uncomfortably next to the recollection of genocide or mass torture and murder; so too does the particular explanation Weinandy offers, in this subsection, of the value and meaning of this general category of suffering (‘Without minimizing the evil and the suffering that it causes, to be sinned against provides the victim an opportunity to respond to such evil in a godly manner, and so to grow in holiness...To be sinned against and to be suffering because of this sin, always calls forth, from within a Christian perspective, a proactive virtuous response.’)¹³

What is missing in this chapter, then, is any sense of bafflement before suffering, of being silenced by it, brought to the end of what can be explained; there is no attention to the limits of the applicability of the explanations of purpose and meaning that are set out. As a result, though each of the individual claims Weinandy makes may be defensible, there is something untruthful about them, taken together as a whole.

¹³ Ibid., 273. The points I am raising against Weinandy are in some ways similar to the kinds of objections that can be and have been made against, for instance, the theodicy of Richard Swinburne. It does not follow, however, that the fundamental problem with Weinandy is that he is offering a theodicy, since this is something he does not claim to do. His goal is to give a theological map of the experience of suffering, general patterns for thinking about and responding to it, rather than to offer an argument to justify God’s goodness and power in the light of this experience. Like the tradition on which he draws, he never toys with the possibility of calling God’s goodness and power into question. So while it may be that there are disturbing resonances with Swinburne, these need to be understood within a framework broader than that of ‘theodicy.’

There is one point where Weinandy himself comes close to a recognition of this. To a sentence which explains that the chapter will be rather long because he wants 'to address the actual lived experience of people,' he adds the note 'It must be remembered that, while I wish to be as practical and concrete as possible, what I say about the Christian experience, interpretation and response to evil and to the suffering that it causes does not *in any way* imply that Christians, within their own hearts and minds, experience, interpret and respond to such suffering in this manner'¹⁴. It seems as though the drive to have a settled 'answer' to suffering leads Weinandy to assemble a framework *about* the experience of suffering which he knows is not true to actual experience.¹⁵

II

The final chapter of *Does God Suffer* can, in my view, serve as a case study in what goes wrong when an apophatic dimension in our response to suffering is missing. But of course one cannot establish the need for an apophatic moment on the basis of such a case study. Even a reader who accepts that there is something problematic in Weinandy's framework for analysing the varying purposes and meanings of suffering might ask how I can know that the problem couldn't be solved by adding on an extra category or two. It is necessary to approach the theme a little more directly, offering a reflection first on the place of speech and thought *within* suffering, and then on the limits of speech and thought *towards* suffering.

Consider, first of all, pain. Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain* is a speculative and wide-ranging book, but what has particularly caught the interest and attention of most readers seems to be the discussion in the first few pages of the resistance of physical pain to capture in language. Scarry makes a convincing case that a 'resistance to language is not simply one of [pain's] incidental or accidental attributes but is essential to what it is,' and indeed that 'pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it'.¹⁶ It is not absolutely impossible to talk about pain, but it is difficult, and developing the capacity to talk about

¹⁴ Ibid., 244, n4, emphasis added.

¹⁵ Weinandy might of course respond that the lack of fit between actual Christian experience of suffering and the Christian experience of suffering he describes is simply the result of the inadequacy, or immaturity in the faith, of actual Christians. This might be taken to be the implication of the final sentence of his footnote: 'How to experience, interpret and respond to evil, and the suffering that it causes in a Christian manner can itself be a life-long, and often unfinished process'.

¹⁶ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 5, 4.

and communicate to others the nature of pain is already to begin to diminish its 'aversive' quality.

Scarry's attention is focused very specifically on physical pain, and not all suffering is pain. Indeed, we probably incline too much to take pain as the fundamental paradigm of suffering.¹⁷ Nevertheless, something like what Scarry says of pain is frequently true more generally. Serious suffering is often associated with a difficulty of speech, and of thought. It is likely to disrupt a person's projects, to interfere with their sense of themselves, with their ability to narrate their life, either forward or backward. It is not necessary to adopt a general theory of the progress of all suffering—something, as I will discuss below, which sometimes happens in the literature of practical theology-- but in many contexts it seems to be the case that suffering comes with an element of disruption to the understanding, and that even the capacity to *name* the suffering, to name it as suffering or in some more specific way, provides a hint of alleviation, a certain improvement in the situation. If I am feeling miserable, and can give the misery a name --'Ah, so this is homesickness' -- there is often already, somehow, a certain lightening; in medical contexts, it can be a relief to have a diagnosis, even when no treatment is possible. And beyond the sense of relief that a name brings, there seems for many to be an instinct to search for a broader pattern within which the suffering can be placed. This may be a broader pattern of intelligibility--I understand what I am going through as rooted in distinct causes, whether in my genes or in something that I or someone else did in the past. Or it may be a broader pattern of value --terrible as it is, I can see good coming from this suffering, some growth or deepening or new possibility.

So far, I have not in fact given any reason to support the importance of an 'apophatic' dimension in response to suffering: just the reverse. Very often, it seems, to the degree that one can *escape* the dimension of the 'apophatic', one is better off—suffering is in some sense diminished. If, to consider another common example, I am suffering a depression and can name the depression *as* a depression, I will often be already a little better off than if I suffer it without knowing what it is. And if I can understand it as a predictable consequence of a series of factors (genetic inclination combined with namable

¹⁷ Eric Cassell's writings are interesting on the relation of pain and suffering and have become classics in the field. (See, for instance, the article entitled 'The nature of suffering and the goals of medicine,' *The New England Journal of Medicine* 306 (1982): 639-45, and the book of the same title published by Oxford University Press in 1991. However, because Cassell begins from medical practice, he still tends to work from a presumption that suffering is always somehow rooted in pain or other physical distress, even as he argues so effectively that suffering cannot be understood *only* in terms of pain and physical distress.

environmental stressors, say), there is likely to be a certain reassurance in this. And if I can understand it as attached to something good—it is the price I pay for a particular sort of creative work, say, or it will fund my capacity to reach out to other people in certain ways—there is also an element of consolation (perhaps only retrospectively) here. So while the depression in itself, this experience of suffering, may press towards inarticulacy, any progress I make in naming, in understanding, in weaving it into a broader understanding, including an understanding of that which I most value, seems to help. What is most needed, on this view, is not *maintaining* the moment of apophysis, but escaping from it.

But this weaving of suffering into larger patterns, especially patterns of value—seeing good in it, or good linked to it—is, to make a rather obvious observation, not always possible. True, many give accounts of the experience of grace amidst suffering, the occurrence of growth in and through suffering, the deepening of relationships to God and others through suffering—in some ecclesial contexts there is a strong tendency to turn any discussion of suffering in these directions¹⁸. But however seriously we listen to such accounts, it is not possible to derive from them a law, whether of nature or of Christian experience.¹⁹ Suffering clearly often leads to more suffering, diminishing a person rather than ennobling them, destroying relationships rather than deepening them.

It is because there is *not* always a tale of the experience of grace or growth or greater intimacy in suffering that the possibility of an ‘apophatic’ response to suffering on the part of the one who suffers is important. ‘This is terrible, and, in spite of what I believe about God working for the good in all things, I can’t see any good attached to it whatsoever.’ Such an unresolved and in a sense uncomprehending attitude is not easy to sustain; there are social, cultural and ecclesial pressures to know what it is all about and to have something positive to report in relation to suffering. And yet without the possibility of such an unresolved, uncomprehending attitude, the believer is forced into a range of distortions in their relationship to their faith and to the reality of their situation.

¹⁸ It is worth noticing that to say one of these things—that I had a particular encounter with grace in the midst of my suffering, or I grew through it, or grew closer to others—is not necessarily to say that the suffering was therefore worthwhile, that its occurring was *justified* by being such an occasion for this grace or growth. In my experience people often point to what can be said of a positive nature without any hint that they are thereby balancing an equation, without any implication that ‘therefore it was all worth it, after all.’ If there is an element of consolation in being able to say one of these things, in witnessing in some way to the goodness of God in the midst of suffering, there is not necessarily therefore a justification of suffering.

¹⁹ The fundamental flaw in Eleanor Stump’s *Wandering in Darkness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), it seems to me, is that, for all its complexity, sensitivity and creativity, she does seem to think she can move from certain such narratives to a general law, a general principle.

So far I have been venturing a variety of claims about the place of speech and thought *within* suffering. But if the possibility of not-knowing within suffering is important, still more is the need for restraint of speech and knowledge towards suffering-- something like an apophatic moment in the face, not of 'my' suffering, but yours, or hers, or theirs. Restraint of speech and knowledge are not, of course, the first thing that comes to mind in relation to the suffering of others. First there is the question of what I or we do to alleviate suffering, and to address its causes, both of which make a range of requirements on our powers of understanding. But what of the suffering for which we know no cure, or before which to one degree or another we are powerless? Here, I'd like to suggest, the role for something-like-apophasis, the requirement of a limitation to our speech and thought, is broader than in the case of the sufferer herself, because there are some kinds of meaning-making, or meaning-finding, which can legitimately be done in relation of 'my' suffering but not 'yours' or 'his'. The process of finding some way to be at least partly reconciled to suffering, of fitting it into a larger pattern of value, of discerning grace and growth met within suffering, is for the most part not one we can properly undertake in the second or third person.²⁰

This something-like-apophasis in the face of the suffering of others is difficult. We don't really want to know about suffering which we can neither eliminate nor absorb into a larger story with a satisfying shape. We are inclined to avert our attention, either by simply looking away, or by trying to nudge the suffering into a story whose shape gives comfort.²¹ Such a pattern of response is frequently reported in everyday interactions by those who suffer chronically or traumatically,²² but it also has analogues on a more abstract,

²⁰ Cf. my 'Eschatology, Suffering and the Limits of Theology' in Christoph Chalamet and Andreas Detweiler, eds, *Game Over?: Reconsidering Eschatology* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2017) for a more extended exploration of the differing first, second and third person relationships to suffering and meaning. One thing I miss, at times, in Rowan Williams' rich and thought-provoking recent book, *The Tragic Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), is an attention to this kind of distinction. So, for instance, on the first page, Williams writes 'we are not simply passive in the face of terror and suffering, because we can *imagine* it, narrate it...' Presumably a great deal depends on who the 'we' are here. Presumably there are indeed forms of terror and suffering which reduce their victims to passivity, which may, for those whom they strike, shut down the imagination, cut off the possibility of narration.

²¹ A fuller exploration of this theme would also include consideration of situations in which those in an apparently 'third person' relationship to suffering have a role in, or an entanglement with, the cause of the suffering. The awareness, conscious or unconscious, of complicity—that, say, the material ease of my life is linked to systems which cause large scale suffering in distant parts of the world or in other parts of my own society—can lead people in different directions, the most frequent of which is probably towards an even stronger instinct to avert attention, or to nudge a story into a comforting shape. I am grateful to Linn Tonstad for pointing to this lacuna in my analysis.

²² So, for instance, Susan Brison, a philosopher who writes about her experience in the aftermath of a murderous assault and rape in *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003) describes the initial anger she feels with those amongst her family and friends who don't want to know about her experience, implicitly

theoretical level. The practice of theodicy is the most obvious of these analogues: the theodocist aims to find a way of thinking so that *all* suffering can be understood as woven into a larger pattern of meaning and value. Theodicy has been routinely rejected by systematic theologians in recent years, and while some of the motivation for this rejection is historical (many theodicies seem to seriously misread the theological tradition) and ‘theological’ in a strict sense (often theodicies operate with a crude, abstract and deist understanding of God), in significant part the animus against theodicy is ethical—it has been ultimately I think, an objection to making meaning from, and thereby being reconciled to, *other people’s suffering*.²³

Theodicy is only *one* way, in any case, of succumbing to the temptation, at a theoretical level, of averting attention from suffering by weaving it into a pattern whose shape we find more comforting, more acceptable. A second way is to suppose that one has within one’s grasp a general technique, a kind of algorithm, for processing suffering and coming out the other side. This seems to be a temptation to which some pastoral and practical theologies are susceptible. Dorothee Sölle, for instance, tells us of a Phase 1, a Phase 2, and a Phase 3 of suffering, and even provides a chart under which the three phases are analyzed according to twelve different features.²⁴ Pamela Cooper-White, in the entry on suffering in the *Wiley Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, does not speak explicitly of phases or present a complex table, but she nevertheless offers what seems a confident, almost diagrammatic, analysis of pain, suffering, trauma and healing: pain, on her account, is mute, whereas suffering is already expressive. Therefore, she writes ‘For healing to take place fully, we must make meaning in relation to our pain...’; or again ‘pain—especially pain that exceeds transient physical pain—must actually be transformed *into* suffering for holistic healing of mind, body, and spirit to occur.’²⁵ Trauma results from a dissociation which blocks this process, and for which there is in turn a specific solution. The pastoral worker has a

deny its gravity, blithely assume she’ll recover in a matter of a few weeks—an anger which affects her until she learns that this is an absolutely standard phenomenon in the face of the trauma of others.

²³ It is worth noting that on the view I am sketching here, it would be a mistake to be too sweeping in the dismissal of theodicy. Any attempt actually to *answer* the problem of evil, actually to provide a theodicy, is on my view problematic for the reasons just indicated. But it is not a mistake to *raise* the theodicy question, or at least close cousins to it—it is not a mistake to be troubled, puzzled and uncomprehending in the face of evil and suffering in the world, to have questions for which one both desires and lacks answers. (This is a point I argued at more length in ‘Evil and the Limits of Theology’ (*New Blackfriars* 84 (2003), 13-29).

²⁴ Dorothee Sölle, *Suffering* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1975).

²⁵ ‘Suffering’ in Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, ed, *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2014).

definite place in this analysis-- Cooper-White's concludes with a summary: 'By standing as witnesses who offer deep recognition of one another's pain, we participate in a holy process of transforming mute pain into expressive suffering. Through the shared comprehension of such suffering, transformation becomes possible—healing and renewal for a broken world!'²⁶ There may well be a good deal of pastoral experience and wisdom condensed into these formulations, but I am not sure I would want, in my moment of distress, to talk to someone in possession of such a tidy knowledge of how it all works, of what *must* be done and what *will* heal me, nor am I convinced that Cooper-White's confidence, and her generalizations about the healing process, could be deployed in the face of large scale horrors.

We can have trouble, then, I am suggesting, in our ordinary concrete encounters in attending to suffering without forcing it into a pattern of meaning to which we have no right; and we have analogous trouble, on a theoretical level, in acknowledging a suffering which we cannot in some way weave into a larger pattern of meaning. We have seen two examples of the latter, more theoretical difficulty, and in the next section we will come across a third, and one which is, for my purposes, the most interesting.

III

I have thus far been discussing *something like* an apophatic moment or dimension in response to suffering, or using quotation marks around 'apophatic'. But what in fact is the relationship between this 'something like' and the real thing?

An obvious objection to the comparison I have been making—to the possibility of the comparison being any use whatsoever—derives from a point of which Denys Turner has steadily reminded us, namely that apophatic theology is not all about having nothing to say about God. It is instead about the acknowledgement, the recognition, of the failure of all language, an acknowledgement and recognition that needs to be accomplished as much through a profusion and piling up of language about God as through its negation.

But some echo, some analogy, to the cataphatic/apophatic dialectic is, I think, in fact present in our relationship to suffering. There is, in a second or third person encounter with suffering, a need to attend, to take interest, to wish to understand, to understand as much as we can, *as well as* a necessary failure in this. A visitor to Rwanda *ought not* say, 'Oh, well,

²⁶ Ibid., p.30.

I am never going to be able to understand what it was like to live through the genocide, so no need to try to learn or listen;’ we have to both try to understand, and in the trying, encounter and not evade the failure.²⁷

In the first person encounter with suffering, too, it might be possible to trace some sort of analogy with the cataphatic/apophatic dialectic. One might think of lament, a theme widely present in current pastoral literature on suffering. To the situation I have described earlier in this paper, where a believer suffers *without* finding she can truthfully speak the familiar words about hidden grace or growth or spiritual deepening, a standard response coming out of recent pastoral literature might be ‘Yes, this is why it is so important that the church recovers the language of lament, the language of the psalms and of Job, of complaint to and before God.’ And though lament is sometimes imagined, ‘as in work of Sölle and Cooper-White, as a ‘Phase 2,’ a step along the way to a resolution, it does not need to be: it can also simply be understood as the flip side, the wordy, articulate side, of the not-knowing which I have been discussing. The speeches of Job offer an example of intense articulacy which serves to underline a fundamental situation of *not knowing*.

Nevertheless, in spite of whatever suggestive similarities can be found, my aim is not to propose that the ‘something like apophasis’ before suffering is in fact the same thing as our ‘unknowing’ of God-- that the mystery of suffering, to put it another way, is mysteriously identical to the mystery of God. What I’d like to suggest, to the contrary, is that the absorption of the one into the other is the last and in some ways most dangerous temptation for an *evasion* of our actual situation before suffering—it is itself a temptation towards a false reconciliation with suffering.

²⁷ It is an oversimplification, of course, simply to say that we must attend to and try to understand suffering. I do not mean to propose that there is a universal ethical requirement that everyone *always* has to pay as much attention to everyone else’s suffering as possible. No doubt there are times where I am entirely justified in skipping over distressing pages of the newspaper to read a soothing article about baking. It is unnecessary for the sake of my argument to propose a set of criteria for determining when in particular we do and when we do not have the obligation to attend to the suffering of others. Indeed, there may be kinds of attention to the suffering of others which are wrong and intrusive. The two things which I am presuming are, first, that we do at times have an obligation to attend to the suffering of others, at times even when we are not able directly to alleviate that suffering; and secondly, that such attending is difficult.

The Rwandan authorities have placed genocide memorials at a range of locations-- usually sites of massacre-- around the country. These do not exist primarily for the sake of foreign tourists, but a touring visitor, such as I was in 2015, does face a recurring challenge—ought I stop and visit this one? For those who come to Rwanda from places such as the US or France or Belgium there is an extra dimension, insofar as they belong to a group which bears a share of guilt for the genocide or the failure to avert it, but I suspect that even without such an element of responsibility there would be something amiss in visiting Rwanda and refusing any attempt to understand what happened in 1994.

Consider for instance Simone Weil's well-known essay 'The Love of God and Affliction.'²⁸ Here Weil depicts a particular kind, or style, or intensity of suffering,²⁹ which she terms *malheur* and which has become 'affliction' in translation. It is, as she describes it, beyond consolation. It includes physical pain, from which the one afflicted cannot escape; it includes social degradation; it rules out solidarity³⁰ and, short of a miracle, any form of human compassion; it submerges the soul in horror. Affliction 'stamps the soul to its very depths' and the one afflicted feels scorn and disgust towards themselves, self-hatred, guilt and defilement. It is not something from which one really recovers ('even a person who has come through his affliction will still have something left in him compelling him to plunge into it again').

Affliction is in a sense unthinkable—the afflicted 'have no words to express what is happening to them'³¹, and others can bear to consider affliction only from a distance. It is, according to Weil, 'the great enigma of human life'³²: we can have some understanding of why suffering is allowed, which can in fact be educative, part of a training, of a spiritual practice, in attuning ourselves to the beauty of the world and its obedience to God.³³ But we cannot understand affliction in such terms, for it is too thoroughly destructive: 'At the very best,' Weil writes at one point, 'he who is branded by affliction will keep only half his soul.'³⁴

We have, then, a portrayal of a kind of suffering which diminishes and destroys and dehumanizes, and of which no one can say that this is good or conducive to growth. But at a certain moment in the essay there is a kind of flip, a reversal, so that that which is worst suddenly reveals itself as the best, the highest possible participation in what is good above all. Love, Weil maintains, expresses itself in two modes, closeness and distance. The love of God for God in the Trinity therefore requires not only unimaginable union but also an infinite distance, a maximal separation, which we find in the relation of Father and Son through the affliction and abandonment of Christ on the cross. We, as embodied creatures, cannot share in this life in the Trinitarian love as closeness, so our highest possible

²⁸ Simone Weil, 'The Love of God and Affliction' in *Waiting for God* (New York: Harper Colophon, 1973), 117-36.

²⁹ Given the deliberately broad way suffering is being used in this paper, Weil's 'affliction' counts as a kind of suffering, even though within the context of the essay she defines affliction by contrast to 'mere' suffering.

³⁰ 'As for those who have themselves been mutilated by affliction, they are in no state to help anyone at all, and they are almost incapable of even wishing to do so', *Ibid.*, 120.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 120.

³² *Ibid.*, 119.

³³ *Ibid.*, 131-2.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 120.

participation in it is at a distance, as affliction³⁵: ‘our misery gives us the infinitely precious privilege of sharing in this distance placed between the Son and his Father’³⁶

In an essay like this Weil can be compelling, beautiful, moving and at the same time—for many readers-- deeply disturbing.³⁷ Of course, it might be objected, this is already something well-known about Weil, and in any case however one might think of her, she will not be counted a mainstream Christian theologian. What is interesting, however, and what makes a consideration of Weil significant in this context, is how often the pattern set out so powerfully and so clearly in this essay can also be discovered lurking somewhere in those who are indeed mainstream Christian theologians.

The similarity between Weil’s position and that of Hans Urs von Balthasar would not be hard to establish—in fact the Trinitarian similarities are quite striking-- but because I have already written about Balthasar on suffering elsewhere³⁸, I will turn here to an essay by Karl Rahner entitled ‘Why Does God Allow us to Suffer?’³⁹

Just as Weil begins with a description of affliction which seems to block off our capacity to be reconciled to it, removing grounds for easy consolation, so Rahner begins with an exploration of the failure of theodicy, showing that all efforts familiar either from tradition or from contemporary thought to answer his question -- why God allows us to suffer --are inadequate. He considers the suggestion that suffering is simply to be accepted as the side effect of an evolving world, the friction generated by the particular version of finitude in which we find ourselves. This cannot account for the immense suffering resulting from sin: ‘Responsibility for the march into the gas chambers of Auschwitz cannot be spread

³⁵ ‘Even the distress of the abandoned Christ is a good. There cannot be a greater good for us on earth than to share in it. God can never be perfectly present to us here below on account of our flesh. But he can be almost perfectly absent from us in extreme affliction. This is the only possibility of perfection for us on earth’, *Ibid.*, 127.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ So, for instance, she writes of the way the force, the shock, from a hammer blow is concentrated into the point of a nail, and moves on to imagine what happens if the hammer and the nail are infinitely large, though the point of the nail remains sharp. Affliction is then ‘a nail whose point is applied at the very center of the soul...a marvel of divine technique...a simple and ingenious device which introduces into the soul of a finite creature the immensity of force, blind, brutal, and cold. The infinite distance separating God from the creature is entirely concentrated into one point to pierce the soul in its center’, *Ibid.*, 134-5. She then moves onto an analogy with the struggles of a ‘butterfly pinned alive into an album’, *Ibid.*, 135.

³⁸ Cf. Chapter 5 of *Balthasar: a (very) critical introduction* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2012) and ‘Julian of Norwich, Hans Urs von Balthasar and the status of suffering in Christian theology’ in *New Blackfriars* 2017 (currently only available online: <https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12298>).

³⁹ Rahner and Balthasar are not, it should be said, the only two possible options here. If space and the patience of readers were unlimited, the focus might open out to what is most fundamentally implied in the link which passibilists make between suffering and divine love; to the treatment of suffering in St John Paul II’s *Salvifici Dolores*; and to the recent argument Linn Tonstad has made about the way suffering and death are imported into the Trinity by thinkers such as Graham Ward and Sarah Coakley. Cf. Linn Tonstad, *God and Difference: the Trinity, Sexuality and the Transformation of Finitude* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

over the phenomena leading to the plunge of a swarm of migratory ants into an abyss. Evil is not merely a complicated case of what is biologically unpleasant or of death prevailing everywhere'.⁴⁰ Can suffering then be accounted for as the consequence of our freedom, or that of other creatures (e.g. angels)? However true this may be, it doesn't offer a real answer: there is still the question of why God *allows* creaturely freedom to go wrong, because 'even our free decision as such is...in every respect and in its whole reality dependent on God'⁴¹. He is clear that what in an Anglo-Saxon context is termed the free will defense is impermissible in Christian theology: it is a 'basic conviction of all Christian theology that to regard our freedom *in this way* as absolute and autonomous is contrary to the Christian understanding of God.' And where the free will defense takes three pages to dispense with, the traditional answer that suffering is 'a situation of trial and maturing' takes only one: 'there is infinitely diverse, terrible suffering in the history of humanity...which cannot be integrated into a process of maturing and personal probation.' Rahner suggests, without entirely endorsing, the judgment that 'only a fraudulent and unrealistic piety' could see the suffering of our world in this way,' that only 'a noble mind untouched by any real distress, practicing spiritual massage in an ivory tower' could imagine suffering as a means of maturing (203). The final failed attempt at an answer is dealt with even more briefly. Is suffering 'a pointer to another, eternal life'?⁴² Certainly, he responds, Christians hope 'for eternal life without death, pain, and tears,' but on the other hand, 'no one can prove that this suffering is the absolutely necessary means for attaining eternal life,' and indeed 'a crudely understood future state of happiness does not justify the horrors that preceded it.'⁴³

We have a rapid tour, then, of potential theodicies, and a forceful rejection of each of them. But once again, in Rahner's final section, we encounter a kind of flip, a reversal: we cannot say why God allows this terrible suffering, but the very-not-being-able-to-say can be united with that which is highest in our life, our relation to the mystery of God: 'The incomprehensibility of suffering is part of the incomprehensibility of God...the very fact that it is really and eternally incomprehensible means that suffering is truly a manifestation of

⁴⁰ Karl Rahner, 'Why does God allow us to suffer?' in *Theological Investigations 19* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd, 1984), 199.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 202.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 204.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 204, 205.

God's incomprehensibility in his nature and in his freedom...Suffering, then, is the form...in which the incomprehensibility of God himself appears...the acceptance of God as the intractable mystery and the silent acceptance of the inexplicability and unanswerability of suffering are one and the same event'⁴⁴. In a final passage, Rahner cites a story that Romano Guardini on his deathbed spoke of the question he would like to ask at the Last Judgment-- 'Why, God, these fearful detours on the way to salvation, the suffering of the innocent, why sin?'. Guardini was, according to Rahner, right to be unable to answer the question himself, and beyond this, Rahner suggests (going well beyond Guardini's own position, it seems), even at the Last Judgment Guardini could expect, as answer 'only the incomprehensible God in his freedom and nothing else.'⁴⁵

If Weil seems to offer us, by bringing the very worst together with the very best, a terrifying valorization of suffering, Rahner seems to offer an equally terrifying reinterpretation of what it means to have faith in a loving God—at least in this essay, he has made our submission to the incomprehensibility of God so profound that we can no longer have, it seems, even the slightest idea of what love might mean.⁴⁶

IV

What does all this have to do with the theme of our symposium? What does it have to do, in particular, with political theology?

To answer this, it will be helpful to turn to two familiar political critiques of Christianity. First, there is the question of the sacralisation of suffering. Christianity teaches its adherents to make their peace with misery, to view suffering as divinely sanctioned and redemptive, to embrace it, so the objection goes, and in doing so exerts a brake on the movement towards human betterment. And then there is, secondly, eschatology: even if the suffering of this life is understood as a genuine evil, in promising something better in a distant future, pie in the sky when you die, Christian faith reconciles its followers to the world order and saps motivation for emancipation.

In the preceding sections I have focused on issues related to the first of these worries: the danger of making sense of suffering when one ought not. The inclination to

⁴⁴ Ibid., 205-7.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 208.

⁴⁶ Though I will not attempt to make the argument for it here, I think this essay, which Rahner wrote quite late in life, need not be read as representing the deepest centre of his theological vision, but can be seen as something closer to an error on his part. For the purposes of my argument, however, what is interesting is that it seems such an enticing error, an easy error to fall into.

avert one's attention from a suffering which one cannot quickly alleviate, to narrate the world in such a way as to make one's peace with the suffering of others, is of course not *only* a temptation for Christian believers. But it is a temptation which can manifest itself quite powerfully and distinctively in an ecclesial context, and, I have tried to show, which makes itself felt in a variety of ways on a theoretical as well as a practical level. It is difficult to maintain an 'apophatic,' unreconciled stance towards suffering, then, and even when one does, there seems to be a final temptation to once again—but on a higher level—quietly come to terms with suffering, by somehow merging what one might call the 'darkness of suffering' into the 'darkness of God'.

If maintaining a genuinely unknowing, unresolved stance towards suffering is so difficult, if there are so many ways in which we seem to be tempted to evade it, what might *enable* such a stance, and allow us to sustain it? What might make it possible? A full answer would of course have many levels and is beyond the scope of this paper.⁴⁷ But for some indication of the beginning of an answer, it seems to me useful to return to the second of the stock political worries about Christianity, the pie-in-the-sky-when-you-die worry. I'd like to propose that if one tries to avoid this altogether—if one pulls back from any sort of future-oriented eschatology—then a proper apophysis before suffering cannot in fact be a real possibility for Christian theology.

To be capable of attending to suffering without improper evasion, in other words, Christian theology needs to maintain a future-oriented eschatology, a real eschatological hope. It does not have to be a detailed and imaginatively full eschatology. In fact, it cannot be: to have a richly imagined eschatology, a concrete depiction of what it might be that would allow us to say that all things are well, would once again entail a failure in the proper 'apophatic' stance before suffering.⁴⁸ But if theology is not to slide into a positive valuation

⁴⁷ The partial answer I will offer here is one naturally favoured by a systematic theologian-- others might well begin elsewhere. I have been told, for instance, and found it entirely plausible, that those who can attend to the suffering of others without evasion are those who have in fact 'processed' their own suffering. Or again, one might, as does Rowan Williams in *The Tragic Imagination*, point to tragic drama as an art form which serves as a kind of training, disciplines an audience to 'contemplate' suffering, to attend to pain which it cannot heal.

⁴⁸ I have argued for this point, against John Thiel's *Icons of Hope: The "Last Things" in Catholic Imagination* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013), in 'Eschatology, Suffering and the Limits of Theology'. Thiel explicitly rejects apophysis in eschatology, arguing instead that we are obliged to 'imagine seriously and to describe with some measure of coherence' the last things (22). Strictly speaking there is no reason to rule out a rich use of the imagination in eschatology, if that is understood as the imaginative generation of a profusion of possibly contradictory, inconsistent images. This seems to be what we find in Scripture, and it can be understood precisely as the cataphatic counterpart to eschatological apophysis. But to imagine a *coherent* eschatology, such that one could see *how* it can turn out to be the case that all will be well, and all manner of things will be well, is, I argue in 'Suffering and Eschatology,' to put ourselves into the wrong relationship to suffering.

of suffering, it needs to maintain a genuine hope that there is a time –however impossible to imagine-- when what has been promised in the resurrection will be made good, when ‘every tear will be wiped away,’ when ‘all shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well.’⁴⁹ There must be a hope for a world radically different from what we now see and know. It might be objected, of course, that to hold on to such a hope is itself to reconcile oneself to suffering, but I do not think this is necessarily so. It is possible, and important, to distinguish between *being* reconciled, and hoping that there *will be* reconciliation.⁵⁰

Christianity cannot, in other words, escape both standard political critiques at the same time. Suffering exerts a kind of pressure on the system which does now allow this. A fully ‘realised’ eschatology will neatly block one line of objection, but it will also, I am suggesting, be accompanied by some form of mystification of suffering and death. If we are too bashful in our eschatology, then, too set on disciplining ourselves against the ‘escapism’ of a future oriented eschatology, we will pay a political price at another point in our thinking-- we will have to find a way to look at things so as to persuade ourselves that suffering is not, in the end, when you come down to it, if you can look at it in just the right way, so very bad after all.

⁴⁹ While proper engagement with Rowan Williams *The Tragic Imagination* would require a longer paper, it is perhaps worth mentioning that to my taste, the role of such eschatological hope in Chapter 5 of this book seems too weak. Williams, following Donald MacKinnon, is concerned to insist that Christian theology is able to take suffering seriously; this includes not needing ‘to suppose that suffering is cancelled or even compensated by the hope of ultimate reconciliation’. On the other hand, Christianity does not affirm an ‘absolute tragedy.’ What, then, stands between the Christian vision and absolute tragedy? It is, if I understand Williams right, ‘the possibility of mourning—the articulation of loss...’ (124).

⁵⁰ As David Newheiser has reminded me, much here depends on exactly how *hope* is understood.