

THE GOD WHO WEPT A HUMAN TEAR: SOME THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS*

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Introduction

As I write this essay, there is ongoing war in Afghanistan, violence still in Iraq, and deaths are mounting because of swine flu. South of where I live in greater Chicago there were fifteen shootings on just one night. In a world of so much, manifest suffering what can the historic Christian faith say? John 11:35 tells us that ‘Jesus wept.’ In other words, God incarnate wept. But did only Jesus, the second Person of the triune Godhead, weep? What of his Father in heaven? In Mel Gibson’s movie *Passion of the Christ* when Jesus expires on the cross, a tear falls from heaven. Theologically considered, was such symbolism defensible or indefensible? As we shall see theologians divide in answering such a question.

In exploring the question of divine suffering we shall consider first the biblical witness in its Johannine expression. Next we explore two approaches to the question of Christology and divine suffering: one of them presupposes an impassible God, the other, in some sense, a passible deity. A mediating position will then be suggested as a way

forward. In the light of the discussion implications will be drawn out for construing the divine character, theodicy and dialog with Islam. In Islam of course the theme of this essay, namely the God who wept a human tear, is problematic in the extreme as we shall see.

The Biblical Witness

Since our focus is on the God who wept a human tear the Gospel of John is the obvious starting point with its clear testimony to both the deity and humanity of Christ.¹ Even some who see little explicit New Testament support for the doctrine of the incarnation view the Gospel of John as an exception. For example, the Roman Catholic scholar Raymond E. Brown argues: ‘Incarnation is truly characteristic of Johannine Christology.’² In the remaining ninety percent of the New Testament witness, according to Brown, the accent falls elsewhere in their Christologies.³

Right from the start, John’s Gospel presents a divine-human Christ. Take the deity. The Gospel begins in eternity as it were with the *Logos asarkos* (‘without flesh’): ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.’ (John 1:1). As the Prologue unfolds the reader learns that this divine *Logos* becomes (*egeneto*) flesh (*sarx*). By the end of the Prologue the *Logos* stands revealed as the unique One who has a human name, Jesus Christ (1:14-18). The real humanity of Christ is soon on view in this Gospel. At the well in Samaria, he is thirsty and tired (cf. John 4:6 and

*A version of this paper was presented at a conference at Tokyo Christian University in July 2010.

¹ Luke’s Gospel reports that Jesus wept over Jerusalem (Luke 19:41) and Hebrews relates that tears featured in Christ’s passion (Heb 5:7). The latter reference shows how widely it was known that Jesus wept and probably has Gethsemane in view.

² Quoted in Robert L. Reymond, ‘Christology’s Future In Systematic Theology,’ in A. T. B. McGowan, (Ed.), *Always Reforming: Explorations in Systematic Theology*, (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2006), p. 68.

³ Robert L. Reymond, ‘Christology,’ p. 68.

4:7). However, it is at the tomb of Lazarus, Jesus' friend that we find that Jesus weeps. Clearly this is no Gnostic docetic Christ who only appears to be human.⁴

An Impassibility Approach: Constantinople II and Beyond

The idea of divine impassibility or the so-called apathy axiom, which argues that God, by definition, cannot suffer has had a long history in philosophical and theological discourse. According to Sextus Empiricus, the 2nd century philosopher, it was “the dogma of the philosophers that the Deity is impassible.”⁵ In religion it was Philo of Alexandria (c. 20 BC –c. 50AD) who argued that in the Torah where emotions like suffering are attributed to God what is being portrayed are not affects in God but effects in us.⁶ Marcel Sarot argues that for Philo: “we experience God’s unchanging and unfailing love now as blissful, then as suffering, and then as repentance, because of changes in *us*.”⁷ (Original emphases.) This idea of divine impassibility entered the Christian bloodstream in the second century, particularly through writers such as Clement of Alexandria.⁸ The “apathy axiom” became fundamental to classical theism. With regard to the history of theological discussion, E. L. Mascall maintains: “There are few doctrines that can claim in their

⁴ Augustine usefully distinguishes those New Testament passages in which Jesus comes before us in the form of God (e.g. John 1:1-2) and those in which he appears in the form of a servant (e.g. John 14:28). The latter presupposes that a real incarnation has taken place (e.g. John 11:35). Augustine, *The Trinity*, Book 1, Chapter 7 in *New Advent: Featuring The Catholic Encyclopedia* (Pennsauken, N. J.: Disc Makers, 2nd ed., 2007), CD-ROM version.

⁵ Quoted in Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets*, Vol. II (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 42.

⁶ Richard J. Gibson, *As Dearly Loved Children: Divine and Human Emotion in Early Christian Thought and its Hellenistic Context* (Macquarie University: 2005), unpublished Doctoral thesis, p. 422.

⁷ Marcel Sarot, “Does God Suffer? A Critical Discussion of Thomas Weinandy’s *Does God Suffer?*” <http://www.arsdisutandi.org/publish/articles/000018/article.htm> accessed 10/11/2005. Also see his “Patripassianism, Theopaschitism And The Suffering Of God. Some Historical And Systematic Considerations,” *Religious Studies* 26 (1990), pp. 363-375.

⁸ Richard J. Gibson, *As Dearly Loved Children*, p. 424. Paul Gavilyuk goes too far in his attempt to debunk “the theory of theology’s fall into Hellenistic philosophy,” *The Suffering Of The Impassible God: The Dialectics Of Patristic Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 1.

support so long and consistent a witness in the tradition of Christian theology as the doctrine of the impassibility of God.’⁹ On this view, at the very least, one of the Godhead suffered in the flesh whilst deity remains impassible.

Constantinople II

Constantinople II was held in 553AD and was the fifth ecumenical council of the patristic period.¹⁰ Its tenth *capitulum* affirms: ‘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.’¹¹ Kallistos Ware sums up its stance in these terms: ‘Just as it is legitimate to say that God was born, so we are entitled to assert that *God died*. In each case, of course, we specify that it is God-made-man of whom this is said. God in his transcendence is subject neither to birth nor to death, but these things are indeed undergone by the Logos incarnate.’¹² (Original emphasis) The question arises as to whether Constantinople II was presenting a limiting case.

One way of preserving Constantinople as describing the limiting case is to appeal to the idea of the *communicatio idiomatum* then suffering may be predicated of the deity of Christ without compromising the doctrine of divine impassibility. The *communicatio*

⁹ E. L. Mascall, *Existence and Analogy*, (New York, New York: Longmans and Green, 1949), p. 134. The fashion in contemporary theology is very much away from the classic theistic idea of divine impassibility according to Paul L. Gavilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God: The Dialectics of Patristic Thought*, (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 1.

¹⁰ My choice of Constantinople II is deliberate. Sometimes it is argued that Christianity is western. However Constantinople II took place before the rise of Europe. People saw themselves as Romans in distinction from Barbarians and Sasanian Persians, not Europeans. See David Levering Lewis, *God’s Crucible, Islam and the Making of Europe, 570-1215* (New York: Norton, 2008). Earliest Christianity was not western and not European.

¹¹ Capitulum 10, *New Advent: Featuring The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Pennsauken, N. J.: Disc Makers, 2nd ed., 2007, CD-ROM version.

¹² Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, Revised Edition, (Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1995), p. 72.

idiomatum is the idea that ‘whatever is true of Jesus’ humanity is also true of his deity and vice versa without mixing the qualities of the divine or human nature. For example, [ex hypothesis] if Jesus suffers and if Jesus is God, then it can be concluded that in Jesus God suffers.’¹³ More precisely put – when Jesus wept we can safely say the Person of the Son wept, but not his divine nature, rather he wept out of his human nature.¹⁴

An Advocate of the Limiting Case: Thomas Weinandy

An outstanding contemporary advocate of the limiting case view is Thomas Weinandy, the former doctoral student of E. L. Mascall and, and now a major theologian in his own right.¹⁵

Weinandy argues that the weighty tradition behind the idea of divine impassibility ought not to be dismissed. Yes the fathers did appropriate Greek philosophical ideas about impassibility but did so in a nuanced and careful way. However, if the whole sweep of the biblical revelation is taken seriously then the God of the Bible has emotions but not fluctuating emotional states. His displays of anger or compassion or sorrow are predicated about his unchanging nature as just and loving (e.g. sorrow as in Genesis 6:6-7). Such biblical statements are not to be taken literally. Moreover, he contends, if God is ethically immutable it is because he is first of all, ontologically immutable. Following

¹³ Stanley J. Grenz, David Giretzki and Cherith Fee Nordling, *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms*, (Downers Grove, Illinois: 1999), p. 27. For a fine account of the idea and its origins in the Patristics, see Thomas G. Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), pp. 173-206.

¹⁴ Kevin DeJong, ‘Divine Impassibility And The Passion Of Christ In The Book Of Hebrews,’ *Westminster Theological Journal*, 68, (2006), p. 45. I do follow DeJong’s general conclusions. DeJong depends upon Weinandy’s Alexandrian account of the *communication idiomatum*. According to Richard A. Muller, both Antiochene and Alexandrian versions have their problems, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker House, 1986), pp. 72-74.

¹⁵ Two other able defenders of this view are Paul L. Gavrilyuk and David Bentley Hart. See their respective chapters in James F. Keating and Thomas Joseph White, (eds.), *Divine Impassibility And The Mystery Of Human Suffering* (Grand Rapids, Michigan/ Cambridge, U.K.: Eerdmans, 2009).

Aquinas, he maintains that God is *actus purus* ('pure act'). There is no potentiality therefore in God that allows changing emotional states. He is perfectly loving and cannot become more so. However, according to Weinandy, the fathers were right to affirm of the Son, as did Cyril of Alexandria 'that 'The Impassible suffers.' Thus the Incarnation is genuinely good news and not merely illustrative of a general myth of a God that can suffer in some generic sense. He argues: 'The suffering and death of the Son incarnate is the Father's answer to human suffering.' Thus 'that God does not suffer is at the heart of the Gospel.' Indeed he boldly claims that the project that affirms divine impassibility 'wreaks total havoc upon the authentic Christian gospel.'¹⁶

A Passibility Approach: Some Recent Voices

We now turn to those who believe in the passibility of God. First we shall consider a surprising voice in Eastern Orthodoxy, next a European Protestant approach and lastly in this section a Japanese perspective.

A Surprising Voice: Bishop Kallistos Ware

One surprising theological voice arguing that Constantinople II does not present the limiting case is Bishop Kallistos Ware. 'Surprising' because he writes as an Orthodox bishop for whom Tradition (the capital is deliberate) is paramount. In fact he describes his church as the 'The Church of Holy Tradition.'¹⁷ He acknowledges that the early church fathers, Greek and Latin, argued for the impassibility of God, whilst also

¹⁶ For the substance of this paragraph and the quotes see Thomas Weinandy, 'Does God Suffer?' *First Things*, 117 (November, 2001), pp. 35-41
<http://www.firstthings.com/ftissues/ft0111/articles/weinandy.html> accessed 10/13/2005.

¹⁷ Kallistos Ware, *The Inner Kingdom: Volume I of the Collected Words*, (Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2000), p. 9.

maintaining that the ‘God-made-man can and does suffer.’ Their concern was to ensure that the transcendence of God was respected. Even so, Ware asks: ‘Without denying the Patristic teaching, should we not also say something more than this?’ He reflects on a number of Old Testament passages which *prima facie* present a suffering God (e.g. Judg. 10:16; Jer. 31:20 and Hos. 11:8). He concludes: ‘If these passages mean anything at all, they must mean that even before the Incarnation God is directly involved in the suffering of his creation. Our misery causes grief to God; the tears of God are joined to those of man.’ A loving God could not be otherwise. He has one further argument for a divine passibility that properly respects the apophatic way and does not ascribe ‘human feeling to God in a crude or unqualified way.’ A loving person shares with others. ‘God is personal, and personhood implies sharing-God does not remain indifferent to the sorrows of this fallen world.’¹⁸

Indeed, on this view it could be argued that humankind created in the image of God may entail that we are emotional beings. The phrase in Genesis 1: 26-27 in context implies contrast with other creatures. There is something qualitatively different about this creature of the sixth day. This is underlined in the next chapter of Genesis because no other creature can meet Adam’s need to assuage his sense of isolation until the fashioning of the woman (Gen 2:18-25). In fact, in the sweep of Scripture no other creature is described in *imago dei* terms, not even angels (pace Aquinas).¹⁹ As for likeness in the Genesis account the accent falls on the functional, namely, the exercise of God-like

¹⁸ For the substance of this paragraph I am indebted to Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, Revised Edition, Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir’s Press, 1995), pp. 63-64.

¹⁹ Aquinas argues that angels ‘bear a more perfect image of God than man does’ based on the idea that angels are ‘pure spirits’ unlike human beings who are spirits mingled with matter. See Paul J. Glenn, *A Tour of the Summa*, (St. Louis, Missouri/London, England: B. Herder Book Co., 1963), p. 78, *Summa Theologica*, 1a, Qq. 93, 3.

dominion. However, if there is merit in the substantial view of the phrase then one of the attributes of humankind that arguably has its analogue in the divine nature is emotionality. On this reading we are theopathic beings.

A European Protestant Voice: Jürgen Moltmann

Famous German theologian, Moltmann believes in a passible God. The title of his ground breaking book published in 1972 is arresting *The Crucified God*. Recently he summed up its central question in these terms: “Is God the transcendent and untouched stage manager of the theater of this violent world, or is God in Christ the central engaged figure of the world’s tragedy?”²⁰

His answers to his own questions are clear. The transcendent God is indeed touched by human tragedy and Christ is the key to how this is so. He writes: ‘Jesus wept over the destruction of Jerusalem (Luke 19:41), and so tears rolled down the face of God at Ground Zero as surely as they did over Jerusalem, and we are called to participate in these sufferings of God with all our compassion.’²¹ He rejects as unbiblical what he calls the ‘metaphysical apathy axiom’ as found in Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, Book 12. Instead the Christian affirms ‘*the passion of the passionate God*’ (original emphasis).²² For him, a God incapable of suffering with humanity is incapable of love. Yet Moltmann is no

²⁰ Jürgen Moltmann, ‘The Crucified God: Yesterday and Today: 1972-2002,’ in Marit Trelstad (ed.), *Cross Examinations*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2006), p. 129. Also see Jürgen Moltmann, Trans, R. A. Wilson and John Bowden, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, (London: SCM, 1974). For a fine treatment of Moltmann’s position up until 1985 see Warren McWilliams, *The Passion of God: Divine Suffering in Contemporary Protestant Theology*, (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1985), pp. 27-49. Also see the excellent essay by Richard Bauckham, ‘In Defence of *The Crucified God*,’ in Nigel M. de S. Cameron (ed.), *The Power and Weakness of God: Impassibility and Orthodoxy* (Edinburgh, U.K.: Rutherford House Books, 1990), 93-118.

²¹ Jürgen Moltmann, ‘Yesterday and Today,’ p. 129.

²² Jürgen Moltmann, ‘Yesterday and Today,’ p. 130.

patripassian. The Father did not die on the cross, the Son did.²³ The Father and the Son suffer in different ways in the intratrinitarian event of the cross: ‘Jesus experienced ultimate abandonment and the Father ultimate bereavement.’²⁴ This passibility of God is not to be misrepresented as a God stuck in the same predicament as fallen humankind (contra Karl Rahner) but a God who willingly as Trinity embraces an ‘*active suffering*, which involves the willingness to open oneself to be touched, moved, affected by others—that means the suffering of *passionate love*’²⁵ (original emphases).

A Japanese Voice: Kazoh Kitamori

The *Westminster Dictionary of Theologians* describes Kitamori as ‘[o]ne of the most creative Protestant thinkers in Japan.’²⁶ What does this significant Asian voice contribute to our inquiry?

Following Luther, Kitamori in his famous *Theology of the Pain of God* locates pain in the very heart of God: ‘God who must sentence sinners to death fought with God who wishes to love them. The fact that this fighting is not two different gods but the same God causes his pain. Here heart is opposed to heart within God.’²⁷ God is both loving and wrathful towards his sinful creature, hence his pain. He writes: ‘The “pain” of God reflects his will to love the object of his wrath.’²⁸ In particular his reflections on Jeremiah 31:20 and Isaiah 63:15 inform his views. He states the intent of his book in these terms:

²³ For a useful definition of ‘patripassianism’ see Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, Fourth Edition, (Malden/MA/Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2007), p.492.

²⁴ Jürgen Moltmann, ‘Yesterday and Today,’ p. 133.

²⁵ Jürgen Moltmann, ‘Yesterday and Today,’ cf. p. 131 and pp. 134-135.

²⁶ Justo L. González, (Ed.), *The Westminster Dictionary of Theology*, (Louisville, KY/London, U.K.: WJK, 2006), p. 207. Contra the dictionary entry, Kitamori died in 1998.

²⁷ Kazoh Kitamori, Trans. M. E. Bratcher, *Theology Of The Pain Of God*, Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2005), Fifth revised edition of 1965, p. 21. McWilliams has a fine treatment of Kitamori’s theology in *Passion*, pp. 99-118.

²⁸ Kazoh Kitamori, *Pain*, p. 21.

‘My purpose in this book is “to know the will of God minutely” and “to search the depths of God” by following Jeremiah and Paul.’²⁹ Significantly, pain in the heart of God is not accidental to the divine nature but essential to it. Pain ‘belongs to his *eternal being*.’³⁰ Kitamori is critical of the mainstream tradition in theology that embraced the impassibility of God.

Kitamori’s theology of the pain of God also bears witness to his Japanese cultural debts. He sees in Japanese tragedy a key idea for understanding the divine pain. The idea is that of *tsurasa* which is realized ‘when one dies or sacrifices his beloved son in order to save another’s life. But in this case the one saved is most precious to the one making the sacrifice’³¹ And the death of the Son of God is a real death. On the cross ‘God has died.’³² Even so, Kitamori is no docetist: ‘Jesus “in the flesh” was “real man,” a *historical* person. God himself had to enter the world of real sin in order to bear responsibility of real sin’³³ (original emphasis). Indeed, Kitamori contends: ‘The whole life of Jesus was a way of pain (*via dolorosa*).’³⁴ Furthermore he argues: ‘The personification of God’s pain is Jesus Christ.’³⁵

Importantly for our purposes, Kitamori explicitly distances himself from any suggestion of patripassianism. In the preface to the fifth edition of his classic work, he addresses his critics: ‘My theology...cannot be identified with patripassianism unless the critics can prove that I made reference to God the Father as the One who suffered on the

²⁹ Kazoh Kitamori, *Pain*, p. 20.

³⁰ Kazoh Kitamori, *Pain*, p. 45.

³¹ The translator provides this note: ‘The sense of *tsurasa* is best expressed by the Latin phrase *lacrimae rerum*. It is the feeling of inevitable fate and sorrow that overhangs human life. Star crossed lovers, parting never to meet again, feel *tsurasa* in their destiny.’ Kazoh Kitamori, *Pain*, p. 177, endnote 9.

³² Kazoh Kitamori, *Pain*, p. 44.

³³ Kazoh Kitamori, *Pain*, p. 35.

³⁴ Kazoh Kitamori, *Pain*, p. 43.

³⁵ Kazoh Kitamori, *Pain*, p. 167.

cross.’³⁶ The problem here may be that there is both a narrow and broad definition of patripassianism in the theological literature. The narrow definition speaks of the Father dying on the cross and presupposes some kind of modalistic monarchianism (e.g. the Sabellianism of the 3rd century). Clearly, Kitamori is not a modalist. According to the broad definition, however, ‘patripassianism’ refers to ‘any view in which God is believed to take the sufferings of the world into his own life and experience.’³⁷ On the broad definition Kitamori is a patripassian, as are Moltmann and Ware for that matter.

A Way Forward

A way forward perhaps is to draw a couple of useful distinctions. The first one is to distinguish between essential impassibility and affect passibility. Essential impassibility maintains that God’s moral character does not change whatever may happen in creation, nor does the divine substance.³⁸ God is immutable. Affect passibility maintains that in choosing to create God has chosen to be open to feelings of pleasure or pain caused by the action of another being (e.g. grief). Given this distinction several possibilities open up. For example, one may assert that God is characterized by essential impassibility but deny affect passibility (Baron Friedrich von Hügel).³⁹ Or one may affirm both essential impassibility and affect passibility (J. I. Packer).⁴⁰ Or one may deny

³⁶ Kazoh Kitamori, *Pain*, cf. 15 and p. 115.

³⁷ Van A. Harvey, *A Handbook of Theological Terms*, (New York, NY: Simon and Shuster, 1997), p. 176.

³⁸ For a brief but useful discussion of the concept of substance, and immutability and impassibility see Kelly James Clark, Richard Lints and James K. A. Smith, *101 Key Terms in Philosophy and Their Importance for Theology*, (Louisville, KY and London, U.K.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), pp. 90-91 and pp. 42-43 respectively. With regard to impassibility they write: ‘If suffering entails some defect or lack, then a perfect being cannot suffer. But if suffering simply refers to an ability to “feel” (such as empathy), then that would not entail a defect but may be a virtue’ (p. 43).

³⁹ Baron Friedrich von Hügel, *Essays and Addresses on the Philosophy of Religion*, (London: J. M Dent, 1926), pp. 199-208.

⁴⁰ ‘What Do You Mean When You Say God?’ *Christianity Today*, September 19, 1986), pp. 27-31.

both essential impassibility and affect passibility (I know of no major systematic theologian who holds such a view).

Philosopher Richard Creel affirms a position that seems consistent with something like the second of these options. God may be ‘emotionally touched’ by the experiences and actions of creatures, but not ‘emotionally crushed’ by them.⁴¹ Creel’s position appears to me to be the one that comports well with the biblical testimony and constitutes a ‘mediating’ position. God is not ‘emotionally crushed’ by the experiences and actions of creatures because of his essential impassibility. Creaturely actions do not destroy the divine character. However, God is ‘emotionally touched’ by the experiences and actions of creatures because of his affect passibility. Walter Kasper expresses it this way: ‘If God suffers, then he suffers in a divine manner, that is, his suffering is an expression of his freedom; suffering does not befall God, rather he freely allows it *to touch him*’⁴² (my emphasis).

A second distinction is important to this ‘way forward.’ This distinction is drawn between the idea of an anthropomorphism and an anthropopathism. Again the Johannine witness is a key testimony to reflect on. In the context of his discussion with the woman of Samaria, Jesus asserts: ‘God is spirit’ (John 4:24). She had wanted to distract him with the question of whether true worship was Jerusalem based or Mt Gerazim based. In claiming that God is spirit he outflanks her. Spirit is not geographically bound. Using Jesus’ claim as a control belief, following Nicholas Wolterstorff, biblical language that describes God as having a human form is clearly metaphorical: God’s eyes, ears, nostrils, finger, arm and the like. God’s arm, for example, speaks in context of God’s strength and

⁴¹ Richard E. Creel, ‘Immutability and Impassibility,’ in Philip L. Quinn and Charles Taliaferro, (eds.), *A Companion To Philosophy Of Religion*, (Malden, Massachusetts/Oxford, U.K.: Blackwell, 2000), p. 318.

⁴² Walter Kasper, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell, *God of Jesus Christ* (London: SCM, 1984), 195.

power: “The Lord’s arm is not shortened that it cannot save” (Is 59:1). This is anthropomorphism, part of the accommodation of God to our capacity to comprehend that communicative action we term special revelation.⁴³ In contrast, anthropopathism refers to the ascription to God of an emotional life like our own –albeit without the distorting effects of sin post the Fall (e.g. Eph 4:30). There is no obvious contradiction in ascribing emotions to God who is spirit in my view.⁴⁴

The question may be raised, however, that if emotion may be predicated of deity does that mean that God can be overcome with passions? That depends upon what is meant by ‘passions.’ If having passions means that God is liable to irrational mood swings and irrational actions, rushes of divine blood as it were, then, no. However, God may be passionate without having passions in the deleterious sense. That is to say, God’s commitments are expressions of a constancy of a moral character that has dependable feeling like tones. In the early church period, Tertullian (c. 160-c.225 AD) made a useful distinction between emotions (*motus* and *sensus*) and passions (*passiones*). God has emotions and feelings as we do, but not like those passions in us that undermine our moral character.⁴⁵ Augustine argued similarly. God has *affectus*, *motus* and *affectiones* but not *passiones*.⁴⁶ Indeed for some early church figures the Scriptural testimony to a

⁴³ For a helpful discussion of communicative action see Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *God, Scripture and Hermeneutics: First Theology* (Downers Grove, Illinois/Leicester, England: InterVarsity Press/Apollos, 2002), pp. 159-203.

⁴⁴ See my, “The Living God: Anthropomorphic or Anthropopathic?” *Reformed Theological Review*, 59 (1, 2000), pp. 16-27. For a contrary view see Paul Helm, ‘The Impossibility Of Divine Passibility,’ in Nigel M. de S. Cameron (Ed.), *Power and Weakness*, 129.

⁴⁵ See E. Evans (ed., and trans.), *Tertullian Adversus Marcionem* (London: OUP, 1972), pp. 129-133 and Graham A. Cole, “The Living God,” fn. 23. Paul Helm, ‘The Impossibility Of Divine Passibility,’ in Nigel M. de S. Cameron (Ed.), *Power and Weakness*, 140, intriguingly suggests that God has ‘themotions’ which he explains as follows: ‘[a] themotion X is as close as possible to the corresponding human emotion X except that it cannot be an affect.’ ‘Themotion’ helpfully preserves the idea that our language about God is analogical but not all of Helm’s discussion of impassibility I find convincing.

⁴⁶ Anastasia Scrutton, ‘Emotion in Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas: A Way Forward for the Im/passibility Debate?’ *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, 7 (April 2005), 170.

passionate God was a clear proof that the God of the Scriptural revelation was not like the unfeeling gods of paganism (e.g., Lactantius and Gregory Thaumaturgus).⁴⁷

It is worth observing that the most able defender of the impassibility of God in present times, Thomas Weinandy, discussed above, has no difficulty in speaking of God as passionate, but as we have seen for him this does not mean that God is driven by changeable, fluctuating passions. Recall he argues; “God is impassible in that He does not undergo successive and fluctuating emotional states, nor can the created order alter Him in such a way as to cause Him to suffer any modification or loss.”⁴⁸ But there is a nuance. He also writes: “God is absolutely impassible because He is absolutely passionate in His love.”⁴⁹ Weinandy’s argument is that God by definition cannot become more loving than He is or less loving than He is. Therefore He is impassible in the sense that He does not change. Even so, he is prepared to say that God “does grieve over sin.”⁵⁰ On his view when we see Scripture present a God who on occasion is angry toward His people that is no indicator that the divine emotional state has fluctuated from love to wrathful. Rather God’s constant love shows itself as mercy on occasion and God’s constant holiness shows itself as wrath on other occasions. The key is that mercy and wrath presuppose a creation that is fallen. However, God as Trinity has always been loving and holy with or without a creation. Love and holiness are essential attributes of God whereas mercy and wrath are contingent characteristics of God: contingent upon the divine decision to create and also to permit the Fall.

⁴⁷ Marcel Sarot, “Does God Suffer?”

⁴⁸ Thomas Weinandy, “Does God Suffer?”

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

A great theologian of last century who appreciated the need to re-envision our inherited theology given the biblical evidence was B. B. Warfield (1851-1921). In a sermon on Philippians 2, he argued: ‘Men tell us that God is, by very necessity of His nature, incapable of passion, incapable of being moved by inducements from without; that he dwells in holy calm [the apathy axiom] and unchangeable blessedness, untouched by human suffering or sorrows....Let us bless our God that it is not true. God can feel; God does love.’⁵¹ He then adds to powerful effect: ‘But is not this gross anthropomorphism [more precisely anthropathism]? We are careless of names; it is the truth of God. And we decline to yield up the God of the bible and the God of our hearts to any philosophical abstraction.’⁵² More recently, J. I. Packer has argued similarly: ‘Let us be clear: A totally impassive God would be a horror, and not the God of Calvary at all. He might belong in Islam; he has no place in Christianity. If, therefore, we can learn to think of the *chosenness* of God’s grief and pain as the essence of his impassibility, so-called, we will do well.’⁵³ (Original emphasis) In this post-holocaust world and given the arrival of Aids and the terror of 9/11, we need to hear Warfield and Packer afresh. Our God is no unmoved mover or a frozen absolute, indifferent to feeling and impervious to emotion.

⁵¹ B. B. Warfield, *The Person and Work of Christ* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1950), p. 570. Warfield’s sermon is based on Philippians 2:5-11 but applies *mutatis mutandis* to Ephesians 4:30. Paul Gavriluk argues that such a vision makes the incarnation superfluous since God already knows suffering on this view, *The Suffering Of The Impassible God*, p. 20. However, Gavriluk does not reckon with the idea that without the incarnation God the Son does not know what it is to weep a human tear (Hebrews 5:7). The incarnation is not rendered superfluous by the notion of a God who may suffer.

⁵² Ibid. Warfield knew great personal suffering in his life because of the chronic illness of his wife. This may account for his passion. See M. A. Noll, “B. B. Warfield,” W. E. Elwell (ed.), *Handbook of Evangelical Theologians* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1993), p. 27.

⁵³ J. I. Packer, “What Do You Mean When You Say God?” pp. 27-31. Contra Packer, I would argue that God’s knowing grief and pain flows from his essential nature as love and is not satisfactorily accounted for by Packer’s voluntarist metaphysic (‘chosenness’). Packer’s position would be aided by the distinction between essential and affect passibility.

On this mediating view, God is impassible in one sense, but not in another. Essential impassibility applies in this respect: God's moral character cannot be destroyed by creatures. One may go further and say that God as God cannot be acted on by anything outside of himself unless he elects to be so acted on (e.g. answering prayer). However, God can suffer and experience pain as God. In other words, affect passibility also applies. Perhaps the best way to capture both aspects is to speak of a Biblically Qualified Impassibility.

Of course, God as omniscient knows all true propositions about suffering and pain, and that they are true (e.g. that human beings experience pain). He also knows all false propositions about suffering and pain and that they are false (e.g. there is never any pain in childbirth). However, on this view, the triune God also knows suffering and pain from the inside. Donald Macleod expresses the thought this way; 'In the One, the Three come. In the One, the Three suffer ... This does not warrant us to say that the Father and the Spirit *died*. The Three suffer, but each suffers in his own way.'⁵⁴ (Original emphasis)

Some Important Implications:

If we believe the Johannine testimony that God incarnate wept a human tear some important implications follow concerning our understanding of the character of God, matters of theodicy and defense, and the Christian dialogue with Islam

The Divine Character

⁵⁴ Donald Macleod, 'The Doctrine of God and Pastoral Care,' in Bruce L. McCormack, (Ed.), *Engaging the Doctrine of God: Contemporary Protestant Perspectives*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan/Edinburgh, U.K.: Baker Academic/Rutherford House, 2008), p.253.

The incarnate Christ (the *logos ensarkos*) wept a human tear at the tomb of Lazarus his friend. The watching crowd's reaction is instructive (John 11:36): 'Then the Jews said, "See how he loved him!"' They judged rightly. This is how love behaves in the face of the death of a loved one. Alan Richardson in his *Creeds in the Making* unpacks the significance of the incarnation in the following helpful way:

In other words, God took the initiative and gave Jesus to the race. Now if Jesus be man and not in any sense God, this would not be true: we could not then believe that God was so loving as to take action by way of incarnation on our behalf.

He elaborates:

Consequently, if Jesus be not in any sense God, God cannot be in the fullest sense a God of Love; in fact, it becomes proportionately harder for us to believe in the existence of a God of love at all. We must realize how important is the doctrine of the incarnation for our belief in God of love.⁵⁵

Richardson argues this against the backdrop of the human predicament.

In addition, Richardson wisely sees the implication for our doctrine of the God: 'Thus, the denial of either the divinity or the manhood of Christ implies consequences disastrous to the conception of a Father-God.'⁵⁶ The testimony of John's Gospel supports his claim John 1:18): 'No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known' and again, this time Jesus is the speaker (John 14:9): 'Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.' A. M. Ramsey rightly said with regard to God: 'he is Christlike and in him there is no unchristlikeness at all.'⁵⁷ We know that God really is love because of the Christ who is the exegete of the Father.

⁵⁵ Alan Richardson, *Creeds In The Making: A Short Introduction To The History Of Christian Doctrine*, Second Edition, (London: SCM, 1972), p. 70.

⁵⁶ Richardson, *Creeds*, p. 70.

⁵⁷ Quoted in J Munsey Turner, 'God's Three Ways of Being God,' *Expository Times*, (Vol. 85, No. 8, 1974), p. 243.

Theodicy and Defense

Following a helpful distinction found in the work of Alvin Plantinga, let me suggest that in the face of evil that all that may be offered is a defense rather than a theodicy.⁵⁸ A theodicy gives THE reason God allows or does X, whereas a defense offers a more moderate proposal. A strong defense would give reasons for trusting in God's moral integrity (for example, the love of God expressed through the cross) and also offer a theory of how that integrity is not compromised by penal substitution. A weak defense would likewise give reasons for trusting in God's moral integrity but unlike the strong defense offer no account of how the existence of evil comports with that integrity. I would contend that because of the limitations in scope of special revelation—not all has been revealed (Deut 29:29)—only some kind of defense is possible.⁵⁹

Integral to any such defense would be the fact that God incarnate wept a human tear. God in Christ knows human pain and grief from the inside of the human condition outside of Eden. More than that God in Christ has acted to defeat evil through Christ's coming and cross as Heb 2:14-15 makes plain: 'Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death....' Bonhoeffer was right to argue that '[o]nly the suffering God can help' and he has.⁶⁰ Baron von Hügel was right to argue we need help not just a fellow sufferer. God in Christ instantiated both desiderata. As Kevin J. Vanhoozer

⁵⁸ Plantinga (1980:10-11, 26-29). A good example of such a defense is found in Avery Cardinal Dulles, 'Divine Providence and the Mystery of Human Suffering,' in James F. Keating and Thomas Joseph White, (eds.), *Divine Impassibility*, 324-335.

⁵⁹ For a contrary view to mine see Tierno (2006:167) who is not convinced that defense is better than theodicy.

⁶⁰ Quoted in Warren McWilliams, *Passion*, p. 44.

argues: ‘God is not Whitehead’s “fellow sufferer who understands” but the “sovereign sufferer who withstands.”’⁶¹

Dialogue with Islam

In Islamic thought it is unthinkable that Allah would allow a prophet of Jesus’ stature to suffer on the cross. How then are Christians and Muslims to dialogue with regard to suffering, hope and Christology? Is this a polarity that can be overcome or must it for integrity’s sake be allowed to stand?

Before these questions may be addressed some understanding of the Muslim difficulty with a suffering God and/or a suffering Christ must be examined, albeit briefly. Let’s start with the idea of a suffering God. The Christian claim is that Christ is God incarnate. But in Islam the only God there is, is Allah. Allah’s transcendence is such that having a son or predicating suffering of Allah is unthinkable: ‘Verily, God is only one God; too exalted [*subhanahu*] is He that He should have a son (*walad*).’⁶² As regards, a suffering Messiah, Badru D. Kateregga speaks for many Muslims when he writes: ‘According to the true belief of Islam, it would seem most inappropriate for the Messiah to die through a shameful crucifixion. God, who is just, would not permit the righteous Messiah to suffer in that manner.’⁶³ Rather, Jesus (Isa) is accorded great honor in Islam

⁶¹ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology: Divine Action, Passion, and Authorship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 466. In this work Vanhoozer writes with his usual theological adroitness but his discussion in my view would have been strengthened even further by drawing a distinction between biblical anthropomorphisms and biblical anthropopathisms (e.g. see his p. 483, fn 36).

⁶² Nisa’: 4:171 (or Women 4:171) quoted in Ingrid Mattson, *The Story Of The Qur’an: Its History And Place In Muslim Life* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2008), p. 39. For a sensitive discussion of this key difference between Islam and Christianity see Daniel L. Migliore, *The Power of God and the Gods of Power* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), p. 126-127.

⁶³ Badru D. Kateregga and David W. Shenk, *Islam And Christianity: A Muslim and a Christian in Dialogue*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1980), p. 140. There is a minority report in Islam going back at least to the tenth-century and the Brethren of the Purity of Basra that affirms the crucifixion of Isa.

as second only to Mohammad as a prophet of Allah. The Qur'an arguably maintains that Jesus did not suffer on the cross but only appeared to have done so. The *surah* entitled 'Women' reads:

They denied the truth and uttered a monstrous falsehood against Mary. They declared: 'We have put to death the Messiah Jesus the son of Mary, the apostle of Allah.' They did not kill him, nor did they crucify him, but they thought they did... Allah lifted him up to His presence; He is mighty and wise⁶⁴ (Surah 4:154 and 158).

Islam has a Christology but it is a low one that sees Jesus as a human creature only.⁶⁵ Ascribing deity to Christ is to commit the sin of shirk. That is to say, another namely Jesus is being associated with Allah. This is idolatry. The classic Christian view of Jesus as expressed in the Chalcedonian Definition of 451 AD is a high Christology. This definition affirms that Christ is one Person in two natures. He is truly human and truly God.

The question raised by Islam's Christology is whether Isa is big enough in the light of evil. The question raised by classic Christian Christology for Muslims is whether the ideas of Trinity and incarnation are coherent and not idolatry.

See the discussion in A. H. Mathias Zahniser, *The Mission & Death Of Jesus In Islam & Christianity*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2008), p. 199, fn. 40.

⁶⁴ *The Koran*, Trans. N. J. Dawood, Fourth Revised Edition, (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: 1980), p. 382. For the Qur'an with Islamic commentary see Maulana Muhammad Ali, *The Holy Qur'an: Arabic Text with English Translation and Commentary* (Dublin, Ohio: Ahmadiyya Anjuman Isha'at Islam Lahoire Inc., 2002).

Some Muslim writers refer to the crucifixion story as 'Cruci-Fiction' see Ahmed Deedat, *Crucifixion or Cruci-fiction?* (Woodside, NY: Islamic Propagation Center International, n.d.), 2.

⁶⁵ Not all agree that Islam has a Christology. John Renard argues: 'Strictly speaking, there is and can be no Islamic "Christology," since Jesus is not the "Christ" in Muslim thought,' *Responses to 101 Questions on Islam*, (New York/Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1998), p. 108. But for a contrary view see F. P. Cotterall, 'The Christology Of Islam,' in Harold H. Rowdon, (Ed.), *Christ The Lord: Studies in Christology presented to Donald Guthrie*, (Leicester, U.K.: Inter-Varsity Press, 1982), pp. 282-298. Contra Renard, Muslim scholar Badru D. Kateregga has no difficulty in regarding Jesus/Isa as Messiah, Badru D. Kateregga and David W. Shenk, *Islam And Christianity*, p. 131.

Conclusion

The God incarnate of biblical testimony knows how to weep a human tear. In the light of this testimony, we can be confident in a world in which there is so much pain and suffering, we have a God who truly understands the human condition outside of Eden. Although some theologians have had difficulty with ascribing affect passibility to God, few, if any, have had difficulty in asserting that Christ suffered. Some have seen Constantinople II constituting the limiting case (e.g. Weinandy). Others, however, have not (e.g. Ware).

This paper has suggested a way forward in that it has argued that God is impassible in the essential sense but not in the affect sense of the word. God is anthropopathic but not anthropomorphic. I described this view as Biblically Qualified Impassibility. These affirmations have important implications for understanding the depth of the divine love for his wayward humankind, for matters of the defense of the divine character given the existence of evils, and for dialogue with Islam