Introduction

The chapters which follow explore how some central themes in the theology of Julian of Norwich may contribute to contemporary Christian theological debates about the problem of evil. First, it is necessary to examine some of those debates in isolation, and in doing so there is a clear focus on what is fast becoming a new point of access into the problem of evil: 'practical' or 'pastoral' theodicy. This new approach critiques traditional theoretical understandings of theodicy, and both this critique and the rebuttals offered by the theoretical theologians are considered. From here, the way lies open to provide an in-depth analysis of how the theology of Julian, though woefully neglected on either side of the debate so far, can positively contribute.

The theological consideration of the problem of evil has greatly changed from that with which many of us were familiar in the 1970s and 1980s. While the history of the problem may still be traced from the classical world, to the Fathers, Anselm and Aquinas to Leibniz and beyond, there has been a radical shift in emphasis in attempting to systematically reconcile the goodness and morality of God in the face of the existence of evil. It is no longer a subset of historical theology or the history of ideas. Rather, while acknowledging that all theodicies must to a greater or lesser degree always be theoretical, theodicy now goes further and concerns itself with how suffering individuals and groups can make sense of the evil structures that surround them and create faith-based strategies for coping with the suffering they encounter as a lived experience day by day.

This means that the theology of theodicy concerns itself far more with the moral, existential, socio-economic and political dimensions of evil, a wider context than the tracing of philosophical and theological speculations as to the origin of evil alone. In short the theology of theodicy is political theology.

To claim that the theology of theodicy is political theology is to immediately raise the three key issues with which this book is chiefly concerned: first, the theoretical context within which pastoral theodicy is possible, second the nature of God in relation to evil and suffering as a lived experience, and third that lived experience itself.

Many pastoral theodicists have, as we will see, claimed that all theoretical theodicy must be abandoned or at the very least shift its focus away from the abstract and the intellectual towards how and why people actually suffer and the effects of that suffering day by day. But this may deprive us of sufficient and robust intellectual evidence to show that theoretical theodicy is indeed as inherently immoral and irrelevant as the pastoral theodicists say that it is. Some themes found in theoretical theodicy may need to be retained in order to make sense of the pastoral position and support it. To take one rather weak example; a belief in some form of life after death may allow the believer to hope for an eventual healing of their suffering and pain and the effects of both encountered in this world. On this view suffering and affliction build our spiritual character and strengthen our souls so that we are able to sing or pray:

> *Be near me Lord Jesus, I ask thee to stay*
> *Close by me forever, and love me I pray*
> *Bless all the dear children in thy tender care*
> And fit us for heaven to live with thee there.[1]

Suffering makes souls. But paradoxically that does not provide licence for perpetuating suffering any more than repeated sinful acts bring about an increase in grace (Rom. 6:1). This 'eschatological verification' may simply put a sticking plaster over the problem, to provide the traditional opiate to produce passivity in the Church and society more generally. Some theoretical theodicists might argue that, for the time being, until death at least, it is a practical response to the problem of evil. This is a very weak argument indeed but, insofar as it is justified to use it at all, it serves to highlight that the question of the intellectual context in which pastoral theodicy is possible at all must be tackled head on.

1. Mrs Cecil Francis Alexander, 'Away in a Manger', a Christmas carol widely in the public domain (my emphasis added to the last line). For an insightful commentary on the relationship between this carol and theodicy see Vincent Bagan, 'Be Near Me Lord Jesus', *Dominicana*, 26 December 2013: www.donminicanajournal.org/be-near-me-lord-jesus (last accessed 4 May 2021). See also Nicholas Hartman, 'Lemon Juice and the Problem of Evil' at the same website.

The second question concerns the nature of God as it relates to human suffering. This lies at the heart of any and every theodicy. Human suffering caused by the evil acts of others and the structures of sin which produce both always stand in stark contradiction and opposition to the notions of a loving, compassionate and all-powerful God. Love and compassion represent possibilities of healing and hope and yet they are not persuasive because God seems to do nothing whatsoever to bring them about and so alleviate or eradicate the effects of suffering and its causes. God is absent. God does not care, or if he does he is unaffected by evil. Why bother to continue to believe in his love and compassion? Perhaps God in his absence and immutability is in fact not loving at all but malignant to the point of being sadistic? As flies to wanton boys are we to God, we suffer for his sport.

What may well be needed then is to engage in a discussion of what can really be known about divine love and compassion and not what we think we ought to know about them. Such an examination may cause us to think very differently about both, especially if that discussion were to revolve around God *in Christ* reconciling the world to himself. Just as the theology of theodicy is a political theology so it is also Christology, or more specifically a *theologia crucis* (= a theology of the cross of Jesus of Nazareth).

This leads to the third key issue: destructive suffering and its effects in the lives of individuals and groups. I use the term 'destructive suffering' to speak of that suffering which has such major *deleterious* effects on our personal, emotional, intellectual and spiritual lives that it attempts to delete them and often succeeds, leaving us a shadow of our former selves. Some pastoral theodicists have, as we will see, strongly argued that it is precisely for this reason that traditional theoretical theodicy is inherently immoral. It does little or nothing to address these effects and consequences. They turn instead to a *theologia crucis,* focussing on the cross of Jesus as a spiritually consolatory power for victims of affliction and atrocity. The cross of Jesus provides potential healing power if, but only if, an individual is able to identify her suffering as being borne by Jesus too, with her and for her, at Golgotha. This assumes that the victim of suffering has a Christian faith and that she believes in a mystical union of her suffering with Jesus in ways which result in an *imitatio Dei* (=imitation of God). For many people who suffer with, say, depression or a 'nervous breakdown', this is at best a pipe dream and at worst adds another layer of perplexity to their difficulties.[2]

2. 'Burnout's Subtle Approach', *Ministry Magazine*: www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/1996/burnouts-subtle-approach (last accessed 4 May 2021.

This book argues that the theology of Julian of Norwich provides a helpful but much neglected resource for examining all three key issues briefly outlined here. I argue that this is true even though, of course, Julian was not aware of our contemporary distinctions between theoretical and pastoral theodicy. She wrote, after all, at least 300 years before any formal formulation of the problem of evil as a specific aspect of the theological endeavour.

It is well known that Julian was an anchoress[3] who received sixteen 'showings' or 'revelations' of God in 1373 and that she wrote the 'Short Text' almost immediately afterwards and the 'Long Text' after nearly 20 years of reflection. According to my late academic colleague and friend Grace Jantzen, the Short Text 'largely restricts itself to a narration of the contents of each vision' whereas the Long Text 'adds a good deal more commentary and theological reflection and is obviously the result of much pondering'.[4] It is an 'example of theology as reflection on the experience of faith, revealing how the insights born of contemplation overflow into doctrinal teaching',[5] and includes 'many questions about the nature of God, about creation and humankind, about sin, and about the ultimate meaning and fulfilment of all things, or eschatology'.[6]

As we will see, Julian was by no means content with easy answers to the theodicic problem and nor was she satisfied with the emotional and sometimes sentimental modes of comforting which follow from them. Rather, she wanted to understand how, if at all, the notion of a loving God who had promised that 'all will be well' was compatible with the natural evil of the Black Death and the burning of the Lollard heretics of her times. In what follows I will argue that Julian posed and explored questions that have re-emerged in contemporary discussions of Christian theodicy and that her insights may make a positive contribution to those discussions. They have for too long been ignored by Julian scholars and theologians working on the problem of evil alike. In bringing Julian firmly and squarely into current debates I hope to present a new approach

3. For a very useful insight into the life and spirituality expected of an anchoress see Grace Jantzen, *Julian of Norwich: Mystic and Theologian* (London: SPCK, 2000), chapter 3.
4. Jantzen, *Julian of Norwich,* p. 3.
5. Joan M. Nuth, *God's Lovers in an Age of Anxiety: The Medieval English Mystics* (New York: Orbis Books, 2001), p. 100.
6. Philip Sheldrake, 'A Practical Theology of the Trinity: Julian of Norwich', in *Spirituality and Theology: Christian Living and the Doctrine of God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), p. 101.

to the problem of evil and so extend the boundaries of the debates, if only a little.

In Chapter 1 I briefly set out why evil is problematic and has been since Epicurus.

In Chapter 2 I explore pastoral theodicy and its critiques of the theoretical approach. I then consider the main rebuttals of theoreticians to those critiques which claim:

1. that theoreticians misconceive and distort the whole problem of evil
2. that theoreticians are only interested in the problem of evil as an intellectual exercise and so wholly ignore actual instances of evil and suffering as a lived experience
3. and that 1 and 2 together demonstrate that the theoretical approach to theodicy is inherently immoral and serves only to legitimise the social, economic and political structures which so often impose suffering. In doing so, it is claimed, the theoreticians give licence and tacit intellectual support to those whom we would normally regard as evil people (the dictators in many lands being just one example).

In view of this it is of considerable importance to look at Dorothy Sölle's theology in her book *Suffering*, not least because it was her theology which laid many of the foundational arguments between the pastoralists and the theoreticians. This is considered alongside the arguments of those rigidly divided into the two camps which are as incompatible as the phenomenon of evil is supposed to be in the face of an all-loving God, through Kenneth Surin's masterly work *Theology and the Problem of Evil*.

Finally, I look at some different kinds of pastoral theodicy in order to clarify what I perceive to be a number of similarities which can be identified in their arguments.

In Chapter 3 I develop some issues in contemporary theodicy. I do so through the thought of O'Connor, Adams, Whitney and Stoeber among others, in an attempt to clarify the implications of completely abandoning the theoretical approach to the problem of evil. These discussions seem to suggest that certain theoretical contexts and themes are essential if pastoral theodicy is to be intellectually acceptable and gain traction in the academy as well as in the Church. This might be regarded as the first major issue.

The second is the traditional problem of the nature of God in relation to evil and suffering. This takes us to the very heart of all theodicy and still

cries out to be resolved. I do not claim to have done so but I do attempt to clarify exactly what is meant when Christians speak of the supposed 'compassion of God'. Here I am heavily influenced by the thought of Fr Luke Penkett CJN ObJN[7] and how the theologies of Merton and Nouwen might be brought to bear on this understanding. Broadly speaking 'compassion' is taken to its linguistic roots: com-passion = alongside or with suffering. For quite obvious and basic Christian theological reasons this involves considering God's 'suffering with' as revealed in the passion, crucifixion and death of Jesus, truly a person, truly God.

As a consequence, this chapter argues that com-passion, co-suffering, suffering with is the main characteristic of God's relationship to evil and suffering. I argue that it is only suffering *with* NOT *for* that can offer even a modicum of comfort to those who suffer. Only com-passion can bring hope and healing and perhaps eventually a deeper love and commitment to God.

Then there is the question of 'destructive' suffering and here it is necessary to take some time to define its nature and its social, economic and political dimensions. The relevance of the theoretical responses of Adams, Weil, Hick and others are closely examined.

Chapters 3, 4 and 5 represent the heart of this book. Here I explore Julian's theology including her concepts of 'the Fall', sin and human nature, God's divine com-passion and the human body. To give each of these themes the proper treatment they deserve would be to write a systematic theology which might result in many volumes. This book confines itself to a brief overview of each of these themes only insofar as they relate to the matter in hand: understanding the problem of evil.

I will argue that Julian's concepts of 'the Fall' and human nature are especially important to that understanding for, as we will see, Julian provides a unique approach that strongly contrasts with the classical-medieval theodicies she inherited. It certainly has nothing whatever to do with the idea that our encounters with evil and personal suffering are somehow character building and so good for us. Far less does her theodicy have anything whatever to do with the idea that evil and suffering are punishments for so-called 'original sin' or for our own deliberate faults. I show this through a reworking of Julian's well-known concept of the Motherhood of God in Christ. My treatment of this is a departure from many other scholarly understandings of this point

7. Luke Penkett, *Touched by God's Spirit: How Merton, Van Gogh, Vanier and Rembrandt Influenced Henri Nouwen's Heart of Compassion*. Foreword by Rowan Williams (London: DLT, 2019).

because I want to argue that the Motherhood of God is a deliberate literary trope by which Julian places a particular emphasis on the divine com-passion in relation to evil. My treatment may also be unique because I want to draw out some of the sacramental implications of this radical divine self-giving and nurturing. I will argue that, for Julian, any discussion of divine power necessarily demands both maternal and paternal aspects.

I analyse Julian's view of the human body. Unlike much theological thinking in her own day and in the classical period she does not take a negative view of the body, nor does she condemn its many functions. To the contrary, being a body is not something to be ignored or escaped from, but rather to be embraced and treasured as the beautiful creation of God that it is – even when that body may be deformed or malfunction in some way. Julian's understanding of the human body and what bodies do is entirely positive and in this way, I argue, Julian's theology makes an equally positive contribution to our relationship to God and our contemporary Christian response to evil and bodily suffering.

I then look more closely at this positive contribution and argue that Julian's theodicy is not only extremely sensitive to our lived experience of suffering but is also rooted and grounded in the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus, all of which are compassionate.

I conclude by showing how Julian's theodicy illuminates the eschatological dimension of contemporary debates on the problem of evil in ways which provide suffering people with the resources to create a hopeful response to their plight. I also conclude that Julian speaks to both sides of the theoretical/pastoral approach to the problem of evil and when taken seriously her insights modify and perhaps eliminate the need for the hot-tempered vitriol that is cast from both sides on the other.

In short, this book shows how Julian's theological theodicy integrates both the theoretical and the pastoral dimensions in current debates in creative and innovative ways that those both in the Church and out of it have failed to notice and implement for far too long.