

Covid-19 and Theodicy: A Theological and Philosophical Response

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Abstract

Since the first diagnosis of Coronavirus (COVID-19) in Wuhan, China, in 2019, the novel disease spread globally and caused the World Health Organization to declare it a global pandemic in March 2020. The stigma and, more so, the fatality rate caused harmful effects on public mental health. For instance, it caused anxiety, depression, trauma, grief over the loss of life, and catastrophic impoverishment from the substantial financial costs of treating COVID-19 patients. One curious question posed by local radio listeners on a Sunday morning program is whether God enjoys seeing people suffering from COVID-19. The daunting paradox is the depth of human pain and suffering in the presence of a loving and powerful God who allows suffering and pain. This paper examines the question of theodicy in the context of COVID-19 to encourage Christians to cope with the challenge of pain, suffering, and tragedy by anchoring on a sound theological understanding. The paper analyses and evaluates research and philosophical arguments to establish logical consistencies on the question of pain and suffering. The study used the Divine Command Theory, which states that an action is right or wrong because of God's prescription. This paper concludes that the current philosophical arguments on theodicy may not sufficiently explain the problem of pain and suffering; thus, the biblical discourse is the only source that gives hope and comfort concerning the intense and horrendous effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: God, Pain, Suffering, Mental Health, Theodicy, COVID-19, Philosophical Response

Introduction

Coronavirus disease (or COVID-19) was first identified in Wuhan (in China) in December 2019. It is a highly contagious disease caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-COV-2). According to the World Health Organization (WHO), COVID-19 has become a global concern, causing existential threats to human life; for instance, dramatic loss of life, increased poverty levels, food insecurity leading to undernourished people, and employment reduction (WHO, October 2020 & To, et al., 2021). The disease spreads from an infected person's mouth or nose in small liquid particles when they cough, sneeze, speak, sing or breathe. These particles range from larger respiratory droplets to smaller aerosols. The common symptoms include gastrointestinal symptoms, headache, loss of smell, cough, muscle pain, sore throat, fever, diarrhea, and breathing difficulties (Niazkar et al., 2020). In addition, the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC, 2021) observed that most cases of COVID-19 were mild or moderate and did not require hospitalization or advanced medical care. However, those requiring hospitalization vary by age, with 1.5% in persons under 30 years, 3.9% in 30-59 years, 12.8% in 60-69 years, 26.1% in 70-79% years, and 34.9% in those 80 years and older.

The deadly virus saw many people succumb to it, with counties forced to go into lockdowns to minimize its spread. In addition, variants of COVID-19 emerged and became dominant in many countries, with Alpha, Beta, and Delta variants being the most lethal. The World Health Organization, on December 11, 2021, identified five SARS-CoV-2 VOCs. They include the Alpha (B.1.1.7 in the United Kingdom (UK) in late December 2020; Beta (B.1.351) reported in South Africa in December 2020; Gamma (P.1) reported in Brazil in early January 2021; Delta (B.1.617.2) reported in India in December 2020, and Omicron (B.1.1.529); reported in South Africa in November 2021(Aleem et al., 2022). As of August 16, 2022, there were more than 588 million cases and 6.4 million deaths globally, making it one of the most lethal pandemics in modern history (WHO, 2022). However, infections differ in many countries and might be higher or below the global average.

Despite several kinds of research, experimental treatments, and clinical trials of vaccines rolled out, there has been no effective vaccine discovered (Siemieniuk et al., 2020). As of August 16, 2022, over 12 billion vaccine doses were administered worldwide (WHO, 2022). Sadly, the currently available vaccines remain unavailable and costly. There is an existential fear of entry of

substandard and falsified vaccines into the market. In addition, there has been inefficiency and injustice in the distribution of COVID-19 vaccines among different countries, regions, and social classes. More affluent countries and regions have acquired far more vaccines than needed, thus exacerbating the epidemic's severity in underdeveloped and marginalized countries and areas (Li, Z., Lu, J., & Lv, J., 2021). The worldwide need for vaccines was evident, especially among vulnerable groups, including healthcare workers, older people, and those with pre-existing diseases. Wang et al. (2020) acknowledge that part of the management of COVID-19 has been supportive care, including treatment of symptoms, fluid therapy, oxygen support, and medications or devices to support other affected vital organs. Kashte et al. (2021) observe that the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that developing, testing, and reviewing multiple safe and effective vaccines against a new disease in less than a year is possible. On the contrary, safety concerns were raised about the speed at which vaccines were developed. Many governments worldwide managed the vaccine distribution and convinced skeptical anti-vaccination groups to recognize the safety and efficacy (Harris & Moss, 2021).

Pain and Suffering Occasioned by COVID-19

Besides the expensive medication for extreme cases of COVID-19, the other major problem that both COVID-19 patients and their families encountered was psychological torture. Whenever a patient was diagnosed with COVID-19, in some cases, insurance companies would withdraw their covers, thus, sinking families financially and causing harmful mental health problems such as anxiety and stress, which in most cases leads to depression (Cordero, 2021). The situation was further intensified by the stigma and trauma from widespread disease, fear of getting sick, isolation, harsh living conditions that restrain public gatherings, the pain of losing a loved one, and jobs and businesses collapsing, among others (Fava, 2020). In addition, the stigma among people treated for COVID-19 affected their emotional and mental health, thus reducing their resilience (WHO, 2020). Furthermore, the impact of COVID-19 on African traditional burial systems and values generated resistance to the Ministry of Health protocols but also invoked an assorted mix of depression (Barasa & Shitandi, 2020; Mweri, 2020). To reduce the risk of disease transmission, the initial WHO protocols on managing dead bodies with COVID-19 required that they should not be embalmed, restricted viewing, put in a body bag, labeled, and

buried within the shortest time possible. This contravenes African burial rites, which require several religious ceremonies to prevent disaster from falling on the relatives of the deceased.

Ordinarily, bereavement, isolation, loss of income, and fear trigger mental health conditions or exacerbate existing ones. For example, an empirical study by Panchal, Kamal, and Cox (2021) observes that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting economic crisis, about 4 in 10 adults in the United States of America reported anxiety symptoms or depressive disorder – a four-fold increase from pre-pandemic levels. In addition, many adults reported specific negative impacts on their mental health and well-being, such as difficulty sleeping (36%) or eating (32%), increases in alcohol consumption or substance use (12%), worsening chronic conditions (12%), due to worry and stress over the coronavirus.

During these depressive moments, believers in Christ and non-believers often ask questions with implications. They ask whether the COVID-19 pandemic and general suffering in the world are because of punishment from God for human sinfulness. Is it from God? Does God enjoy seeing people suffer? Does God really love? Is God ultimately powerful? Why does God allow Christians to suffer? How can there be a benevolent God when there are so much evil and suffering in the world? Is pain a punishment for my sin? Will God hurt me and call it good? Romans 8:28 reads, “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (NIV). This verse acknowledges that God works in ‘everything,’ not just in isolated incidents for our good. Evil is prevalent in our fallen world, but God can turn every circumstance around for our long-range good and fulfill His divine purpose. The COVID-19 pandemic has led many to despair, pain, and suffering; thus, it is critical to explore this subject philosophically and theologically.

Objectives

The objectives of this paper are two-fold. First, to analyze and evaluate philosophical arguments on the problem of theodicy. Second, to examine the concept of theodicy amid COVID-19 and to provide biblical and theological perspectives for Christians to cope with suffering and pain.

Methodology

This article evaluates relevant literature (both theological and philosophical) to establish the logical consistencies of theodicy and is guided by the Divine Command Theory (DCT). The meta-ethical theory asserts that what is moral and immoral is commanded by the divine (Geirsson & Holmgren, 2010). While DCT is a widely used theory, its basic tenet is to use God

as the source for all principles. Pollock (2007) argues that a person must believe that a willful and rational God has a direction toward an ethical outcome. It is consistent with the revelation of the Decalogue in Exodus 20:1–17 and Deuteronomy 5:6–21, which portray God’s endorsement of a moral code for the ancient Nation of Israel, which is also relevant to our existential challenges today.

The Concept of Theodicy

The term ‘theodicy’ is not in the Bible; hence it is prone to misapprehension and misinterpretation. Theodicy is an agelong quest that attempts to justify or vindicate God’s divine providence in a world with evil. Scott (2015) opines that theodicy is an empty technical term disconnected from real life and, to others, an elusive abstract for the elites. However, scholars agree that it is a term that addresses an age-old problem: the existence of God in relation to the presence of suffering in the world (Hernandez, 2018 & Griffioen, 2018).

In its classical form, ‘theodicy’ was first formulated by Epicurus (341–270 BC) in the form of a dilemma (Surin, 1983). Morgan (2008) observes that the issue of theodicy is too crucial for major religions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam to ignore, adding that ‘theodicy’ is derived from two Greek words, *theos* (God) and *dikē* (justice). The word is used in two ways: first, to designate the philosophical problem of the existence of evil, and second, to defend God’s justice in an unjust world. The two understandings of theodicy are often collapsed into questions, such as why godly people suffer. Why do tyrants harm the helpless with apparent impunity? Why is there evil in a world created by a good God? Is the God who created such a world morally good? If God is omnipotent, then God can prevent evil; if God is good, then God wants to prevent evil, but evil exists; hence God is neither omnipotent nor good (Yarbrough et al., 2008). In addition, today’s pertinent questions regarding the COVID-19 pandemic include why God wants the world to remain broken forever. Why does God permit pain and suffering? Is God fair and in control of the world? Why does a good God allow evil and suffering in our world?

Historical and Philosophical Arguments on Theodicy

Scholars have numerous philosophical arguments in response to the prevalent problem of evil, pain, and suffering. In its classical form, theodicy requires one to reconcile the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect God with the reality of evil. The most extreme is the

secular theodicy which is premised on the non-existence of God. The ‘God is dead’ claim by Friedrich Nietzsche has been modified to fit within an atheist, secular framework (Bosman, 2019). The concern for the theistic groups is now that if God is believed to exist, why is the problem of evil, pain, and suffering still there? Who takes the blame?

St. Irenaeus of Lyons (AD 130 - 202) and St. Augustine of Hippo (about AD 354 - 430) presented two key strands of thinking about the concept of evil in relation to Christianity. They both use free will to explain how an all-good, all-powerful God could allow evil pain and suffering in the world. However, they disagree on the role that free will plays.

The Irenaeian theodicy states that God allows evil and suffering in the world to lead to the higher goal of moral development, also known as ‘soul-making theodicy,’ to enable humans to achieve moral maturity (du Rand, 2016). This argument seems to agree with the Islamic and John Hicks’ view of the so-called “problem of evil.” In the Islamic worldview, evil is not presented as a problem but rather as an instrument in the actualization of God’s plan, which is intertwined with human experiences in this world for man’s spiritual development (Rouzati, 2018 & Byerly, 2017). This view raises other questions about whether all suffering and pain create moral growth and maturity in human life. It is important to note that the creation narrative in Genesis 1 and 2 presents God’s perfect creation of our world as it relates to God’s purposes for humankind (summarized as worship, stewardship, and upholding relationships). Grudem (2020) describes the image of God in humanity as morally accountable to God, having an inner sense of right and wrong, exhibiting righteous behaviour, and having the ability to relate with God. This establishes humankind’s fundamental nature before humanity’s fall into sin as devoid of evil, wickedness, and suffering.

Further, St. Augustine’s theodicy is best described as ‘soul-judging’ (Mathewes, 2021). Augustine draws on the story of the fall of humankind into sin in Genesis 3 that God created a perfect world, but original sin, the disobedience of Adam and Eve, introduced evil into the world. Therefore all evil and suffering that have entered the world have come from that original sin. No one is blameless, and no one is innocent. In order to judge human beings fairly, Vorster (2011) opines that the very nature of humankind when God created them in Genesis 1 and 2 comprised of emotions, spirit and intellect, and free will. Adam and Eve’s disobedience in the Garden of Eden was an abuse of this free will. Since they were not robots, they chose to disobey God and evil came into the world. Thus the evil in the world does not provide evidence of a

moral fault in God, the world's creator and governor. McGrath (2016) posits that evil results from the actions of free, rational, fallible human beings, which allows the existence of God and evil to be consistent.

John Hick's theodicy is a criticism of the Augustinian theodicy, arguing that if humans were made perfectly good, then it should have been impossible for them to have made an immoral choice, hence rejecting the idea of the inheritance of sinfulness. He believed that an eternal hell would render "a Christian theodicy impossible" (Hick, 2010). Alvin Plantinga's view on theodicy is a defense of free will. It attempts to show that the belief in God is still logically possible, despite the existence of evil, adding that there are some things that an omnipotent God could not do yet remain omnipotent (Geivett, 1995), thus challenging Hick's theodicy.

John Calvin's Theodicy takes a different trajectory from the philosophical speculations and diverse opinions and entirely surrenders to the Word of God (Miller, 2018). Calvin's theodicy was influenced to a large extent by the work of St. Augustine. Unlike Augustine, Calvin maintained that God could not be indicted. Calvin concurred with the Augustinian approach that sin is the result of the fall of humankind and argued that the human mind, will, and affections are corrupted by sin. Additionally, only the grace of God is sufficient to provide humans with ongoing ethical guidance. Calvin's view, therefore, is embedded in what was referred to as the "divine hiddenness and the foundation of scripture," which vindicates God's justice by demonstrating the meaningfulness of God's activity in human life, as demonstrated in the book of Job (De, 2012).

Biblical Teaching on Pain and Suffering

The prevalence of pain, suffering, death, and evil in today's world is real. Long (2011) rightly observes that tsunamis, earthquakes, famines, diseases, wars, and many other devastating forces lead Christians to ask agonizing questions. Is God all-powerful? Is God good? How can God allow so much innocent human suffering? Furthermore, Scott (2020) raises a legitimate question: Why does God seem absent, silent, and even cruel during suffering? Does God allow this to happen? Also, Elvis and Ronda (2021) add that if God is love, why did the COVID-19 pandemic occur? These questions, taken together, have been called the "theodicy problem" Christians find it even more difficult to reconcile suffering brought about by COVID-19 with faith in God.

While suffering and pain are deeply personal and usually evoke strong emotions, the Bible offers examples that reveal the mystery of human suffering and God's eternal perspectives. Therefore, biblical theology offers a proper explanation of the existence of evil and God's initiative to deal with it. A theology of suffering is the study of what the Bible says about suffering while considering God's nature and the current state of humanity. Peterman and Schmutzer (2016) opine that this biblical knowledge is essential for Christians to understand why suffering exists. When will it end? God's place in it, and how can Christians bear through it?

A systematic scan through the Bible introduces the story of creation in Genesis chapters 1 and 2, where God is indeed all-powerful and good (Luke 18:19). God's goodness emanates from His nature and extends to actions (Ps 119:68). God's intentions and motives are always good, and has nothing unpleasant or evil (Gen 50:20; Hab 1:13; 1 John 1:5). Everything that God made was very good according to Genesis 1:31; Romans 7:12; James 1:17.

God's creation began as a masterpiece in Genesis 1 and 2, but Genesis 3 records what exactly went wrong. Adam and Eve disobeyed God, resulting in shame (Gen 3:7), fear (Gen 3:8–10), and the pain of broken relationships. Sin brought devastating consequences such as death, oppression, accidents, wars, and diseases like COVID-19. It also brought natural disasters like earthquakes, tornadoes, storms, floods, drought, crop failure, landslides, and tsunamis. Therefore "evil is the primal cause of suffering, rebellion is the root of pain, sin is the source of death" (Carson, 2006, p. 40).

Since the fall of humankind in Genesis 3 till today, suffering, which includes punishment, hardship, grief, disaster, loneliness, injury, shame, disgrace, disease, and death (Deut 30:15–19), etches deep marks on human beings. Innocent suffering and its accompanying protest to God is a common scenario because there seems to be a struggle with the whole concept of theodicy and prosperity of the wicked (Hab 1:2–4; Ps 73:3–13). However, even within this premise of struggle and protest, it is never understood in the Old Testament theology as a challenge to the justice and goodness of God because there is always a corresponding certainty that God will vindicate (Ps 94:1-3; Isa 57:17–21; Hab 3:12–15). Therefore, from the preceding section, it is right to conclude that it is not God that makes us suffer (Lam 3:33), but God allows suffering to come to our lives to accomplish a divine purpose, as in the case of Job (Job chapters 1 and 2).

It is agreeable that, generally, suffering is multifaceted; it can be moral, physical, psychological, or even theological. From a theological perspective, Piper (2020) postulates that

God is not silent but always at work, even in moments of pain and suffering through COVID-19. Likewise, Kuwornu-Adjaottor (2013) argues that God has valuable lessons to teach whenever we go through suffering.

Though suffering is not virtuous nor a sign of holiness, several pieces of literature (Piper, 2020 & Vitillo, 2014) postulate that suffering in the Bible is a result of several reasons, first, the fallen world; second, testing the faith of the righteous (Job 1:2; Rom 8:18–24; Phil 2:25–28); third, to get our attention (Psa 103:4; 119:67, 92; Exod 15:26); fourth, sin as the cause (Num 16:1–38; Jos 7:1–26, Acts 5:1–11, 12:20–25). Fifth, correction or discipline (Heb 12:7–13); sixth, testing courage (2 Tim 3:12; 1 Pet 4:12–14; Jas 1:1–19); seventh, to build our faith and toughen our character (Psa 23:4; Rom 5:3–4)); eighth, persecution (John 15:18–26; 16:1–3; Acts 14:21–22; 2 Tim 1:11–12; Phil 1:29; 3) and ninth, to prepare believers for a greater blessing ahead and to turn one’s attention towards the redemptive suffering of Jesus in the Gospels (Isa 40–55; Gen 50:20; Matt 26:39; John 15:1–5; Rom 8:18; 2 Cor 4:17–18). From these passages, suffering is partly a result of unwise or immoral choices and might not raise the issue of theodicy. In other cases, however, the suffering endured seems excessive for the offense committed or even directed against innocent parties. For instance, the undeserved pain of the Korahites rebellion in Numbers 16 and the death of the firstborn son of David and Bathsheba in 2 Samuel 11, alongside the case of Job (Job 1 & 2), who suffered as a consequence of contestation between God and Satan. In addition, parents of stillborn babies or victims of brutality or natural catastrophes will affirm the issue of theodicy.

In the New Testament, pain and suffering are both physical and emotional. It includes but is not limited to disease, grief, storms, exploitation, accidents, shame, slander, torment, brutality, terror, frustration, despair, murder, abuse, and betrayal (Peterman & Schmutzer, 2016). However, Jesus of Nazareth underwent Jewish and Roman trials, was flogged, and was sentenced to death to crucifixion (Edwards, Gabel & Hosmer, 1986). The cross of Christ then was meant to divinely bring the solution to the issue of pain and human suffering. That is why all four gospels (Mathew 27, Mark 15, Luke 23, and John 19) record the humiliating trials, torture, and crucifixion of Jesus. The cross is not and cannot be loved or admired. The Roman criminal justice system punished criminals guilty of a crime such as stealing, murder, and rebellion against the government by publicly hanging them. They were forced to carry their own wooden cross to the place of execution, nailed on top of the cross with their arms outstretched. Several

soldiers hoisted the cross upright and jolted the bottom into a hole dug in the ground. Most people died of suffocation. Habermas, Kobel, and Shaw (2021), forensic pathologists, and clinicians hypothesized the manner of Jesus' death, which included: pulmonary embolism, cardiac rupture, suspension trauma, asphyxiation, fatal stab wound, and shock.

Why did Jesus have to suffer in such a manner? Biblically, to appreciate this question, the implicit principle of the innocent dying for the guilty was established in the Garden of Eden, when a garment of animal skin was used to cover the nakedness of Adam and Eve (Gen 3:21). Later, the same principle was set in the Mosaic Law (Lev 17:11 cf. Heb 9:22). Therefore, the crucifixion of Jesus is the cornerstone of Christian faith because through the painful death and the resurrection came the greatest gift of redemption (Rutledge, 2017). Stott (2006) argues that through the pain of the cross of Christ, we find triumph in tragedy and victory in shame. While the momentary pain and suffering in the world is real, we find comfort in the words of Revelation 21:3–4, where evil is finally defeated.

The Problem of Theodicy and the COVID-19 Pandemic

Christians can find meaning and purpose in living whenever they undergo pain, suffering, or distress. Africa is familiar with suffering, some from witchcraft, poverty, war, and curses, yet God is not seen as the source but as a redeemer (Reed, 2017). However, suffering is attributed to the fallen world, and COVID-19 is part of it; therefore, there is no need to blame God for allowing such an unfortunate reality or others for abusing their free will (Cordero, 2021). If God was to stop suffering and pain today, Little (2000) argues that God must destroy all humans or remove human freedom of choice.

Instead of Christians lamenting and even losing hope in life during the challenging season of the COVID-19 pandemic, Wright (2020) suggests that they should think of new ways of showing kindness and also engage in research and diligently observe World Health Organizations' protocols and precautions. Additionally, God has given humanity the intelligence and the resolve to restructure social and economic lives to survive the onslaught of COVID-19 (Pityana, 2020).

During the COVID-19 era, *Koinonia* has been redefined (Kipkoros, 2021). The term κοινωμία (Acts 2:42, 46, and 4:32) denotes something that happens in the public sphere continually and is experienced through continual material sharing ((Silva, 2014 & Arndt et al. 1957). Therefore drawing from the concept of church and fellowship, during this COVID-19

pandemic period, believers should engage in a partnership that mutually benefits each other by providing support, encouragement, and counsel for one another. The community of believers (ekklesia) in Acts took care of each other in terms of material sharing, those who had more shared with those who had less through a common fund managed by the apostles (Caudle, 2020).

There is a need for a solid Christian biblical foundation for stability in times of crisis. Although the Bible does not contain the word theodicy, it does consider the question of why evil strikes innocent people. Bosman and Van Wieringen (2021) and Boyd (2003) present a hopeful picture of a sovereign God who can be trusted for a restorative comeback, like the case of Job in Job 42:1–2. Scholars have proposed what needs to be done when faced with challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Swinton (2018) argues for a practical theodicy that seeks to explain the existence of evil to enable Christians to live faithfully with unanswered questions as they wait for God’s redemption of the whole creation. This view is quite different from Scott’s (2020) observation that though the friends of the biblical Job responded by remaining respectfully silent at the beginning, when they opened their mouths later, their speeches demonstrated emotional insensitivity, theological inaccuracy, and philosophical overreach. Pipes & Taylor (2006) call for Christians to look to Christ even in suffering to find greater confidence, deepest comfort, and sweetest fellowship; while Keller (2015) encourages the use of biblical wisdom and personal stories of overcoming adversity that there is meaning and reason, behind our pain and suffering. Zacharias and Vitale (2015) argue that God’s decision to allow temporal pain and suffering makes sense when viewed from the eternal triumph over evil in the New Jerusalem. Again God does not abandon believers even when they feel isolated, confused, anxious, depressed, despondent, and alone (Ps 88 and 89) but instead offers to sustain grace by carrying them in the darkest moments of their lives (Duncan, 2020, Risner, 2016, Schleifer, 2014, Yerkes, 2007).

Conclusion

In times of great distresses, occasioned by the problem of pain, suffering, and evil in general and the COVID-19 pandemic, the world was unprepared to tackle this monumental crisis. This paper attempted to examine the philosophical and theological arguments addressing the question of theodicy. Why do innocent people suffer? Why does evil exist in the world, yet God has revealed Himself as omniscient (all-knowing), omnipotent (all-powerful), and omnibenevolent (all-loving)? The study acknowledges that there are many reasons why people suffer. Some suffer

because of sin and thus face God's justice, while others suffer, yet they are righteous. Even so, God's purposes are accomplished. The paper argues that suffering is not foreign to Christians since Jesus Christ suffered to fulfill God's plan of bringing redemption to humanity. In the New Creation, suffering, pain, death, and the devil shall finally be defeated. By implication, Christians can go through suffering with hope. Additionally, the biblical narrative of Job, who, though righteous, lost everything, rendered bankrupt, childless, helpless, and broken, remained a man of heroic endurance by trusting God. Therefore, Christians can still persevere through the pain of COVID-19 because God remains sovereign, and in due course, His purposes will prevail through suffering.

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