

# Theology in the Face of Poverty and Suffering: An Examination of Religious Perspectives

Leonard Ndzi  
Email: [ndzigracebaptist@gmail.com](mailto:ndzigracebaptist@gmail.com)

---

## Abstract

---

This work examines theology in the context of poverty and suffering. It explores the storyline of theological discourse, from the days of early Christian theologians like Augustine to contemporary theories such as relational and process theologies. It highlights how religious ideas have adapted and responded to societal change. Blending an interreligious approach with religious and interdisciplinary perspectives is critical because it provides a good understanding of how theology responds to social injustice. The paper explores the obstacles of a suitable theological response to global issues, proposing a framework of dialogue, empathy, and public involvement essential for a more effective response to the vast challenges the world faces today.

**Keywords:** Poverty and Suffering, Theodicy, Social Justice, Interreligious Perspectives, Problem of Evil.

---

## Introduction

The long-standing presence of wretchedness and suffering raises some unavoidable questions in terms of theology, let alone a lifelong research study of what evil is and what part the benevolent deity plays in these circumstances. Underlying this whole errand is the theodicy, which appeals to scholars, theologians, philosophers, and ordinary people as they try to understand why evil persists if God is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent.<sup>1</sup> The struggle, therefore, becomes more tenuous in the face of the latest global problems, which

---

<sup>1</sup> Esan, Oluwatobi David, and Adekunle Muhydeen Adedoja. "The Problem of Evil and The Existence of God." *Nnamdi Azikiwe Journal of Philosophy* 12, no. 1 (2021).



mostly tend to overstretch theological approaches in their rationale and provide comfort to the afflicted.

This paper highlights how various philosophical thoughts, social conflicts, and developments in human thinking have shaped and influenced theological perceptions of poverty and suffering over time. The discussion starts with the primary thoughts of the early Christian theologians in framing human suffering within the divine scheme. It also covers the medieval and modern periods, where theologians have incorporated notions of social justice into the discussion. The study also looks at relational theologies, which portray God being with humanity through suffering.

As the world constantly changes with the advent of factors like globalization, technological advances, and multifaceted geopolitics, one thing that remains consistent is the theologizing of poverty and suffering.<sup>2</sup> By understanding these varying theological viewpoints, this work aims to give insight into how modern-day theology can offer viable and thoughtful answers to timeless inquiries about pain and justice.

### **Historical and Theological Perspectives on Poverty and Suffering**

Religious responses to poverty and suffering have a long historical heritage, demonstrating that religious thought evolves in addressing the questions of evil and universal justice. The early medieval Christian thinker Augustine of Hippo, in his *The City of God*, harmonized the understanding of the eternal benevolence of God and evil existence.<sup>3</sup> He argued that evil, by its nature, is the outcome of human free choice, not a design of God himself.<sup>4</sup> Thus, he formulated his theodicy model, which posits that evil is merely a necessity of human free decision, forming the foundation that permeated the Christian worldview and shaped it for centuries to come. He argued that God permits evil for the higher good, which looks contrived to some divine scheme where the good is the ultimate goal.

---

<sup>2</sup> Hossain, Delwar. "Globalization, Governance, and New Institutionalism: Exploring a New 'Developing World' Framework." In *Global-Local Tradeoffs, Order-Disorder Consequences: 'State' No More An Island?* pp. 23-59. Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2022.

<sup>3</sup> Gronewoller, Brian. "Augustine of Hippo." *Great Christian Jurists and Legal Collections in the First Millennium* (2019): 266-282.

<sup>4</sup> Matthews, Gareth B. "Augustine." In *Encyclopedia of Medieval Philosophy: Philosophy between 500 and 1500*, pp. 225-232. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2020.



Later, the thirteenth-century Roman Catholic theologian Thomas Aquinas synthesized Aristotle's philosophy.<sup>5</sup> The discourse also touched on questions about social justice and democratic theory. He argued that natural law, human marks of reason, and God should govern moral duties, including providing a good life and equal distribution of resources.<sup>6</sup> It depicted the problem of poverty from a systemic perspective, not as a personal or moral failure issue but as a societal issue that necessitates a collective response following Christian ethics.

In modern times, the phenomenon of urban poverty, workers' exploitation, and disparity between the rich and the poor have become relevant questions for the established traditional theodicies. In response to the complexities of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, John Caputo noted the failure of the ancient approaches to theodicy, which do not appear to comfort the scale of contemporary human suffering.<sup>7</sup> He specifically put forward the position that 'suffering is a protest' and saw it as an insult to God's plans and injustice in the world when we silently sit in apathy. Indeed, he brought forward alternative views according to which theopoetic methods see God as suffering with humanity, thus looking for a divine being with omnipotent and impassible powers. This perspective consistently encourages people to free themselves from unjust suffering and to recognize their additional role within the system that genuinely contributes to the same suffering. Caputo differs from previous theological responses encouraged by his radical theology, which gravitates towards a religion without sovereigns where God is not the almighty ruler anymore but more of an event of love and justice itself that comes from human experience.<sup>8</sup> In Caputo's theology, goodness and justice emerge as the world realizes its most minor yet most profound possibilities, rather than heroes driven by the desire to please an all-powerful God.

These contemporary criticisms reflect a significant theological transformation from the power of divine omnipresence and justice to the notion of the fickleness and vulnerability of the divine being associated with human suffering. The theological difficulty of believing

---

<sup>5</sup> Bal, Huseyin. "Human Freedom in Thomas Aquinas' Thought." *Recent Developments in Social Sciences: Political Sciences and International Relations* (2017): 231.

<sup>6</sup> Prudlo, Donald S. *Thomas Aquinas: A Historical, Theological, and Environmental Portrait*. Paulist Press, 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Ullrich, Calvin Dieter. "Sovereignty and the Event in John D. Caputo's Radical Theology." PhD diss., Stellenbosch: Stellenbosch University, 2019.

<sup>8</sup> Caputo, John D. "Thinking with Faith, Thinking as Faith: What Comes After Onto-theo-logy?." *Open Theology* 8, no. 1 (2022): 237-247.



in the divine justice accompanying suffering is now part of the old story. The new one is about encouraging faith communities to actively participate in the fight against suffering based on their faith. Caputo's analyses of poverty and suffering represent the development of a theological discourse that reflects a constant dialogue between religious thought and reason, old and new.

### **Emerging Theoretical Responses**

In reaction to the multifaceted nature of the intricate issues of the present world, old frames of theological understanding have been reappraised and re-envisioned, generating different new methods that demand relevant explanations and guiding principles for today's suffering and the interaction of God.<sup>9</sup> Theological movements, like relational and process theology, are known for rethinking God and His interaction with the world.

Relational theology redefines God as never changing and proposes a nearer and more interactive divine witness.<sup>10</sup> This theology maintains that God is primarily synthetic and that divine sufferings are, by nature, not alien to human exposure but rather human experiences. This approach implies a commonality between the divine and human experiences.<sup>11</sup> As a result, this understanding of the world contrasts with the deistic perception that God is a distant orchestrator who simply watches humanity's lives from a distance, moving people in the way He deems necessary.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the view sees God as the one who engages with the joys and failures in humans' lives, providing comfort and faith in moments of despair.

Along with the continuous development of relational theology comes process theology, heralded by the likes of Catherine Keller.<sup>13</sup> Process theology rejects the concept of God's divine constancy, preferring the idea that God is not static once but displays growth in response to the world. Whitehead's theory, which posits that reality is a continuous process

---

<sup>9</sup> Obiano, Doris, Christian Agama, Kenneth Chukwu, and Benedict Igbokwe. "Trends and Approach to Multidisciplinary Issues in the Academia: A Festschrift in Honor of Rev. Prof. Jude Onuoha." (2022).

<sup>10</sup> Cherry, Natalya. "Believing into Christ: Restoring the Relational Sense of Belief as Constitutive of the Christian Faith." (2018).

<sup>11</sup> Johnson, M. David. "Louis Berkhof's Introduction to the New Testament Book Outline with Notes." (2021).

<sup>12</sup> Oord, Thomas Jay. *God Can't: How to Believe in God and Love after Tragedy, Abuse, and Other Evils*. SacraSage Press, 2019.

<sup>13</sup> Keller, Catherine, and Petar Jandrić. "Process Theology Against Global Capitalism: Towards an Ecological Civilization." In *Postdigital Theologies: Technology, Belief, and Practice*, pp. 21-37. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022.



rather than a static entity, forms the basis for this consideration.<sup>14</sup> According to this perspective, the world and God are interdependent, and their dynamic relationship necessitates mutual influence and reciprocation. According to process theology, God is not an omnipotent deity, impervious to human actions and the passage of time, but rather an emotional God, susceptible to human actions and undergoing changes.<sup>15</sup>

Likewise, existential and narrative theologies appeal to the experiential and subjective dimensions of the spiritual journey, linking human personality and truth.<sup>16</sup> Existential theology is like existentialist philosophy, emphasizing the person grappling with absurdity and agony.<sup>17</sup> As observed by Gill (2021), the works of Søren Kierkegaard and Paul Tillich are some of the primary outcomes in the development of existential theology. Theology in existential crises is based on personal responsibility, authentic existence search, and integrity through a human relationship with God above one's inner self.<sup>18</sup>

Contrary to narrative theology, the principle of storytelling and personal narratives is concerned with illustrating the picture of divine realities; this way of reasoning suggests that theological truths are probably most understandable regarding the stories of those who made them accurate.<sup>19</sup> Through their assigned role of discovering their significance, narrative theology lets people see their stories added to the larger divine narrative. Every suffering can make one's experience of it valid and summon the forces of redemption hidden inside.

The contemporary theological perspectives, though controversial at times, challenge our perception of the divine.<sup>20</sup> They are conscious of the complexity of modern life and know that the one suffering is not the only one who suffers. They offer guidance and inspiration that ensure safety when stepping away from everyday familiarity and encourage a deeper examination of the spiritual aspects of human life. Similarly, these approaches unsettle the

---

<sup>14</sup> Sayem, M. Abu. "Religions and Environmental Sustainability: Focusing on Some Practical Approaches by John B. Cobb Jr. and Seyyed Hossein Nasr." *Australian Journal of Islamic Studies* 6, no. 1 (2021): 65-80.

<sup>15</sup> Potana, Venkateswara Rao. "The Nature of God: God is Self-Existent, Omniscient, Sovereign, and Triune." *International Journal of Scientific Research and Management (IJSRM)* 12, no. 02 (2024): 01-06.

<sup>16</sup> Visser, Anja, Bert Garssen, and Ad JJM Vingerhoets. "Existential Well-being: Spirituality or Well-Being?." *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* 205, no. 3 (2017): 234-241.

<sup>17</sup> MacDonald, Douglas A. "Commentary on "Existential Well-being: Spirituality or Well-being?"" *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* 205, no. 3 (2017): 242-248.

<sup>18</sup> Gill, Jerry H. "Recent Thought." In *Faith and Philosophy*, pp. 80-107. Brill, 2021.

<sup>19</sup> Klaasen, John. "Practical Theology and Narrative: Contours and Markers." *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 3, no. 2 (2017): 457-475.

<sup>20</sup> Peterson, Michael L., and Raymond J. VanArragon, eds. *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Religion*. John Wiley & Sons, 2020.



church and Christians, causing them to ponder their efforts to alleviate suffering and urgency. Unlike their predecessors, these theologies encourage active participation in combating pain and bringing about change that perpetuates structural inequalities.<sup>21</sup>

Therefore, the rise of these theologies resulted in the emergence of theological conceptions of God, including a deeply rooted connection to the human experiences of each epoch. These methods impart to people not only a distinctive vision of God but also the choice of the almighty in introducing suffering into their lives and, of course, the parameters of their actions in adjusting to the difficulties of the modern world. This multifaceted approach allows theology to remain an ever-appealing and liquid topic, making it a suitable tool for addressing the most considerate questions of existence.

### **Interdisciplinary Perspective and Practical Applications**

In theological discussion of poverty and suffering, interdisciplinary perspectives enhance comprehension by bringing new insights from disciplines like sociology and psychology.<sup>22</sup> Liu and Dietlind (2017) highlight the intertwining social structures that promote susceptibility to poverty and inequality.<sup>23</sup> Their research reveals how unequal relationship networks and participation in civil life create greater rifts in social and economic factors. According to this study, efforts to reduce poverty in society should factor in social cohesion and factors that divide communities. Thus, theology can reflect on social cohesion and its absence, enabling poverty reduction by interpreting it not only as an economic issue but also as a relational one.

In addition, psychology studies stress more profound aspects of individual and collective human emotion when facing suffering.<sup>24</sup> It highlights the associations between poverty and mental health, the strategies people use to cope with it, and the resilience people develop as they live with this challenge. Through these insights, a theology can provide psychologically informed and empathetic answers to suffering people who recognize the

---

<sup>21</sup> Janaway, Christopher. "On the Very Idea of 'Justifying suffering.'" *Journal of Nietzsche studies* 48, no. 2 (2017): 152-170.

<sup>22</sup> Smit, Dirk J. "Does it matter? On Whether There is Method in the Madness." In *A Companion to Public Theology*, pp. 67-92. Brill, 2017.

<sup>23</sup> Liu, Christopher, and Dietlind Stolle. "Social Capital, Civic Culture and Political Trust." *Handbook on Political Trust* (2017): 338-352.

<sup>24</sup> Kaliampos, Apostolos, and Pagona Roussi. "Religious Beliefs, Coping, and Psychological Well-Being among Greek Cancer Patients." *Journal of Health Psychology* 22, no. 6 (2017): 754-764.



mental and emotional part that alleviates poverty.<sup>25</sup> This approach can effectively provide appropriate care through pastoral missions and community outreach programs, addressing both spiritual and psychological aspects.

Several movements and programs demonstrate the application of an interdisciplinary set of theories in which theological teaching interacts with social change in the system. The Landless Workers Movement (MST) in Brazil is an example that combines land reform struggle with broader economic and social critiques.<sup>26</sup> This need stems from liberation theology, which emphasizes biblical notions of justice and demands better treatment of farm workers, who are the most impoverished. Through spiritual framing, they connect religious aspects with political elements, empowering the poorest mass of society and converting their struggle into a crusade.<sup>27</sup> Another exemplary case is the Jubilee USA Network, a consortium of religious groups that addresses the problem of international economics and offers forgiveness for Third World nations.<sup>28</sup> Jubilee—a biblical concept that provides the moral grounds for a fair and just economic policy—has inspired the networks to have similar economic policies.<sup>29</sup> This makes the Jubilee USA Network the only NGO that uses theological authority to tackle global economic problems by insisting on removing unjust debts and unequal financial systems that work against poor economies.

The illustrations above show that, when acknowledged by other approaches, theology can refresh its ability to adapt and become more effective in meeting the challenges of the modern world. Sociological knowledge of inequality systems is helpful in theology in understanding the structural aspect of poverty, and psychological insights shed light on the individual and community-level impacts of suffering.<sup>30</sup> Integrating theology and communities with actions feeds theological discussions, allowing religious communities to campaign for

---

<sup>25</sup> Van Mastricht, Petrus. "Theoretical-Practical Theology." *Diedit oleh Joel R. Beeke. Diterjemahkan oleh Todd M. Rester*. Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books 2021.

<sup>26</sup> Tarlau, Rebecca. *Occupying Schools, Occupying Land: How the Landless Workers Movement Transformed Brazilian Education*. Global and Comparative Ethnogr, 2019.

<sup>27</sup> Bleil, Susana. "Militancy and Religious Feeling in the Younger Generations of the Landless Workers' Movement in Brazil." In *Where Has Social Justice Gone? From Equality to Experimentation*, pp. 213-227. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022.

<sup>28</sup> LeCompte, Eric. "Benedictine Perspective on Diversity, Equity, Inclusion & Justice:" Diversity, Equity and Inclusion: The Benedictine Demand to Live in Right Relationship with Our God, Community and Planet," 2022.

<sup>29</sup> Thompson, Spencer P. "The Commodified Christ and the Economics of Jubilee." *The Kenarchy Journal* 1, No. 7 (2020): 86-141.

<sup>30</sup> Piff, Paul K., Michael W. Kraus, and Dacher Keltner. "Unpacking the Inequality Paradox: The Psychological Roots of Inequality and Social Class." In *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, vol. 57, pp. 53-124. Academic Press, 2018.





significant changes that improve the human condition through justice. Transcending the limits posed by interdisciplinary approaches to poverty and suffering allows for the exploration of the rationale behind these teachings, which, in turn, entrenches the theories and their principles in the real world. By utilizing sociology, psychology, and other disciplines, theology can effectively tackle the diverse aspects of human suffering and implement systemic changes shaped by a comprehensive understanding and analysis of the causes and real-life experiences of those living in poverty. Theology then serves as an innovative tool in the social sector, bridging the gap between spiritual beliefs and ways of living to create a just and kindly society.

### **Social Justice Imperatives and Theological Diversity**

Among the most relevant approaches is the emergence of liberation theology in Latin America in the 1960s.<sup>31</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, Leonardo Boff, and Jon Sobrino established liberation theology, representing a significant paradigm shift in the identity of the Christian mission concerning the wider world.<sup>32</sup> It expands on the work of spiritual teachers, dispelling the harsh stereotypes of a test or a path that leads to inner peace and spiritual enlightenment.

However, liberation theology posits that God's favor is not directed towards a specific social group but instead towards those who are impoverished. It asserts that Christians are not obligated to aid the impoverished but rather to combat injustice, as it is a fundamental aspect of their faith.<sup>33</sup> The theological approach applies the fundamentals of Christianity and the Bible to criticize and oppose the systems and mechanisms that cause poverty and marginalization. This leads to advocacy for economic, social, and political inclusiveness and justice.

In developing Christian-based liberation theology, they singled out the Engaged Buddhism movement, which deals with social justice.<sup>34</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh first coined this movement, and world-renowned leaders such as the fourteenth Dalai Lama later supported

---

<sup>31</sup> Krigner, Henrique. "The Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant Definitions of Justice and the Liberation Theology" 2023.

<sup>32</sup> Bingemer, Maria Clara Lucchetti. "Liberation Theology and Its Fruits: Some Bibliographical Milestones." In *Decolonizing Liberation Theologies: Past, Present, and Future*, pp. 37-50. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2023.

<sup>33</sup> McLaren, Peter, and Petar Jandrić. "From liberation to Salvation: Revolutionary Critical Pedagogy Meets Liberation Theology." *Policy Futures in Education* 15, no. 5 (2017): 620-652.

<sup>34</sup> Makransky, John. "How Buddhist and Christian Liberation Epistemologies Should Inform and Correct each Other." *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 39 (2019): 241-255.





it,<sup>35</sup> emphasizing the importance of politics that can alleviate suffering through non-violent methods.<sup>36</sup> It does not strictly adhere to traditional Buddhist practices. It also develops mindfulness and compassion to effect social change through activism. The methodology of this movement encourages people to apply Buddhist doctrines such as compassion, impermanence, and interdependence to solve contemporary burning issues, including social inequity, negative environmental development, and conflict.

The Islamic religion expresses the element of social justice through its theology. Islamic doctrine places pursuing zakat (the flower of charity) at the forefront, one of Islam's five pillars that binds Muslims to share their riches with poorer sections of the community.<sup>37</sup> As stated by the Lord, this practice is not only a charitable activity but a sin that the rich must give to the poor, who have certain rights over the rich. Modern Islamic scholars and Islamic movement institutes combine these fundamental principles to come up with solutions to today's challenges, dealing with poverty, injustices, and inequality.<sup>38</sup>

Hinduism equates to a rich set of everything, including views on karma, a Hindu concept of duty, and social responsibility. Generally, karma means enjoying good or suffering based on past actions.<sup>39</sup> However, while modern personalities like Vivekananda have interpreted it to suggest that nothing should justify one's presence in situations such as injustice, the opposite is true.<sup>40</sup> Rather than simply advocating for response actions to address social problems and serve people experiencing poverty, they place a strong emphasis on karma yogAbhishekam, or the act of performing one's duty without expecting anything in return, as they believe this is what leads to moksha (liberation).<sup>41</sup>

These theologically differing views significantly contribute to the ongoing dialogue on social justice, highlighting that despite diverse practices and beliefs, many religious

---

<sup>35</sup> Mishra, Manoj Kumar, Priyankar Upadhyaya, and Thomas Paul Davis. "Tracing the Legacy of Peace Leadership from an Asian Perspective: Mahatma Gandhi, Dalai Lama, and Thich Nhat Hanh." *Journal of Peace Education* 21, no. 2 (2024): 231-253.

<sup>36</sup> Hanh, Thich Nhat. *Being Peace*. Parallax Press, 2020.

<sup>37</sup> Salleh, Wan Nur Azira Wan Mohamed, Siti Zaleha Abdul Rasid, and Rohaida Basiruddin. "Towards Transforming Zakat Collection and Distribution Roles Using Digital Wallet in Support of Social Justice and Social Financing." *Open International Journal of Informatics* 7, no. 2 (2019): 95-103.

<sup>38</sup> Al-Kahwati, Ashi. "The Strategy of the Islamic State: Instrumental and Organizational Developments in Relation to the Strategy of Al Qaeda." (2018).

<sup>39</sup> Okafor, Justus Onyebuchi, and Osim Stella. "Hinduism and Ecology: Its Relevance and Importance." (2018).

<sup>40</sup> Medhananda, Swami. "Was Swami Vivekananda a Hindu supremacist? Revisiting a Long-standing Debate." *Religions* 11, no. 7 (2020): 368.

<sup>41</sup> Corodimas, Mihika. "Believing is Seeing." *Agora* 27, no. 2018 (2018): 1.



traditions share a common goal of improving human lives and alleviating suffering. Incorporating these views is the reason behind a broader awareness of what the interpreters of the different belief systems believe are the reasons for and solutions to poverty.<sup>42</sup> Such interreligious dialogue helps form a broader coalition of religious activism that can capitalize on each tradition's specific approaches and frames of reference to call for structural changes.

The social justice dimension in contemporary theology is not exclusive to any theological viewpoint; instead, it is a vibrant and dynamic field of study incorporating numerous enrichments from Christian, Buddhist, Islamic, and Hindu traditions. Therefore, they provide a unique perspective on poverty and oppression, drawing from the wisdom of each world religion and demonstrating the deep connection between social justice and the spiritual roots of specific religions. The logical consequence of this confluence of ideas and actions into theology elevates the discussion on poverty and gives international solicitude and sympathy.

### **Mysticism and Experience of Suffering**

Mysticism, which is a common strand connecting different religious schools, shares an insightful understanding of suffering and its place in people's lives; in their narration, it is not only a personality burden, which is not favorable, but it can also be a stimulus for profound self-discovery and personal change.<sup>43</sup> The mystic belief system views human suffering as a means to develop and strengthen the spiritual life, drawing a person closer to God. Many influential figures in this discourse, such as the Christian Julian of Norwich from the Christian tradition<sup>44</sup> and the Islamic Sufi Rumi from the Islamic tradition,<sup>45</sup> suggest that we should not avoid suffering but rather learn from it, as this path leads to spiritual benefits.

Julian of Norwich, a medieval church mystic, gave one of human history's most compassionate and deep-minded explanations for suffering. In light of her showings, commonly called 'the Revelations,' she primarily discusses the theme of divine knowledge

---

<sup>42</sup> Tomalin, Emma, Jörg Hausteijn, and Shabaana Kidy. "Religion and the Sustainable Development Goals." *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 17, no. 2 (2019): 102-118.

<sup>43</sup> Gäb, Sebastian. "Mysticism without Concepts." *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 90, no. 3 (2021): 233-246.

<sup>44</sup> Scott, Jessica. "'Come and See': Uncovering Julian of Norwich's Teaching of Wonder in Revelations of Divine Love." *Modern Theology* 38, no. 3 (2022): 485-499.

<sup>45</sup> Gray, Billy. "Rumi, Sufi Spirituality and Western Sufism in Elif Shafak's Forty Rules of Love." *Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis* 29 (2020): 124-146.



and love amid suffering.<sup>46</sup> Julian suggests that God uses human suffering to lay the foundation for His kind and merciful nature. In her famous statement that “All shall be well and all manners of things shall be well,” she puts forward the perspective that in the sufferings, we are open to communion with God, a closeness eventually that will finally work for the rest it might not understand now.

At the same pace, the Sufi mystic Rumi, who counted love and the soul’s journey through different axons among his poetic expressions, gave suffering a central role on the path to man’s spiritual awakening.<sup>47</sup> According to Rumi, people’s sufferings and the obstacles they face are not only the evil consequences of this world but also the reasons and forces that make emerging in the spiritual world possible. He lived with the premise of exploring the possibility of reaching ancient spiritual ecstasy and experiencing a mystical union with divinity through sacrifices and disengagements from personal desires. His poems reveal that there is only the atrocity behind the mask of the ego, opening the way for the divine truth to see the way down to the heart of the human being.

While the challenge of integrating these mystical perspectives logically with the rest of theology has accompanied them, their main disadvantage may be their potential to contradict the orthodox understanding of suffering. Some critics, such as Michael Stoeber, have critically examined the spectacles of suffering in the context of mystical religiosity.<sup>48</sup> He suggests that spiritual meanings that arise from times of material suffering can help us to understand from a different angle the reality of this suffering. Still, he may not necessarily shed light on the actual suffering. The spotlight on the heroic qualities encompassed by suffering may only give people a chance to spread fame rather than address existing issues.

This runs against the idea that esoteric experience lacks a degree of subjectivity as an intellectual phenomenon and appears to blame how mystic experiences blend with dogma in religious organizations.<sup>49</sup> Mystical experiences often present an idiosyncratic unveiling of God, subverting and transforming individuals’ sense of reality in ways challenging to integrate into a comprehensive religious discourse within a group.

---

<sup>46</sup> England, Frank. "Love is Our Lord's Meaning: Spiritual Formation in Julian of Norwich and Desmond Tutu." *Anglican Theological Review* 104, no. 3 (2022): 287-303.

<sup>47</sup> Safi, Omid, ed. *Radical love: Teachings from the Islamic Mystical Tradition*. Yale University Press, 2018.

<sup>48</sup> Stoeber, Michael. "Theopoetics as Response to Suffering: The Visual Art of Käthe Kollwitz in the Reformation of Practical Theodicy." *International Journal of Practical Theology* 23, no. 1 (2019): 24-38.

<sup>49</sup> Kripal, Jeffrey J. "Mysticism." *The Blackwell Companion to the Study of Religion* (2017): 321-335.



These hardships' phenomenological uniqueness leads to subjective interpretations of ruinous experiences that are too incomprehensible for some and, at times, seem philosophically alienating to others.

Furthermore, while the theological discourse incorporates mystery themes, the tension between celebrating the potential for transformation through suffering and acknowledging its potential to ruin lives persists. To illustrate, poets such as Julian of Norwich and Rumi, among others, depict soul-stirring union with the divine through pain and hate in their beautiful poems.<sup>50</sup> However, compassion, demonstrated through an active and intelligent approach to alleviating suffering, must also echo the reality of this union. This equilibrium is inevitable if we do not allow the spiritualization of suffering to become an excuse to escape reality and act helpless when confronted with wrongdoing and pain. On the one hand, religious communities are responsible for interpreting mystical reflections so that the in-depth qualities of individual spiritual experiences remain respected. On the other, the community's understanding and actions progress further.<sup>51</sup> In this case, one has to form a theological basis that acknowledges the non-contradiction of suffering—it is where the divine encounters transpire, but it should be removed through compassion.

Ultimately, the diverse mystical traditions conceal a significant spiritual lesson about the nature of suffering. Relics such as Julian of Norwich and Rumi offer an attitude that brings the challenge of seeing suffering as the line of the spiritual journey, entailing deeper understanding and closeness to God. The vanity of the divine experiences opens up great difficulty to theological logical coherence and results in its applicability into concrete practice to strike a balance between recognizing spiritual aspects of suffering and reflecting on its physical consequences. Nonetheless, mystical approaches to suffering encourage ongoing religious discussions and reflections that aim to bring believers' most profound insights into everyday life in a spiritually fulfilling and morally sound way.

### **Contemporary Challenges and Future Directions**

Modern theology has become more complex in embracing the diversity of various social justice notions, perhaps due to theological traditionalism and political inertia. On the one

---

<sup>50</sup> Van Nuffelen, Peter. "The Christian Reception of Julian." In *A Companion to Julian the Apostate*, pp. 360-397. Brill, 2020.

<sup>51</sup> Odeleye, Abraham Olutoye. "Comparative Ethical Analysis of Sin in African Traditional Religion and Christianity." *International Journal of Innovative Social Sciences & Humanities Research* 8, no. 2 (2020): 7-12.



hand, these challenges threaten the theological discourse, which resembles the fragmentation of theology in the early Christian church. On the other hand, they create a discursive space for developing a new, inclusive, and sophisticated theology that can better address the conditions of the modern world.

People perceive theological conservatism as a call to uphold mainstream traditional doctrines, potentially preventing the incorporation of new social and ethical perspectives into doctrinal teachings.<sup>52</sup> Traditionalism may restrain the church's response to social problems by looking at them from viewpoints and historical contexts that may not be relevant or sufficient; as a result, the church may not fully address current issues. For example, if one resists the reinterpretation of the scripture, which questions the place of poverty and divine providence, a return to liberation theology, which provides justice to both social and economic classes, may emerge.<sup>53</sup>

Furthermore, theology and politics of resistance combine forces to address social issues. Religious institutions often manifest social and political influences to safeguard the status quo and resist alterations threatening prevailing power structures.<sup>54</sup> Usually, formal political organizations can find common ground, sharing opponents with religious communities who may oppose progressive reforms on issues such as economic inequality, human rights, or environmental degradation. It can take away all of the momenta of liberating theological aspects, which often propose radical notions and how societies should structure themselves.

Unaccompanied, these obstacles can pose problems, although their presence also signifies a situation of development and transformation. When progressive theological movements encounter resistance, they often catalyze rich reflection and dialogue within the religious communities.<sup>55</sup> It essentially invigorates theologians and believers to reflect upon their faith's teaching within the context of modern realities, thereby leading to a more objective-oriented and profound spiritual understanding. The interaction can lead to a multi-

---

<sup>52</sup> Henriksen, Jan-Olav. "Systematic Theology in the Nordic Countries after 1945," 2023.

<sup>53</sup> Stinson, Morgan A., J. María Bermúdez, Jerry Gale, Denise Lewis, Andrea S. Meyer, and G. Bowden Templeton. "Marital Satisfaction, Conflict Resolution Styles, and Religious Attendance among Latino Couples: Using the Actor-partner Interdependence Model." *The Family Journal* 25, no. 3 (2017): 215-223.

<sup>54</sup> Fox, Jonathan. *An Introduction to Religion and Politics: Theory and Practice*. Routledge, 2018.

<sup>55</sup> Mokhoathi, Joel. "From Contextual Theology to African Christianity: The Consideration of Adiaphora from a South African Perspective." *Religions* 8, no. 12 (2017): 266.



stranded theological discourse that allows the conventional wisdom of religion to operate at the societal level and seeks to find practical solutions to contemporary problems.

Theological responses must identify the upcoming global issues that will undoubtedly influence future theological doctrines. These comprise climate change, technological enhancements, and dispersion, each leading to diverse issues that demand careful study of theology. Climate change is an ethical controversy that concerns environmental stewardship, justice for those who bear the brunt of climatic changes, and moral beliefs about humans' impact on the earth.<sup>56</sup> Theology could significantly contribute to the debate, placing matters such as these in a general discourse on endeavor, leadership, and fairness for all parties. It can also help rally religious groups to implement measures to improve the environment and policies while maintaining concern for the earth's condition.

On the other hand, technological advancements come with their own moral and social dilemmas, which theology must contemplate. Topics like artificial intelligence, bioethics, and digital security pose a challenge to distinguish between the ethos of a human being, the right technology to use, and the ethical way of researching.<sup>57</sup> Theological discourse on these subjects can serve as a moral compass, guiding the review of solutions to problems and new technologies in a manner that upholds human dignity and benefits the entire society. Migration, as a result of preferences like war, plant destruction, and economic hardship, requires religion to be involved in these issues for the good of humanity. The humane doctrine of hospitality, compassion, and justice shall guide the responses to the migrant and refugees' needs, which will call for laws that do not discriminate against them and are humane, as well as policies that address the root causes of displacement.<sup>58</sup>

Finally, while theological conservatism among the community and political resistance to the exhibition of liberation insight are some contemporary challenges, they act as catalysts in developing a more comprehensive and sympathetic theological discussion. As theology

---

<sup>56</sup> Borrás, Saturnino M., and Jennifer C. Franco. "The Challenge of Locating Land-based Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation Politics within a Social Justice Perspective: Towards an Idea of Agrarian Climate Justice." In *Converging Social Justice Issues and Movements*, pp. 82-99. Routledge, 2020.

<sup>57</sup> Chowdhury, Mohammad. "Emphasizing Morals, Values, Ethics, and Character Education in Science Education and Science Teaching." *MOJES: Malaysian Online Journal of Educational Sciences* 4, no. 2 (2018): 1-16.

<sup>58</sup> Rababa, Mohammad, Audai A. Hayajneh, and Wegdan Bani-Iss. "Association of Death Anxiety with Spiritual Well-being and Religious Coping in Older Adults during the COVID-19 Pandemic." *Journal of Religion and Health* 60, no. 1 (2021): 50-63.



engages with various global happenings—climate change, technological achievements, and migration—theology evolves and offers viable answers to the pertinent questions of this century of morals and ethics. An open-minded attitude towards dialogue, a willingness to challenge existing understandings, and a dedication to devising an inclusive justice policy that does not discriminate based on cultural and religious preferences but aspires to build a more tolerant and just society are necessary in this case.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, it is clear that religious understanding has undergone significant transformations and continues to grapple with these issues. Over the centuries, theology has witnessed the development of perspectives on theological questions, struggling with the obstacles of the turbulent environment it is a part of but always aiming to synthesize the old dogma with a new modern reality. The call for a liberation theological approach also addresses the issues we have been looking at, particularly theological conservatism and political resistance. This would give us an understanding of the complexity that is involved. These challenges, however, are not only the “thorns” but also entry points into the development of contemporary theological thought. They result in internal dialogue and conversation, leading religious communities to question who they are and what they should be in a global world that does not stand still.

However, theology should become a receptor for global bridges and transformations, with eyes open for ecological issues, technological development, and trans-border relocations. These topics call for a tailored and informed theological perspective that will outgrow the traditional approach by including some aspects of the human experience to divine action. Such a model will incorporate newer insights from all disciplines, examine ethical implications, and provide relevant and in-depth responses to spiritual needs and social change problems that will go beyond the realms of authority. We can only say that theological discourse is alive when it forces us out of our comfort zones, urges us to improve, and shows us a possible learning path. In their connection with the extraordinary problems of today’s society, imaginers and believers are requested to make an eventual dedication to justice, mercy, and comprehension. This path will not only adapt theological concepts to emerging realities but also foster a dialogue between these realities and the divine, resulting in a deeper understanding of them. Through this perpetual cycle of music, theology touches





on its most revealing and meaningful section, providing the best balance between faith and life. As a result, it becomes the medium and purpose of our efforts for a more just world filled with love and compassion.

## Bibliography

- Al-Kahwati, Ashi. “The Strategy of the Islamic State: Instrumental and Organizational Developments in Relation to the Strategy of Al Qaeda,” (2018).
- Bal, Huseyin. “Human Freedom in Thomas Aquinas’ Thought.” *Recent Developments in Social Sciences: Political Sciences and International Relations*, (2017): 231.
- Bingemer, Maria Clara Lucchetti. “Liberation Theology and Its Fruits: Some Bibliographical Milestones.” In *Decolonizing Liberation Theologies: Past, Present, and Future*, pp. 37-50. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2023.
- Bleil, Susana. “Militancy and Religious Feeling in the Younger Generations of the Landless Workers’ Movement in Brazil.” In *Where Has Social Justice Gone? From Equality to Experimentation*, pp. 213-227. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022.
- Borras, Saturnino M., and Jennifer C. Franco. “The Challenge of Locating Land-Based Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation Politics within a Social Justice Perspective: Towards an Idea of Agrarian Climate Justice.” In *Converging Social Justice Issues and Movements*, pp. 82-99. Routledge, 2020.
- Caputo, John D. “Thinking with Faith, Thinking as Faith: What Comes After Onto-theology?.” *Open Theology* 8, no. 1 (2022).
- Cherry, Natalya. “Believing into Christ: Restoring the Relational Sense of Belief as Constitutive of the Christian Faith.” (2018).
- Chowdhury, Mohammad. “Emphasizing Morals, Values, Ethics, and Character Education in Science Education and Science Teaching.” *MOJES: Malaysian Online Journal of Educational Sciences* 4, no. 2 (2018).
- Corodimas, Mihika. “Believing is Seeing.” *Agora* 27, no. 2018 (2018).
- England, Frank. “Love is Our Lord’s Meaning: Spiritual Formation in Julian of Norwich and Desmond Tutu.” *Anglican Theological Review* 104, no. 3 (2022).
- Esan, Oluwatobi David, and Adekunle Muhydeen Adedoja. “The Problem of Evil and the Existence of God.” *Nnamdi Azikiwe Journal of Philosophy* 12, no. 1 (2021).
- Fox, Jonathan. *An Introduction to Religion and Politics: Theory and Practice*. Routledge, 2018.
- Gäb, Sebastian. “Mysticism without Concepts.” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 90, no. 3 (2021).
- Gill, Jerry H. “Recent Thought.” In *Faith and Philosophy*, pp. 80-107. Brill, 2021.
- Gray, Billy. “Rumi, Sufi Spirituality and Western Sufism in Elif Shafak’s Forty Rules of Love.” *Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis* 29 (2020).



- Gronewoller, Brian. “Augustine of Hippo.” *Great Christian Jurists and Legal Collections in the First Millennium* (2019).
- Hanh, Thich Nhat. *Being Peace*. Parallax Press, 2020.
- Henriksen, Jan-Olav. “Systematic Theology in the Nordic Countries after 1945.” (2023).
- Hossain, Delwar. “Globalization, Governance, and New Institutionalism: Exploring a New ‘Developing World’ Framework.” In *Global-Local Tradeoffs, Order-Disorder Consequences: ‘State’ No More An Island?* pp. 23-59. Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2022.
- Janaway, Christopher. “On the very idea of “Justifying Suffering” *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 48, no. 2 (2017).
- Johnson, M. David. “Louis Berkhof’s Introduction to the New Testament Book Outline with Notes.” (2021).
- Kaliarnos, Apostolos, and Pagona Roussi. “Religious Beliefs, Coping, and Psychological Well-Being among Greek Cancer Patients.” *Journal of Health Psychology* 22, no. 6 (2017).
- Keller, Catherine, and Petar Jandrić. “Process Theology against Global Capitalism: Towards an Ecological Civilization.” In *Postdigital Theologies: Technology, Belief, and Practice*, pp. 21-37. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022.
- Klaasen, John. “Practical Theology and Narrative: Contours and Markers.” *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 3, no. 2 (2017).
- Krigner, Henrique. “The Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant Definitions of Justice and the Liberation Theology.” (2023).
- Kripal, Jeffrey J. “Mysticism.” *The Blackwell Companion to the Study of Religion* (2017).
- LeCompte, Eric. “Benedictine Perspective on Diversity, Equity, Inclusion & Justice:” Diversity, Equity and Inclusion: The Benedictine Demand to Live in Right Relationship with Our God, Community and Planet” (2022).
- Liu, Christopher, and Dietlind Stolle. “Social Capital, Civic Culture and Political Trust.” *Handbook on political trust* (2017).
- MacDonald, Douglas A. “Commentary on “Existential Well-Being: Spirituality or Well-Being?”” *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* 205, no. 3 (2017).
- Makransky, John. “How Buddhist and Christian Liberation Epistemologies Should Inform and Correct Each Other.” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 39, (2019).
- Matthews, Gareth B. “Augustine.” In *Encyclopedia of Medieval Philosophy: Philosophy between 500 and 1500*, pp. 225-232. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2020.
- McLaren, Peter, and Petar Jandrić. “From Liberation to Salvation: Revolutionary Critical Pedagogy Meets Liberation Theology.” *Policy Futures in Education* 15, no. 5 (2017): 620-652.
- Medhananda, Swami. “Was Swami Vivekananda a Hindu Supremacist? Revisiting a Long-Standing Debate.” *Religions* 11, no. 7 (2020).



- Mishra, Manoj Kumar, Priyankar Upadhyaya, and Thomas Paul Davis. “Tracing the Legacy of Peace Leadership from an Asian Perspective: Mahatma Gandhi, Dalai Lama, and Thich Nhat Hanh.” *Journal of Peace Education* 21, No. 2 (2024): 231- 253.
- Mokhoathi, Joel. “From Contextual Theology to African Christianity: The Consideration of Adiaphora from a South African Perspective.” *Religions* 8, no. 12 (2017).
- Obiano, Doris, Christian Agama, Kenneth Chukwu, and Benedict Igbokwe. “Trends and Approach to Multidisciplinary Issues in the Academia: A Festschrift in Honor of Rev. Prof. Jude Onuoha.” (2022).
- Odeleye, Abraham Olutoye. “Comparative Ethical Analysis of Sin in African Traditional Religion and Christianity.” *International Journal of Innovative Social Sciences & Humanities Research* 8, no. 2 (2020).
- Okafor, Justus Onyebuchi, and Osim Stella. “Hinduism and Ecology: Its Relevance and Importance.” (2018).
- Peterson, Michael L., and Raymond J. VanArragon, eds. *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Religion*. John Wiley & Sons, 2020.
- Piff, Paul K., Michael W. Kraus, and Dacher Keltner. “Unpacking the Inequality Paradox: The Psychological Roots of Inequality and Social Class.” In *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, vol. 57, pp. 53-124. Academic Press, 2018.
- Potana, Venkateswara Rao. “The Nature of God: God is Self-Existent, Omniscient, Sovereign, and Triune.” *International Journal of Scientific Research and Management (IJSRM)* 12, no. 02 (2024).
- Prudlo, Donald S. *Thomas Aquinas: A Historical, Theological, and Environmental Portrait*. Paulist Press, 2020.
- Rababa, Mohammad, Audai A. Hayajneh, and Wegdan Bani-Iss. “Association of Death Anxiety with Spiritual Well-Being and Religious Coping in Older Adults during the COVID-19 Pandemic.” *Journal of Religion and Health* 60, no. 1 (2021).
- Ridlehoover, Charles. “The Ethics of Lament: Dereliction, Theodicy, Embodiment, and Discipleship.” *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 44, no. 1 (2022).
- Safi, Omid, ed. *Radical Love: Teachings from the Islamic Mystical Tradition*. Yale University Press, 2018.
- Salleh, Wan Nur Azira Wan Mohamed, Siti Zaleha Abdul Rasid, and Rohaida Basiruddin. “Towards Transforming Zakat Collection and Distribution Roles using Digital Wallet in Support of Social Justice and Social Financing.” *Open International Journal of Informatics* 7, no. 2 (2019).
- Sayem, Md Abu. “Religions and Environmental Sustainability: Focusing on Some Practical Approaches by John B. Cobb Jr. and Seyyed Hossein Nasr.” *Australian Journal of Islamic Studies* 6, no. 1 (2021).
- Scott, Jessica. “Come and See”: Uncovering Julian of Norwich’s Teaching of Wonder in Revelations of Divine Love.” *Modern Theology* 38, no. 3 (2022).
- Smit, Dirk J. “Does it Matter? On Whether There is a Method in the Madness.” In *A Companion to Public Theology*, pp. 67-92. Brill, 2017.



- Stinson, Morgan A., J. María Bermúdez, Jerry Gale, Denise Lewis, Andrea S. Meyer, and G. Bowden Templeton. “Marital Satisfaction, Conflict Resolution Styles, and Religious Attendance among Latino Couples: Using the Actor–Partner Interdependence Model.” *The Family Journal* 25, no. 3 (2017).
- Stoeber, Michael. “Theopoetics as a Response to Suffering: The Visual Art of Käthe Kollwitz in the Reformation of Practical Theodicy.” *International Journal of Practical Theology* 23, no. 1 (2019).
- Tarlau, Rebecca. *Occupying Schools, Occupying Land: How the Landless Worker’s Movement Transformed Brazilian Education*. Global and Comparative Ethnography, 2019.
- Thompson, Spencer P. “The Commodified Christ and the Economics of Jubilee.” *The Kenarchy Journal* 1. No. 7 (2020): 86-141.
- Tomalin, Emma, Jörg Haustein, and Shabaana Kidy. “Religion and the Sustainable Development Goals.” *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 17, no. 2 (2019).
- Ullrich, Calvin Dieter. “Sovereignty and the Event in John D. Caputo’s Radical Theology.” PhD diss., Stellenbosch: Stellenbosch University, 2019.
- Van Mastricht, Petrus. “Theoretical-Practical Theology.” *Diedit oleh Joel R. Beeke. Diterjemahkan oleh Todd M. Rester. Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books* 2021 (2018).
- Van Nuffelen, Peter. “The Christian Reception of Julian.” In *A Companion to Julian the Apostate*, pp. 360-397. Brill, 2020.
- Visser, Anja, Bert Garssen, and Ad JJM Vingerhoets. “Existential Well-Being: Spirituality or Well-Being?.” *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* 205, no. 3 (2017)

