Christopher Southgate on Glory and Compassion

Bethany N. Sollereder, University of Oxford

Abstract: This article was presented at the 2018 American Academy of Religion conference at a panel honouring the work of Christopher Southgate. The first half is a response to the theology of glory in Southgate's *Theology in a Suffering World* (CUP 2018). The second half expands on Southgate's work on practical theodicy. I argue for a redirection of the work of theodicy toward a compassionate approach, outlined by three principles that are centred around helping those who suffer create their own theodicies. The job of the practical and compassionate theodicist, then, is not to provide answers for why suffering occurs, but rather to offer resources to help others frame their own experience.
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Bio: Bethany Sollereder is a Postdoctoral Fellow in Science and Religion at Oxford University. She is a Canadian scholar and first moved to England to study for her PhD at the University of Exeter. Christopher Southgate was her doctoral supervisor.

Christopher Southgate's work has been an inspiration to many over the years. His work is expansive, poetic, and experimental. It ranges from tackling the difficult questions of theodicy and hermeneutics to scientific explorations of the origin of life. This short paper is an examination and response to Southgate's newest book *Theology in a Suffering World: Glory and Longing*, followed by an examination of a redirection of theodicy down therapeutic rather than philosophical lines.[1]

Southgate's new book, *Theology in a Suffering World*, seeks to bear witness to God and the world. The main thesis is that glory is a revelation of the God-ness of God, and that such a revelation requires a response. Glory is neither luminosity, nor beauty, but is better expressed as a weighty sign of divine presence, sometimes expressed in highly troubling circumstances.[2] Glory is part of God's self-communication to the world.

Southgate's suggests a threefold way of seeing, a three-lensed approach that encompasses the *Gloria mundi*, the glory of the natural world in the wonder and awe it inspires, *Gloria crucis*, the weight of glory of the Cross and the suffering and loss that may yet, like the Cross, find new redemptive meaning, and third, the lens of *Gloria in excelsis*, the redemptive future free from destruction. Southgate writes that with these lenses, the

"scientific, poetic and prophetic seeing can thus be combined."[3] These three lenses are used to see a variety of theological and philosophical topics, from biblical stories to mysticism to art and the deep experiences of human longing.

Jesus's cry of dereliction from the Cross is one example of many of the three-lensed hermeneutic Southgate uses. Southgate makes the "surprising suggestion" that the cry of dereliction–"My God, My God, why have you forsaken me" is a manifestation of glory.[4] Is the cry simply a mark of the failure of Jesus's bold hope that God's kingdom would come? A failure of the belief that love would finally triumph? Southgate interprets the cry as: "the ultimate mark of the humanness of the Incarnate Son, and the ultimate sign (before the death itself) of the extremity of giving in the compassionate salvific heart of the Triune God."[5] It reveals the God-ness of God, the full shocking painful extent of the Incarnation.

It is the suffering of Christ, more than the miracles or the resurrection that exposes the bones of theology. The nature of the Incarnation, the unity of the Trinity, the question of patripassionism: these all face crucial decision points in the suffering of Christ. If the cry of dereliction exposes the god-ness of God, it also illuminates our deepest beliefs about what God is like.

As those familiar with Southgate's past work would imagine, he also addresses the question of nonhuman animal suffering—"glory in the natural world."[6] He explores the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004, a golden eagle hunting a fleeing hare, and the transmission of malaria through the bite of a female anopheles mosquito.[7] Southgate emphasises the suffering of Christ on the cross as revelatory of God's closeness to the suffering in the natural world, but also of God's delight, God's creative work in and through the hunting eagle and the shrewd strategy of the parasite. Southgate writes: "This is one of the most difficult areas of our explanation. The God of weal and woe is yet the God of Calvary, and of the Emmaus

Road, and of Pentecost."[8] We cannot divide the God of creation, with all its ambiguity, from the God of salvation who makes all things new.

My impression reading *Theology in a Suffering World* is that the book is *dependently Christian*. It would not work in another faith tradition, and is not easily translatable into general concepts of "the divine". It is a fascinating stretch of the Christian tradition to its limits as Southgate explores the suffering and trouble of the world intertwined with God's glory. The entire work rotates around the *Gloria crucis*, the glory of the crucified God. Throughout the book, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus act like a kite's string that both tethers the rest of the theology but also allows it to soar. Cut a kite's string and you do not release it to untold heights, you only condemn it to fall sadly to the ground. The theology in this book soars, battling the winds, pulling against its grounding narratives, overlooking a vast landscape of experience and tradition. It is the creative tension in between the various disciplines that Southgate holds—science, theology, poetry, philosophy—that offer his work its grandeur.

Southgate's approach is rich and textured, complex and challenging. It confirms my hunch that simple narratives of the fallenness of the world to account for natural suffering and disvalue are simply not enough.[9] It has become popular in evolutionary theodicies to either posit some mysterious intertwining of what God willed in evolution with what God did not will, whether through Celia Deane-Drummond's shadow sophia,[10] Neil Messer's Barthian appropriation of *Das Nichtige* or Gregory Boyd and Michael Lloyd's proposal that satanic influence introduced a demonic violence and corruption to the process of evolution from the beginning of life's journey.[11] Accept those approaches, and God is off the hook for natural disvalue. But the deep and challenging theological interrelations of God, creation, suffering, purpose, and Incarnation fade. They don't disappear, but they are harder to make out, more difficult to trace. Suffering brings a white-hot intensity to theologies; it clarifies

theological priorities and it demolishes the neat categories and easy solutions. Southgate offers a vision of God that is sometimes profoundly disturbing—in the best possible way. God's goodness is terrifying and unsafe. Southgate writes: "The language of glory… allows us to admit God's deep involvement in situations in which the creation harms the creatures, and [enables us] to interpret… the array of signs to be found in these events, but also to acknowledge the element of mystery to which these events give rise."[12] If we accept notions of fallenness of the natural world, the ability to discern how nature points to God is irretrievably difficult. If we allow creation to be God's good, "serviceable" (to borrow another term from Southgate), and incomplete creation, we find a God who (to paraphrase C.S. Lewis) is "not a tame Lion" and who creates a world of untamed creatures. The price is too high, I suggest, if we give up that power and that mystery in order to have a clear-cut answer to the problem of natural disvalue.

Further reflection on Southgate's approach to glory suggests that nearly the whole of it could be categorised as a constitutive type of Good-Harm Analysis. In collaboration with his colleague Andrew Robinson, Southgate has used a matrix of three categories of analysis to think about theodical strategies, which he calls a Good-harm analysis.[13] The first category, property-consequence, describes harms that are made possible because of the existence of some other good. For example, we feel pain because pain warns us about danger in our environment and motivates us to get out of that situation. Yet, the good capacity for pain allows the possibility of torture or useless chronic pain. The property of having a biological alarm system is the consequence of having ways to abuse its painfulness. In similar ways, the world requires earthquakes and volcanic activity to maintain a habitable surface temperature. Yet, that plate activity can also threaten the life it sustains. The second type of good-harm analysis is developmental. In this category, the good that results is dependent on a process that either needs or makes possible related harms. For example, if I have the desire to build

muscle strength, I have to go through a necessarily stressful process of exercise that involves actively and intentionally breaking down my muscle fibres. The goal is inseparable from the harm. The fleet-footed deer is only agile because its ancestors have spent millennia running from pursuing fangs. Give freedom to a child, and they will cause harm to themselves and others, yet there is no other way for them to mature.

The third category is what Southgate and Robinson call "constitutive". It is an elusive category, in which the good and the harm are inseparable, because at some level it is the harm that is the pleasure. It is the pleasant body ache after a long day of hiking, the joy of the too-tight hug, or the beauty of a terrifying painting by Hieronymus Bosch. Robinson and Southgate write, "The good does not derive from a process leading to a goal, with the suffering as instrumental to the process: the good finds its meaning only in relation to the harm."[14] It is such a difficult and challenging type of argument, that in *The Groaning of Creation*, Southgate identifies it and then moves rapidly on. In *Theology in a Suffering World*, this constitutive approach is perhaps most obviously seen in the exploration of Etty Hillesum's writings, a young Jewish woman who was executed in the *Shoah*. Through the difficulty and dirt, she finds joy. Joy—not in spite of the harsh treatment, but in and through it. The same is true of many of the other moments of witnessing in Southgate's book: the God-ness of God is revealed in the ambiguity, without clear delineations of where or how the good begins and the harm stops. We know of the glory only because those who experience tells us that it is there: that the self-communication of God came through circumstances of adversity and suffering. Perhaps that is the trouble with constitutive arguments: they can be shown, witnessed to, but not really argued for, because the recognition that a constitutive good is good depends somewhat on the choice of the sufferer to respond to the harm in that way.

The book ends with a chapter on glory and the Christian life—how glory is manifest in perfectly quotidian circumstances of ordinary behaviour, as people—beholding Christ—are transformed into the image and likeness of God. The analysis of the practical aspect of the theology of glory leads me want to highlight just one other little-known aspect of Southgate's theology. Southgate is running a project on practical theodicy called *Tragedy and Congregations*.[15]

Southgate is working with a team of chaplains, theologians, and trauma experts to provide theological and psychological resources for ministers, giving them a multi-faceted set of tools informed by the psychology of trauma studies that includes reason and its outcomes, but also holds together protest, lament, and worship. It is a theodicy of the people, a liberation-type approach to the project of the theology of suffering, where voice is given back to those who suffer, but amplified and perhaps catalysed by the resources of the theological academy.

The work on trauma in congregations is a variant on traditional theodicy, what I have come to call "*compassionate theodicy*."

Ever since Leibnitz coined the term "*théodicée*" for his 1709 work, theodicy has been a largely analytical task that weighs out the costs and benefits of various events, and defends the goodness and the justice of God in allowing the significant amounts of evil and harm we see in the world.[16] That word, *defends*, is key. Theodicy takes place in the courtroom. Evidence is provided in defence of the divine, picking apart the sceptical arguments of atheists or agnostics who think the existence of God is unlikely. It is a rational affair, following lines of logic through (largely) analytic philosophical approaches. Compassionate theodicy is, by contrast, a new type of theodicy project that seeks to witness and not defend. It does not have all the answers, and it does not seek to impose meaning on those who suffer,

but to provide resources that help those who suffer to discover how to make meaning for themselves.

Two things inspired the idea of compassionate theodicy. The first influence was medical and psychological studies, like the work of Irene Tracy or Jamie Aten, who have shown that the way you think about your pain and the way you think about God changes in what way and how much you suffer.[17] Contemplating a religious framework can lessen suffering, and Aten shows how different models of God led people to have more or less resilience in the face of natural disasters. For example, those who thought that a hurricane was a sign of God's punishment and judgment had a much harder time with being hit by a hurricane than those who had a view that God did not intend this to happen, but was suffering with and comforting them through it. Our thought directs our suffering to a significant degree. Given that, in so far as theology informs our mental framework, it should be able to have a profound influence on people's experience of suffering.

The second influence was a profound conviction of the impossibility of giving any existent theodicy literature to someone who is suffering. Even the best of it, is simply divorced from the needs of those going through sorrow. It wasn't intended for that purpose.

What are the biggest pastoral problems with traditional theodicy literature? First, traditional theodicy assumes a homogeneity in the cause and meaning of harmful events. Most theodicies come down to only one or two options: free-will, soul-building, package deal, etc. Even compound theodicies that draw on more than one approach cannot cover the full range of possibilities. In response, a compassionate theodicy does not try to find an answer, or even a compound answer, rather it tries to provide the theological resources that people can use to discern meaning and understanding in their own unique circumstances. Everyone suffers differently and for different reasons.

Second, traditional theodicies run the risk of silencing the voices of those who suffer by imposing particular meanings on them. This is a concern raised primarily by anti-theodicists such as Kenneth Surin and D.Z. Philips.[18] The one who suffers is in the best position to understand his or her suffering. This is especially true if meaning is not wholly a fixed, unchanging fact, but is a dynamic understanding of value created by perception and context.[19] The meaning of a situation is not, then, an objective reality but a created and fluid dynamic. Our chosen response to a situation is part of the meaning of that situation. Compassionate theodicy is trying to empower those who suffer by adding concepts and vocabulary to their expression, giving more options for people's responses. In this respect, theodicy can even become part of the therapeutic process, a possibility raised by Amber Griffioen, if it is done with sensitivity and pastoral concern.[20]

How does compassionate theodicy offer possibilities without imposing? One analogy is the work of Blue Apron or Abel & Cole. These companies respond to the desire of people to have homemade meals, but who are too busy to make them themselves. Blue Apron will deliver the various ingredients of a meal in the right quantities, and the customer takes up what they have provided, and can adjust it in light of taste and needs as they cook it. In terms of theodicy, a compassionate theodicy resource would follow three basic principles:

First, the compassionate approach does not need to illustrate evil. Most theodicies and defences begin with a graphic illustration of the problem at hand. A compassionate approach does not repeat stories from concentration camps or horrific cases of abuse. Instead, it allows the reader to bring their own experiences of evil to the table, allows them to ask the questions relevant to their own situation, without comparison to the wider suffering that we all know exists in the world.

Second, a compassionate theodicy provides the options for resolution rather than a singular solution. Since the aim is to provide others with the language and concepts needed to

make their own solutions, a variety of approaches need to be offered because of the variety of sources and types of evil and suffering, but also because people will find different approaches useful. Many of the 20th century approaches to evil, for example, have emphasised the centrality of the suffering of God.[21] Elizabeth O'Donnell Gandolfo, however, has recently emphasised instead that the invulnerability of God to suffering is "the ground and source of human courage in the face of vulnerability, suffering and violence."[22] I disagree with Gandolfo, but I would want her approach to be represented as an option for those who find her approach more pastorally useful than my own.

Third, a compassionate approach allows for the place of affect a place at the table in theological decision-making. Logic is not the final arbiter of what is right or true. If a solution satisfies the logical side of enquiry and yet the emotional response it evokes is one of disgust, a compassionate approach takes that as reasonable grounds to leave the solution aside. Justifying horrendous moral evils by pointing out that the events offered the perpetrators of those evils opportunities for moral choice would be a good example. The argument might be true, but its very ability to stir up a sense of disgust should be taken as evidence that this cannot stand as a very large part of a theodicy.

On the whole, compassionate theodicy is attempting to move the theodicy project outside the realm of a few highly-specialised philosophers, and return it to the practical realm. In doing so, it is not actually new, but resembles the pastoral context of the early writers, like Irenaeus or Augustine, whose work that has been subsequently coalesced by philosophers like John Hick into "the Irenaean approach of soul-making" or the "Augustinian free-will defence".[23] Augustine and Irenaeus were not trying to create abstract philosophical categories: they were responding to the pastoral needs of their congregations in light of political realities and natural and human disasters. Compassionate theodicy is returning to that goal, but is using the best of psychological wisdom and practice to do it. Southgate's

work returns to that original context by responding with theology and psychology to the pastoral needs generated by the traumatic and unpredictable nature of much suffering in contemporary life.

Southgate's theological journey in the last ten years, then, has gone from the adventure in the theology of creation found in *The Groaning of Creation* through the contemplation of glory found in *Theology in a Suffering World*, and lands in the practice of practical and compassionate theodicy, using the resources of academic thought to help people make sense of their own circumstances of in communities of suffering and growth. Those of us who have benefitted so significantly from his work are grateful to his ongoing practice of poetic theology infused by the natural sciences.

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[1] Christopher Southgate, *Theology in a Suffering World: Glory and Longing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).
[2] Southgate, *Theology in a Suffering World*, 5-6.
[3] Southgate, *Theology in a Suffering World*, 99.
[4] Southgate, *Theology in a Suffering World*, 87.
[5] Southgate, *Theology in a Suffering World*, 87.
[6] See especially Christopher Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation: God, Evolution, and the Problem of Evil* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008).
[7] Southgate, *Theology in a Suffering World*,142-44.
[8] Southgate, *Theology in a Suffering World*, 144.
[9] See Bethany Sollereder, *God, Evolution, and Animal Suffering: Theodicy without a Fall* (London: Routledge, 2019).
[10] Celia Deane-Drummond, "Shadow Sophia in Christological Perspective: The Evolution of Sun and the Redemption of Nature," *Theology and Science* 6:1, 13-32.
[11] Michael Lloyd, "Are Animals Fallen?" in *Animals on the Agenda*, eds. Andrew Linzey and Dorothy Yamamoto (London: SCM, 1997): 147-60; Michael Lloyd, "The Fallenness of Nature: Three nonhuman suspects," in *Finding Ourselves After Darwin*, general editor Stanley Rosenberg (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 262-279.
[12] Southgate, *Theology in a Suffering World*, 145.
[13] Christopher Southgate and Andrew Robinson, "Varieties of Theodicy: An Exploration of Responses to the Problem of Evil Based on a Typology of Good-Harm Analyses." In *Physics and Cosmology: Scientific Perspectives on the Problem of Evil*, edited by Nancey Murphy, Robert J. Russell, and William R. Stoeger, SJ (Berkeley: Vatican Observatory and Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences, 2007): 67-90.
[14] Southgate and Robinson, "Varieties of Theodicy," 87.
[15] Project details available online at: https://tragedyandcongregations.org.uk/
[16] Kenneth Surin, *Theology and the Problem of Evil* (Eugene, Or: Wipf & Stock, 1986), 13.
[17] Weich, Katja, Miguel Farias, Guy Kahane, Nicholas Shackel, Wiebke Tiede, and Irene Tracey. 2009. "An fMRI study measuring analgesia enhanced by religion as a belief system."

Pain 139: 467-476; Jamie Aten, Michael Moore, Ryan Denney, Tania Bayne, Amy Stagg, Stacy Owens, Samantha Daniels, Stefanie Boswell, Jane Schenck, Jason Adams, and Charissa Jones, "God Images Following Hurricane Katrina in South Mississippi: An Exploratory Study," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 36:4 (2008): 249-257.

[18] Surin, *Theology and the Problem of Evil*; D. Z. Philips, *The Problem of Evil & the Problem of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009).

[19] See Bethany N. Sollereder, *God, Evolution, and Animal Suffering: Theodicy without a Fall* (London: Routledge, 2009), 144-146.

[20] Amber L. Griffioen, "Therapeutic Theodicy? Suffering, Struggle, and the Shift from the God's-Eye View." *religions* 9:99 (2018): available online doi:10.3390/rel9040099.

[21] Paul S. Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988); Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ: New Edition* (New York, NY: Continuum, 2012); Jürgen Moltmann, "God's Kenosis in the Creation and Consummation of the World." In *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis*. Edited by John Polkinghorne, 137–151. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001.

[22] Elizabeth O' Donnell Gandolfo, *The Power and Vulnerability of Love: A Theological Anthropology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015), 189.

[23] Surin, *Theology and the Problem of* Evil, 13.