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Independent Study

Essay

Ordinary Theodicy: A study into ordinary theological
views on the problem of evil and suffering

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1.0 Introduction

The fact of evil constitutes the most serious objection to the Christian belief in a God of love (Hick 1988: ix).

The above quote taken from John Hick's *Evil and the God of Love* (1988) highlights the significant challenge made to theistic belief in God, by the presence of evil and suffering in the world. Theologians and Christian philosophers have pondered the relationship between God's loving nature, and the realities of evil throughout Christian history. The conclusions reached by patristic theologians Augustine and Irenaeus, and more recently theologians such as John Cobb, John Hick, John Roth and James Cone¹ have offered those within academic spheres an interesting line of enquiry to pursue in their study of theodicy; but how do those without any knowledge of such theologies begin to grapple with the complexities of asserting that God is benevolent whilst acknowledging that bad things *do* in fact happen?

This study is based on conversations had with ordinary Christian believers and those who have at some point 'lost' their faith, on the problem of evil and suffering. Although the majority of those interviewed for the purpose of this research have academic backgrounds, they have not had any formal theological education or training. The conclusions arrived at in this study can by no means offer a comprehensive solution to this complex area of Christian theology; more it serves as an interesting insight into the theodicies offered by ordinary theologians.

1.1 What is Ordinary Theology?

Jeff Astley describes ordinary theology as:

...the term for theological beliefs and processes of believing that find expression in the God-talk of those believers who have received no scholarly theological education (Astley 2002: 1)

Whilst still in relative infancy within Christian theology, its emerging prominence as a framework within which to conduct theological discourse is obvious, as a number of texts concerned with this area have emerged within the last decade. Scholars such as Ann Christie (2007; 2013), Leslie Francis (2000; 2001) and Michael Armstrong

¹ See Migliore's chapter entitled 'Recent Theodicies' in *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing pp128-131.

(2011; 2013) (amongst others) have conducted empirical studies that have engaged with ordinary believers on a personal level, in order to establish what it is they take from the dogma and doctrine that is so heavily embedded within the Christian tradition. According to Astley, theology, in its original and perhaps purest form, belongs to ordinary believers, for theology relates most closely to them; it is the understanding 'proper to the life of the believer' (Astley & Christie 2007: 5) – hence the importance of conducting such studies.

Ordinary theology must be acknowledged to counter the apparent ownership of the Christian narrative that scholars, academics and perhaps the clergy have taken. Not only does ordinary theology give voice to the many unheard theologians sitting in the pews every Sunday, but it can be argued that it will ultimately carry Christianity into the future:

If the church is to grow, or even survive, in its third millennium it needs something more than a certain freshness of expression. It needs to do some serious listening to its own members...it needs to take them seriously...it needs to listen to their theology. (Astley & Christie 2007: 4)

The research conducted for this essay seeks to add fuel to the ordinary theology discussion, by tackling what many academic theologians have termed, the biggest problem for theology.

1.2 What is theodicy?

Theodicy can be described as the theological task of reconciling belief in a benevolent and omnipotent God, in the face of the existence of evil and suffering in the world; John Bowker suggests that God's omnipotence and benevolence, and the existence of evil and suffering, are incompatible (Bowker 2002: 968). In academic theology, it is acknowledged that there are two main 'branches' of theodicy. The first comes from St Augustine of Hippo and is concerned with the Free Will Defence, which follows from the events depicted in myth of The Fall in the book of Genesis; the second can be traced back to Irenaeus and is predominantly focussed on what John Keats named a 'vale of soul-making', an idea that found sympathy in the work of John Hick centuries later (McGrath 2011: 224).

Augustine's Free Will Defence looks back in history to a time when humanity was deemed to be perfect. The disobeying of God as told in Genesis 3 is the action that

ultimately lead to humanity's fall and thus renders all humans to be born sinful; the only way one can rid themselves of their sin is to live a life fully committed to God. The 'blame' as it were, in Augustine's model of theodicy rests with humanity alone, it was Adam's abuse of his free will that led him to disobey the instructions of God; this model renders God blameless for the existence of evil.

The issue with Augustine's model of theodicy is that it does not appear to clearly explain why natural suffering occurs; the presence of evils such as disease and natural disasters cannot be explained by humanity's sinfulness; the closest answer one may arrive at is that such evils act as 'punishment' (see Astley 2003: 60). The Irenaean position provides us with a solution different to that offered by Augustine and instead begins with a view to the future of humanity. For Irenaeus, humans were not initially created perfect and thus no 'fall' could have taken place. Rather whilst being born imperfect, humans have the ability to develop themselves through a process dubbed soul-making. The evils and suffering endured by humans throughout their lives are present in order to build character and to develop the soul into a state of near-perfectness; in this case, evil and suffering are necessary.

John Hick builds on this idea to present his own theodicy in *Evil and the God of Love* (1988). He claims that both humanity and God are to blame for the presence of evil: whilst humanity does often misuse its free will to act sinfully, it must be acknowledged that God, in his omnipotence, could have chosen to create humanity with the capability to only ever choose to act morally. This 'omni-responsibility' (Hick 1988: 291) accounts for the existence of both natural and moral evil; moral evil can be explained as a result of humankind and its abuse of its free will. Natural evils such as disease and natural disasters can be seen as challenges which humanity must overcome, lending themselves to the development of a person's soul; as these disasters cannot be directly caused by humanity (except in the case of engineered biological weapons and extreme weather patterns caused by humanity's polluting of the environment), God may be seen to permit such things.

The issue with Hick and Irenaeus' type of theodicy is that, by Hick's own admission, this journey of perfecting the human soul cannot take place in one's own lifetime (Hick 2001: 51). This can lead many to criticise a soul-making theodicy. Kenneth Surin argues that the suffering and evil endured by humans in their lifetimes must

have an obvious and justifiable end that is 'guaranteed by God' (Surin 1986: 93). In addition to this point, as will be seen later in the discussion of ordinary beliefs concerning theodicy, many examples of extreme evil and suffering cannot be justified as having a role to play in some metaphysical attainment of a 'perfect human community'². John Roth in his theology of protest, claims that horrors such as the Shoah³, cannot and should not ever be seen to be justified (Roth 2001a).

It must be noted that whilst researching for this piece of work, only two empirical studies into theodicy have been conducted⁴. One must question, if the problem that evil poses to belief in God and the questions it raises are fundamental to 'our human experience' (Vermeer 1999: 1), why has there not been more time and work dedicated to researching ordinary people's beliefs concerning theodicy? Vermeer's mention of the 'human experience' surely relates to all people, not just academics and theologians. By virtue of the fact there appears to be a significant lack of empirical research in the area of theodicy, it can be argued that it is vital for the thoughts, beliefs and reflections of ordinary people, as Astley (2002: 1) defines, to be taken account of.

1.3 Methodology

The findings in this research are as a result of five semi-structured interviews that were conducted in the early part of 2015⁵. Four of the interviewees are currently secondary school teachers; the fifth is a close relative and cancer survivor. The people with whom I conducted the interviews for this research volunteered either because they currently identify as a Christian, or they have at some point 'lost their faith'. The five interviewees are from a range of backgrounds and upbringings; the interesting point, as will be seen, is the commonality between beliefs concerning the issue of reconciling belief in God with the problem of evil and suffering.

² The terminology used by Hick to describe the end purpose for which the soul-making is heading. See Hick 2001: 51.

³ The term Shoah is used in lieu of holocaust as many in the Jewish faith find the latter offensive due to its literal translation into English. See Evans 1989: 142.

⁴ Paul Vermeer (1999) *Learning Theodicy: The Problem of Evil and the Praxis of Religious Education* and Abby Day (2005) *Doing Theodicy: An Empirical Study of a Women's Prayer Group*

⁵ The proposal for this research, along with an ethics consideration form, was vetted by the York St John University Research Ethics Board, and approved. All participants gave consent for their interviews to be recorded and used in the writing of this research; all names of the participants displayed in this research are pseudonyms, to protect their anonymity.

I chose to conduct semi-structured interviews as opposed to using a questionnaire or telephone interview as, when discussing with someone face-to-face, the listener is able to determine meaning in the interviewees' responses (Cameron & Duce 2013: 82). In addition to this, the semi-structured interview allows for questions to be much more open-ended and grants the interviewee a certain amount of freedom, allowing them to discuss their ideas, beliefs and feelings in greater detail (Cameron & Duce 2013: 83). The responses given in the semi-structured interviews I conducted were based on questions that were focussed on a specific area or topic (see Appendix 5.3), and were recorded using my mobile telephone. Once the interviews had finished, they were played back and key points in the participants' responses were categorised according to: overall understanding of theodicy; thoughts and ideas concerning free will; thoughts and ideas concerning soul-making⁶; and the nature of the theodicy question (an intellectual approach 'versus' a practical one).

These categories of questions were picked based on the fact that academic theodicy is often divided into either an Augustinian (informing beliefs concerning free will) or Irenaean (soul-making) approach (Hick 1988). There is also a distinction between a philosophical/intellectual approach to theodicy, and a practical one. Much of theological and philosophical discourse concerning the problem of evil and suffering in the world seeks an intellectual answer to the question: 'if God is all-loving and all-powerful, why does He let bad things happen?' The difference between this and a practical approach is that the practical theologian will not 'gloss' the issue with 'platitudes about the goodness of God', more they 'seek better ways of thinking and *responding to situations*' (Pattinson & Woodward 2000: 14) (*italics added by author*). A practical approach to theodicy has already been shown to be present amongst some ordinary theologians, as the women in Day's study used prayer as a means by which to tackle the questions of evil and suffering. I was very interested to know whether or not the focus of my theologians resided with finding a philosophical answer to the problem of evil akin to that offered by John Hick or John Cobb for example, or whether they, like the practical theologian and the women in Day's prayer group, sought primarily to find a way of coping with their own struggles in their immediate everyday lives, and to help others to overcome their evils.

⁶ The term soul-making was explained to the interviewees whom upon first being asked the question did not fully understand the concept. An interesting observation: the language of academic theology has already been shown to be confusing to the ordinary believer!

2.0 Ordinary Theodicy

2.1 The 'Problem' of Evil?

The first task of this research was to determine, through the interviews, what the participants thought of the problem of evil. As has already been demonstrated above by John Hick, there exists a common trend in academic theology to think of theodicy as the biggest problem posed to theistic belief in God. This is due to the fact that there is a logical and perhaps theological contradiction between God's all-loving, omnipotent and omniscient nature, and the existence of evil and suffering in the world. Many non-believers with whom I have had conversations in the past have stated that, apart from scientific theories that they believe 'disprove' religious claims, the presence of evil in the world stops them from believing in God:

Judith⁷

'No, I can't believe it [in an omnipotent and benevolent, Christian God]. Why would a God let all those millions of children suffer and die?'

For many, Judith can be seen to make a valid claim as it highlights the apparent contradiction between God's benevolence, and the existence of evil (see Bowker 2002: 968). Mary was brought up in a very strict Catholic family. She talked at great length about her beliefs and how they had begun to wane in her later life; the tragic death of her younger sister served as a turning point for her belief in God:

'...if anything it kind of flushed out whatever remnants...not the event itself but in the months after it, because it wasn't a one day, one thing and one day [inaudible]. But that was the turning event which kind of...I was up to that point, I was kind of probably still keeping a foot in the door...'

Mary did not elaborate too greatly about the loss of her sister, but what was made clear was that it was the main cause for her to lose her faith completely. Despite her profession as a science teacher and her admission that much of her non-belief is based on scientific theory, it is obvious that the immense grief that she and her family endured was enough to cause her to lose faith in God entirely. What came to be astonishing is that out of the sample of people I interviewed, Mary's inability to reconcile her belief in God in the face of suffering and evil came to fall into the

⁷ Judith is not one of the people interviewed for the purposes of this research, however when she made her point, she gave me verbal consent to use her comments in this research.

minority of opinions. Both Judith and Mary, and perhaps even Bowker, have a presupposed model of God that supports the traditional objection of theistic belief on the ground of evil and suffering.

Jennifer, a survivor of a severe brain tumour, the lasting effects of which have led her to become disabled, offers a very different theology:

'I thought that maybe, after everything I'd been through, someone was looking down on me and...it was then that I started praying, believing, reading the Bible.'

'[The] reverend⁸ was lovely. He kept coming to see me in the hospital and...reading things out the Bible [sic] and obviously, it wasn't until I told people later that I died twice...on the operating table...and they were going to [inaudible] my eyes up and I just sat bolt upright and I came back. It wasn't my time to go. And that was what made me realise, did God send me back?'

Jennifer's story was harrowing to listen to and surprising. Such a severe illness that almost resulted in death caused her to have faith in God. This is a clear contradiction to the common objection to belief in God because of evil and suffering. The fact that Jennifer survived her ordeal to see her children grow up convinced her enough that God did in fact exist. This example of showing how evil may not in fact be the biggest objection to belief in God is demonstrated again in the other interviewees' responses to questions that focussed on possible challenges to their belief in God, either from evil or another factor:

Peter

'Nothing [could make me lose faith in God]. My wife could die tomorrow, my daughter could die tomorrow my son...and I'm not only talking I actually mean it. I had friends losing their three year old, four year old kids and I felt awful and all the rest of it, but no, no.'

Fiona

'No I don't think it does. No. I never ask "how could God let this happen?" I've never asked that question.'

Keith

'There has to be a little bit of everything in the world to balance things out.'

⁸ The reverend's name has been omitted to protect their anonymity.

With the exception of Mary, the interviewees expressed that the presence of evil in the world did not affect their belief in God in any adverse way. Although a small sample of people, it is extremely interesting to note that the 'problem' of evil is perhaps not so big an issue after all. This result is not unique to our ordinary theologians⁹; Michael Armstrong in his work on ordinary eschatology (2011) helpfully highlights the fact that for his theologians, the question of theodicy need not even be asked in the first place (Armstrong 2011: 132). Fiona exemplifies this idea perfectly. Out of the five people interviewed, she offered the only theology that did not consider the question of theodicy in any way. We can draw parallels between our theologians, and Armstrong's. He makes the point that for the theologians in his research, the theodicy question 'was not actually a question for them at all', as with Fiona; for others, there was an 'obvious solution' to the question, in absolving God of the blame, demonstrated below by Jennifer, Peter and Keith (see Armstrong 2011: 132).

In the case of Mary, it could be suggested that an already weakened faith, because of her profession in the sciences, was not strong enough to withstand the awful events surrounding the loss of her sister. Nonetheless, all of the participants offered insightful reflections on how they would attempt to construct a theodicy, the majority of which help to enforce their view that the presence of evil is not a big enough challenge to their belief in God, to render it non-existent.

2.2 Reflections on Free Will

The concept of free will plays a pivotal role in an attempt to solve the theodicy question. It is helpfully explained by Stephen Davis (2001); God's aim was to create a universe that is inhabited by rational beings, which choose to love God *freely* (Davis 2001: 74). As has been highlighted in recent philosophical debates¹⁰, reaching a definitive definition of free will is difficult. Davis states that humans have free will if a) its decisions are not coerced and b) there is a genuine alternative (Davis 2001: 74). There is no element of coercion or determinism in a Free Will Defence; humans are completely free to choose how to act; whether to love God or turn their backs on Him; whether to act morally or sinfully.

⁹ Stylistic note: where I have written 'our', I refer to the people with whom I conducted interviews for the purposes of this research.

¹⁰ See *The Big Questions* (2015) Series 8 Episode 14, 'Do We Have Free Will?' BBC One. 19th April.

The implications of humanity's free will on the theodicy question means that it is humanity who is responsible for the presence of both moral evil (as a result of Adam's original sin) and natural evil (as a punishment for its sinfulness) (Astley 2003: 60). This idea, in particular the idea of humanity's responsibility for the existence of moral evil, found sympathy with our ordinary believers:

Mary

'Well for myself...I wouldn't say "if God existed then why is He letting you know, these people be murdered in Africa or you know why's..." because...humans are doing that...and it's kind of, people are doing it and one of the things that I remember in the teachings, when I was younger, was that God gave people free will.'

Jennifer

'Where you always have good, you're always going to have bad and I do believe that is nothing to do with God and the Devil...or Satan.'

'You get good people, you get bad people [...] and I don't think that's anything to do with the Bible at all.'

Peter

'I believe that even though there is a creator, we still have free will and actually evil on earth doesn't come from God, it comes from us.'

Fiona

'Free will...yeah! I think they [people] do it through their own volition...yeah I do, I think people choose to do evil.'

Keith

'I think a lot of the suffering and evil is man-made and it's not the making of God, it's not God's plan or idea.'

As can be seen from all of the responses from our ordinary theologians, there is consensus with the idea that evil exists in the world because of humanity's misuse of its free will. John Hick critiques this Free Will Defence on the assumption that its foundation lies within the Genesis narrative. Hick suggests that the Genesis account of Adam's initial misuse of free will no longer satisfies 'very many people today', as the nature of the narrative is understood 'as myth, rather than history' (Hick 2001: 39). Our theologians appear to challenge this point, and it is not the only critique

posed by Hick that comes under scrutiny. In challenging the Free Will Defence, Hick rejects the absolution of God that belief in free will appears to provide, he argues:

...how can God fail to have the final responsibility for the existence of His creation in its concrete actuality, including, as it does, evil as an element within it? (Hick 1988: 290)

Upon first inspection, a solid critique perhaps. However Hick is short-sighted in his rejection of the Free Will Defence. Not only has it been demonstrated that our theologians do not hold God responsible for the existence of evil in any way, there is also no mention of which source our theologians' idea of free will is based upon. If Hick's challenge is to be taken seriously, then it must be deemed that all free will defenders read the Genesis narrative as historical truth, and this simply is not the case; Peter is the only theologian who alluded to a scriptural basis for his free will theodicy. The absence of any mention of sources in our ordinary theologians' theodicy is not surprising. Astley comments that ordinary believers are often 'bewildered' by the traditionally cited sources of theology (Astley 2002: 14). This is not to suggest that they are ignorant to them, more they are not conscious of the explicit role they play in forming their theology.

The absolution of God from the theodicy question is not unique to this research; Abbey Day's women's prayer group (2005) share this antipathy towards Hick's idea of a shared responsibility. Day writes extensively on her observations of a prayer group 'doing' theodicy. What becomes apparent through reading her research is that despite any evil or morally questionable events that take place, the women seek to 'interpret the events within a new understanding of God's providence' (Day 2005: 352). This reinterpretation does not result in God's omnipotence, omniscience and benevolence being lost – examples of what the women describe as divine intervention are detailed in Day's research (2005: 349) – more it suggests that the nature of God, as the women in Day's study understand, is a complex matter, the definitive description of which must be learned through a continual process of living the Christian narrative. Astley argues this point and claims that it is integral to Christian theology. Rather than being solely studied in the academy, theology must be learned through a journey of living as a Christian (Astley 2002: 13). The complexity of God's nature is a theme our theologians grappled with in their reflections on the Irenaean idea of soul-making.

2.3 Reflections on Soul-Making

The concept of soul-making can be explained by asserting that evil and suffering exist in order to help humanity develop morally, and to assist in the attainment of the perfect human community (Hick 2001: 51). Irenaeus first formulated this type of theodicy but it has since attracted development in contemporary theology from John Hick, Richard Swinburne and Jerry Walls (Adams 1999: 49). It differs from the Augustinian model of theodicy, in that it implies that humanity is not solely responsible for the presence of evil and suffering; whilst humans are to blame for moral evil, God has 'deliberately put natural evil in the world to create the best environment for soul-making' (Astley 2003: 60-61).

This shared responsibility for evil is a key element in any soul-making type of theodicy. As has already been demonstrated, it would be justified to assume our theologians' theodicies are not consistent with this basic premise, as they do not appear to hold God responsible for the existence of evil in any way. However, this assumption is erroneous. Our theologians were asked about the idea of evil serving as a means to some higher end or purpose¹¹:

Peter

'I'm also of the view that things happen for a reason.'

'I believe that we are challenged all the time and again it's how we respond to it...the guy who's an alcoholic has a choice. When he goes to the fridge [...] it says in the Bible that he will be provided with opportunities not to open that door. After that, it's how badly we fight [...] it's back to free will again.'

Fiona

'It [evil] has to be part of God's plan. It has to be part of what He wants for us here on Earth. It could be a test, it could be some sort of [...] means for us to reach a higher place...it's hard to reconcile.'

Keith

'[...] if the hand of God came down and stopped all the evil in the world, then I don't think we would be as complex a human as we are these days.'

¹¹ The question was worded this way specifically, as soul-making may have been a confusing or unclear term for our theologians.

'I think suffering is wrong and it's not right but...I think that it teaches us a lot of values and makes us become the very complex human beings that we are [...]'

The notion that evil and suffering play a necessary part in both personal development (in the case of Peter's alcoholic) and the advancement of humanity as a whole (in the case of Fiona and Keith) is demonstrated here. Their theodicies may not fit strictly into the traditional Irenaean branch of theodicy, as it can still be seen that they do not hold God responsible for the existence of evil as is seen in Hick's development of the Irenaean theodicy¹². However, they each express the idea that humanity may benefit by enduring instances of suffering; Peter's example is worthy of further comment. Peter shares Fiona's idea of God's plan:

Peter

'I believe it is predestined, even though we have free will. He...because He's completely out of space and out of time...He knows, yeah of course He knows. We're just nothing.'

The notion of God's plan can be argued to be logically inconsistent with the idea of free will; if God is omniscient and thus knows the course of the future, how can it be possible for humanity to exercise complete free will? Peter in his theodicy addresses this without being prompted and argues that God is outside of a human realm of understanding, thus such logical contradictions do not pose any challenge. From this, using Peter's example of the alcoholic, his theodicy suggests that certain instances of suffering are sent by God to test us¹³. Although God may know what the outcome of a certain event may be, we ultimately, do not. The alcoholic may be faced with the struggle of overcoming his addiction, but he has the choice as to whether he has another drink, or not. Such a test, according to Peter's theodicy, can eventually lead to something greater – in the alcoholic's case, beating his addiction and becoming healthy again.

Both Fiona and Keith share this sentiment. Their theodicy describes evil and suffering as playing a part in allowing humanity to achieve something better; Fiona describes it as a spiritual or metaphysical 'higher place', whilst Keith's comment on evil being necessary for humans to become the complex creatures we are, has a

¹² See page 7.

¹³ Peter made it clear during his interview that he did not believe God was sending such tests or permitting evil out of malice, or wanting to 'make it awkward for us'.

strong link to Darwinian evolutionary biology. One of the key premises of Darwin's theory is that "...all organic beings are exposed to severe competition" (Darwin 1998: 49), and only through this competition can organisms eventually evolve (Darwin 1998: 64).

Despite our theologian's acknowledgement of evil and suffering playing a part in the attainment of a higher state of being and possibly being part of a divine plan, more needs to be said of the apparent contradiction between this idea, and that held of the human responsibility for the *existence* of evil and suffering. Peter addressed this idea in the initial formulation of his theodicy, Fiona was encouraged to speak on the matter further, and suggested that the notion of a divine plan could coincide with that of a free will defence:

'Maybe God lets us have that [free will]. That is linked to God's plan... that might be His idea...it's up to you.'

By Fiona's own admission, when I highlighted her belief in both free will and a divine plan, the two ideas appear contradictory. However, Peter's appeal to mystery is one that may alleviate such a logical contradiction and is common amongst many academic theologians (see Cohn-Sherbok 2011 for example). John Hick's rejection of this appeal to 'divine mystery'¹⁴ cannot be seen to pose any challenge to our theologians' theodicy at this point, as they appear comfortable with accepting this 'appeal to divine mystery'.

Abby Day's prayer group appear to share a theodicy akin to that of our theologians, that suggests evil and suffering can often play a functional role in one's life. Using the example of one of the women's husbands losing their job, the prayer group deemed this redundancy to be a good thing, as it allowed him to reevaluate his career path (Day 2005: 348). The appeal to divine mystery, whilst not explicitly stated in Day's women's theodicy, is certainly hinted at:

The group worked together to reinforce their worldview that God had the better plan, even if we cannot see it right now and even if the timing seems a little harsh. (Day 2005: 348)

As successful as this may be in both answering the question of contradiction and perhaps the theodicy question overall, the idea of evil and suffering being used as a

¹⁴ '...we cannot save a defective hypothesis by dubbing it a divine mystery.' (Hick 1993: 71)

means to a positive end was something that was firmly rejected by Jennifer. When asked this question, she made reference to the Shoah:

'No. I would say the [Shoah]¹⁵ was totally unnecessary. I believe Hitler was filled with hatred and he was bad, but that was through his own free will...that made him like that. It was nothing to do with God.'

Jennifer can be seen to articulate a similar rejection to the soul-making type of theodicy as John Roth. He argues clearly and definitively that the Shoah cannot be compatible with the 'plan of person-perfecting he [John Hick] describes' (Roth 2001b: 62). Roth's rejection goes much further than Jennifer's, so much so that he adopts Hick's terms for his theodicy; '*antitheodicy*' (Roth 2001a: 4). Roth argues against the traditional task of theodicy; the vindication of God or the apparent justification of evil is unacceptable. To satisfy theologians like Roth, perhaps the task of theodicy needs a change in focus. The penultimate section of this research will focus on our theologian's reflections on the importance of theodicy, and as to what role or focus it should play in theology.

2.4 The Task of Theodicy

The task of theodicy throughout Christian history has predominantly been one with a philosophical or intellectual agenda: namely to attempt to provide a definitive answer to the questions posed by accepting the existence of an omnipotent, benevolent God in the face of evil and suffering. As has already been discussed, this task has been undertaken by theologians both historically and in modern theology. John Roth protests against the justification of evil that often appears from intellectual responses to the theodicy question, which causes him to suggest that a solely practical approach to theodicy is needed; such horrendous evils as the Shoah can never hope to be 'justified'.

When our ordinary theologians were asked the question as to what the task of theodicy or its focus should be, there appeared a common theme:

Peter

'It's not philosophical, it's all spiritual. I mean it's taking people to church, it's making them realise that there is a God, making them pray, making them

¹⁵ As with the rest of this research, I have used Shoah in lieu of Holocaust.

be forgiven for their sins, making them believing there really is a God and start benefitting from the presence of God. To me, that's the answer.'

Fiona

'I think it's a social problem. In a way I don't think we need to ask "if God exists why do people do evil things?" I think both things can happen at the same time. God does exist and people do evil things.'

Keith

'I think everyone's been asking the [theodicy] question for years haven't they? I think it's one that needs to be relevant and brought to people's minds. I think people would react more and generally...I'd like to think that people like you and I would come to the conclusion that it's of man's own making and as a new generation we need to do something about it. I think it is a relevant question'

There is a general consensus amongst our theologians here, and that is that the task of theodicy must have some practical element that may be implemented in order to improve human society. Whether it is by 'taking them to church' as Peter suggests or by acknowledging humanities' flaws and learning from mistakes of the past as Keith hints at, both of these responses involve the attainment of an improved society and ultimately, a better quality of life for everybody. Keith hints at an important aspect of a practical theodicy that is perhaps ignored in Roth's protest. Keith suggests that by answering the theodicy question with an intellectual answer, a practical solution may then be sought. This is also demonstrated by Abby Day's ordinary theologians. Day writes:

...they [the prayer group] would offer suggestions and discuss their responses to the events...once they were satisfied that they understood and could accept what had happened, they would then 'chat' about who needed prayer now.
(Day 2005: 344)

Day's prayer group used their 'chats' to arrive at an intellectual answer in response to events that affected them or their relatives negatively, and did so by 'modifying their construct of God as necessary' (Day 2005: 351). The group then used their intellectual answer to inform their prayer, which as Day details, was the group's method of 'doing theodicy'. An example of this in Day's study is demonstrated by the story of a girl's relationship with her boyfriend ending which, for most people, would be considered a very saddening and difficult time. The women reached the intellectual conclusion that the girl's boyfriend had been drawing her away from God, which is why the relationship had ended. Based on this, their prayer was focussed

on the absence of God in the girl's life and so they requested that He would become part of her life again (Day 2005: 348).

What this demonstrates is apparent from our theologians' reflections; often an intellectual resolution to the problem of evil may help to guide the practical approach one may take in order to help one overcome their suffering. One could argue that traditional academic theology is essential for the task of practical and pastoral theology¹⁶; firstly to put the Christian teaching into practice in order to address issues of human significance¹⁷ and secondly, to relate this practice to the 'Christian theological tradition' (Pattinson & Woodward 2000: 6). Whilst the answer to the theodicy question may never be fully articulated or accurately answered, the musings of theologians both academic and ordinary may be as important as providing pastoral care for those whom moral evil and natural evil has befallen.

3.0 Conclusion

What this research has demonstrated is that ordinary Christian believers are able to reflect upon one of 'the biggest challenges to theistic belief in God' succinctly and successfully in a way that provides them with a way of reconciling their belief in God with the stark realities of evil and suffering in the world. Our theologians have challenged the notion that theodicy is as big a problem for theology; for them, it is not a question or issue that has ever caused their faith in God to be diminished. The supposed contradictions that are often found within academic theodicies – between God's omniscience and free will for example – have been addressed and have been shown to not pose any barriers to our theologians' beliefs. The people with whom I spoke about theodicy seemed to suggest that God is outside of human comprehension and that certain contradictions that may exist in a human capacity of understanding may not exist for the divine. Most importantly, the reflections of our theologians have helped them to better understand the possible reasons as to why evil exists, so that they may offer help and guidance to those plagued by suffering, or indeed help themselves in times of need.

¹⁶ Pattinson and Woodward point to the fact that although pastoral and practical theology are distinct from each other, the terms are often used interchangeably by the Anglican tradition (see Pattinson & Woodward 2000: 2).

¹⁷ Pattinson and Woodward (2000) use this term on page 7.

This research has highlighted a need for academic theology and Christianity as a whole, to listen to and take seriously the ordinary believers within its membership. Many traditional doctrinal acclamations drive people away from the Church, thus a new way of 'telling the old story' is needed (Astley & Christie 2007: 26). If the Church is to continue into the future and remain relevant for its believers present and potential, theology surely needs a change in focus. Ordinary theology may yet provide a lifeline for Christianity, for as Jeff Astley concludes, 'ordinary theology is the theology of God's church' (Astley 2002: 162) and as he points out¹⁸, theology is something that must be learned or acquired, not simply studied in the academy.

¹⁸ See page 14.

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5.0 Appendices

5.1 Interview Introductory sheet



THEOLOGY AND RELIGIOUS STUDIES

Ordinary Theology Research Project

This interview is part of a research project for the Independent Study module that I am currently taking as part of my MA in Contemporary Religion. The aim of the research is to investigate and analyse an aspect of ordinary theology, and my project focuses on ordinary churchgoers'/believers' views about the problem of evil and suffering. The main aim of the interview is to explore with you, the beliefs and attitudes that you hold on this subject and some of the influences that have shaped your thinking.

During the interview I will ask you some questions on the topic – please feel free to say whatever you want. There are no right or wrong answers. Everything you say will be treated confidentially, and will not be attributed to you in any way or passed on to anyone else.

You do not have to answer a question if you would rather not. Just let me know and we will go onto something else. Do not worry if you don't understand the question or have nothing much to say about it. Again, we can talk about something else.

If at any time you want to conclude the interview, just let me know and we will stop.

Do you have any questions?

Before we start, I need you to sign this form to show that you understand what the reason for the interview is, and that you can withdraw at any time.

5.2 Interview Consent Forms



THEOLOGY AND RELIGIOUS STUDIES

Participant Consent Form

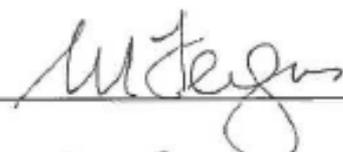
Researcher's name: Clarke Roberts BA (Hons)

The researcher named above has briefed me to my satisfaction on the research for which I have volunteered. I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the research at any point. I also understand that, within the constraints of the research, my rights to anonymity and confidentiality will be respected. Any data used for this research will be stored securely following University guidelines and will be destroyed when no longer required for this research.

I agree to the interview being recorded

(tick the relevant box)

I do NOT want to have the interview recorded

Signature of participant 

Date 11th March 2015

This form will be produced in duplicate. One copy should be retained by the participant and the other by the researcher.



THEOLOGY AND RELIGIOUS STUDIES

Participant Consent Form

Researcher's name: Clarke Roberts BA (Hons)

The researcher named above has briefed me to my satisfaction on the research for which I have volunteered. I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the research at any point. I also understand that, within the constraints of the research, my rights to anonymity and confidentiality will be respected. Any data used for this research will be stored securely following University guidelines and will be destroyed when no longer required for this research.

I agree to the interview being recorded

(tick the relevant box)

I do NOT want to have the interview recorded

Signature of participant _____ 

Date 15 March 2015

This form will be produced in duplicate. One copy should be retained by the participant and the other by the researcher.



THEOLOGY AND RELIGIOUS STUDIES

Participant Consent Form

Researcher's name: Clarke Roberts BA (Hons)

The researcher named above has briefed me to my satisfaction on the research for which I have volunteered. I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the research at any point. I also understand that, within the constraints of the research, my rights to anonymity and confidentiality will be respected. Any data used for this research will be stored securely following University guidelines and will be destroyed when no longer required for this research.

I agree to the interview being recorded

(tick the relevant box)

I do NOT want to have the interview recorded

Signature of participant

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be "Benji", written over a horizontal line.

Date

14/04/2015

This form will be produced in duplicate. One copy should be retained by the participant and the other by the researcher.



THEOLOGY AND RELIGIOUS STUDIES

Participant Consent Form

Researcher's name: Clarke Roberts BA (Hons)

The researcher named above has briefed me to my satisfaction on the research for which I have volunteered. I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the research at any point. I also understand that, within the constraints of the research, my rights to anonymity and confidentiality will be respected. Any data used for this research will be stored securely following University guidelines and will be destroyed when no longer required for this research.

I agree to the interview being recorded



(tick the relevant box)

I do NOT want to have the interview recorded

Signature of participant

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "A. Houghton", written over a horizontal line.

Date

A handwritten date "15th April 15 -" written in black ink over a horizontal line.

This form will be produced in duplicate. One copy should be retained by the participant and the other by the researcher.



THEOLOGY AND RELIGIOUS STUDIES

Participant Consent Form

Researcher's name: Clarke Roberts BA (Hons)

The researcher named above has briefed me to my satisfaction on the research for which I have volunteered. I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the research at any point. I also understand that, within the constraints of the research, my rights to anonymity and confidentiality will be respected. Any data used for this research will be stored securely following University guidelines and will be destroyed when no longer required for this research.

I agree to the interview being recorded

I do NOT want to have the interview recorded

(tick the relevant box)

Signature of participant

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "K. Roberts", written over a horizontal line.

Date

16/04/2015

This form will be produced in duplicate. One copy should be retained by the participant and the other by the researcher.

5.3 Final Questions



ORDINARY THEODICY

Interview Questions

- Introduction

- Introduce interview: state that interviewee may stop at any point; state that interviews will be recorded unless otherwise stated by interviewee.
- Ask interviewee about religious views.

- Theodicy

- How do you reconcile your belief in God with the existence of evil and suffering in the world?

- Free Will Defence

- How do you interpret the idea of free will?
- Does its 'existence' play a part in your understanding of theodicy?

- Soul-Making

- How would you respond to the claim that evil is a necessary means to some higher end?

- Intellectual vs Practical

- Does the existence of evil affect your belief in God?
- Does the existence of evil need an intellectual/philosophical answer?
- How do you cope with personal struggles in relation to your Christian faith?

- Prayer

- What role, if any, does prayer play in your Christianity?
- If praying during a particularly difficult in your life, what purpose does your prayer serve?