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**DIVINE IMPASSIBILITY:  
A COMPARISON OF WEINANDY’S AND CULPEPPER’S PERSPECTIVES ON  
WHETHER GOD SUFFERS**

**Elizabeth Flynn**

**1. Introduction**

‘Theology has no falsier idea than that of the impassibility of God.’<sup>1</sup> With these words of the nineteenth-century Scottish theologian Andrew Fairbairn, Thomas Weinandy opens his masterly work in defence of the doctrine of divine impassibility. As Weinandy notes in the opening paragraph of *Does God Suffer?*, since the time of the Early Church, the notion of divine impassibility was accepted as axiomatic. With Fairbairn and others, however, a doctrinal shift occurred. That shift was not confined to a few Anglicans on the British Isles, but rather it spread further afield and has now been embraced by many contemporary theologians, including prominent Roman Catholics such as Hans Urs von Balthasar, Jean Galot and Raniero Cantalamessa.<sup>2</sup> In light of this trend, the so-called ‘new orthodoxy’ is the teaching that God does indeed suffer.<sup>3</sup> This paper will draw from the work of two contemporary theologians, namely Thomas Weinandy and Gary Culpepper, to consider how it can be said that God must or must not suffer.<sup>4</sup>

At this point, the initial question arises: has there been a reversal in one aspect of the Christian doctrine of God, such that what was once deemed to be true has now become false? An initial answer can be found in looking at the motives for the debate. As James Keating and

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<sup>1</sup> A. M. Fairbairn, *The Place of Christ in Modern Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1893), 483 in Thomas Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), 1.

<sup>2</sup> See Thomas Weinandy, “Does God Suffer?” *First Things* 117 (November 2001): 35. See also Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 11-38. In footnote 38 he directs the reader to Jean Galot, *Dieu Souffre-t-il?*, H. U. von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama V: The Last Act* and Raniero Cantalamessa, *The Power of the Cross*, amongst other works by other authors who speak of a passible God.

<sup>3</sup> See Ronald Goetz, “The Suffering God: The Rise of a New Orthodoxy,” *The Christian Century* 103 (1986):385.

<sup>4</sup> In defence of divine impassibility, the main work used by Weinandy will be his book, *Does God Suffer?* His article with the same name will also be referenced (see footnote 2) as well as his entry in the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* on the Impassibility of God (see footnote 13). Regarding divine passibility, the arguments used will be those presented by Gary Culpepper, “‘One Suffering, in Two Natures’: An Analogical Inquiry into Divine and Human Suffering,” in *Divine Impassibility and the Mystery of Human Suffering*, ed. James F. Keating and Thomas Joseph White (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2009), 77-98.

Thomas White point out, the main reason the ancients asserted the impassibility of God was ‘to safeguard the divine transcendence and its inalienable prerogatives.’<sup>5</sup> Modern theologians, they say, however, are concerned with the question of evil such that the notion of divine impassibility cannot be claimed in light of the reality of human suffering, for, ‘since we suffer, should we not say that God suffers as well?’<sup>6</sup> In light of this, the contemporary question of whether or not God suffers is essentially of a soteriological nature. It will be demonstrated below that in Weinandy’s opinion, the assertion of a passible God has dire consequences in this regard.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, Culpepper will argue that the ‘analogy of suffering’ sheds light on the ‘eternal wound in God’ which, rather than denying the crucifixion of any redemptive value, in fact demonstrates how humans are to participate in the divine communion.<sup>8</sup> There may be valid arguments to say that by using human suffering as their premise, it is possible for ‘passibilists’ to deny divine transcendence. As will be shown, that does not seem to be case for Culpepper, who is aware of this challenge.<sup>9</sup> In addition, although he argues for a certain passibility in God, he asserts his agreement with the traditional defence of divine impassibility which seeks to safeguard ‘God’s eternal life [from being] diminished by the divine act of uniting human modes of suffering with his own eternal form of life.’<sup>10</sup>

In order to comprehend the arguments proffered in this debate, it is important to recognise that the concept of divine impassibility is granted a variety of shades of meaning by different authors.<sup>11</sup> In highlighting the definitions given by Weinandy and Culpepper, a brief assessment will be made as to whether the debate is really just semantic, which the latter hopes it is not.<sup>12</sup> The paper will then look at the implications, arising from these definitions, for asserting a suffering God and in particular what this says about God’s love and our salvation. Prior to elaborating on the contrasting accounts of divine suffering as presented by Weinandy and Culpepper, it will be helpful to consider the key reasons why this change in approach to God came to the fore in theological discussion. Two of these will be examined in more depth: (1) the reality of immense suffering in the contemporary world and (2) the change in biblical

<sup>5</sup> James F. Keating and Thomas Joseph White, “Introduction: Divine Impassibility in Contemporary Theology” in *Divine Impassibility and the Mystery of Human Suffering*, ed. James F. Keating and Thomas Joseph White (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2009), 2.

<sup>6</sup> Keating and White, “Introduction: Divine Impassibility in Contemporary Theology,” 2.

<sup>7</sup> See Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 157: “Salvation — freedom from evil and suffering — becomes a false hope for it will never be attained.”

<sup>8</sup> See Culpepper, “One Suffering, in Two Natures,” 94-96.

<sup>9</sup> See Culpepper, “One Suffering, in Two Natures,” 77.

<sup>10</sup> See Culpepper, “One Suffering, in Two Natures,” 78.

<sup>11</sup> See Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 38. Weinandy highlights those given by E. A. Livingstone, R. Creel, H. P. Owen and M. Sarot.

<sup>12</sup> See Culpepper, “One Suffering, In Two Natures,” 97.

interpretation regarding feelings in God. The remainder of the paper will be devoted to exploring why Weinandy believes that God must be impassible and why Culpepper asserts the opposite.

## 2. Understanding the Notion of Divine Impassibility

In the Christian tradition, the philosophical question of whether God is impassible has been examined in the light of biblical faith in the ‘One God who is Saviour, Creator and Sanctifier.’<sup>13</sup> The conclusion and therefore doctrine of divine impassibility was drawn from the fact God is utterly transcendent (or ‘Wholly Other’ to use Weinandy’s terminology) and incorporeal. As such, impassibility is an attribute that can only be positively said of God as God. The fact of the Incarnation and the subsequent doctrine of Christ as ‘true God and true man, in the unity of his divine person’ mean that the real suffering of the Passion is understood as being attributable only to Christ’s humanity.<sup>14</sup> An example of Patristic teaching on the matter is Cyril of Alexandria’s explanation of why we can profess in the Creed that the second Person of the Trinity ‘suffered’: ‘We do not mean that God the Word suffered in his Deity ... for the Deity is impassible because it is incorporeal. ... The impassible was in the body which suffered.’<sup>15</sup> Centuries later, Aquinas will deny that the Passion can be attributed to the Godhead because ‘Christ’s Passion belongs to the “*suppositum*” of the Divine Nature by reason of the passible nature assumed, but not on account of the impassible Divine Nature.’<sup>16</sup> Even more recently, John Paul II has asserted that in His Passion and death, the ‘Son who is consubstantial with the Father suffers as man.’<sup>17</sup>

The idea of Christ’s suffering being confined to the flesh has significant defenders throughout Church history. As will be shown, Weinandy’s arguments are firmly in line with this traditional approach. Culpepper, however, draws importantly different conclusions, that he believes are in accordance with the logic of the Christological teachings as defined at

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<sup>13</sup> Weinandy, “Impassibility of God” in *New Catholic Encyclopedia* Vol. 7 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 2003, 357.

<sup>14</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd edition (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 1997), 480.

<sup>15</sup> Cyril of Alexandria, *Ep. iv* in *Documents of the Christian Church*, ed. Henry Bettenson and Chris Maunder (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 52.

<sup>16</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Bros., 1947-48), III, 46,12. Note that ‘suppositum’ is another way of speaking of the hypostatic union of Christ’s divinity with his humanity.

<sup>17</sup> John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Salvifici Doloris*, Vatican website, 11 February 1984, [https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_letters/1984/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_apl\\_11021984\\_salvifici-doloris.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1984/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_11021984_salvifici-doloris.html), 17§5.

Chalcedon. In light of his arguments, it is not only Christ in His humanity who suffers, but rather that ‘God suffers according to the divine nature as well.’<sup>18</sup> The underlying arguments for Culpepper’s position will be articulated in the section dedicated to him below.

### *2.1 Definitions and Applications of Terms Used*

In order to demonstrate the logic of their positions, both Weinandy and Culpepper recognise the need to define the terms ‘passibility’ and ‘impassibility’ and explain how they can or cannot be predicated of God. For Weinandy, asserting the impassibility of God means that ‘He cannot experience emotional changes of state due to His relationship to and interaction with human beings and the created order.’<sup>19</sup> He insists that this does not mean however, that ‘God is not utterly passionate in His love’ and admits that the sorrow and grief that are ascribed to God in the biblical accounts do entail true suffering.<sup>20</sup> However, he explains that this is because God is ‘intensely concerned with the reality of sin and evil, and the suffering that ensues from them.’<sup>21</sup> Weinandy accepts that there is a possibility of ascribing suffering to God in a metaphorical sense to mean that He is ‘wholly adverse to all that is contrary to His goodness, and that in His perfectly actualised love He embraces those who suffer because of sin and evil.’<sup>22</sup> Such ‘suffering,’ in God, however, has nothing to do with having a passible emotional state. He believes that describing God as passible would necessarily imply ‘that He is capable of being acted upon from without and that such actions bring about emotional changes in him.’<sup>23</sup> If this were the case, a passible God would experience a variety of emotional states that are ‘analogous to human feelings.’<sup>24</sup> Therefore, from Weinandy’s perspective, it does not become possible to assert a passible God. Being impassible, therefore means that God is utterly unaffected by exterior forces that would make him experience ‘inner anguish and distress’ in a way comparable to humans. God’s real concern for human suffering is not, from Weinandy’s perspective, an expression of His passibility.

Culpepper prefers to speak predominantly of God’s ‘suffering’ over divine ‘passibility.’ This seems to be because whereas passibility is a purely abstract term used in theological

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<sup>18</sup> Culpepper, “One Suffering, in Two Natures,” 78.

<sup>19</sup> Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 38.

<sup>20</sup> Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 38.

<sup>21</sup> Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 169.

<sup>22</sup> Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 169.

<sup>23</sup> Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 39.

<sup>24</sup> Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 39 and 169.

dialogue, suffering is a term that has concrete connotations for the ordinary person.<sup>25</sup> ‘Suffering’ is also the term that allows Culpepper to draw the obvious parallel with the Person of Christ and thus to argue for ‘one suffering, in two natures.’ When explaining the specific signification of ‘suffering’ that he deems most appropriate in this debate, he recognises that it is a term that has a broad range of meanings. Culpepper believes that ‘suffering’ is too often used in a restricted sense, being predicated only of experiences with negative associations. He highlights that the term ‘suffer’ is not purely negative, for in itself it simply has the neutral connotation of ‘a “bearing” or “receiving” of the action of another person or thing.’<sup>26</sup> In this vein, he asserts that the concept of suffering is similar to that of passion and that both can be defined as ‘[being] moved by another.’<sup>27</sup> The passive implication is important. He adds that this ‘being moved’ can occur ‘spatially, emotionally, or spiritually.’<sup>28</sup> Culpepper clarifies that in terms of the Godhead, this ‘being moved by another’ is to be applied analogically, such that by arguing for the possibility of God being moved by another he will also be able to speak of “‘motion’ in God himself.”<sup>29</sup> It is important to point out that when Culpepper refers to God being moved by another, he specifically refers to movement within the Trinity, or the ‘suffering’ of one Person by another. Such movement would not be one of physical location but rather of spiritual state. Culpepper is aware that speaking of suffering in God has the danger of implying that God experiences ‘defective forms of suffering associated with physical and emotional change.’<sup>30</sup> He asserts his agreement with Aquinas and Weinandy that such predications should not be made. However, unlike Weinandy, he is not averse to speaking of suffering in God.

By way of a summary it seems that the base definition of ‘being moved by another’ is understood in the same way by Weinandy and Culpepper, and both conclude that God cannot be moved by creatures to experience the instability of an emotional state characteristic of humans. Both scholars also admit (albeit using different language) that in a certain way there is an experience of passion within the Godhead. The reason why one concludes that God is impassible and the other that He is passible seems to be due primarily to their understanding of

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<sup>25</sup> It is important to note that word usage in general is stylistic and connotations can be subjective, depending on context, register etc. In addition, it is important to note that although suffering could be considered a concrete noun, it is still essentially abstract and is undoubtedly uncountable.

<sup>26</sup> Culpepper, “One Suffering, in Two Natures,” 81.

<sup>27</sup> Culpepper, “One Suffering, in Two Natures,” 82.

<sup>28</sup> Culpepper, “One Suffering, in Two Natures,” 82.

<sup>29</sup> Culpepper, “One Suffering, in Two Natures,” 82.

<sup>30</sup> Culpepper, “One Suffering, in Two Natures,” 97.

God's inner experience of passion. On the one hand, for Weinandy, God's passionate love is an immutable characteristic of His perfectly actualised love.<sup>31</sup> Culpepper, on the other hand, believes that there is true movement within the Trinity which, as will be shown below, enables him to argue for there to be true suffering in the divine nature.

## 2.2 Implications

Consideration of the question of suffering in God naturally brings up the question of love. As Our Lord said on the eve of His death, 'greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.'<sup>32</sup> To show great love therefore, it seems that a person must not only be capable of great suffering, but that he also must put it into effect. The great love shown by Jesus is that of the cross, and being a disciple of Jesus necessarily implies taking up one's own cross.<sup>33</sup> Consequently, the question of the relationship between suffering and love is of serious import. One may legitimately ask whether it is possible to love greatly without suffering at all. If the two necessarily go hand in hand, it would seem that the answer would be negative. In light of this, those who argue for a passible God seek to demonstrate that suffering is an inherent element of love. As Culpepper highlights, the famous German passibilist Jürgen Moltmann argued that 'were God incapable of suffering in any respect, and therefore in an absolute sense, then He would also be incapable of love.'<sup>34</sup> Passibilists naturally conclude, therefore, that 'the very nature of love is said to require that the lover suffer, in some sense, the existence of the other.'<sup>35</sup> Culpepper thus shows that they equate impassibility in God to pagan notions of ego-centric deities and so contrast the Christian God as being One who suffers in love for His creatures.

Impassibilists hold the opposing view regarding suffering in God, but not regarding God's infinite and unconditional love. As St John teaches, 'God is love.'<sup>36</sup> While the Sacred Scriptures unequivocally predicate love of God, the same cannot be said of suffering. Those who hold the impassible view about God would agree with Weinandy that 'suffering is not constitutive of love.'<sup>37</sup> It is plausible therefore that God should be said to love without suffering. As Weinandy will argue, it is essential that God be understood to be impassible to believe at

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<sup>31</sup> See Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 164-5.

<sup>32</sup> Jn 15:13. All Scripture citations are taken from the RSVCE.

<sup>33</sup> See Mt 10:38 and parallels.

<sup>34</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 230 in Culpepper, "One Suffering, in Two Natures," 84-5.

<sup>35</sup> Culpepper, "One Suffering, in Two Natures," 79.

<sup>36</sup> 1 Jn 4:8.

<sup>37</sup> See Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 160.

that same time that He is ‘lovingly present and dynamically active in our midst.’<sup>38</sup> Similarly, it is necessary that God be impassible for Christ’s suffering on the cross to have salvific value, for suffering is a result of the evil that exists only in the created order. In Weinandy’s view therefore, a God who suffers would also be ‘impaired by evil’ and just as powerless as mere humans, and ‘salvation — freedom from evil and suffering — becomes a false hope for it will never be obtained.’<sup>39</sup>

Therefore, for both sides of the debate, the question of God’s love is imperative. On both sides it is clear that it is because of God’s love that humankind can be saved. On one side are those who hold the opinion that a God who suffers is a God who cannot love, and therefore humankind’s salvation becomes impossible. On the other, there are theologians who believe that a God who suffers is a God who most loves humankind, whereas a God who does not suffer does not properly love us. The consequences for both sides of conceding their argument could therefore be said to be dire.<sup>40</sup> How proponents from each side of the debate defend their point will be illustrated in sections four and five.

### 3. How the Question Arises

Commentators on this debate draw attention to a variety of reasons for this change in understanding about God. These issues cover matters that are not only theological and philosophical but also socio-political in nature.<sup>41</sup> The following sections will shed light on the arguments regarding the reality of immense suffering in the world today and will take a brief look at the consequences of the modern approach to biblical interpretation.

#### 3.1 *Situation of the World*

The incontrovertible reality of immense human suffering in the twentieth century is repeatedly identified as being at the core of the argument for a suffering God.<sup>42</sup> Although, as Weinandy points out, the earliest passibilists were responding to the poverty of nineteenth-

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<sup>38</sup> Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 40.

<sup>39</sup> Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 157.

<sup>40</sup> See Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 157.

<sup>41</sup> Goetz identifies four: (1) the decline of Christendom, (2) the rise of democratic aspirations, (3) the problem of suffering and evil, and (4) the scholarly critical appraisal of the Bible, see Goetz, “The Suffering God,” 386. Weinandy identifies three: (1) the prevailing social and cultural milieu, (2) modern interpretation of biblical revelation, and (3) contemporary trends in philosophy, see Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 1.

<sup>42</sup> See Anastasia Foyle, “Human and Divine Suffering,” *Ars Disputandi* 5 (2005): 209.



century industrialised Britain, the emblematic account for a passible God as the apparently-satisfactory answer for human suffering is taken from Auschwitz, the experience of which underlies the passibilist arguments of Moltmann.<sup>43</sup> Weinandy refers first to the horrifying story of Elie Wiesel whose experience of the concentration camp leads him to comprehend that God was suffering in the gallows with him, and then to Moltmann's own conclusion that 'the inexpressible sufferings in Auschwitz were also the sufferings of God himself.'<sup>44</sup>

The immense sufferings endured in places affected by the drama of events such as the Holocaust and nuclear bombings are presented as being obvious reasons for easily convincing people of a suffering God.<sup>45</sup> The absolute quantity of innocent lives lost in the twentieth century is probably the highest ever such that John Paul II's evaluation of the current period as being one of an '*incomparable accumulation of sufferings, even to the possible self-destruction of humanity*' is no exaggeration.<sup>46</sup> However, one need not look too closely at both world and salvation history to recognise that suffering, even as grotesque as that experienced repeatedly in the modern era, has been present for as long as man has existed on this earth. The physical brutalities inflicted on many English martyrs of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are just one example, and the evils inflicted upon the Chosen People by Pharaoh as recounted in Exodus are another. As Anastasia Foyle cleverly argues, humans have been cruelly exploited and persecuted throughout history, but the logical answer to this suffering was not explained through a passible God until recently. Although the suffering of God may not be the absolutely necessary result of extensive and intense human suffering, it is true that many passibilists do argue from this starting point.<sup>47</sup> It is to be noted that although Culpepper's arguments for divine impassibility gain strength from the undeniable evidence of human suffering, this is not the underlying basis for his thesis.

### 3.2 Reinterpretations of Scripture

As Goetz notes, the twentieth century has seen a change in approach towards biblical scholarship that has allowed for new interpretations which affirm a passible God. With 'biblical interpretation no longer bound by patristic and scholastic presuppositions' it has become self-evident that 'the God of the Bible is a personal, passionate, jealous, concerned and suffering

<sup>43</sup> Weinandy, "Does God Suffer?," 35.

<sup>44</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *History and the Triune God*, 29 in Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 3-4.

<sup>45</sup> See Weinandy, "Does God Suffer?," 36 and Foyle, "Human Suffering and Divine Suffering," 1.

<sup>46</sup> John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris*, 8§3. Italics original.

<sup>47</sup> See Foyle, "Human Suffering and Divine Suffering," 211-212.

God.<sup>48</sup> Weinandy also recognises this trend, but he defends the traditional approach whereby ‘passages using anthropomorphic language ... cannot be taken literally.’<sup>49</sup> He also argues that where the Bible seemingly applies emotional states to God, these ‘are predicated not upon a change in God but upon a change within the others involved.’<sup>50</sup> He insists that it is precisely because, as Scripture attests, ‘God is not man’ that specifically-human language must not be interpreted as if God were human.<sup>51</sup>

Weinandy similarly argues for the traditional interpretation of Christ’s suffering on the cross. In line with the teachings of Cyril of Alexandria and Chalcedon he asserts unequivocally that this is experienced only in the Son of God’s humanity.<sup>52</sup> Culpepper believes that it is possible to deduce from the Church’s doctrine of the oneness of Christ that the suffering of the crucifixion should not be restricted to the experience of Jesus. He states: ‘It becomes appropriate, analogically, to attribute suffering to the ‘divine nature’ of the Son as well.’<sup>53</sup> He qualifies this, to assert that this argument does not lead to the conclusion that ‘there exists any defect such as physical or emotional pain’ in the one Godhead.<sup>54</sup> He also questions Weinandy’s lack of clarity in allowing for ‘passionate love’ in God whilst insisting on His absolute impassibility.<sup>55</sup> A more detailed examination of both Weinandy’s and Culpepper’s understanding of the suffering of the second Person of the Trinity will be presented in each of the sections dedicated to them below.

#### 4. Weinandy’s Arguments for Divine Impassibility

##### 4.1 God is ‘Wholly Other’

At the beginning of chapter three of *Does God Suffer?* (from where Weinandy presents his own arguments defending divine impassibility), the author asserts his aim to ‘defend the biblical revelation of God as lovingly present and dynamically active in our midst.’<sup>56</sup> This God, he explains, who is both transcendent and immanent, is most accurately referred to as being

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<sup>48</sup> Goetz, “The Suffering God,” 386-7.

<sup>49</sup> Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 59.

<sup>50</sup> Weinandy, “Does God Suffer?,” 37. To demonstrate his point, Weinandy gives the examples of the apparent divine sorrow at appointing Saul king (1 Sam 15:11,35) as well as his relenting of his anger towards the Ninevites (Jon 4:2) and towards the Israelites (Ex 32:14).

<sup>51</sup> Weinandy, “Does God Suffer?” 38-39. Num 23:19.

<sup>52</sup> See Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 201.

<sup>53</sup> Culpepper, “One Suffering, in Two Natures,” 90.

<sup>54</sup> Culpepper, “One Suffering, in Two Natures,” 91.

<sup>55</sup> See Culpepper, “One Suffering, in Two Natures,” 83 and Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 39.

<sup>56</sup> Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 40.

‘Wholly Other.’<sup>57</sup> Whilst cautioning the reader against misinterpreting the term, he insists on its suitability for it is only because God is ‘Wholly Other’ that He is also ‘the Creator, the Saviour and the Holy One.’<sup>58</sup> In this way, God depends on no one, yet at the same time interacts dynamically within the created order, saving man and making him holy.<sup>59</sup>

Being ‘Wholly Other,’ God’s manner of existence is a unique interplay of immanence and transcendence, but it is important to note that He is of a different ontological order to all creation. This does not mean, as he points out in a lengthy footnote, that ‘He cannot be known’ nor that ‘we cannot make true statements about Him,’ nor that ‘He has no relationship with the created order.’<sup>60</sup> On the contrary, Weinandy explains that through the act of creation itself, all creatures, in particular all human persons, are related to the Creator in an immediate, dynamic, intimate and enduring way.<sup>61</sup> Unlike relationships between two humans, the Creator-creature relationship is everlasting. Exactly how this relationship occurs he posits as being beyond the capacity of the human mind to comprehend, for the nature of God as pure act and having no potency is unlike anything in the created order.<sup>62</sup> Nevertheless, that does not stop it from being intelligible.<sup>63</sup> It is the biblical God who is ‘Wholly Other,’ Creator and Saviour, who ‘abundantly testifies that no historical situation is outside [His] providential care nor immune from his saving action.’<sup>64</sup> This same biblical God can be understood philosophically as pure act, and thus necessarily, impassible.

#### 4.2 *God and the Sin of Mankind*

Sin is at the heart of the Christian understanding of evil and is directly associated with suffering in its negative connotations, as indicated above.<sup>65</sup> In line with traditional Catholic doctrine, Weinandy highlights that sin is the ‘free misuse of God’s gifts.’<sup>66</sup> The truth of the existence of sin is undeniable, and as the *Catechism* asserts, ‘any attempt to ignore it or to give this dark reality other names would be futile.’<sup>67</sup> Although the Old Testament notion that present-day sufferings are the direct consequence of one’s own or one’s ancestors’ sins is first

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<sup>57</sup> Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 46.

<sup>58</sup> Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 54.

<sup>59</sup> See Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 45, 49.

<sup>60</sup> Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 46, footnote 11.

<sup>61</sup> See Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 135.

<sup>62</sup> See Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 120-1. Weinandy takes this notion from Aquinas.

<sup>63</sup> See Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 145.

<sup>64</sup> Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 45.

<sup>65</sup> See Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 148. See also John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris*, 14§3.

<sup>66</sup> Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 148. See *Catechism*, 1739.

<sup>67</sup> *Catechism*, 386.

questioned by Job and ultimately turned on its head by Jesus when He cures the blind beggar of John 9, it is undoubtedly true that one's own sin, as well as that of others, *is* the cause of vicious attitudes and actions that are experienced by human beings and other beings of the created order as painful suffering.<sup>68</sup> Weinandy insists, however, that God's experience of humankind's sin is utterly different for two reasons. The first is because evil is only to be found in the created order and, as indicated above, God is 'Wholly Other' and so incapable of 'being infected by the evil that takes place within the created order' such that He is 'immune to suffering.'<sup>69</sup> The second reason is because 'evil ... is a privation of some good or perfection which in turn causes suffering;' being pure act, privation is impossible for God and so there is nothing that 'can impair God's goodness so as to inflict a loss of some good which could then entail God suffering.'<sup>70</sup>

Another important consideration that Weinandy gives in this regard is that it is only God, who is 'Wholly Other' and thus ontologically different from humans, who can do what humans cannot do, namely, 'dispel the evil which is the cause of suffering.'<sup>71</sup> He argues that humans can express compassion to suffer in love with a fellow sufferer, but that because this compassion is not an expression of fully actualised love (like God's), it cannot remove the evil. For this reason, purely human suffering, or compassion, is ultimately of no soteriological worth. Because God's compassion, or mercy, is fully actualised, it makes Him 'present to and active within the created order as the Wholly Other.'<sup>72</sup> In other words, because God is pure act, and incapable of suffering, He is able to save humankind from the evil of sin.

#### 4.3 *The Incarnation*

As St John teaches in his First Epistle, it is by way of the Incarnation that 'the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world.'<sup>73</sup> In his exposition on the Incarnation, Weinandy points to the statements of faith developed in the first centuries of Christianity that have led the Church to teach that the Son sent by God is truly divine and truly human and that His two natures are ontologically united as one person or one

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<sup>68</sup> See John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris*, 11§1. See also Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 151 where he indicates that all humans are somehow "a victim of suffering" because of the vast array of atrocities inflicted throughout history and to the present day.

<sup>69</sup> Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 154.

<sup>70</sup> Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 157.

<sup>71</sup> Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 167.

<sup>72</sup> Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 168.

<sup>73</sup> 1 Jn 4:9.

‘I’. By virtue of these truths, he explains that it has been customary to use the communication of idioms, or ‘the predicating of divine and human attributes of one and the same person — the Son,’ to say that ‘God suffered and died on the cross.’<sup>74</sup> Weinandy can therefore assert that it is the one ‘Son who, as man, experiences all facets of this human life, including suffering and death.’<sup>75</sup> As he points out, the Incarnation is a mystery that the human mind cannot fully comprehend, but its truth means that it is permissible to say with Cyril, ‘the Impassible suffered.’<sup>76</sup> He argues that in no way does this mean that the Son of God suffered in his divine nature. However, other than being as a mystery, Weinandy does not fully explain *how* Christ is one person, yet has different experiences in his human and divine natures.<sup>77</sup> In line with the traditional interpretation of Chalcedon, he insists that it is impossible for there to be suffering in the divine nature, for if one were to allow it, ‘this would negate the very thing one wanted to preserve and cultivate.’<sup>78</sup> It is possible, however, to assert, for example, that ‘the Son of God rejoices, grieves, suffers and dies,’ but only because “he does so from within his human self-conscious ‘I.’”<sup>79</sup> As will be seen in the following section, it is such a reading of Chalcedon that Culpepper disputes.

### 5. Culpepper’s Arguments for a Passible God

From the very beginning of his article, Culpepper demonstrates his awareness of the difficulty of predicating suffering on God due to the possible implication that He is thus powerless and incapable of saving us from our wretched human condition.<sup>80</sup> The human need for a Saviour, which is pivotal to his argument, means that this initial obstacle does not impede him from investigating whether the eternal Son can, in any way, be said to suffer and thus what such suffering could say to the suffering of the created world.

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<sup>74</sup> Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 174.

<sup>75</sup> Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 201.

<sup>76</sup> Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 202-3. In a footnote, Weinandy recognises that this exact phrase does not seem to appear in Cyril’s Greek text, but he asserts that it is “Cyrilian in tone and meaning,” and that the very similar text “within the suffering body was the Impassible” is clearly evident in Cyril’s work, *Ad Nestorium*.

<sup>77</sup> See Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 209. It is evident that the two natures enable the Son to have two modes of experience, each being proper to its nature, but as Weinandy admits, “what the tradition has not clearly distinguished is the identity ... of the one ‘I’ and the existential mode under which the one “I” exists.”

<sup>78</sup> Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 204.

<sup>79</sup> Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 211.

<sup>80</sup> See Culpepper, “One Suffering, in Two Natures,” 77.

### 5.1 'One Suffering in Two Natures'

The basis for Culpepper's argument lies in the Christological faith made explicit at the Council of Chalcedon that Jesus Christ is 'the same perfect in divinity and perfect in humanity' and that 'the property of [His] natures is preserved and comes together into a single person (*prosopon*) and a single subsistent being (*hypostasis*).'<sup>81</sup> He is thus able to posit that 'the suffering of the man Jesus can never be separated from the eternal life of the Son' and therefore suggest that Jesus' suffering cannot be attributed to his human nature alone, but rather that 'God suffers according to the divine nature as well.'<sup>82</sup>

Culpepper draws on Aquinas to assert that God could have created a better world such that there were no suffering in it, for He has the power to do so.<sup>83</sup> However, as the *Catechism* teaches, God chose to create man with free will and that being 'limited and fallible,' man fell, and sin and evil entered the world.<sup>84</sup> In light of this, sin and its consequent suffering, is caused by a 'defective use of human freedom' which in and of itself, cannot affect the infinite and infallible goodness of all that God is and creates.<sup>85</sup> Nevertheless, Culpepper believes that God *can* be said to suffer. Following Aquinas, who asserted that God 'wills to permit evil to be done,' Culpepper explains that it is precisely in this permissive will that 'God suffers the creature's refusal of the goodness of his creative intentions.'<sup>86</sup> An in-depth exposition of the interplay of God's antecedent and permissive will goes beyond the scope of this essay. It is sufficient here to note that in his antecedent will, God wills the good of all creation, but in His permissive will He keeps sinful humanity in existence.<sup>87</sup> Due to this gap in God's eternal will, He can be said to suffer an eternal 'wound.'<sup>88</sup> Contrary to Weinandy's view as explained above, the notion of an eternal wound in God means that God is somehow affected by moral evil, by virtue of the fact that He has permitted the creature He loves to sin.

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<sup>81</sup> Council of Chalcedon. In Declan O'Byrne, *For us and for our Salvation: The 'Christological' Councils and Trinitarian Anthropology* (Vatican City: Urbania University Press, 2018), 131.

<sup>82</sup> Culpepper, "One Suffering, in Two Natures," 77-8.

<sup>83</sup> See Culpepper, "One Suffering, in Two Natures," 86. See Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I,25,5.

<sup>84</sup> *Catechism*, 1730, 1739.

<sup>85</sup> Culpepper, "One Suffering, in Two Natures," 86.

<sup>86</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I,19.19. Culpepper, "One Suffering, in Two Natures," 87.

<sup>87</sup> See Culpepper, "One Suffering, in Two Natures," 94.

<sup>88</sup> See Culpepper, "One Suffering, in Two Natures," 87. On this point, Culpepper draws from Jacques Maritain.

### 5.2 *Suffering Within the Divine Persons*

Culpepper argues that the eternal suffering in God can be understood because of the absolute unity of God.<sup>89</sup> It is within this unity, that the suffering of ‘being moved by another’ can be understood. As he posits, each person ‘is moved to love by the other’ and this spiritual movement implies the reciprocal suffering arising from the ‘knowledge and love of the otherness’ of the other divine person.<sup>90</sup> Following Aquinas’ understanding of divine relations, he is able to assert that ‘the Father is, substantially, nothing other than the suffering of the Son, and the Son is nothing other than the suffering of the relation of the Father.’<sup>91</sup> He sums up this point by stating that ‘the Father, who *is* the act of suffering a relation to the Son, is *moved by that other who is the Holy Spirit*.’<sup>92</sup> The deep reality of reciprocal openness in the Trinity implies, in Culpepper’s view, therefore, inherent suffering. This suffering in no way nullifies but rather *signifies* divine perfection. This divine perfection is also signified by the Incarnation of the Son, through whom the divine, eternal suffering as perfection is united to the suffering that is proper to the fallen world, namely that which is fruit of sin and known as privation and defect. Due to Jesus’ inherent openness, Culpepper asserts that Jesus is opened ‘to the depth of the suffering of humanity.’<sup>93</sup> The link between the suffering of the created world and that of the Creator is revealed in Jesus, but Culpepper argues that it is not restricted to Him and His crucifixion. He asserts that the Father’s suffering is revealed when ‘He is moved by the Holy Spirit to send the Holy Spirit to [all humanity].’<sup>94</sup> This eternal suffering is therefore shared by the three Persons of the Trinity.

At this point it is important to indicate that although Culpepper chooses to attribute suffering to the Son in His divine nature, this does not imply that the Son experiences any ‘physical or emotional pain,’ for the term suffering is here used specifically to mean the divine relation is ‘moved by another’ in love.<sup>95</sup> In light of this, it seems that his view is in fact very similar to Weinandy’s, such that there must be no emotional suffering in the Trinity although the Persons *do* experience reciprocal, passionate love. However, when Culpepper raises the question as to whether there is suffering in the eternal essence, he gives an affirmative

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<sup>89</sup> See Culpepper, “One Suffering, in Two Natures,” 88.

<sup>90</sup> Culpepper, “One Suffering, in Two Natures,” 89.

<sup>91</sup> Culpepper, “One Suffering, in Two Natures,” 89.

<sup>92</sup> Culpepper, “One Suffering, in Two Natures,” 89. Italics original.

<sup>93</sup> Culpepper, “One Suffering, in Two Natures,” 89.

<sup>94</sup> Culpepper, “One Suffering, in Two Natures,” 90.

<sup>95</sup> Culpepper, “One Suffering, in Two Natures,” 91.

response.<sup>96</sup> As explained above, Weinandy, unhesitatingly denies such suffering.<sup>97</sup> In Culpepper's view, it is possible to argue for the affirmative because the eternal God is revealed in the economy such that it is possible to say that the suffering of Jesus in his human nature reveals the eternal suffering (or movement) of the Father by the Son.<sup>98</sup>

### 5.3 *Jesus Suffers as Man and as God*

In the final section of his article, Culpepper seeks to explain human suffering through the notion of divine solidarity, whereby Jesus, who, as St Paul teaches, was 'made to be sin,' enters into the 'region of alienation from God.'<sup>99</sup> He recognises that this alienation is certainly not that of a condemned sinner who has freely chosen against God's love. Rather, he posits that it is due to the 'gap between the antecedent and permissive will of God for humanity.'<sup>100</sup> In other words, Jesus personally and intimately knows the incongruity of the invitation of God's goodness, of which He is the visible image, being rejected by sinful humanity. In light of this, he can say, 'the profound grief of the man Jesus reveals the eternal wound in the heart of God.'<sup>101</sup> It seems therefore that the basis for the Son's suffering on the cross is not His humanity, but rather His divinity. The Son of God is eternally wounded, and it is that eternal wound that moves Him to enter into the created world and suffer in solidarity with all. Rather than being characterised by a love of death and emptiness, Culpepper proffers that this eternal suffering is characterised by the 'fullness of the joy of divine knowing and loving in the oneness of an interpersonal communion of life.'<sup>102</sup> This mysterious connection between suffering and joy easily finds human parallels, such as that of giving birth to a new child. As Culpepper illustrates, it is at the heart of Paul's vocation: 'I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church.'<sup>103</sup> Human suffering, endured patiently and joyfully, thus becomes the way to 'share in the joy of God's eternal suffering of knowledge and love in the Trinity.'<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Culpepper, "One Suffering, in Two Natures," 93.

<sup>97</sup> See Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 153.

<sup>98</sup> See Culpepper, "One Suffering, in Two Natures," 93.

<sup>99</sup> 2 Cor 5:21. Culpepper, "One Suffering, in Two Natures," 94.

<sup>100</sup> Culpepper, "One Suffering, in Two Natures," 95.

<sup>101</sup> Culpepper, "One Suffering, in Two Natures," 95.

<sup>102</sup> Culpepper, "One Suffering, in Two Natures," 95.

<sup>103</sup> Col 1:24.

<sup>104</sup> Culpepper, "One Suffering, in Two Natures," 96.



## 6. Conclusion

This paper began by considering whether it is true to say that the doctrine of divine impassibility as affirmed by the Early Church has, in recent times, been invalidated. As it has been attempted to show, impassibility is a complex philosophical notion that depends both on Scriptural interpretation and definition of terms. In addition, even when there is apparent agreement in these areas, as seems to be the case of the two theologians discussed in this paper, it is still logically possible to draw opposing conclusions. This paper has attempted to highlight the main issues at stake, namely that if God is said to suffer, what impact does that have on the salvation of fallen humanity and what does that say to the suffering that all human beings experience?

Although this debate does not appear to be fully semantic, it does not seem that these two ‘opponents’ are that far from each other in their opinion regarding the nature of suffering in God. For both Weinandy and Culpepper it is imperative that God not be said to experience emotional changes of state, for such is the suffering that is proper only to creatures and not to the Creator. Again, both Weinandy and Culpepper assert that there is some sort of passion in the Godhead. However, where for Weinandy this is simply recognition of the total self-giving in love of the divine Persons to one another, for Culpepper, the life of the Trinity is marked by openness to one another’s love, which implies a true movement that is at the same time true suffering. In Weinandy’s view, this passionate love cannot imply impassibility because God is incorporeal and immutable and so necessarily impassible. For him, suffering necessarily implies evil, which in the case of God would negate His ability to save us. Culpepper views that the Trinitarian openness is a sign of divine perfection which, in turn, is equatable to eternal suffering. The openness within the Trinity is revealed by the suffering of Jesus in His humanity.

The major difference between the two is the understanding of how the Incarnation reflects the eternal reality of God. For Weinandy, the necessary impassibility of God restricts Jesus’ suffering to His humanity. Culpepper, however, deduces that God’s eternal knowledge of His permission for man’s sin implies an eternal wound in God. It is the eternal wound in His divinity that leads the second Person of the Trinity to enter in solidarity into the fallen world and to suffer with it and thus show human beings the way to participate in the eternal life of God.

It is clear that the linguistic disparities identified above make this debate particularly challenging. It is easy to be confused about what it means to say that God suffers. It is also true that it is easy to reduce the argument for impassibility to the hypothesis that because humans

suffer, God must necessarily suffer. Both Weinandy and Culpepper seek to explain their viewpoints using sound theological and philosophical arguments. Neither would deny God's providential concern for His creation, nor His capacity to save fallen humankind.

The major difference is found in their perspectives regarding the impact on God arising from His granting human beings free will. Although this can be said to make Him vulnerable, God does not suffer any form of emotional change, as human parents do when their children make choices against their wishes, for He is an incorporeal, transcendent being. Considering this, it makes sense to regard Him as impassible. However, as Culpepper posits, there is an analogous divine suffering that arises when the Creator's children use their free will in a distorted fashion. The eternal One is inflicted with an eternal wound. The case for a passible God is certainly open for debate.

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