

# 4 Developing Christian Theodicy in Conversation with Navid Kermani

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In my understanding of theology, the meaning of religious convictions always depends on a particular language game, i.e. on a certain theological context.<sup>1</sup> Because, for example, the sentence “God is love” can point to different meanings depending on to whom and in what context it is said, one can understand it adequately only if one perceives it as embedded in a particular dialogue or language game. Therefore, comparative theology can never result in a universal theory about religions and truth.<sup>2</sup> Because the meanings of basic religious beliefs within particular traditions are diverse, comparative theology focuses on select details within particular solitary cases and contexts.<sup>3</sup>

Although comparative theology may be geared toward any number of problems, the selection should address lay questions about theological sense, salvation, and truth in addition to critical challenges by specialists. Otherwise, comparative theology would become a playground for detail-loving eccentrics, those who meticulously compare irrelevant subjects. Capricious comparisons of themes within religious traditions are not automatically comparative theology.

Therefore, it is important that, as a first step, comparative theologians draft problems meaningful for a range of religious and non-religious traditions. Of course, it is not expected that there will be a uniform canon of questions for all comparative theologies in the world. But at least at the point of concrete research, one should identify shared problems and assess examples with a view to their competence in addressing them.<sup>4</sup>

These methodological observations contribute to decisions about the methodology used in this article. The first decision is to choose the problem of theodicy, or the problem of evil, because it is one of the most

frequently discussed subjects in Western theology, and most scholars agree that it has not yet been solved.<sup>5</sup> This chapter does not compare how Muslims and Christians in general deal with this problem. Such an attempt should be reserved for comparative religion and is not the task of comparative theology. Instead, I struggle with the problem itself and try to stabilize it; and I do this as a Christian who is learning from dialogue with a Muslim.

The second decision is to learn from a particular, contemporary Muslim thinker in this context: Navid Kermani. He is perhaps the most well-known Muslim scholar from Germany today, and some of his works have already been translated into English. Kermani was probably the first Muslim scholar who challenged my theology in such a way that I learned from him and his thinking not only about Islam, but also about Christianity. I have had many conversations with him and we have much in common, although his theological style and his ideas are very different from mine. This great sympathy has to do with some points that I share biographically with Kermani: We both love the best and most multicultural city in the world (Cologne) and its soccer club. For both of us soccer has been a bridge from a bourgeois family to working class people;<sup>6</sup> for both of us humanistic and social engagement is central for religion; and for both of us prayer arouses feelings of ambivalence and strangeness.<sup>7</sup> Thus, there are important similarities in our worldviews that might help me to understand his ideas, although they are articulated in the framework of another religion. However, I intend to present only *my* approach to his ideas in relation to my own approach to the problem of theodicy, without claiming to give a complete or neutral overview of his theological writings<sup>8</sup> or the theological problem of theodicy.

## Free Will Defense within Christian Theology

Before starting with Kermani, let me briefly introduce my approach to the problem of evil within Christianity. The most important German scholar who has influenced my own thinking on the problem of evil is a Catholic theologian from Munich, Armin Kreiner.<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, he is completely unknown in the English speaking world. For an English-speaking thinker who comes close to his ideas, one may refer to the theodicy of William Hasker.

Theologians and philosophers like Kreiner and Hasker teach that one must use the methods of free will theodicy and natural law theodicy if

one wants to defend the rationality of a theistic belief in the face of the problem of evil. Natural law theodicy is based on the assumption that the “world has developed to its present state through a complex evolutionary process and enjoys a considerable amount of autonomy in its functioning.”<sup>10</sup> It is unavoidable that the universe that produces human freedom as the outcome of the evolutionary process “contains a great deal of suffering and death.”<sup>11</sup> The advantage of this kind of theodicy is that it accepts “that severe pain, suffering, and death really are evil” and possibly against God’s good will.<sup>12</sup> This argument regarding natural evil points as well to a free will theodicy because the very same laws that produce this natural evil are the precondition of free will.

A libertarian view of free will theodicy tries to show that free will is the central value of humanity and can be defended as the price of pain and suffering.<sup>13</sup> What is very important in this approach is the fact that it resists “the temptation to claim that all suffering has . . . beneficial results.”<sup>14</sup> On the contrary, it insists that much suffering makes no sense and is against the good will of God (this kind of evil is sometimes called *gratuitous evil*).

In the approach of free will theodicy, evil is not willed by God but is the result of the risk that God accepts in order to create a world with persons who have free will: “And this means that God is a risk-taker; in expressing his love toward us, he opens himself up to the real possibility of failure and disappointment.”<sup>15</sup> Thus, if people act against God’s good will, it is beyond God’s power to prevent them from doing evil; otherwise God would destroy the free will, which had been the very reason for creation.

William Hasker takes one further step. For him, the only reason why God does not prevent all gratuitous evil is that through such interventions God would destroy “our own motivation to prevent or alleviate such evils.”<sup>16</sup> But is gratuitous evil too high a price for this motivation? Hasker tries to respond to this argument through the observation that rejection of the possibility of evil implies rejection of the existence of humanity. It is impossible to reject humanity if one values or accepts life: “If I am glad on the whole about my own existence, and that of persons close to me, then I cannot reproach God for the general character or the major events of the world’s past history.”<sup>17</sup> Hasker too quickly presupposes that people will be grateful for their existence, an assumption that the tradition of skepticism from Hume to Kant and Schopenhauer contests. Thus, I do not defend the necessity of accepting life, but I have argued

elsewhere that it is rational to hope that people in their encounter with Christ in death will accept evil as the price of freedom and love.<sup>18</sup>

Although I think that my formulation is more convincing than Hasker's, I have to admit that it cannot meet the moral challenges raised in Fyodor Dostoevsky's famous novel *The Brothers Karamazov*. In this novel, Ivan Karamazov refuses the admission ticket to a postmortem process of reconciliation. As illustration for this refusal, Ivan chooses a newspaper report on a Russian general and rich landowner who wants to punish the eight-year-old son of one of his bondmen for hurting the foot of one of his dogs while playing. The punishment consists of setting all his greyhounds on him and tearing him to pieces.<sup>19</sup> Although this crime is beyond awful, Ivan admits that after death God might be able to help the boy, his mother, and himself to forgive the crime of the landowner. It is possible that God will help all to praise his glory and justice after death. But at the same time, Ivan insists:

I don't want to cry aloud then. While there is still time, I hasten to protect myself, and so I renounce the higher harmony altogether. It's not worth the tears of that one tortured child who beat itself on the breast with its little fist and prayed in its stinking outhouse, with its unexpiated tears to "dear, kind God"!<sup>20</sup>

For Ivan, an atonement for the suffering of children is not conceivable. Thus, he refuses to accept the harmony of heaven if it is built upon the suffering of so many innocent people:

I don't want harmony. From love for humanity I don't want it. I would rather be left with the unavenged suffering. . . . And so I hasten to give back my entrance ticket, and if I am an honest man I am bound to give it back as soon as possible.<sup>21</sup>

Ivan refuses the idea of recompense after death because, though rational, it comes too late.<sup>22</sup> Thus, although the free will defense and natural law defense might succeed in defending the rationality of faith in God, it fails in defending its morality.

Current debates on the problem of theodicy have taken up this challenge to give a convincing response that preserves both the rationality and morality of faith. The following section shows how Navid Kermani responds to this challenge with the help of the Muslim tradition in a combination of practical and theoretical theodicy that can also inspire the Christian tradition.

## The Terror of God

In *The Terror of God: Attar, Job, and the Metaphysical Revolt*, which is the most important work on the question of evil in his writings, Kermani does not present an argumentative defense of the rationality of faith but sticks to the tradition of practical or authentic theodicy.<sup>23</sup> He refers to Job's rebellion against God and quotes Kant's critique of all speculative theodicy. In this tradition, he criticizes all forms of doctrinal theodicy and pleads instead for complaint, lamentation, and even accusation against God because of evil. The main source for this line of thought in Islamic tradition is the "Book of Suffering" of the Persian mystical poet Attar (1145–1221), which "teaches that the paths taken by those who quarrel with God can lead straight through the heart of Muslim piety."<sup>24</sup>

This kind of theodicy insists on God's justice against the injustice of the world. In this approach, one does not defend the existence of God's justice but demands for God to show it. Thus, the idea is to oblige God to demonstrate divine justice and mercy. The theologian's task is not to defend God but to demand God's self-defense. Theology cannot affirm, but only demand and postulate. The protest against God's absent self-defense is part of both the task of theology and the practical fight against suffering. All of these ideas are well known as practical theodicy in Western thinking. But Kermani, one of the first Muslim theologians to consequently buy into this tradition of theodicy, gives an unusual shape to them.

Kermani's suggestion is so unusual for Muslim theology because Islamic tradition usually criticizes the idea of accusations against God. The Qur'anic Job, for example, is not a rebel at all. He most resembles the silent sufferer and servant of the narration of the first two chapters of the biblical book of Job. Job's rebellion, which starts in the third chapter, does not occur in the Qur'an (cf. Q 21:83, 38:44). Kermani is totally aware of the fact that this is typical for the Qur'an: "The Qur'an does not permit any form of lamenting piety, let alone one that accuses God."<sup>25</sup> But instead of drawing conclusions about Islamic piety from this observation, Kermani explains that the Qur'an cannot open up space for lamentations or even accusations against God because the Qur'an is conceived as the speech act of God. This is the decisive difference between the self-understanding of the Bible and that of the Qur'an. Whereas the Bible can open up the floor for people's lamentations and complaints because it is written by humans with the help of the Holy

Spirit, the Qur'an is understood by most Muslims as God's direct speech. And because of this literary category, complaints and accusations against God simply do not make sense in the Qur'an: "The textual concept itself already precludes the possibility of humans complaining about God, as it is He who speaks in the first person in the Qur'an."<sup>26</sup> This observation does not, however, suggest the consequence that lamentations, complaints, and even accusations by humans are impossible within the Islamic tradition.

Kermani uses this insight to invite his fellow believers to look through the Muslim tradition and to rediscover the tradition of lamentation and complaint in it. The attitude of protest against suffering demanded by atheists is not, then, anti-theistic but must be adopted by believers. Moreover, believers are able to make sense of this protest because they have someone to address in their accusations. They can include complaints in their prayer and dialogue with God and integrate them into the theistic perspective. This, at least, is what the believers presented in Attar's writings do.

In Attar's book the most faithful believers are those who ask why God persecutes them and leads them into misery.<sup>27</sup> They insist that God take responsibility for creation and persist in asking God to change the destiny of the deprived. Even though they live in ardent desire for God and accept all the blows of fate, they do not stop asking God for help. Because of their solidarity with other oppressed people, they blame God for lack of compassion: "in their despair, they are more religious than the believers who praise God, but turn a blind eye to the real state of His creation."<sup>28</sup>

Kermani's method of practical theodicy via Islamic mysticism can help respond to the question of protest atheism quoted at the end the last section. Kermani shows a possibility of affirming God in the mode of protest and resistance. If faith is articulated in the way of the faithful fools in Attar's writings, it is very close to what Kant called a *postulate*, "a theoretical proposition, not demonstrable as such, but which is an inseparable result of an unconditional a priori practical law."<sup>29</sup> Such faith helps to transform all talk of God into the mode of demanding, waiting, desiring, insisting, and postulating. In the Qur'an God can use the indicative mood to articulate divine mercy and love. But we are not able—or at least morally speaking not allowed—to respond to this love in faith and confidence without showing the oppressed face of the world

to God. Therefore, all affirmative and theoretical talk about God has to be articulated in the mode of demand and hope.

Through this shift within speech about God, it becomes clear that faith does not ideologically justify the suffering of other people but is a way of remaining in solidarity with the oppressed. If a protest atheist like Ivan Karamazov does not accept the possibility of recompensation for the tortured child, then, by implication, he must also give up hope for *all* the dead and the oppressed. As only God's love is stronger than death, only belief in God can give hope and ultimate sense to solidarity with tortured and slaughtered people. Thus, the protest of Ivan does not destroy belief in God as long as this belief is articulated as a desire and outcry in solidarity with the oppressed and marginalized people.

From Kermani's perspective, belief in God can thus express protest against suffering rather than justify it ideologically. This reminds me of the expression of Fidèle, a good friend of mine from Rwanda, who lost his whole family in the genocide of 1994 and who adopted numerous orphans in order to help them start a better life. When asked, "How can you still believe in God after all the terror you had to witness in your life?" his response was: "How can I stay human after seeing all those slaughtered people—without faith in God?" God, for him, is his last hope for his own humanity and for a better future. At the same moment, he both accuses the terror of God and persists in asking God to change God's behavior. No defense or theodicy changes his desire for God, who alone can be the response to his agony.

But with all respect to Fidèle and to the pious mystics in the writings of Attar: Why should people continue to blame God and place their hope in God at the same time? Doesn't the attitude Kermani recommends lead to schizophrenia? The mystics in Attar's writings are also called fools. It does not seem to be very rational to argue in this way. So why should one continue to have confidence in God? Why not use protest as a means of getting rid of faith?

## The Beauty of God

Kermani gives his response to the question of why Muslims still surrender their lives to God despite awareness of divine terror in his dissertation on God's beauty.<sup>30</sup> Kermani depicts God as *fascinans et tremendum*: divine terror cannot be seen without divine beauty and vice versa.<sup>31</sup> The

beauty of God attracts people so much that they dedicate their lives to celebrating and responding to this beauty. This terrific beauty and majesty helps them to endure oppression and encourages them to demand that God fulfill the promises given by this very beauty and goodness.

When I first read it in Kermani's dissertation, I found the reconstruction of revelation in aesthetic terms very unexpected and challenging. Here, "aesthetic" has to be understood in the broad meaning of the word *aisthesis* in the writings of Baumgarten and Kant: it stands for all forms of sensual perception.<sup>32</sup> Thus, Kermani wants to show that the Qur'an is much more than a challenge to reason.

Kermani notes that the idea of the Qur'an's aesthetic peculiarity first occurred decades, perhaps even centuries, after the life of Muhammad. Since the tenth century at the latest, one of the most important elements of Muslim belief has been that nobody was ever able to create something as beautiful, good, thrilling, and fascinating as the Qur'an.<sup>33</sup> No other text in history boasts so many witnesses to its unique aesthetic dignity. Let me quote one example from the many reports Kermani cites in his book. It is the story of the conversion of the later caliph Umar:

Originally one of the most dangerous opponents of the young Muslim congregation, Umar was a man of thirty or thirty-five who was endowed with enormous muscular strength and energy, loved gambling, wine, and poetry, and was considered both sentimental and short-tempered. . . . On the day of the events recounted, Umar had originally intended to kill the Prophet, but, just when he wanted to go to him, he learned that his sister Fatima and her husband Said ibn Zayd had embraced Islam. Enraged, he ran to their house. From the street in front of their door, he heard someone reciting the Qur'an to them. Umar stormed into the room. The reciter hid as quickly as he could, while Fatima took the pages of the Qur'an and hid them under her legs.

"What was that murmuring I heard?" Umar shouted at her.

"You didn't hear anything," said Fatima and her husband, trying to calm him.

Umar shouted, "Yes, I did, by God, and I know that you are following Muhammad in his religion!"

He wanted to attack his brother-in-law, but Fatima threw herself between them so that Umar unintentionally struck her a violent blow.

"Yes, we have converted to Islam, and we believe in God and His Messenger—so do what you want," Fatima and Said cried.

Umar already regretted his behavior; and the blood on his sister's face moved his heart. In a gentle voice, he asked her for the scripture. After Fatima had made him promise to return the manuscript undamaged and had also persuaded him to perform an ablution, since an unclean person must not touch the Qur'an, she handed it to him. Umar began to recite the sura *Ta Ha* (No. 20). After just a few verses he stopped, and exclaimed,

“How magnificent, how beautiful these words are . . . !”

Once he had read to the end, he immediately went to Muhammad to profess Islam before him.<sup>34</sup>

In this story of conversion, the beauty of the Qur'an transforms Umar from an opponent of Muhammad to his follower, but the story does not exaggerate its beauty so much that all other aspects of his conversion disappear. His sister's courage and openness are witnesses to the Qur'an's beauty and, in light of the fact that he has hurt her, they move him so much that he takes the Qur'an seriously. Umar can be fascinated by its beauty only because of this sensitivity and attentiveness to the recitation of the Qur'an. Thus, his sister's personal testimony of faith contributes to his conversion; but the aesthetic uniqueness of the Qur'an, which attracts him so much that he does not want to give it up, is the deciding factor.

Kermani impresses upon the reader how intensely God's beauty attracts people through the recitation of the Qur'an—so much that they accept the terror of God as the shadow side of the light, which captivates their life and faith. Moreover, he points out that the “comprehensive shift in norms that the Qur'an caused throughout an enormous geographical territory, encompassing in particular the use of language and the aesthetic norms, is incomparable. As Bernard Lewis once remarked, that norm shift is actually the wondrous thing about the Arab expansion.”<sup>35</sup> For the Arabs, the Qur'an is “a linguistic heaven on earth”; it is the realization of humankind's dream of a perfect language.<sup>36</sup> One part of this kind of reasoning is not only “the Arabs' recognition of the Qur'an as a divine work by its stylistic perfection, but also the fact that the Arabs, the nation of poets par excellence, were the ones who were obliged to admit the poetic miracle: a people who appreciated the art of oratory above everything else, and who could only be persuaded by a miracle of words.”<sup>37</sup>

Thus, in Kermani's approach, the Muslim understanding of revelation depends on a personal-dialogical relationship between God, Muhammad, and the people. God communicates in an aesthetic way

because this is exactly the kind of revelation the people can understand. God, in this approach, does not want blind obedience but the appreciative perception that is the foundation of love. And this love is awakened by the beauty of God. Thus—still in the reconstruction of Kermani—religious perception is aesthetically mediated in Islam “by the hearing of a speech that is called beautiful and makes the listener shiver, gives him gooseflesh, . . . an experience of beauty.”<sup>38</sup> The way of perceiving God’s message in Islam is an aesthetic way of listening.

Muhammad did not receive a written textbook from God but listened to the revelation through the recitation of the archangel Gabriel.<sup>39</sup> Until today the liturgical recitation of the Qur’an for Muslims is the direct speech of God and a confrontation with divine beauty. According to Kermani, “God speaks when the Qur’an is recited. Strictly speaking, we cannot read his word; we can only hear it.”<sup>40</sup> Thus, hearing, not representing, touching, or tasting, resides at the center of liturgy in Islam: “The central ritual is listening to or reciting the divine oration, the *salat*, the ritual prayer performed three to five times daily.”<sup>41</sup> Recitation of the word mediates a perceiving of the proximity of God. Thus, Christians can understand the recitation of the Qur’an as a kind of sacramental act.<sup>42</sup> One must look at such acts, and at the intensity of the relationship of surrender to God, in order to understand why Muslims love God in good times and bad.

For Kermani faith is no blind leap but is grounded in perceptions, and these perceptions are in turn grounded in the beauty and majesty of God, which can be perceived through the recitation of the Qur’an. Kermani allows that reason can be a way to believe in God. Signs and hints for believers are shot through all of history and creation. But to *perceive* God and receive God’s love, one must employ the heart and senses. This *aisthesis* reaches to the life-changing beauty of God, which can fascinate people so much that they dedicate their life to God. However, because one can never perceive the beauty of God without its majesty and terror, there is no easy way to God. One must simultaneously affirm divine beauty and resist the disasters of this world.

## Rebellion and Love

Kermani invites readers to neither unthinking obedience nor an irrational leap of faith. He calls for a faith grounded in religious experiences. Such experiences are highly ambivalent. Religion promotes a sensitivity

for reality that makes it difficult to appreciate life's beauty without seeing its terror. That is why, for Kermani, the beauty and the terror of God cannot be separated from each other. To surrender a life to God in complete awareness of all this ambiguity is only possible through love. Only love for and surrender to God, only fascination and mystical interweavement with divine mystery, can motivate people to believe and to dedicate their life to God. Love can help a person to stay aware of the high ambiguity of reality without losing confidence in God. The peculiar aspect of Attar's attacks against God consists of the fact that he is in love with the person he is attacking: "Only someone who believes in the Highest can throw stones up to heaven. . . . Those whose love exceeds the conventional degree dare to demand the kind of God He Himself revealed to them."<sup>43</sup> Thus, it is precisely through rebellion that people's most intimate moment of belief becomes visible, and it becomes visible as something inseparably linked with love.<sup>44</sup>

For a deeper insight into Kermani's notion of love, one may look to his novels and other literary writings. Many of his novels, short stories, and plays deal with the love between God and humanity. Kermani insists that there is no purely spiritual love, for even mystical love relates to erotic love. He refers to a long tradition in Sufism and in Christian and Jewish mysticism, which understands the relationship between God and humanity as a relationship of lovers.

It is arresting how much Kermani focuses on erotic love in his description of the divine-human relationship. Whereas the modern Christian tradition speaks of a loving God without sexual implications, Kermani quotes many traditional texts with explicit erotic language to describe the relationship between God and God's people. The language of sexualized violence, which is so important in the Bible, and which at the same time is so much neglected and even ignored in modern theology, is especially important to him. He argues that violence and terror are not the absence or opposite of love—as free will theism seems to imply—but that they are inherent in love itself. Kermani shows God as a lover disappointed by failed attempts at courtship. Sometimes Kermani focuses so much on the violence and jealousy of God's affections that it becomes unbearable. To me, his book *Du sollst*, which tells ten short stories, each of which explains one of the ten commandments through a narrative of love and violence between a man and a woman, is the most difficult to bear.<sup>45</sup> In this text, God's jealousy becomes revolting, and the terror of this highly erotic love is unacceptable.

This dynamic becomes even more challenging in Kermani's dramatic productions, which leave the spectator feeling violated by his language and by God's penetrating approach to humanity. The dramas do not permit uninvolved bystanders. In showing how persistently God invites people into love, they show the dark sides of this love. This ambivalence is grounded in the unconditionality of divine love and the unconditionality of the response it demands from humans. Both the completeness of surrender and the divine desire to possess completely manifest in all their ambiguity.<sup>46</sup>

Kermani takes seriously the Christian rhetoric of God's essence as pure love and shows its dark side. As he investigates the enduring power of talk of God as love, he goes to its breaking point by reading it from its hidden and tacit elements. He neither solves the problem of theodicy, nor separates the good God from evil, nor tries to pacify his thinking. He struggles, he wants to debate, he shows desire—in a word: he confronts theology with life.

Although Kermani's theology is deeply rooted in life experiences, he does not simply affirm all aspects of religious experience. His critique of the mysticism of suffering in Shi'a Islam and Christianity, for example, has been highly debated in the German speaking academic world, because many Christians see it as an insulting criticism of the theology of the cross. He articulates these ideas in a short essay, *Why have you forsaken us?*, which was first published in the most important Swiss newspaper in 2009. This critique is an important clarification of some ideas of his book, which could otherwise be read as a mystical transfiguration of suffering.

In contrast to the common understanding of the Qur'an, Kermani does not doubt the historical fact of the crucifixion, but he criticizes the excessive glorification of suffering in some branches of Christianity, visible in movies like Mel Gibson's on the passion of Christ. Inspired by Guido Reni's altar-piece "Crucifixion" from 1637/38 in San Lorenzo in Lucina in Rome, he confronts this glorification of suffering with the following interpretation of the cross:

And now I was sitting before the altar-piece of Guido Reni in the church San Lorenzo in Lucina and I was so much moved by this view—it was so much full of blessings—that I did not want to get up again. It was the first time that I thought: I—not only you—I could believe in the cross. . . . Jesus is not suffering in order to release God as Christian ideology wants

it, but Jesus is blaming God: Not, why have you forsaken me, but why have you forsaken us?<sup>47</sup>

Jesus is not portrayed as the greatest victim and the “supersufferer.” Rather, his humanity and vulnerability invite Kermani to feel solidarity with him. Jesus does not replace<sup>48</sup> humans but empowers them for a relationship with God, with all its ambiguity, in which they will call for justice and recompense for the oppressed and marginalized. Facing Jesus, Kermani becomes aware of the fact that he is not alone in his history of suffering and that the cry of Golgotha is the cry of agony, rebellion, and complaint, not of victory and hope. Hence, he understands Jesus in the tradition of the practical-authentic theodicy he is defending.

Kermani’s point of view clearly excludes certain Christian implications of the cross. Kermani is and stays Muslim, and this is why his attempt to appreciate the cross is so important. His ideas are remarkable because they combine an acknowledgement of basic Christian intuitions with a critique that is highly acceptable for many Christians. It is really a shame that most Christian theologians did not welcome Kermani’s invitation to dialogue but even rejected it as an unacceptable gaffe.<sup>49</sup> For his critics, the most disturbing aspect of Kermani’s intervention seems to be that he, as a Muslim, takes part in the discussion of the interpretation of the cross.<sup>50</sup> When I remember the fanatical reactions to the book on Jesus by Reza Aslan in the United States (although he does not write it as a Muslim), I am afraid that the reaction to Kermani’s suggestion would not be much more encouraging in North America. However, comparative theology thrives amid such interventions, and one can learn a lot from Kermani’s suggestions.

## The Theological Take-Away for Theodicy

Several points can be gained from discussion with Kermani. First of all, Kermani shows that it makes no sense to separate practical from theoretical theodicy. Whereas Christian discussions feature two groups of theologians—those who defend an argumentative approach to the problem of evil like the free will defense and those who defend a practical-authentic theodicy in the tradition of Kant—Kermani provides arguments from both sides of the discussion. On the one hand, he seems to understand all theological statements in the mode of postulates and thus invites a practical-authentic theodicy in the tradition of the

dialogues in the book of Job. On the other hand, he refers to aesthetic religious experiences as the foundation of a theology of revelation, reminiscent of a free will theodicy. Thus, he takes the most important part of the free will defense, which is the focus on the value of love, and he combines it with his practical theodicy.

Second, this combination is possible because Kermani stresses the majesty and ambiguity of God, who is always *tremendum et fascinans*, both terrible and fascinating. Through this operation, love itself becomes an ambiguous phenomenon. God, in this perspective, is not purely good and innocent, but confronts humanity with dark sides of God's essence, which seem to be a result of divine love. From discussions with Kermani, I know that, at the moment, he defends a mystical approach in the tradition of Ibn Arabi, combining Muslim thought with a mysticism that overcomes all duality.

I am not sure whether I can finally accept Kermani's approach to the problem of evil. For me, it is very important that God is purely good and that God's love is always just and redemptive. God's anger—in my interpretation—is always a call for love. To me, God's nature is unambiguous. In the context of the free will defense, I argue that the practical dimension of theodicy consists of postulating this God against the ambiguity of humankind. God's love is the aim of human protest against all humiliation of humankind. In response to Ivan, I insist that he should not give up the child killed by the greyhounds. From my perspective, the cry for escape and recovery for the child is a moral duty out of solidarity with the mother of the child. Thus, the origin of the word "God" is—as Johann Baptist Metz puts it—a cry of humankind, an expression of hope and solidarity with the oppressed, and an act of resistance against despair.<sup>51</sup> In this approach, free will and natural law theodicy can be defended against the protest of Ivan and of protest atheism through understanding every theological utterance as a postulate for justice and recovery. In this approach, everything depends on God's pure goodness, which is both the postulate of practical reason and the content of the defense of God in free will theodicy.

Nonetheless, I have to admit that God's mercy with criminals like Hitler stays a scandal for me, too. Thus, perhaps there is something like ambiguity in the love of God, exactly because of its pureness and unconditionality. How can one defend unconditional love if one faces its consequences on the battlefields of this world? I also have to admit that Kermani's idea of an ambiguous God supports a kind of reading of the

Bible that I sometimes try to avoid. It is true that the jealous love of the biblical God can be disturbing. Thus, Kermani forces me to a closer reading of the Bible and invites me to a different connection of practical and argumentative theodicy. In this connection, the terror of this world is also a part of the terror and mystery of God.

Although Karl Rahner and others in my own tradition have suggested similar ideas,<sup>52</sup> what is so interesting in Kermani's case, and what makes it so difficult to reject his approach, is his aesthetic mode of expression. It is very compelling that Kermani conveys important aspects of his theology in his novels, poems, and plays. Literature has the capacity to express an aesthetic approach to revelation and the problem of evil with greater clarity and persuasive force than academic theology ordinarily can.

The encounter with God as a solution to the problem of evil at the end of the book of Job (42:5) is so convincing because it is told in narrative form. When I had to explain the book of Job in a sermon, I myself used the means of a drama to perform the explanation. In a dramatic context, it is so much easier to see that the solution to the problem of evil is the presence of God rather than a theological theory. This makes understandable why, especially in the context of the problem of evil, the Muslim tradition insists on repeating the sentences of the Qur'an. Just as the recitation of Qur'an is nothing other than the presence of divine love in all its beauty and ambiguity, Kermani bears witness to this kind of response to the problem of evil in his own writings. In his novels and plays, he stresses the ambiguity of God, which is sometimes forgotten in theology, and through this he tries to reintroduce the terror and the beauty of God in theological discourse. Although I cannot follow him to the mystical, non-dual conclusion of this approach, my ongoing struggle with its implications is a good example of how fruitful the comparative approach can be for systematic reasoning.

## Notes

1. See Klaus von Stosch, "Wittgensteinian Fideism?" in *The Contemplative Spirit: D. Z. Phillips on Religion and the Limits of Philosophy*, ed. Ingolf U. Dalferth and Hartmut von Sass (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 115–34.
2. "Working by examples also has the advantage of making it clear that I am not attempting a general theory about theology and religion nor about Christianity and Hinduism in order to explain everything, all at once." Francis X. Clooney, *Hindu God, Christian God: How Reason Helps to Break Down the Boundaries between Religions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 14.

3. Clooney talks about a "careful consideration of some details of a few particular cases" and requires that every criticism of his statements be illustrated with examples (*Hindu God, Christian God*, 15). Clooney's criticism of Dupuis's strongly apriorically arranged criticism of religion is symptomatic (cf. *Hindu God, Christian God*, 23).
4. For further explanations, see Klaus von Stosch, "Comparative Theology as Challenge for the Theology of the 21st Century," in *Religious Inquiries* 1, no. 2 (2012): 5–26; and Klaus von Stosch, *Komparative Theologie als Wegweiser in der Welt der Religionen* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2012), 193–215.
5. As an introduction to the problem of theodicy, see Klaus von Stosch, *Theodizee* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2013).
6. Cf. Kermani's autobiographical portrayals in Navid Kermani, *Wer ist Wir? Deutschland und seine Muslime* (München: C. H. Beck, 2009), 133.
7. In one of his essays, Kermani describes prayer as an experience with something strange because German society is not accustomed to praying people. On the one hand, this leads to a great solidarity among those who pray; on the other hand, praying becomes something demonstrative that does not befit prayer (Navid Kermani, *Beten heute*, March 11, 2008). This act of displaying one's piety in public is criticized by Jesus (see Mt 6:5), and it is an aspect of public religiosity that has always been a source of suspicion for me.
8. If I wanted to examine all theological writings of Kermani, I would have to refer to his detailed discussion of Abu Zayd, *Offenbarung als Kommunikation: Das Konzept wahy in Nasr Hamid Abu Zayds Mafhum an-nass* (Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang, 1996); and Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid, *Ein Leben mit dem Islam. Aus dem Arabischen von Chérifa Magdi. Erzählt von Navid Kermani* (Freiburg: Herder/Spektrum, 1999), which, however, are not as relevant for the problem of evil.
9. Armin Kreiner, *Gott im Leid. Zur Stichhaltigkeit der Theodizee-Argumente* (Freiburg-Basel-Wien: Herder, 1997), 168.
10. William Hasker, *The Triumph of God Over Evil: Theodicy for a World of Suffering* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 138.
11. Hasker, *The Triumph of God Over Evil*, 138.
12. Hasker, *The Triumph of God Over Evil*, 140.
13. Cf. Hasker, *The Triumph of God Over Evil*, 150 and 155; and Robert Kane, *The Significance of Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996). The notion of "libertarian" is used here in the philosophical sense of believing in free will, not in a political sense.
14. Hasker, *The Triumph of God Over Evil*, 164.
15. William Hasker, "A Philosophical Perspective," in *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding Of God*, ed. Clark Pinnock et al. (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 151.
16. William Hasker, "An Adequate God," in *Searching for an Adequate God: A Dialogue Between Process and Free Will Theists*, ed. John B. Cobb and Clark H. Pinnock (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2000), 215–45, 237.
17. William Hasker, "On Regretting the Evils of This World," in *The Problem of Evil: Selected Readings*, ed. Michael L. Peterson (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 164.

18. See von Stosch, *Theodizee*.
19. Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, ed. William Benton (Chicago: *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 1952), 125.
20. Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 126.
21. Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 126.
22. Cf. Karl-Heinz Menke, "Der Gott, der jetzt schon Zukunft schenkt. Plädoyer für eine christologische Theodizee," in *Mit Gott streiten. Neue Zugänge zum Theodizee-Problem*, ed. Harald Wagner (Freiburg-Basel-Wien: Herder, 1998), 169.
23. Cf. Regina Ammicht-Quinn, *Von Lissabon bis Auschwitz: Zum Paradigmenwechsel in der Theodizeefrage* (Fribourg-Freiburg: Universitätsverlag, 1992), 43; and Johann Baptist Metz, "Theologie als Theodizee?" in *Theodizee—Gott vor Gericht?* ed. W. Oelmüller et al. (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1990), 103–18.
24. Navid Kermani, *The Terror of God: Attar, Job and the Metaphysical Revolt* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), 163.
25. Kermani, *The Terror of God*, 129.
26. Kermani, *The Terror of God*, 129.
27. "He has made faith bitter for me today, what will He do to me tomorrow?" (Kermani, *The Terror of God*, 139); "In *The Book of Suffering* it is the fools, the crazy people, the idiots, who call out loudly what most believers hardly dare to think: that God has evil intentions. A fool is asked if he knows God. 'How could I not know him? He is the one who cast me into misery'" (141).
28. Kermani, *The Terror of God*, 167.
29. Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*, ed. K. Vorländer (Hamburg: Meiner, 1990), A 220.
30. Cf. Navid Kermani, *Gott ist schön: Das ästhetische Erleben des Koran* (München: C. H. Beck, 1999). In the references that follow, I follow the English version: Navid Kermani, *God Is Beautiful: The Aesthetic Experience of the Quran*, trans. Tony Crawford (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2015).
31. Cf. Rudolf Otto, *Das Heilige* (München: C. H. Beck, 1917).
32. Cf. Navid Kermani, "Appelliert Gott an den Verstand? Eine Randbemerkung zum koranischen Begriff *aql* und seiner Paretschen Übersetzung," in *Encounters of Words and Texts: Intercultural Studies in Honor of Stefan Wild*, ed. Lutz Edzard and Christian Szyska (Hildesheim-Zürich-New York: Georg Olms, 1997), 43–66.
33. Cf. Kermani, *God Is Beautiful*, 7, 49.
34. Kermani, *God Is Beautiful*, 17.
35. Kermani, *God Is Beautiful*, 83.
36. Kermani, *God Is Beautiful*, 129.
37. Kermani, *God Is Beautiful*, 7.
38. Kermani, *God Is Beautiful*, 10.
39. Cf. Kermani, *God Is Beautiful*, 137.
40. Kermani, *God Is Beautiful*, 134.
41. Kermani, *God Is Beautiful*, 171.
42. Cf. Kermani, *God Is Beautiful*, 171–84.
43. Kermani, *The Terror of God*, 134, 167.
44. Cf. Kermani, *The Terror of God*, 165.

45. Navid Kermani, *Du sollst. Erzählungen* (Zürich: Ammann Verlag, 2005); cf. as a typical Muslim reaction, Hamideh Mohagheghi, "Der 'Islam' in Navid Kermanis literarischen Schriften," in *Islam in der deutschen und türkischen Literatur*, ed. Michael Hofmann and Klaus von Stosch (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2012), 259–66.
46. Cf. Friedrich Nietzsche, "Die Liebe zu Einem ist eine Barbarei: denn sie wird auf Unkosten aller Übrigen ausgeübt. Auch die Liebe zu Gott." "Jenseits von Gut und Böse," in *Friedrich Nietzsche Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe V.*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1993), 86.
47. Navid Kermani, "Bildansichten: Warum hast du uns verlassen?" in *Neue Züricher Zeitung*, March 14, 2009.
48. In German, the distinction between *Stellvertretung* and *Ersetzung* is decisive here; cf. Karl-Heinz Menke, *Stellvertretung. Schlüsselbegriff christlichen Lebens und theologische Grundkategorie* (Freiburg: Einsiedeln, 1991).
49. Cf. Jan Heiner Tück, "Religionskulturelle Grenzüberschreitung. Navid Kermani und das Kreuz. Nachtrag zu einer Kontroverse," in *IkaZ* 38 (2009), 220–33. In German he speaks of a "religionskulturelle Entgleisung."
50. See, for example, Tück, "Religionskulturelle Grenzüberschreitung," 225ff.
51. Cf. J. B. Metz, *Theologie als Theodizee?* 104.
52. Cf. Karl Rahner, "Warum läßt Gott uns leiden?" in *Schriften zur Theologie XIV* (Zürich: Einsiedeln, 1980), 450–66.