

The Mystery of Evil and the Hiddenness of God: A Comparative Exegesis of Mystery in Christian Theodicy

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Abstract. *Mysterium iniquitatis*, the “mystery of evil,” constitutes the unresolved theological, philosophical, and pastoral debates over the pervasion of evil and suffering that contradicts a world under the providence of the omnipotent, omniscient, and benevolent God of Christianity. At the same time, the idea of mystery not only characterizes the conundrum of evil but also the hiddenness of God that formulates the relationship between creature, creator, and the pervasion of suffering that spans Christian scriptural and theological thought. The paper aims to construct a comparative exegesis of three works concerned with the meaning and significance of mystery in Christian theodical thought. Explicating the Grand Inquisitor from Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*, the paper begins with highlighting a cynical view of mystery as a tool for the authority of liturgical institutions that ultimately offers no pastoral consolation within the framework of Christian theology. Then, drawing on Karen Kilby’s critique of Post-Enlightenment theodicy and its shortcoming in understanding the creator and Gustav Gutiérrez’s idea of divine love and gratuitousness, I propose understanding mystery as a destabilizing opening in the practice of theodicy that constellates ways to engage theologically with the mystery of the divine and translating it into an ethical understanding of, instead of a justification for, the pervasion of evil and injustice.

In Pope John Paul II’s address on the World Day of Peace in 2002, he used the term *mysterium iniquitatis* to describe the evil that the Church and the world must fight against (John Paul II, 2002). Translating to the “mystery of evil,” the term constitutes the unresolved theological, philosophical, and pastoral debates over the pervasion of evil and suffering that contradicts a world under the providence of the omnipotent, omniscient, and benevolent God of Christianity. The idea of the mystery of evil and the mystery of God are present in many theological and literary expositions of the place of suffering in the relationship between God and the world. However, though broad and enigmatic in itself, the idea of mystery is potentially reductive in its essentialization of evil and the task of theodicy toward an expedient explanation that eschews the presence and minimizes the effects of evil; for the pervasion of evil is not only a theological paradox but a question of injustice. Grappling with the mystery of evil, a variety of

literature and theological works propounds differing evaluations of the idea of mystery as demarcating the apparently unreconciliatory relationship between the hiddenness of God and the human world. While Ivan Karamazov in Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* cynically views mystery as a tool for the authority of liturgical institutions that ultimately offers no consolation within the framework of Christianity, Karen Kilby and Gustavo Gutiérrez understand mystery as a destabilizing opening that constellates ways to engage theologically with the divine and ethically with the pervasion of evil and injustice.

In Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*, Ivan Karamazov’s story of the Grand Inquisitor both reveals the inherent paradox that characterizes Christian faith in the face of pervasive suffering and the arbitrary authority of mystery as a doctrine of worship. In Ivan’s story, the Grand Inquisitor indicts Christ for granting humans the freedom to

choose to worship God with an unwavering faith out of nothing but free will. The Inquisitor deems that the demand for free will is fundamentally at odds with the inherently human need for a universal and constant object for worship when it denies an authoritative justification for faith and a reason to believe in the face of spiritual doubt. As the Inquisitor explains, when Christ, tempted by the devil, refused to turn stone into bread to fulfill hunger, to cast Himself down from a tower to reveal the miraculous power of God, and to reign on earth the universal kingdom of the world, He refused to have “mankind [...] run after [Him] like a flock of sheep” by providing them the “earthly bread” of physical comfort and spiritual security (Dostoevsky, 1880, p. 262). Instead, He rejected the “earthly bread” for humans in order to uphold the “heavenly bread” of freedom and salvation. Christ, for the sake of human freedom, denied to satisfy “the universal [...] craving of humanity [...] to find someone to worship” by denying an immediate certainty of salvation, something “to worship that is beyond dispute” when human reality is fraught with suffering and doubt towards an elusive salvation and a silent God (Dostoevsky, 1880, p. 263). The Inquisitor puts forth a powerful criticism of the hiddenness of God in the wake of deprivation and the irreconciliation between suffering with the eschatological promise of salvation when free will paradoxically creates doubt and supplants the certainty of faith. When Christ chose “all that is exceptional, vague, and enigmatic,” he chose things that are beyond the scope of man’s faith, leaving humans in the state of confusion and suffering with the “many cares and unanswerable problems” because humans cannot “in the moments of their deepest, most agonizing spiritual difficulties [...] cling only to the free verdict of the heart” (Dostoevsky, 1880, p. 264).

The Inquisitor’s solution to the inefficacy of the heavenly bread is for the Church to reclaim the forces of “miracle, mystery, and authority” in order to provide for humans the certain and unwavering object of faith and to free them from the freedom of having to *choose* to believe (Dostoevsky, 1880, p. 264). As the Inquisitor describes, the Church claims the miracle of turning stone into bread when in reality they “take the bread made by [the believers’] hands from them” and “give it to them without any miracle” (Dostoevsky, 1880, p. 268). The Church, too,

“proclaim[s] [them]selves sole rulers of the earth,” by which they become the subject of worship, the means to subdue people’s conscience, and to create the illusion for a universal object of worship and the community of worship longed by all humans (Dostoevsky, 1880, p. 267). With regards to mystery, the Inquisitor acknowledges that the paradox of theodicy is indeed a mystery: why God gave the gifts of freedom and demanded a freely chosen faith when only very few can bear the “terrible gifts” and *choose* to believe in the face of suffering (Dostoevsky, 1880, p. 266). Then, he claims that “we too have a right to preach a mystery, and to teach them that it’s not the free judgment of their hearts, not love that matters, but a mystery which they must follow *blindly*, even against their conscience [emphases added]” (Dostoevsky, 1880, p. 266). Instead of embracing the mystery and hiddenness of God in the face of evil and suffering, the Inquisitor turns mystery itself into a justified object of worship to comfort the weakness of humanity that longs for consistency and justification. The illusion of mystery is particularly enslaving: The Inquisitor describes the confused and miserable human without guidance from Christ or the Church as a “beast [crawling] to us and lick[ing] our feet [...]” The Church, then, “shall sit upon the beast and raise the cup, and on it will be written, ‘Mystery’” (Dostoevsky, 1880, p. 267). According to the Inquisitor, to worship mystery and authority is the only way that humans could attain peace and happiness in the wake of the hiddenness of God and the paradox between suffering and providence. The Inquisitor’s description of mystery serves as a reminder of the potentially reductionist and simplistic theodicy that places mystery at the core of an explanation of evil and suffering and the dangers of worshipping simplistically and blindly. At the same time, he also reveals that divine hiddenness, precisely what he indicts, is central to understanding the relationship between creatures and the Creator in the Christian imagination.

Karen Kilby also grapples with the conundrum of mystery that both characterizes the unrationalizable pervasion of evil and the inconceivability of the divine in her article “Evil and the Limits of Theology.” She suggests that the “cliché” that “evil is mysterious” could in fact help construct the

underlying principles that should ground productive theodical discourses (Kilby, 2003, p. 26). For Kilby, there is something fundamentally limiting about the practice of theodicy itself, especially in the Post-Enlightenment era. The first problem is how the philosophy of religion often characterizes God as “an abstract entity with a number of characteristics” — namely His omnipotence, omniscience, and benevolence — and focuses on the logical-philosophical conundrum that these characteristics present in the wake of the pervasion of suffering and evil (Kilby, 2003, p. 14). The result of this, for Kilby, is a “wrong kind of relationship with evil” where the ultimate goal of theodicy is to reach a reconciliation with the existence of evil (Kilby, 2003, p. 15). Kilby names a number of theodical ideas that are grounded in this implicit goal: the idea that there is a greater, universal good that cannot be achieved without and thus justifies evil, which falls apart quickly in the face of injustice and the suffering of the innocent (2003, p. 15). Kilby also suggests that as logical and abstract as these kinds of theodicies are, they do not satisfy the moral dimension that is generally sought after in dealing with evil and suffering. She cites Alvin Plantinga, who says explicitly that his theodicy “is not designed for pastoral purposes,” to demonstrate the division between the logical and the ethical agenda of theodicies (Kilby, 2003, p. 15). What results is a detached theodicy that becomes complacent with the state of the world and convinced that “all is really all right with the world as we know it,” or, in any case, is on the right track towards an eschatological end (Kilby, 2003, p. 17). But, as Kilby argues, the theoretical dimensions of these theodicies do not translate into the real world. Easily rebuked by the suffering of the innocent and the injustices of the world, philosophical theodicies ultimately circle back, as the Inquisitor indicts, to the enigmatic hiddenness and silence of God that reveals no solution to the problem of evil.

While Kilby apparently arrives at a similar conclusion as the Inquisitor, who propounds the inability of humans to comprehend the insoluble mysteries of evil and suffering, a problem that human conscience and inherent desire for a consistent object to live for cannot reconcile with, she uses the idea of mystery as an aperture that enables an alternative relationship with evil and with God that displaces the systems of Christian theodicy and human

meaning-making. She suggests that a Christocentric theology potentially allows the questions concerning the mystery of evil and the hiddenness of God to remain askable without supplying definitive answers — such as “how have things got to such a state where the cross is necessary if Christ is the sovereign creator in the first place?” (Kilby, 2003, p. 23). The first step towards an alternative understanding of evil is therefore to acknowledge that even according to the dogmatism of the scripture, these questions “ought to be acknowledged as completely legitimate and as utterly unanswerable” (Kilby, 2003, p. 24). However, the insolubility of the mystery of evil should not signify an end to the failure of theodicy and simply fill in the gaps that theodicy cannot address; for mystery then becomes a tool of ideological ease that either nihilistically views the world as a meaningless and mysterious chaos or, as used by the Inquisitor, subjugates humans into blindly following an expedient solution to the dissonances in their systems of meaning-making.

Kilby therefore understands mystery as a mechanism that dissolves the rigid rationality and retributive ordering of justice and evil in perceiving the world and God’s action. In particular, she imagines theodicies where the explanations and justifications no longer occupy the central stage, writing that indeed “suffering can bring growth, sin is an occasion to turn back to God’s forgiveness with trust, dependence, and gratitude [...] but we cannot turn these things into explanations” (Kilby, 2003, p. 26). It is crucial to recognize that this mysterious good that potentially co-exists with evil and suffering does not relate to evil and suffering in a causal or explanatory relationship. In other words, even if good potentially comes from evil and suffering, it is not a justification that conceals the fact that evil is evil, it “bring[s] about degradation and degeneration,” and perhaps more sins (Kilby, 2003, p. 26). For this reason, the theodicy of a greater good founded upon the duality of good from bad, just from unjust, neither recognizes the complexity of evil and suffering nor the good that potentially proceeds. Kilby thus reveals how the theodicies aimed at justifying and untangling a conundrum in fact simplify and solidify the conundrum by perpetuating a dualistic relationship between evil and good as causal and explanatory. Instead, in the same way that goodness and growth undeni-

ably co-exist with evil and suffering, the “goodness, faithfulness, and creative power of God” co-exist with the “brokenness of creation” (Kilby, 2003, p. 26). The paradoxical co-existence of good and evil that characterizes the world therefore demands that “systemic theology” be “systemically incoherent” and “dissonant,” where a recognition of limitation and weakness in the face of a mystery produces a deeper understand of evil and a deeper awareness of the mystery of God (Kilby, 2003, p. 26). By framing evil as essentially mysterious, Kilby neither reduces evil into an incomprehensible object not worthy of further examination nor claims the authority of mystery as the final destination of faith like the Grand Inquisitor. Instead, mystery should be recognized as a feature of the relationship between God and humans as much as post-Enlightenment thinking tends to abstract theological ideas with syllogism and detach it from the individual experience.

Furthermore, Kilby’s mystery involves a productive use of inconceivability to characterize the intimacy between individuals and God. She suggests that in the free will defense as a theodical tool (that it is humans who choose to sin regardless of the beneficence of God), there is an assumed competition between the free agency of humans and the free agency of God. There is the assumption that the full exercising of human freedom requires the non-intervention of God. Kilby describes this relationship as a “contrastive approach” that emphasizes the contrasting dualities of being free and being determined (Kilby, 2003, p. 18). She then provides the alternative that “the more God, as creator, acts, the more fully we come into being, and that the more God is involved with us the freer we are” (Kilby, 2003, p. 18). The principle that lies behind Kilby’s alternative is the fact that God’s freedom and agency as the Creator does not necessarily interfere with the freedom of God’s creatures, and the conception of God’s agency as in competition against human agency is to conflate the Creator with a creature. Through pointing out this fallacy, Kilby again demonstrates how mystery characterizes the relationship between creature and Creator where the creature cannot fully conceive of the Creator’s agency and presence and let alone the Creator’s plans for His created world. In the same way that the good and the bad are not dualistic categories that justify each other, neither should

the agency of God justify the agency of humans, nor should the actions of humans justify the actions of God. In this light, Kilby also demonstrates how the focus on the duality between human freedom and divine freedom “can very easily fall into [the danger] of distancing God from much that we in fact deem most valuable and hold in greatest respect in our world,” especially things that coexist with evil and suffering, such as love, grace, and mercy, which God must also be involved in (Kilby, 2003, p. 18).

Similar to Kilby’s argument that there is a certain mystery that characterizes the relationship between the creature and the Creator, and that there is the co-existence of human agency and freedom with God’s agency, Gustavo Gutiérrez explicates these concepts through the Book of Job. In his interpretation of God’s reply to Job’s indignation and plea to communicate, Gutiérrez suggests that what is revealed to Job is the absolute freedom and gratuitousness that governs all of God’s actions and must ground the discussion of theodicy (Gutiérrez, 1986, p. 16). For this reason, God’s opening line— “Who is this, obscuring my intentions with his ignorant words?” (Job 38:2)— not only rebukes Job’s doubt in God’s just plan for the world but also Job’s friends’ attempt at justifying Job’s suffering through searching for some fault of Job’s that must have directly caused God’s punishment. God’s speech reveals that there indeed is a plan of God, “but it is not one that the human mind can grasp so as to make calculations based on it and foresee divine action” (Gutiérrez, 1986, p. 73). God’s plan, therefore, is in a certain way mysterious and inconceivable (and perhaps should not be referred to as a ‘plan’ because of the word’s connotation to categorizing and ordering) but nevertheless stands justified in the framework of God’s gratuitousness and God as the Creator. In this light, Ivan Karamazov’s Inquisitor appears to be an extreme version of Job’s friends, who, unable to understand God’s plan and unable to answer Job’s doubts, tries to justify divine action. Like the Inquisitor, they “seek to domesticate God, subject God to their will, decide whom God is to favor, and thus attempt to win a privileged place for themselves in human society” (Gutiérrez, 1986, p. 77). Similarly, the Inquisitor of Ivan’s story locks Christ up as a prisoner, which both alludes to the Inquisitor’s enslaving and tyrannical manipulation of faith but also how his theology tries to confine God

and God's free and gratuitous love in his own theological concepts that offer easy and foreseeable explanations. More importantly, Gutiérrez notes how mystery is essential to the human-God relationship and towards an objective understanding of God. He writes:

[...] the logic at work in a knowledge that claims to know everything about the Lord, to account fully for the Lord's actions, and to foresee how the Lord will intervene, leads in the final analysis to the replacement of God with self and to the usurpation of God's place. It leads, in other words, to the denial of God (Gutiérrez, 1986, p. 79).

For this reason, a theodicy based on fully knowing and justifying God, like Kilby suggests, is trapped in its own conundrum and ultimately works against itself because it produces a logic that denies God as a Creator and as the divine who is beyond conceivability. Furthermore, since God should not be defined by the conceivable human definitions of omnipotence, omniscience, and benevolence, but by the processes and acts of gratuitousness and love, Gutiérrez points out, crucially, that God's greatness "is to be identified less with power than with freedom and gratuitous love— and with tenderness" (Gutiérrez, 1986, pp. 68-9). In other words, God is inconceivably powerful and mysterious, and, precisely for this reason, there is ultimately no solution to trying to reconcile the evils and sufferings of the world with any definitions or actions of God. Defying the justifications that seek a causality between God and suffering, God essentially cannot be characterized by the logic of causality and therefore indeed not by the conundrum of evil that tries to reconcile God with it. To return to Kilby's argument, mystery is not the final solution of theodicy where theodacists recognize their inability to grasp God, but the rationale that governs the human-God relationship and ought to inform human's approach to God.

Arguably, the problem of evil still remains because, as the Inquisitor suggests, the hiddenness of God and the mystery of evil do not ease the human need to find a definitive object of faith. For Gutiérrez, however, to understand God through mystery, freedom, and gratuitousness already constitutes the

ethics of grappling with evil and with a hidden God. As he points out, God does not impose divine judgment because of God's respect for His created beings and their freedom (Gutiérrez, 1986, p. 78). In the same way that God does not create animals so that they may be domesticated by humans, every single creation is equal and respectable in the eyes of God. Therefore, even though Gutiérrez says that "God's power is limited by human freedom," it is also important to recognize that God self-imposes the limit, and He is equally free from being defined by and therefore imposing justice according to certain moral codes. As a result, God's love and gratuitousness is equally given to those who are innocent like Job and those who have committed evil or are about to commit evil; good things and bad things happen to good and bad people equally and mysteriously, and the creatures of God commit crimes without retribution, and without justification, in an utterly mysterious way.

Gutiérrez therefore proposes that humans should also adopt love and gratuitousness in their interaction with the world and with God. He writes: "the reason for believing 'for nothing' [...] is the free and gratuitous initiative taken by divine love" (Gutiérrez, 1986, pp. 70-71). Indeed, the Inquisitor sees this as too difficult of a demand for humans to both love God and practice divine mercy towards evil-doers, and he cites it as evidence for God's pride for the very few who can master the gratuitousness of love and disinterest towards the rest. However, to return to Kilby's argument, it is the intimate and symbiotic workings of human freedom and God's freedom that could counter the problem of evil. By respecting the freedom of humans, God is, in fact, granting the power of mystery. In the same way that God's free gratuitousness and love enables divine mercy, His respect for human freedom enables humans to also practice freely the gratuitousness and love even if they ought to remain mysterious in the face of causality and retributive justice. Just as Kilby has argued that dissonance and irrationality ought to play a part in theodicies, it is the dissonance brought by God's mystery that the human being is able to practice divine love and mercy. The inherent irrationality and mystery of mercy is clearly articulated by Bryan Stevenson in his book *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*: "Mercy is just when it is rooted

in hopefulness and freely given. Mercy is most empowering, liberating, and transformative when it is directed at the undeserving. The people who haven't earned it, who haven't even sought it, are the most meaningful recipients of our compassion" (Stevenson, 2014, p. 294). In the same way that some good may arise mysteriously, not causally, from suffering, humans receive the freedom to practice mercy and love towards the doers of evil and the flaws in creation through an irrational and mysterious process if indeed they correctly use mystery as a principal to understand God and His created world. Therefore, the agencies of humans and God are not competitive but work intimately because humans are most free to understand, forgive, and to collaborate when they recognize the mystery of God and occupy "the place that is properly [theirs] as human being[s] and believers[s]" (Gutiérrez, 1986, p. 77). As Gutiérrez writes, "human beings [...] are great enough for God, the almighty, to stop at the threshold of their freedom and ask for their collaboration in the building of the world and in its just governance"—a governance not based on a rigid and retributive justice that seeks to confine God, the good, and the evil, but ultimately on God's love and gratuitousness.

The paper began with a summary of Ivan Karamazov's story of the Grand Inquisitor and the use of mystery in the Inquisitor's theodical approach as the object of worship used by the Church to ease spiritual anxiety. Karen Kilby, on the other hand, identifies the limiting nature of post-Enlightenment theodicy and the free will defense rooted in their fixity with duality and syllogism that sought to justify evil through causality and place God within the framework of human logic. Finally, drawing on Gustavo Gutiérrez's interpretation of Job and synthesizing God's mystery and His gratuitousness, I observed how God essentially defies 'the problem of evil' and transforms the conundrum into an understanding of God's mysterious gratuitousness and freedom that exceeds causality and retribution. What is necessary, therefore, is the role that mystery must play in the human-God relationship because it is a crucial theodical vehicle that allows humans to understand God's gratuitousness and love that formulate His intimate investment in the freedom of His creatures. It is by embodying God's mystery through the freedom and gratuitousness granted by the divine that humans

may productively respond to and engage with the pervasion of evil at the human level.

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