

**Virág Szentandrás: Muslims, Jews and Christians Asking God in Suffering (an external examiner's review of a Master's thesis submitted at the PTF of Charles University, Prague)**

The thesis entitled "Muslims, Jews and Christians Asking God in Suffering" was submitted by Ms Virág Szentandrás at the Department of Religious Studies at the Protestant Theological Faculty of Charles University in Prague in 2016 as part of the requirements towards her Master's degree in Evangelical (Protestant) Theology. The thesis has 94 pages, including a bibliography (divided into literature and web resources). It consists of all the requisites of a Master's thesis, such as a declaration, bibliographic citations, summaries and keywords both in English and Czech, and acknowledgments. The thesis is written in English.

The thesis is divided into an introduction, three main chapters discussing views on evil and suffering in Islam, Judaism, and Christianity respectively, and some concluding reflections. Each of the three main chapters offers an overview and reflection on central themes and positions on the topic from the perspective of a respective faith tradition as well as a more in-depth analysis of the issue as elaborated by two major religious thinkers and/or theologians coming from that faith tradition. As for the part with concluding reflections, it provides a discussion on the "unforgettable questions of Job" as well as some responses to the challenge of evil and suffering.

In the introduction Ms Szentandrás describes the purpose of her study as "to give an insight into the widths of the issue [of evil and suffering and responses thereto as found in the three faith traditions under review] and to provide examples of various possible answers of believers when confronted with the reality of evil and suffering" (p. 6). She also clearly positions herself as a Christian theologian (and not necessarily as an "objective" scholar of religion) who is, however, in constant dialog with other faith traditions than her own. Furthermore, she defines theodicy in "a wide sense" as "a question [addressed] to God when confronted with evil and suffering" (p. 8). In addition, she describes her understanding of theology as "a kind of speech to God [...], as an attempt of speech and a human witness to Him, with the belief that He listens and with the humbleness before the unreachable depth" (p. 9).

In the introduction Ms Szentandrás also explains her choice of dialog partners from the three respective traditions, however, without really justifying her decision. These interlocutors include Al-Ghazali and Attar (interpreted through the hermeneutic lenses of Navid Kermani) as representatives of Islam; Hans Jonas and Elie Wiesel as representatives of Judaism; and Jürgen Moltmann and Johann Baptist Metz as representatives of Christianity.

In her discussion of the issue of suffering in Islam Ms Szentandrás concludes that suffering can be alternatively interpreted as testing; punishment and the price for human freedom; a sign of spiritual growth; a task of the community of the faithful; and something which is to be rewarded by God either here and now or in afterlife. Al-Ghazali tries to find a balance between God's goodness and omnipotence, leaving space for the ultimately mysterious nature of the issue which humans are never able to fathom completely. On the contrary, Attar questions both God's goodness and justice, nevertheless holding on to God strongly and confronting Him in lamentation.

The chapter on Judaism brings explanations of suffering as a punishment; a test; atonement; a part of the witness to God; a sign of the coming Messianic reign; and an open question addressed to God. Hans Jonas introduces an image of "God at risk", a God who gives up on His omnipotence in order to make space for human freedom and responsibility. Elie Wiesel emphasizes the hope in God "in spite of everything", saying that it is only possible to talk *to* God, not *about* God in effort to find reasonable explanations of His involvement in the world.

In Christianity Ms Szentandrásí finds interpretations of suffering as a consequence of sin; a part of the imperfect world waiting for its ultimate redemption; participation in the suffering of Christ; a test; something which only has limited duration; and a mystery, an unanswerable question. Jurgen Moltmann reminds us that God suffers with His creation, yet without giving up His omnipotence; however, this omnipotence is to be interpreted eschatologically. Also accenting the eschatological dimension of the question, Johann Baptist Metz argues that we are to never forget the suffering of others. Theodicy remains an ultimately open question.

Ms Szentandrásí masters her discussion very well. She works with a remarkable range of sources (albeit a number of them are cited via different authors) in several languages. I would like to especially appreciate helpful summaries of the main themes and issues at the end of each chapter. Moreover, her approach is critical, enabling her to enter into genuine dialog with her interlocutors.

The final part (concluding remarks) brings a discussion on the relevant themes which appear in the Book of Job. In addition, further important and related issues appear here, such as the question of absurdity vs. meaning in suffering. Even though this chapter is most interesting and very well managed, it seems to me that it does not fill the task of a conclusion ideally. Instead of summarizing the results of research and drawing out possible implications it introduces new material (e.g. Ricoeur on evil). Moreover, the link between this final chapter and the rest of the thesis could have been outlined more explicitly.

The thesis also has some minor imperfections of rather technical/formal nature, such as the inconsistent way of referring to books (italics vs. no italics – e.g. *Book of Suffering* vs. Book of Suffering), occasional use of German names and terms (e.g. Venedig instead of Venice; Offenbarung instead of Revelation; Jes. instead of Isaiah; etc.), and some typos (although it needs to be acknowledged that the language level of the thesis is generally very high).

Despite the aforementioned criticism, I view the present thesis as an excellent piece of academic writing at the Master's level. I recommend accepting the thesis and awarding it with an "A".

#### Questions for discussion:

- 1.) What difference does your own personal positioning (Christian, female, young, living in 21st century post-communist Europe) make on your discussion of the issue?
- 2.) Why is it important to engage with the issue of suffering and evil theologically today? How is it different from the previous theologizing on the issue?
- 3.) What possibilities of interfaith theologizing on the issue do you see today?

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