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Where is God:

A Reflection on Trauma and Theology

Daryl A. Schrock

Graduate School of Psychology

Fuller Theological Seminary

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Terrell Davis, a six year-old African American boy featured in a recent article in Time magazine (Roche, 2000), was found dead in his grandmother's home. She was appointed Terrell's foster mother after the state of Georgia determined that his birth mother was unable to adequately care for him. His back was bruised, he had deep cuts over his right ear, and scars on his forehead. Unhealed, third degree burns were on his feet. Terrell had been kept tied to a banister with leather belts and pantyhose, and was fed only oatmeal and grits. The 6 year-old boy's corpse weighed 29 pounds.

Another example from that article cites two girls who were given to Homer and Beth Griswold. The couple, who lived in Gillette, Wyoming, was a respected "pillar of the community." Beth worked as a psychologist who specialized in identifying sexual abuse survivors. Ironically and tragically, her husband sexually molested the two girls. The girls were returned to their natural parents, and Homer was sent to prison. The father of the two girls responded with confusion: "They take kids away from someone like me who hasn't got an education and money, but they give them to Homer? Now what am I supposed to do for my baby? You know, when she came home, I didn't know how to hold her. I didn't know if, after what she'd been through, she should sit on my lap." (Roche, 2000). Parents of children like these often eventually ask where God was while their children were being hurt, or they may angrily turn in disbelief from a God who could allow these events to happen.

Where is God for the children who suffer abuse? Where is the compassion of God for the mother who has been brutally raped? Where is the love of God for the father who

was paralyzed in combat and is no longer able to support his family? Where is God for the child who survives the earthquake that kills his parents and brothers? Trauma therapists must face the reality of evil in their client's lives. Christian therapists who wish to maintain their spirituality must also address how a loving, personal, and omnipotent God could allow these traumatic events to happen.

Theologians term this problem "Theodicy." The reflections presented in this article represent the author's nascent thoughts about this issue and seek to directly address the experience of trauma survivors and their therapists. Firm conclusions will not be stated, rather these thoughts are the product of the author's struggle to understand these issues. They are presented from within a distinctly Protestant Christian worldview, and reflect a Protestant concept of God.

The pages of the New Testament ring with promises that do not correspond to the experience of many trauma survivors. "Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (NIV, John 8:12); and "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you" (NIV, Hebrews 13:5) are prime examples of such promises. These promises directly contradict the experience of many trauma survivors who may feel that God was absent during their trauma. They may feel that God chose to abandon them when He allowed the traumatic events to occur.

Some modern theologians address this problem by suggesting that the existence of evil demonstrates that God is not omnipotent. A loving and active Creator would be unable to watch these events happening to creatures He loves without intervening. These theologians, while struggling deeply with this issue of evil, would rather limit God's

power than reject his loving concern. They see no alternative: a loving God must intervene in horrible circumstances.

Christian mystics may focus on passages such as Isaiah 55:8-9 that assert “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (NIV). These mystics suggest that a good God does not allow evil to occur without purpose, even if that purpose is not easily discernible to those who experienced the evil. They may further assert that “In all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (NIV, Romans 8:28). While these precepts may be true, they are hardly comforting to those in the midst of healing from a personal traumatic experience.

It seems to this author that although God is omnipotent, when He created human beings with the will to choose for or against Him, He chose to place limits on his power. God appears bound from the human perspective. That God does not stop traumatic events from occurring is partly a sign of the respect that He holds for human free will. Each time he allows humans to make evil choices, He is reaffirming his value for human free will. That God himself, as the incarnate Christ, suffered horrible abuse at the hands of evil men does not glorify suffering as some might assert, but it does suggest that our “high priest” knows the pain of trauma and abandonment (Hebrews 4:15-16). These feelings of abandonment are further echoed by Jesus’ cry on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (NIV, Matthew 27: 46; Mark 15: 34).

God’s respect for human free will offers little comfort for the trauma therapist or the trauma survivor. The concept is bitter and may seem equivalent to neglect if God is held to human standards. The mystics’ concept of God’s ways being unfathomable to

humans is true, though also highly unsatisfying. That God suffered at the hands of his creation, however, insures God's immanence. God himself knows the depth of such pain in a way that only one who has been there may know. This leaves the ultimate, existential questions raised by many trauma survivors unaddressed, but reaffirms that survivors are not alone. Christ's torture, death, and resurrection offer hope for recovery from trauma and a fellow traveler for the journey. Clues to the existential crises may, after all is said and done, be found within the relationships, both human and divine, cultivated in response to the trauma.

References

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