



Evolution, Suffering, Omniscience and the Kenosis of Jesus Christ – Attempts at a Synthesis

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ABSTRACT

At present, an intensive search is underway for a synthesis that satisfactorily explains the existence of evil and suffering against the background of the evolution of living beings and essential attributes of the Christian God. The methodological approach of this paper was to combine fundamental statements of the Christian faith, results of research in modern theological and philosophical publications, and findings of the natural sciences. The first attempt explains suffering and evil in the world in terms of evolution and human free will. The second attempt also takes into account the Angelic Fall and the Adamic Fall. The third attempt adds the following working hypothesis: God the Father is timeless. In contrast, God the Son, as part of his kenosis, subjected himself to time not only during his life as a human being on Earth, but also before and after. Various consequences of this working hypothesis were considered. The contribution of this working hypothesis is that it resolves the conflict between the free will of creatures and the omniscience of God and explains some other theological questions: The incarnation of Jesus Christ as a response to the Fall, the intra-Trinitarian dialogue and the significance of God the Father for creation.

Keywords: Adamic Fall, Christology, Omniscience, Theodicy, Timelessness.

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INTRODUCTION

The topic of theodicy and evolution is currently the subject of intense research – see, for example, Sollereder (2016), Eikrem and Søvik (2018), Lamoureux (2015, 2020), Houck (2020), Casadesús (2023), Roszak et al. (2024), and Roszak and Huzarek (2024). An international scientific project has even explicitly set itself the goal of “Understanding God, Evil, and Evolution” (Roszak et al., 2024). Nevertheless, all the models presented so far have significant shortcomings when it comes to a comprehensive explanation. To give two examples: the power of evil in the world is not sufficiently explained, or the freedom¹ of man comes into irreconcilable conflict with the omniscience of God.

Therefore, in this article, I seek answers to the question of how some essential attributes of the Christian God (e. g. omniscience) together with the evolution of living beings and the existence of evil and suffering can form a meaningful picture. This task is more than challenging as the literature on these topics is so vast that it is not possible to capture and penetrate all the essential contributions and views in this context. Moreover, these are matters that affect every human being existentially, so that any attempt at an answer is inevitably coloured by one’s own personality, life experiences and personal religiosity.

In the first step, I will briefly present some elements from the fields of science, philosophy and theology that are relevant in this context. Here and in the following, I will only be able to touch on many topics and will have to refer to the cited literature for a deeper discussion. The aim of this article is to show the big picture and to dare a far-reaching synthesis that allows new and surprising insights. To achieve this, from the elements presented in the first step, I will build a synthesis in three attempts. The second attempt at a synthesis builds on the first attempt and adds further elements. Similarly, the third attempt at a synthesis builds on the second attempt and adds the last elements that have not yet been considered. The third attempt is even able to consider adequately God’s omniscience and timelessness.

In the third attempt, I put forward the working hypothesis that God the Father is always timeless, while God the Son subjected himself to time long before his incarnation and is still subject to time now, after his ascension. This working hypothesis provides surprising insights into the Trinity and raises interesting questions, which are explored in a separate section. Finally, possible objections and difficulties of the working hypothesis are addressed.

¹Since the term “freedom” is ambiguous and there are numerous different definitions (Breul & Langenfeld, 2017), I would like to point out that here, freedom is understood to mean the possibility to decide for or against someone or something. This definition of the term “freedom” is generally accepted in Western society. It is positively oriented towards active decision-making and not only negatively towards the avoidance of restrictions.

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METHOD

This article tries to create a synthesis from fundamental statements of the Christian faith, the research results of modern natural sciences and current theological and philosophical investigation. Consequently, the methodological approach in this article consists of first analysing and compiling relevant findings of the natural sciences, Christian truths, and the results of modern theological and philosophical publications. The results of this literature review are then used to filter out and condense essential elements for a later synthesis.

After that, the elements obtained in this way are used in an iterative process to build an ever more comprehensive synthesis. The process is complete when all the essential elements have been incorporated without contradiction. This has been achieved here in the third attempt. Finally, the consequences of the synthesis are considered and it is determined where open questions or contradictions arise.

Below is a list of these elements that are relevant for the synthesis we are striving for: First, Quantum physics brings indeterminacy to the universe (Bollini, 2013, pp. 181–182; Ellis, 2019; Vanney, 2015). The future is therefore no longer clearly predictable. This is a first fundamental prerequisite for human freedom (Peters, 2019, pp. 278–280; Stapp, 2017).

Second, The evolution of complex living beings and the death of the individual are inextricably linked (Clark, 1998). Natural selection prevents multicellular living beings from being immortal, because a species of immortal multicellular organisms would quickly reach the limits of its ecological possibilities (Passarge & Horsthemke, 2009, p. 10). In order for a multicellular species to survive and evolve, the individuals of this species must die at some point.

Third, Biological evolution is not goal-oriented (May, 2024c, pp. 146–148). “However, since there are numerous internal and external constraints that limit the scope of what is possible, it often seems as if the process of evolution is directed” (May, 2021b, p. 32). “Increasing intelligence is not the only possible solution to the challenges of natural selection, but it is one possible solution. Therefore, through random mutations and natural selection, intelligent beings can be created without having to adopt any teleology or alignment to a goal” (May, 2021b, p. 33).

Fourth, There are good reasons to assume that God intervened several times in Earth's history to promote the evolution and expansion of intelligent life on Earth. May (2021b, pp. 23–26, 2024c, pp. 135–142) analyses four events in the history of the Earth.

Fifth, With the evolution of living beings, a further dimension of freedom, unpredictability, and uncontrollable dynamic growth emerged in a structure determined by natural laws. This increase in freedom is closely linked to an increase in autonomy (Dalleur, 2015). This all escalated in the emergence of humans through evolution. Humans are the culmination of evolution on our planet because they can decide freely (May, 2021b, p. 34, 2023b, p. 3).

Six, Numerous theologians and philosophers are of the opinion that God could give his creatures maximum freedom only through evolution. Wahlberg (2015) provides an insight into the scientific debate. Wahlberg (2015) attempts to refute this view, but the papers of Eikrem and Søvik (2018) and Søvik (2018) invalidate his arguments. Eikrem and Søvik (2018, p. 433) state: "If the world were created *ex nihilo* it would have been less independent, less self-created, not creative (until now), and not a surprise to God." Consequently, only by way of evolution could God give maximum freedom to his creatures.

Seventh, I follow the view of Plantinga (1977), Kroon (1981) and Choo and Goh (2019) that freedom inevitably includes the possibility of evil. And doing evil produces much suffering. This concept, known as the "free will defense", is also defended by Balci (2022) and Oliveira (2022).

Eighth, The apostle Paul explains in Romans that the goal of all creation is "the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (Rom 8:21). "This will complete the freedom that God has placed in his creation from the beginning" (May, 2023b, p. 5).

Ninth, All Christian churches believe that God first created transcendent beings – see, for example, The Holy See (1997, pp. 328–336, 391–395) for the Catholic Church, Clendenin (2003, pp. 73–75) for the Orthodox Churches and Kuiper (1996) for the Reformed Churches. God gave each of these beings the freedom to choose for or against him. Those transcendent beings who in the so-called "Angelic Fall" decided against God and rebelled against him are the devil and the demons. For Loke (2022), Peckham (2018, pp. 55–86), Covan (2021) and O'Halloran (2015), the Angelic Fall is a real and important event.

Tenth, The Judeo-Christian tradition reports that the first humans lived in paradisiacal freedom in communion with God until the devil seduced them to evil, to disobey God in the "Adamic Fall" (Gen 3:1–24). There is an extensive debate in the relevant literature as to whether the Adamic Fall really took place – see May (2023b, p. 4, 2024b, pp. 24–25). Not only do all Christian churches insist that the Adamic Fall happened – see e.g. The Holy See (1997, p. 390) and Clendenin (2003, p. 187) – but also Suarez (2016), Houck (2020), Green and Morris (2020), Johnson (2020), Macdonald

(2021), Loke (2022), May (2023b, 2024b) and Vanzini (2023) are convinced that the Adamic Fall took place and hold the view that the Adamic Fall and evolution are compatible. May (2024b, p. 28) assumes, “that the fall of man took place around 900,000 years ago – perhaps even in connection with the emergence of *Homo heidelbergensis*”.

Eleventh, A central tenet of Christianity is that Jesus Christ, the second person of God, became human, died on the cross and rose again to redeem us.

The twelfth, Jesus Christ acquired a human body through his incarnation. Even after Jesus’ resurrection, this human body bore the wounds of his crucifixion (Jn 20:25–28; Joest, 2000, p. 136). “This observation signifies that the Son of God coming from ‘timeless’ eternity returns to ‘timeless’ eternity with God the Father with a human body subjected to and marked by time” (May, 2023a, p. 33). “By taking in the human body of Jesus the Trinity has taken in temporality into the very core of the Trinity” (May, 2023a, p. 34).

Thirteenth, Christians believe that God is omnipotent, omniscient and morally perfect. Barrett (2019) and Peckham (2021) provide an overview of the attributes of God.

Fourteenth, In Christian philosophy, the prevailing opinion used to be that God, as the Creator of the universe, is timeless (Mullins, 2016). Nowadays, this is the subject of intense debate. The view that there is a kind of time in God is held by Mullins (2016, 2021) Sydnor (2018), Holland (2012), Russell (2022), Peters (2016) and Everhart (2021). Levering (2004, pp. 89–107), Rogers (2007), Cobreros (2016), Volek (2019) and Page (2024) insist on the timelessness of God. Padgett (2000, 2010, 2011) mediates between the two positions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Synthesis

First attempt: Suffering from the interplay of evolution and freedom

The first attempt explains the suffering in the world from the interplay between evolution and freedom. The first step in the line of reasoning is the well-founded assumption that it is very important to God, the Creator of this universe, that his creatures have the greatest possible freedom so that they can freely decide in favour of or against God and his offer of eternal love. For this reason, our universe is non-deterministic, because quantum physics brings indeterminacy into the universe. It is for this reason that God created humans by means of evolution, as this was the only way he could ensure that humans have the greatest possible degree of freedom.

Precisely because biological evolution is an undirected process, it enables the greatest possible degree of freedom. Although biological evolution is undirected, it serves God’s purposes because one of the expected outcomes of biological evolution is the

emergence of intelligent life (Conway Morris, 2003, 2009, p. 1328; May, 2021b, p. 32, 2024b, pp. 146–149; J. B. Stump, 2020, p. 18). From time to time, God intervened in the evolutionary process to promote the evolution and expansion of intelligent life on Earth (May, 2021b). Since God only intervened from time to time and otherwise allowed life to follow its own laws, these interventions cannot be seen as a significant restriction on the freedom of his creation. They are therefore also not a restriction of human freedom (May, 2023b, p. 3).

Biological evolution inevitably brings with it a great deal of suffering. One example among many is that the biological death of the individual is an important driver of evolution (Clark, 1998; Passarge & Horsthemke, 2009, p. 10). Earthquakes, to take another example, are unavoidable side effects of continental drift.² And this drift of the continents has given evolution many important impulses (Miller, 2001, p. 187). Infectious diseases and parasites are unavoidable products of evolution; for the same evolution that has produced ever more intelligent beings also gives rise to ever new pathogens and parasites (May, 2023b, p. 3; McLeish, 2020, p. 61).

God created the fullness of life and us on the path of evolution to ensure that we humans have the greatest possible degree of freedom. Peckham (2018, pp. 5–6) explains that freedom is the necessary prerequisite for love. In his view, this love is a sufficient moral justification for God allowing the existence of evil. From this perspective, natural disasters, physical suffering, illness and death are not just unavoidable side effects, but necessary instruments of creation through evolution (Ruiz Soler & Núñez de Castro Ignacio, 2017, p. 63; Sollereder, 2016). Under this premise, all the suffering that has occurred in the context of evolution can be accepted as part of God's very good creation (Casadesús, 2023, pp. 123, 128; Gen. 1:31; Lamoureux, 2020; Miller, 2011, p. 90).

Another cause of suffering is that God, through evolution, has given us humans the freedom to choose good or evil. This freedom inevitably includes the possibility of evil (Choo & Goh, 2019; Kroon, 1981; A. C. Plantinga, 1977). Whenever we do not love, do not do good or do not obey God, we do evil and increase the suffering in the world. God is often blamed for not preventing this evil in the world, but if He were to prevent it, we would be like slaves who are only allowed to do what their master allows them to do. True freedom means that you have to live afterwards with the consequences of your own and other people's free decisions. In this context, Choo and Goh (2019) work out that free

² The other types of natural disasters are also causally linked to processes that are necessary or at least beneficial for the evolution of life. Volcanic eruptions, like earthquakes, are unavoidable consequences of continental drift. Storms, floods and forest fires are linked to the atmosphere, the water cycle and the seasons. The atmosphere and water are essential for life. The changing seasons provide important stimuli for evolution. At least one meteorite impact was important for the evolution of intelligent life on Earth – for details, see May (2021b, 2024c, pp. 137–138).

will is instrumentally valuable as it gives created agents ultimate responsibility with regards to morally significant acts.

All this suffering, both the suffering associated with creation through evolution as well as the suffering produced by our evil deeds, will end when the whole of creation reaches its goal, “the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (Rom 8:21) (May, 2021a, pp. 239–243, 2023b, pp. 5–6). For us humans, the goal is eternal communion with God, but only those who have chosen the good (and thus God) in their biological lives will enter into this communion. Whatever evil is still in them will be cleansed beforehand in purgatory (The Holy See, 2007, pp. 45–47). Therefore, in eternal communion with God, in “heaven”, there is no more evil.

Second attempt: The influence of the Fall

The line of reasoning presented above explains the suffering through the interplay of evolution and freedom. Its explanation does not require the Angelic Fall or the Adamic Fall. Comparable considerations can be found in various authors – see, for example, Lamoureux (2015, 2020).

At first glance, the concept presented above seems conclusive and convincing. But then justified doubts arise: The Bible describes the world created by God as “very good” (Gen 1:31). Nevertheless, evil has great power in this world. Paul describes this as follows: “For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do” (Rom 7:19). Furthermore, in Jesus Christ, God became man and died on the cross. Why did God take such dramatic steps?

The whole thing makes a lot of sense if we accept that the Judeo-Christian traditions of the Angelic Fall and the Adamic Fall refer to events that really happened, and if we accept that the devil really does exist. Jesus mentions him several times in the New Testament (Sayés, 2005, pp. 92–95). The devil is a fallen angel, a transcendent intelligent being who was created good by God but has decided against God (Clendenin, 2003, pp. 74–75; Covan, 2021; Kuiper, 1996, p. 226; Loke, 2022; O’Halloran, 2015; Peckham, 2018, pp. 55–86; The Holy See, 1997, pp. 391–395, 2851–2852). The devil hates God and therefore wants to enslave and destroy humanity as well as all of creation.

The most plausible explanation for why evil is so widespread and so powerful in the world is that the Adamic Fall really happened. Van Inwagen (2006, pp. 84–94) and Sanguineti (2023) also support this view. If we consider the Angelic Fall and the Adamic Fall, we realise that there are three main causes of suffering: 1) Natural suffering, which is related to evolution and the imperfection of this world (The Holy See, 1997, 310); 2) The suffering caused by people abusing their freedom and doing evil; 3) The suffering that arises because transcendent beings have abused their freedom and turned against God. Since the Adamic Fall, these transcendent beings are seducing people into evil in order to enslave and destroy them.

The incarnation of God in Jesus Christ is the answer to all causes of suffering, but especially to the third cause of suffering. Christianity teaches that the final and comprehensive liberation of man is the liberation from the slavery of sin and death. This liberation took place through the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. Through the disobedience of some angels, evil entered the world (Loke, 2022; O'Halloran, 2015; Peckham, 2018) and through the disobedience of the first humans, evil took up even more space. But through the perfect obedience of Jesus Christ – obedience “to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phil 2:8) – the power of evil was overcome (May, 2023b, p. 5).

An essential significance of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ on Earth is the victory over the power of evil, which came into the world through the Angelic Fall and the Adamic Fall. But the significance of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is not limited to this. May (2024a, p. 53) works out that all suffering and death, every suffering and death of every human being, every animal, every plant, every fungus, every eukaryotic protozoan and every prokaryotic protozoan, receives its meaning, its value and its redemption through the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. May (2024a, pp. 53–54) explains this with the keywords enabling, participation, solidarity and resurrection.

Third attempt: The kenosis of Jesus Christ

With the second attempt we can explain satisfactorily the magnitude of the observable suffering, the terrifying power of evil and the necessity of the life and death of Jesus Christ. But we cannot yet explain how this model fits with the belief that God is omniscient and possibly timeless.

The conflict is between the free will of creatures and the omniscience of God. A great deal has been written about this and many attempts have been made to resolve this conflict without contradiction – see, for example: Rogers (2007), Dodds (2012), Schärtl (2013), Grössl (2014), Hoon Lee (2018), De Florio and Frigerio (2019), Volek (2019), Strahan (2020), Frigerio and De Florio (2021) and Zhang (2023).³ However, none of them have provided truly satisfactory answers (De Florio & Frigerio, 2019; Frigerio & De Florio, 2021). As long as one assumes that God is timeless and only observes the events in the universe from the outside, from his timelessness, and does not actively intervene, the free will of his creatures is no obstacle to his omniscience: The creatures act according to their free will and since the timeless God sees the entire timeline at once (=all the events of the timeline simultaneously), he sees the actions of his creatures and the consequences of these actions “simultaneously” (De Florio & Frigerio, 2019, p. 256).

³ For the sake of completeness, it should be mentioned that there is a theological view known as “open theism” which holds that God is not omniscient and does not know the future, but that humans have the freedom to shape their own future. For details, see, for example, Pinnock et al. (1994) and Sijuwade (2023).

The whole thing only becomes logically problematic when this timeless God wants to intervene in the universe, which is subject to time, or wants to interact with its creatures, which are subject to time. Because for any meaningful intervention or interaction, God must submit to the laws and restrictions of temporal order. And by intervening in time as a timeless God, he then compromises the freedom of his creatures; for while he is acting, he already knows the entire future.

As long as the timeless God sees only the sequence of events, he does not restrict the freedom of his creatures, for he perceives only the results of their free decisions without influencing them. But if the timeless God intervenes in time and simultaneously sees the temporal consequences of his intervention – that is, he sees that these consequences are not only a possibility but are true – then the creatures no longer have free choice, because the affected time interval is fixed in its results.

In the following, I would like to develop a proposal for solution that expands on the second attempt at a synthesis described above by taking radically seriously the kenosis⁴ of Jesus Christ described in Phil 2:6–8. The starting point is the apostle Thomas' observation that the resurrected Jesus still bears the stigmata of his crucifixion on his body (Jn 20:25–28). Jesus Christ, the second person of the Trinity, did not have a human body before his incarnation. However, at his ascension, he took this human body with him into transcendence into the interior of the Trinity. “Furthermore, this human body – by its wounds – shows very clearly the influence of time and the immanent creatures. By taking into itself a human body with wounds, the Trinity solidarises in an absolutely unheard-of way with all creatures suffering and subject to time” (May, 2023a, p. 34).

Jesus Christ was of course subject to time during his time on Earth as a human being. But even beyond that, he subjected himself to the flow of time: After his resurrection, Jesus Christ did not separate himself from his human body (May, 2023a, p. 33), which was subject to time, but took it with him into the interior of the Trinity and thus accepted his human body's being subject to time forever. Furthermore, the fact that it is possible to distinguish between “before” and “after” the incarnation inevitably introduces a temporal component into the divine life of Jesus.

If one accepts that God the Father is timeless, but that God the Son is not timeless, but has subjected himself to time long before his incarnation and is still subject to time today, various aspects make sense:

Jn 1:1–3 refers to the Son of God as the “Word” and states: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.” Against the background that it is problematic when the timeless God wants

⁴ The term “kenosis” describes Jesus' self-emptying: when he became human, Jesus gave up various aspects of his divinity. Further information on this can be found in Osorio Herrera (2014).

to intervene in the universe, which is subject to time, this biblical passage makes profound sense: the timeless God the Father entrusts the creation of the universe and the communication and interaction with the creatures to his Son, who is perfectly prepared for this because he has subjected himself to time. From this we can conclude that God the Son either subjected himself to time before the creation of the universe or, at the latest, subjected himself to time when he created the universe.

Furthermore, the Bible passage Matthew 24:36 takes on a profound meaning: “But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” This is not about God the Father having secret knowledge that he withholds from his Son. No, the point is that God the Father knows and sees the hour of judgement because he is outside of time. For the Son of God, who is in time, the Last Judgement is still in the future and therefore he does not yet know all the details.

Finally, the current discussion about whether God is timeless or whether there is time with him has a surprising answer that resolves many contradictions: both. God the Father is timeless, but God the Son is subject to time.

In this way, “who, though he existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied himself” (Phil 2:6–7) takes on a deeper meaning: It was not only during his life on Earth that Jesus Christ gave up his fulfilled life in transcendence and subjected himself to all the limitations and inconveniences of human life, and he was not only here, as a man on Earth, “obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phil 2:8). Even before his incarnation, he had renounced a divine attribute: timelessness. Although Jesus Christ is eternal like the Father, he is no longer timeless like the Father, but subject to time. The entire universe is inevitably subject to time from the beginning and must obey the flow of time. But Jesus Christ could have remained timeless like God the Father. Out of love for God the Father and out of love for the creation, he obediently submitted himself to time – forever? – in order to be as close as possible to the creatures – and here especially to the human beings. The loss of timelessness is necessarily accompanied by a limitation of his omniscience – as a side effect. The omniscience of Jesus is therefore limited, since, like any being subject to time, he cannot know the details of the future with certainty. The incarnation of Jesus is the logical continuation of the kenosis that began with the abandonment of timelessness.

Review of the steps of the synthesis

Before the actual synthesis could take place, the scientific research results, philosophical considerations and Christian truths relevant to the topic had to be condensed into 14 elements.

The first attempt at a synthesis explained suffering and evil in the world through evolution and human free will. Here, the first eight elements are linked together in a meaningful and coherent way. Comparable concepts can be found repeatedly in the

literature. Nevertheless, this first attempt is incomplete because it does not satisfactorily explain why evil has such power in this world and why God had to become human in Jesus Christ and die on the cross. These two points are adequately explained by the second attempt, which, in addition to the elements of the first attempt, also takes into account the Angelic Fall and the Adamic Fall. The second attempt at a synthesis links 11 of the 14 elements in a meaningful way and is therefore better than the first attempt. However, it cannot integrate the last three elements.

Only the third attempt at synthesis integrates all 14 elements, including the last three: the reception of Jesus' human body into the very core of the Trinity, the attributes of God, and the temporal dimension of God. Since all elements are now integrated, no further attempt at synthesis is necessary. The proposal for solution presented here can elegantly explain the connection between suffering, evolution, freedom and omniscience. It also shows how incomprehensibly great God's love is for us humans and for all of his creation, and how much it cost Jesus Christ to redeem us. This proposal for solution emphasises that the freedom of his creatures is of central importance to God. Thus, "freedom" becomes a key concept that explains and meaningfully links many Christian truths. One example is the relationship between suffering and the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. All three sources of suffering are inextricably linked to freedom. Natural suffering is related to evolution, which is necessary to give humans maximum freedom. The second source of suffering is that human beings misuse their freedom and do evil. The third source of suffering is that transcendent beings have misused their freedom and turned against God. By dying on the cross, Jesus Christ frees us from the slavery of sin and provides the comprehensive answer to all suffering. This death on the cross is the last and most radical consequence of his kenosis.

The timeless Father and the Son subject to time

Above, I put forward the working hypothesis that God the Father is always timeless, whereas God the Son subjected himself to time long before his incarnation and is still subject to time even now, after his ascension. In this section I would like to make some further considerations on this topic.

The Incarnation of Jesus Christ and the Fall

There are many hypotheses and opinions about the relationship between the incarnation of Jesus Christ and the Adamic Fall – see, for example Echavarría (2023), Stump (2022) and Plantinga (2004). If one believes that the incarnation of Jesus Christ is God's response to the Adamic Fall and that the Adamic Fall was therefore a necessary prerequisite for the incarnation – as Thomas Aquinas, for example, argued (Do Vale, 2019) – two questions arise: Did God know in advance that the Adamic Fall would take

place? If so, does this mean that the entire history of the universe is already predetermined and that we humans have no freedom?

Human free will is a central point in the line of reasoning in the previous section. May (2023b, 2024c, pp. 338–354) also explains in detail that the freedom of his creatures is a central concern for God. Consequently, it will be explained in this subsection how it is possible that the incarnation of Jesus Christ is God’s answer to the Adamic Fall without the entire history of the universe already being determined.

Before the creation of the universe, God had created transcendent beings who had the freedom to choose for or against him. At the latest since the Angelic Fall, in which some of the angels decided against God and rebelled against him, it was clear that these fallen angels would do everything in their power to harm God. In other words, since the Angelic Fall at the latest, no omniscience, but only a certain degree of “common sense” was necessary to recognise that if God were to create a universe with intelligent beings in it, the fallen angels would do everything in their power to corrupt these intelligent beings. Furthermore, I maintain that God already knew that the Fall of Man would be inevitable before he created these transcendent beings, since he would give these transcendent beings freedom of choice. And God knew, even before he created the transcendent beings, that the Fall of Man would cause a terrible amount of suffering and evil, and that in order to overcome the negative consequences of the Fall of Man, he himself would have to become human and suffer. When I write “God knew” here, I do not mean in the sense that the course of time was fixed, but I mean that God was able to “calculate” that each of the almost infinite number of possible futures would inevitably require the incarnation of God for redemption. This does not require omniscience. Knowing all this by “calculating”, God embarked on the adventure of creating intelligent beings with freedom of choice. First he created the angels, the transcendent intelligent beings, and later, through evolution, us humans, the immanent intelligent beings. God accepted all this suffering from the beginning in order to ensure that his creatures have freedom, because freedom is the necessary prerequisite for love (Peckham, 2018, pp. 5–6). God wants a free and honest love relationship with his creatures, and for this he accepted and still accepts all this suffering and all these hardships – including his incarnation!

Perhaps, the fact that the Fall of immanent intelligent beings would be unavoidable was the motivation for God the Son to give up his own timelessness out of love for God the Father and to submit to time. Even after submitting to time, God the Son knew that the Fall would be inevitable and that it would therefore be necessary to incarnate in this universe. What God the Son could not know in advance after giving up his timelessness were the exact times and circumstances of the events.

The fact that God the Son did not know everything exactly in advance is shown by many details in the Gospels. One vivid example is Lk 4:38–44: Jesus healed Peter’s mother-in-law. Afterwards, all the sick people in the town were brought to him and Jesus

healed them. At dawn, he went to a lonely place and prayed. In prayer, he understood that his mission was greater than just healing the sick in the neighbourhood. Jesus needed contact with his timeless Father through prayer in order to compare what he saw in the Father with what he saw in his surroundings (see also Jn 5:19). He was then able to recognise how exactly to implement the mission that his father had given him in this specific situation at this specific time. There are many examples of this in the Gospels. Normally, Jesus' behaviour of seeking and finding out his own mission in dialogue with the Father is explained by the fact that Jesus temporarily lost his omniscience through his incarnation, or that the man in Jesus could not naturally be omniscient. However, this phenomenon can also be explained – at least in part – by the fact that Jesus Christ was subject to time and therefore could not see the future, but could only guess at it.

The Intra-Trinitarian Dialogue and the Holy Spirit

The fact that the incarnate Son of God communicates with God the Father in prayer brings us to the question of how an intra-Trinitarian dialogue can function when one part of the Trinity is timeless and the other part is subject to time. All the problems and tensions that arise from the contrast between timeless and omniscient on the one hand and subject to time on the other must come together in this intra-Trinitarian dialogue. Under these circumstances, it is difficult to imagine that the intra-Trinitarian dialogue functions in the same way as a human dialogue, in which one dialogue partner says something, to which the other replies something, to which one of the dialogue partners replies something again, and so on. It is also difficult to imagine that God the Father gives instructions to God the Son about specific events in time, because very quickly we would be back to the logically difficult constellation that God the Father, who sees the whole of time from the outside, intervenes precisely in this time.

A possible starting point for understanding an intra-Trinitarian dialogue under these conditions arises from the following remark by Jesus: "Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own but only what he sees the Father doing, for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise. The Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing, and he will show him greater works than these, so that you will be astonished." (Jn 5:19–20). Seen in this way, the intra-Trinitarian dialogue could be understood as an exchange of images between the dialogue partners. Images have a significant advantage over spoken or thought dialogue: in an image, all the information is conveyed simultaneously and not in a chronological order. A chronological order could cause problems when communicating with a timeless dialogue partner.

Another starting point for understanding an intra-Trinitarian dialogue between a timeless God the Father and a God the Son who is subject to time is that the Holy Spirit can be understood as the bond of love between God the Father and God the Son (Berry, 2020, pp. 111–112, 160; Paulus PP. II, 1986, p. 10). It is therefore reasonable to assume

that the Holy Spirit mediates communication between the timeless God the Father and the God the Son, who is subject to time.

This brings us to the next question: Is the Holy Spirit timeless like God the Father or subject to time like God the Son? One characteristic of the Holy Spirit is that his work is often surprising and unpredictable: “The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” (Jn 3:8). In my opinion, this observation speaks in favour of the Holy Spirit being timeless like God the Father. On the other hand, the Holy Spirit is active in many ways in creation (Paulus PP. II, 1986). It is not for nothing that the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed says about the Holy Spirit: “who is Lord and gives life”. This could be an indication that the Holy Spirit is subject to time like the Son of God. Since the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed in the version of the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant churches also says that the Holy Spirit “proceeds from the Father and the Son”, one could put forward the working hypothesis that the Holy Spirit – depending on the circumstances or necessities – is sometimes timeless and sometimes subject to time. However, it would then be a more than legitimate question as to how such a thing could be imagined or even logically justified. At the moment, it is not possible to give a meaningful answer to the question of whether the Holy Spirit is timeless or subject to time.

The question of perichoresis is closely linked to the question of intra-Trinitarian dialogue. Since the 8th century, this term has been used to describe “the mutual indwelling and containment among the persons of the Holy Trinity – their presence in each other, in which each contains the other” (Stamatović, 2016, p. 304). Since this mutual indwelling of the three persons of the Trinity in the last is incomprehensible to us, there are different concepts and interpretations of perichoresis in theological literature (Otto, 2001; Stamatović, 2016). The working hypothesis considered in this article does not make perichoresis any more understandable.

Are all Creatures Subject to Time?

“But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” (Mk 13:32; Mt 24:36). I have used these biblical passages above as evidence that God the Son has subjected himself to time. They also provide further valuable information. One could interpret these biblical passages in such a way that – by analogy with God the Son – those beings who do not know the hour of judgement do not know it because this hour is still in the future for them; or in other words: because these beings are subject to time. If one then takes it seriously that “only the Father” knows the hour of the Last Judgement and not even the transcendent angels know this hour, the following picture emerges:

All, explicitly all creatures are subject to time, regardless of whether they are transcendent creatures (angels, devil and demons) or immanent creatures (humans, animals, etc.). One could conclude from this that being a creature and being subject to time are inextricably linked. In relation to transcendent creatures (angels, devil and demons), this would explain certain behaviours very well. But it also has consequences for our assumptions about the state of human beings after the Last Judgement: if being a creature and being subject to time were really inseparable, this would indicate that the fulfilled eternity of human beings after the Last Judgement will be an eternity subject to the flow of time and that it will not be a timeless eternity.

This speculation brings us to the question of whether Jesus Christ, the Son of God, will continue to be subject to time after the Last Judgement or whether he will become timeless again like God the Father. So far, Jesus Christ has been radically in solidarity with our human existence (Rabie-Boshoff & Buitendag, 2020; van Niekerk & Niemandt, 2019) and subjected himself to time out of love for us and all of his creation. We can therefore expect that he will continue to have the same status as humans in terms of being subject to time. And this could mean that Jesus Christ will continue to be subject to time after the Last Judgement.

These considerations show what a big step the abandonment of timelessness must have been for God the Son. Simply by giving up his timelessness, God the Son has already carried out an important part of his kenosis.

God the Father and Creation

The working hypothesis that God the Father is timeless and (therefore) does not intervene directly in the history of this universe, but leaves this to his Son (and to the Holy Spirit), could give the impression that God the Father is not that important at all. But this is incorrect. Only two aspects should be mentioned here:

Firstly, God the Father is the origin of the other two persons of the Trinity: Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and the Holy Spirit. The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed states this unequivocally. Concerning the Trinitarian processions see Hasker (2023).

Secondly, God the Father has an extraordinary significance for the universe. We experience our universe and all the laws of nature in it as constant and reliable. But all this is not of itself, but because it was created by God out of nothing and because God the Father constantly maintains it in existence through his “yes” to this creation. If God the Father did not constantly express his “yes” to this creation – and especially to us humans – everything would immediately dissolve and fall back into nothingness.

Which person of God can guarantee continuity and eternity? God the Father, of course, because he is timeless. Everything was created through Jesus Christ, as the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed states; but the timeless God the Father, the ultimate

source of all existence, sustains everything created in existence through his constant “yes”.

Now one could ask: “Does God the Father intervene in creation in a temporal way by maintaining all created things in existence? Is he thereby subjecting himself to time? Is he thereby restricting the freedom of his creatures?” My answer to all three questions is: “No”. The “yes” that God the Father speaks is just as timeless as He Himself, just as unconditional as He Himself, just as unchanging as He Himself, just as reliable as He Himself, just as all-loving as He Himself. That is why this “yes” does not restrict the freedom of creation or the freedom of His creatures. Jesus explained it like this: “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven, for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.” (Mt 5:44–45).

Possible Objections and Difficulties

In this article a synthesis has been developed that elegantly explains the connection between suffering, evolution, the freedom of man and the omniscience of God. A central component of this synthesis is the working hypothesis that God the Father is always timeless, whereas God the Son subjected himself to time long before His incarnation. This working hypothesis can explain many things well. But there are also some open questions and possible points of criticism that could call into question the suitability of the working hypothesis:

1) If one assumes that God the Father is timeless, but God the Son is subject to time, is the truth of faith “consubstantial with the Father” from the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed still fulfilled?

This question is very controversial, because the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed is a cornerstone of the Christian faith. There is already a similar case, because Nemes (2024) is of the opinion that the biblical passages Mk13:32 and Mt 24:36 – “But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven nor the Son, but only the Father” – are logically inconsistent with the truth of faith “consubstantial with the Father”.⁵ But precisely these biblical passages are key witnesses for my working hypothesis.

2) How can one imagine a Trinity in which one part is timeless and another part is subject to time? How is an intra-Trinitarian dialogue conceivable under such conditions?

I have already written above about the possibilities of an intra-Trinitarian dialogue. Nevertheless, there is still much need for clarification on this topic.

⁵ Kinzig (2023) presents the history of the “consubstantial with the Father” in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed.

3) Is it even possible that God (or a person of God) was timeless in the beginning, but later became subject to time?

Such a transition is absolutely necessary if one is not of the opinion that all persons of God were always subject to time, because Jesus Christ was undoubtedly subject to time during his time as a human being on Earth. Nevertheless, in connection with the creation of the universe, the question has been raised in modern theological literature as to whether it is possible that God was timeless in the beginning but has been subject to time since the creation of the universe. Erasmus (2021) gives an overview of the discussion and comes to the conclusion that it is logically possible that God is timeless without creation and subject to time subsequent to creation.

4) What is the position of the Holy Spirit? Is he timeless or subject to time?

5) Do only God the Son and the Holy Spirit interact with the universe and human beings or also God the Father? If so, how?

This point is an important counter-argument to the working hypothesis formulated in this article; for much of God's activity – especially in the Old Testament – is intuitively attributed to God the Father. It is therefore difficult to imagine that the timeless God the Father does not intervene in his creation at all and does not interact with us humans.

6) How can divine providence be understood in this context?

This point is closely related to the previous point: Both the Bible and numerous people report on divine providence. God prepares important circumstances in people's lives and helps us in this way. How can this be explained in the context of this working hypothesis? One possible explanation is to assume that the persons of God who are subject to time (Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit?) do not know the future with absolute certainty, but at least know the present completely. This complete knowledge of the present is sufficient to allow divine providence to operate without restricting human freedom. Of course, this divine providence must then continually adapt to the consequences of people's free decisions.

7) How can the divine indwelling in human beings be understood in the case of a timeless God the Father?

This point is directed not only against my working hypothesis, but also against the widely held concept that God is timeless in his entirety. The three persons of God dwell in every Christian (Jn 14:23; 1 Cor 3:16–17; Forteza Salas, 2013; Martínez Sáez, 2014, pp. 253–258; May, 2024c, p. 219; Sesboüé, 2011, pp. 85–86). This means that Christians are never alone. The triune God always dwells within them, and Christians can contact God at any time and seek advice and guidance from the God who dwells within them (Martínez Sáez, 2014, pp. 254–255). The difficulty lies in imagining how a timeless person of God can dwell in a human being who is subject to time.

Generally speaking, all these unanswered questions touch on the fundamental question of how the Trinity of God should be conceptualised. Theologians have been

wrestling with this for centuries. It is important to me not to damage the correct understanding of the Trinity of God – one God in three persons. Under no circumstances should the impression be created that there are several gods in Christianity, as this accusation is repeatedly levelled at Christianity by other monotheistic religions.

The Trinity of God – one God in three persons – as explained in the Apostles' Creed and even more so in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, is not fully comprehensible to us humans. Any attempt to make it comprehensible to us raises problems – see, for example, Rea (2020). The modern concept of “Social Trinitarianism” emphasises the independence of the three persons of God more strongly than other concepts (Bray, 2023; Craig, 2009; Mosser, 2009; Swinburne, 2018). “Social Trinitarianism” has the great advantage that it shows us that God is not a monolithic block, not a transcendent iceberg that drifts untouched and untouchable through eternity (May, 2024c, p. 245). God is communion in himself, the three persons of God have each other as counterparts of love (Parappally, 2014) and they do not need anyone else to love (Swinburne, 2018). This is why John is right when he writes: “God is love” (1 Jn 4:8).

“Social Trinitarianism” has the great merit of giving us a new and better understanding of why God is love. But it also harbours the danger of slipping into a more or less veiled polytheism. Therefore, if I see a danger in the working hypothesis formulated above that it damages the proper understanding of the Trinity of God, it could be because I am looking at the working hypothesis through the eyes of “Social Trinitarianism”. Our whole understanding of the Trinity of God is based on images. It seems that the images of “Social Trinitarianism” reach their limits here. Perhaps other images can help us further.

“Social Trinitarianism” applies the modern meaning of the term “person” to the Trinity. The etymology of the word “person” shows that its root is the Latin word “persona” (Brasser, 2008, p. 53). The word “persona” comes from the context of theatre and refers to the mask or disguise of an actor (Brasser, 2008, pp. 55, 58). Does it help if we transfer the old Latin meaning of the term “person” to the Trinity? Then the timeless Father, the Son, who is subject to time, and the Holy Spirit would be nothing more than masks or disguises of the same God. This concept, which Bray (2023, p. 790) refers to as “Latin trinitarianism”, could indeed explain some aspects elegantly, but in my opinion it would create considerably more problems than it would solve: For example, the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ could too easily be misunderstood as a theatrical performance. And it would also no longer be possible to justify why God is love, because he would be a monolithic block as in the other monotheistic religions.

Leftow (2004) develops a concept known as the “Latin Trinity”, which explains the Trinity of God through three parallel timelines of the one God. Leftow (2004) explains his concept with the example of a time traveller who returns to a certain point in his life. Sijuwade (2024) attempts to explain how such a “Latin Trinity” could be described as

“love”. The “Latin Trinity” model can explain the existence of three persons of one God. But I cannot see how this model can explain the difference between the three persons. Nor can I imagine how the three persons of a “Latin Trinity” can communicate with each other or even have an intra-Trinitarian dialogue.

In summary, it can be said that any attempt to understand or explain the Trinity of God is limited because God transcends our understanding (Is 55:9). This necessarily also limits the possibilities of exploring the connections between theodicy, evolution and the attributes of God. In this essay, I have tried to approach these limitations.

CONCLUSION

In this article, a synthesis was developed that explains the existence of evil and suffering against the background of the evolution of living beings and essential attributes of the Christian God. The first attempt at a synthesis explains suffering and evil in the world in terms of evolution and human free will. It does not satisfactorily explain why evil has such great power in this world and why God had to become man in Jesus Christ and die on the cross. These two points are adequately explained by the second attempt, which takes into account the Angelic Fall and the Adamic Fall.

Within the second attempt we still have a conflict between the free will of creatures and the omniscience of God. The third proposal resolves this conflict by developing the following working hypothesis: God the Father is timeless. In contrast, God the Son, as part of his kenosis, not only subjected himself to time during his life as a human being on Earth, but also before and after. This third attempt at a synthesis provides for the first time a model that combines all 14 elements from natural sciences, philosophy and theology in a consistent and satisfactory way. The evaluation of this working hypothesis is closely linked to the concept with which one attempts to understand the Trinity of God.

The article shows that theodicy can be understood without contradiction if one accepts that for God the freedom of his creatures is of central importance. For example, all sources of suffering are inextricably linked to freedom. The omniscient, omnipotent, and timeless God takes this freedom of human beings so seriously that He intervenes in a way that does not compromise the freedom of humans. The second person of God, Jesus Christ, gives up his timelessness and thus also limits his omniscience in order to be able to act in this universe without compromising the freedom of human beings. Jesus Christ becomes man and frees us from the slavery of sin through his death and resurrection. In this way, he enables us humans to give back our freedom as loving obedience.

Of course, some questions remain unanswered and possible points of criticism emerge. Therefore, at this point I would like to invite theologians and philosophers to evaluate whether the presented working hypothesis is able to form a viable basis for a deeper understanding of the relationship between God, his creation and us, his creatures.

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