Hurricane Katrina: an act of God?

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Hurricane Katrina: An Act of God?

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Submitted in Fulfillment
of the Requirements for Honors
to the Faculty of the
Jepson School of Leadership Studies
University of Richmond

April 16, 2010

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Signature Page for Leadership Studies Honors Thesis

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Thesis presented

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Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Dr. Hicks for sharing his time and wisdom with me throughout my Jepson education, and especially during the course of this year. I am also grateful to Dr. Kaufman, Dr. Landphair, and Dr. Williamson for serving on my committee and for sharing their valuable insights and comments on this work.
Preface

The following thesis explores questions surrounding the suffering that resulted from Hurricane Katrina. Before introducing the work, I would like to acknowledge the ways in which my own background and various identities have shaped the project.

As a native of the Greater New Orleans area, I recognize that this subject must be treated with great respect for all those who died in or were affected by the storm. My immediate family and I evacuated the city before the hurricane struck New Orleans, and we were fortunate enough to have been able to return to a salvageable home. I hope to one day settle in New Orleans to aid in the rebuilding of the social and/or physical infrastructure of the city.

As a Roman Catholic, I am also interested in the ways that belief in God both sustains and challenges people of faith in times of suffering. My thirteen years of Catholic education as well as my personal faith have undoubtedly shaped my own response to the hurricane in addition to the content of this project.

Finally, as a student of the Jepson School of Leadership Studies, I am committed to social justice and engaged citizenship. I hope this work encourages its readers to think critically about issues of diversity and inclusivity while exploring the implications of ideas expressed within church settings.

I hope that these reflections help to contextualize my own investment in this thesis, *Hurricane Katrina: An Act of God?*
In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, citizens scrambled to attribute blame for the catastrophic events that had taken place in August 2005. Some accused the local or state government: Mayor Ray Nagin should have executed the emergency evacuation plan earlier; the Levee Board should not have misspent money that was intended for city protection; Governor Kathleen Blanco should have asked for assistance from the National Guard sooner. Others felt abandoned by the rest of the country and criticized the federal government. Why did the Army Corps of Engineers construct such faulty levees? Why did President Bush take so long to respond to the flooding? Why didn’t Michael Brown of the Federal Emergency Management Agency furnish adequate relief to those stranded in the Superdome?

Amidst all the angry indictments and finger-pointing, some residents questioned God’s role in the hurricane. Desperately struggling to make sense out of the physical destruction and social collapse of Katrina, many grappled to understand questions that seemed outside the realm of human influence—why did this disaster tear an entire city and its surrounding areas to ruins? Why did 30,000 people in the Louisiana Superdome have to subsist without adequate food or sanitation, and why were families ripped apart by death and violence? How could a good God let this happen?

At a time when residents were struggling to deal with the deaths of family and friends, the destruction of property and personal possessions, financial problems and insurance claims, and the daunting task of rebuilding homes while maintaining jobs and families, it was not surprising that many New Orleanians found themselves engulfed by feelings of anger or defeat. Similarly, in a city where the majority of the residents identify as Christians, it was also not surprising that they looked to faith to provide some explanation—any explanation—for their suffering. The New York Times describes Cecile Conway, a woman of 44 who had lost track of
all family members in the storm, sitting in Houston’s Astrodome and underlining Psalm 6 in her Bible:

O Lord, rebuke me not in thine anger, neither chasten me in thy hot displeasure. Have mercy upon me, O Lord; for I am weak:
O Lord, heal me; for my bones are vexed. My soul is also sore vexed: but thou, O Lord—how long? Return, O Lord, deliver my soul: oh save me for thy mercies’ sake.

(Psalm 6:1-4)¹

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, New Orleanians were left to cope with the emotional, physical, and psychological trauma that resulted from the storm: severely damaged collective identification with a city that faced destruction, the literal grayness of an environment that had been submerged in water for two weeks, and over 1,400 deaths of those who could not escape the forces of nature.

But was Hurricane Katrina merely a force of nature—or was it an act of God? If the storm and its subsequent destruction was the will of God, how could that God possibly be good? And if it was not an act of God, yet God failed to prevent it, how could this God possibly be omnipotent? The problem of reconciling an all-good and all-powerful God with the presence of excessive suffering is one that humans have contemplated since antiquity, and the modern term used to describe this discussion is “theodicy,” from the Greek words theos (God) and dikē (justice).² Immanuel Kant claimed that “either God wishes to prevent evil but cannot, in which case he is just but not omnipotent. Or he can prevent evil but does not want to, in which case he is omnipotent but not just.”³ To frame Kant’s dilemma in terms of Katrina is to ask if God either

a) was incapable of preventing the storm or b) was capable of preventing it, but instead chose not to.

In 1710, the philosopher G.W.F. von Leibniz had coined the term theodicy in his work *Essays on the Justice of God and the Freedom of Man in the Origin of Evil*; he claimed that suffering was merely a part of God’s ultimate plan, for if God is at once omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly good, “this supreme wisdom...cannot but have chosen the best” possible world to create. 4 The violence of nature against humankind—including disasters such as earthquakes and hurricanes—is often referred to as “natural evil,” which Leibniz viewed as “actually part of a larger divine plan that we cannot grasp, but which in fact maximizes the amount of good in creation.” 5 Forty-five years later, the residents of Lisbon, Portugal were faced with this conundrum of reconciling a good God with the existence of disaster when the city experienced a ten-minute long earthquake that reached approximately 9.0 on the Richter scale. Scholars estimate that 30,000 people lost their lives to the earthquake, which also left 17,000 of the city’s 20,000 homes in ruin. 6 After the event, Leibniz’s “best possible world” theory received harsh criticism from contemporaries such as Voltaire and Rousseau, who argued that *humans* were instead responsible for the severity of the disaster. 7

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6 Lynn Bridgers, “Beyond the Medical Model: Re-examining Religion Response in the Aftermath of Trauma and Disaster,” presented at 2006 meetings of the AAR, Religion and Social Sciences section.

7 This idea is known as *anthropodicy*, by which “the accusation of God becomes at once a critique of men, women, and society.” Voltaire, who was a deist, believed that God was *l’Horloger Suprême*, the Great Watchmaker, and that God had created the world but did not intervene it its affairs. Rousseau expounded upon the consequences of this belief, arguing that “human beings must account for themselves.” (see Kristiaan Depoortere’s *A Different God: A Christian View of Suffering*, 53-54).

However, the concept of anthropodicy is not rooted exclusively in deistic foundations. Many Christians who believe in a personal God have also argued that because God is good, only goodness can issue from that God; therefore, any evil or suffering in the world is the result of human failings.
Analogously, reducing the disaster of Hurricane Katrina to the storm itself would be overlooking the elements of social collapse that also characterized the event. Although the killing, looting, and gang aggression that was publicized after the hurricane was, in many cases, inflated by the media, any violence that took place following the hurricane was certainly not due to the forces of nature; theologians would instead tend to qualify this suffering as the result of "moral evil," the evil that humans can inflict on one another due to the exercise of their free will. Moreover, many residents of New Orleans are careful to make the distinction between the hurricane and the flood, maintaining that the immense flooding of Hurricane Katrina would not have taken place had it not been for the lack of proper levee protection—a problem that reflects the inadequacies of humans, not God. As John P. Newport points out, "floods are frequently the result of...irresponsible policy," and "even though events of natural evil are sometimes referred to legally as 'acts of God,' the fact is that occurrences of flood, famine, and pestilence are often caused by human selfishness." Ted Steinberg, a professor of history at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, went so far as to argue that Katrina "was an unnatural disaster if ever there was one" and claimed that "blaming god is moral hand-washing."  

However, while hurricane preparedness in Louisiana was grossly inadequate, there must be some acknowledgment that unpredictable forces of nature, in some ways, will always threaten the security that humans attempt to create around themselves. The enormity of the destruction and suffering from the events surrounding Hurricane Katrina is difficult to internalize, and for this reason, many look upwards for some kind of explanation—in fact, even insurance

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companies define a “natural occurrence beyond human control or influence [including] hurricanes, earthquakes, and floods” as an act of God.\(^\text{10}\)

In this thesis, I plan to present a framework of four theodicies which organizes various responses to and attempted explanations of the suffering experienced during Hurricane Katrina; to examine several post-Katrina sermons in which pastors and priests address suffering within each theological framework; and to discuss the important leadership implications that the ideas expressed on the pulpit carry for how citizens understand the rebuilding of New Orleans.

Although the city is home to citizens from a diversity of faith traditions including Judaism and Islam, this thesis will focus on responses expressed within Christian contexts. In the following pages, I will use a theological framework to show how these ideas expressed within sermons can affect participation in public life, or more specifically, how various conceptions of theodicy have shaped responses to suffering and to the rebuilding of New Orleans.

I. Theological Frameworks

Acknowledging that any attempted explanation of suffering will always be incomplete, and that interpretations of such should be as “broad and deep and varied as life itself,” I would like to put forth in this opening chapter four conceptions of theodicy that coincide with and help to sort out many of the sentiments expressed during and after Hurricane Katrina.\(^\text{11}\) After developing these various theodicies, I will then briefly discuss the role of clergy and their sermons in times of disaster and expound upon the leadership implications of the aforementioned theodicies as expressed in various post-Katrina sermons. In the following paragraphs, I introduce


\(^{11}\) Newport, 230.
divine retribution, divine pedagogy, protest theodicy, and the Co-Suffering Son of God model as theoretical frameworks for understanding suffering.  

**Divine Retribution**

The first of these theodicies offers the concept of *divine retribution*: God inflicts suffering on earth as punishment for human transgression. For John Wesley, the 1755 Lisbon earthquake "represented divine retribution for the sins of the Inquisition." But Wesley was not a lone voice; this idea existed even during antiquity and extends into the present. In the biblical book of Job, Job's physical afflictions render him a social outcast, for his contemporaries believed "that poverty and sickness were a punishment for the sins of the individual or the family." Because Job had been such a prosperous man, the magnitude of his new misfortune seemingly indicated the magnitude of his sins. Although some interpretations of Job claim that the authors meant "to challenge this conception [of divine retribution] by showing it to be inoperative and misleading," other biblical narratives often cited in defense of this theodicy include the fall of Adam and Eve, the Noahic flood, and the ruin of Jerusalem as well as Sodom and Gomorrah. Similarly, numerous Old Testament examples such as Isaiah 3:11—"Woe to the wicked! It shall be ill with him, for what his hands have done shall be done to him!"—further serve to support the idea that God actively inflicts punishment upon those who deserve it.  

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12 The phrases 'divine pedagogy' and 'protest theodicy' are taken from Migliore's *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, pages 124 and 128. Process theology—the concept that God experiences the suffering of creation—is also worth noting. Process theology "argues that the reality of God is not fixed and that God...is still developing." However, the implications of this particular theodicy fall outside the scope of this thesis. See “The Process Theology” at http://www.philosophyonline.co.uk/pages/process.htm (accessed April 5, 2010).


14 Gutiérrez, 22.

15 Newport, 230.
In our time, a number of conservative Christians maintained that New Orleans deserved—even recklessly invited—the disaster it endured. Steve Lefemine of Colombia Christians for Life stated that “God judged New Orleans for the sin of shedding innocent blood through abortion. Providence punishes national sins by national calamities. Greater divine judgment is coming upon America unless we repent of the national sin of abortion.” Similarly, John Calvin wrote that “the scriptures teach us that pestilence, war, and other calamities of this kind are chastisements of God, which he inflicts on our sins,” but these sins could certainly extend beyond the scope of the issues that are traditionally considered conservative Christian values such as the right to life. Although the concept of retributive justice can be interpreted as punishment for “sins” such as abortion, homosexuality, and general debauchery, it also possible that this divine punishment could have resulted from sins which may be more emphasized by progressive more so than by conservative Christians, such as the neglect of the poor.

However, many have severely criticized the concept of divine retribution as the sole explanation for the existence of evil for a variety of reasons. First, most modern thinkers agree that divine and human activity are not mutually exclusive and argue that a strict interpretation of divine retribution renders the relationship between sin and suffering overly simplistic. Additionally, several biblical texts have been held up as Jesus’ rejection of retribution as the explanation for suffering, including Luke 13:1-5, when Jesus proclaims,

Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were greater sinners than all other Galileans? By no means!...Or those eighteen people who were killed when

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the tower at Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than everyone else who lived in Jerusalem? By no means!18

Finally, some authors assert that to place the blame of natural disaster on the actions of those suffering from it is grossly flawed, and to a certain extent, even offensive. Gustavo Gutiérrez describes the concept of divine retribution as “a convenient and soothing doctrine for those who have great worldly possessions, and it promotes resignation and a sense of guilt in those who lack such possessions,” and Daniel Migliore maintains that “to add guilt to the burden of suffering carried by the victims of natural evil or of human injustice is unconscionable.”19

Divine Pedagogy

Like divine retribution, divine pedagogy also “considers affliction as a visitation from God.”20 However, this second theodicy interprets suffering not as an active punishment, but rather as a disciplinary gesture intended to teach believers to become a more “mature humanity in the image of God.”21 There exists an intimate relationship between this instructive discipline and the word discourse, which is borrowed from the Latin discipulus, or “pupil.” Although discipline is often associated with punishment or stringent rigor, a closer look at the Latin etymology sheds light upon the didactic nature of divine pedagogy. Similarly, the Latin verb discipere—which comes from the prefix “dis-” (apart) and “capere” (to take) denotes thorough analysis and intellectual engagement. Taking these roots into consideration, it becomes clear that divine pedagogy does not render the experience of suffering a passive process. Whereas the emphasis of divine retribution focuses on suffering merely as an accepted punitive measure, the

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18 Example given in Newport, 230.  
19 Gutiérrez, 22; Migliore, 124.  
20 Newport, 231.  
21 Migliore, 130.
discipline involved in divine pedagogy is one that encourages the formation and habituation of virtuous discipleship. In this way, suffering presents believers with the opportunity to become more like God. In his work *Evil and the God of Love*, John Hick calls this concept ‘soul-making’ theodicy and writes that suffering serves to refine an individual’s faith and character. Hick asserts that the continual “process of becoming the perfected being whom God is seeking to create” takes place “through a hazardous adventure in individual freedom” that could not occur in a world where suffering did not exist.  

Similarly, philosopher John Macquarrie argues that we must fully engage in reality and all of its pain, for “to be delivered from every suffering...would be like returning to the womb, where all needs are satisfied but the possibility for growth past a certain point is limited.”

Hick criticizes and challenges writers who “assume that the purpose of a loving god must be to create a hedonistic paradise.” He asserts that

> The question we have to ask is not...Is the architecture of the world the most pleasant and convenient possible? The question that we have to ask is rather, Is this the kind of world that God might make as an environment in which moral beings may be fashioned, through their own free insights and responses, into ‘children of God’?  

Hick’s emphasis on fully becoming a child of God also underscores the significance of the biblical description of God as a heavenly Father, which Hick states “is not a merely random illustration but an analogy that lies at the heart of the Christian faith.” According to this theodicy, the Divine Parent exercises “tough love” by allowing suffering to facilitate learning and by allowing believers the choice to respond in faith.

This educational aspect of suffering emerges frequently in biblical texts such as Proverbs 3:11-12, in which the author advises, “The discipline of the Lord, my son, disdain not; spurn not

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23 Newport, 237.
24 Hick, 256-57.
25 Hick, 258.
his reproof; For whom the Lord loves he reproves, and he chastises the son he favors.” In this way, suffering bears a more didactic purpose than it does according to the concept of divine retribution. Additionally, suffering can serve to remind us of our interdependency; John P. Newport points out that “in the biblical view, natural evil can play a part in this purpose by disciplining us and shattering our false sense of self-sufficiency.” Jeremiah 18:1-10 extends the image of shattered autonomy and self-identity to the way a potter “breaks a vessel and remolds it after his own design”: God questions, “Can I not do to you, house of Israel, as this potter has done?...Indeed, like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand.”26

However, divine pedagogy is often criticized in the same way that divine retribution is criticized; modern thinkers who argue that God’s role is to preserve, accompany, and govern followers critique divine pedagogy’s tendency to represent human and divine activity as mutually exclusive. Moreover, this particular theodicy fails to give adequate attention to the emotional, physical, and psychological trauma that can result from suffering; it risks not validating the painful experience of suffering by focusing too much on the growth that may proceed from it.

Protest Theodicy

The third approach, protest theodicy, is an expression of distress from those who faithfully challenge the seeming inaction of God in the face of suffering. As opposed to divine pedagogy, which often neglects to fully acknowledge the distress of suffering, protest theodicy embraces this pain and presents it before God in the form of a question and a plea. Protest theodicy emanates from the liberationist tradition, which according to Desmond Tutu “issues out

26 Newport, 236.
of the crucible of human suffering anguish” “more than any other kind of theology.” According to this theodicy, suffering people protest against what they perceive as abandonment and neglect while pleading for a return to the covenant that God seems to have forgotten. Their cries echo the crucified Christ’s: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mk 15:34). There exists a rich biblical tradition of the despair of God’s people; one author cries, “How long, O Lord? I cry for help but you do not listen! I cry out to you, “Violence!” but you do not intervene. Why do you let me see ruin; why must I look at misery? Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and clamorous discord” (Hb 1:3-4). Similarly, cries of lament and pleading constitute the majority of the 150 psalms. For example, Psalm 35:22 begs the Lord, “do not be silent,” and Psalm 74 implores the Lord for a return to the covenant: “Remember your flock that you gathered of old, the tribe you redeemed as your very own. Remember Mount Zion where you dwell. Arise, God, defend your cause” (Psalm 74:2, 22).

Protest theodicy is characterized by “the honesty to raise what earlier believers would have considered blasphemous questions” as well as the “determination to be faithful to God even when it appears that God has ceased to be faithful.” Protest theodicy is not only unapologetic in its challenge to God, but exists even as an acknowledgement that cries of frustration and questioning are equally legitimate components of a loving faith, for “the silence of God is hardest to bear for those who believe that the God of our faith is a living God.” As Archbishop Tutu points out, if the suffering “believed that god was neither good, nor loving, nor powerful, then there would be no problem.” Protest theodicy, which directly challenges the world’s suffering and injustice, stands in contrast with both divine pedagogy and Leibniz’s concept of the

28 Migliore, 129.
29 Jon Sobrino, Where is God? (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2004), XV.
“best possible world,” according to which believers accept suffering without question. Finally, while a suffering person may certainly move beyond protest to a rejection of God altogether, this theodicy remains rooted in faith.

Co-Suffering Son of God

Other thinkers have responded to the problem of suffering not by attributing fault to God, but instead by maintaining that Christians can take comfort in knowing that Christ shared in this suffering during the crucifixion and overcame it through the resurrection, a theodicy I call co-suffering Son of God. Samuel Wells, the dean of Duke University Chapel and research professor of Christian ethics at Duke Divinity school, emphasized the co-suffering Son of God in his essay “God in the hurricane” when he advised, “Let’s never ask, How can God do nothing? For God has already done everything. The one thing he hasn’t done is obliterate us. He did that to Jesus instead.”30 In the same way, Marilyn McCord Adams posits that justifications of suffering will always be incomplete and that believers’ primary praxis should be learning how to more fully identify with Christ’s suffering on the cross.31

Similarly, the German Lutheran theologian Jürgen Moltmann argued that “God through Christ does not will suffering but rather shares the lot of suffering humanity.”32 In contrast to Leibniz, Moltmann maintains that suffering is, in fact, contrary to God’s will and that God too suffers when His sons and daughters endure distress. However, to reduce the Co-Suffering Son of God model to the crucifixion creates around it an artificial limitation, for it is more accurately understood as the product of both the cross- and resurrection-centered theology as revealed

32 Ibid., 497.
through the Trinitarian God—in other words, a reflection of the co-suffering Son of God as well as the promise of future transformation of reality.

In his article “Theodicy from Ivan Karamazov to Moltmann,” Richard Bauckham identifies Moltmann’s theology as “an authentically Christian response to the characteristically modern perception of the world.”33 He points to *The Crucified God* and *Theology of Hope* as two phases in the development of Moltmann’s interpretation of suffering. The first underscores love and divine suffering, and the second focuses on “the resurrection, interpreted by the concepts of divine promise and hope”; however, these notions go hand-in-hand and only together can they illuminate the full expression of this theodicy. Christ’s resurrection stands as “God’s promise of life for the dead, righteousness for the unrighteous, [and] freedom for those in bondage.”34 This promise of redemption “sets believers in contradiction to the state of the world in which they live,” and these believers, feeling acutely the contradiction between their own reality and the reality that Christ promises, strive to transcend this contradiction, “seek[ing] possibilities of bringing reality into closer correspondence to the promise.”35 The hope and anticipation of God’s promised transformation is what inspires Christians to become politically, socially and personally engaged in their present reality. However, Bauckham is careful to point out that Moltmann does not claim that suffering “will prove justified as contributing to the final fulfillment of God’s purpose,” as may those who ascribe to divine pedagogy, but rather Moltmann declares that the resurrection displays God’s victory over it.36

34 Ibid., 90.
35 Bauckham, 91.
36 Ibid.
And yet, it is questionable whether a God who promises to overcome suffering can justify those same afflictions. Bauckham asks, “How does the promise of liberation from suffering in God’s presence, given in the resurrection, reach those who in their meaningless suffering feel abandoned by God?” Moltmann answers this question in *The Crucified God*, in which this promise of liberation reaches the abandoned by Christ’s own identification with them on the cross. When Christ cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”, “the incarnate God identifies with the suffering of those he loves and, as those who suffer in loving solidarity with innocent sufferers must, he takes up and expresses their protest against their pointless suffering.” Moltmann argues that neither Jesus’ rejection nor humiliation by Jewish or Roman authorities reveals Christ’s most intimate suffering; rather, “the deepest dimension of the cross is seen only in Jesus’ abandonment by his God and Father, when God leaves him to die.” Christ’s voluntary identification with human agony involved “a sharing of...suffering in God’s absence,” and this act of love is what completes God’s initial promise of transformed reality.

Christ’s crucifixion stands not as “fatalistic acceptance of suffering,” but instead as “protest [and] moral outrage” that lend themselves to a Christ-centered praxis. Kenneth Surin also argues that the response to this theodicy is more important than theodicy itself. He says that because “the God who shares our sufferings is a God who justifies himself,” theodicy as a means to provide explanation for suffering becomes secondary; instead, it “is perhaps best regarded as a form of second-order theological discourse facilitating a first-order praxis.” Far from neglecting a practical response to suffering, the implications of the coupling of Christ’s crucifixion and subsequent resurrection require that “God’s people to do as much as we can to

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37 Ibid.
38 Ibid., 93.
39 Ibid.
40 Ibid., 92.
alleviate suffering.” Above all, a theodicy grounded in an understanding of God’s solidarity in human suffering “inevitably leads the community of Christ to the poor, the sick, the ‘surplus people,’ and to the oppressed”—the abandoned people with whom Christ identified in the crucifixion and promised to redeem through the resurrection.

While the Co-Suffering Son of God model addresses God’s shared pain as well as the promise of redemption that accompanies the resurrection, the expressions of this particular theodicy are varied. While those who identify with this model agree that belief in the crucifixion and resurrection necessitates some kind of Christ-centered human response, many disagree on what that praxis should look like. For the purposes of this thesis, I have categorized this response into two main responses: a ministry of presence and Christopraxis.

Those who respond to the Co-Suffering Son of God model with a ministry of presence believe that because the existence of suffering is, to a certain extent, simply incomprehensible, the profound of significance and necessity of human presence renders it the most essential response to human suffering. Moreover, the comfort of knowing that Jesus shared in human suffering during his crucifixion as well as overcame this suffering through the resurrection effects an ethos of communion and solidarity. Those who identify with the ministry of presence also look to the New Testament for instances in which the apostles emphasized this same ethos of solidarity. For example, St. Paul writes in his letter to the Philippians that “if there is any encouragement in Christ, any solace in love, any participation in the Spirit, any compassion and mercy, complete my joy by becoming of the same mind, with the same love, united in heart, thinking one thing” (Phil 2:1-2). Similarly, he writes in his second letter to the Corinthians that communities were “afflicted in every way, but not constrained; perplexed, but not driven to

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42 McWilliams, 359.
43 McWilliams, 358.
despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed,” and they were able to persevere because Christians had integrated the life and death of Christ into their own existences (2 Cor 4:8-9). The ministry of presence manifests itself both as a physical and emotional presence with those who suffer as well as individual acts of service, which will be examined in greater detail in Chapter 5.

Christopraxis constitutes an alternative though not incompatible response to a theodicy grounded in the co-suffering of Christ. Among the inclusion of other social justice agendas, Christopraxis is traditionally considered the pursuit of economic justice, care for the earth, the promotion of peace and human dignity, and the development of a preferential option for the poor. In numerous biblical texts, Jesus calls his disciples to be “light of the world,” and in his last hours, Jesus reminds God that he has invested the disciples with the responsibility to carry on his work on earth: “as you sent me into the world, so I sent them into the world” (Mt 5:14, Jn 17:18). The Christopraxis response interprets the crucifixion and resurrection as calls for Christians to transform the shared pain of the human experience into a socially engaged embodiment of hope and forgiveness. As St. Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans, “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are as nothing compared with the glory to be revealed for us” (Rom 8:18). For those who respond to the Co-Suffering Son of Model with Christopraxis, this future glory can be revealed on earth at least partially through the pursuit of just structural change.

II. Sermons as public proclamations and calls to leadership

Before addressing the greater leadership implications of these particular theodicies, I would first like to address the significant influence that religious figures yield as leaders both
among their own congregations and within the public sphere in times of crisis. Independent of their particular denominations, Christian leaders of various stripes—pastors, ministers, bishops, or priests—all share the responsibility of tending to their flocks: fulfilling the spiritual, emotional, psychological, and sometimes even the physical needs of their congregations within the context of the Christian faith. In the months following Hurricane Katrina, these spheres of well-being had been intensely damaged in immeasurable ways, and pastors found themselves facing the challenge of leading congregations in a time of despair and demoralization. As leaders within the church, pastors were left with the practical responsibility and challenge of explaining why God would allow such suffering as well as the responsibility of comforting and empowering their congregations in that time of distress and perceived abandonment. And although those outside of New Orleans may not have had to deal with the suffering from Hurricane Katrina in any direct way, religious figures and Christians around the country experienced shock and dismay as they and their parishioners grappled with similar questions about God's role in the hurricane.

In addition to fulfilling the spiritual, emotional, and psychological needs of congregants, many Christian leaders also honor the social responsibility to clothe the naked and feed the hungry as Jesus taught; in this way, religious leaders carry their moral status into the public sphere, emphasizing to their congregants that civic engagement and the pursuit of social justice are integral to living a Christian life. Because New Orleans was so obviously a place in need, religious leaders across the country saw the city's dilemmas as an opportunity to help the suffering. As a result, churches across the country frequently used their enormous social networking and organizing capacities to coordinate volunteer trips to New Orleans and are still continuing to do so. As just one example, in July 2009, 37,000 Lutheran youth traveled to the
city for a three and a half day event called “Jesus, Justice, and Jazz” during which the young adults attended Bible studies and worked in community rebuilding projects. Over $150,000 was raised for hunger projects in the city, and 100,000 books were donated to local schools.  

Similarly, churches in New Orleans have found ways to contribute to the rebuilding process by raising money for congregants, partnering with local non-profits, or coordinating smaller-scale volunteer groups.

How faith informed believers’ responses to the events surrounding Katrina is pivotal, for these responses in turn shaped Christian citizens’ understanding of and/or contribution to the rebuilding of New Orleans. For example, if the pastors of the 37,000 Lutheran youth would have preached that the city was merely a “parade of drunkenness, homosexuality and passions of the flesh” (as did Rev. Philip “Flip” Benham of the extremist group Operation Save America), they most likely would not have encouraged their churches to donate such time, energy, and money to a city they had believed was punished for its sin and debauchery, or perhaps they would have donated those resources to some organization that promotes “repentance.”

Because pastors and other Christian leaders contribute significantly to both their congregants’ spiritual formation as well as their conception of social justice, I have chosen to look specifically at the ways that they present the suffering experienced during Hurricane Katrina within sermons and homilies; that is, I examine preaching as a practice of leadership. In their work Resurrecting Excellence, L. Gregory Jones and Kevin R. Armstrong emphasize the integrated nature and importance of preaching for religious leaders, who must have “a capacity for rigorous study of Scripture and other classical and contemporary texts, as well as a capacity

45 “God’s Will Be Done,” 111.
for guiding processes of practical reasoning among the whole people of God.  

Similarly, Avery Dulles, S.J. in his work *Models of the Church* describes the role of the Church as a *herald*. Considering “the task of the Church primarily in terms of proclamation,” the ‘Church as Herald’ model “is kerygmatic, for it looks upon the Church as...one who receives an official message with the commission to pass it on.”  

He continues to describe the Church as “the herald of a king who comes to proclaim a royal decree in a public square.” These “royal decrees” hold weighty significance amongst congregations, and thus one central means of proclaiming the good news is preaching.

As Richard Lischer describes in his work *The Preacher King*, “a sermon is a cultic performance of a biblical text among people who identify themselves as Christians...a public speech serves its own political agenda, but a sermon must follow the Bible’s leading into every conceivable corner of life.” Because of the pervasive nature of such messages, the implications of these conceptions of theodicy extend far beyond church walls. Moreover, because pastoral leaders have the power of “injecting [the] gospel into political debate,” religious values often shape individuals’ political ideologies as well as bear weighty significance for their involvement in the public sphere.

For these reasons, the majority of this thesis examines how various religious leaders have sought to explain the suffering of Hurricane Katrina in their own public proclamations. Although the theological frameworks may seem primarily theoretical, each concept bears practical

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48 Ibid.
50 Ibid., 4.
leadership implications principally via the act of preaching that shape congregants’ responses to both past and present suffering as well as the future rebuilding of New Orleans.

* * *

The following page presents a chart which summarizes God’s role, human response, and leadership implications of the four previously described theodicies. Consistent with an understanding of suffering as punishment, leaders who ascribe to the concept of divine retribution seek to resolve suffering by fostering the moral transformation of their followers. According to the understanding of suffering as divine pedagogy, leaders who believe that God intended Hurricane Katrina to serve as an opportunity for character and faith formation would encourage the moral development of their followers instead of dwelling upon their pain or anguish. Within the tradition of protest theodicy, leaders acknowledge and empathize with their followers’ feelings of abandonment. Leaders ascribing to the Co-Suffering Son of God theodicy emphasize to their followers that God experienced the pain of Katrina alongside them; they can also aid in developing just organizational structures and encourage follower participation and initiative in rebuilding the city.

In the following chapters, I examine how these theodicies and their leadership implications are represented in various post-Katrina sermons. A certain amount of variability exists amongst these sermons, which I have drawn from journals and church websites and which date from several months after Hurricane Katrina until the storm’s three-year anniversary. The sermons represent a number of faith traditions, including Roman Catholicism, Episcopalianism, Unitarian-Universalism, and non-denominational Christianity as well as several geographic

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51 Sermons were found through searching ATLA database, various internet sites, and the library at Union-PSCE as well as through contacting New Orleans churches found in the yellow pages.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Retributive Justice</th>
<th>Divine Pedagogy</th>
<th>Protest Theodicy</th>
<th>Co-Suffering Son of God</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>God's Role</strong></td>
<td>God wills that Hurricane Katrina would serve as punishment for the transgressions of the people of New Orleans.</td>
<td>God intends that the hurricane would serve as an opportunity for character and faith formation.</td>
<td>God stands silent as those suffering quarrel with and question divine purposes.</td>
<td>God in Christ shares in the suffering of Hurricane Katrina through the crucifixion and overcomes this suffering in the resurrection.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Human Response</strong></td>
<td>Citizens must repent of their sinful practices.</td>
<td>Citizens must use the suffering as a way to improve humanity.</td>
<td>Citizens protest against the inaction of God and plead for a return to a covenant that God seems to have forgotten.</td>
<td>Ministry of Presence: Citizens take comfort in knowing that Christ is amidst them in their suffering and that their suffering has a redemptive nature and/or citizens partake in acts of service.</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Christopraxis: Citizens have a responsibility to rebuild both the physical and social structures of New Orleans.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Leadership Implications</strong></td>
<td>Leaders concern themselves with the moral transformation of their followers.</td>
<td>Leaders do not dwell on suffering, but rather encourage their followers to forge ahead and to grow as human beings.</td>
<td>Leaders acknowledge feelings of abandonment and encourage them to consider other responses such as Christopraxis.</td>
<td>Leaders aid in developing just organizational structures and encourage follower participation and initiative in the rebuilding of the city.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
locations, including but not limited to Louisiana, Tennessee, Texas, and North Carolina, and New York. While this diversity certainly adds texture and depth to the analysis on theodicy and its leadership implications, certain biases must also be recognized. First, the complex matrix of geography, society, and culture will undoubtedly affect the response to such a politically- and emotionally-charged event as Hurricane Katrina. Additionally, one must also note the socio-economic bias involved in pulling sermons from the internet, for certainly not all churches have the means to make their sermons available online.

With these notes in mind, I have organized the following chapters according to each theodicy, treating the sermons of each school of thought as reflections upon the hurricane and divine and human responses. After interpreting each sermon’s theological explanation of Hurricane Katrina, I use these explanations to assess what leadership implications might follow. Readers will also notice that some sermons reappear in several different contexts. I hope that the multiple appearances of some of these sermons serve to demonstrate the multi-faceted nature of suffering and the innumerable ways that both New Orleanians and other citizens within the United States have come to deal with and understand the suffering of Hurricane Katrina.

Some religious leaders drew on various theological frames to make sense of the tragedy and to call their followers to action, and the following chapters present a more detailed look at four theodicies which leaders used to conceptualize suffering: divine retribution, divine pedagogy, protest theodicy, and Co-Suffering Son of God. Although each perspective has its own merits, no one theodicy can stand as the ultimate description of God’s role in the hurricane, and no one response is holistic enough to serve as the definitive response to human suffering. However, the following discussions are meant to stimulate readers to think critically about
various conceptions of suffering and about the emotional, social, psychological, and spiritual implications of those conceptions.
Chapter 2 – Divine Retribution

*I will carry out great vengeance on them and punish them in my wrath. Then they will know that I am the Lord, when I take vengeance on them.*

-Ezekiel 25:7

Proponents of the theodicy of divine retribution in the context of Hurricane Katrina maintain that God used the storm to serve as punishment for the moral transgressions of the people of New Orleans. Many are well-acquainted with this concept, as it has circulated widely throughout the media and has been applied to explain other social and natural disasters. For example, evangelist Pat Robertson claimed in January 2010 that the earthquake in Haiti was punishment for the Haitians’ pact to the devil. They said ‘we will serve you if will get us free from the French’...so the Devil said, ‘O.K., it’s a deal.’ and they kicked the French out. The Haitians revolted and got themselves free but ever since they have been cursed by one thing after the other.”

Not only do such arguments presuppose certain socio-political and religious beliefs, they also generally reflect a poor understanding of the cultural context of a given situation as well as flagrant insensitivity to the suffering in question. In the following pages, I present several examples of messages from conservative pastoral leaders who have used divine retribution as explanation—and sometimes justification—of the suffering induced by Hurricane Katrina. After examining these arguments and their implications, I offer examples of more progressive leaders who have also interpreted the hurricane as divine punishment, but who have done so through a politically- and socially-liberal lens. The chapter will conclude with various critiques of this theodicy.

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Fr. Louis J. Campbell is one such pastoral leader who has used the theodicy of retributive justice to explain God’s role in the storm as a punitive one. In his sermon “Mane, Thecel, Phares” given on September 18, 2005, Campbell attempts to explain Hurricane Katrina in light of Biblical narratives; he begins, “Why do we have destructive hurricanes like Katrina? Katrina must be examined in the light of Holy Scripture. Remember the great flood God sent in the time of Noah! Remember the fire and brimstone that fell upon the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah!” While Campbell states that “the people of New Orleans, Biloxi, and other devastated areas are neither more nor less sinful than the rest of us,” he emphasizes that these cities have failed to repent of their wrongdoings, and “Jesus Himself pronounces terrible judgments against those who are indifferent to His word.”

Campbell’s message is clear, and it is characteristic of many who believe that suffering comes as punishment from God: believers must repent of their sinful practices. In this particular sermon, the clergyman cites what he perceives as libertine social activities to be the cause of the hurricane; he points to Mardi Gras as evidence of sinful revelry that brought upon God’s wrath: “God’s judgment is provoked when at Mardi Gras, the day before the penitential season of Lent, people are behaving like the idolatrous Israelites cavorting and carousing before the golden calf.” Not only does Campbell use this theodicy to place blame upon the people of New Orleans, he arouses fear and anxiety when he suggests that God could inflict such calamity upon his own congregants in Stafford, TX, if they do not also repent of their sins. He states, “and this is only the tip of the iceberg. The destruction and loss of life caused by the terrible hurricane

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54 Ibid.
55 Ibid.
Katrina, is a lesson for all of [sic] to repent of our sins, to do penance, and to change our way of living—before the chastisement comes.”

Campbell continues his sermon with a discussion on the role of grace in such calamity, but he wavers between declaring that God’s grace has been removed from the people who suffered from the hurricane and claiming that the resultant suffering was grace itself, inasmuch as it allowed the sufferers to repent and thus escape eternal damnation. He quotes St. Alphonsus Liguori at length:

> When there is no true repentance, does the time of grace come to an end to be succeeded by chastisement? St. Alphonsus Liguori warns us: “God, as the Apostle says, ‘will have all men to be saved’ (1 Tim. 2:4); but He also wishes us all to labor for our own salvation...[by] obeying Him when He calls us to repentance. Sinners hear the calls of God, but they forget them, and continue to offend Him. But God does not forget them. He numbers the graces which He dispenses, as well as the sins which we commit. Hence, when the time which He has fixed arrives, God deprives us of His graces, and begins to inflict CHASTISEMENT.”

However, although Campbell implies that the hurricane was an indication that “the time of grace [had] come to end,” this is not precisely what St. Alphonsus indicates several lines later. Campbell continues to quote St. Alphonsus, stating that “tribulation...is a punishment inasmuch as it has been drawn down upon him by his sins; but it is a grace, and an important grace, inasmuch as it may ward eternal destruction from him.” He uses St. Alphonsus’s words to describe Hurricane Katrina as “an assurance that God means to deal mercifully with him if he look [sic] into himself, and receive with thankfulness that tribulation which has opened his eyes to his miserable condition, and invites him to return to God.”

Although Campbell quotes St. Alphonsus extensively, he never fully fleshes out what he means in reference to “grace.” At first, he tells his congregants that God “deprives us of His

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57 Ibid.
58 Ibid.
59 Ibid.
graces" when the time has come that we have for too long ignored the call to repentance. Later on, Campbell says that the ‘tribulation’ of the storm was itself a grace inasmuch as it served as an invitation “to return to God.” While his language is less than specific, Campbell’s homily clearly reinforces the idea that one’s spiritual well-being is more important than physical well-being; in this context, inflicting earthly suffering is an act of mercy from God, for according to Campbell, to endure eternal spiritual suffering as the result of earthly sin is the obviously more heinous outcome.

The espousal of this sharp dichotomy between the relative unimportance of material/physical as compared to immaterial/spiritual well-being, in conjunction with the belief that tribulation is merciful punishment from God, bears weighty significance for the way leaders such as Fr. Campbell understand and communicate to their listeners the nature of suffering. For example, individuals who approach spirituality primarily as the means by which to save their souls tend to focus on the gravity of personal sin, and this way of thinking may allow its adherents to more easily ignore the enormity of structural injustices. Moreover, it will be difficult for someone who thinks the way Campbell does to feel empathy for those who suffer from such structural injustices as were revealed after Hurricane Katrina. After all, according to this pastoral leader, any kind of distress someone encounters is because she’s done something wrong in the first place, and earthly suffering doesn’t even really matter anyway, except to move a sinner to moral repentance.

Conservative pastor and televangelist John Hagee, whose comments regarding Nazism, Catholicism, Islam, and homosexuality have stirred controversy in past years, is another leader who has used fire and brimstone language to describe the retributive justice of God. In 2006, Hagee remarked that “New Orleans had a level of sin that was offensive to God, and they are—
were—recipients of the judgment of God for that." In an interview with NPR’s Terry Gross, he explains that he “believe[s] that the Hurricane Katrina was, in fact, the judgment of God against the city of New Orleans” because “there was to be a homosexual parade there on the Monday that the Katrina came [and] the promise of that parade was that it was going to reach a level of sexuality never demonstrated before in any of the other Gay Pride parades.” Hagee continues, “I believe that the judgment of God is a very real thing. I know that there are people who demur from that, but I believe that the Bible teaches that when you violate the law of God, that God brings punishment sometimes before the day of judgment.” When asked if “the whole city was punished because of things like the forthcoming gay pride parade,” Hagee responded: “This is true. All of the city was punished because of the sin that happened there in that city.”

Notably, Hagee references the day of judgment as in the same way that Campbell does: both pastoral leaders argue that punishment before one’s “judgment day” is an opportunity to repent. However, while Campbell does not say explicitly who should be held responsible for the “cavorting and carousing before the golden calf,” Hagee states boldly that the entire city of New Orleans was held responsible for the “sin” of the Southern Decadence Festival. Intelligently unpacking the rest of Hagee’s comments is difficult, as the purported logic of his argument does not withstand scrutiny. For example, why hasn’t another city with a large gay population been punished for celebrations similar to Decadence Fest? Conversely, why were areas like Mississippi punished by God through Katrina when those residents had nothing to do with the “sin” that Hagee references? Moreover, how could Hagee defend the parameters of responsibility for such a claim?

61 Ibid.
Two years later, Hagee drew back from his comments about New Orleans, stating that “as a believing Christian, I see the hand of God in everything that happens here on earth, both the blessings and the curses. But ultimately neither I nor any other person can know the mind of God concerning Hurricane Katrina. I should not have suggested otherwise.” While it is not clear why Hagee recanted his inflammatory comments, readers could reasonably assume that he did so because of social pressures and not because he suddenly changed his views about the explanations of suffering.

Meanwhile, other pastors around the country were also pointing to (what they perceived to be) hedonistic festivals and traditions of New Orleans including Mardi Gras and Decadence Festival as the reasons that God inflicted the city with such destruction. In his pastoral letter, “Remember and Repent,” Walter Russell asks, “Is it really a coincidence that a city known for depravity was condemned (literally) by God? That the casinos of another city were moved by the force of a storm surge?” In the aftermath of the hurricane, Rev. Bill Shanks, pastor of New Covenant Fellowship of New Orleans, also states that God cleansed New Orleans through the hurricane, claiming “New Orleans is now abortion free. New Orleans now is Mardi Gras free. New Orleans now is free of Southern Decadence and the sodomites, the witchcraft workers, false religion—it’s free of all those things now.” According to Shanks, God wiped New Orleans’s slate clean: “God simply, I believe, in His mercy purged all of that stuff out of there—and now we’re going to start over again.”

65 Ibid.
As Shanks expresses, many others also saw the destruction resulting from the flood as the opportunity to repent and build New Orleans anew in the image of socio-political and religious conservatism. Russell explained that Hurricane Katrina provided the opportunity to re-create a more moral (read: socially conservative) society. He writes,

I believe we can...hold fast and make a difference. We must stop being tasteless salt. We must get out from under the bushel! Maybe that is how Katrina can be a pure and holy blessing to us. If we repent and turn to God and shepherd our nation back to God.66

Russell wrote in the same pastoral letter that because “we have not preached and lived God’s Word...we are guilty of this great judgment brought upon our nation by God.” Russell calls “to all the followers of Jesus to join me in repenting for our great sin.”67 Whereas Hagee maintained that New Orleans was responsible for its own suffering, Russell at least acknowledges some mutual responsibility amongst Americans for the storm—even if that mutual responsibility is to collectively repent of our national moral corruption. Although Russell implies that God punished New Orleans specifically for its “depravity,” he interprets this chastisement as a warning for the entire nation, calling policy makers and citizens alike to repent of their sin:

I appeal to all mayors, congressmen and governors, all civic and political leaders, if they claim to be followers of Christ, to change their way doing business in our cities. Do not invite Southern Decadence, the biggest gay event in the South, which was to happen in New Orleans on Labor Day weekend (but God obviously shut it down), to come back to New Orleans (if there is a New Orleans to come back to). Do not rebuild the casinos in Gulfport. Let us all turn our hearts toward God. What else needs to happen to our nation before we will listen?68

Russell’s approach to repentance is drastically different from Campbell’s, who exhorted his parishioners to tend to their own souls. Instead, Russell argues that personal repentance is not sufficient; believers must also appeal to national authorities and representatives in asking them to

66 Russell, “Remember and Repent.”
67 Ibid.
68 Ibid.
rebuild not only New Orleans, but the entire nation, in the image of Christian conservatism.

Whereas Campbell is not concerned with infrastructure, Russell believes it is imperative that believers become civically engaged citizens so as to shape the public sphere according to their religious views. While it would be false to claim that religious convictions do not influence other leaders’ views on issues of public interest, Russell’s response is particularly alarming because it is possible that his extreme convictions—if translated into public policy—would institutionalize religious and social intolerance.

Another pastor, Chuck Baldwin, also wrote in a September 2005 newsletter of his concern for the moral state of the country in light of Hurricane Katrina. Claiming that “the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, should have been a wake up call for America,” Baldwin despairs that “we have continued our sinful ways as a people and as a government.”69 In this newsletter, Baldwin points to various indulgences as the reasons for which God used Hurricane Katrina as a signal for repentance: “Washington, D.C., is intoxicated with power, the American people are intoxicated with pleasure, and churches and pastors are intoxicated with prosperity.”70

While numerous pastors pointed to abortion, homosexuality, and general debauchery as the “sins” for which New Orleans was punished, more progressive Christians have also drawn upon the precepts of divine retribution, emphasizing that perhaps God punished the city of New Orleans for its sin of mistreating marginalized populations. This difference in interpretation can be understood in terms how someone appealing to the theodicy of retributive justice might understand the violence in New Orleans. Although pastoral leaders such as Campbell, John Hagee, and Walter Russell might claim New Orleans was punished for its inordinate amounts of violence, more progressive leaders might interpret the hurricane as a punishment for failing to

70 Ibid.
evaluate social infrastructure, rather than blaming those caught in a cycle of poverty. Along those same lines, Dr. Samuel Wells cites neglect of the poor as reason to fear the anger of God; he writes,

Deep may we ponder the mystery of his creative purpose, the beauty of wind and wave and yet the ghastliness of hurricane and flood. And anxiously may we fear his anger against those who reject his grace and mercy, those who harden their hearts against the destitute, exploit the desperate, and withhold the abundance of his good gifts from those in plight and scarcity.\(^1\)

While Wells does not explicitly state that the hurricane was sent as punishment, neither does he entirely discount the possibility of divine retribution against those who do not tend to the needs of the impoverished. Similarly Archbishop Alfred Hughes of New Orleans leaves open the possibility of divine retribution. He states,

The word ‘hurricane’ comes from a West Indian word that means ‘divine wind.’ Katrina means ‘cleansing.’ On this second anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, can we pray that the divine wind of the Holy Spirit cleanse us of what was not right in the old New Orleans, that we might know new life in a new New Orleans.\(^2\)

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Although one could certainly pick out Biblical passages which describe a vengeful God, relying upon this particular theodicy to explain natural disaster both fails to acknowledge the compassionate aspects of God’s character as also revealed in Scripture as well as potentially allows individuals to distance themselves from systemic problems such as poverty and racism. Of course, how one interprets divine retribution will certainly be dependent upon her concept of sin, but those who appeal to this theodicy overwhelmingly identify the sins of New Orleans as related to homosexuality, “false” religious practices, and the celebration of Mardi Gras.


Other pastoral leaders reject the theodicy of retributive justice altogether. In his sermon “In All Things,” Lutheran Mark D. Ridley criticizes this concept of divine retribution. He describes this theodicy as “ridiculous...sub-Chr...think...and explains that “people often think that way when they need to believe that, somehow, everything is ‘under control.’ They invent a reason for everything that happens, so the world doesn’t seem too scary. And the reason they usually seize on is God.”73 Philosopher of social science René Girard and Catholic theologian Raymund Schwager would perhaps agree with these claims, arguing that reliance upon the idea of divine retribution also allows humans to avoid acknowledging their own shortcomings. By “projecting violence on to deities,” humans defer taking responsibility for their mistakes and merely use God as a scapegoat.74 This shirking of civic responsibility appears clearly in Campbell’s sermons, in which he says, “We must learn from Katrina. Not how to respond to a natural disaster. We’ll let the President and FEMA work on that. What we must learn is that the handwriting is on the wall for America, just as it was for the king of Babylon.”75

While the theodicy of retributive justice maintains that suffering is a message from God, so too does the theodicy of divine pedagogy. However, while the first category interprets this message as one of repentance, the next chapter will describe in what ways suffering can be interpreted as a message of teaching and spiritual instruction.

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74 Chester, 497.
75 Campbell, accessed 12 April 2010.
Chapter 3 – Divine Pedagogy

You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am.

- John 13:13

Divine pedagogy explains suffering as a force which will ultimately refine an individual’s faith and character and interprets devastating circumstance as a means to becoming a more actively engaged disciple. Sewanee lecturer in New Testament James Dunkly says in his sermon, “In the Same Boat,”

The church’s common task is to reflect on the lessons we must have heard and learn from them what we can. For we Christians are a community of disciples, of learners, people gathered round the word of God written in Scripture so that we might listen for the word of God spoken in our hearts and in our lives. What can we learn from Katrina, then, and from today’s lessons? 76

Generally, divine pedagogy encourages the concept of trial as opportunity: the opportunity to grow closer to God or to become a better neighbor. But while this theodicy often deals explicitly with motifs surrounding increased spiritual dependence as well as community interdependence, it could also be more broadly interpreted as “blessing in disguise.” Whereas divine retribution claims suffering is punishment from the Lord, divine pedagogy puts forth that this suffering is a display of God’s love, for it allows believers to grow in their religious and spiritual commitments.

In some ways, divine pedagogy may sound strikingly similar to retributive justice; in fact, they may sound like two sides of the same coin. On the one hand, suffering is interpreted as God’s merciful punishment used to induce repentance, and on the other, suffering is interpreted as God’s love that will teach believers to learn from and rectify past mistakes. A key distinction

between these two theodicies is that the first puts forth that God *inflicts* suffering, while the second maintains that God *allows* it. Generally, two explanations exist that defend why God would allow such suffering: only goodness issues from a good God, and while suffering was not a part of this God’s plan, God does not intervene so as to respect the free will of human beings; or while God does not inflict suffering, it is still a part of the divine plan.

Those who believe that suffering is a part of God’s plan tend to use language of blessing and opportunity to describe tribulation. This particular conception of suffering harkens back to Leibniz’s “best possible world” theory, which maintains that any evil or suffering contributes to “maximiz[ing] the amount of good in creation.” Because the best possible world theory has a more utilitarian justification for the existence of suffering—as opposed to this second theodicy’s focus on the improvement of faith and character—Leibniz’s theory could constitute a theodicy independent from *divine pedagogy*. However, the two share several important theoretical arguments, and a brief look at Leibniz’s best possible world theory will shed light upon an understanding of the type of *divine pedagogy* which asserts suffering is a part of God’s plan.

Leibniz introduces his work *Essays on the Justice of God and the Freedom of Man in the Origin of Evil* by acknowledging that man’s freedom “appears incompatible with divine nature” and that God appears to be involved with the existence of evil, producing “the principle difficulty…that it seems the evil will itself cannot exist without co-operation, and even without some predetermination, on his part, which contributes towards begetting this will in man.”

Even if God is not actively responsible for the world’s evil, it would appear God is at least complicit with it through the allowance of its existence.

Conceding that reason is “at the service of faith,” Leibniz replies to the difficulties described above by claiming that an omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly good God would,

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77 Leibniz, 140-41.
without a doubt, have created the best possible world. To argue that this world is not the best possible would be to argue that “there would be something to correct in the actions of God”; moreover, Leibniz claims, “if there were not the best among all possible worlds, God would not have produced any.”

To the critic who argues that God could have created a world without suffering, Leibniz responds that this world would not have been the best, by virtue of the fact that it was simply not the one that God created.

Leibniz points to Romans 5:12 in suggesting the necessity of suffering in the world: “yet where sin abounded, grace did much more abound.” Leibniz uses this passage to argue that the apostles “tend[ed] to maintain that a sequence of things where sin enters in may have been and has been, in effect, better than another sequence without sin.” He argues that “an imperfection in the part may be required for a greater perfection in the whole” and cites both St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas as having argued that “the permission of evil tends towards the good of the universe.”

New Orleans Catholic Archbishop Alfred Hughes appeals to Leibniz’s best possible world model in his “Homily on Anniversary of Katrina” given in 2007. Archbishop Hughes acknowledges that “the struggle has been challenging, filled with exhausting labors and daunting tasks” but insists that through these trials “we have learned...that for those who love God, everything turns to good,” as St. Paul says in Romans 8:28.

C.S. Lewis also concedes that suffering is necessary for perfection in Christ. In his work *The Problem of Pain*, he argues that humans’ distorted understanding of love as mere kindness is what (mis)shapes our understanding of pain. He writes that “the problem of reconciling human suffering with the existence of a God who loves, is only insoluble so long as we attach a trivial

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78 Leibniz, 145.
79 Ibid., 147.
80 Ibid., 424.
81 Hughes, 222.
meaning to the word ‘love.’” He explains, “there is kindness in Love: but Love and kindness are not coterminous, and when kindness...is separated from the other elements of Love, it involves a certain fundamental indifference to its object, and even something like contempt of it.” Kindness is merely concerned with its object’s escape from suffering, even if this escape involves the very “removal of its object,” whereas Love is something “more stern and splendid...and in its own nature, demands the perfecting of the Beloved.” The process of becoming perfect in Christ is not without suffering, for as Lewis points out—albeit much more eloquently—pressure makes diamonds. In this way, Lewis’s ideas coincide with divine pedagogy’s conception of a Divine Parent who loves by allowing education to take place through suffering.

Neither Leibniz nor Lewis attempts to explain away suffering; however, both agree upon its necessity for the existence of good. While both of these authors communicate clearly that suffering is ultimately a part of God’s plan, most pastoral leaders surveyed in this chapter do not address whether or not they believe this. They do, however, address the suffering as education in general, and while this education encompasses various topics, preachers often use the events surrounding Hurricane Katrina as lessons of spiritual dependence on God as well as human interdependence. In some cases, leaders draw upon the foundation of divine pedagogy without explicitly acknowledging it as such; in other instances, preachers put forth these same lessons while more directly insisting it is God who seeks to teach disciples through this calamity. For example, Archbishop Hughes frames his message in human terms—“we who survived Katrina have had to relearn some important lessons”—without ever directly stating God’s role as

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83 Ibid., 36.
84 Ibid., 36, 41.
teacher. He instead uses the hurricane as a historical event through which to express spiritual truths that believers often lose sight of. On the other hand, in his sermon “Grab Your Rescuer—And Hold On,” popular conservative Christian author and minister Max Lucado directly accredits the teaching to God: “What are we to learn from all of this?...There are some spiritual lessons that I think God would want us to learn through this tragedy.” Whether clergy say that we learn from Katrina or from God, all those who draw upon divine pedagogy agree that the hurricane (or perhaps, God in the hurricane) created the space for spiritual commitment to flourish.

Often, preachers who invoke the themes of divine pedagogy interpret Hurricane Katrina as an opportunity for the renewal of a commitment to God. For example, Thomas R. Ward of the Episcopalian Church, in his sermon “Blessed be the Name of the Lord!” prays that Katrina would “deepen our dependence on God.” He describes Job, completely stripped of his dignity, who clings to the Lord in his time of distress; Ward says, “So what do we do? We do what Job did. We worship God. We come in our helplessness, open ourselves to God, and we say, ‘Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked I shall return; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.’” Similarly, Max Lucado uses Katrina as a representation of life’s trials in general and calls for spiritual transformation in response to tragedy. Lucado points out that these trials expose not only physical or geographic vulnerabilities, but more importantly, the vulnerability of the human spirit. He says, “and when the Katrinas of life blow in, our true nature is revealed and our deepest need is unveiled: a need

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85 Hughes, 222.
88 Ibid., 9.
deeper than food, more permanent than firm levees. We need, not a new system, but a new nature. We need to be changed from the inside out.”

Although Lucado does not specify what he means by a “new system,” his comments make clear that honing in on what personal lessons we can take from the storm easily obscures believers from attending to lessons regarding structural injustices. While Lucado may be right in his claim that “we need to be changed from the inside out,” this assertion fails to recognize that New Orleans also needs just organizational structures and proper storm protection.

Instead of choosing to emphasize the opportunity for spiritual growth or renewal as Lucado does, other preachers use Hurricane Katrina to teach about human solidarity. At first, Episcopalian James Dunkly draws attention to shared vulnerability in the face of such destruction. He says, “And we learn once again that the world is the same for all of us; no one can withstand a hurricane’s destruction or a flood’s devastation. All are equal before it.”

Shortly thereafter, he questions, “Or are we?” and states that “If it were the case that all stand equally defenseless before the hurricane’s might, then the poorest would not have suffered so much more grievously that those who were better off.” He thus uses Hurricane Katrina to allude to the inequality of social and economic conditions as well as the Christian responsibility to take care of one’s impoverished neighbor.

In addition, Dunkly outlines various lessons to take away from Katrina: expect government responses to disaster to be both highly politicized and unsatisfactory; be wary of those individuals who are “looking for opportunity to profit from the misery of others” while trusting others who “transcend those evils”; and finally, remain vigilant in having open hearts and ears—for “when we listen to those who have offended us, we find out something about the

90 Dunkly, 12.
91 Ibid.
other person's motivation, about how that person reads a situation we thought we had understood so completely." Dunkly places a particular emphasis on this last point, asking

And what happens if people begin to listen to one another? One learns perhaps that the offender considers himself or herself offended against, or ignored, or regarded as of no account—by us! One learns something about the offender's motive—ignorance, mistake, embarrassment—even need. How many "looters" in New Orleans were motivated by poverty rather than criminality?

By urging his congregants to "find a mirror" for themselves, Dunkly calls them to examine their relationships with those whose lives seem drastically distant from their own. Similarly, he encourages his listeners to search for commonalities in human motivation, and in doing so, promotes the exploration of interrelations amongst community as well as solidarity across class lines.

Although Dunkly briefly references Romans 3:23 in his discussion about listening to one another—"All have sinned and come short of the glory of God"—he does not fully synthesize the lesson of social responsibility towards one's neighbor with the aforementioned lessons on spiritual growth. Dunkly's point about encouraging solidarity across class lines is an important one and could have been made even more salient if Dunkly had not left a disconnect between the significance of human relationships and spiritual well-being.

While some preachers such as Dunkly do not explicitly address this relationship between spiritual growth and social responsibility, Archbishop Hughes is one leader who presents spiritual dependence and earthly interdependence as mutually inclusive. He emphasizes that the erratic and unpredictable nature of the storm serves as a reminder that "we are not really in control of our lives, however much we may have thought we were." Archbishop Hughes uses

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92 Dunkly, 14.
93 Ibid.
94 Ibid.
95 Hughes, 222.
this potentially jarring realization to call his listeners to greater humility, stating frankly that "we are dependent on God and interdependent on one another." 96 He continues, "We have learned that faith is the most powerful weapon in the face of adversity; [and] that acts of thoughtful kindness by strangers and to strangers strengthen solidarity and forge human community." 97

Although Archbishop Hughes does not explicitly condemn American consumerism, one can certainly interpret his comment on human community as a social criticism of the primacy Americans tend to place on financial independence and material acquisitions. Archbishop Hughes emphasizes the importance of human relationships over material possessions and states that "family relationships should never be taken for granted; [and] that people are far more important than the things we once possessed." 98 This theme is a common thread that weaves in and out of several other sermons, and Lucado also echoes this sentiment when he says, "Through Katrina, Christ tells us: stuff doesn’t matter, people do. Understand the nature of possessions." 99

However, while a criticism of Americans’ materialistic tendencies is in many cases warranted, the argument that Hurricane Katrina was an opportunity to learn about the importance of human relationships in some ways assumes that New Orleanians did not appreciate those relationships in the first place. Although this may serve as a feel-good lesson for those not living in New Orleans, claiming that New Orleanians didn’t appreciate their friends and families before the hurricane is potentially insulting and patronizing. Moreover, highlighting the importance of family is not much of a consolation to those who may have lost their loved ones in the storm.

Moreover, down-playing the importance of material possessions—or even glorifying the loss of them—is much easier to do from a seat of economic privilege. In his sermon "Hurricane

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96 Hughes, 222.
97 Ibid.
98 Ibid.
99 Hughes, 222; Lucado, accessed 12 April 2010.
Katrina,” Dr. Samuel Wells brings attention to the role that poverty played in determining families’ ability to respond to the storm:

Everyone who lives by the coast in Louisiana...knows perfectly well that when a warning comes, they need mighty quick to secure their homes, get in their cars, and head to their other home, or, in the event that they don’t have a second home, for their relatives, or a hotel some way in land. But what if you don’t have a car, what if you don’t have handy relatives, what if you don’t have money for a hotel? This week we have found the answer to that question. You die. If you don’t die, you enter the nightmare of squalor known as the Superdome.¹⁰⁰

However, although the lessons of divine pedagogy may potentially come across as belittling or emotionally distant, identifying areas of growth out of suffering is also a way for an individual to claim agency in a painful experience which she feels had imposed itself on her; in this way, the suffering can take ownership of a situation that had previously seemed hopeless. For example, Eric Dishongh told his Hickory Knoll Church of Christ congregation in River Ridge, LA that

People of God should never give up. No matter how bad the storms of life are, we still have to rely on God. And as I looked around my completely destroyed home and neighborhood and saw all the devastation, I realized that there are some things in life that just aren’t all that important. I still had my family and more importantly, I still had my God.¹⁰¹

After looking at his “completely destroyed home and neighborhood,” Dishongh finds strength in “these two lessons [that] are something worthy of holding on to.”¹⁰² This pastoral leader is able to take pride in his renewed appreciation for his family and for his faith despite the devastation which surrounds him, and with this sense of strength and pride, he has the ability to inspire hope within his congregants who are struggling with similar burdens.

¹⁰² Ibid.
But what if this approach to understanding suffering does not inspire followers? What if a suffering individual feels that in viewing her own tribulations as the opportunity for growth, her pastoral leader is flippantly dismissing the pain of her experience? The following chapter examines protest theodicy, according to which believers quarrel with and question divine purposes and perceive God as silent and inactive in the face of suffering.
Chapter 4 – Protest Theodicy

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning?

-Psalm 22:1

Protest theodicy deals explicitly with those who decry God’s perceived absence in the midst of their suffering. According to this third theodicy, God stands silent as believers protest the inaction of God and plead for a return to a covenant that God seems to have forgotten. This expression of both frustration towards and longing for God is expressed in Psalm 74:1-2. The psalmist asks

Why have you rejected us forever, O God?
   Why does your anger smolder against the sheep of your pasture?
Remember the people you purchased of old,
   The tribe of your inheritance, whom you redeemed—
   Mount Zion, where you dwelt.

A response of protest stands in opposition to the responses of retributive justice or divine pedagogy, according to which believers generally accept suffering without question; in the first theodicy, God inflicts suffering for the sake of punishment, and in the second, God allows suffering for the sake of spiritual growth. However, those who protest suffering refuse to accept its existence in this way. While protest theodicy may seem like the expression of faltering faith, I argue that it is instead the expression of a faith that trusts God enough to question divine purposes. For if those who protest suffering did not believe and trust in a good God, they would have nothing to protest in the first place; it is their very belief in the holiness of God that leads faithful people to question the evil they witness. Even within many psalms of lament, sentiments of trust and veneration characterize the psalmist’s questions; for example, Psalm 74 continues, “But you, O God, are my king from of old; You bring salvation upon the earth. The day is yours,
and yours also the night; You established the sun and the moon” (Ps.74:12, 16).

Pastoral leaders have used this particular form of theodicy to achieve various ends. First, some use this theological protest to directly empathize with those who suffer and to validate their experiences of anguish and despair. In other instances, preachers use this theodicy to encourage their congregants to empathize with the sufferer’s sense of abandonment or to promote community-building amongst those who have the shared experience of feeling abandoned. Finally, some leaders acknowledge this theodicy in order to redirect their congregants’ focus from feelings of abandonment to responses associated with other theodicies; for example, pastors may encourage followers, after or through protesting, to reflect on the ways that God is present in and consoles them in their suffering—a response that will be more closely examined in the following chapter on the Co-Suffering Son of God theodicy.

In her sermon “I Wonder about America,” Unitarian Universalist Rev. Lone I. Jensen uses protest theodicy to act as the voice of her congregation, acknowledging that the struggle to find God’s presence in suffering is a legitimate challenge; she says, “There is an African American poem that says: Reach out your hand children for God’s voice is in the storm. In the aftermath of Katrina those are hard words to hear. Where, if anywhere at all, is God in all of this?”103 As the psalmist does in Psalm 22, she laments the way God seems distant in both space and time.104 Jensen embraces the question of ‘where is God?” instead of merely dismissing it, and she stays with the pain of abandonment in the same way that Jesus did during the crucifixion, when Jesus cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mk 15:33).

In facing this question, Jensen affirms her congregants’ feelings of abandonment and in doing so,

creates the space needed for emotional or psychological healing to occur. The way that Jensen sits with this uncomfortable question is significant, for while many pastors acknowledge an element of protest in suffering, they are also quick to offer possible explanations for their congregants’ pain, perhaps in fear that any questioning of God will seem unfaithful.

James Turrell is one pastoral leader who openly expresses his personal anger at God, yet who is not comfortable remaining in a state of questioning and protest. At the very outset of his sermon Turrell acknowledges his own indignance towards God’s silence, stating plainly that this morning we heard readings about how a Christian community should function. And that frustrates me. In the wake of last week’s violent storm and the devastation not very far to our south, I think I want to hear something that speaks directly to our present circumstances—something that explains why this sort of thing happens, something that explains where we go from here.\(^\text{105}\)

Shortly thereafter, Turrell assures his congregation, and perhaps even himself, that “I know God does not send the storm. I know that God does not intervene in nature just to kill people. I know and believe that God is right there alongside every person who is suffering, a present help in time of need.”\(^\text{106}\) With these comments, Turrell points his followers to the fourth and last theodicy to be discussed in the following chapter, \textit{Co-Suffering Son of God}. Although Turrell is eager to provide an explanation for the suffering, namely, God’s own involvement in it, a thread of protest is woven throughout his comments. Turrell is honest in recognizing his own sense of bewilderment and finally insists, “But I want to hear a word in scripture that will explain it all, make sense of it all.”\(^\text{107}\) In Turrell’s case, the quick redirection from protest theodicy to alternate explanations may be less of a way to cover up any impression of doubtfulness and more of a way to make sense of a conundrum that seems inexplicable. The struggle for sense-making is even


\(^{106}\) Ibid.

\(^{107}\) Ibid.
evident in the title of the sermon, "So What Are We to Do?" Perhaps this yearning for sense-making is the very thing that prevents Turrell from being able to really immerse himself in the uncertainty of protest theodicy.

In other instances, pastoral leaders who were more removed from the trauma in New Orleans used protest theodicy to encourage their listeners to understand the significance of questioning God for those who suffered directly as a result of the flooding in New Orleans. In her sermon "Weak and Strong after Katrina" given on September 11, 2005, Fleming Rutledge reflects upon Psalm 6. The psalm begins, "O Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger or discipline me in your wrath./ Be merciful to me, O Lord, for I am faint; O Lord, heal me, for my bones are in agony./ My soul is in anguish. How long, O Lord, how long?" (Ps. 6:1-3). Rutledge begins, "think for a moment about how we read this Psalm...Context means so much, doesn’t it?...I don’t know about you, but it is my impression that most Episcopalians go through the psalms each Sunday as a matter of habit, without paying very much attention to the words." She continues, "But imagine yourself as a person suddenly without a home, without family, having spent four days in the hellish Superdome and now, marooned, sitting on a cot with thousands of other people and no privacy in a strange city—and you are reading this Psalm." Rutledge contextualizes the meaning of this Psalm for those in the midst of suffering and points out to her congregants, "It [Psalm 6] has a different urgency in those circumstances, doesn’t it?" In situations as desperate as many of those post-Katrina, Rutledge emphasizes the importance of the

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108 In her compilation *Not Ashamed of the Gospel* from which this sermon was drawn, the author did not identify the location at which the sermon was given. She explains in the introduction, "generally speaking, I have identified the place where the sermon was preached if that information seems relevant. If the sermon seemed to me to be more generally applicable to any location, I have omitted such identification" (8).


110 Ibid.

111 Ibid.
words of Scripture as sustaining those who otherwise may have been without physical evidence of God’s presence in their lives; she explains, “You search the words for a message that might mean the difference between life with or life without hope. In such an extreme situation, it would make a great deal of difference to you to know whether these words from Scripture are truly a message from the living God.”

Another way that preachers draw upon protest theodicy is with the purpose of using unanswered questions to unite those who share in suffering. In his sermon “In All Things,” Pastor Mark D. Ridley responds to the concept of patient hope presented Romans 8:24-25, which reads “For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.” (Rom. 8:24-25). Ridley acknowledges that although “sometimes I get pretty impatient in my waiting,” “Paul’s right—we have to hope for what we don’t yet see, and we have to keep on clinging to that hope for all we’re worth.” According to Ridley, questions and demands do not contradict the presence of this hope in a sufferer’s life; instead, he maintains that the way we sit with questions is an act of hope in itself. Moreover, this waiting must take place in community. He says, “And in the meantime, we live and wait in a world where tragedy strikes one person, and another later, and leaves few if any of us untouched. It’s a world where our questions have to wait, along with us.” When it may seem as if God remains silent in the presence of suffering, Ridley asserts that it is in those very circumstances that humans must take on one another’s questions and distress. He explains, “As we wait for this fallen and unfair world to be redeemed—as we wait for that day when all pain and death and sorrow are behind—as we wait, we wait together. And that means that another human being’s need is our need; another person’s

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112 Rutledge, 386.
113 Ridley, 6, accessed 12 April 2010.
114 Ibid.
tragedy is our tragedy. We are God’s gift to one another.” Pastor Ridley’s point that we are not alone in our suffering is one that is also emphasized under the fourth theodicy, Co-Suffering Son of God. In bringing his congregants together in this way, he does not rush them into abandoning their protest, but makes it possible for them to ask difficult questions in community with one another.

Other pastoral leaders use protest theodicy to more directly shepherd their congregants towards the Co-Suffering Son of God model of theodicy—the recognition that although the traditionally conceived God as Father may seem absent from their suffering, God in Christ is fully present there. One pastor in South Bay, California who addressed the suffering from Katrina admits that “maybe it is too easy for me to talk like this. Those of us who are not experiencing suffering have to be very careful when we talk about what it means to suffer.”

She continues, “I am acutely aware of the fact that I am waxing poetic about the theological meaning of a hurricane when I am thousands of miles away, dry and unscathed.” However, although this leader acknowledges that she is far removed from the suffering taking place in New Orleans and states that “I have no right to tell someone who has lost everything in a natural disaster that it is inappropriate to be angry at God,” she subtly expresses the view that because God has preemptively answered their desperate calls, protest theodicy is perhaps unnecessary. She says, “Yet I believe that even as the shouts of frustration and cries of lamentation are hurled at God, God continues to console the inconsolable. God continues to be an ever-present source of strength and courage and comfort and peace.” This particular pastor encourages her congregants to move towards dealing with suffering in such a way that is consistent with the theodicy I

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115 Ridley, 6, accessed 12 April 2010.
describe in the following chapter, but does so in an attempt to divert the anger and frustration that is commonly associated with protest theodicy.

On the other hand, other pastoral leaders point their congregants towards the Co-suffering Son of God model while still validating the reality of their anguish as expressed through theological protest. For example, Samuel Wells references the Nicene Creed when he says that “if we truly believe God is almighty, well may we come to him in horror at this catastrophe in his created order, well may we rail against him for the many injustices of the story—the loss of life, the punishment of the poor, the devastation of livelihoods.” However, after Wells emphasizes with feelings of anger towards and abandonment by God, he transitions from exploring this protest to reminding his listeners about the implications of the crucifixion. He says,

But let not that be all we say about the story of God. Let us remember, when we wonder why God doesn’t do something, that he has already done something...Of all the catastrophes of the world, one stands alone: and that is the catastrophe that we rejected God’s loving offer in Jesus. He died a terrible death. However low we go, even to the superdome itself, we need never look up to Jesus- only sideways: he went that low too. All God’s anger against human depravity- and we have seen plenty of depravity this week, in many aspects of this tragedy—all God’s anger was experienced by Jesus on the cross.

This conception of theodicy, which I name the Co-suffering Son of God model, often proceeds from expressions of protest theodicy. According to this last model, God in Christ shares in the suffering of Hurricane Katrina through the crucifixion and overcomes this suffering in the resurrection. As described in previous examples, pastors responding to those who are protesting divine purposes often shepherd their congregants towards this particular theodicy. While the Co-Suffering Son of God model may seem like a neat resolution of the anger expressed in protest,

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118 Ibid.
this fourth and final theodicy is often expressed in many different ways and elicits a wide variety of human responses, which will be examined more carefully in the following chapter.
Chapter 5 – Co-Suffering Son of God

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

-Rom. 8:37-39

The previous chapter on protest theodicy explored many of the ways in which leaders respond to followers’ cries of abandonment after Hurricane Katrina. While some pastoral leaders are comfortable with questioning divine purposes, most others briefly nod at their congregants’ perception that God is absent in their suffering, then quickly make a point about lessons to be learned or about God in Christ’s communal suffering with humanity. This communal suffering provides the foundation for the fourth and final theodicy, the Co-Suffering Son of God model, which maintains that God in Christ not only experiences human suffering through the crucifixion, but overcomes it in the resurrection. Because those who identify with protest theodicy often ask ‘how could God sit back and let this happen?’ the Co-Suffering model of theodicy is often presented as an answer to this question. For while it may seem that God has not intervened in suffering, this theodicy explains that God has already experienced the full depth of human suffering through the crucifixion; humans model that experience by being with one another and by working to prevent similar destruction from future disasters.

In his sermon “Hurricane Katrina,” Samuel Wells holds up Christ’s suffering on the cross as a resolution to the feelings of abandonment associated with protest theodicy. He writes, “Let us remember, when we wonder why God doesn’t do something, that he has already done something...He died a terrible death. However low we go, even to the superdome itself, we need
never look up to Jesus—only sideways: he went that low too.”

Wells justifies what is perceived as God’s inaction in the face of suffering with the crucifixion, during which Christ took on human experiences such as pain and abandonment. When Jesus cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mt. 27:46), echoing the psalmist’s supplication in Psalm 22, God in Christ faced the same abandonment that many felt after Hurricane Katrina. In redirecting attention from feelings of desertion to the implications of the crucifixion, Wells appeals to the Co-Suffering Son of God model of theodicy, which maintains that God has not abandoned believers but has instead assumed their own pain.

But ultimately, do we really want to believe in a God who suffers with us? What kind of help is a God who displays such weakness? Although the crucifixion is held up as the emblem of God’s solidarity in suffering with humanity, this event alone does not suffice to explain why believers should find comfort in Christ. Rather, the Co-Suffering Son of God model stands complete only when Christ’s crucifixion is taken into consideration with the promise of the resurrection. Wells, who began his sermon in response to those who felt that they had been abandoned, followed the explanation of the crucifixion with a discussion on the resurrection. He says, “But most importantly, death was overcome. The horror of Nature, its death and destruction, does not have the final word. Easter has the final word. So let’s never say ‘how can God do nothing?’ for God has already done everything.”

Similarly, in his sermon “Turning to the World in Christ’s Name,” William S. Stafford describes how the crucifixion and resurrection together constitute the fulfillment of this particular theodicy:

God has dealt with evil by sending Jesus, his Son, born of a woman in the midst of this shattered, lovely world, to suffer the full outcome of evil with us and for us, and in rising

120 Ibid.
from the dead, to open the way to the resurrection of all things. God has not responded to evil by controlling things from the outside, but by entering it and taking it into himself...the cross and resurrection of Jesus is the place to take this evil, too. It is the only place for us because it is the place where God is in the storm.\footnote{121}

As Stafford so clearly expresses in the previous passage, the dominant theme of the Co-Suffering Son of God model is that God in Christ both shares in the suffering of humans through the crucifixion as well as overcomes this suffering in the resurrection.

However, although the crucifixion and the resurrection must be jointly taken into consideration according to this perspective, it is worth noting that the language of the resurrection may be less fitting for communicating this model to the family members of those who had just died. A more appropriate initial pastoral response would perhaps be one centered on the crucifixion; instead of bypassing that grief, it may be more suitable for pastoral leaders to simply sit and mourn with those family members.

While God’s role in this theodicy is fairly well-defined and consistently understood, the human responses and leadership implications that follow are varied. The first common response to the Co-Suffering model is based upon a ministry of presence, in which believers take comfort and find strength in knowing that Christ is amidst them in their suffering. The leadership implications of this first response result largely in acts of individual service and literally standing present beside victims. In contrast, other Christians have interpreted this theodicy as the explanation for a religious obligation to partake in enacting social and systemic change. Leaders who appeal to or identify with this particular human response aid in developing just organizational structures and encourage congregants’ participation in and initiative of structural transformation. Although these two sets of responses issue from the same theodicy, significant differences exist between them. In the following sections, I examine in greater detail how

pastoral leaders use the *Co-Suffering Son of God* model to craft arguments in support of a ministry of presence in the face of suffering or in support of the active pursuit of social and structural improvements in New Orleans.

**Presence in the Midst of Suffering**

Some pastoral leaders draw upon the *Co-Suffering Son of God* model to present God’s share in human suffering as emotional solace and as a source of spiritual rejuvenation. Although these speakers do not necessarily ground their responses explicitly in the theology of the crucifixion and resurrection, they do draw upon this theodicy to communicate that God has not abandoned the suffering. Pastoral leaders who emphasize this shared suffering draw their congregants’ attention to God’s solidarity with creation. For example, in his sermon “Where is God in this Mess?” Thomas McKibbens says frankly,

If you have gathered with our church family today asking “Why this mess?” I can’t give you a theological answer. The mystery of human suffering and tragedy will remain a mystery as long as we are human. But if you have come today to asking “Where is God in this mess?” then I think we have an answer.

God is where God is always found: standing beside the weak and the broken, comforting those who have lost everything. God is working with and through the bravery of those engaged in rescue and recovery. God is walking with trained volunteers for the Red Cross and all the other helping agencies on the front lines of this tragedy. And...God is with us in this congregation as we give and volunteer and pray and organize...the God we know is in New Orleans and Biloxi and Gulfport, and even in my once-beautiful hometown of Laurel, binding up the wounds of the broken-hearted and giving strength to the weak.¹²²

Pastor Mark D. Ridley offered this similar consolation: “We’re not alone in our waiting. God is waiting with us. And God has promised that, no matter what befalls us in this fallen

world, God can make it right.” 123 Another leader said that “God is with the people stranded on rooftops. God is with the rescuers. God is with the looters. God is with those who hunt desperately for their lots and beloved fathers, brothers, daughters, and friends. To God, those folks are not lost.” 124 James Turrell also stated confidently in his sermon “So what are we to do?” that “I know and believe that God is right there alongside every person who is suffering, a present help in time of need.” 125 These comments serve as powerful forms of witness for those who have previously felt invisible, for these expressions of solidarity stand in sharp contrast to the assertion that God has abandoned creation.

Similarly, Bishop Brown explains the significance of the cross as a symbol of strength: “In the long run, we cling to the cross as the sign of God’s promise to stand by us and to give us courage, even the courage to overcome catastrophes like Katrina, Rita, and Ike.” He continues, “The cross was not the end of Jesus’ life. He rose from the dead. We need to keep that in mind, too, when we remember Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.” 126 In this way, human response to suffering within the Co-Suffering model is that believers can both take comfort in knowing that Christ shares in their anguish as well as trust that their suffering has a redemptive nature. By focusing on the resurrection, pastoral leaders accentuate the point that God in Christ’s crucifixion did not mark defeat; in fact, God in Christ’s resurrection marked victory. By comparing followers’ own experiences of suffering with Christ’s, pastoral leaders provide hope for the afflicted that just as Christ’s suffering was defeated, so too will their own suffering be redeemed.

This particular interpretation of the Co-Suffering model encompasses not only God’s solidarity in suffering with the human race, but also involves a reflection upon human

123 Ridley, 6.
125 Turrell, 19.
compassion. In fact, the word *compassion* is from the Latin *compati*, which can be broken into the roots *com-*, "together," and *pati*, "to suffer." With this reflection in mind, it follows that those who believe in a compassionate God would also seek to emulate that compassion on earth. In the case of Hurricane Katrina, this compassion often manifested itself in the shape in individual acts of service. Mark D. Ridley explains that hope in the resurrection undergirds these acts of service: "*that's* how a Christian 'waits’ for God’s promises: not by sitting and moaning, but by getting up and *helping* people when they need it. We wait—by *waiting* on others."\(^{127}\)

Samuel Wells agrees that Christ’s crucifixion can be a source of comfort and that the resurrection provides hope for the suffering, and he highlights the importance of acts of sorrow by drawing attention to the significance of the Pentecost that followed Christ’s reappearance on earth: “And after the resurrection God sent his Holy Spirit to transform and empower his people, to turn sorrow into dancing and waste places into springs of joy.”\(^{128}\) Although this “transformation” that Wells references could certainly be understood as a call for more systemic change, Wells himself interprets the Pentecost as evidence for the importance of individual acts of kindness and compassion. He views Hurricane Katrina through the lens of the Pentecost and in doing so, enumerates material ways that Christians had individually responded to Katrina’s dire circumstances.

> And we have seen the Holy Spirit this week. We have seen ordinary people offer moments of breathtaking kindness. We have seen glimpses of remarkable goodness, sacrificial selflessness, disarming generosity. There is no room on my boat: I shall swim so you can step on board. There is no more food: you can have mine. You have lost everything: everything that is mine is yours to share. You have no home: my home is your home.\(^{129}\)

\(^{127}\) Ridley, 6-7.
\(^{129}\) Ibid.
Although other pastoral leaders may hold up the magnitude of such disaster as Hurricane Katrina as a way to reveal the futility of human efforts, the pastors surveyed for the purpose of this work overwhelmingly used the idea of presence in the midst of suffering as an example of the significance of individual acts of service and compassion.

However, while ministry of presence frequently refers to these tangible acts of service such as rebuilding homes, this response to the Co-Suffering Son of God model can also refer to ways of simply being present with someone, as opposed to doing something as an indication of service. For example, sitting with someone and listening to her does not necessarily involve physical evidence of the service rendered, but it is an equally valuable expression of ministry of presence all the same.

**Christopraxis**

In contrast, the Christopraxis response to the Co-Suffering model interprets the Christian anticipation of future transformation as embodied by Christ’s death and resurrection as the responsibility to change unjust social structures. For example, Lone I. Jensen calls congregants to respond to the social problems that were exposed after the storm and to think long-term about those problems that have consistently plagued the United States:

> Unless we look deeper this will happen again. We must not forget...Poverty and racism pollute our nation’s soul. I don’t care what party you belong to, this should not happen again. Our faith calls us to action. This shall not happen again. The most vulnerable were hurt the most, the ill, the old and the very young...[sic]

But unless we listen and learn it will happen again...There have been many plans to both restore the wetlands and repair the levees. But these plans never made it through Congress because of the cost. 10 Billion dollars were the price of last big plan proposed in the nineties which seems like a real bargain now [sic]. We seldom look far enough ahead. The sense of history is missing. Short attention spans and short term solutions are sadly typical American characteristic [sic].

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Similarly, Rev. Harris Riordan addresses his congregation about prejudices such as classism and racism. He writes,

If there is any good to come out of this hurricane, it will be if those winds blow away our illusion that our nation is a class-less society...Certainly some poverty is a direct result of personal choice, but most of it is systemic. Those of us who by luck or hard work [who] have more must stop pretending we have no shared obligation to those who have less.

There are many ways to explain the prejudices away, and every one of them is an excuse. All of us should be outraged and make that sentiment known. Only if we are honest about the prevalence and power of institutionalized racism do we have any hope of someday becoming the America we already claim to be.\[131\]

Similarly, in his sermon “Katrina’s World,” Rev. McKinney provides his congregation with a sort of rallying call: “It’s time for those of us who care about social justice and who refuse to leave poor people—or anyone—behind, to find our voice and to call our country back to its promises. It is time we take back our country.”\[132\] In these instances, the three pastoral leaders interpret civic action as a religious responsibility; according to these pastors, if being a Christian requires working for social change, then Christians should do so in the most effective ways possible, which often necessitate involvement in the civic sphere.

Although these leaders did not outline specific measures towards social change in their sermons, New Orleans Archbishop Hughes uses the pulpit to delineate general policy changes that would be steps towards the creation of just social structures. He says,

Isaiah in the first reading today lifts up for us a vision of a kingdom of justice. We need to embrace a vision of a new and just New Orleans:

-where our youth receive quality education and formation;
-where violence no longer is committed in the womb, in the home and on the streets;
-where all are welcome no matter what race or culture or economic status;
-where the opportunity for affordable housing is available to all;
-where health care is truly accessible to all;


Immediately after describing these structural changes—which transcend traditional political lines—Archbishop Hughes describes personal initiatives that are equally important in the establishment of this “kingdom of justice.” He says, “In today’s Gospel message, Jesus offers in a sense a self-portrait even as he lays out the blueprint for discipleship: simplicity of life, meekness, compassion, purity of heart, courage in the face of adversity and willingness to give all even unto death.” He continues, “St. Paul summarizes for us the virtues we need: compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience and mutual forgiveness. He then insists that love, strong love, courageous love, must underline them all.” The way that Archbishop Hughes distinguishes between these different responses to a compassionate God is noteworthy, because it demonstrates that both Christopraxis as well as presence in the midst of suffering are necessary elements for the creation of a better New Orleans.

**Ministry of Presence and Christopraxis**

As Archbishop Hughes indicates, the question of individual acts of service versus systemic change is not an ‘either-or’ situation. Rather, it should be considered a ‘both-and’ situation, because individuals’ immediate needs must be met while long-term responses to the suffering of the hurricane must be developed at the same time. Because short-term and long-term needs are so wide-ranging, human responses and leadership implications of the Co-Suffering Son of God model will be varied. Those who identify with this theodicy may choose to become involved in faith-based rebuilding organizations such as Operation Nehemiah or Operation

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133 Hughes, 223.  
134 Ibid.  
135 Ibid.
Helping Hands. However, responses to this theodicy could also be made manifest in organizations which are not associated with faith, such as Common Ground Relief.

This theodicy has arguably the most tangible, if multi-faceted, implications for human responses and leadership roles. However, while the Co-Suffering Son of God model involves a wide array of potential outcomes, this theodicy alone is not fully adequate as a response to suffering. As will be discussed in the conclusion, these implications as well as the insights of other theodicies must be taken into account collectively, for no one theodicy and its responses are holistic enough to be applied within all contexts or to all followers.
In the five years after Hurricane Katrina, religious leaders and U.S. citizens have been witness to various other tragedies around the world, including the Virginia Tech shootings in April 2007, the January 2010 earthquake in Haiti, and the recent April 2010 plane crash which killed 97 Polish citizens and officials on a trip to Russia. Although each of these events is distinctive in its own way, they have all involved extraordinary suffering and have elicited human emotions similar to those experienced after Katrina, such as anger, confusion, bewilderment, or sorrow. While the categorization of theodicies within this thesis was crafted with Hurricane Katrina in mind, the various perspectives and responses examined may also prove valuable in contextualizing the suffering of other circumstances, as well. This thesis outlines several theodicies in order to challenge readers to consider the theological insights of each of framework; to examine how the theological concepts expressed on the pulpit shape congregants’ responses to suffering; and to think critically about the various implications of these responses. While this paper does not attempt to present one theodicy as the “right” understanding of God’s role in tragic events such as the ones mentioned above, it does attempt to reveal areas of tension that exist within and throughout these various perspectives.

In sum, the four theodicies described in the context of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina include *retributive justice, divine pedagogy, protest theodicy,* and *Co-Suffering Son of God.* Those who conceptualize God’s justice on earth in terms of retribution believe that Katrina served as punishment for the transgressions of the people of New Orleans and that citizens must repent of their sinful practices; the leadership implications of this first theodicy result in the encouragement of moral transformation of followers. A number of religiously conservative leaders consider this moral transformation as repentance of “sins” such as Mardi Gras or
Decadence Festival, whereas more progressive leaders may view moral transformation as better
treatment of the poor. Divine pedagogy maintains that God had intended for the hurricane to
serve as an opportunity for character and faith formation. Believers who identify with this
theodicy view suffering as a way to improve humanity, and consequently, leaders do not dwell
on suffering but rather encourage their followers to forge ahead and to grow as human beings.
Dunkly is one preacher who projects the suffering of Hurricane Katrina in this light; as
previously cited, he challenges his listeners to learn from the storm because “a community of
disciples, of learners... [must] listen for the word of God spoken in our hearts and in our
lives.” According to protest theodicy, the suffering quarrel with and question divine purposes
in the face of God’s perceived absence. While leaders acknowledge these feelings of
abandonment and affirm followers in their struggle, those who protest against the inaction of
God plead for a return to the covenant that God seems to have forgotten them. For example,
Jensen says in a sermon, “There is an African American poem that sys: Reach out your hand
children for God’s voice is in the storm. In the aftermath of Katrina those are hard words to hear.
Where, if anywhere at all, is God in all of this?” Finally, the Co-Suffering Son of God model
describes a God who shares in the suffering of Hurricane Katrina through the crucifixion and
overcomes this suffering in the resurrection. Human responses to Co-Suffering Son of God
include a ministry of presence as well as Christopraxis. Presence of ministry describes those who
take comfort in a God who suffers with humanity, and leaders encourage believers to be present
to neighbors as well as to engage in acts of service. Ridley uses hope in the resurrection to
inspire individual acts of service when he says, “that’s how a Christian ‘waits’ for God’s
promises: not by sitting and moaning, but by getting up and helping people when they need it.

136 Dunkley, 11.
We wait—by waiting on others.”\textsuperscript{138} \textit{Christopraxis} describes the responses of believers who interpret the implication of this fourth theodicy as a responsibility to work for systemic change in New Orleans, as well as the leaders who aid in the development of just social structures and motivate their followers to do the same. McKinney is one religious leader who embraces \textit{Christopraxis}; he says in a sermon, “It’s time for those of us who care about social justice…to find our voice and to call our country back to its promises.”\textsuperscript{139}

At the end of the day, even if particular theodicies are supported by Biblical evidence, spiritual tradition, and/or personal experience, humans have no way to say definitively what God’s role in Hurricane Katrina was. As such, we must be prepared to acknowledge the potential legitimacy of any of the aforementioned theodicies. And while remaining open to the potential truth or theological insight of any theodicy, we must also be prepared to critically engage these ideas with an acute awareness of their psychological, social, moral, and spiritual implications. Although I posit that no one theodicy is sufficient to explain God’s role in Hurricane Katrina, it is important to note that these perspectives are not equally valuable in addressing suffering, and more specifically, they are not equally effective in creating improvement in the rebuilding of New Orleans or an inclusive social environment.

Divine retribution stands out as the least palatable of these explanations from a perspective of faith in a loving God and is a framework which frequently engenders social exclusion and ignorant condemnation. It could be argued that an aversion to this particular theodicy reflects a certain reluctance to examine personal shortcomings and that unwillingness to believe in the possible veracity of divine retribution is—on some level—a mechanism by which we avoid confronting our own human inadequacies.

\textsuperscript{138} Ridley, 6-7.
\textsuperscript{139} McKinney, accessed 13 April 2010.
Taking those arguments into consideration, citizens can still reject the concept of divine retribution on the basis that the reactions of its proponents are often exclusionary or even hateful. However, how can critics of this theodicy reject it on a theological level? After all, according to biblical tradition, God’s character encompasses qualities such as vindictive, paternalistic, and silent. How can believers in a loving God reconcile these qualities with God’s other characteristics such as compassionate, fraternal, and protective?

The answer lies in the belief that God is both infinitely just and infinitely merciful. Although God expresses vengefulness and anger throughout the Bible, divine mercy is the last word. If God is infinitely merciful and forgiving, then it is on these grounds that divine retribution can and should be rejected as an explanation for suffering.

This distinction is also part of what marks divine retribution as a separate theodicy from the Co-Suffering Son of God model. Although divine retribution claims that suffering is the manifestation of justice served, the Co-Suffering Son of God model invokes God’s judgment not for punitive purposes, but rather for redemptive ones. In addition, proponents of divine retribution often use theodicy to scapegoat some groups and not others, whereas the Co-Suffering framework uses theodicy to critique unjust social structures. Finally, divine retribution espouses a nearly pre-modern sense of causality, whereas those who believe in the Co-Suffering model see the destruction from Katrina as a by-product of how society has been organized—they understand the suffering as brought about by the failures of the levee system, and not the power of winds or water.

And yet, even the Co-Suffering Son of God model cannot stand as the definitive explanation of God’s role in Hurricane Katrina, for there is also value to be found in both divine pedagogy and protest theodicy. While these theodicies also have their own disadvantages, they
contribute to a more holistic and empathetic means of conceptualizing suffering. Although responses to understanding God as the Divine Teacher can come across as the hasty or insensitive dismissal of suffering, it allows the suffering person to claim agency in an experience in the midst of feelings of helplessness. In addition, responding to suffering in protest is dangerous in the way that it can allow a person to languish in her own distress. Yet, it can also be constructive in the way that it challenges individuals to confront difficult and uncomfortable questions. And while these three theodicies each have their own merits, it must also be recognized that in some cases, conditions exist under which a framework may not be welcome. For example, a person who is protesting against the seeming inaction of God may find fault with the sentimentality of the Co-Suffering Son of God model.

* * *

Just as no one theodicy can completely suffice as the definitive description of God’s role in suffering, the categorization of theodicies has also created artificial boundaries around the types of human responses. Certainly, the spectrum of human emotion as well as the human capacity to experience anguish are multi-dimensional, and it is likely that a suffering person would be struggling to reconcile several elements which checker the neat structure of the proposed four theodicies: If I believe in a God who suffers with humanity, how could that God seem so removed from my life right now? If God really is punishing my actions right now, did the resurrection really defeat all sin?

And if followers’ reactions to suffering are varied, no one leadership response will be adequate to respond to such a breadth of needs. In this way, leaders are responsible for establishing a rhythm of meeting followers at their various emotional conditions while at the
same time shepherding those followers to a socially, emotionally, and psychologically stable state.

To some, Christopraxis may stand as the epitome of human response in the face of suffering. According to this response, citizens become civically engaged in the name of a liberating God who works against human suffering; leaders work towards the rebuilding of a just New Orleans by creating long-term solutions for improvement of the social and physical infrastructure of the city. Those who identify with Christopraxis may point to the lack of planning and foresight as a reason that the disaster of Hurricane Katrina happened in the first place—if long-term development would serve as the best way to protect the city and to hopefully prevent future catastrophe, why wouldn’t Christopraxis serve as the fullest response to the suffering of the hurricane? In short, this response is insufficient because it does not adequately address the immediate physical and emotional needs of the suffering. Of course, the tension between the implementation of long-term versus short-term “solutions” circulates frequently throughout discussions regarding social justice and is not a new challenge to those seeking to serve their community and their God.

In terms of measurable standards, it may seem that those who feel called to Christopraxis can offer the most tangible evidence of their responses to suffering. For example, having answers to questions such as “How high will the new levees be?” or “How many units of affordable housing can we build?” provides citizens with concrete ways of understanding responses to Hurricane Katrina. However, while a positivist tendency may lead many Americans to find the most value in measurable responses such as these, we must remember to first take a step back and acknowledge that those actions must be pre-empted and under-girded by human empathy. Moreover, the effects of Christopraxis extend far beyond such measurable standards, for this
response is fundamentally about the establishment of a just social order. Similarly, there is no way to measure expressions of a ministry of presence, such as the worth of sitting silently with someone as she mourns the death of a family member, or the weight of a psychological burden that has been lifted after one’s home has been rebuilt by volunteers. And yet, these more immediate forms of response are equally important to the healing process of the suffering as is Christopraxis to the establishment of a better New Orleans.

As discussed in the paragraphs above, no one theodicy can stand definitively as the description of God’s role in Hurricane Katrina, nor are any of the leadership responses within one perspective holistic enough to provide for the vast array of needs of those who suffer. While each theodicy offers varying capacities of theological insight into the explanation of suffering, conditions surely exist under which certain perspectives are not welcome. I hope that this paper has aided its readers in understanding the nuances of and potential friction between these theodicies and in framing the ways they conceptualize and respond to suffering as individuals. Finally, I hope it has also encouraged them to explore how they can more compassionately respond to the suffering of both the victims of Hurricane Katrina and other tragedies.
## Appendix of Sermons and Pastoral Communications

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<td>9/3/07</td>
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<td>Homily on Anniversary of Hurricane Katrina</td>
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<td>Origins 37, no. 4 (September): 222-23</td>
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<td>Pershey, Katherine Willis</td>
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<td>Redondo Beach, CA; South Bay Christian Church</td>
<td>Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)</td>
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I hereby pledge that I have neither given nor received any unauthorized assistance during the completion of this work.

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