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Does God Suffer?

A Critical Discussion of Thomas G. Weinandy's *Does God Suffer?*

Abstract

The author argues that Thomas G. Weinandy in his book *Does God Suffer?* starts from the axiom of divine apathy, rather than that he argues for it. He criticizes the hermeneutic implicit in Weinandy's interpretation of 1 Samuel 15, and proposes an alternative approach. Moreover, he criticizes Weinandy's appeal to agreement among the church fathers (based on a non-representative selection) and his appeal to the doctrine of the Trinity (based on a most speculative, but insufficiently warranted interpretation of this doctrine).

1 Introduction

In 1985, Thomas G. Weinandy published his *Does God Change? The Word's Becoming in the Incarnation* (Still River, Mass.). His new book, *Does God Suffer?*¹ can be seen as a sequel to that earlier book; the views that Weinandy defended in his earlier study on the Incarnation with respect to God's immutability, are now developed in connection with God's impassibility. This new, mature presentation of Weinandy's views is in many respects an outstanding achievement. I would like to underscore two of its most obvious merits. Firstly, Weinandy provides an accurate and most sympathetic interpretation of the views of Aquinas on the question whether God can suffer, and succeeds in showing the attraction which Aquinas' views can have even today. Moreover, and this is the second merit of Weinandy's book that I would like to underline here, he is not content with merely interpreting what Aquinas has said – important a task as that may be – but goes beyond Aquinas, giving a rational reconstruction of Aquinas' views. In fact, Weinandy defends these views against 20th century opponents, and eventually presents what I would without hesitation call the best presentation of the classical orthodox impassibilist point of view up to the present date. What makes me say this? Weinandy succeeds in undermining the caricature of the traditional position that is often made of it by contemporary theologians, who argue that ascribing impassibility to God is equivalent to ascribing aloof indifference to God. As Weinandy convincingly shows, this interpretation of the traditional position is blatantly unjust to Aquinas and others, who never intended to assert God's indifference, but merely denied that God can have emotions in the sense in which we can have them. The assertion of impassibility has its context in a negative theology that seeks to safeguard the otherness of God, and not in an insensitive theology that takes divine indifference for granted. Weinandy goes beyond this, and while accepting the apathy-axiom, seeks to assert God's involvement, mercy

1. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000.

and compassion in a truly eloquent way. He pushes impassibility to its utter limits, doing all he can do to emphasise the active involvement of God.

In this way, Weinandy confirms a conviction that has arisen out of my own research on the attributes of God, namely that the debate between those who affirm and those who deny that God suffers is not a debate between people who believe in different sorts of gods. It is, rather, a debate between people who take for granted different philosophical axioms and employ different philosophical tools in their articulation of belief in one and the same God. Thus, while I would affirm what Weinandy denies, namely that God can suffer and does suffer, I can see why he has to talk about the God that I believe to suffer in the way he does, namely because he participates in a different philosophical and theological language game. In this respect I agree with Weinandy that, if I would define 'impassibility' in the way that he does, namely either in the sense that God 'cannot experience emotional changes of state due to his relationship to and interaction with human beings and the created order'² (38), or in the sense of denying 'of God all those characteristics and properties of the created order which would render him less than perfectly good, loving and merciful' (94), I would attach much value to asserting that God cannot but be impassible. And this is not a *retractatio* on my part, but a restatement of the position I have defended all along; in spite of my ascription of suffering to God, I have never ascribed 'changes of state' to God, or assumed that God was less than perfectly good, loving and merciful.³ I hasten to add that I do not accept Weinandy's definition, and would rather define 'impassibility' as 'immutability with regard to one's feelings, or the quality of one's inner life.'⁴

However, in spite of my sympathy for Weinandy's development of the received position, there are disagreements between us, real disagreements, so many of them that it's difficult to know where to start when articulating them. To bring the discussion further, I will here concentrate on these disagreements. I will begin by articulating my main worry about Weinandy's book, a concern that grew while reading it. After that, I will try to flesh out this concern by following the argument of his book chapter by chapter, thus arriving only gradually at the heart of the question that has for so long fascinated both of us: does God suffer?

2. The phrase 'emotional changes of state' is explained by examples Weinandy gives further on in his text: 'Thus one can speak, for example, of God's inner emotional state as changing from joy to sorrow, or from delight to suffering' (39). I understand from this quotation that an inner emotional state is equivalent to the dominant emotional 'tone' of one's inner life. For my own rejection of 'emotional changes of state' in God, see, e.g., my 'A Moved Mover? The (Im)passibility of God,' in: Gijsbert van den Brink & Marcel Sarot (eds.), *Understanding the Attributes of God* (Frankfurt a.M. 1999), 119–137.

3. Of my own publications on the subject, several of which are discussed by Weinandy, I merely want to mention two. I have stated my position most fully in *God, Passibility and Corporeality* (Kampen 1992). More recently, I have given a synthesis of my position in: Sarot, 'Moved Mover?'

4. I have argued for this definition in my 'Patripassianism, Theopaschitism and the Suffering of God: Some Historical and Systematic Considerations,' *Religious Studies* 26 (1990), 363–375. The main problem with Weinandy's definition is that it explicitly includes imperfection, and thereby *a priori* decides the debate on God's (im)passibility.

2 Impassibility as Axiom

My main concern about Weinandy's book is the following. By saying that in the early Church the impassibility of God was a 'self-evident axiom' (85), he implicitly claims that it was not a conclusion at which the Church Fathers arrived after much theological reflection, but rather their starting-point for reflection. Weinandy appears to agree with them. His whole book is based on the tacit presupposition that the apathy-axiom is indispensable. By the title of his book Weinandy suggests that he is willing to discuss the axiom, that he is willing to entertain the possibility that God is not impassible, but on the evidence of his book I would conclude that he is not. This is not primarily shown in the constructive parts of his book, which are very good indeed, but in the chapters in which he considers the evidence. And by evidence I mean the testimony of the Bible and the tradition, and the arguments of contemporary theology. My claim will be that Weinandy's interpretation of these so strongly assumes the apathy-axiom, that it distorts the evidence.⁵ The caricature that to my regret has been made of the traditional position, a caricature that he so effectively undermines, is replaced by an equally misleading caricature of what is sometimes called the 'new orthodoxy,' the doctrine that God suffers.

Let me try to flesh this out by commenting on some main strands of the first chapters of the book. In Chapter 1, Dr. Weinandy claims he will summarise as clearly and objectively as he can, the various arguments on behalf of the passibility of God. Moreover, he claims that he will allow, as much as possible, the advocates to speak for themselves (2). In fact, however, even in this 26-page presentation of contemporary passibilism, Dr. Weinandy starts his own argument against it. While he correctly notes that I am one of those who defend the idea that God suffers, he does not concentrate on my arguments for this position, but rather draws attention to my hesitations about and arguments against some aspects of the positions of some suffering-God-theologians. Thus, he draws attention to my objections against the use of Wiesel's youth-on-the-gallows story in suffering-God-theologies (3–4), he quotes me when I describe the development of Kenneth Surin's position, who changed from a protagonist of the suffering God to a traditional impassibilist (10), he notes that I hold 'that it is false to argue that, because there is suffering in the world, God, therefore, has a moral obligation to suffer,' et cetera. While I have indeed written most of the things Dr. Weinandy ascribes to me, I have been quoted very selectively. Dr. Weinandy uses my texts in the way someone who is constructing an argument against the suffering of God would use them, and not in the way someone who is objectively describing the views of those who believe that God suffers would use them.⁶ The same applies to the ways in which he uses the writings of other scholars, e.g., Terence Fretheim. In sum, after reading Chapter 1, the reader knows that many theologians claim that God

5. While Weinandy claims that 'those who propose a passible God . . . do so without first adequately considering the more central issues of God's nature and of his relationship to the created order' (40), I will argue that Weinandy discusses God's (im)passibility while uncritically assuming the apathy-axiom.

6. I do not object to selective quotation as such, but to its appearance in what is claimed to be 'objective description.'

suffers, but has no idea *why* they do so. Moreover, in the rest of the book Chapter 1 hardly plays a role. Weinandy makes a fresh start in Chapter 2 – on the aims of theology, a subject that is usually discussed in the first Chapter – and hardly ever enters into a serious engagement with the positions described in Chapter 1.

Things become worse in Chapter 2. This Chapter, I submit, is the least satisfactory in the whole book. Here, Weinandy proposes an overly simplistic distinction between two types of theology, namely problem solving and mystery-articulating. Problem-solving, so we read, is characteristic for heretics, like Arius and the kenoticists, and mystery-articulating for orthodox theology. Of course, Weinandy reckons himself among the mystery-articulators, and suffering-God-theologians among the problem-solvers. Even if we leave apart the fact that this way of distinguishing between heresy and orthodoxy is over-simplistic, it should be noted here that in the absence of any clear-cut criteria, it becomes almost completely arbitrary which theology is designated as problem-solving and which as mystery-articulating. It entirely depends upon the aspects one focuses attention upon. Weinandy gives one hint, however, that I would like to note: ‘when theological issues are treated as problems to be solved, once the seeming solution has been found, usually by denying one of [the] terms of the problem, the issue becomes completely closed. The problem is solved. The complete answer has been given. There is no longer any further need for clarification or development. One can move on to the next problem’ (36). As I have noted in my contribution on this subject to the *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*,⁷ now that it is widely accepted that God is not apathetic, the discussion is *not* closed. The focus of attention is shifting, rather, from the arguments for and against passibility to the implications of the idea that God is capable of having feelings and emotions for other parts of theology. Thus, several Trinitarian models of God’s passibility have been developed (Moltmann, Von Balthasar, and Nnamani⁸), and it has been inquired whether the assertion of God’s passibility has any consequences for the traditional doctrine of divine incorporeality (Sarot). It seems that the in-depth-exploration and development of a view on the quality of God’s inner life has been the exclusive privilege of suffering-God-theologians in recent times, and not of the few partisans of the traditional position. Thus, on Weinandy’s own criterion, the passibilist position is a less likely candidate for heresy than the received impassibilist position. It would be interesting to know how Weinandy would receive this evaluation; it is difficult to say, however, because in his book here theologies of the suffering God have been labeled as problem-solving and heretic *before the argument has started*. This is characteristic for the axiomatic way in which Weinandy takes the traditional doctrine of God’s impassibility, and

7. Sarot, ‘Apathie II: Dogmatisch,’ in: H.D. Betz e.a. (eds.), *RGG* (Tübingen 41998), 583.

8. It is striking that most monographs on the subject published after the bibliography of my *God, Passibility and Corporeality* (Kampen 1992) had been published, are not taken notice of in Weinandy’s study: e.g., Wilfrid Harrington, *The Tears of God: Our Benevolent Creator and Human Suffering* (Collegeville, Minnesota 1992); Amuluche Gregory Nnamani, *The Paradox of a Suffering God: On the Classical, Modern-Western and Third World Struggles to Harmonise the Incompatible Attributes of the Trinitarian God* (Frankfurt AM 1995); Dennis Ngien, *The Suffering of God according to Martin Luther’s Theologia Crucis* (New York 1995).

for the condescending way he comments on his opponents. He describes these not as scholars who have come to different conclusions from his own, but as persons who have ‘failed to grasp’ (e.g., 54, 124) something, are ‘inconsistent’ (67), ‘fail to realize’ (137) or to recognize’ (99) something, or ‘forget’ (155) something. I may be wrong, but I cannot help feeling that this is a symptom of the way in which Weinandy fails to take his opponents entirely seriously.

3 The Biblical Evidence: Hermeneutical Considerations

In Chapter 3, Weinandy gets to the heart of the matter. There, he presents the biblical evidence, concentrating on the First⁹ Testament. He does not primarily concentrate on the texts regarding God’s suffering, mercy and repentance, however, but rather concentrates on the texts regarding God’s transcendence. In brief, he argues that in the First Testament God’s transcendence and God’s immanence are not opposed to each other; on the contrary, it is exactly as the transcendent that God is immanent. This understanding, which is certainly correct for some books of the First Testament, is then generalised by stipulating ‘the mature proclamation of Deutero-Isaiah’ as a summary of the Hebrew understanding of God. From then on, Weinandy uses this understanding as the matrix or grid with which to explain, and in many cases to explain *away*, all anthropomorphisms both in the Bible and in the subsequent tradition. Applied to the suffering and repentance of God: whenever it is suggested that God suffers, Weinandy asserts that this must be understood as a passion of the impassible God, and thus not as a real suffering. And whenever God is said to repent, this must be understood as a repentance of the immutable God, and thus not as real repentance. Weinandy takes recourse to a long-standing tradition, originating with Philo of Alexandria and found by some even in Holy Scripture itself, that whenever emotions like repentance and suffering are ascribed to God, they do not describe *affects* or emotional changes in God, but *effects* in us: *we* experience God’s unchanging and unfailing love now as blissfulness, then as suffering, and then as repentance, because of changes *in us*. St. Anselm’s expression of this point of view is still unrivalled for its clarity: ‘You are [merciful] according to our way of looking at things and not according to Your way. For when You look upon us in our misery it is we who feel the effect of Your mercy, but You do not experience the feeling.’¹⁰ My question is presently not, whether this is an acceptable view of God, but whether it is a matrix that is helpful for the interpretation of all texts from the Bible and the church Fathers. Here, I say with emphasis, the answer must be a clear ‘No!’ An example of what goes wrong when one tries to do this, can be found at p. 60, where Weinandy asserts:

The classic passage, which brings relief into the whole discussion, is 1 Samuel 15. Here Yahweh ‘regrets’ and ‘is sorry’ that he had made Saul king, for he has turned away (1 Sam. 15:11, 35). And yet, in the very same chapter, Samuel states ‘Moreover the Glory of Israel will not recant or change his mind; for he is not a mortal, that he should change his mind’ (1 Sam. 15:29).

9. My terminology, not Weinandy’s.

10. Proslogion VIII; English translation in: M.J. Charlesworth, St. Anselm’s PROSLOGION with a REPLY ON BEHALF OF THE FOOL by Gaunilo and THE AUTHOR’S REPLY TO GAUNILO (Oxford 1965). For a brief analysis of this hermeneutical strategy, see my ‘Moved Mover?’, 123–124.

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And at p. 61 he explains:

Yahweh . . . is sorry that he appointed Saul not just because Saul had changed, but he is equally sorry because he, as God, has not changed. The sorrow is an expression of the fact that ‘the Glory of Israel will not recant or change his mind; for he is not a mortal, that he should change his mind.’ . . . The statement that God does not change his mind is an expression of God’s total otherness, and the expression that God does change his mind expresses this unchangeable mind of God under circumstances which, under ordinary human conditions (if God were man), would demand that a change of mind take place, but in actual fact need not, because God, as the Wholly Other, is constant in his love, forgiveness, righteousness and justice.

The problem with this way of explaining away the paradox between the twofold assertion that God regrets that he has made Saul king over Israel on the one hand and the assertion that God does not change his mind on the other, is that it deals with these assertions in isolation from the narrative context in which they have their place. Once we take this context into account, the picture changes drastically. The verses 10–11 run as follows:

10 The word of the Lord came to Samuel:

11 ‘I regret that I made Saul king, for he has turned back from following me, and has not carried out my commands.’ Samuel was angry; and he cried out to the Lord all night.

It is important to notice two things. In the first place, God’s regret is expressed in God’s own words; that leaves little doubt about the status of these words. And in the second place, Samuel strongly disagrees with God’s words: he becomes very angry indeed, and cries out to God all night. This is the context in which Samuel asserts to Saul: ‘the Glory of Israel will not recant or change his mind; for he is not a mortal, that he should change his mind.’ Here, Samuel distorts the words of the Lord into their contrary, a distortion for which the narrator has prepared his readers by mentioning Samuel’s anger at God’s words. We cannot, of course, accord the same status to the words of Samuel when contradicting God as to the words of God themselves. To take away the last shadow of doubt about how the narrator has intended this section he ‘allows himself the last word . . . and declares authoritatively’:¹¹ ‘Samuel did not see Saul again until the day of his death, but Samuel grieved over Saul. And the Lord was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel.’ Thus the narrator confirms the revelation of God’s repentance given earlier on, and explicitly corrects Samuel’s distortion of this revelation. This is the one place in Scripture where the paradox of repentance and changelessness is explicitly dealt with. What a superb vindication of God’s repentance! What a pity, that so little of the dynamic of this fascinating text is conveyed by Weinandy’s discussion! I cannot help but concluding that Weinandy takes the part of Samuel, even where the Bible declares him to be unreliable and in the wrong.

11. J.P. Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative: A Practical Guide* (Leiden 1999), 60–61. I am much indebted to Fokkelman for my analysis of 1 Sam. 15, and to Prof. Bob Becking for drawing my attention to Fokkelman’s discussion.

I do not claim that the Bible is unambiguously in favour of the idea that God suffers. This question as such is hardly ever addressed in the Bible. In my view, the Bible does not speak with one voice on this issue, and we should be very careful in juxtaposing the various positions represented in the Bible. Here, I cannot argue for my position in detail, but can merely refer to my own and others' published work in this field, to show that the biblical testimony cannot be used to exclude the possibility of God's suffering.¹² It is a pity that the work on the hermeneutics of these issues that has been done in recent decades is ignored in Weinandy's study.

4 Agreement among the Church Fathers?

It must be said in favour of Weinandy's chapter on the biblical material, that he at least mentions the relevant texts. That, I submit, cannot be said of his chapter about the Church Fathers. Here, employing the same interpretative grid that he also employs in his biblical Chapter, he provides a 30-page discussion of the Church Fathers, in which he discusses many of the less important texts, and argues that they without exception confirm his own assumptions of the issue. By 'less important texts' I do not mean that these texts are unimportant in themselves; many of them are major texts. What I mean, is that they do not focus on the issue of God's emotions, but mention the issue only in passing. There are only two monographs from the early church that are entirely devoted to the question whether God can have emotions. These are Lactantius's *De ira Dei* and Gregorius Thaumaturgus's *Ad Theopompum*. Of these, Weinandy gives only a very superficial and brief discussion of Lactantius, and completely ignores Gregory. He states that Lactantius' treatise is 'primarily pastoral,' and seems to think that it is therefore less important. My reply would be: if Lactantius is pastoral, so Weinandy is; Lactantius engages in serious critical reflection on Epicurus and the Stoics, and in a philosophically refined rejection of the apathy-axiom. Thus, in a 30-page treatment, of the two most important texts the one is neglected entirely, and the other discussed only superficially. Could this perhaps be because a thoroughgoing discussion of these texts could not but falsify Dr. Weinandy's interpretative matrix? Gregory does ascribe suffering to God, though he also tries to show how God's suffering should differ from human suffering. And Lactantius explicitly engages in the refutation of the doctrine of divine impassibility, claiming that those who think that God 'is moved by no affection, because every affection is a sign of weakness, which has no existence in God' in fact abandon belief in the 'one supreme God' (*De ira Dei* 2; cf. 22). Here again, I do not want to claim that among the Church Fathers massive support can be found for the idea that God suffers. Like in the Bible, we find a plurality of views; whereas in the Bible the idea that God is emotional is dominant, among the Church Fathers the belief that God is impassible is most popular. The agreement suggested by Dr. Weinandy is conspicuously absent, however.

12. Among the best studies are Terence E. Fretheim, *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective* (Philadelphia 1984); Jean Galot, *Dieu Souffre-t-Il?* (Paris 1976); Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York 1962).

5 The Trinity and Suffering

By the time he arrives at Chapter 6, and starts the systematic development of his own views on God's impassibility, Weinandy has tried to show, on the basis of his distinction between heresy and orthodoxy, his presentation of the biblical material, and his interpretation of a non-representative selection of texts from the Church Fathers, that we cannot avoid the conclusion that God must be impassible. For those who have been convinced by him, the arguments given by him in the subsequent chapters will function in a cumulative argument, and I could imagine that under these conditions they could be considered convincing.

For those who have *not* been convinced by Weinandy's arguments in the earlier Chapters, the question whether God indeed is impassible is still entirely open at the beginning of Chapter 6. For them, and for those who judge that the Biblical testimony favours the pathos of God, the arguments in favour of God's impassibility that follow will be unconvincing. I will not discuss all of them; there is no need for doing so, because most of these arguments are well-known arguments, that have a long tradition behind them, and that, in my opinion have been conclusively refuted. Weinandy ignores these refutations, and repeats the arguments as if they had never before been criticised. The only notable exception is Weinandy's first, Trinitarian argument. As far as I know, this argument is original. Here, I will just indicate why I am not convinced by this new argument. It is a highly speculative argument, which uses an interpretation of the doctrine of the Trinity as 'subsistent relations fully in act' to prove God's impassibility (114–120). The problem is that here, a speculative interpretation of the Trinity is used as a basis from which to derive more basic views on, for example, the nature of God's love. Those who have reason to believe that the more basic views implied by this view of the Trinity are false, will reject this speculative view rather than their basic beliefs about the nature of God. I am one of those. A second argument, starting from Aquinas' view of God as *actus purus* and *ipsum esse* (120–122) fails to convince as well. This view is well known, of course, but so are the objections. It is doubtful, for example, whether a timeless being is conceivable without implicit contradiction; Weinandy supposes without argument that it is, whereas I believe – and have argued in publications¹³ – that it is not. It is also doubtful whether perfection requires the absence of potency; Weinandy assumes that it does (121–123; 157–158),¹⁴ but I again disagree with him.¹⁵ Again, it is doubtful whether a being could simultaneously possess every perfection or good; Weinandy assumes that that is possible, but I have been convinced by Charles Hartshorne that not all perfections are compatible – compossible on Hartshorne's terminology.¹⁶ Absolute perfection seems an empty notion to me – though I do

13. See, e.g., my *God, Passibility and Corporeality*, 57–58; 'Alwetendheid en de dialoog tussen theologie en natuurwetenschap,' *Tijdschrift voor filosofie* 56 (1994), 237–271. Cf., e.g., Anthony Kenny, *The God of the Philosophers* (Oxford 1979), 38–48; Nelson Pike, *God and Timelessness* (London 1970).

14. But cf. p. 128, where it is asserted that the persons of the Trinity have 'absolute positive relational potential.'

15. I argue for this rejection in my *God, Passibility*, 56.

16. See, e.g., Charles Hartshorne, *The Logic of Perfection* (1962; LaSalle, Ill. 31962).

believe God to be a Being greater than we can think of.¹⁷ A third argument, based on suffering as an evil (160), also fails to convince; suffering is a physical evil of course, but when it's freely accepted with a view to a greater good it may be a moral good.¹⁸ And that is the kind of suffering passibilist theologians ascribe to God.

6 Conclusion

The debate on the question whether God suffers, a debate that has not been very lively in recent years because almost all theologians agree that God does suffer, is not brought much further by Weinandy's book. Neither his examination of Bible and tradition, nor his discussion of the arguments that are around in the debate, has led to genuinely new results. There is one exception, and it is an important exception: Weinandy's articulation of the doctrine of divine impassibility itself is splendid; it is the most attractive and plausible articulation of the doctrine that I have come across in my extensive reading in the field. I expect that it will not change the course of the debate, but if it will help people to understand more of the traditional view, and to articulate their own views in explicit continuity with that, Weinandy's contribution will have been most valuable indeed.¹⁹

17. For a defence of a similar position, see G.N. Schlesinger, 'Divine Perfection,' *Religious Studies* 21 (1985), 147–158.

18. The distinction between various forms of evil is made already by Aquinas, *STh* III 48,3 ad 3: 'On the part of those who put Christ to death, the passion was a crime; on the part of Christ, who suffered out of love, it was a sacrifice.' A sacrifice is not – in an unqualified way – an evil.

19. This critical discussion of Thomas G. Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000) goes back to a colloquium in Utrecht with Dr. Weinandy, March 23, 2001.