

THE THEODICY OF PETER TAYLOR FORSYTH:
A “CRUCIAL” JUSTIFICATION OF THE WAYS OF GOD TO MAN

Theng Huat Leow

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“To justify God is the best and deepest way to fortify men. It provides the moral resource and stay which is the one thing at last. With open face to see the glory of God in things as they are, to blink nothing of the terror and yet to be sure of the Kingdom of God with all our heart—that is more for the courage of man than any nationalism or any patriotism when heart fails and grief benumbs.” So wrote one of the most able theological minds that Britain produced during the nineteenth century, P. T. Forsyth, in his extraordinarily astute book *The Justification of God: Lectures for War-Time on a Christian Theodicy*. What is, perhaps, most remarkable about such a claim is that it was published, as the subtitle indicates, at the height of the Great War, the event in which God, according to Forsyth, entered the pulpit and which brought to the surface again the “old dilemma.” But contra the Stoics, Gottfried Leibnitz and Joseph de Maistre, it was Forsyth’s claim that the solution of the great world juncture is at last a provision from God which both taxes all the resources that faith has, and settles faith in a certainty grounded in, but finally from beyond, history and its moral order—in the world’s moral crisis, in tragedy, in the great divine *commedia*, in Christ and his cross.

In this well-researched, and clearly-written exposition of Forsyth’s “Theodicy,” Theng Huat Leow (Lecturer in Theology at Trinity Theological College, Singapore) provides an able and constructive introduction to Forsyth’s theological *oeuvre* via a consideration of a subject of central concern to the Scottish Congregationalist theologian—God’s *self*-justification in the face of evil. And because of Forsyth’s open-textured approach to theology, an approach that refuses the kind of tidiness for which most theology strives, a study like this occasions the opportunity to engage with Forsyth’s thinking on a range of subjects, a prospect appropriately exploited by the author. Hence, Leow introduces Forsyth’s thinking on the relationship between evil, sin and suffering, his appropriation of Martin Luther’s *theologia crucis*, his understanding of divine election, his conviction that, no matter how

“devious” and “dreadful” the way, creation would willingly “go through it again at the Father’s will” for “the last things shall crown the first things, and ... the end will justify the means,” his “Christian universalism,” his constructive and cautious engagement with evolutionary theory, the important distinction Forsyth makes between God’s primary and secondary acts of judgement, his commitment to divine passibility and to sailing along the rocks of “true patripassianism,” and his view on the origin of evil, among other subjects. Leow notes Forsyth’s conviction that the problems of evil are “essentially insoluble from an intellectual or theoretical perspective,” and considers Forsyth’s approach to theodicy along “practical” and “historic” lines. What this means, as Leow makes plain, is that Forsyth resolves “to treat the existence of evil in our world as a given reality, and [to] direct his focus on God’s practical overcoming of it through his act on the Cross” (p. 180), a move which gives to Forsyth’s theodicy “unity, cohesion and groundedness in the historical reality of this world” and so renders, in Leow’s assessment, Forsyth’s justification of God to be one which “far surpasses” (p. 235) corresponding attempts penned in Forsyth’s day.

Avoiding hagiography, and with judicious editorial judgement, Leow brings Forsyth’s thought into conversation not only with those with whom Forsyth himself was most interested to engage—for example, G. W. F. Hegel, Wilhelm Windelband, Albert Schweitzer, R. J. Campbell, and so on—but also with more contemporary voices known for their engagement with the subject at hand, such as Albert Camus, Marilyn McCord Adams, David Bentley Hart, Paul Fiddes, Dorothee Sölle, J. K. Mozley, Jürgen Moltmann and others.

Greatly to be welcomed is Leow’s taking seriously the much too neglected and “subjective aspects” of the atonement, highlighting, most obviously, the role that prayer—and especially protest prayer—plays in Forsyth’s thought: that it may be God’s will for us to resist God’s will; that to struggle with God is one way of doing God’s will, one way of saying, “Thy will be done”; that, as Forsyth would insist in his profound essay *The Soul of Prayer*, the divine will is “to be resisted as much as indulged.”

But a quibble and a most unfortunate miscalculation ought also be noted. Regarding the quibble, it is curious that Leow relies heavily throughout the book on Richard Bauckham’s reading of Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*, a near-essential reference, it seems, in any essay on the subject of theodicy. Why then, did he not engage with Dostoyevsky’s characters directly rather than have them mediated through Bauckham’s interpretation?

If my memory serves me correctly, Forsyth's *Justification* was my entrée into Forsyth's corpus. I was a theological abecedarian; it was not an easy read, and I had no Beatrice to guide me. Dr Leow's book is a Beatrice: but this Beatrice brings along a partner who too often distracts and detracts from the conversation. Rather than enhancing it, this partner steers the conversation away from its substantial themes and terms and, in so doing, rearranges the parameters of discussion in ways that leave Forsyth, at times, misheard and misrepresented, and with his thought systematized in ways that castrate some of its spirit. This, in my view, is the most substantive setback with Leow's study. The most apparent candidate for this less-welcome friend is John Hick and his *Evil and the Love of God*. This is evident in Leow's frequent—and very odd—description of Forsyth's theodicy as "Irenaean" (see pp. 188, 195–96, 209, 223, 227–30, *passim*), and, not unrelatedly, in his suggesting a view of sin that is considerably tamer than is Forsyth's own. The Aberdonian insisted, in the strongest possible terms, that there could be no Hegelian integration of God's antithesis into God's final purposes for the world—"Die sin must or God"! To be sure, Leow is aware that for Forsyth there can be no possible compromise at this point (see, for example, pp. 17, 237), but, because of the distractions generated by Beatrice's friend, the implications of that principal conviction struggle to arrive at their proper end.

Nonetheless, those desiring to engage the questions that give rise to theodicies generally, or those wishing to better understand one of that project's most daring and able theological minds, ought not allow these criticisms to dissuade them from taking up this composed and valuable study.

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