

## LITERATURE AND CHRISTIANITY: THE ASPECT OF THEODICY

Dalia Čiočytė

Vilnius University  
Institute for Literary and Cultural Research  
Skroblu 7–49, 03138 Vilnius, Lithuania  
Email: [dalia.ciocyte@lff.vu.lt](mailto:dalia.ciocyte@lff.vu.lt)  
Telephone: +370 5 268 7216

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**Abstract.** *Literature is a form of human consciousness, so the main question raised by literary theological thought is more concerned with the human being than with God. Literature interprets and seeks to explain the existential experience of the individual and society. God appears in the context of literary introspection when artistic thought seeks for the ontological essence and existential meaning of being human. The theology of literature investigates the literary interpretation of the origin and sense of existence, and holds literature to be a variant of the individual theological quest, namely an existential test for the Christian doctrine. The main collision between literature and Christianity (the traditional Western religion) is the justification of God in the context of evil. This paradox is investigated through theodicy, a philosophical and theological attempt to reconcile the traditional divine characteristics of omnibenevolence, omnipotence and omniscience with the occurrence of evil or suffering in the human world. The contradiction between the omnipotence of God and the evil that exists in the world is the main question concerning the existential experience of God, and a question that provokes literary thought. Literary theology (theological thought seen in literary works, a form of the so-called theology of experience) considers the paradox of God's love and existential evil, and the possibilities for the justification of God in the face of innocent suffering. Many literary works, from Dante to contemporary literature, raise the theodic issue. The apexes of literary theodicy are works*

by *Fyodor Dostoevsky (Brothers Karamazov, 1880) and Albert Camus (La Peste, 1947). Literary theodicy artistically points to the depth of the problem of innocent suffering.*

**Keywords:** *literature, Christianity, theology, theodicy*

## Introduction

This article examines literature from the theoretical perspective of the theology of literature. Literature is a form of human consciousness, so the main question raised by literary theological thought is more concerned with the human being rather than with God. Literature interprets and seeks to explain the existential experience of the individual and society. God appears in the context of literary introspection when artistic thought seeks for the ontological essence and existential meaning of being human. The theology of literature investigates the literary interpretation of the origin and sense of existence, and holds literature to be a variant of the individual theological quest, namely an existential test for the Christian doctrine.

The main collision between literature and Christianity – the traditional Western religion – is the justification of God in the context of evil, a paradox that is investigated by theodicy. Etymologically considered, theodicy (theos + dike means God + justice) signifies the justification of God in the context of evil. The problem of evil is the main problem in philosophical considerations of the possibility of God's existence. It is, however, easy to harmonise the scientific and theological world views. For example, the biblical story of creation (and the vision of creationism) may be harmonised with the theory of evolution (if we accept this theory): the Bible “thinks” in symbols and allegories, and the six days of the world's creation in the Book of Genesis can be seen as the period of the divine creation. What is particularly difficult in the context of considering the philosophical possibilities of theism is to reconcile the traditional divine characteristics of omnibenevolence (“all-goodness”), omnipotence and omniscience with the occurrence of evil or suffering in the world.

Theodicy is therefore at the very centre of the philosophical attempt to consider the possibility of God's existence, or the possibility of theism. In other words, theodicy is the link between philosophy and theology.

The term was introduced into philosophy by Gottfried Leibniz in 1710. Leibniz then published a work titled “*Essais de Théodicée sur la bonte de Dieu, la liberté de l'homme et l'origine du mal*”. The purpose of the essays was to show that the evil in the world does not conflict with the goodness of God and that, notwithstanding its many evils, the world is the best of all possible worlds. Imitating the example of Leibniz, other philosophers called their treatises on the problem of evil “theodicies”.

Although the term “theodicy” only began to be used in the 18th century, the philosophical problem of evil has been considered since very early times. According to the syllogistic idea of Greek philosopher Epicurus (341–270 BC), if an omnipotent and loving God exists, then evil does not exist; however, if evil exists, then an omnipotent and

loving God does not exist (Epicurus claimed that God is indifferent to the world). We find considerations of the problem of evil in mythology and in ancient religious writings. In the Book of Job in the Old Testament, we find a deep consideration of the problem of suffering among the non-guilty. In the Book of Judges, the theodic problem is formulated by the judge Gideon: "If the Lord is with us, why then has all this befallen us?" (*Jdg 6, 13*). The biblical prophet Habakkuk speaks about the existential experience of divine silence: "Thou who art of purer eyes than to behold evil and canst not look on wrong, why dost thou look on faithless men, and art silent when the wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he?" (*Hab 1, 13*). Here we see the subtle metonymy of holy sight, the oxymoron of looking at evil with divine eyes.

The problem of theodicy is particularly sharp in the realm of Christianity. Every religion represents the conception of the sense of being. Such a sense may be perceived as nature, progress, love, spirituality and so on. In Christianity, the sense of being is reflected in the form of personal divine love, represented by Jesus Christ. Raising the theodic problem with regard to Christianity therefore means not only asking about the abstract possibility of God's existence, but also about the possibility of trusting in Jesus Christ as in the interpersonal "You".

Christianity treats the theodic problem in several ways. One of the most important theodic arguments is the notion of free will. According to Immanuel Kant, if we were able to prove the existence of God, moral law would no longer be broken. However, "most of the actions that conformed to the law would be done from fear, a few only from hope, and none at all from duty, and the moral worth of actions, on which alone in the eyes of supreme wisdom the worth of the person and even that of the world depends, would cease to exist"<sup>1</sup> (*Critique of Practical Reason*, 1788). In his essay "On the Failure of All Attempted Philosophical Theodicies" (*Über das Mißlingen aller philosophischen Versuche in der Theodizee*, 1791), Kant declares that evil is a personal challenge to a human being. According to him, this challenge may be confronted only by belief, because those things that we cannot experience we may reflect only in a limited way. For Christianity, the main theodic answers are the theological mysteries of incarnation and resurrection, Jesus Christ's personal response to the problem of evil and death.

Philosophical and theological thought that appears in Western literature also perceives the problem of evil as the main problem of God's existence. The contradiction between the omnipotence of God and the evil that exists in the world is the main question concerning the existential experience of God, and a question that provokes literary thought. Literary theology (theological thought seen in literary works, a form of the so-called theology of experience) considers the paradox of God's love and existential evil, and the possibilities for the justification of God in the face of innocent suffering. Many literary works, from Dante to contemporary literature, raise the theodic problem. The apexes of literary theodicy are the works of Fyodor Dostoevsky (*The Brothers Karamazov*,

1 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*. New York: Classic Books International, 2010, p. 151.

1880) and Albert Camus (*La Peste*, 1947). Literary theodicy artistically points to the depth of the problem of innocent suffering<sup>2</sup>.

### Literary theodicy: illustrating theodic arguments

An interesting theodic dialogue can be found in the novel *The Quiet Light* (1950) by Louis de Wohl (1903–1961), about Saint Thomas Aquinas.

Piers Rudde, an English knight in the novel, tells Saint Thomas Aquinas about the human suffering he has seen among the innocent. He says: “Wherever you look, you see tears and despair and bloodshed. I felt that my own life was senseless. And I may as well admit it: I am no longer certain that God exists”<sup>3</sup>.

Saint Thomas Aquinas then gives him a rational proof of God’s existence. Here the author interprets the ontological argument proposed by Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109) in 1078 in his *Proslogion*. Anselm defined God as “that than which nothing greater can be conceived” (*aliquid quo nihil maius cogitari possit*), and suggested that if the greatest possible being exists in the mind, it must also exist in reality. If it only exists in the mind, a greater being is possible – one that exists in the mind and in reality.

So in *The Quiet Light*, Saint Thomas Aquinas rationally explains: “I needn’t exist [...]. You needn’t exist. But God must exist or nothing else could. You can scarcely doubt your own existence – it’s a violation of the law of contradiction: for if you do not exist, who is it that holds the doubt? So you exist, but not in your own right. You have received existence: from your parents and ancestors, from the air you breathe, the food you take in. A river has received its existence and so have mountains and everything, not only on earth but everywhere in the universe. But if the universe is a system of receivers, there must be a giver. And if the giver has received existence, he is not the giver at all. Therefore the ultimate giver must have existence in His own right, He must be existence and this Giver we call God. Can you contradict that?” (p. 274). The character Piers Rudde then formulates the theodic problem: “I cannot contradict it [...]. But it does not satisfy me. Nor will it satisfy anyone who suffers” (p. 274). Saint Thomas Aquinas gives a theodic answer, with his character contending that all human suffering goes back to the archetypal form of suffering – that is, the separation of man from God. He says: “Do you remember the words of the serpent, ‘Eat, and you shall be as God’? We ate, and by that act of rebellion cut ourselves off from God. We broke the link between the natural and the supernatural. That was the separation” (p. 276). Piers Rudde then reproaches God: “And were driven out of paradise. And had to die and to suffer. That was God’s answer” (p. 276). This notion of human suffering as God’s punishment is a crucial point of the dialogue. Saint Thomas Aquinas argues that human suffering is not God’s punishment: “No, friend. That [paradise lost – *D. Č.*] was the inevitable consequence of our own

2 For a wider examination, see Dalia Čiočytė, *Literatūros teologija: Teologiniai lietuvių literatūros aspektai*, Vilnius: Vilnius University Press, 2013, p. 99–162.

3 Louis de Wohl, *The Quiet Light: A Novel About Saint Thomas Aquinas*. New York: Ignatius, 1996, p. 274. Further quotes from this publication indicate the page numbers.

act. But God did give an answer and his answer was Christ. [...] Our Lord took upon Himself the total pain of that separation. The union between God and man is the Cross. [...] Supernatural life was restored to man” (p. 276). So the character’s words evoke the classical theological explanation: God’s personal response to the problem of evil is his incarnation, death and salvation of humanity.

### Literary theodicy: interpreting the existential experience of metaphysical injustice

The philosophical novel *The Brothers Karamazov* by Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821–1881) is one of the most significant texts of literary theodicy. Dostoevsky, a deeply religious person, claimed in his biography, undergoing intensive religious reflection – that he had never met such a strong atheist as the one he himself created out of words, Ivan Karamazov.

In the novel, Ivan Karamazov tempts the belief of his sincerely religious brother Alyosha. The space of this temptation is a tavern, an archetypal demonic space in mythology and folklore. Ivan Karamazov speaks of the suffering of children as reflecting the essence of innocent suffering: “Are you fond of children, Alyosha? I know you are, and you will understand why I prefer to speak of them. If they, too, suffer horribly on earth, they must suffer for their fathers’ sins, they must be punished for their fathers, who have eaten the apple; but that reasoning is of the other world and is incomprehensible for the heart of man here on earth. The innocent must not suffer for another’s sins, and especially such innocents!”<sup>4</sup>

According to Ivan Karamazov, it is impossible to defend God in the light of children’s suffering: “Can you understand why a little creature, who can’t even understand what’s done to her, should beat her little aching heart with her tiny fist in the dark and the cold, and weep her [...] tears to dear, kind God to protect her? Do you understand that, friend and brother, you pious and humble novice? Do you understand why this infamy must be and is permitted?” (p. 213). If, argues Ivan Karamazov, suffering is the price of free will, then this price is definitely too high: “Without it [suffering – D. Č.], I am told, man [...] could not have known good and evil. Why should he know that diabolical good and evil when it costs so much? Why, the whole world of knowledge is not worth that child’s prayer to dear, kind God!” (p. 213).

Alyosha asks why his brother wants to tempt Alyosha’s belief. One intention is very simple, that he doesn’t want his brother to become a monk: “You are dear to me, I don’t want to let you go, and I won’t give you up to your Zossima” (p. 214; Zossima is the prior in the monastery that Alyosha wants to enter). However, there is also another, deeper intention, in which the strength of Ivan Karamazov’s arguments interestingly lies. Ivan Karamazov says he wants to get acquainted with his brother: “I want to get to know you once for all, and I want you to know me. And then to say good-bye. I believe

4 Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* / Translated by Constance Garnett. [S.I.]: Digireads.com Publishing, 2017, p. 209. Further quotes from this publication indicate the page numbers.

it's always best to get to know people just before leaving them" (p. 201; the irony of "it's always best to get to know people just before leaving them" is characteristic of Ivan Karamazov's voice – compare his phrase "I could never understand how one can love one's neighbours. It's just one's neighbours, to my mind, that one can't love, though one might love those at a distance", p. 208; compare the famous phrase by Jean-Paul Sartre: *Hell is other people*). According to Ivan Karamazov's logic, to get acquainted means to become friends, to become really close: "I want to be friends with you, Alyosha, for I have no friends and want to try it" (p. 206). So the author brings to light the idea that even the closest of relatives may know very little about one another (as Ivan and Alyosha are biologically the closest of the four Karamazov brothers, having the same mother and father: Dmitri is Fyodor Karamazov's son from another marriage, and Pavel Smerdyakov is his bastard son). In Ivan Karamazov's voice, we hear the author's notion of getting acquainted – namely, showing one's essence to the other: "I am trying to explain as quickly as possible my essential nature, that is what manner of man I am, what I believe in, and for what I hope, that's it, isn't it?" (p. 207). In the context of the dialogue between Ivan and Alyosha, to explain one's essence means to explain one's relationship with God (or one's attitude towards God). Ivan Karamazov generalises: "You didn't want to hear about God, but only to know what the brother you love lives by. And so I've told you" (p. 208). Antitheodic and antitheistic considerations are much more suggestive to an addressee when they are a form of such disclosure, not just direct persuasion that God is unjust. The intimacy of Ivan Karamazov's discourse is the main strength of his atheism (antitheism).

So what theodic answer does the author of the novel present?

Firstly, the novel's theodic thought highlights human freedom. Ivan Karamazov tells the famous legend "The Grand Inquisitor". The Inquisitor gives people portions of bread and games (*panem et circenses*) and takes away their freedom. F. Dostoevsky thus presents some kind of literary prophecy about future soviet communism. It is important that the Inquisitor reproaches Jesus Christ for having given freedom to human beings, with this reproach becoming the apotheosis of Jesus Christ. Here we see an interesting metanarrative comment: a work of art may have its own life and change the author's intention (the original intention of Ivan Karamazov was not about the apotheosis of Jesus Christ, but his debasement).

Secondly, the novel's theodic thought highlights the free will of belief. Ivan Karamazov is such a strong atheist because he *wants* to reject God, he doesn't want any theodic explanations. We can look at the long quotation that is crucial to F. Dostoevsky's literary theology, for his reflection on the essence of theism and atheism: "You see, Alyosha, perhaps it really may happen that if I live to that moment, or rise again to see it, I, too, perhaps, may cry aloud with the rest, looking at the mother embracing the child's torturer, 'Thou art just, O Lord!' but I don't want to cry aloud then. While there is still time, I hasten to protect myself, and so I renounce the higher harmony altogether. It's not worth the tears of that one tortured child who beat itself on the breast with its little fist and prayed in its stinking outhouse, with its unexpiated tears to 'dear, kind God!' It's not worth it, because those tears are unatoned for. They must be atoned for, or there

can be no harmony. But how? How are you going to atone for them? Is it possible? By their being avenged? But what do I care for avenging them? What do I care for a hell for oppressors? What good can hell do, since those children have already been tortured? And what becomes of harmony, if there is hell? I want to forgive. I want to embrace. I don't want more suffering. And if the sufferings of children go to swell the sum of sufferings which was necessary to pay for truth, then I protest that the truth is not worth such a price. I don't want the mother to embrace the oppressor who threw her son to the dogs! She dare not forgive him! Let her forgive him for herself, if she will, let her forgive the torturer for the immeasurable suffering of her mother's heart. But the sufferings of her tortured child she has no right to forgive; she dare not forgive the torturer, even if the child were to forgive him! And if that is so, if they dare not forgive, what becomes of harmony? Is there in the whole world a being who would have the right to forgive and could forgive? I don't want harmony. From love for humanity I don't want it. I would rather be left with the unavenged suffering. I would rather remain with my unavenged suffering and unsatisfied indignation, even if I were wrong. Besides, too high a price is asked for harmony; it's beyond our means to pay so much to enter on it. And so I hasten to give back my entrance ticket, and if I am an honest man I am bound to give it back as soon as possible. And that I am doing. It's not God that I don't accept, Alyosha, only I most respectfully return him the ticket" (p. 216). Ivan Karamazov's compassion for the suffering of humanity and his religious complaint is no atheism; his atheism is just his will not to accept any theodic arguments.

Alyosha, in contrast, has a strong will to believe. After his talk with Ivan, Alyosha is deeply shocked and has no other belief than that of his will. He asks God to give him a sign and receives no sign. The elder Zossima dies and Alyosha asks God to show people that Zossima is a saint, to create some kind of miracle during the funeral. However, no miracle happens and moreover, the remains of Zossima begin to spread an ugly smell. The narrator comments that this was a "turning-point in his spiritual development, giving a shock to his intellect, which finally strengthened it for the rest of his life and gave it a definite aim" (p. 292). Here Alyosha demonstrates his will to believe, and he stands near the coffin and reads the Bible. Next he experiences grace, and feels some kind of mystical unity of all humanity: "He longed to forgive everyone and for everything, and to beg forgiveness. Oh, not for himself, but for all men, for all and for everything..." (p. 323); "Someone visited my soul in that hour,' he used to say afterwards, with implicit faith in his words" (p. 323).

F. Dostoevsky's idea on theodicy appears in his suggestful apotheosis of freedom, the artistic vision of the link between human will to believe and divine grace, and a vision of the mystical unity of all human beings – a unity that enables forgiveness.

Another important work with regard to literary theodicy is the novel *The Plague* (*La Peste*, 1947) by Albert Camus (1913–1960). In the novel, the character of Father Paneloux (a Jesuit priest) gives his believers two sermons. The first of these may be seen as a parody of theodicy: Father Paneloux speaks about the plague as about divine punishment, so that after this sermon his listeners paradoxically begin to understand that they are being punished by God without any real guilt. The second sermon is given after Father

Paneloux has seen a child's death (*The Plague* has strong intertextual relationships with F. Dostojvsky" novel *The Brothers Karamazov*): "He, Father Paneloux, would keep faith with that great symbol of all suffering, the tortured body on the Cross; he would stand fast, his back to the wall, and face honestly the terrible problem of a child's agony. And he would boldly say to those who listened to his words today: 'My brothers, a time of testing has come for us all. We must believe everything or deny everything. And who among you, I ask, would dare to deny everything?'"<sup>44</sup> Here Father Paneloux expresses the very interesting theodic idea that we must accept ourselves and our world as a gift and therefore accept every aspect of the gift.

Theodicy represented in Lithuanian literature reflects the collisions of the nation's history and the dramatic nature of Lithuania's various military occupations. It is notable that Lithuanian classical authors (Antanas Baranuskas, Maironis and others) in their interpretations of Lithuania's occupation stress the nation's internal situation. They look for the reasons for Lithuania's occupation not only in external political situations, but mainly in the historical and spiritual state of the nation itself. Lithuania's historical fate is perceived as a manifestation of metaphysical justice – partly as retribution for transgressions and partly as the innocent sufferings of the righteous, which in the context of Christianity are connected with divine invitation to maturity and perfection.

## Conclusion

Literature, as can be seen from the text above, gives no satisfactory theodic answer; nor does philosophy, nor theology. However, deep theodic reflections may illuminate the possibility of such an answer. Paradoxically, those literary works that interpret the existential experience of metaphysical injustice and present a metaphysical quarrel and/or complaints (F. Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, A. Camus, *The Plague*) acquire more theodic strength than literary works that just illustrate theological answers to the theodic problem (Louis de Wohl, *The Quiet Light*).

## References

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| <p>Albert Camus, <i>The Plague</i> / Translated by Stuart Gilbert. London: Vintage International, 1991.</p> <p>Dalia Čiočytė, <i>Literatūros teologija: Teologiniai lietuvių literatūros aspektai</i>, Vilnius: Vilnius University Press, 2013.</p> <p>Fyodor Dostoevsky, <i>The Brothers Karamazov</i> / Translated by Constance Garnett. [S.I.]: Digireads.com Publishing, 2017.</p> | <p>Immanuel Kant, <i>Critique of Practical Reason</i>. New York: Classic Books International, 2010.</p> <p>Louis de Wohl, <i>The Quiet Light: A Novel About Saint Thomas Aquinas</i>. New York: Ignatius, 1996.</p> |
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## LITERATŪRA IR KRIKŠČIONYBĖ. TEODICĖJOS ASPEKTAS

Dalia Čiočytė

Vilniaus universitetas, Lietuva

*Santrauka. Literatūra, kaip žmogiškosios savimonės forma, klausdama apie Dievą ir religinį santykį su juo, iš esmės klausia apie žmogų, jo kilmę, ontologinę esmę, egzistencinę prasmę. Dievas pasirodo literatūrinėje introspekcijoje, kai žmogus meniniu mąstymu ieško savo paties prasmės. Literatūros teologija, tarpdisciplininė teorija, literatūrą suvokia kaip krikščionybės mokymo tikrinimą egzistencine patirtimi. Krikščionybės, – tradicinės Vakarų pasaulio religijos, – ir literatūros dialogo esminė kolizija yra Dievo kaip meilės samprata blogio akivaizdoje. Šį paradoksą reflektuoja teodicėja, – filosofinis teologijos priešingis, filosofinė ir teologinė pastanga pateisinti Dievo sutikimą su visokeriopu pasaulio blogiu ir mirtimi. Teodicėjinė problema yra pagrindinė, giliausioji egzistencinės Dievo patirties problema, provokuojanti literatūrinę mintį. Plačiausia teologijos definicija teigia, kad teologijos esama ten, kur tikintysis siekia reflektuoti bei analizuoti savo tikėjimą, pasiremdamas kitų nei tikėjimas sričių duomenimis. Tai vadinamoji patirties teologija. Taip žvelgiant patirties teologijos forma yra ir į literatūrinį tekstą įtaista tikėjimo refleksija, – literatūrinis tikėjimo tikrinimas egzistencine patirtimi, literatūrinė teologija. Literatūrinių teodicėjinės problemos svarstymų atveria daugelis kūrinių nuo Dante's iki šiuolaikinės literatūros. Paradigminiai literatūrinės teodicėjos kūriniai yra F. Dostojevskio Broliai Karamazovai (1880), A. Camus Maras (La peste, 1947). Šie ir kiti kūriniai, interpretuojantys pasaulio neteislingumo įspūdį, išryškina ypatingą semantinę įtampą tarp teodicėjinio atsakymo nesaties ir atsakymo galimybės, ir šios įtampos erdvėje plėtoja įtaigiausius nekaltos kančios problemos svarstymus.*

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**Dalia Čiočytė**, Vilniaus universiteto Literatūros ir kultūros tyrimų instituto docentė. Mokslinių tyrimų kryptys: literatūros teorija; XIX ir XX amžių Lietuvių literatūra; Biblijos interpretacijos vakarų literatūroje; literatūros teologija.

**Dalia Čiočytė**, Vilnius University, Institute for Literary and Cultural Research, Associate Professor. Research interests: literary theory, Lithuanian literature of the 19th and 20th centuries, interpretation of the Bible in Western literature, the theology of literature.