

Dialogical responses to suffering in a traumatised world: An experiment in epistolary theology

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Abstract

Engaging with themes from the 2024 Church of Scotland Chalmers Lectures, as well as the authors' forthcoming co-authored book (provisionally titled *Defiant Hope: Theological Conversations in a Traumatised World*), this article takes the form of an epistolary conversation about the problem of suffering and the reality of ongoing trauma. This dialogical format has deep roots within the Christian tradition and early Christian communities. It is used here because the problems under discussion resist resolution by solitary monologue. Similarly, the work of trauma theology involves communal, rather than singular, response. Our exchange critiques the limitations of traditional theodicies, which often conflate suffering with evil, thereby risking misplaced blame on those who suffer. It also warns against pastoral responses that inadvertently normalise or sustain oppressive systems, advocating instead for transformative theological practices that unmask systemic complicity, foster communal resistance, and reimagine Christian responses to suffering beyond resignation or passive endurance.





From October to December 2024, we delivered the Chalmers Lectures Series for the Church of Scotland on the theme of “Hope in the world today”. Early in the series, we named the immense suffering and trauma that characterises the world we live in. For the purposes of this article, we define trauma as the aftermath and ongoing mental and physical suffering caused by a single event or repeated events of a stressful, frightening, distressing, or dangerous nature.¹ To be aware of trauma is to recognise, anticipate, and respond to its many social, physical, and personal consequences. In theological terms, this involves considering the ways in which theology can directly or inadvertently re-traumatise or dismiss those who have experienced profound pain. Trauma highlights the need for theologians to approach discussions of suffering with care, creating space for survivors to process their experiences without coercing or forcing them into accepting predetermined explanations.

Despite this, classical theological responses to trauma and suffering often fail to address these issues in ways that engage the lived realities of those who suffer. Theodicy, the justification of why a ‘good’ and ‘all-powerful’ God allows evil and suffering to exist in the world, has maintained a central place within Christian thought for centuries. However, it can frame suffering as a necessary or justifiable component of a greater divine plan, inadvertently invalidating the experiences of trauma survivors, or reinforcing harmful theological narratives. Our shared concern is that these approaches risk diminishing the depth of human pain or distorting the nature of divine presence in ways that might alienate those experiencing trauma or crisis.

In response to these concerns, and engaging with themes of suffering and trauma discussed in our joint Chalmers Lectures series, we offer this article as an experimental work of epistolary theology. Our reflections on suffering and trauma are exchanged as letters; at times affirming, at times questioning, and at times redirecting one another’s arguments; precisely because the problems under discussion resist resolution by solitary monologue. As interlocutors, our theological work here is shaped by what we hope to be a sustained, relational engagement.

¹ Katie Cross, “Waiting, Witnessing, Embodying: A Trauma-informed Approach for Theological Qualitative Research”, *International Journal of Practical Theology* 29, no. 1 (2025): 2.





Doing epistolary theology: A note on form and format

The epistolary form has deep roots within the Christian tradition. The earliest Christian communities received their formative theological instruction, exhortation, and correction in letters. Paul's correspondence with Corinth and Rome, the Johannine and Petrine epistles, and the letter to the Hebrews (itself a written homily) all testify to theology's originary dependence upon personal address. In the patristic and medieval periods, Augustine's exchanges with Jerome, Anselm's pastoral letters, and Catherine of Siena's exhortations continued to use the letter not merely as a vehicle for theological content, but as a mode of theological reasoning in which address, context, and relationship were constitutive of the argument itself. Modern examples, from John Newton's *Cardiphonia* to the correspondence of Karl Barth and Eduard Thurneysen, show that epistolary theology can sustain rigorous doctrinal reflection while preserving its responsiveness to lived experience.

Theologically, the epistolary mode is not an incidental literary or methodological choice. It enacts a dialogical method in which theology emerges in response to the other's thought, and where the exchange is as significant as any single contribution. This relational dynamic resists the abstraction and closure that can characterise systematic treatments, allowing for open-endedness, provisionality, and the possibility of mutual transformation. In this respect, epistolary theology parallels the dialogical nature of Christian Scripture itself, in which divine address calls forth human response, and human address, which, whether through lament, praise, or protest, enters into the life of God.

In adopting this form, we intend more than stylistic novelty. The letter enables us to embody the very commitments that a trauma-informed, anti-theodicy framework requires. Trauma destabilises linear narratives and resists premature resolution; correspondence allows us to return, to revise, and to linger over what remains unresolved. Moreover, trauma-informed theology must be alert to the power dynamics embedded in its own discourse. Writing to one another as equals, and allowing each voice to speak in its own cadence, disrupts any unilateral imposition of theological interpretation upon the other's argument. The subject of our exchange, the problem of suffering and the theological temptations of theodicy, has long been conducted in modes that aspire to universality and finality. Classical theodicies, by seeking to reconcile the existence of evil with the goodness



and omnipotence of God, often abstract suffering from the specific bodies, communities, and histories in which it occurs. In doing so, they risk reinscribing harm: legitimising suffering as divinely purposed, reinforcing structural injustices, or silencing the testimony of survivors whose experiences resist neat incorporation into theological schemas.

In what follows, each of us develops our own argument in extended form before responding to the other's claims in a further exchange. Our shared concern is to resist the reduction of suffering to a philosophical puzzle to be solved. Instead, we wish to interrogate the structural, systemic, and relational dimensions of suffering; dimensions that traditional theodicies too often occlude; and to articulate theological practices that foster resistance, solidarity, and communal transformation. By structuring this work as a correspondence, we hope to model a form of theological engagement that is responsive, situated, and self-critical: responsive to the other's voice, situated in the lived realities of suffering and resistance, and self-critical in its awareness of the risks inherent in speaking about the pain of others. The letters you will read are not mere containers for pre-formed arguments, but sites where our theological reasoning is tested, refined, and sometimes unsettled in the act of dialogue itself.



The letters

Dear John,

In our work, we have both underlined our concerns about the use of theodicy in practice. Theological attempts to justify divine goodness in response to radical suffering are, in your words, both 'theologically questionable' and 'pastorally dangerous'.² As you know, theodicy often takes the form of abstract philosophical dialogue, and as such risks undermining the realities of evil. Theoretical approaches to theodicy remain disconnected from the realities of human suffering, overlooking the specific and personal dimensions of pain. By emphasising the doctrine of original sin, these frameworks can also reinforce narratives of blame,

² John Swinton, *Raging with Compassion: Pastoral Responses to the Problem of Evil* (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2007), 12.



directed at those most affected by trauma.³

A particular concern I have is that theodicy is often used to present suffering as ‘redemptive’, emphasising the structural dimensions of evil and pointing towards a more trauma-informed and action-oriented response to suffering. In an essay titled “For God So Loved the World?”, Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker write that:

The central image of Christ on the cross as the savior of the world communicates the message that suffering is redemptive. If the best person who ever lived gave his life for others, then, to be of value we should likewise sacrifice ourselves. Any sense that we have a right to care for our own needs is in conflict with being a faithful follower of Jesus.⁴

Here, as they emphasise the widely accepted glorification of suffering in Christian theology, Brown and Parker highlight the crucifixion as a central and emblematic expression of redemptive suffering. As they note, ideas of redemption in Christian theology refer to God’s liberation of humanity from sin and suffering through the death of Jesus Christ. With regards to theodicy, I am concerned that redemption provides a theological rationale for suffering, asserting that it may carry a greater salvific purpose of restoring creation and reconciling humanity with God. Irenaeus theodicy (based on the writings of the second-century Greek bishop Irenaeus) is

³ Take, for example, Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell’s response to 9/11. Falwell, a Southern Baptist pastor and televangelist, appeared on Robertson’s programme *The 700 Club* two days after the attacks. They discussed possible ‘theological’ explanations for the event, deciding that 9/11 was a result of God’s anger at marginalised groups. Robertson named: ‘the pagans and the abortionists and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU [American Civil Liberties Union], People for the American Way, all of them who tried to secularize America.’ He ended by stating ‘I point the finger in their face and say: “You helped this happen.”’ See “Transcript of Pat Robertson’s Interview with Jerry Falwell, Broadcast on the 700 Club, September 13th, 2001”, in *Holy Terrors: Thinking About Religion After September 11*, ed. Bruce Lincoln, 2nd edition (University of Chicago Press, 2010), 110.

⁴ Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker, “For God So Loved the World?”, in *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse*, ed. Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn (Pilgrim Press, 1989), 2.



built on the concept of a two-stage creation. Human beings are made in the *image* of God, a condition already fulfilled, while their *likeness* to God represents an ongoing process of spiritual maturation and moral development. John Hick's work has expanded this concept of 'soul making', going as far as to suggest that innocent suffering can be justified on the grounds that those who suffer innocently display compassionate love and self-giving for others.⁵ For Hick, human life is enhanced by challenges, and suffering should be understood as a character-building exercise that brings us into closer communion with God.⁶

As you know, soul-making theodicy faces several significant criticisms. The magnitude and intensity of suffering in the world (war, genocide, natural disasters, famine, structural violence, etc) seems disproportionate to any conceivable moral development. If soul-making is the goal, why then is suffering so unevenly and often cruelly distributed? Further, some individuals suffer without the opportunity for any growth or transformation. As a practical theologian whose work is engaged with the lived realities of faith and practice, I find the abstraction of suffering within this model deeply troubling. In particular, I am concerned by the framing of suffering as a theoretical 'problem' to be solved, rather than a concrete and painful dimension of the human experience. If we consider what it means to be 'trauma informed' (to return to the definition given in the introduction of this article), this type of theodicy appears to ignore the social, physical, and personal consequences of human suffering, while also, as will shortly become apparent, holding the potential to directly or inadvertently re-traumatise or dismiss those who have experienced profound pain.

In response to criticisms of abstraction in explanations for evil, Alvin Plantinga contends that theodicy is not 'designed to be of much help or comfort to one suffering', nor should it be used 'as a means to pastoral counselling.'⁷ Plantinga's separation of intellectual and practical forms of theodicy is echoed by David O'Connor, who, in his defence of theoretical theodicy, contends that it 'is not, and to my knowledge, never has been offered as, a response [...] to the victims', or as 'an attempt to minister to

⁵ John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 2nd edition (Harper and Row, 1978), 291–92.

⁶ Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 292.

⁷ Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom and Evil* (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1974), 30.



the afflicted [...]’.⁸ Plantinga and O’Connor’s words raise an important question for us: If these abstract explanations of evil are not designed to meet people in the depths of their grief and trauma, what purpose do they ultimately serve? Both thinkers appear to suggest that theodicy can exist purely within academic discourse and away from Christian communities. This position, I think, underestimates the extent to which doctrine can influence ecclesial culture and everyday faith practice. Theodicy does not exist within a vacuum.

Womanist theologian Kelly Brown Douglas demonstrates this in her work on anti-Blackness in the US context. She explores how Black bodies have historically been constructed as sinful and thought deserving of punishment.⁹ Brown Douglas points out that theological narratives have been used to implicitly justify racial violence by portraying Black suffering as redemptive or divinely ordained. These ideas have become embedded in American culture, where violence against Black bodies is a normalised and ‘pervasive’ reality.¹⁰ This presents a challenge to Plantinga and O’Connor’s assertions that theoretical theodicies are not intended to be used in practice. The theological frameworks used to make sense of suffering often reflect, reinforce, or ignore the power structures and injustices that give rise to suffering in the first place. Structural evil, manifest particularly in institutionalised racism, and by extension in unjust political systems, economic exploitation, and ecological destruction, is not merely the backdrop to individual pain but a central feature of it. When theologians focus narrowly on abstract philosophical justifications for evil, or attempts to artificially separate the theoretical from the practical, they risk obscuring these embedded systems of oppression. Perhaps this is something you have encountered in your own work and life?

Theology, then, must grapple not only with why suffering exists, but with *how suffering is distributed*, with whose suffering is validated, and with whose is dismissed. In order to do so, I suggest that we must shift from reflection on the problem of evil to a more grounded, solidarity-driven praxis. This will involve confronting the misuse of power,

⁸ David O’Connor, “In Defense of Theoretical Theodicy”, *Modern Theology* 5, no. 1 (1988): 64.

⁹ Kelly Brown Douglas, “Stop the Violence: Breaking the Cycle of Anti-Black Violence”, *Interpretation* 71, no. 4 (2017): 400–01.

¹⁰ Douglas, “Stop the Violence”, 398.



questioning theological traditions that inadvertently uphold injustice, and participating in the dismantling of structures that perpetuate harm. In my Chalmers Lectures, I spoke of the need for action in our ‘traumatised world’. While I used this term to describe the ‘age of trauma’¹¹ that we are currently living in, as well as the interlinked crises that shape individual suffering and create collective, structural harm on a global scale, its meaning extends even further. It points to the ongoing psychological burdens we carry due to our exposure to, and consumption of, trauma on a daily basis. Through our technology and devices, we carry the suffering of the world in our pockets, yet from an evolutionary perspective, the human nervous system was not designed to process the intensity and frequency of such exposure.¹² While incidents of extreme violence, destruction, and systemic injustice would, historically, have been rare, exceptional events, we now encounter these on an almost daily basis. They are delivered instantaneously through screens as we engage in mundane routines such as commutes, lunch breaks, or queueing in supermarkets. Crucially, this psychological burden is further compounded by the capitalist structures within which many societies operate. The frameworks we live in prioritise productivity and continuity over emotional processing or collective mourning, leaving us little space to process the suffering we encounter. For this reason, while I recognise that trauma is an individual response and something which people may or may not experience,¹³ I use

¹¹ Lucy Bond and Stef Craps, *Trauma* (Routledge, 2020), 41.

¹² Salma M. Abdalla et al. have researched the effects on media exposure and the risks of trauma development in the wake of mass traumatic events. They conclude that ‘availability and exposure to media coverage of mass traumatic events, particularly as social media becomes more ubiquitous, has the potential to increase community PTSD prevalence.’ See Salma M. Abdalla, Gregory H. Cohen, Shailesh Tamrakar, Shaffi Fazaludeen Koya and Sandro Galea, “Media Exposure and the Risk of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Following a Mass traumatic Event: An *In-silico* Experiment”, *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 12 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyt.2021.674263>.

¹³ George Bonanno considers how individual differences, such as personality traits, coping mechanisms, and psychological resilience, can all influence whether someone becomes traumatised by an event or ongoing event. He explains that the same event can lead to varying psychological outcomes depending on the person. See the following article for further information: George Bonanno, “Loss, Trauma, and Human Resilience: Have We Underestimated the Human Capacity to Thrive



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the term ‘traumatised world’ to draw attention to the persistent, pervasive nature of global suffering. Bessel van der Kolk writes that trauma has lingering consequences, and that it ‘is not just an event that took place sometime in the past; it is also the imprint left by that experience on mind, brain, and body.’¹⁴ In other words, the *ongoingness* of trauma is significant for theological considerations of suffering.

Trauma leaves us in a difficult place. I find myself reluctant to place survivors in a position of accepting definitive theologies of suffering. Yet there is a risk in not providing an answer, isn’t there? For now, I believe that theodicy is not the answer (at the very least, it should not be presented as the *only* answer) to suffering and trauma.

I await your response.

In solidarity,

Katie



Dear Katie,

Reading this, I find myself circling back to your insistence that theology should resist the urge to say anything that risks coercing trauma into a predetermined pattern. That restraint is vital. Yet I wonder: Is there not also a pastoral responsibility to ensure the silence is not filled by others with more dangerous narratives? In congregations I have served, the absence of theological framing has sometimes left the bereaved or traumatised to reach for the stock phrases of providential necessity, precisely the ‘God has a reason’ logic you oppose.

In such cases, my instinct is not to stay silent, but to intervene with language that rejects justification while still locating suffering within God’s ongoing presence. You may find this too close to the old problem, but to me it is a question of stewardship: who tends the theological imagination of a community in moments when pain is raw? We cannot

After Extremely Aversive Events?” *American Psychologist*, 59, no.1 (2004): 20–28.

¹⁴ Bessel A. van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (Penguin, 2014), 33.



simply trust that leaving meaning-making open will lead to liberative interpretations; in my experience, the void is often filled by what is most familiar, which is often the most harmful.

John



Dear John,

Thank you for your reply. I recognise the pastoral tension that you have raised. I share a similar unease with some of the thinking around trauma theology, which has developed from Shelly Rambo's work on Holy Saturday theology and the concept of 'holding space' for suffering. While allowing space for trauma is vital, there is a pastoral temptation to disengage from hope, remaining in a perpetual state of suffering and theological silence without resolution. This is not what Rambo intends, but it is a potential misapplication of her work, and one which has serious consequences for those whose lives are implicated by systemic oppression. When I was preparing for the Chalmers Lectures, a friend of mine who is transgender told me that hope is not just an abstract concept for them: it is the very thing that keeps them alive as they face an onslaught of social and political violence every day. When I think of this and of your question, I can see that not providing any alternative to theodicy could be problematic. At the same time, I do not think that a single answer to the problem of suffering is possible or desirable.

Instead, as I put forward in my Chalmers Lectures, I think that the ongoingness of suffering and the realities of trauma necessitate space for two very grounded (and on the surface opposed) realities: hopelessness and action. In his work, Miguel De La Torre resists abstract ideas or distant futures, instead looking to the day-to-day realities of suffering and oppression. He is more concerned with concrete actions in response to real world injustices, than detached, utopian ideas of what the world should look like. These, he argues, are often fuelled by white, Western, middle-class perspectives that impose moral imperatives on us: ideas of patience, or having faith in the system. Instead, when we consider suffering, we should be thinking first and foremost about those who have no reason to hope for systemic change within their lifetimes. While De La Torre's 'hopeless ethic' calls us to acknowledge trauma and suffering without



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explanation or divine justification, it does so to facilitate more realistic, grounded ethical decisions that are aimed at survival and resistance in the present.

I agree with this description of action. In my lectures, I suggested that engagement with people, politics, and protest is more important than abstracted justifications for suffering. In a traumatised world, there will be times in which action seems like an impossible way forward. Given the fundamental issues with intellectual theodicy, even the smallest, most imperfect acts of solidarity and resistance against oppressive systems are a far more meaningful use of our time than generating further rationales for suffering.

Action might not be a single or definitive answer, but on a pastoral level it is more than silence; it is an opportunity to engage in community, and to create meaning that moves beyond the static and detached explanation that theodicy provides.

Looking forward to hearing more of your thoughts,

Katie



Dear Katie,

Your last letter has left me reflecting on the lived texture of hopelessness. You describe, following De La Torre, how hopelessness can function as a critical ethic – stripping away illusions, forcing theology to face the immediacy of suffering, and opening space for realistic action. I see the value of this, yet I continue to wonder how hopelessness is actually experienced in traumatised lives. Sometimes, hopelessness is not an ethic to be embraced but an atmosphere imposed. This becomes painfully clear when we, for example, attend to the phenomenon of voice-hearing.¹⁵ A

¹⁵ The term *voice-hearing* is used here in preference to *auditory hallucinations* to reflect the language adopted by survivor movements and trauma-informed research communities, which emphasise phenomenological description rather than pathological classification. See, Eleanor Longden, Dirk Corstens, Sandra Escher and Marius Romme, “Voice Hearing in a Biographical Context: A Model for Formulating the Relationship Between Voices and Life History”, *Psychosis* 4, no.



considerable body of clinical and phenomenological work has demonstrated how traumatic experiences, particularly interpersonal abuse in childhood, are closely implicated in the onset and persistence of auditory verbal hallucinations. Voice-hearing is, of course, a heterogeneous phenomenon, ranging from benign and even positive voices in non-clinical populations to distressing, persecutory voices in psychosis. Yet in many cases, there is a striking thematic continuity between traumatic experiences and the content of voices. Research has shown that many trauma-exposed voice-hearers report direct or thematic linkages between what they endured and what the voices say: perpetrators' words echoing years later, or voices that repeat familiar themes of worthlessness, shame, and threat. What emerges is not simply 'symptom' but the traumatic past returning in auditory form.¹⁶

For those who live with such voices, hopelessness is not chosen but enacted upon them. The voices tell them there is no escape, that they are trapped, that they are worthless. In this sense, hopelessness is not an abstract category but an embodied experience, impressed upon consciousness by trauma itself. If De La Torre asks us to embrace hopelessness as a way of refusing sentimental theologies of progress, the clinical realities of voice-hearing suggest that hopelessness may already be the dominant register of traumatised existence. To valorise it uncritically risks confusing an imposed condition of despair with a prophetic stance of resistance.

3 (2012): 224–34.; and Dirk Corstens, Sandra Escher, Marius Romme and Eleanor Longden, "Accepting and Working with Voices: The Maastricht Approach", in *Psychosis, Trauma and Dissociation: Evolving Perspectives on Severe Psychopathology*, 2nd edition, ed. Andrew Moskowitz, Martin J. Dorah and Ingo Schäfer (Wiley Blackwell, 2019), 319–32. The phrase resists the medicalisation of experience, foregrounding the person's agency and meaning-making rather than defining the phenomenon solely in diagnostic terms.

¹⁶ Ann K. Shinn, Jonathan D. Wolff, Melissa Hwang et al., "Assessing Voice Hearing in Trauma Spectrum Disorders: A Comparison of Two Measures and a Review of the Literature", *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 10 (2020): 1–31, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2019.01011>. See also Dirk Corstens and Eleanor Longden, "The Origins of Voices: Links Between Life History and Voice Hearing in a Survey of 100 Cases", *Psychosis: Psychological, Social and Integrative Approaches* 5, no. 3 (2013): 270–85. These studies locate auditory verbal hallucinations within a trauma-related continuum and demonstrate the phenomenological continuity between past interpersonal abuse and current voice content, supporting the use of the non-pathologising term *voice-hearing*.



At the same time, the research also points to the possibility of resistance. Trauma-informed therapeutic approaches invite voice-hearers to explore the possible connections between their voices and past experiences. Many find that recognising the voices as bearers of traumatic memory opens a path towards new ways of relating to them. Some begin to talk back to their voices, to challenge their authority, to reframe their meaning. In clinical settings, trauma-focused therapies like EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitisation and Processing)¹⁷ has proven safe and effective for people with serious mental health challenges. When voices are recognised as carriers of trauma, interventions that address the trauma can reduce their frequency or distress. This suggests to me that that hopelessness need not be the end of the story; even where trauma imposes hopelessness, new practices can cultivate resistance.

This brings me back to your appeal to Delores Williams' insistence on embodied acts of survival and solidarity. In the context of voice-hearing, resistance may not take the form of public protest but of small, intimate acts of reclaiming agency: naming the voice, reframing its significance, grounding oneself in community. These are modest acts, but they can be transformative. They remind me of the fragile practices I described in my Chalmers Lectures exploring the lived experience of dementia: singing, touch, presence. Just as those practices embody what I called attenuated hope, these acts of resistance against the tyranny of traumatic voices are fragile yet real signs of life against despair.

But you are absolutely right about the dangers of theodicy. What is most destructive in these situations is not only the trauma itself but the theological narratives that are sometimes invoked to interpret the voices. It is not uncommon for persecutory voices to be framed by religious communities as divine punishment, demonic attack, or signs of moral failure. The voices themselves already speak hopelessness; to overlay them with theodical interpretations is to intensify the violence. This demonstrates, more starkly than any theoretical critique, the danger you and I have both underlined: theodicy, in practice, can retraumatise. When suffering is explained away as 'redemptive' or as God's necessary testing, the voices of trauma are sanctified rather than challenged.

Here I see the pastoral responsibility I raised in my earlier letter.

¹⁷ See Marcel A. van den Hout and Iris M. Engelhard, "How does EMDR work?", *Journal of Experimental Psychopathology* 3, no. 5 (2012): 724–38.



Silence is not enough. If theology refuses to speak, the vacuum may be filled with precisely these harmful interpretations. The danger is that theology colludes with trauma, rather than unmasking it. Our task, then, is to find a theological language that rejects theodicy's coercion without abandoning people to imposed hopelessness. It may be that epistolary theology itself might model what is needed here. Just as voice-hearers find new possibilities by entering dialogue – with therapists, peers, or communities – so our correspondence enacts the possibility of being addressed, interrupted, and transformed by another's voice. If trauma imposes hopelessness as a solitary burden, then theology must cultivate dialogical practices that keep conversation alive. In doing so, we resist both the finality of despair and the false closure of theodicy.

Warmly,

John



Conclusion

In exploring the possibilities of epistolary theology, we have sought not only to speak about trauma, but to think *through* it together. The dialogical form has not been merely literary, but constitutive: it has altered our theological positions in the process of exchange. John's insistence that silence may permit harmful theologies to re-emerge has unsettled Katie's initial refusal of resolution, pushing the critique of theodicy toward a constructive, trauma-attuned pastoral practice. Conversely, Katie's structural analysis of suffering as political and systemic has widened John's focus beyond the clinic or congregation, revealing the necessity of integrating personal and collective forms of resistance. What has emerged, therefore, is not synthesis but transformation: a theology re-shaped by encounter.

Throughout these letters, a tension has remained between hopelessness and hope. For John, De La Torre's hopeless ethic, when refracted through the lived realities of trauma, risks collapsing into imposed despair unless it is re-conceived theologically. The dialogue itself has forced that re-conceiving. We now understand hopelessness not as the negation of hope, but as the refusal of false consolation and abstract certitude. What endures



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beyond that refusal is a form of hope that does not justify, explain, or predict, but persists as resistance: what we have elsewhere called *defiant hope*. Defiant hope is fragile and embodied; it names the practice of remaining present when redemption cannot yet be narrated. It attends to the wounded body and refuses the closure of theodicy while still insisting that meaning may be enacted, if not yet understood.

Finally, this exchange has clarified that trauma-informed theology must operate across two interdependent scales. The first we call *prophetic resistance*: the public, structural, and political labour of unmasking the systems that perpetuate suffering. The second we name *pastoral resilience*: the intimate, embodied practices that sustain life within and against those systems. The small acts through which voice-hearers reclaim agency or people living with dementia re-member themselves in song exemplify this convergence. Each is at once pastoral and prophetic, gestures of survival that contest the narratives of despair imposed by trauma and theology alike. Thus, our experiment in correspondence is also a model of praxis. By allowing our theological reasoning to be tested, interrupted, and re-formed by another's voice, we have attempted to practise the very solidarity we commend. In a traumatised world, such dialogical, defiant hope may be the most truthful resistance that theology can offer.

