




# Evil Re-Examined: Barthian Insights

## Post-Covid Pandemic

Denni Boy Saragih, PhD\*  
Krida Wacana Christian University  
1st Floor, Building E, Campus I  
Tanjung Duren Raya no. 4, Jakarta Barat, DKI Jakarta, 11470, Indonesia  
\*Corresponding: [denni.boy@ukrida.ac.id](mailto:denni.boy@ukrida.ac.id)  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2038-7236>

 <https://doi.org/10.46222/pharosjot.105.222>

### Abstract

This paper delves into Karl Barth's unique interpretation of evil within the context of the 2019-2022 global COVID-19 pandemic, guided by Kenneth Surin's concept of 'practical theodicy.' Employing a critical analysis of Barth's theological works, with a particular focus on '*das Nichtige*' (nothingness), it uncovers a fresh understanding of Barth's theological intentions concerning the problem of evil. Barth's theology highlights the inherent malevolence of evil and its ultimate defeat through Christ, providing a theological framework for addressing post-pandemic suffering challenges. This reinterpretation holds specific relevance for Indonesia's and global Christian community, offering a practical theological foundation for navigating the pandemic's aftermath. The research's implications extend to theology and ethics, offering a new perspective on how Christians can comprehend and respond to suffering in a post-pandemic world. Informed by 'practical theodicy,' Barth's theological insights prompt a reconsideration of our approach to evil and its implications for human existence. This paper reevaluates Karl Barth's theology of evil through a contemporary lens, presenting a novel interpretation that is particularly valuable to scholars and theologians seeking fresh viewpoints on the enduring issue of suffering. Moreover, it offers practical guidance for Indonesia's Christian community in addressing the challenges posed by the global pandemic.

**Keywords:** suffering, pandemic, theodicy, Karl Barth, nothingness.

### Introduction

The pandemic 2019-2022 is an era of intense suffering, isolation, death, and loss. It is a time, both in Indonesia and globally, when the question of evil and suffering shakes many in ways that have never been experienced before. People are puzzled by the sheer, intense, and prolonged horror the pandemic brings to human life. Why is there suffering in this God's good world?

Evil is an enigmatic anomaly and, at times, a subject of confusion and misunderstanding. It could be differentiated, in primary forms, as sin and suffering, or according to Paul Ricœur, as blame (evil as wrongdoing) and lament (evil as suffering) (Ricœur & Ihde, 1974). However, this fundamental distinction is broken down when evil as wrongdoing is seen as a form of suffering or when lament (suffering) is thought concerning the sins one committed (Ricœur & Ihde, 1974). Thus, it poses a challenge to theodicy or any endeavour about the interpretation of suffering that tries to construct a theology that works by explaining suffering. Nevertheless, this challenge is not noted by the recent exploration of the theology of suffering in the context of the current pandemic. For example, Marthen et al. suggest that suffering is an everyday experience in human life and part of the ordinary Christian life (Marthen & Dominggus, 2021).



Similarly, Stevanus also proposed an explanation for the suffering that places God's planning at the centre of theodicy, and it must be accepted with self-surrender (Stevanus, 2019).

In response to the conversation, we propose to engage with the framework explicated by Kenneth Surin. He proposes an insightful distinction between "theoretical theodicy" and "practical theodicy" (Surin, 2004: 2). Traditionally, theodicy is an attempt to provide philosophical or theological reasons that reconcile the reality of evil with the belief in an omnipotent and loving God. It asks, "Why do evil and suffering exist in the world created by a good and omnipotent God?" "Theoretical theodicy," as Surin understands it, looks for a logical coherence or a biblical/theological defence that reconciles the two traditional attributes of God (Ricoeur, 1974: 635). However, a new development in theological reflection, particularly in response to our present experience of suffering, has shaped a unique landscape that sits uncomfortably with this logic. Practical theodicy questions the goal of theoretical theodicy as either unattainable or misplaced. It fails to provide a satisfactory solution (Surin, 2004), and its various proposals, in the end, reflect what Immanuel Kant calls "a metaphysical miscarriage" (Kant, 1964: 21). Kant himself has not had a straightforward solution to the problem, and it remains an unsolvable quest in his philosophy (Huxford, 2020). As such, this research proposes that a more mature response to suffering needs to move along the line of practical theodicy (Zylla, 2012).

The specific purpose of this paper is to provide a way to understand suffering by exploring Barth's exposition of *das Nichtige* in CD III/3 §50 ("God and Nothingness"). The theological task poses a new challenge during this pandemic era. However, by reading Barth's theology of suffering from a practical theodicy perspective, we submit the reflection will result in a fresh reading of what and how we should understand suffering and how this might contribute to the situation where the church in Indonesia need to respond to the challenge of suffering during the pandemic.

Our thesis is this: Barth's creative way to respond to the problem of suffering is by not constructing an explanation of the suffering (theoretical theodicy) but rather by highlighting God's taking sides with the sufferers against the existence of evil (practical theodicy). Instead of explaining (either philosophically or theologically) the origin of evil and suffering, Barth instead construes a proper theological grammar for speaking and understanding suffering (Mitchell, 2011), particularly in the light of Christ's event in which evil is defeated in His cross and resurrection. We also submit that some critics have misunderstood Barth because their readings assume that Barth is offering a "theoretical theodicy." With and beyond Barth, we must not try to explain suffering but rather explore the implications of God's revelation in Jesus Christ, which shows God's response to evil by taking sides with the sufferers who underwent the experience of pain. It is this essential biblical theme that we contend is a critical contribution to constructing a theology of suffering during this pandemic era.

## **Methodology**

This research method applied was a qualitative research of literature review combined with the constructive theological approach by reading Barth's theology of suffering in the light of Surin's practical theodicy. This constructive theological reflection is offered as the contribution of the church in Indonesia and in global world in constructing a theology of suffering in the aftermath of the pandemic era.

## **Practical Theodicy Critique of Theoretical Theodicy**

At the heart of its theological construct, practical theodicy critiques the logic and ethics of theoretical theodicies. The critical evaluation is fundamental; it questions how theoretical theodicy sees problems and constructs solutions. The three most essential criticisms are the question of its explanatory legitimacy, its contextual discrepancy, and its ethical permissibility.

First, concerning its explanatory legitimacy, practical theodicy argues that the philosophical landscape of the post-Enlightenment has shattered the acceptability of doing theoretical



theodicy. Theoretical theodicy is a search for metaphysical “reason” and “justification,” which works with the assumption that all events, including suffering, have a justifiable teleological dimension (Surin, 2004). It entails the possibility of rational or theological explanations for the metaphysical purpose of suffering (Surin, 2004). Three common explanations are as follows: (i) suffering is God’s pedagogical way to nurture faith and hope, (ii) suffering is the result of God’s justice for our sins, and (iii) suffering is God’s mysterious way to bring goodness in the mystery of divine wisdom.

These explanations, however, contain implausible constructs within the context of the modern worldview. The rise of scientific and mechanical worldviews has given birth to a worldview where the law of nature governs everything. The reality, it supposes, can be exclusively explained by physics (Surin, 2004). The new rationality creates a “hermeneutical gap” with what is assumed in theoretical theodicy (Surin, 2004). It does not need a belief in God to explain the process of human experience. The reality of God bears no teleological consequence. This new intellectual culture opens the door to the possibility of seeing evil and suffering as a tragic instance, understood within a ruthless and practically non-theistic cosmological system. Human suffering, including today’s experience of COVID-19, is just senseless and purposeless. There is no logical plausibility of doing theodicy in this new context. Doing theoretical theodicy suffers a crisis of legitimacy (Surin, 2004).

Second, concerning its contextual discrepancy, theoretical theodicy which has three forms logical/deductive, evidential/inductive, and existential, covers a range of different themes that are inherently inconsistent (Surin, 2004). The problematic trait in the coverage is that various explanations, from other times and purposes, are treated equally to solve the problem of propositional logic. For example, it is expected to speak of Augustine’s theodicy, Irenaeus’ theodicy, Calvin’s theodicy, etc. However, those treated as “the patron saints” of a theoretical theodicy may not agree about the nature and purpose of their respective projects (Surin, 2004). Take, for example, the contrast between Augustine and Irenaeus. A set of historical-pastoral questions drove Augustine’s answer to the problem of evil. It might not necessarily align with modern “free-will theodicy” questions that bear his name, as some have proposed (Berthold, 2004). Irenaeus’ theodicy might not be as different as it is supposed from Augustine’s theodicy and might be historically inaccurate to represent the approach that bears his name (a pedagogical theodicy) (Scott, 2010). The contingency of their respective historical contexts, upon close inspection, proposes that their projects are different from modern “theoretical theodicy.”

Thirdly, concerning its ethical permissibility, the comprehensiveness of the explanation creates a concrete moral problem. It trivializes the suffering of the victims and abstracts the theological reflection from the horror of suffering (Surin, 2004). It provides odd justifications for the irrationalities of suffering. Concrete historical suffering is transformed into logical propositions that need to be reconciled by a system of coherent explanations. However, what is achieved is only a shallow reconciliation and a pretentious justice of abstract evils. Ricœur perceptively comments, “It does not triumph over real evil but only over its aesthetic phantom” (Ricœur & Ihde, 1974: 312).

These criticisms are rooted in theoretical theodicy attempts to explain evil at its heart. The problematic trait of theoretical theodicy lies in its explanatory attitude, where every suffering, including the horrific, is justified by a unified construct of logical rationalization. However, in doing so, it only domesticates evil and suffering. The explanations come in many forms, but as Richard Bauckham rightly notes, the problem is not only logical but, more importantly, ethical, i.e., “the difficulty with such explanations of suffering is not that they do not explain anything, but that they do not, or should not, explain everything” (Bauckham, 2006: 72). It fails to differentiate between blame (evil as wrongdoing) and lament (evil as suffering) and also between various degrees, numbers, and kinds of suffering (Ricoeur, 1974). As Surin rightly notes, it mediates the praxis of averting our attention from real suffering in human experience



(Surin, 2004). It places theology in a false trajectory and fails to consider the evilness of suffering from the sufferer's point of view.

### **The Alternative: Karl Barth's *Das Nichtige***

Karl Barth's account of *das Nichtige* (nothingness) in CD III/3 § 50 ("God and Nothingness") offers a fascinating and for many a controversial theological interpretation of evil that we propose avoids the weakness of traditional theodicy. Barth describes the reality of evil as "*das Nichtige*" or "Nothingness," a dynamic and anomalous power menacing God's creation and purpose. An existence that is real but unjustifiable as a rational reality. Barth resists any talk of its justification or explanation and insists on its irrationality. In the context of Nothingness, suffering is not ordinary; it is an invasion of an alien element to God's good creation. Thus Barth's is a relatively idiosyncratic treatise to the problem of evil that deviates greatly from the theological tradition but it remains a work worthy of contemplation.

However, many critics have found Barth's account inadequate, primarily under the charge of dualism and mythical construction of evil. John Hick, for example, criticizes Barth's account as "a naively mythological construction which cannot withstand rational criticism" (Hick, 2010: 135). By Barth's standard, '*das Nichtige*' is "an infringement of his ban upon speculative theorizing" (Hick, 2010: 135). Hick concludes Barth's ontology of evil is "halfway towards a Manichean dualism" (Hick, 2010: 187).

In a similar vein, Roland Chia critiques Barth's *das Nichtige* as "a form of dualism," unconvincing in its argument against the necessity of evil and questionable in its exegesis of Genesis 1. (Roland Chia, 2004: 88). In our view, these criticisms are related to an inaccurate approach of placing Barth's theology as a form of theoretical theodicy. In light of Surin's proposal of practical theodicy, it might be more accurate to interpret Barth's from a practical theodicy point of view (Surin, 2004). Barth is critical to theodicy within the limit of the philosophical system as understood in theoretical theodicy. In what follows, we provide arguments for this contention and, in so doing, offer a reading of Barth's theology of suffering from a "practical theodicy" point of view.

### **Theodicy as Theological Knowledge**

Barth's theology of suffering is best understood from practical theodicy because his interpretation is set within the context of the church doctrine and not a philosophical construct (McDowell, 2002). Barth does not believe that theodicy is even plausible as a theological project (Barth, 2010). Like practical theodicy, Barth is critical of theoretical theodicies and their philosophical determinations to explain suffering. Barth's exposition of *das Nichtige* is shaped by his understanding of theological knowledge, which differs from general epistemology. Theology is not a rational human investigation into transcendental reality (Webster, 2000). Its foundation lies instead in the self-revealing Trinity. God is "the methods, norms, and source of theology" (Webster, 2000: 51). It is not an exploration of transcendental truth isolated from the revelation of God (Webster, 2000). When theology assumes such a possibility, it must admit the existence of a natural point of contact between God and the human mind, between grace and nature, outside God's revelation. The logical consequence is the abstraction of divine reality into a phenomenon of historical contingency (Webster, 2000).

This entails a construct of theological knowledge as an impossible possibility (Webster, 2000). It only makes sense within a Trinitarian understanding of revelation as a miracle and event (Webster, 2000). Only because God first decided to reveal God-self is there a possibility of theological knowledge. This impossible possibility is a miracle of faith by the work of the Holy Spirit (Webster, 2000). A knowledge structure based on revelational conviction does not automatically ensure proper understanding without divine guidance at work. God's gracious communicative action must support theological knowledge in the event of faith.



This theological prolegomenon provides the background to understand his rejection of theodicy. Evil is a surd element and anomaly, i.e., a break between God, creation, and God's relationship to creation, demanding a theological grammar bordering on conflicting claims.

"The meaning of objectivity is that we must be prepared and without diminution to accept and take into account, each in its place and manner, all the conflicting claims: the claim that God's holiness and omnipotence should be equally respected, the claim that we should think and speak of this matter with joy and also with seriousness; the claim that the power of nothingness should be rated as low as possible concerning God and as high as possible concerning ourselves" (Barth, 2010: 295).

The break creates an alien ontology of what is possible to human knowledge. Our theological knowledge, objectively speaking, is an inadequate tool to capture God's relationship with this break. This is so because, after all, theological knowledge is a creaturely activity shaped by creaturely capacity. Since suffering as an inbreaking of nothingness is unnatural and uncreated, it resists a proper theological description as a being but can only be described as a real "non-being." Theology, regarding the reality of evil, faces an impenetrable theological anomaly.

### **The Brokenness of our Theological Language**

Barth's theology is shaped by his acknowledgment of the brokenness of all theological language. This is also applied to the theological language of suffering. Barth's gesture at this point is very different from the logical structure of theoretical theodicy, in which the explanation is "evaluated and reassessed against the data along with the parameter of consistency, explanatory power, and (theoretical and practical) fruitfulness" (Adams & Adams, 2009:1).

In response to the theodicy question, "How can justice be done both to the holiness and the omnipotence of God when we are faced with the problem of nothingness?" (Barth, 2010: 292), Barth helpfully explains that "(we cannot) overcome the contrast between God's holiness and His omnipotence by mediation." As pursued by theoretical theodicy, conceptual systematization points to an empty propositional rationalization. The problem of suffering cannot be resolved by logically reconciling two or three contradictory propositions. Barth instead highlights the contradiction and admits the brokenness of theological language:

"It may be said that it can be so only as we soberly acknowledge that we have here an obvious demonstration of the necessary brokenness of all theological thought and utterance. There is no theological sphere where this is not noticeable. All theology is *theologia viatorum*. It can never satisfy the natural aspiration of human thought and utterance for completeness and compactness." (Barth, 2010: 293).

### **God Taking Side with the Victims**

Barth's theological knowledge and language construct point to his Christological reflection of *das Nichtige*. God's revelation recounts God's dealing with evil in the concrete event of Jesus Christ. God is not a neutral observer, observing human suffering from the sideline, but rather the Father of all who cares for creation and takes a victim's role. God chooses to suffer and stands as a sufferer out of His freedom to love the creatures and His love in freedom for the creation.

"He whom nothingness has no power to offend prepared on behalf of his creature to be primarily and properly offended and humiliated, attacked, and injured by nothingness. ... He might remain aloof and detached from nothingness. He need not involve himself.... However, He descends to the depths and concerns Himself with nothingness because in His goodness, He does not will cease to be concerned for His creature." (Barth, 2010: 357).

In a similar vein to practical theodicy, Barth is not interested in why evil exists in creation but in how God is dealing with evil for the sake of all creatures.



Barth's theological grammar of God as a victim raises the question of God's impassibility. Paul S. Fiddes construes divine involvement in the cross beyond the "indication of an eternal truth about God" into what "actually expresses what is most divine about God" (Fiddes, 2011: 30). Meanwhile, Fiddes rightly affirms that "the cross is an actualization in our history of what is eternally true of God's nature. ... [such that] there must always be across in the experience of God as he deals with a world which exists over against him" (Fiddes, 2011: 29); we need not conclude that God's suffering in Jesus Christ is equal with God's immanent suffering in eternity. Some proposals try to place God's suffering and human suffering in a more intimate relationship (Zaluchu, 2021). Nevertheless, this raises a further theological question on the divine aseity. God's eternal decision implies involvement with the world's suffering and constitutes the infinite being of God (Fiddes, 2011: 31). Cross, however, remains a temporal event, an actualization of what God has decided for His being in eternity (Webster, 2000).

Nevertheless, Barth's presentation of God is very different from the God of modern theoretical theodicy. His response to the problem of evil portrays God as "an-involved-being-for-the-other" (McDowell, 2002: 323). Barth's interpretation is the starting point of further development in discussing God's ontological suffering, as found in the writings of Theopaschite theologians such as Jurgen Moltmann (Fiddes, 2011). However, whereas in recent theological explorations, God's suffering is resolved into the immanent of God, and Christological suffering is transposed into the eternal being of God, Barth confines his theological exploration within the revelation where incarnation and cross are understood as temporal actualization of what God has decided eternally about His being.

### **The Goodness of Creation**

The next theme in Barth's theology that can help the church during this pandemic is his hopefulness about creation. In some "theoretical theodicies," there are inclinations to construct an instrumental role of creatures for supposedly more significant causes. The meaning of suffering is external to the victim's life, or if it is related, the victim is secondary and instrumental to the aesthetic justification of future bliss. If suffering and evil were inevitable prices for the eschatological goodness of creation, then we rightly question the inherent worth of creaturely reality (Dostoyevsky, 1982). We propose that Barth's determination to affirm the integrity of creation will help us avoid this theological deficiency. *Das nichtige* is not part of creation. If evil is the realization of God's will, there is no reason to celebrate the goodness of creation. However, if creation is the object of God's will, God's election in Jesus Christ, then *das Nichtige* and its manifestation in human suffering is the object of God's rejection.

Nevertheless, Barth's theology construes creation in a way that includes creaturely imperfections in the goodness of creation. This perspective is vividly illustrated through his interpretation of Genesis, where the 'tohuwabohu' (formlessness and emptiness) before creation is seen not as negative but as a stage in the unfolding of God's creative purpose. Barth also delves into the role of pain and vulnerability in human life. He suggests that these experiences, while profoundly challenging, can open individuals to a deeper awareness of their limitations and the reality of their dependence on God. As such, creation as an elected and willed reality, consists of positive and negative sides (Barth, 2010). The negative side, the shadow side, is differentiated from *das Nichtige*. Barth argues that a clear distinction between the shadow side and *das Nichtige* provides a solid reason to celebrate the goodness of creation despite its imperfection. It is not a celebration of creation despite evil and suffering; it is a celebration of creation despite its two sides of realities:

"...as God's creation, it has a positive and a negative side. However, this negative side is not to be identified with nothingness, nor must it be postulated that the latter (nothingness) belongs to the essence of creaturely nature and may somehow be understood and interpreted as a mark of its character and perfection. ... It is good, even perfect, in so far as it does not oppose. Still, it correspondent to the intention of God as revealed by Him in the humiliation and



exaltation of Jesus Christ and the reconciliation of the world with Himself effected in Him.” (Barth, 2010: 296).

The negative side is an original part of God’s design; it is also an essential element of creation for all creatures. God embraces the inner antithesis of negative and positive sides in Jesus Christ. The negative side of creation is not evil and can be affirmed by the doctrine of creation and Christ’s incarnation.

“It is true that in creation, there is not only a Yes but also a No; not only a height but also an abyss; not only clarity but also obscurity; not only progress and continuation but also impediment and limitation; not only growth but also decay; not only opulence but also indigence; not only beauty but also ashes; not only beginning but also end; not only value but also worthless. It is true that in creaturely existence, and especially in the existence of man, there are hours, days, and years both bright and dark, success and failure, laughter and tears, youth and age, gain and loss, birth and sooner or later its inevitable corollary, death.” (Barth, 2010: 296–297).

Barth refuses to understand the shadow side of creation as *das Nichtige*. It must be embraced as part of the goodness of creation, albeit its shadow side. This is why Barth can recognize evil both as sin, for which we must be responsible, and also as “something under which we suffer” (Barth, 2010: 310). It follows that Barth can differentiate between suffering and death as the work of *das Nichtige* and human creaturely transient existence and its challenges and difficulties as part of the good creation. *Das Nichtige* is different from the ‘normal’ suffering concerning the shadow side, such as its transitory nature and imperfection. *Das Nichtige*, on the contrary, is anomalous and destructive inherently aims to end the existence of creation.

Barth’s theology thus invites us to reflect on the goodness of creation concerning various forms of suffering. The word ‘evil’ commonly includes many categories, which are very different by nature. It has evil deeds, natural sins, sufferings (including suffering with and without the imposition of others’ oppression), and the absence of certain qualities compared to other creatures (metaphysical evil). This is one of the severe blunders in theoretical theodicy. Evil is construed as a category inclusive of various kinds of troubles. All sorts of difficulties and sufferings are awkwardly forced to fit into one category of evil to be reconciled with, either theologically or philosophically, the love and power of God. The result is an abstract explanation and justification, putting various kinds of human experience into a single category, from discomfort to horrific suffering. Barth’s interpretation resists this abstraction and differentiates between the shadow side of creation and the dark existence of true evil. In the context of Barth’s theology, acknowledging the shadow side of creation is not merely a good or bad thing; it is an essential aspect of understanding the depth and complexity of God’s creation. The acknowledgment of the shadow side of creation in Barth’s theology is both profound and constructive. It is not about labelling the imperfections of creation as simply good or bad but about deepening our understanding of divine grace, human reliance on God, and the call to live out a response to God’s love in the midst of a complex and imperfect world. This approach fosters a more mature faith, one that embraces the full reality of creation while holding fast to the hope of redemption.

### **The Evilness of Evil**

Nevertheless, Barth’s theology is insistent in pointing out “the evilness of evil” (Ruether, 1969: 6). For Barth, “theoretical theodicy” domesticates the presence of evil in creation (McDowell, 2002). McDowell argues that the primary concern of Barth in §50 is to emphasize the intolerability of evil, i.e., “something which theodicy is in danger of losing” (McDowell, 2002: 324). Evil must not be constructed into a theological system where its existence is inevitable for the goodness of creation. For Barth, evil is always alien, destructive, and chaotic. It has no positive element and only darkness in its totality.



Barth emphasizes this by coordinating several interrelated ideas. The most insightful is the metaphor of conflict between God and *das Nichtige*, which underlines that evil is an anomaly. Barth specifies the evilness of evil; he identifies it as the enemy of God and denies its origin in the positive will of God. Barth's theological grammar should not be understood as a logical necessity of a dialectical relationship between God and evil. The ontology of evil is not eternal and independent, nor is it a necessary and unavoidable by-product of God's action in creating the world. We proposed that it is best understood as a "mythopoetic" language that emphasizes evil as God's enemy (Ruether, 1969). It denotes the positive will of God in rejecting *das Nichtige* as the enemy. It is not a willed existence but rather a denied existence. Barth, however, does not try to place evil (rejected possibilities) in a dialectical relationship to creation (realized possibilities). Barth rejects any dialectical relationship between creation and *das Nichtige* (Barth, 2010). Barth's exposition is different from Hegelian dialectic, where a thesis and an antithesis result in a synthesis. Barth's commentary is characterized by a broken construct (Ricoeur, 1974) in the sense that there is no synthesis between creation (goodness) and *das Nichtige* (evil). Evil cannot have a synthesis relationship to creation; it is substantially the enemy of creation.

"It [*das Nichtige*] is the antithesis whose relationship to creation is real but damaging, offering only menace, corruption, and death, so that it must never be expressed in terms of synthesis. Real synthesis, which must always be the criterion of an ideal or intellectual, cannot be effected except by the surrender of creation to negation, menace, and corruption offered by this antithesis." (Barth, 2010: 302).

It is true that Barth's exposition of *das Nichtige* borders on the possibility of human linguistic expression (McDowell, 2002). It is not a philosophical investigation of the reality of evil (McDowell, 2002) precisely because Barth does not believe that theodicy as a systematic intellectual project is plausible (Barth, 2010). The nature of theological knowledge and the anomaly of the subject matter (*das Nichtige*) implies that the interpretation of evil remains constrained by the brokenness of human knowledge. However, Barth resists the notion of dualism by retaining the language of God's activity concerning the emergence of evil, i.e., it is "the left hand of God," the *opus alienum* of God. The "is" of *das Nichtige* comes from the paradoxical omnipotence of God's rejection, "Even on His left hand, the activity of God is not in vain. He does not act for anything. His rejection, opposition, negation, and dismissal are powerful and effective like all His works because they, too, are grounded in Himself, the freedom and wisdom of His election" (Barth, 2010: 352).

This perplexing claim almost sounds as if God is the creator of evil. However, in this context, Barth is not attempting to describe an etiological description of the origin of evil. We submit that Barth's description is instead a poetical analogy within his theological grammar, denoting that *das Nichtige* is not an independent entity but kept under the sovereignty of God. Barth's mythopoetic language thus highlights that *das Nichtige* is evil, destructive, and chaotic, but it is not an independent power capable of existence outside God's sovereignty. Although Barth seems to "explain" the emergence of *das Nichtige* as a by-product of creation, the concept of *das Nichtige* fundamentally resists any etiological interpretation. It instead presses on the grammar of faith, which is a belief in the power and freedom of God, even concerning the emergence of evil. The emergence of evil is based on God's negation, and theology must keep the tension between its reality as surd existence and the faith in God's love and power. Any theological speculation that resolves the tension fails to recognize the reason for the necessary use of a mythopoetic language and the necessary rejection of an etiological explanation. Theology must remain insistent that *das Nichtige* is an object of God's rejection; it has no place in the *opus aroprium* of God.

### **Conclusion: A Theological Reflection for the Church in Indonesia**

The primary purpose of this paper is to approach the problem of suffering in the aftermath of the pandemic era from the point of view of practical theodicy. For this purpose, the exposition





of Barth's theology is explored from this point of view. Practical theodicy provides a better framework for constructing a theology of suffering in today's context.

To sum up our discussion, we provide five summaries of Barth's theology of suffering that can be incorporated into a constructive theological approach to suffering. First, we need to be aware of the failure of theodicy. Theology needs to reaffirm the source and the nature of theological knowledge. Theological knowledge is critical knowledge, but it is a human critical response to God's self-revelation. In this regard, theology needs to resist a philosophical or socio-cultural determination to offer an exhaustive explanation for suffering. Second, theology must acknowledge the inherent lack of language to explain or describe the reality of human suffering fully. An excellent theological starting point is an acknowledgment of the brokenness of our human vocabulary. This brokenness is not solely based on the insight of human linguistic capacity but also on the realization that evil and the suffering brought about by evil is an anomaly in the creation. Theology needs to emphasize the incompleteness of our response and the irrationality of horrendous evils. Third, a theology of suffering needs to highlight the gospel account of God taking sides with the sufferer who is also standing in the position of a victim.

Theology does not necessarily need to speculate on the notion of God's suffering in the immanent. Nevertheless, the cross as the historical actualization of God's eternal decision shows the innermost concern of God's heart, that is, His infinite love for all creatures. Fourth, a good theological exposition needs to reaffirm the goodness of creation amid suffering. Despite the shadowy side of creation, it remains good and beautiful. This can be achieved by identifying evil as a severely destructive character, an anomaly within creation. Evil should not be placed with everyday life difficulties (the shadow side). Evil and the suffering it causes is the enemy of God. Moreover, finally, theology needs to highlight the evilness of evil, that evil is ultimately destructive and intolerable. COVID-19 should not be identified as evil. Nevertheless, nothingness is at work during pandemics, creating disruption and impacting death, suffering, and loss of human life. It is an invasion of evil in God's good creation. Here, the language of theology must be admitted, bordering on human expression. Nevertheless, theology must be insistent on not explaining further than this.

Explaining evil trivializes human suffering and domesticates its wickedness from an aesthetic perspective. Evil should not be tame; it is a dark reality that menaces the life of humanity; it is the adversary that must be seen as the enemy of God and creation. This dark reality was at work during the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, it is a reality that has been rejected and defeated by God in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. This gospel narrative should shape and inspire the church's life, hope, and ministry during and beyond the pandemic era.

## References

- Adams, M. M., & Merrihew, A.R. (2009). *The Problem of Evil*. Oxford University Press.
- Barth, K. (2010). *Church dogmatics*.: Vols. I–IV (Study ed.). T & T Clark.
- Bauckham, R. (2006). *The Theology of Jürgen Moltmann*. T & T Clark. <http://books.google.com/books?id=lzGos7ZCRiQC&printsec=frontcover&dq=theology+of+jurgen+moltmann&hl=en&sa=X&ei=nAojVP2qAomdyAS5hIGIBQ&ved=0CCgQ6AEwAQ#v=onepage&q=theology+of+jurgen+moltmann&f=false>
- Berthold, F. (2004). *God, Evil, and Human Learning: A Critique and Revision of the Free Will Defense in Theodicy*. State University of New York Press.
- Chia, R. (2004). Karl Barth and The Problem of Evil, *Trinity Theological Journal*, 12.
- Marthen, E., & Dominggus, D. (2021). Memahami Penderitaan Dalam 1 Petrus 4:12-19 Dan Implikasinya Dengan Situasi Pandemi Covid 19, *DIEGESIS: Jurnal Teologi*, 6(1).



- Dostoyevsky, F. (1982). *The Brothers Karamazov*. Penguin Books.
- Fiddes, P. S. (2011). *The Creative Suffering of God*. Clarendon Press. Oxford University Press.
- Hick, J. (2010). *Evil and the God of Love*. Palgrave Macmillan.  
<https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230283961>
- Huxford, G. (2020). *Kant and Theodicy: a search for an answer to the problem of evil*. Lexington Books.
- Kant, I. (1964). *Immanuel Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*. Macmillan, St. Martin's Press.
- McDowell, J. (2002). Much Ado About Nothing: Karl Barth's Being Unable to Do Nothing about Nothingness, *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, 4(3).
- Ricoeur, P. (1974). Evil, a Challenge to Philosophy and Theology, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, LIII(4).
- Ricœur, P., & Ihde, D. (1974). *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*. Northwestern University Press: USA.
- Ruether, R. R. (1969). Left Hand of God in the Theology of Karl Barth, *Journal of Religious Thought*, 25, 1, 3–26.
- Scott, M. (2010). Suffering and soul-making: Rethinking John Hick's theodicy, *Journal of Religion*, 90(3).
- Stevanus, K. (2019). Kesadaran Akan Allah Melalui Penderitaan Berdasarkan Ayub 1-2, *Dunamis: Jurnal Teologi Dan Pendidikan Kristiani*, 3(2), 2541–3945.
- Surin, K. (2004). *Theology and the problem of evil*. Wipf & Stock Publishers.
- Webster, J. (2000). *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*. Cambridge University Press.
- Webster, J. B. (2000). *BARTH: Outstanding Christian Thinkers*. London, New York Continuum.
- Zaluchu, S.E. (2021). Human Suffering and Theological Construction of Suffering, *Evangelikal: Jurnal Teologi Injili Dan Pembinaan Warga Jemaat*, 5(2), 127.  
<https://doi.org/10.46445/ejti.v5i2.369>
- Zylla, P. C. (2012). *The Roots of Sorrow: A Pastoral Theology of Suffering*. Baylor University Press, 217.

**Conflict of Interest Statement:** *The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.*



**This article is open-access and distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Licence**  
*The use, distribution or reproduction in other forums is permitted, provided the original author(s) and the copyright owner(s) are credited and that the original publication in this journal is cited, in accordance with accepted academic practice. No use, distribution or reproduction is permitted which does not comply with these terms.*