

# Coping with Tragedy and Malice

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## *Abstract*

*This paper explores ways of dealing with evil based on the distinction between tragedy and malice. This distinction regards the intention behind the suffering from a victim's point of view. It takes as its starting point the theoretical framework of religious coping and empirical research in theodicies. The notion of "evil" is located in the attributions people make and not on the basis of some absolute or essentialist classification by a theologian. The manifestations of "evil" that figure in this article are child neglect, sexual abuse, and inhumanity in times of war. Theodicies are interpreted as coping strategies.*

## *Introduction*

In recent years, religious coping has become a central theme in the psychology of religion and an important contribution to practical theology. Among other things, religion has to do with coping with the contingencies of life, and that means that we can and should investigate the ways in which religion contributes to or hinders coping. In a sense, this is close to the very heart of religion. Religion is, of course, much more than coping with contingency (Luckmann 1991), but it has certainly always had a special connection to evil and suffering. Suffering is probably religion's greatest incentive as well as its most stubborn problem (Bowker 1984). The quest for answers or ways of dealing with suffering can be found throughout the religious world. Even if it is not phrased in religious terms, the quest itself usually hinges on religious issues.

In research on religious coping, a vast collection of experiences with evil has been the topic of investigation. There are investigations of cases of disease, especially cancer and coronary diseases, and investigations of relational crises, notably divorce, mourning, and violence. A third category is found in collective experiences like responses to the Gulf war, major fires, floods, and terrorist attacks (Pargament 1997). In my own research on the function of and change in faith in a life crisis, I included

women with breast cancer, children of divorced parents, widows of fighter pilots, unemployed persons, and so on (Ganzevoort 1994). A subsequent project was devoted to adult male victims of childhood sexual abuse (Ganzevoort 2001). In studies like these, attention is paid to both the particularities of each situation and the common processes of coping with the threat or loss one encounters.

There is, however, a dimension to these investigations that until now has not been made explicit: the distinction between tragic and malicious events. It makes a difference in the coping process as to whether one is dealing with accidental misfortunes, severe as they may be, or with acts of bad intent such as violence. In the one case we are coping with the tragic dimension of human existence and, in the other, with evil committed by others. This distinction relates to debates in the research on psychotrauma: this is probably the only diagnostic concept that includes an etiology and refers explicitly to a threat to the person. For structural forms of traumatization (as in political oppression or domestic violence), J. Herman postulates that there is almost always a perpetrator who is to blame for the traumatizing event (Herman 1992).

Obviously, tragedy and malice are not always that easily distinguished, especially because they are not elements of the actual events but of the meanings attributed to the events. The question remains: how do attributions of tragedy and malice influence the religious coping process? In this paper I will start with some experiences from pastoral counseling. Here the question will take on flesh and blood. In the next step, I will reflect on the conceptualization of the terms tragedy and malice. After that, I will discuss consequences for theodicy constructions and religious coping styles.

#### *Counseling Karen*

The counseling case I will present is not unique. It is in fact—unfortunately—so common that I have compiled it from a series of encounters. The case concerns a woman in her fifties from a mainstream Protestant background. We will call her Karen. She sought counseling following the death of her parents and her primary concern was how she could learn to trust God again. In exploring her relationship with her parents, she was hesitant to

admit to the ambiguities inherent to that relationship. Karen's central message was that her parents provided well for her and did the best they could. It took several conversations for her to admit that their best was perhaps not good enough and that they failed to give her what she needed most: caring warmth and intimacy. On top of that, they failed to protect her from an abusive teenage relationship. In fact, they were not even aware that their daughter was going through such painful and confusing experiences.

Was that something for which they could be blamed? Not according to Karen, because she understood all too well that her parents had to work hard to make ends meet. Not only did they spend most of their time in the bakery shop, they also cared for six children and devoted their energy to the church and other good causes. The funerals of her parents had included lengthy testimonies about their many contributions and the love they had spread. In contrast, Karen had known loneliness and emotional neglect. Because her parents could never be guilty of such a negative experience, Karen had concluded early on that it had to be her fault.

Emotionally vulnerable and uncertain, she found became involved at age fifteen in a romantic relationship with a man ten years her senior, who soon turned the romance into coercion and exploitation. Obviously, she did not tell her parents about this, convinced that they would be shocked by the sinful and irresponsible deeds of their daughter. She guarded her secret until after their death.

Karen felt helpless, lonely, and full of guilt, when she entered counseling. The idea that all this was not her fault confused her. The notion that her parents were remiss in their duties toward her almost offended her. Or, at least, it so belied her fundamental understanding of herself and her history that she was not able to contemplate what this might mean. The counselor set out to help her construe a more balanced view of her situation, so that she would finally, perhaps, be able to resolve and release the pain of her past—perhaps even forgive.

In the terms of this chapter, tragedy and malice are closely linked in Karen's story. It probably makes sense for her to understand her parents' shortcomings as tragic consequences of their own history and situation. The wrong they did to Karen was contrary to their intentions, at least, that is what Karen

feels. If they have harmed her, they probably deserve exoneration. The alternative would be to blame her parents for the emotional neglect they caused her, but that would mean that she would have to accept that the very foundation of her life was bad. Like many victims of neglect or violence, she would rather consider herself unworthy than admit the notion that her primary caregivers failed her. One of the paradoxes of victimization is that victims prefer to attribute guilt rather powerlessness to themselves. The problem connected to exonerating her parents is, however, that Karen runs the risk of justifying her parents' actions, thereby denying her own suffering. In consequence, if her suffering from her parents' neglect is seen as tragic, Karen waives her rights as a child to protest against the lack of care and love. This tragic attribution is in fact Karen's way of defending and caring for her parents.

The acts of her so-called boyfriend, on the other hand, are easily interpreted as malicious. He displays no good intentions that result tragically in unplanned harm. His behavior is characterized by bad intent, willfully using a vulnerable child for his own gratification. Or so it seems. We do not know enough of his life story to pass a final verdict. Perhaps his intentions were not that negative either, and his wrongdoings may be the result of limited relational and empathic capacities. It may even be that he himself has been a victim of violence or abuse. In seeing his actions are seen as malicious, a black-and-white portrait of the situation is construed that may not be completely accurate.

I hope it is clear that I am not try to cloud the ethical dimension of this counseling case, let alone excuse a rape disguised as romantic love. All I am saying is that the distinction between tragic and malicious evil is of direct import for Karen's understanding of her life story and thus for the counseling process. This distinction is an ethically charged interpretation of the situation, not a factual identification. It is an interpretation that directly influences the ways in which Karen can cope with her trials and tribulations and an inadequate attribution may harm her options of resolving them.

#### *Conceptualizing Tragedy and Malice*

With this significance in mind, I will now turn to exploring the conceptual issues around tragedy and malice. In conceptualiz-

ing them, I am taking the victim's perspective. Both terms then refer to harmful actions or events from which a person may suffer. This perspective—focusing on the passive dimension of suffering—is radically different from many traditional conceptualizations from an actor's perspective. In such traditional conceptualizations, the core question is whether our negative experiences are the result of our own sins or of some divine or cosmic force. This is a construction based on the question of agency, and eventually it is framed in connection with the notion of guilt. In the classical actor-oriented perspective, we can work with Leibniz's distinction between metaphysical, physical, and moral evil. Metaphysical evil is the imperfection of human life, physical evil is the suffering that we endure, and moral evil is the suffering or wrong that we cause (Sarot 1997). In his analysis of tragedy, evil, and the good life, Marcel Sarot notes that one particular event may be interpreted under two headings: it may be moral evil on the part of the aggressors and physical evil on the part of the victims. Interestingly, the victim's perspective here becomes devoid of ethical meaning.

In this line of thought, tragedy is one possible understanding of the situation that blames neither God nor humans. It may apply to metaphysical and physical evil and not directly to moral evil. Tragedy is usually defined in reference to its ancient literary meanings. *Webster's Dictionary* defines it as a serious drama typically describing a conflict between the protagonist and a superior force (as destiny) and having a sorrowful or disastrous conclusion that excites pity or terror. According to Heering's interpretation, tragedy always includes unintended yet inevitable human guilt (Heering 1961). The tragic situation is found precisely where we cause harm contrary to our intentions. Tragedy then connects the individual's responsibility with circumstances beyond one's control, freedom with necessity. Powerful forces for this tragic drama are the protagonist's character and high principles and fateful coincidences. In this literary understanding of tragedy, the protagonist is the actor, as is clear from the use of terms like guilt and responsibility.

In ordinary language, the "tragedy" has a wider range of meanings. It is used to describe a disaster, small or large, man-made or an act of God. The terms "tragedy" and "tragic" can be found on a daily basis in newspapers, denoting everything from a tsunami to a divorce and from a terrorist attack to a dis-

ease. The main component of the term seems to be the severity of the undeserved suffering. In a theological interpretation from a victim's perspective, tragedy may refer to the dimension of fate, to the factuality of our existence, to transience and vulnerability, and to futility (cf. Krijger 2005). From an actor's perspective, the notion of the tragic hero with his or her unintended harm is added to these meanings.

Tragedy is not only an issue in the roles of victim and actor. It is also a key element in the role of the helper, as Andries Baart points out in the "theory of presence" that he presents for social work (Baart 2001: 687ff.). He propagates the paradigm of tragic action as a model for comforting people in suffering. This perspective departs from the vision of fateful destiny in its dedication to the fragile good. Surpassing the limitations of the attitude of fate and the debilitating theodicy question, the tragic response does not rule out suffering nor does it try to erase it. The tragic response accepts the reality of suffering and offers comfort by participating in enduring the suffering. Baart acknowledges that the tragic approach needs to be complemented by resistance to evil. If we assume, however, that suffering often cannot be resolved, the role of the comforter in tragedy implies a response of presence and solidarity rather than a solution to suffering.

All this shows how tragedy is a container concept that can incorporate everything painful, even those actions that are characterized by the malicious intentions of the actor. The core question defining the concept is, as stated, whether or not we are responsible for an event. If we are, it is guilt. If we are not, it is tragedy. From a victim's point of view, however, the core question is whether someone else is to blame for the suffering we have to endure. Here we need to differentiate between, for example, suffering from terrorism and suffering from earthquakes. In the case of terrorism, we are tempted to make a clear-cut attribution of guilt and malice, turning the perpetrator into some kind of monster, with the pleasant implication that we are powerless yet sinless victims. In the case of earthquakes, this attribution is much more difficult, and a moral vacuum emerges. As I stated earlier, one of the paradoxes of victimization is that the victim may tend to attribute the guilt to him- or herself, thereby avoiding both tragedy and malice.

From the explicit perspective of the victim, tragedy is not contrasted with sin or guilt but with malice. The question is not which actor is responsible—the person himself or someone else. Here the question is whether my suffering should be interpreted as accidental or intentional. Again, this question easily focuses on the actor, because it rests on the assumed intentions of the wrongdoer. In the case of tragedy, he or she causes evil despite his or her good intentions or efforts. With malice, the causation of evil is the explicit purpose. The postulated actor's intention is what distinguishes tragedy from malice. *Webster's Dictionary*, for example, defines malice as the intent to commit an unlawful act or to cause harm without legal justification or excuse. Sometimes the term is used in an even more restrictive way as referring to a deep-seated often inexplicable desire to see another suffer. This, one could say, is real evil. From this perspective, malice is the ethical identification of the other person as responsible for evil deeds.

At this point in my explorations, I found a paucity of clues in theological discourse. There is enough material to discuss sin or guilt from the actor's point of view, and there are several leads for tragedy. But suffering as a result of malice, suffering from intentional evil by others, is a different case. Perhaps we could work with categories from liberation theology or explore the symbolic meanings of demonic possession and exorcism, but for mainstream believers and congregations, these categories seem rather exotic. It is, I would say, no coincidence that Karen felt more at home with guilt or tragedy and had trouble with the religious concept of malice. Suffering from malicious evil may be a rather common experience in human life; it is a marginal topic in theology.

As a consequence of this lack of theological articulation, many victims of malicious evil tend to confuse tragedy and malice. Just as Karen seemed to lack the vocabulary to make accurate interpretations of her childhood experiences, our public discourse often lacks any distinction between the two terms. The result of this confusion between tragedy and malice is serious—both on the individual and on the collective level. It may result in the inability to accept the tragic and a similar failure to resist malice. Instead, we can engage in fruitless efforts to fight our tragic fate or accept the existence of intentional evil. From the perspective of the victim, making an adequate interpreta-

tion is crucial. It determines what theological answers are to the point and what type of theodicy is warranted.

*Karen's Theodicy*

Let us return to our conversation with Karen. The question that brought her to seek pastoral counseling was how she could learn to trust God again. As always, this question regarding the relationship with God is inextricably connected to the person's relationships with fellow humans. For the pastoral counselor, it is a matter of tactics as to where to start: in the area of human relationships or in the religious domain. Still, Karen's question merits a specific exploration of her relationship with the God of her life story. She wants to trust God again, but she is incapable of doing so.

In Karen's personal theodicy, the confusion between tragedy and malice has resulted in a complicated understanding of God's role in her life story. Consistent with the theology she had been taught throughout her life, there had to be a reason for all she went through, and that reason would have to do with God. Obviously, God could not be the malicious cause of her misery but neither could it have been beyond his control. Like a modern Job, she pondered her theodicy options.<sup>1</sup>

She could, of course, assume that God made her suffer in retaliation for her sins. This theodicy model would explain why a powerful God did not protect her from evil. Trusting God would then mean surrendering to his might, obeying his commands, and believing that that would protect her from future punishment. This precise structure can be found in the way Karen had interpreted her parents' neglect. She had concluded that it must be her fault and that change depended on her repentance. This theodicy model takes the perspective of the actor. That means that Karen can frame her life in terms of guilt but not in terms of tragedy and malice. This interpretation seems less than adequate in light of her life. It absolves both her parents and abusive boyfriend, and leaves her to bear the guilt for her mishaps.

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<sup>1</sup>This is based on the research into theodicy by J.A. van der Ven and his colleagues in Nijmegen. See Van der Ven and Vossen 1995.



A second option from research into theodicy would see God as equally transcendent but would account for innocent suffering. This is the plan model, according to which God determines the world and our lives in order to realize his intentions. There is a plan—admittedly a hidden one—behind all our vicissitudes. We will see the grand scheme and the meaning of everything at the end of time, and we are sometimes allowed to catch a glimpse of that in this life. For Karen, this also made some sense, because she had always understood that her parents could not care for her enough because they had to work hard and offer their time to the wider community. The eulogies at her parents' funerals proved that they had lived according to such a plan, and Karen could only conclude that she had to bear her cross in order to be part of the plan.

It was much harder to see how the abuse could be part of a divine plan. If Karen followed this option, she would just have to trust God, but that was precisely her problem. There was some room for tragedy in this model but only in the sense that misfortunes may be inevitable in the process of unfolding the plan. Malice is defused: behind the bad intention of the aggressor, there is a positive plan of the divine. Resistance to evil thus seems to equal resistance to this plan and to God Himself.

The third option brings theodicy to a more personal level. Suffering is again part of God's plan for the world, but here it is believed that God has pedagogical motives in allowing suffering. Here our misfortunes are indeed negative experiences, but they serve to make us grow. Suffering teaches and disciplines. In a way, that would make it easier for Karen to trust God. It is better to believe that He induces this suffering for our own good than to believe that we suffer for some grand scheme that may benefit others yet victimizes us. Both tragedy and malice are deconstructed here and reinterpreted as learning opportunities. In radical versions (as we may find in some versions of New Age spirituality), this learning is sought by our own soul. The events we encounter are what we need in order to attain a new level. Obviously, this would help Karen to accept what happened, but her experiences would no longer count as tragedy nor as malice. Evil does not exist anymore.

The fourth option is a compassion model. Here we find no causative relation between God and suffering. God is the all-loving compassionate comrade and not the omnipotent ruler or

manipulator. As a consequence, suffering is a mystery, senseless in itself. This option appeals to the tragic dimension of Karen's life story. Even God seems to be a tragic figure, unable to resolve the misery of humans. That would help Karen to trust God—or her parents for that matter – as having good intentions but limited possibilities. As for the malicious acts of her boyfriend, she would have to conclude that this evil is more powerful than the good that God's love might bring. This option seems meaningful *vis-à-vis* tragedy but not as meaningful in relation to malice.

The same holds for the mystical theodicy model. Here again, God is not the author or inventor of evil, nor does He use it for some plan or purpose. All that happens is that in the midst of meaningless accidental suffering humans may experience a longing for mystical communion with God. Perhaps suffering can even have a sacramental dimension in that it allows a unique loving encounter. Meaningful as this may be, it can also function as a religious escape and sublimation of unbearable pain. It may be an answer in tragedy, but it obstructs our resistance to malice. In fact, this model exculpates God, but it does not help us in coping with evil, unless perhaps indirectly. The love, warmth, and beauty it provides are nurturing, empowering forces of healing, empowering in order to resist evil or avoid it and leave it behind.

The last model is one of vicarious suffering. Molded after the image of the suffering servant, this model speaks of a particular vocation for the sufferer. The sufferer's loving relationship with God grounds a choice for self-sacrifice, solidarity with other suffering humans, and resistance to evil. God's love is located in the comfort and inspiration, His omnipotence in the eschatological promise of overcoming evil. This complex theodicy might be helpful for Karen. It addresses tragedy and malice and offers responses from acceptance to resistance. It even gives her a new responsibility and communion with others. But it is a complex story that may not come across in sermons. It is also a possibly dangerous story.

### *Coping with Evil*

How can Karen cope with her experiences and what can her faith contribute to that? This is the question of research into reli-

gious coping. In Kenneth Pargament's powerful overview of the field (see Pargament 1997), we find investigations in a variety of contexts, some of which were mentioned in the beginning of this paper. I already mentioned the inclusion of categories like disease, relational crises and violence, and collective experiences with disasters and wars. In his review of dozens of empirical investigations in this area, relatively few projects fall under the heading of malice. Most situations are ambiguous or can be understood as tragedy. This is my reading of it, because the distinction is not made explicit in his book. Pargament pays some attention to this matter when he discusses helpful and harmful forms of religious coping. In his overview of research projects, he concludes that spiritual support, congregational support, and a religious interpretation of God's will and love tend to show a significant positive relationship with coping outcomes. Spiritual discontent and discontent with the congregation as well as an interpretation of God's punishment usually shows a significant negative relationship. A collaborative coping style, in which both God and the person are expected to act in response to the event is also a positive contributor, in comparison to coping styles in which the person defers everything to God or feels that God would not interfere at all. In his more recent research, Pargament is looking at what he calls sanctification, the process of imbuing aspects of life with a spiritual character and significance. The loss or violation of such aspects results in different types of emotional distress, spiritual change, post-traumatic growth, and religious coping (Pargament *et al.* 2005).

Pargament is careful to note that religion may function differently in different situations for different persons and in different traditions. For example, he addresses the benefits and dangers of forgiveness, pointing to the risks of premature forgiveness. In this closing section of my article I will consider the adequate coping issues for situations of tragedy and malice. I will use some insights from my inquiry into tragedy and malice in army chaplains' reports about their recent mission in Iraq.

One of the chaplains used his experiences in Bosnia as a point of reference. When he was there, hostilities were rare and the task of the military was primarily humanitarian. He felt the term tragedy was the most adequate way of describing the situation that the soldiers encountered. For him, tragedy did not mean that there was no guilt on one side or the other; it merely

described the present situation in which pain and powerlessness were the most important elements. It could be dubbed tragedy because malicious actions had become part of the past. The situation in Iraq was rather different. Here they encountered people that intended to harm them, as evidenced in nightly shootings and guerilla attacks. Although the background of this situation might be interpreted in tragic terms as well, the actual encounters were of a malicious nature.

According to this chaplain, these two situations solicited completely different responses. The Bosnian tragedy elicited compassionate care and willingness to communicate with the local population. Although they had to be careful about still-present threats, the overall response was a helpful one. In Iraq, the primary response consisted of anger and fear. The overall language used to describe the Iraqi people was therefore much more negative than that used to describe the Bosnians.

Most of the soldiers would not employ religious language to interpret these situations. Interestingly, neither would the chaplains. Although they noted that these situations could evoke religious questions, they felt that their religious tradition had no adequate vocabulary. The message—if it can be called that—that guided their ministry was one of personal support and comfort, complemented where needed by a critical response to possible wrongdoing. When asked directly about the potential of the language of tragedy and malice, they felt that this might have helped them in distinguishing the situations they had been in. It might even have offered a religious interpretive framework for these situations, a framework that could have served the chaplain in articulating his care in sermons and conversations. That might have resulted in questioning explicitly the understanding of the Iraqi situation as malicious. And this, in turn, might have helped in preventing bitterness and cynicism. Obviously, the actual situation in which they had to work was probably too stressful and confusing to allow this kind of interpretation, but the fact that this language was not available must be seen as a hindrance for adequate theological reflection.

In Karen's situation, the intricate connection between tragedy and malice needed to be unraveled. Her parents' neglect was perhaps tragic at first glance and also in the end, but in between it needed to be addressed as culpable negligence. Karen's

eventual response was one of forgiveness and acceptance. She forgave rather than exculpate her parents' shortcomings, and she lovingly accepted their tragic failure in caring for her. Obviously, this was a long and hard journey. As for her boyfriend, Karen found refuge in her pastor's acknowledgement of her victimization. This helped her in exonerating herself and putting the blame where it belonged. Finally, Karen decided to let go of her vengefulness in order to become the free person she wanted to be. Her trust in God was regained slowly when she found Him to be an inspirer of resistance to malice and of acceptance in tragedy.

An important dimension in the process that Karen went through was that she had to overcome victimhood. In the end, healing implies that one steps away from the delimiting "identity" of being a victim of evil, and develops a more nuanced understanding of both self and others. That may imply the development of a more active role in which resistance to evil becomes possible (in whatever shape). To take these steps, however, she needed to separate tragedy from malice, because these two notions requested completely different responses. It was precisely the confusion between the two that made it difficult for Karen to break the bonds of passivity.

### *Conclusion*

In these explorations of the distinction between tragedy and malice, I have chosen a partly narrative style and real-life focus because the essential questions of theology and evil are to be answered by ordinary people in their ordinary confrontations with tragedy and malice. Our theological explorations may be of some help in these struggles, and it is for that reason that I argue for the fine-tuning of our theodicy language to account for the distinction between tragedy and malice.

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