

Article

# Synchronizing Missio Dei with Process Theology and Theodicy

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**Abstract:** Since the second half of the 20th century, missiology has continued to elevate Missio Dei to a topic of the highest importance in theology. According to Missio Dei, the salvific mission is more theocentric than anthropocentric in that its actuality is wholly rooted in the nature of God. However, much work remains to be conducted to evaluate and reconcile the modern interpretation of the Missio Dei and its predecessor theological doctrines, to avoid illogicalities. Consequently, the responsibility to identify any discrepancies in the systematic knowledge of the Missio Dei falls on the broad shoulders of theology in general, but of missiology in particular. In keeping with this unavoidable intellectual duty, this article interrogates the literature on modern theodicies to improve the conceptualization of the Missio Dei and missionary God in the context of evil and human suffering. The inter-comparative analysis of the biblical Job serves to relate divine perfection and human suffering within process theodicy. Consequently, the intellectual enterprise of this work, with all its shortcomings, not only illuminates another facet of Missio Dei but also motivates further investigation to reconcile mission Dei with the reality of evil, free will, and human suffering.

**Keywords:** Missio Dei; total salvation; process theology; process theodicy; human free will; evil existence

## 1. Introduction

The Biblical presentation of the monotheistic God sending God-self into the world to redeem humanity following the fall is encapsulated by the Latin Christian concept of Missio Dei, or the mission of God. The 1952 International Missionary Council (IMC) in Willingen, Germany, sparked a resurgence of interest in the concept among mission scholars, even though its roots date back to the early church fathers (Laing 2009, pp. 89–99). As a result, the revised definition from the conference viewed mission as the essence of God’s nature, giving Missio Dei a more theocentric nature than the anthropocentric view that characterized the pre-Willingen mission theology (Engelsviken 2003, pp. 481–97). Since that time, Missio Dei has served as a fundamental theoretical framework that has influenced the development of other mission theological frameworks and remained a topic of great significance in missiology (Taylor 2020, pp. 52–77). Insofar as the revised Missio Dei was not introduced into academic circles until the latter part of the 1900s, it had to be examined in comparison with a few Christian classical teachings, the majority of which provided evidence for its comprehension. Moreover, to put it another way, Missio Dei was modified over time to better conform to commonly accepted Christian doctrines such as the trinity of God, Jesus’ deity, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, and many others. While the conceptual reinterpretation of the Missio Dei is still laudable, it has not been improved to fit the logic of other later theological constructs such as those represented by recent theodicies, which, despite their glaring flaws, continue to succeed in conserving God’s ascendancy over evil.

The term theodicy comes from the combination of two Ancient Greek terms: θεός which means ‘god’, and δίκη, which means justice, thus arguing for the justification or vindication of God, as it were. In the context of religion, theodicy is a theory that considers evil and suffering in humans within the framework of the ideal divine, transcending the frameworks of faith-based existing systems (Rouzati 2018; Trakakis 2008). This term appears to have been first used in 1710 by the German philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm



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Leibniz in his French essay often shortened to ‘Théodicée’, which examined the origins of evil, man’s freedom, and God’s goodness (Sleigh 1996, pp. 481–99). Although its invention was preceded by broad attempts to solve the problem of evil, it has since been used by philosophers and theologians in intellectual discourse about divine goodness in the context of evil (Van Woudenberg 2013, pp. 175–91). This includes, in particular, the attempts made by followers of theistic faiths to reconcile the existence of evil and the reality of an all-knowing, all-powerful, and morally flawless God (Surin 1983, p. 225). Consistent with this, Asad (1986) cited Janet Nelson’s explanation that theodicy refers to ‘the problem that arises within a belief system when the individual’s experience involves suffering which the system fails to accommodate’ (Asad 1986, p. 347; Nelson 1972, p. 66). Christian theology’s conceptualization of theodicy, while embracing other viewpoints, confines itself to the traditional Christian theism perspective and emphasizes maintaining God’s omnipotence and unwavering goodness in the face of evil. Accordingly, one could argue that the primary objective of the theodicy as a discipline within the field of theology is the elucidation of an evil existential presence in the context of an all-knowing, all-powerful, and justly loving God. The result is that theodicy is now widely studied in theology, and a large body of theodicy literature covering but not limited to Biblical, traditional, and contemporary theodicies has been produced (Loke 2022, pp. 1–15). Though all theodicies are equally important, process theodicy, for all its flaws, nevertheless stands out among other modern theodicies because of its distinctive emphasis on divine relationality and human free will in the context of evil (Frankenberry 1981; Griffin 1976, 2004). Furthermore, its continued relevance is perhaps furthered by its remarkable openness, which resonates with the logic of most Christian classical teachings as well as their contemporary conceptual frameworks, such as the *Missio Dei*, which is central to this paper. That being said, no academic work has examined the *Missio Dei*’s validity in light of process theodicy within the theological literature in general or missiology in particular.

Consequently, or pursuant to filling the above-indicated gap, the intricate but primary objective of this paper is to bring the *Missio Dei*’s conceptualization into direct harmony with theodicy’s implications in general and process theodicy’s logic in particular. Although there is currently no direct model that encompasses the harmonization of *Missio Dei* and process theodicy as disjointedly developed frameworks in theology, this article draws on the available literature to enigmatically inform and enable such harmonization. In order to achieve this, first, the concept of *Missio Dei* is presented as the central idea within the discipline of missiology but at the same time an almost laggard addition to the field of theology. The second section provides an outline of process philosophy, which naturally leads to a discussion of process theology as acknowledging God’s omnipotence and the applicability of the metaphysical process in light of evil. Third, the evolution of theodicies from biblical to modern times is given, albeit in a somewhat retroactive way, or at least in a way that is geared towards underscoring the special nature of process theodicy. Last but not least, the essence of the missionary God in the context of the *Missio Dei* is derived from the divine omni-attributes, as anchored in the central Christian theologies and the theodicies resulting from them. Conclusively, the *Missio Dei*, when anchored in the logic of process theodicy, articulates the perfect missionary God who persuades human free will toward morality and congruently aligns ontological sequences to achieve human redemption from evil realism.

## 2. *Missio Dei*

A Latin Christian theological framework known as *Missio Dei* means ‘mission of God’ or ‘sending of God’, to put it loosely. This framework holds that mission, to which the church is called to participate, is at the core of who God is. In other words, mission is rooted in the nature and character of God as one who sends their ‘divine-self’ to actively engage in salvific activities in the world. Additionally, this framework presupposes that Christ, as the divine Apostolate Son, provides the most significant revelation of God’s everlasting purpose—which includes human salvation. In its broadest sense, *Missio Dei* is rooted in the beliefs or theology of St. Augustine, speaking on the role of the trinitarian

God in human redemption (Poitras 1999, pp. 28–46). This framework emerged as a central idea that defines or sums up the focus of the missiological discourse within the broader field of theology since the latter half of the 20th century (Buys 2020, pp. 1–9). According to Engelsviken (2003), the *Missio Dei* in its broadest sense or in its interpretation that includes the theocentric perspective could even be found in Martin Luther's mission theology (Engelsviken 2003, p. 481). Beyond that, Karl Barth is among the first contemporary scholars who equally presented the concept of mission as God's work, which validates church mission in response, as early as 1932 (Arthur 2013, online). As far as the concept of the mission *Dei* is concerned, Laing (2009) claims that the Barthian theology reached the pinnacle of its comprehensive articulation at the 1952 International Missionary Council (IMC) conference held in Willingen, Germany (Laing 2009, p. 90). However, German missiologist Karl Hartstein is credited with being the first to coin the exact term '*Missio Dei*' following this conference, in the course of distinguishing God's mission from the mission of the Church (*missio ecclesiae*). The mission paradigm shifted from human-centered mission ideas, which defined the mission discourse prior to 1952, to emphasizing mission as primarily the triune God's work. To this end, Laing (2009) describes the realization of mission as originating in the heart of the triune God's nature or existing as a property of the triune God. He writes: 'Mission is thus not seen as origination out of the church or from any other human agency, but as an attribute of the Triune God himself' (Laing 2009, p. 90).

As previously established, the triune God is the great originator of the salvific mission, with its origins traced back to Adam and Eve's fall from grace in the garden. God, however, had complete control over the actions of the first humans to the extent that from all eternity human destiny remained completely subordinate to his creative will. In other words, humankind's first sinful acts were under the jurisdiction of God's creative will, at least within the parameters of divine omnipotence and notwithstanding the fact that their inexcusable sinful action was voluntary. Despite the fact that their wicked deed was firmly ingrained in the framework of the divine, everlasting plan, they had the freedom to choose whether to stand or fall in the face of temptation. It may be sufficient to state that God's mission began as a result of Adam and Eve's disobedience, without delving into the biblical complexities surrounding human fall (Revard 1973, p. 70). That is the exact framework or viewpoint that is used to attribute to humanity the ordinance of sin and, by extension, evil (Pyne 1999, p. 202). However, Augustine and Aquinas contend, like theodists, that God remains absolutely good and holy in spite of His foreknowledge of all human actions, including but not limited to sinful ones, and His inclusion of those actions in His divine plan (Rogers 2019; Rowe 1964). Augustine in particular viewed evil not so much as existential but rather as the absence of the good created by God. Therefore, the abstract existence of evil was never part of God's creative will but was inevitably based on the human sin of rejecting the good commanded by God (Dein et al. 2013). To that very end, however, God chose to show them kindness and mercy despite humanity's disobedience because he is a loving father to his creation. As soon as humanity fell or as soon as human sinful action was fulfilled, God began to carry out his everlasting plan of redemption and restoration. Essentially, the divine awareness of sin from the beginning, which was consistent with His irrevocable foreknowledge and will, was what initially sparked the redemptive mission. As a result, salvation—which is only about the divine act intended to deliver or redeem humanity from sin and its effects—became the central theme of both the Old and New Testaments.

To the extent that human sinning and consequently, divine response to it, fell within the eternal purview of divine foreknowledge, the entire enterprise of mission finds origin within divine nature. God the father thus made covenants with important Old Testament figures, which were further personified in the New Testament ministry of Jesus Christ and culminated in the manifestation of the Holy Spirit. According to the *Missio Dei* philosophy, this demonstrated the character of God's redemptive work. All of these advancements contributed to the theocentric character of mission, which maintained God as the focal point of His redemptive work throughout human history. In other words, this strengthens

the theological understanding that the triune God has always been the primary agent of redemptive mission and always will be. To this end, believers in general or religious organizations such as Christian churches assume the role of willingly cooperating as divine instruments in order to fulfill God's willed redemptive purposes. [Engelsviken \(2003\)](#) articulates this exact viewpoint in connection to Luther's mission theology, stating: 'along with God's word and every baptized believer, as crucial divine instruments for mission' ([Engelsviken 2003](#), p. 481). Or, perhaps to put it another way, human involvement is merely a means by which the triune God chooses to accomplish his redemptive mission rather than a goal unto itself. He alone is the one who freely invited human beings to freely participate in line with His eternal will at every point in his redemptive work. This claim is strongly supported by [Engelsviken \(2003\)](#), who says that rather than being the primary or only actor in the establishment of the Kingdom, the church may take part in it or serve as a mere witness to its manifestation ([Engelsviken 2003](#), p. 483). All the same, God knew in his everlasting will that people would reject an invitation to partake in His mission activities, just as He knew that people would sin. Just as divine prescience anticipated human sin but allowed free will to triumph, humans are given the freedom to choose whether or not to take part in God's redemptive work. Therefore, God remains the primary source and actor in His mission to the extent that humans can or may choose to exercise their free will in any way they see fit within the context of God's redemptive mission.

### 3. Process Theology

Theology can be defined as the study of the nature of the divine and, more broadly, the comprehension of religious phenomena and beliefs, despite the fact that there are still definitional disagreements in the literature. Though theology has generally existed since ancient times as a non-formalized discipline of organized religions like Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, it emerged later than philosophy as the rational study of God's nature. In other words, while theological concepts, theories, and beliefs have been around since antiquity, they were not formally acknowledged as a separate field of study until after philosophy began to take shape in Greece in the sixth century. When a need arose to systematize beliefs and doctrines about the divine emergence, the works of philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle laid the foundation for what later came to be developed into theology. The biblical revelation of God's nature and its philosophical construction have been at odds for centuries, despite the fact that the Bible is the primary source of theological knowledge. As time went on, Christian theologians came to understand—or at least concede—that constructing the doctrine of God exclusively from the Bible leaves many unanswered questions and calls for philosophical analysis. Therefore, a reformulation of theological knowledge that went beyond the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and the images found in the New Testament was necessary in order to understand the essence of God from philosophical and theological perspectives. Thomas Aquinas, Augustine of Hippo, and many other early Christian theologians continued to philosophically explore the nature of the divine in their writings and teachings. Numerous theologies, including Biblical, Historical, Soteriological, Anthropological, Natural, Practical, and even Systematic theology, to name a few, were developed as a result. The development of process theology, which is the subject of this paper, was similarly sparked by Alfred North Whitehead's metaphysical process philosophy in the early to mid-1900s.

It might seem superfluous to offer a thorough introduction to theology in relation to philosophy, as above, but it is important to emphasize that process philosophy functions as the fundamental field in which process theology is situated. It is crucial to emphasize that process theism is a genuinely philosophical theology since it is based on philosophical reflection rather than assertions of unique insight or revealed truth. In line with Bernard Loomer ([Loomer 1949](#), pp. 181–203), a number of scholars refer to process theology as 'process-relational philosophy' to emphasize its indisputable connection to philosophy ([Poling 2010](#), p. 205). The subsequent sections that delve into the philosophical dynamics of process theodicy, and consequently the nature of the missionary God, will highlight

the significance of this originating character. At this point, it is sufficient to introduce process theology merely as a school of thought whose concept of God is rooted in the natural world and metaphysical processes. As previously mentioned, it stemmed from or was motivated by the metaphysical perspective of Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947), an English mathematician and philosopher, and consequently those who emulated his thoughts. Charles Hartshorne (1897–2000), Whitehead’s doctoral dissertation student in 1923, in particular, became the leading proponent of process philosophy by arguing for the existence of a God who is the preeminent exemplification of relational thinking. This upheld God’s temporal existence as well as His changeability and passibility, without overtly downplaying His eternal and omnipotent nature. Process theology consequently started to understand God as a living entity that is actively engaged in and susceptible to change as a result of metaphysically interconnected realities. God’s active participation in temporal processes is one of His primary attributes, recognized by process theology and potentially applicable in molding the missionary God’s perspectives within the *Missio Dei* context. The next section first shows how process theology and related theodicy are consistent with contemporary mission theology, setting the stage for the post-1952 reconceptualized *Missio Dei*.

Christian theology explores the nature of God as expressed in Jesus Christ, illustrating a divine eternal willingness to embody human weakness in the face of evil and thus serving as a model for human willpower in the face of evil. The idea that the all-powerful God uses His divine power to persuade people to embrace good over evil—albeit without using force—is reflected in process-relational theology. Mission theology similarly highlights the essential characteristics of the missionary God, who sent the God-self in the person of Christ to take on human brokenness and persuade human free-willed good to oppose evil. In both instances, the relational God exhibits his omnipotence by empathizing with human suffering and influencing human free will to embrace absolute good against evil, in contrast to the remote, impassive classical God. Whereas God is the absolute ruler over all things, the process-inclined missionary God inspires human free will with a desire to contribute to the creation of an evil-free world. Similar to process theology, modern mission theology affirms that the all-powerful missionary God is at work in all of the universe and in every person to actualize the ultimate purpose of all-embracing salvation. The missionary God, while not explicitly suggested within the framework of process theology or its ensuing theodicy, shares in human suffering against evil to the extent that human free will acknowledges divine inducement in or participation towards engagement in divine redemptive works. The missionary God thus fulfills the requirements of process theism, which holds that the divine is not only self-giving but also shares in suffering within the context of bringing about human salvation (Quinn 1980, pp. 173–78). Consequently, process theology is only considered in this work to the extent that it helps to articulate the *Missio Dei* in relation to the problem of evil in general and human suffering in particular within the framework of process theodicy.

#### 4. Biblical Theodicies

The Bible is a very important source for understanding theodicy in relation to God’s nature and his coexistence with evil, especially as it is understood in monotheistic religions (Laato and de Moor 2021). In actuality, or at least as scholars like Watson (1962) and Scobie (2003), among others, largely underscored, the best approaches to the discourse of God’s nature—whether it be philosophical, theological, or otherwise—use the biblical text as the main source (Scobie 2003; Watson 1962). Therefore, to engage in the intellectual exercise of developing theodicies without using the Bible as the instrumental source, or even not developing Biblical theodicy, would be somewhat against theological scholarly tradition. The study of theodicy is, by definition, a ‘theo-philosophical’ academic search for rational answers to the central question of how the ‘perfect God’ of the Bible, in all His perfection, could allow evil to persist almost continuously in the world (Itene 2022, pp. 15–21). As some have noted, the importance of theodicy and its advancement therefore benefits monotheistic believers

or followers of the Biblical God perhaps far more than it ever will benefit their doubters or even atheists (Sharp 2014, pp. 873–90). To this end, Laks (1964) is correct in suggesting that ‘for the religious minded the difficulty involved in explaining the presence of pain is a theological one as well’ (Laks 1964, p. 345). A number of Biblical characters or individuals, such as Job, who questioned God’s benevolence and even cursed his own existence when evil and suffering befell his life, perhaps serve as the recorded reminder or mirror image of their own existence. Consequently, monotheistic believers have a greater obligation to understand and rationalize divine coexistence with the existence of evil, especially given their belief in the perfect God revealed in their Bible. It is to this end that several biblical scholars like Walter Brueggemann (1933–present ‘2024’) have drawn the somewhat less formal conclusion that theodicy is an ongoing theme running through the whole Bible (Brueggemann 1985, 1997). To ascertain the validity of such an observation or perspective, it may be necessary to first scrutinize the presence of theodicy from some of the major Biblical stories where God’s righteousness is questioned in the face of evil. Due to space limitations in this paper, the next section will use only the account of Job as a major biblical narrative that encompasses the dynamics of theodicy, even though theodicy elements appear in almost every book of the Bible in one way or another. Nevertheless, well-written books like *Theodicy in the World of the Bible*, by Laato and de Moor (eds.), would be helpful in the quest to understand how elements of theodicy are represented in almost every book of the Bible (Laato and de Moor 2021). Therefore, the story of Job is chosen as the focus of the next section as it represents more memorable theodicy-related themes or resonances, especially when compared to the depiction of theodicy in other biblical accounts.

The Book of Job is located in the Ketuvim section of the Hebrew Bible and is considered the first of the poetic books in the Old Testament of the Christian Bible (Clines 2003; Hartley 1988). In the beginning, the protagonist Job is portrayed as a pious person with unparalleled wealth in the land of Uz (Hebrew: עֵזְרָאֵל—eres-‘Ūs), often identified as Edom in modern-day Jordan or Aram in modern-day Syria (teal). He is presented as an individual who not only feared God but also shunned evil. First, God is depicted as being in a dialogue with the devil, during which He is hailing Job as His unmatched faithful servant on Earth (Job 1, pp. 1–8). Next, the devil appears or is reported to challenge God to take everything Job has, suggesting that Job’s faith is strong simply because he is wealthy and living comfortably under God’s protection. God bets on Job’s capacity to uphold his moral integrity and faith before the narrative suddenly shifts from Job being extraordinarily fortunate to losing everything he has ever owned. Consequently, God appears not only to accept Satan’s challenge with some ease (1:12) but additionally grants Satan authorization to carry out a string of ‘evil activities’ against everything that Job had, his children, wealth, and consequently, his well-being (1:13–2:11). At this very point, it is perhaps worth noting that even though God yields to Satan’s challenge, he is not the source of the resulting evil and suffering that characterized Job’s life. Instead, it is Satan who inflicts evil on Job, even though God is the one who permitted him to do so, still not without first setting limits on how far such devastation can personally harm or affect Job. Job experienced painful boils all over his body, from the soles of his feet to the top of his head, as part of a test of his faith. These afflictions caused him immense distress, coupled with the loss of everything he had. After learning of Job’s problems, Bildad, Ephaz, and Zophar—his three credulous friends—enter the story to pay him a visit. They spend a week sitting with Job in silence as they grieve his extreme suffering. After listening to Job lament how miserable his life has become, they concluded that his extreme suffering is a direct result of his personal sin, which he must turn from and embrace God. In other words, they were somewhat adamant that Job had to have done something sinful to merit the evil he was experiencing. Next in the narrative, his unnamed wife suddenly appeared and, upon seeing her dearest husband sitting in the dust scraping his sores, daringly urging him to curse God, asking: ‘Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God and die’ (Job 2:9). According to Suomala (2011), Job’s wife attempted to be very honest with her suffering husband and outwardly encourage him to consider assigning the blame for his anguish to God, who, in her opinion, was its

rightful source (Suomala 2011, p. 397). She, perhaps like many others around Job, could not understand why a just God, for whom Job is a righteous servant, could allow him to suffer in such a manner without reasonable hope of recovery. Hence, she could not understand why Job, in the face of God causing him such unbearable suffering, should, for even a split second, continue to be the true, obedient, and sincere person he has been toward God. However, even following these interactions, Job does not seem inclined to think evil of himself or even to have a desire to curse God; that is, he maintained his righteousness and continuously proclaimed divine innocence despite criticisms from his close friends and wife. Rather, as he struggles with what seems to be the unfairness of his ordeal, he asks God why, as a good man, he is going through such severe trials. Consequently, when God challenges Job to consider the limits of human comprehension in light of God's incredible creation, Job in return humbly admits his incapacity to comprehend God's miraculous ways. The two sets of interactions with Job exhibit an intriguing twist or contradiction in that while seemingly blaming Job as the cause of his misery, they offer opposing perspectives on how he should put an end to his suffering. The first counsel (from Job's friends) urged that he should repent and embrace God in order to live, while his wife urged him to curse God so that he may die.

Beneath the above respective points of view, though, there existed an implicit assertion that Job's suffering was solely the result of his sins, which in and for itself cleared God of the responsibility for creating evil. These same views emphasize, however, that God alone has the power to end Job's suffering, provided that Job is willing to follow either of the recommended courses of action. The divine response to Job is represented by God's theophany, which takes the form of a dark and terrifying storm. The fact that God is present in such a magnificent natural event highlights his omnipotence, awesomeness, and supremacy over the cosmos (creation) where evil is present. This miraculous display of God's grandeur highlights the distinction between him being the transcendent creator and ruling over the entirety of creation. Furthermore, this theophany not only emphasizes human fallibility but also acts as a divine invitation for Job to acknowledge the boundaries of human comprehension of God's transcendent nature, especially in the face of evil and suffering. All things considered, the transcendence of nature itself expresses the essential idea that God is holy and has the unending power to put an end to evil without becoming tarnished by it. In addition, God's transcendence regarding humanity's situation and the issue of evil is further emphasized by the fact that, although he may allow evil to exist passively, his holy nature requires that he actively put an end to it. Arguably more significantly, this demonstrates or underscores God's nature as being more inclined to putting an end to evil and suffering rather than permitting it to continue unchecked.

## 5. Recent Theodicies

The theological literature is full of accounts of early key philosophers who attempted to solve the problem of evil in the context of the perfect divine decades before the word theodicy was coined in 1710. The list of such figures and theologians includes but is not limited to Saint Augustine of Hippo ((254–430), Anicius Boethius (c. 477–524), Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), and John Duns Scotus (c. 1266–1266). 1308) and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716). Consequently, post-biblical theodicies would naturally fall into several categories, including but not limited to Patristic, Medieval, and Contemporary theodicies (McGrath 2022; Wiley 2002). The most prevalent theodicy is the free-will theodicy, which holds that humankind's abuse of free will is to blame for all moral evil and some natural evil (Schoenig 1998, pp. 457–70). Given that the description of free-will theodicy expresses philosophical ideas found in other consequent theodicies, it might be necessary to allot some significant space for its overview. Free-will theodicy, to put it briefly once again, contends that although God gave humans free will, it was this free will that, when abused, led to evil and suffering apart from God's perfect will (Couenhoven 2007, pp. 279–98). This theodicy was first articulated by Augustine of Hippo in his *Defense of God*, claiming that only humans are guilty of abusing their freely given will in disobedience to perfect God's

will (Berthold 1981, pp. 525–35; Francis Allen 2003, pp. 84–90). This means that human abuse of free will is seen from the perspective of this theodicy as the only cause of evil and suffering in the world and not as an act or omission of God. Therefore, it is in God's nature never to act tyrannically against man's free will, even though His omni-attributes may permit the divine execution of such unsolicited intervention. Simply put, while God remains the all-powerful Creator, His divine nature is not inclined to forcefully treat human beings as mere objects against the exercise of their free will. Consequently, the poor exercise of human free will not only exposes human beings to evil and suffering but also deprives them of the opportunity to freely experience the peaceful divine presence.

Karl Barth (1886–1968) did not offer a conventional theodicy in the strict sense of the word, but his theology did highlight the transcendence of God in connection to the existence of evil. He made a compelling case that since God's ways are still completely beyond human comprehension, humans should approach the issue of evil with complete faith in God's goodness. As a result, a large number of theologians discussed Barth's ideas regarding providence, the existence of evil, and the related theodicies, which would invariably include liberation theodicy, protest theodicy, person-making theodicy, and process theodicy. Though it was not originally articulated as a form of theodicy centered on the suffering of Jesus Christ on the cross, redemptive suffering served as the cornerstone of liberation theology. It may come as no surprise that the term 'theodicy' was coined in the 1970s, at the same time as the liberation theology movements were gaining relevance or were experiencing popularity growth in Latin America, albeit for different reasons. The belief is that the cross represents God's battle against evil, and the resurrection represents God's ultimate triumph over its existence. Given this, human agency is bound to imitate the suffering of Christ in order to set the oppressed free and even to create a more just society that is devoid of evil and fully in accordance with God's intended Kingdom. Protest theodicy, in a similar vein, draws inspiration from Job's ferocious defense of innocence and in particular Christ's cries against God's inaction or silence in the face of evil and suffering. This acknowledges that evil has always existed in human history, but it also acknowledges that, as demonstrated by Christ's cries on the cross, human protest is a valid way for suffering human beings to faithfully respond to God. Third, the core of the two preceding theodicies culminates in person-making theodicy being one of the most influential modern theodicies. This theodicy holds that evil and the suffering that results from it are necessary conditions that drive human development toward maturity and the full image of God. It further contends that in order for humans to truly reflect the full image of God, they must first undergo voluntary suffering as incomplete beings. Lastly, since process theodicy is the main subject of this paper, it is given more space below even though it is largely a part of the above generation of theodicies that have defined modern theology in recent years.

## 6. Process Theodicy

Process theodicy exists among the wildly divergent approaches that emerged from the repeated attempts of several theologians who sought to develop systematic theodicies that either followed or deviated from Barthian theology. Migliore (2004) provides support for this assertion, stating emphatically that process theodicy is the most comprehensive of modern theodicies, despite occasionally seeming to deviate from biblical witness (Migliore 2004, p. 130). The development of process theodicy has been largely, if not entirely, predicated within the guidelines of process theology, a process that may be somewhat analogous to the liberation theodicy presented above. Philosophers like David Ray Griffin (1939–2022) and John Boswell Cobb (1925–2024 (present)) developed theodicy within the context of process theology in the late 1900s, building on the ideas of Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947) and Charles Hartshorne (1897–2000), as has already been introduced. Specifically, Griffin wrote important books on the subject of process theodicy, such as *God, Power, and Evil: A Process Theodicy* (Griffin 1976, 2004). Consequently, many others who wrote about process theodicy, regardless of their rarely differing perspectives, similarly described process theodicy with an emphasis on the relationship between God, humans, and the natural world in the context

of evil. They adopted a process-oriented perspective on the issue of evil, arguing that since the cosmos is composed of successive events, even the source of evil naturally originated through a process with human beings as free-will agents. In other words, while God's omnipotence may constantly motivate his creation toward goodness, evil ultimately results from free-will decisions and deeds rather than from God's essence. God did not create evil in its highest form but merely allowed it to exist as the result of a process in which human beings, as agents of free will, deprived themselves of good. Furthermore, even in the face of evil, God's relational rather than dominating, persuasive rather than coercive, nature forces him to consistently respect both metaphysical processes and human free will. Process theodicy thus maintains that God's perfect nature is unaltered to the extent that evil exists because of a process wherein free will was used in an imprudent and antithetical manner to God's predetermined good.

Perhaps underlining a few 'process metaphysical theodicy' examples will be helpful to deepen the broad and practical understanding of process theodicy as presented above. Among other examples, the following set will uphold divine goodness while addressing the problem of evil and human suffering from the perspective of process metaphysics. The next sequence of events illustrates that, though the omnipotent God can end any evil or human suffering, he just chooses not to use his all-encompassing power in a way that would diminish the significance of human free will. First, since natural laws and metaphysical processes—rather than human activity or non-divine agency—cause natural disasters like hurricanes, tsunamis, earthquakes, and tornadoes, among others, they primarily fall under the category of natural evils. God's all-attributes may undoubtedly allow him to override, for example, an earthquake, but he chooses not to do so because of his innate respect for the Earth's natural laws and geological processes. Among others, this divine transcendence is illustrated by extraordinary provisions (Exodus 16, pp. 1–36; John 2:1–11), disrupting the flow of the sea and gravitational forces (Exodus 14:21–22; Matthew 14:22–33), and including the reversal of mortality (Mark 5:21–43; Matthew 9:18–26). To this end, process theodicy is well aware that God's incessant intervention in the natural order would consequently, in one way or another, disrupt the natural order as a whole, regardless of how damaging the natural consequences might be. Furthermore, although God participates in human suffering when caused by natural disasters, divine oracles contain discernible instructions that, among other things, encourage caution and preparation for the uncertainties of life, including natural disasters (Proverbs 22:3; 27:12; Psalm 46:1–3).

The idea of correctly directed human free will enabling a nation to remain under God's protection and refuge even in the face of natural evils like the 'trembling of mountains' is specifically expressed in the latter passage (Nahum 1:5; Psalm 46:3). Recognizing that natural evil can manifest itself in the form of cancer, tuberculosis, or even hydrocephalus, the process theodicy God gives humanity the free will to investigate creative ways to counter cancer's environmental causes, stop its genetic mutations, or at least make it medically manageable (Genesis 1:28). Furthermore, even though God restrains God-self from eradicating the process of cancerous growth or the suffering that results from it in humans, he nevertheless feels the same anguish as its sufferers (Alcorn et al. 2010), just as he felt the same agony that Jesus Christ endured on the cross, as suggested by the doctrine of the suffering God (Sarot 1992; Weinandy 2002). Last but not least, moral evil, as previously mentioned, includes negative events brought about by the deliberate action or inaction of an agent such as a human being, in contrast to natural evil. Examples of evil caused by free human actions include murder, war, and any other heinous deed for which a person may be held accountable. On the other hand, however, 'free human inaction' encompasses examples such as a child being killed by a runaway car or a fast-moving train. Unless humans allow divine love to persuade their free will into rebuking the child who is playing by the rail tracks, the process theodicy God will not violate human free will by stopping the fast-moving train from killing the child. Along these lines, McCloskey mentions evil in the context of being forced to watch helplessly as a child slowly perishes after their body was shattered by a landslide. Thus, as was already mentioned, the God of process

theology—and, by extension, process theodicy—chooses to respect human free will to the extent that God-self refrains from interfering or infringing human free will even when causing evil. Process theodicy preserves the omnipresence of the traditional monotheistic God while allowing for human free will in the face of evil and suffering. Consistent with the conventional monotheistic conviction regarding God's omnipotence, the process theodicy affirms that God continues to be benevolent toward human suffering but abstains from interfering in evil in order to preserve human free will.

## 7. The Missionary God

In monotheism, belief in one God is not only at the heart of its teachings but also forms the basis for all affiliated religions to pass on their beliefs to others (Stott 2013, p. 4). This means that all monotheistic religions are uniformly characterized by the missionary disposition of God, whose active role in the context of salvation is emphasized despite the different names used in reference to transcendent experiences (Nessan 2001, p. 112). Insofar as God is relational, the preceding section explains how the divine self, even in the face of evil and human suffering, remains not inclined to divorce such inherent character. However, as process theodicy affirms, in the same way that God bore human suffering through the death of Jesus on the cross, the divine self also shares in the afflictions of evil and human suffering. Thus, within the framework of process theodicy, divine nature set the stage for the missionary God by articulating the transcendent God who sends God-self to take on the role of a fellow sufferer. From this perspective, the missionary God is therefore obliged by the eternal divine relational nature to send God-Self to share in human suffering and consequently to inspire humanity in its struggle against evil. In examining the context of evil and human redemption, the Bible should fundamentally be viewed as a careful exposition full of irrevocable evidence of God's missionary intent (Stott 2013, p. 3). Within this framework, which spans from Genesis of the Old Testament to the New Testament Revelation, God is portrayed as sending God-self—that is, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—to ensure the salvation of the human race. As a loving deity, the missionary God is also portrayed as promising to bless all of humankind through Abraham, thereby enlisting human participation, in addition to driving evil from the surface of the universe. Nessan (2001) rightly notes that the missionary triune God, whether through the personification of God the Father, the Son, or the Holy Spirit, still remains the main agent of his own mission, which is realized on the part of humanity in worship (Nessan 2001, p. 115). This self-sending expression is encompassed in the Johannine framework: 'God (θεός) sends the Son (γίος) Jesus Christ, who then sends the Holy Spirit (Άγιο πνεύμα) in the mission of salvation (Bevans 1998, p. 102). Stott (2013) is equally stimulated by the realization of such dynamic expression and consequently affirms: 'It is this expression more than any other which reveals the living God of the Bible to be a missionary God' (Stott 2013, p. 9). Within the limits of such claims, or at most consistent with their logic, the earthly ministry of Christ, with the consistent participation of his disciples and the entire Church, strives to eradicate evil with the express mission of bringing about the salvation of humanity. Consequently, the emphasis on missionary God activism is seen and expected to demonstrate the attributes of an all-knowing, all-powerful, and perfect missionary God experienced in worship.

Expressive of process theism (Bloesch 1995), God appears to have changed over time from being the sovereign monarch or God of pure power in the Old Testament (Hegel and Sterrett 1892, pp. 253–80), to the responsive missionary God of pure love with soteriological determination in the New Testament (McDonnell 2003; Talbott 2014). The radical shift seems to occur immediately after the human fall as God is suddenly depicted as descending into the universe and directly interacting more with the human realm. However, throughout all of these encounters or epiphanies, God appears in a variety of ways, such as burning bushes, angels, visions, and theophany—human-like figures. First, the traditional picture of the missionary God in Genesis of the Old Testament Bible is that of a creator who exists outside and beyond the universe as His creation, much like an artist who transcends their creation. He is the self-existing creator, free from the constraints

of nature and abstracted from all its metaphysical considerations. This infinite missionary God remains the reason for all creation and the sole principal agent ensuring that it remains faithful to His eternal purpose, which includes, among other things, the well-being of all the inhabitants of the universe (Braaten 2016; Newbigin 1995). If this God possessed any unfathomable limitations, they would be self-imposed in service of the divine purpose and would greatly surpass human capacity and comprehension. Among other things, these unique divine attributes paint a picture of the nature of the missionary God, who exists completely independently of the world, the cosmos, and all its beings and yet eternally sends God-self to sustain them (Baker 1929, pp. 1–2). God's descent into the universe is always portrayed as having or characterized by the sole goal of saving humans in mind. In the New Testament, however, the missionary God-self is humanizing by taking on human flesh while still entirely divine with unfathomable transcendence. It is precisely to this end that Kwiyani (2015) sees Christ's earthly ministry as encompassing the divine process in which the triune missionary God explicitly humanizes pursuant to restoring humanity (Kwiyani 2015, p. 61). Thus, the missionary God, as portrayed in the New Testament through Christ's earthly ministry, demonstrates unparalleled goodness and extraordinary love by humanizing God-self in order to achieve human salvation (Haight 1994; Kettler 1986). The missionary God, despite never having created sin or been its author, entered the universe via the person of Jesus Christ and utilized His infinite wisdom to become the author of salvation (Davis 2014; Köstenberger 2020). This character reinforces the *Missio Dei* theoretical framework by implying that God is a flexible missionary who actively works to establish a community of the redeemed throughout Scripture, from Genesis to Revelation and beyond (Decock 1999, pp. 373–410). Consequently, or to the extent that Willingen's mission theology shifted from anthropocentric to theocentric mission, it pointed to the sacrificial missionary God who eternally entrusted the mission of human redemption to God-self (Laing 2009, pp. 89–99).

In the context of divine respect for human free will, the missionary God openly invites humanity to participate in the mission of salvation, although the missionary God self is by no means helpless in this regard. This means, or at least as most of this essay attempts to express, that the existential perfection of the missionary God-self is not deficient in the appearance of evil nor His activism dispirited by humanity's unwillingness to partake in the redemptive mission. Furthermore, the missionary God is omnipotent enough even to prevent God-self from violating both human free will and creation's metaphysical processes just to prove the divine eternal powers in the face of or against the existence of evil. The idea of an unyielding God, which characterized the pre-Willingen's mission theology, stood in stark contrast to the consequential missionary God who, according to the redefined *Missio Dei*, dynamically interacts with human creation to bring about complete redemption. The concept of a relational-active missionary God who is completely independent of natural laws and evil existence but who shares in human suffering and personally guarantees complete salvation continues to shape the post-Willingen's mission theology. In particular, the relational missionary God, as projected by the Second Person of the Trinity, underscores the process of divine presence in human suffering, despite the inherent incapacity of the divine nature to suffer. The very nature of the Trinitarian God, who, according to progressive theology, revealed his relational nature through participation in human suffering, is at the same time the supreme source of mission. Furthermore, and finally, the missionary God prescribed by process theodicy is the one who sends God-self to inhabit the human body with the intention of sharing in human suffering, thus intimately achieving unmitigated salvation.

## 8. Conclusions

This contribution drew on the available literature to reconcile the idea of *Missio Dei*, as projected by the post-1952 missiology, with the existential reality of evil caused by the poor exercise of human free will presented in the reasoning of process theodicy. This intellectual determination followed the recognition that much work remains to be

conducted to evaluate or reconcile the modern interpretation of the Missio Dei in light of its predecessor philosophies, in order to avoid illogicalities in the field of theology and especially missiology. First, the concept of Missio Dei is presented from the perspective of the pre-1952 IMC Willingen conference and then redefined as a result of the conference's commitments and scholarship. In keeping with post-Willingen scholarship on the Missio Dei, it was argued that the missionary enterprise as a whole had a theocentric rather than anthropocentric character, making mission the essence of God's eternal nature. Second, process theology, its resulting theodicies, and especially process theodicy are presented in a way that recognizes the contemporary significance of the Missio Dei. Biblical and modern theodicies, particularly process theodicies, are then reconciled within a framework that asserts that poor exercise of human free will not only caused evil but also justified the resulting human suffering. The operational God-self in the context of Missio Dei, when read alongside the relational and dynamic God of process theodicy, points to the sovereign missionary God who, while metaphysically transcendent of evil, is nonetheless immanent in human suffering. Consequently, the integration of Missio Dei with process theodicy seamlessly articulates the relational missionary God who, in addition to sending God-self to embody mortality against evil, transcendentally remits all temporal events and human free will to fulfill divinely predestined rectitude. Although the argumentation of this work may have flaws, it has nevertheless illuminated another aspect of the Missio Dei, the validity of which needs to be confirmed by further research. That is, this article pointed out another feature of the Missio Dei that necessitates, first, further research to sanction its scholarly exceptionality and, second, the verification of its validity in the context of other missio-theological frameworks. This section is not mandatory but may be added if there are patents resulting from the work reported in this manuscript.

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