

Engage360 | Episode 46: Theological and Pastoral Theodicy

- Introduction: Welcome to Engage360 Denver Seminary's podcast. Join us as we explore the redemptive power of the gospel and the life-changing truth of scripture at work in our culture today.
- Dr. Don Payne: Well, Hey friends, welcome back to Engage360. I'm Don Payne. We're here at Denver Seminary and I'm joined today again by our president, Dr. Mark Young Mark. Welcome back.
- Dr. Mark Young: Thanks Don.
- Dr. Don Payne: Before we get underway this week, I want to remind you kind of while I'm thinking about it, that full transcripts of all of our podcast interviews are available on the seminary website. If you ever have need of those, of course, all of the audio recordings are still available there as well, but regardless of the platform on which you normally listen to Engage360, you can always go to the Seminary website. It's denverseminary.edu/podcast. And look for the episode you want, there'll be a little icon there where you can download a full transcript of each episode, and I hope you'll avail yourself of those, that resource. Well, a few weeks ago, we tackled the issue of God's sovereignty and what it means to say things like God is in control when life is flipped upside down, and we can see no reason or pattern to it. Now this week, we want to send another probe into that topic because it involves some longstanding and really troublesome questions about how God relates to evil and suffering in particular. And to help us in that endeavor our guest this week, I'm really excited about is Dr. Anna Robbins, who is President of Acadia Divinity College and Dean of Theology at Acadia University in Nova Scotia. Anna welcome, welcome to Engage 360.
- Dr. Anna Robbins: Thanks, Don. It's really great to join you here
- Dr. Don Payne: We are. So, so glad you could, even though we've got, I think about a three-hour time difference between us. Well, the theological word that is often used as leverage to talk about this kind of problem is theodicy, which some dictionaries will define as a vindication of God's goodness or divine goodness, and sovereignty in light of the existence of evil. Anna, I guess maybe a lead off question and all of this is even, even though there've been lots of apologetic efforts, apologetic explanations offered by Christians to make sense of that question of God and evil, God and suffering. Why is it that we need to keep thinking or thinking more deeply about this question, about theodicy? What keeps us coming back to this question?
- Dr. Anna Robbins: Yeah, I mean, I think we keep coming back to it because the experiences of life drive us back to it in part, right. I mean, from the very beginning, there's the question of, if God is good, then are all the nasty things happening around us. And so whenever we experience, I think in our lives, something that seems like God could have stopped it and if he could, why didn't he should have done.

Then we come back to those questions all over again, whether it's an incident that happens around us in a crisis, or whether it's a personal thing, someone who is ill that we love and you want God to do something about why isn't he acting? I think it's those experiences of life that keep driving us back to that question. I think too, the way that we approach the question and the way we frame the question is very much shaped by the culture in which we live. And I think that is a of real significance for us at this point in our own Western history, particularly the way that we pose the question the way that we feel that we can approach God and ask that question is itself very much shaped by the culture in which we live. So I think it's a perennial question, of course. But I, the way we answer it has also been shaped by those cultural realities.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. And sadly as we're recording this you and your part of North America are right on the heels of a pretty intense travesty of late. And so I'm sure that this is really fresh for all people in particularly the church there in Nova Scotia.

Dr. Anna Robbins: Yeah, I think it always is whenever tragedy strikes. And of course, you're referring to a mass shooting that happened in Nova Scotia just a few weeks ago. But you know, we read about these things elsewhere and hear about them elsewhere, they tend not to happen in a place like this. People have the sense here that, you know, it's quiet and relaxed and we're all about the sea and the sky. And the thought that that such an interruption can come into our peaceful lives is devastating. And then of course, that was already in the midst of being locked down from the pandemic. And then right on the heels of that of course, you know, crises around racism and unjust killings and yeah, your mind reels, God, where are you? How can this all be happening?

Dr. Mark Young: Yeah. And I remember hearing you say at a conference, we both attended in January that traditional approaches to this question have left us unsatisfied in a lot of ways. Would you comment on why those traditional approaches have left us unsatisfied, particularly when we have evil that occurs at the hands of evil doers, but we also have catastrophes and other things that create suffering that we certainly would want to avoid.

Dr. Anna Robbins: Yeah. I mean, there's a lot of different ways from an apologetic standpoint that we can approach both of those questions, whether we see it as, you know, a moral, evil, like a shooting or a natural evil, like a pandemic. And I think, you know, the traditional approaches from at least the enlightenment period onward have been to justify God somehow, that somehow in his character to justify that he's not flawed, right. That he's not evil, that evil can coexist with a good God somehow. And they become very philosophical, that in itself is not necessarily a bad thing. And I think reason can turn itself to help us at least wrestle well with some of those questions, but I'm not convinced we will find the best answers there. I know having taught apologetics over many years, the best essays that come back on the question of the Odyssey are always ones that don't resolve the question tidally if that makes sense.

They don't resort to the philosophy that then people find difficult to relate the experiences of their lives, to this kind of esoteric thinking. And the best answers that come back tend to be the pastoral one. You know, what does it mean for God to be with me in this? What does it mean that that maybe God hasn't abandoned me and that somehow God can paradoxically live his good character in the midst of the evil that I'm experiencing in my life or that I'm witnessing around me. So I think, I think a lot of us have been left cold over the years with that. I mean, there's some good arguments there, and reason can help us, but in the, in the heart of the question, you know, how does God, why has God allowed this to happen? I'm not sure that that high level philosophical, formulae touch most of us where it really where the hurt happens, if that makes sense.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah, that really does. Because what you're talking about Anna is a very different angle of approach than the angle that presumes that if I can find the answer to that question, then it will be okay. And I've never heard it put quite that starkly, but I can recall from years ago, and in my own pastoral ministry, dealing with people for whom life had sort of collapsed around their feet in one way or another. And they ask understandably and I mean, we all ask why, and it took me a while to realize that when people ask that why question, they're not always or not necessarily looking for a philosophical answer that is more of a lament, it's a protest. And in other words, they're not looking for the type of answer that if given would say, Oh, I get it. Oh, well, that's all, okay. Now let's go have coffee. You know, it's not, that's not what they're looking for

Dr. Anna Robbins: Right I mean, who exactly who having lost the child wants to hear live Mrs. Freewill defense, right? I mean, why would you engage that at that point? There might be a place for it somewhere the class, or, but that's not it right. And for most of us, and I say this, even as a theologian having spent lots of time with those arguments, having made many of them myself and would still continue to in the right context, in order simply to, to be able to understand and cope with life as it exists. They're not satisfying to me personally in terms of how do I put those things together? And so I came to a point of realizing that maybe I was just asking the wrong question, to be honest, maybe I'm asking the wrong question.

Dr. Mark Young: Anna, I've really appreciated your approach to understanding how context shapes the way we ask the question and the way we attempt to come to grips with it. And I know that you've done a lot of work in the area of secularism and in particular, Charles Taylor's work. By the way, you're one of the few people I know who've actually read the whole book. His book, a Secular Age.

Dr. Don Payne: It's kind of like Karl Barth's *Dogmatics*, everybody talks about it. Nobody's ever actually read it. Right?

Dr. Anna Robbins: Yeah. I've never read Karl Barth's *Dogmatics*.

Dr. Mark Young: But I would go on to say, you're the only person I know who can explain it in a way that most of us can understand. So I'm wondering if you could think with us

out loud about how has secularism, at least as Charles Taylor has described it, how do they frame the theodicy question and what kinds of answers, and by they, I shouldn't use that pronoun. How do those of us who live in the secular age tend non-theist, for example, to answer that question or to ask that question, and then what answers would be listened to?

Dr. Anna Robbins:

Yeah, first of all, Mark, you're very kind because I would never claim to be an interpreter really well. I do claim, don't I, sometimes when I'm speaking to be an interpreter of Charles Taylor. I would say I've taken from Charles Taylor, which what makes sense to me and it has helped me to understand our context. And so I would say in as much as he's helped me to understand our cultural context, he's given a bit of a language and some insights, I think, for understanding where we are in our culture with the theodicy issue, because it is a problem for us in our culture today. And it's a particular problem because as the enlightenment period unfolded, we then for the question of, you know, how do we have reconcile a good God with the evil that we encounter in the world, you know, up until the time of the enlightenment, largely that was a question we had to continually just wrestle with it, wrestle with it, wrestle with it. When we hit, you know, the 1700s onward, you finally have this option, which is a theological exit, right? So if you can't resolve the question satisfactorily, you can walk away from faith.

And so I think that what was observed in that time then has really come to fruition in our current culture, because we've reached a point where if we, if we take some of those observations, put them together with consumerism, the way we understand God in our culture is as the great capital P provider. And as we've developed the ability to look after ourselves better and better and better, then he becomes a much smaller and smaller capital P provider, right? Because there's less and less, we need him for. And I'll use the him pronouns for God, cause it's easier for me, but the lesson less and less we need God for as time goes on because, you know, I make a good income. I can provide for myself. I, you know, I have my house, I have, my car has everything I need. So God becomes then the provider, only of things that I can no longer provide for myself. And what are those things tend to be. They tend to be things like intense sickness where someone doesn't have a ready, obvious solution of healing available to them or a large tragedy that happens internationally. Like a tsunami, for example where many, many people are killed.

So we only need God then to step in and intervene in those great, big things that we can't control for ourselves. And, and I think what that does is first of all, it hugely limits God and our perception of who God is to this kind of provider of the things we can't provide for ourselves. So that when he doesn't come through in the way that we expect God to come through, what's the easiest solution? Either to kind of continually hum along pretending this paradox isn't existed in our lives, or we walk away. And I think Taylor highlights that for many people, there's a great relief in that walking away. And I don't know about where you, where you folks are in Denver, but we see that all around us. I think in North America and Western Europe where I've spent a good deal of time that

is the option people are taking because that's how it's presented. God is this provider of the things I can't provide for myself if he's not going to do even that. Right. The little thing that I've left for him, then why hang on then? Why bother?

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. I've heard that. I've heard that. I'm sorry. Yeah. Well I've just heard that periodically. Well, what good is God, then I've heard that phrase used, well, what good is God? And there's all kinds of sanctions embedded in him.

Dr. Anna Robbins: Huge, huge assumptions, right? Because I mean, I'm sympathetic to all that. Cause I know these people right there, we know them, they're all around us. Some days it might be us who feels that way. Why God, this one thing I'm asking of you, right? This one thing, you can't do that? But I think what, what all of this whole, this whole attitude highlights is, is what Taylor calls the buffered self, where it used to be that kind of the cosmos and human existence were all caught up into one. And with the buffered self, we've kind of made ourselves each individual person, the measure of everything around us. So we're the ones who measure what is good and what is bad. We're the ones who measure therefore who God is and what God can and cannot do. And we're the ones who then can stand in a position where we actually can question God. And so when I read this, it really challenges me because I think is that the right question really then is to say, God, why are you not doing that one thing that I think you ought to be able to do rather than to say, actually, if God be God, maybe this is the wrong question, maybe instead of why are you letting this happen? Why are you doing that? Why can you not stop it to say, what does it look like to actually just follow God in this situation? And I just think there's so much more richness for us theologically then to just put God on trial and stick him in a box and leave him in the corner.

Dr. Don Payne: I would love for us to be able to kind of take a swing at rebuilding, a model of engaging divine goodness and divine sovereignty from the vantage point of some better questions. And you've certainly started us down that road Anna, can we develop that? Can we tease that out a little bit further? Backing up, redefining, reframing some of the questions and then suggesting a framework or a paradigm that would help the people of God know how to relate to God on God's own terms rather than on terms we invent and superimpose on God. What if that makes any sense? Can we kind of tease that out?

Dr. Anna Robbins: Well, I think there are some places we can start you know, I think about, for example, PD Forsyth who was writing at the time of the first World War. The Justification of God. And, you know, after, you know, many chapters of looking at different arguments for justifying, you know, the goodness of God and the evil that was that terrible war. He comes with this conclusion that really we can not justify God, that God justifies himself and he to the suffering Christ, the Holy Christ on the cross as God justifying himself saying, you know, these are questions that you can't ask, but look, I can, I've answered them here at this place. And that's, that has to be, I think our starting place, I would agree with Forsyth on that. And that can then lead us into a whole different set of questions and a different direction, a different takeoff point. But I think if

people, if we're going to, did anybody ever argue anybody into the kingdom of God? I don't think so. Did anybody ever save anyone's faith through an argument? I don't think so. Yeah. So what is it, where is God then in the midst of it? And we start, I think, from the cross.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. And that, I wonder whether this exposes a grossly underdeveloped theme within our theology, and it's quite ironic, perhaps because as evangelical Christians, we of course are going to say, and we're going to actually believe that we're all about the cross, right? David Babington's Crucicentrism. I mean, you know, we're not that we're not anything and the resurrection. Yeah.

Dr. Anna Robbins: Maybe we've missed that. When we take the resurrection. But we don't necessarily take the cross. And the cross says so much to us, you know, I can't help, but think about a well-known figures who lately have come out in public as walking away from the faith. And when I've read some of those stories about some of those famous figures in contemporary culture, what I noticed time and time again, is the description of why they walked away and why they walked away as grounded it seems is because they weren't grounded in a sufficient theology. There's one article actually that I read about one particular Christian who walked away and said, if I'm good enough at this and thought, they thought their view of God was always transactional, this big, you know, God provider idea again. And they wrote this, if I'm good enough, or if I pray hard enough, or if I believe enough, then I get blessings and I get a baby, or I get a good life and that's not how life is. And they walked away from God when they visited the concentration camp at Auschwitz and had to try to figure out how this God who was supposed to provide all these good things could be held together with this idea of the fact of the Holocaust.

And to me, that is just the theology that had birthed them, [inaudible] them. I'm not sure that's a shallow theology that had never had to confront Holocaust. And, and Jesus can confront Holocaust. Jesus is in the midst of suffering wherever it happens. And this is something I think we have to understand, even in the contemporary crisis of what's happening with black lives and so on, that suffering and the goodness of God, although they're difficult to understand, and we may never understand them. They don't have to be antithetical in the sense that God is there in the midst. And I think black theology is one example of a place where those two things have been held together.

Dr. Mark Young: I think that's a really profound observation. And one of the ways I think we've gotten to the point we are is our movement, Evangelicalism, at least in the United States was essentially a revivalist movement, right? It was the offer of something good. It's the offer of eternal life. And if you do the right thing, just like this man wrote, or woman, if you do the right thing, then you'll get something good. Meaning if you believe in Jesus, you'll get something good. And so we had a very, we have and have had a very transactional concept of Gospel and faith and what it means to be in relationship with God. We would always say, of course it's because Jesus died on the cross, but that wasn't the main point. The main point is what you're going to get from God, because Jesus died

on the cross, and what God was going to give you was always something good. So we drink, we continue to drink deeply from that view, just as you described, God is a capital P provider.

Dr. Anna Robbins: But we're so negligent. And our whole Bible understanding when we think that though, aren't we, because you don't have to go any further than the Gospel to read what Jesus says to his disciples, that if the world hated me, it's going to hate you. If life was hard for me, it's going to be hard for you. And I think for a long time as evangelicals we've, we have done that. We've held out a view of salvation that is come to Jesus and everything will be great. And I'm not sure that's a fully or biblical view. In fact, I'm pretty sure it's not where a biblical view says, come and follow Jesus. It's really hard, but you've got a Holy Spirit to walk with you.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. That'll really sell won't it. Come follow Jesus it's really going to be hard.

Dr. Anna Robbins: Yeah. You can feel some tense with that, I think.

Dr. Mark Young: Anna, I know that you are a keen critic of contemporary culture. Where do you see in literature, music cinema, where do you see the theodicy question being asked? And what are the answers that you see in contemporary culture, particularly arts to that question?

Dr. Anna Robbins: It's an interesting question. For some specific examples, I might need to think longer. I have a sense though that the question might not be, might not, we might be past the question in culture. That's my suspicion that the question resides with those who are still holding onto a modicum of transcendence, and that those who have surrendered an idea of transcendence that is God have moved on. I think that there's a great nihilism that characterizes contemporary culture in terms of cinema and so on. That is featured far more than an existentialism maybe used to be, to kind of, you know, the idea of pushing forward and seizing the day. And you only live once. And I think that's giving way in many places to a nihilistic view and probably has done since the late eighties actually. Where the idea is you, you know, you can seize the day if you want, but it's not going to go anywhere. Everything just comes to nothing eventually. And so the idea that there is a great relief in letting go of the transcendent and letting go of God only goes so far, there's a great relief maybe for the first month or so, but then there's this great anxiety that's created because where do you go then with it?

How can anything mean anything? And I think out of the pandemic, we're going to see some huge issues emerge. I'm already seeing this in conversations online and so on amongst people who previously would, would find a great joy in life saying, I don't see that there's any point anymore. And I think this is going to be a huge issue in a culture that has jettisoned an idea of the transcendent God and have held only on to the idea of eminence. In other words, what Charles Taylor called the malaise of eminence, you know, that once we realized that ourselves are all that there is there's a real crisis of meaning that arises. And I

think we do see that in many places in the arts. So I'm not saying there's no glimpses of hope anywhere there. But the thing I see overridingly in pop culture at least is nihilism. It comes to nothing. How do you live without a sense of meaning and purpose then becomes a huge issue for us as a culture.

Dr. Don Payne: Do you see, I'm sorry. Do you see any of that maybe in a more subtle theologically framed form in the church? I don't mean that rhetorically.

Dr. Anna Robbins: Yeah. Yeah. I mean, I've been thinking I haven't developed it very much, but I have seen yeah, the [inaudible] culture exists in the church as much as anywhere because we've been so reliant our own programs and programming and programming being the solution to everything. And then you realize that there's no program that can solve the idea that everything is just [inaudible] all the time. And that our purpose for so long became you know, getting more stuff and being better than the church next door and all of that. And then it is, it's [inaudible], what? And I think in some ways evangelicalism has given way to a sort of evangelical deism. Gods around, but the way we've solved the theodicy problems, just to pretend like he's kind of out there but not necessarily involved in my day to day. So that way I don't give him the blame for stuff that happens. And we just live our lives like secular people. And God has just kind of out there somewhere rather than understanding ourselves as disciples of Christ in whom this very spirit of God dwells. It demands a sociological counter movement of some kind I think

Dr. Don Payne: I'd love to have you, if you can, maybe if any, in your more hopeful moments as you.

Dr. Anna Robbins: Oh, I'm actually an optimist.

Dr. Don Payne: Good, maybe I'm, maybe I'm projecting myself onto you and you're not saying anything. Okay. As you look forward, maybe five, 10 years from now, what kind of, how would you characterize the church as it ought to learn from all that we're going through right now?

Dr. Anna Robbins: Yeah, I think that the reality of post Christendom is hitting the ground pretty hard. And I think you folks are probably a little behind in the echoes of that from maybe what we are in Canada and Canada's behind what they were in Western Europe when I was living there. But post Christendom is hitting the ground hard and that means that people whose faith is based on a cultural construct, which is, well, this is what we do we go to church, this is what we do, we believe in Jesus. Rather than because of any life transforming presence of the spirit that it's just going to fall off the edge pretty quick. I think we're in the midst of that now. So we will see, I think, continue to see a significant decline in church because church doesn't seem to have addressed people's questions as the Odyssey with that kind of hard hitting, yeah. It really hurts. This is terrible. Let's cry together to God, you know, that sort of thing. But I really am hopeful because I do see bright lights and I think they're will emerge you know, a fresh movement.

Maybe it will be characterized by leadership from the next generation. But I do think it will definitely emerge and it will emerge far more authentically maybe than previously, less tied in with cultural values, much more attuned to a scriptural view of the world and of life. Much more community based in terms of being based around the community of faith, embracing of the diversity of the people of God. I'm very hopeful. It will be far less institutional, I think. And we'll see a massive change in our denominational structures I believe. I think Seminaries are going to have that huge impact. And we can prepare ourselves for it. I think there are ways of preparing for it and nurturing it to be honest from the seminary. So I'm hugely hopeful, but I don't know exactly what it's going to look like any more than anybody else. It'll probably be much more locally-based, but at the same time you've got, there's going to be the, the online piece shaping that as well.

Dr. Don Payne: Well, I can put this question to both you and Mark, because you're both in leadership positions at the forefront of theological education in North America. What implications does this have for theological education moving forward?

Dr. Mark Young: Yeah, I think one of the clear implications is that we can no longer view theological education as a place where we can have robust, not robust, where we can have less than honest conversations about the differences in various faith traditions. Meaning, trying to argue one is better than the other, one has all the answers than the other, but that theological education has to address the kinds of questions that are being asked in the broader culture. Questions of eminence and transcendence, questions of theodicy to the degree that we're able to say the world isn't what we want it to be. How do we enter into that world? So a recasting of traditional boundaries of theological discourse, as discourse with those outside the faith, as much as those within the faith, or more than with those who are within the faith. I think is a major shift that we need to see in theological education and every discipline, every dimension of it. I also think that the front door to the church, if we want to just say, what are those pathways that folks are going to be accessing to want to explore faith, our faith. I wonder if the front door to the church, isn't going to be driven more by the way we are able to lament with and enter into the suffering that people experience, the challenges they have in life. Then having the answers to the questions. So a shift from a more purely intellectual approach to the faith and to apologetics, to a more pastoral approach to the world as a way that then as the church, we're able to bring people toward us.

Dr. Anna Robbins: Yeah. I mean, I can wholeheartedly agree with that. We live our seminary is on a secular campus and I think in the past there was this sense that, you know, we were certainly regarded by many as the Holy huddle on the Hill. You know, you kind of keep to yourself and you have your own way of doing things and you make your own judgments. And we are now so engaged with our campus and people would say, I don't understand how that can happen. How can you be engaged on a secular campus in a secular country like Canada today? And we're engaged because we love conversation and people want conversation about things like God, I was at one event once in the neighborhood and I had just done

a conference, an open public conversation with an atheist in the philosophy department. And we're friends, we do that kind of regularly, and she said, Oh, I'm so glad you're here. And I said, Oh, why? And she said, because we never get to talk about God. We can talk about God. And it gives people permission because even people who might not have had a faith relationship with God for a long time or who never have, they want to talk about it. Cause the experiences of life drives in that way. I agree with you Mark. The pastoral side is huge.

People still have the sense when tragedy hits that, that they're part of their anger, I think comes because they are aware that there is a presence that cares for them. And there's a tension there. And to be able to enter into people's situations with confidence I think is huge for us. And I'm a little bit wary because there is a sense in some circles that, you know, with the end of Christendom, that we need to hunker down into this kind of exile mentality. And I think that is completely wrong-headed response. If we want to live a theodicy, then we have to be out sharing people's pain and being willing to embrace it with them, not to hide away from the world or to circle the wagons against the world. As if somehow if we stand there long enough, it'll go away. I think we can have a confidence in our faith that the Holy Spirit is in us and we walk around with the Holy spirit in us, we can go anywhere not with arrogance, but with confidence and a confidence that can bear one another's burdens. I couldn't agree with you more Mark. There's such room for that and an openness to it. And if we, if there's future for the church there are some deep roots to be set there.

Dr. Don Payne:

Well, I grew up in a Southern revivalist tradition and I feel like I want to give an altar call right now. That's a hopeful note, Dr. Anna Robbins of Acadia Divinity College. Thank you. Thank you so much for spending time with us. We're really grateful for what you're doing in Nova Scotia. Well, this is Engage360 Denver Seminary again, and on behalf of Dr. Mark Young, our president, our guest, Dr. Anna Robbins and Christa Ebert, who is faithfully on our soundboard right now and does all our quality editing and the rest of our production pain. We want to thank you for spending some time with us. I hope you'll make that a regular practice and let us know what you find beneficial. You can reach us at podcast@denverseminary.edu. Take care. We'll talk to you again next week.