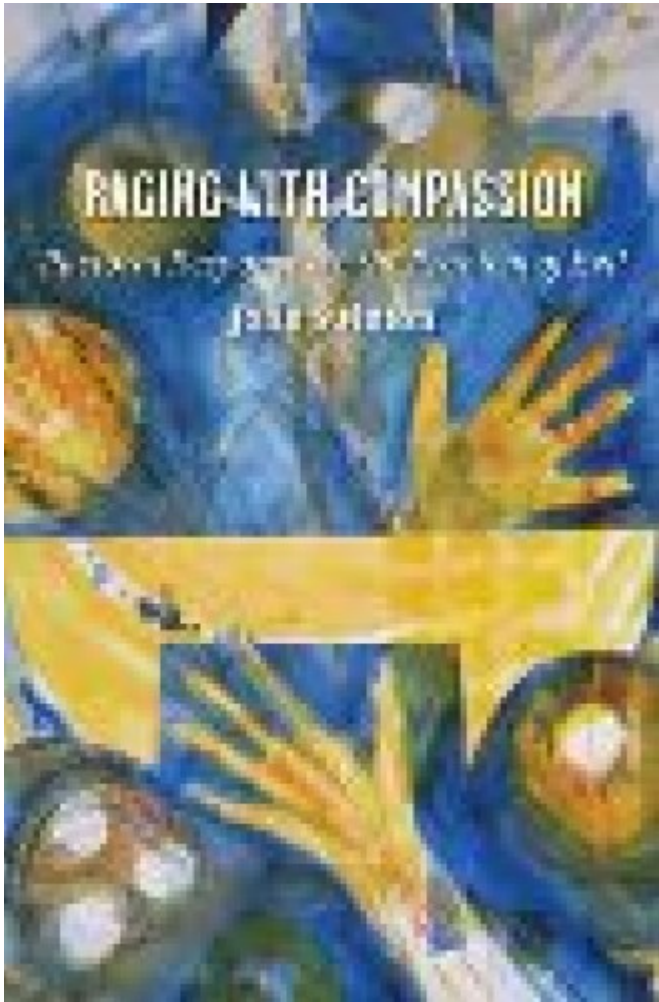


Raging with Compassion

reviewed by [Samuel Wells](#) in the [October 16, 2007](#) issue

In Review



Raging with Compassion: Pastoral Responses to the Problem of Evil

John Swinton
Eerdmans

When I talk with Christians about their struggles in faith, the question of evil invariably surfaces early on. When I talk with those who have come to faith as adults, very often I hear stories of how God or one of God's angels in human form has been very present to them in times of suffering. When I talk with those who claim no faith, the philosophical and moral objections clustered around the question of evil tend to arise quickly. And when I talk with those who have been Christians but now claim no faith, I frequently hear stories of how other Christians' thoughtlessness and heartlessness toward them at times of distress constituted the last straw. It is in the midst of such contexts that John Swinton has composed this thoughtful, heartfelt and deeply faithful response to the abiding question of evil.

Swinton seems to have had three projects in mind in writing this book. The first is a reorientation of the discipline of practical theology, a discipline that is perpetually in danger of being patronized on all sides—by the social sciences because it is theology and is thus taken to lack the rigor of quasiscientific inquiry, and by systematic theology because it is regarded as dwelling too much in the realm of subjectivity and personal experience.

Swinton pays close attention to experience and human feelings—he narrates several accounts of bereavement, abuse and other forms of agonizing hurt and loss—and he frequently looks over his shoulder to ensure that the sensitive reader does not misunderstand his more analytical arguments. But perhaps the book's most significant feature is that it places practical theology squarely within a doctrinal and ecclesial framework, not simply within a pastoral setting.

I recall attending a clergy conference on life after death in which all everyone wanted to talk about was what makes a good funeral and what is appropriate to say on such occasions. Swinton makes practical theology into a discipline that goes beyond pastoral sensitivity to ask more profound philosophical, moral and theological questions—and he does so with all the more authority because he never forgets his formation as a health-care practitioner.

The second project of the book is to reframe theodicy. This is becoming a more familiar exercise: it is now commonplace to point out that the god that modernity stopped believing in on moral grounds was a distant, deist entity that was invented in the 17th century. Swinton does a tidy job of telling this story and outlining the theological issues involved in a new way. He defines evil precisely: it is that which

inhibits “the hope that there is meaning or order in the world or a God who exercises providential care.” He thus distinguishes evil from tragedy, which is more a matter of human finitude. The most telling part of the argument comes when Swinton shifts attention from what evil is to what evil does: this marks the transition from speculation about origins to recommendations for response, and it successfully opens the door to the rest of the book, which presents proposals for engaging with the distressing circumstances that evil brings about.

Thus the third project of the book is to give an account of Christian practices that build community and hope in the face of pain and suffering: lament, listening to silence, forgiveness, thoughtfulness and hospitality. The most successful treatment is that of lament. I vividly recall attending the funeral of a member of my own extended family at which it seemed impossible for those leading worship to mention that anyone might be sad that she was dead: all was celebration and exaltation. I wasn’t asking for ululation, just lament. Swinton explores, largely through the psalms, what a practice and liturgy of lament might look like.

It is fashionable among moral theologians to allude to practices—and students, once they have grasped this, sometimes speak of practices as if one could grab a few off the shelf and be fully equipped for adversity, as if they were like camping gear. Swinton, without talking as if we were all living in monastic communities, makes it clear that practices are demanding, time-consuming to learn, and fragile even when well understood.

What I find most interesting is the way Swinton handles the definition of evil, given his obvious intention to concentrate on communal and pastoral responses rather than engaging in a head-on analysis of evil itself. There remains an ambivalence in the book about whether evil has a reality in itself or simply names a constellation of attitudes, behaviors and consequences that radically diminish trust in God and one another. On the one hand Swinton seems to distance himself from a precise identification of evil itself (though he spends a number of pages untangling terms such as *evil*, *tragedy* and *suffering*); on the other hand, he continues to use the term *evil* throughout the book in what to me is a rather loose manner, taking for granted that the term is helpful.

A positive result of this approach is that Swinton includes a helpful discussion of the demonization of notorious murderers; it is particularly useful to British readers for its reflections on the child-killer Myra Hindley. One less positive result is that because

he seems to be working with an unclear notion of evil, the relation between his interesting chapter on thoughtfulness and the rest of the book is less than smooth.

Nonetheless, Swinton comprehensively succeeds with the three projects with which the book is most directly concerned. Given that undergraduate religion classes tend to be made up of the four kinds of people I identified at the beginning of this review, and that the issues raised by Swinton are always on the back burner of public discourse (and frequently on the front burner—think of the Virginia Tech shootings), it would be hard to imagine a more accessible and thoughtful book to use for a general class that addresses both the philosophy of religion and the reality of the church. While philosophical treatments are evidently not the answer to evil, they are more than likely to address the question.