

***Deus Abscondicus, Providence and the Crucified God:* A Critical Response to the Fiction of Mary Doria Russell**

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Regent College, 2004

I. Introduction

Nearly every person of faith has experienced the silence and inaction of God amidst pain. Why is God so palpably absent from the world in apparent indifference to human suffering? What can human beings realistically expect of God in the face of inexplicable suffering? These are some of the deepest human questions about God, and Mary Doria Russell takes them on in her books, *The Sparrow* and *Children of God*. Russell asks the questions from the perspective of a post-Holocaust Jew, from a tradition that is justifiably casting about for the location and care of a God who seems to have left the scene. Russell's own comment here is revealing: "When you convert to Judaism in a post-Holocaust world, you know two things for sure: one is that being Jewish can get you killed; the other is that God won't rescue you" (*RG-S*, 1-2).¹ This statement notwithstanding, Russell concludes these books with the message that meaning for suffering is found in the knowledge that God is in control. It is especially in *Children of God* that Russell develops Emilio Sandoz's character with the idea that the passage of time and the benefit of hindsight reveal a bit of what the sovereign God is up to, and that's all we can really know.

But is this answer adequate? Is it enough? If we seek a fully meaningful and consistent answer, then there are some things missing. In what follows we will argue that Russell's view of providence is inadequate on three levels: First, her view of divine sovereignty overwhelms God's love for and solidarity with humanity, and relinquishes the human possibility of finding meaning *within* the suffering moment. Second her use of human hindsight as an evaluative grid fails under

¹ Throughout this paper, these abbreviations will be used: *SP*: *The Sparrow*; *COG*: *Children of God*; *RG-S*: Reader's Guide- *The Sparrow*; *RG-C*: Reader's Guide- *Children of God*; *V*: *Love's Endeavor, Love's Expense*; *M*: *The Crucified God*; *B*: *Theology of the Old Testament*. See bibliography for full details on each source.

her own terms of human foresight. Third, her depiction of Yahweh who is to and for his people falls short of Scriptural witness; the absence of the cross falls short of Jesuit witness. After delving into Russell's argument, we will integrate her thoughts with W.H. Vanstone and Jurgen Moltmann in search of a more robust, meaningful and biblical view of God's providence.

II. Russell's Transcendent God

A key theme in both *The Sparrow* and *Children of God* is the nature of divine providence, and attention to several portions of the narrative alerts us to Russell's view here, particularly in relation to God's silence or inaction. The first example plays a big role in the *The Sparrow*, and it is the "signs" or "turtles on fence posts" that Sandoz and others take to be indications of God's will.

Peter Pan. You guys are all set to go to Never-Never-Land and I get to be Wendy. Fabulous! There is a rude gesture that comes to mind,' Anne snapped. 'Emilio, you are the most sensible, rational priest I've ever met. And now you are telling me that you think God wants us to go to this planet. Us personally. The people in this room. Am I getting this straight?' 'Yes. I am afraid I think I do believe that,' he said, wincing. 'I'm sorry.'

She looked at him, helpless with exasperation. 'You are demented.'... 'But, Anne! This is an extraordinary moment, the notion that we are all here in this room, at this moment, for some reason....The fact that we know one another appears to be a result of chance. And yet, here we are' (SP, 99).

Later, when Sandoz is lying in bed reflecting on the Arecibo discovery, he is convinced that God has given him a green light to go to Rakhat: "...if ever a man had wanted a sign from God, Emilio Sandoz had been hit square in the face with one this morning, at Arecibo" (SP, 108). Later of course Sandoz endures what he believes to be God's ultimate betrayal of him, even after he experienced total spiritual rapture and contentment with the Runa people of Kashan. In an interview at the back of *The Sparrow*, Russell makes some revealing comments about what these events mean for her view of God. When asked what the moral of the story is, she says: "Maybe it's 'Even if you do the best you can, you still get screwed.' We seem to believe that if we act in accordance with our understanding of God's will, we ought to be rewarded. But in doing so we're making a deal that God didn't sign onto" (RG-S, 5).

In many ways, the above comment summarizes Russell's view of divine providence. God is sovereign and in control, but he does not have to answer for himself or explain human suffering. No answers are forthcoming for Sandoz in the *midst* of his suffering, but by the end of *Children of God* Russell confirms that only *hindsight* reveals providential superintendence and perhaps, care as well. While speaking with Sandoz at the close of *Children of God*, John Candotti comments on the story of Moses' encounter with God's back: "...Maybe that was God's way of telling us that we can never know His intentions, but as time goes on...we'll understand. We'll see where He was: we'll see His back" (COG, 428).

As the reader moves from *The Sparrow* into *Children of God*, there is certainly a sense of the clarity and meaning given by hindsight. Sandoz befriends Hlavin Kithari's son; he has indirectly caused the freedom of the Runa; he defends the struggling remnant of Jana'ata; he hears Isaac's music; he recovers his faith and goes home to a new daughter and granddaughter. Yet the comforting assignation of meaning to human hindsight still skirts the issue of God's inaction and betrayal of Sandoz *at the moment* of his suffering. The murderer of a young girl may "pay" her family with life in prison, but no amount of "sufferer's compensation" can redeem the atrocity itself or speak meaningfully to the deep places of the parents' loss. It is no solace that Sandoz's unspeakable suffering "makes sense" and has ultimate meaning, as Russell suggests, *only* through the hindsight hint of a contestable providential scheme that is years from the event of suffering, which in these novels includes a blurred line between divine care and random fate.

In addition, the "nice" things surmised from human hindsight are no more reliable than human *foresight*—the fallibility of the latter is aptly demonstrated by Russell—thus hindsight cannot be the *sole* source of meaning with regard to suffering. It may be no more than wishful thinking. Is Isaac's discovery and creation of the DNA music that is supposed to "mean" so much, any less a "turtle on a fencepost" than the extraordinary events leading up to the first mission? It would seem not. We are left at an impasse. As Russell herself says of hindsight: "...perhaps it just takes us that long to think up a convincing rationale for why things happened as they did, and then

we ascribe it to Providence” (RG-C, 2)! It could be that Russell may not even take her own “hindsight of providence” scheme as seriously as the reader might think.

Further, what is strikingly absent is the attempt to make sense of God’s silence or inaction in light not only of human experience, but also in light of the concrete and specific actions of Yahweh in the history of Israel. Where is the God who, according to the people of Israel, breaks the silence and takes action in history, whose *deeds* Israel recalls when faced with the darkness? Walter Brueggemann notes that Israel’s claims about God are first and foremost concerned with his actions *to and for Israel* in sentences governed by strong verbs of transformation (B, 145). These verbally driven utterances are the substance of Israel’s memory in the dark places, and produce the claims that Yahweh is the God who creates (*bara’*), promises (*sava: natan* and *barak*), delivers (*yasa, natsal, ga’al*), commands (*savah*) and leads (*halak*) (B, 145-201). These strong verbal affirmations of Israel—the distinctive characteristics and historical actions of Yahweh himself—are notably absent from Russell’s depiction of God.

Finally, perhaps the most conspicuous shortcoming is that Russell bypasses the *one* specific historical action of God that would hold vitally deep meaning for a member of the Society of *Jesus* who has come home with bleeding hands. It is difficult to understand how Russell could construe Sandoz as making sense of his experience with not one single reference to the cross. With this notable gap in mind, we turn to look at what could have happened in Russell’s books if both the character of Yahweh and the cross were taken more seriously.

III. Vanstone’s Gambling God

In *Love’s Endeavor, Love’s Expense*, W.H. Vanstone offers a view of God which adds much to our reflection on his involvement in, or detachment from Sandoz’s suffering. Vanstone constructs a three-part description of God’s love by cataloguing human responses to *inauthentic* love, marked as it is by limitation, control and detachment. Certainly the mark of control became a factor in Sandoz’s rejection of God. He believed that God had laid out all the events leading up to the team’s arrival on Rakhat and so held God responsible for all the terrible things that happened, even to the

point of saying that he was raped by God (*SP*, 394). As Vanstone says, “parodies of love are not only recognized: they are resented.” (*V*, 40). The marks of inauthentic love are often self-evident.

Russell’s God is one of limitless power and transcendence, but that does not make him a God who loves, or who can be loved. Vanstone rightly asserts that “Respect on the part of the inferior may be dictated by prudence: but it can hardly be justified by moral sensitivity. Superiority as such confers no moral right to respect: in particular, superiority of power confers no such right” (*V*, 61). This was most certainly Sandoz’s perspective in the wake of his tragedy. Rather than choosing atheism, he chooses to continue believing in a vicious God so that he can enjoy the satisfaction of hating him (*SP*, 394).

Vanstone’s Sparrow

What Sandoz needed was a God of limitless love, not one possessing only limitless power. And this is the point at which Vanstone adds a great deal to Russell’s picture of God. He points out that authentic love is sabotaged whenever there is “complete assurance of control” or guaranteed outcome on one side of the relational equation (*V*, 46). He rightly contends that when this happens in human relationships, we call such control by names such as manipulation, condescension, selfishness or in Sandoz’s case, viciousness (*V*, 49). So, Vanstone argues that simply by virtue of choosing to create something truly “other” than himself, God has let such control pass out of his hands. He notes, “Love aspires to reach that which, being truly an ‘other’, cannot be controlled” and as such the act of true love that involves an ‘other’ is always precarious (*V*, 49).

How does this explain or inform the evil that happened to Sandoz? Vanstone holds that evil does not happen as a result of a divine plan that is rolled out like a prefabricated carpet. Rather, evil is “the moment of control jeopardised and lost...[evil is] the expression or consequence of the precariousness of the divine creativity” in which each triumph holds tragic possibility, and each tragedy able to be redeemed into triumph (*V*, 63). In other words, nothing less than the authenticity of God’s own love was at stake in the tragedies that happened to Sandoz and his company.

God's involvement in a "precarious" game could tag him as a careless gambler who plays with tragedy and triumph. However, Vanstone also argues that God's love involves vulnerability, because authentic love always offers "power over the feeling self" to the other (*V*, 50). He argues that if God's love is authentic, then he *must* allow our response to his love to affect him, because without such dignity we as creatures have no significance or "power of meaning."

With all of these reflections Vanstone's theology of providence gives immense depth of meaning to Sandoz's darkest experiences because God is *impacted* by them and weeps for Sandoz's pain, whereas Russell's God previews the next series of events that will roll out as planned. Thus the self-emptying of Vanstone's God acts in complete congruency with the kenosis of the redeemer Christ—who in his own limitless, precarious and vulnerable incarnation, death and resurrection—completely reveals both the being and the activity of God the creator (*V*, 58). It is finally the suffering and death, the godforsakenness of the crucified God that fully brings meaning into the darkness of Sandoz's experience. To that we now turn.

IV. Moltmann's *Crucified God*

In his *Crucified God*, Jurgen Moltmann takes on the controversial issue of divine suffering. Unlike Vanstone's emphasis on the kenosis of God the Creator, Moltmann focuses his answer particularly on the cross and provides a Trinitarian account of the suffering that happened there. First, Moltmann outlines the shortcomings of a theism which protects a powerful and transcendent God at humanity's expense and results in a kind of servile fear of God, as Sandoz's attests: "he had discovered the outermost limit of faith and, in doing so, had located the exact boundary of despair. It was at that moment that he learned, truly, to fear God" (*SP*, 21).

The opposite, related movement is toward atheism, which is equally inadequate as it divinizes humanity at God's expense. In theism the central problem is that there is a great God in charge who can't identify, and in atheism there is a denial of God in protest against the absence of righteousness in the world (*M*, 221). Moltmann then seeks a way forward between these two options, and argues that *in the cross* God both identifies with his people's suffering *and* protests

against the world's injustice, while he also defeats suffering, death and unrighteousness in the process.

Moltmann contends that if God cannot suffer *in any way*, then he cannot love or be loved, is uninvolved, narcissistic, and is an incomplete being since he cannot experience the helplessness, grief and powerlessness that his creatures do (*M*, 222-223). So, like Vanstone, he argues that God actively chooses “the suffering of love, in which one voluntarily opens himself up to the possibility of being affected by another...as a result of the otherness of the other” (*M*, 230). And he adds, when we rightly affirm that God's suffering does not cause divine powerlessness or exposure to sickness, pain or grief, or affirm that his suffering is not a *deficiency* in his being, this does not preclude the further affirmation that God can indeed suffer out of the *fullness* of his being, that is, out of his love (*M*, 232).

It is here that Moltmann zeroes in on the meaning of the cross, and carries the suffering that happens there far deeper into the being of God than traditional Nicene Christology has ever allowed (*M*, 228). Exegetically he notes the negative connotations of the Greek word for “deliver up,” which is associated with the wrath of God. On the cross Christ is “delivered” up by the Father for the sake of the godless, so that they will not be godforsaken. But Moltmann also reveals that Christ delivers *himself* up (Gal. 2:20; Eph. 5:24) at great cost of suffering to the Father. So in Trinitarian terms, the “not sparingness,” forsakenness, abandonment, the “delivering up” also involves the Father himself who “suffers the death of the Son in the infinite grief of love” (*M*, 243).

Moltmann's Sparrow

Sandoz suffered because he loved God and loved the Rakhati people. Even his journey into Kithari's harem was motivated by love and by the last remnant spark of hope in him. It is hard to imagine, especially in light of his relational losses and perpetually bleeding hands, that as a Jesuit he would not find himself identifying in some way with the suffering of Christ. It is almost inconceivable. For all the exhaustive research Russell masters in order to write these books, it is a wonder that she misses the central person of the Jesuit existence, Jesus himself. Perhaps it was

intentional, perhaps not, but the difference it would have made to her conclusions on the question of God's inaction and silence is unavoidably vast.

For instance, when Sandoz goes through his inexplicable suffering, he cries out in horror. Russell writes, "The penetration, when it came, made him scream. Things became very much worse after that. Perhaps ten minutes later he was pulled into an unfamiliar room, bleeding and sobbing. Left alone, he vomited until he was exhausted." (*SP*, 393) Almost as if he had read *The Sparrow* and sought to rewrite it in light of the crucified God, Moltmann gives some idea of the difference the cross would make:

Anyone who suffers without cause first thinks that he has been abandoned by God. God seems to him to be the mysterious, incomprehensible God who destroys the good fortune that he gave. But anyone who cries out to God in this suffering echoes the death-cry of the dying Christ, the Son of God. In that case God is not just a hidden someone set over against him, to whom he cries, but in a profound sense the human God, who cries with him and intercedes for him with his cross where man in his torment is dumb (*M*, 252).

V. Conclusion

In the end, Russell's answer to the question of God's silence falls short of offering people a meaningful basis for knowing themselves to be fully and authentically *loved* by God *in the midst* of atrocities; it further fails to offer a convincing reason why raped humanity might authentically love God back. A supposed knowledge *only* of God's sovereign control *after the suffering event* is not enough to make sense of and redeem it, nor does it adequately move beyond the God of Job to include the whole of who Yahweh is, because he is a God who is to and for his people, who unequivocally commits himself to them, hears their cry and enters into the moment of their suffering. In the face of inexplicable suffering, it is in the cross of the crucified God that we find an answer that opens up the far reaches of human dignity in a way that traditional theism cannot. For any kind of human dignity through, and real redemption of the suffering event, a substantive engagement of God with his people must take place in the midst of their darkest moments.

Could it be that God himself enters the loneliness of the *absence of God* in the world? Could it be that human beings may be fellow-sufferers in the silence and inaction of God *with* the crucified God himself who was also "godforsaken," and with the Father who is marked by the grief of infinite

love, and with the Spirit who brings new life out of these shadows to empower the victory of love as it takes death into itself and so defeats it? (M, 254).

Therefore anyone who enters into love, and through love experiences inextricable suffering and the fatality of death, enters into the history of the human God, for his forsakenness is lifted away from him in the forsakenness of Christ, and in this way he can continue to love, need not look away from the negative and from death, but can sustain death” (M, 254).

Abbreviations:

<i>SP:</i>	<i>The Sparrow</i>
<i>COG:</i>	<i>Children of God</i>
<i>RG-S:</i>	Reader’s Guide- <i>The Sparrow</i>
<i>RG-C:</i>	Reader’s Guide- <i>Children of God</i>
<i>V:</i>	<i>Love’s Endeavor, Love’s Expense</i>
<i>M:</i>	<i>The Crucified God</i>
<i>B:</i>	<i>Theology of the Old Testament</i>

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Mary Doria Russell (born August 19, 1950) is an American novelist. Russell was born in Elmhurst, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago. Her parents were both in the military, her father a Marine Corps drill instructor and her mother a Navy nurse. She was raised as a Catholic but left the church at age fifteen, and her struggles to figure out how much of that culture to pass on to her children fueled the prominence of religion in her work. View Deus absconditus Research Papers on Academia.edu for free.Â The author defined how Luther perceived God and the devil. According to Luther, everything that looks like the Godâ€™s work, could be devilâ€™s. And inversely: what looks like the devilâ€™s work, could be Godâ€™s behaviour. However, due to the Christâ€™s work we discover, if everything that happens to us comes from the devil, or from God. Beyond Christ God is hidden, he is horrible, and he is more like a daemon. God revealed in Christ is Deus revelatus. Deus absconditus is a revealer. Theistic evidence abounds. But in that abundant evidence a fundamental aspect of God remains un-revealed -- specifically the God-data needed "for us and for our salvation." Three nuances a) God's work in creation proceeds via "God's masks," the larva dei. God's creatures are the masks, with God hiding behind the masks.Â building a Lutheran mission theology. Both the person witnessing to Christ and the conversation partner not (yet) enjoying "the merits and benefits of Christ" have this broad base of common experience of deus absconditus.