

# Holding Hope and Doubt:

## The Interreligious Theopoetic Response to Public Tragedies

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### Abstract

This article examines how the language of theoetics can help communities respond to suffering and gives us language in the face of tragedy. First, looking at theoetics of witness, developed by Rebecca Chopp, this article develops language of resistance to suffering and locates the Divine in what remains after the trauma. Next, this article considers suffering as an experience that transcends religious differences, tracing the theoetic responses to trauma found within the writing of theological scholars Abraham Joshua Heschel and Dorothee Soelle. To conclude, this article will turn to a particular interreligious community response to a traumatic event. By sifting through the images of suffering and hope found in the responses of an interfaith vigil in Newtown after the mass shooting at an elementary school, this article develops a theoetic method—an interreligious poetics of witness—which facilitates communities of support and healing.

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Irving Greenberg argued that a theology that does not make sense “in the presence of burning children” is not an adequate theology.<sup>1</sup> On December 14<sup>th</sup> 2012, pastors and religious leaders around the nation were called to make sense of their theology in the wake of the shooting of twenty children at Sandy Hook Elementary. With what language can theology speak to these tragedies? This is not the first time this question has been leveled against the religions of the world. Greenberg’s words above are shaped by the reality of burning children in concentration camps of Nazi German in the early twentieth century. In the aftermath of World War II, the question of what religion could offer us in the midst of suffering reverberated through churches, temples, mosques, and other houses of worship. After WWII, during this post-modern turn, there was a poetic reawakening, in which people remembered and utilized the poetic traditions of their religions. The turn to the poetic can help us, across religious traditions, to hold our doubts and hopes in tension in the presence of suffering, as a testimony to both realities.

This article will examine how theo-poetics can respond to suffering and give us language in the face of tragedy. First, we will look at how theo-poetics of witness, developed by Rebecca Chopp, help us to stand in resistance to suffering and locates the Divine in what remains through the trauma. Next, we must consider the fact that suffering is an experience that transcends religious differences. Our experiences of suffering and our practices of resistance to suffering can help us build bridges of interreligious dialogue. As our world becomes more interconnected, there are many tragedies that we share as a pluralistic world. The possibility of community-shared poetics of resistance in the response to suffering has the potential to create spaces of healing. These communities are already being shaped and must be encouraged to develop language together. To conclude, this article will look closely at the shared im-

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<sup>1</sup> Greenberg, Irving. "Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire: Judaism, Christianity, and Modernity after the Holocaust," *Auschwitz: Beginning of a New Era*. New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1977.

ages of suffering and hope present at the interfaith vigil in Newtown as an example of interreligious poetics of witness, which help bring together communities of support and healing.

### Theopoetics and Suffering

For our purposes here, we will borrow David Miller's definition from the previous *Cross Currents* issue on theopoetics. Miller writes, "theopoetics will have to refer to strategies of human signification in the absence of fixed and ultimate meanings accessible to knowledge or faith." Using poetic language becomes a strategy for many theologians to work through the theological difficulties around questions of suffering that reason and logic tend to exacerbate. As Heschel scholar, Edward Kaplan, eloquently writes, "by becoming aware that all language is metaphorical, we open ourselves to the reality beyond words, beyond concepts, systems, ideologies."<sup>2</sup> Particularly chosen words, each a metaphor for meanings much deeper than we may first realize, can help us to further explore the questions life leaves us. Theopoetics, a term originally used by Stanley Hopper, does not exclusively refer to poetry or metrical writing.<sup>3</sup> Poetics lends itself to be a very important tool within a theologian's toolbox, especially during time of suffering. An idea can be a very powerful thing and by avoiding the sterilization of scientific language that original spark of inspiration may remain intact. "Before the message there must be the vision, before the sermon the hymn, before the prose the poem."<sup>4</sup> Most importantly, poetic language and poetic ways of knowing keep religion relevant to the human experience, which often involves suffering.

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<sup>2</sup> Kaplan, Edward K. *Holiness in Words: Abraham Joshua Heschel's Poetics of Piety*. West Fulton: State University of New York Press. 1996. p.5.

<sup>3</sup> Miller, David L. "Theopoetry or Theopoetics?" *Cross Currents*. Volume 60, Issue 1. March, 2010. p. 8.

<sup>4</sup> Wilder, Amos. *Theopoetic: Theology and the Religious Imagination*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976. p. 1.

Amos Wilder writes, “when imagination fails doctrine becomes ossified, witness and proclamation wooden, doxologies and litanies empty, consolations hollow and ethics legalistic.”<sup>5</sup> Our religious language must speak from our experiences, or it will become meaningless.

While theo poetic language has its roots in the mystical traditions of Christianity and Judaism, we will examine the timeframe in which the revival of theo poetics and the emergence of it as a field of study took place. Theo poetic literature began to surface during the postmodern turn after the Second World War. Theology was faced with a crisis of language in the aftermath of the Holocaust. Prior to the postmodern shift in language, theological language was most influenced by the meta-narrative of progress put forth by modernity. Modernity, a movement marked by an optimistic view of humanity and its ability to use science and reason to understand and control the world, ultimately resulted in the single bloodiest time period in the history of the world.<sup>6</sup> “Modernity is a grand narrative gone wrong, hence the catalogue of disasters in recent years and the decades of genocide that seem to constitute the twentieth century.”<sup>7</sup> In the wake of this horrible truth, theologians and philosophers were left wordless. “*With what language?*”<sup>8</sup> could they possibly speak to the reality of evil and suffering in the world?

As the 20<sup>th</sup> century progressed and postmodern thought began to emerge, theo poetics came to the fore as a viable candidate for language and expres-

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<sup>5</sup> Wilder, 2

<sup>6</sup> Reader, John. *Beyond All Reason: The Limits of Post-Modern Theology*. Cardiff: Aureus. 1997. p. 21. This section of the article is a very quick and simplified look at the relationship of modernism and postmodernism. There are a number of nuances between modernity, modernism, postmodernity, and postmodernism, which go beyond the scope of this article. It is important to note, the postmodern turn in language, which acts as a critical critique to modernism (rather than a separate epoch) and focuses on the particularity of experience and the problems of metanarratives (and meta-language), is different from the economic and social realities of late capitalism, which constitute postmodernity.

<sup>7</sup> Reader, 27

<sup>8</sup> Zylla, Phil C. "What Language Can I Borrow?: Theo poetic Renewal in Pastoral Theology." *McMaster Journal of Theology and Ministry*. Volume 9. 2007-08. pp. 129-143.

sion. Many theopoetic scholars and poets allude to the Tower of Babel as an icon of this time period.<sup>9</sup> The optimism of modernity gave us hope that we would eventually reach the Divine. It was a tower stretching higher and higher, hinting that we would reach the top. We would reach the ineffable through intellect and reason. We would solve our problems with science without regard. But as atomic bombs fell on thousands of innocent people, or millions of Jews and others were silenced by mechanized forms of murder, the tower was destroyed. We were scattered. All were left speaking in tongues and in shock. As Rubem Alves writes, “[T]he body speaks in tongues. Babel must be overcome by Pentecost. Truth lives on the reverse side of what is familiarly known.”<sup>10</sup> Only in the language of the unknown will we find ways of expressing our doubts and hopes.

Our experiences of suffering and loss are intimately tied to how we experience the Divine or see the role of religion. Feminist theologian, Elizabeth Johnson, writes that “God’s own honor is at stake in human happiness. Whenever human beings are violated, diminished, or have their life drained away, God’s glory is dimmed and dishonored.”<sup>11</sup> For these reasons, there is a call to make meaning of suffering in light of experience and religious beliefs. For Johnson, this includes “grappling with the meaning and praxis of faith in situations of massive suffering.”<sup>12</sup> Massive suffering is unfortunately not a rare phenomenon in our world.<sup>13</sup> Suffering is a quintessential part of our lives, and Johnson makes this point clear throughout her writings, arguing

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<sup>9</sup> Reader, 27; Alves, Rubem A. *The Poet, the Warrior, the Prophet*. SCM Press, 1990.

<sup>10</sup> Alves, *The Poet, the Warrior, the Prophet*, 29.

<sup>11</sup> Johnson, Elizabeth A. *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*. New York: Crossroad, 1992. 14.

<sup>12</sup> Johnson, *She Who Is*, 11.

<sup>13</sup> It is important to note, when talking about the theological notion of suffering questions of “scale” often become a part of the conversation. For the purposes of this article, I will be addressing suffering as a “theological theme” and not drawing comparisons between different instances of trauma, suffering, or violence. Rather, I wish to focus on how we can respond in the wake of these events, regardless of scale.

that “everywhere is the suffering of illness, aging, and death...both in the natural world and among human beings a history of suffering weaves in and out of every moments so profoundly that suffering can be called the ‘red thread’ that connects all living things in history.”<sup>14</sup> This ‘red thread’ of suffering must be account for in our theologies.

Situations such as the Sandy Hook shooting are public reminders about the reality of suffering in the world. Johnson argues that “a God who is not in some way affected by such pain is not really worthy of human love and praise.”<sup>15</sup> It is important that our religious language incorporate suffering in a way that does not gloss over the reality of trauma. In his book, *Anatheism: Returning to God After God*, Richard Kearney makes a similar point, arguing that “the only God worthy of belief is a vulnerable and powerless one who suffers with us and is incapable of being relieved from this suffering unless we act against injustice.”<sup>16</sup> For Johnson and Kearney, our religious language must incorporate suffering in real and meaningful ways, or it will fail to speak to our experiences and will inevitably become irrelevant. What can poetics offer this call? Does religion have anything left for us in moments of deep suffering? The truth is Babel was never going to be the answer. Working towards a monolingual understanding of the Divine destroys the Truth that we are seeking. As Wilder writes, “divinity requires a dynamic and dramatic speech.”<sup>17</sup> The travesties of the turn of the century left people in a space that was silent. Out of this silence came the need-- the cry-- for language. This void is a pregnant space in which theoetics can work.

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<sup>14</sup> Johnson, *She Who Is*, 249.

<sup>15</sup> Johnson, *She Who Is*, 249.

<sup>16</sup> Kearney, Richard. *Anatheism: Returning to God After God*. (Columbia University Press, 2011) 61.

<sup>17</sup> Wilder, *Theopoetic: Theology and the Religious Imagination*, 12.

**Language of Witness and Testimony:**

Theopoetics creates a potential space in which both hope and doubt can remain together, held in tension. This balance is important in the wake of trauma and suffering, when moving too quickly to speak on hope, absent of doubt, may not be appropriate or helpful for those suffering deeply. Rather than using tragedy as a space to make claims about the Divine or the proper role of religion, theological language can provide a more flexible space, where doubt and hope can be held together. Shelly Rambo writes in her book *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining* of theological language that “is compelling language not insofar as it contains truth but insofar as it testifies to truths that cannot be contained. The promise of theology lies in its testimonial positioning instead of its confident proclamations.”<sup>18</sup> The *testimonial position* of theo-poetics is helpful in responding to tragedy, because it speaks out of human experience of great suffering, but also to the truth that the Divine remains in the depths of despair. Rambo writes that “Acknowledging the fractured nature of both word and body in witness moves us into distinctively pneumatological territory, in which the Spirit is not a life-giver but is, instead, witness to the emergence of life out of death. We have, through the Spirit, a theological picture of what it means to remain.”<sup>19</sup> The testimony of deep suffering, in the wake of tragedy, speaks to the great abyss of suffering in the human experience. In this same testimony, there is a lifting up of the “life out of death.” In the act of witnessing to this life, there is something that remains—a voice, which refuses to be silenced.

Rebecca Chopp develops the poetic voice of testimony and witness in her article, “Theology and the Poetics of Testimony.” Similar to the above definitions of theo-poetics, Chopp defines the “poetics of testimony” as “the discursive practices and various voices that seek to describe or name that which

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<sup>18</sup> Rambo, Shelly. *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010). 165.

<sup>19</sup> Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 44.

rational discourse will not or cannot reveal.”<sup>20</sup> This poetic voice witnesses to the experience of suffering communities and calls its audience into accountability. For Chopp, there is a moral summons within the testimony, which we must answer. Testimony has the ability to “speak to the unspeakable, and tell of the suffering and hope of particular communities who have not been authorized to speak.”<sup>21</sup> Structures of power often attempt to silence or re-narrate the experiences of suffering communities, which threaten their control. But these communities do not remain silent. Their testimonies are a “silent cry,”<sup>22</sup> which calls us to action. For example, in her work, *Suffering and Salvation in Ciudad Juárez*, Nancy Pineda-Madrid looks at the women of Ciudad Juárez, who have used practices of resistance, which name oppression and act against it, to speak against the femicide<sup>23</sup> that is continuing to take place around them. The government and corrupt authorities attempts to silence these practices by removing the memorials from public view, or not allowing public marches, but the women continue their practices of witness.

The poetics of testimony witness to the injustices and suffering in the world. This creates a space, which allows people to name the evil and suffering in their midst without being consumed by it. Chopp argues that, in hearing language of testimony, we are called to witness the “indisputable claim of existence. It is this radical otherness in which we are summoned by testimony. Testimonies enact a moral consciousness and communal, even at times, global responsibility.”<sup>24</sup> By testifying to the suffering in our lives or the lives of others, we connect with each other in community and witness each other’s pain. “Testimonies call us to an otherness, a reality greater than even the basic

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<sup>20</sup> Chopp, Rebecca S. "Theology and the Poetics of Testimony." *Criterion*, Winter 1998 (1998): 2-12. p. 2.

<sup>21</sup> Chopp, "Theology and the Poetics of Testimony." 6.

<sup>22</sup> Soelle, Dorothee. *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance*. Fortress Press, 2001.75-76

<sup>23</sup> Defined as “the murder of females because they are female.” Pineda-Madrid, *Suffering and Salvation*, 10.

<sup>24</sup> Chopp, "Theology and the Poetics of Testimony." 7.

rules of individual and public life.”<sup>25</sup> In witnessing, there is an acknowledgement of our deep connectedness as humans and this calls us into account for each other and cannot be ignored.

By witnessing to each other and connecting through poetics of suffering, we can begin to build bridges between each other, reaching across experiences and cultures. Most significantly, these bridges can reach across religious differences. Chopp writes,

Like one meaning of negotiation, theology may help us traverse deep waters in our swirling culture of diversity... theology may help us imagine new possibilities for our life together before the price of our cultural wars rises too high for us to pay. In all these ways of traversing, settling, and building bridges, theology does its work through its ability to speak truth about its own moral summons as it discerns Spirit at work in a particular time and place.<sup>26</sup>

In our evermore connected world, there is an urgent call towards deeper and more significant religious dialogue. One area this is already taking place is in response to suffering. Before turning to the particular example of the Sandy Hook Vigil and other interreligious projects in response to suffering, we must first examine how theoetics can act as a language bridge in these types of interreligious ventures.

### **Theoetics and Interreligious Dialogue**

For this article, we will examine two religious traditions, Judaism and Christianity, utilizing two particular theologians, Abraham Joshua Heschel

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid

<sup>26</sup> Chopp, "Theology and the Poetics of Testimony." 11.

and Dorothee Soelle.<sup>27</sup> These two traditions share much of their history and philosophical roots, which make them natural dialogue partners around issues of theological language and poetics. Judaism has always struggled for the language to make sense of and express the human experience. We see examples throughout the Hebrew Bible of poetic language, such as the beautiful imagery of creation within Genesis, which gave the Israelites hope during the Babylonian Captivity. Surrounded by the violent and strange gods, Abzu and Tiamat, of the Enuma Elish, the Israelites searched for the language to describe the reality they knew. They choose for their creation story a God who spoke creation into existence – a God who cared for the slaves, the poor, the widowed – a God who made a covenant with the people. Out of generations of war, captivity, and occupation came the poetics of hope and testimony. Similarly, Christianity has roots in the poetics of witness in the tradition of the martyrs. Christianity's first several centuries were filled with persecution and martyrdom and from this time period erupted prophetic and poetic language from the lips of the tortured and slain. For example, in the journal writings of Perpetua, a third century martyr, Perpetua witnessed to the poetic images that filled her dreams. In the void, brought about by the imminence of her own death, Perpetua's writings bring enlightenment to those in similar dire situations. Perpetua's poetic image of Christ as a shepherd, greeting her at the top of the ladder of struggle, gives hope to those who suffer in the void. Turning to two particular examples, Abraham Joshua Heschel and Dorothee Soelle will act as interreligious partners as we compare their theo-poetic language and build a dialogical bridge between Christianity and Judaism.

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<sup>27</sup> Underlying this article is the need for a much larger project, which would look at building bridges of poetic language across many (if not all) world religions. Below, the Sandy Hook Vigil will be discussed and a number of religious traditions were represented at this event.

**Shared Experiences and Influences:**

It is important to note that our authors have strikingly similar life experiences, because it helps to illustrate further how suffering crosses religious and cultural barriers. Both Heschel and Soelle grew up in families that were greatly affected by the events of World War II. Regardless of their religious differences, experiences as indiscriminate as war, especially a world war, touch the lives of all peoples. Considered a “Rabbinic prince,” Heschel grew up in an upper class Jewish family in Poland. Soelle, a Lutheran, grew up as a member of the liberal bourgeois within Germany. Both also went to school in Germany and received their doctorates from German universities. Heschel, a young adult at the time, was targeted by the Nazis as a Jewish scholar. He was uprooted from his home in Europe at the beginning of World War II and found safety in the United States. Much of Heschel’s family died in Nazi Germany and these experiences clearly shaped his theological writings. While Soelle and her family were not targeted by the Nazis, her life was greatly changed by the War. Soelle, a teenager at the time of the war, witnessed her parent’s bourgeois class and their Marxist ideals fall apart after the War. As a young adult, Soelle was ostracized as a female scholar at the German universities she attended and eventually had to find an intellectual home in the United States at Union Theological Seminary. For both Heschel and Soelle, the War was a profound existential and theological interruption, which shaped their theological questions and responses.

World War II acts as a catalyst, similar to the 1755 earthquake in Lisbon, which brought many theological ideas into question, such as the role of the Divine in the reality of suffering. Suddenly, theologies were being held accountable for the “truths” they claimed to teach. After WWII theologians were being commanded to speak, but they had no language with which to answer. Despite their religious differences, this is the theological world Heschel and Soelle shared. Out of this reality, both our authors developed

similar theological language to speak to these questions. Heschel and Soelle responded in strikingly similar ways to this call. Both used literary themes of theo-poetics to develop a language that expressed (and still expresses) the ineffable. Both theologians used their theological writings to testify to the great suffering they witnessed in their lifetimes.

Both theologians speak from within their tradition, which can be an important step for both building poetics of testimony and interreligious dialogue. It is important in both field to acknowledge the particularity of an author's voice. Heschel's writings lean heavily on Hebrew Scripture, Midrash, and rabbinic writings. His father was the Hasidic leader of their community and Heschel was exposed to Hasidic rhetoric from a young age. Heschel's love of scripture and poetry reflect the passion found within the "Song of Songs," a text that clearly influenced Heschel as a young student.<sup>28</sup> Within the "Song of Songs," as well as within Heschel's own works, "Poetry can become a form of prayer, sharpening vision, transforming lives. Prayer can become poetry, emancipating words that illuminate the world's fullness."<sup>29</sup> As a Lutheran, Soelle's tradition influences her writings as well. It is clear in her writings that Soelle shares the concern for the reality of suffering that Luther expressed throughout his own theology. Both Heschel and Soelle speak from within their tradition, but this does not mean they did not bring critical lenses to their own traditions. For example, Soelle brought a strong feminist critique to her Lutheran tradition.

### **Shared Poetic Language:**

Both Heschel and Soelle argue in their writings that words, ultimately, are futile in their attempt to understand or express the Divine. Heschel writes

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<sup>28</sup> Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *The Ineffable Name of God--Man: Poems*. trans. Leifman, Morton M. New York : Continuum, 2005. p. 10

<sup>29</sup> Heschel, INGM, 7

that “always we are chasing words, and always words recede.”<sup>30</sup> Words are always trying to encapsulate something that is just beyond our mental grasp. Similarly, Soelle describes words as “dust,” something that can be easily blown away and is insignificant.<sup>31</sup> Even though words may never become fully formed ideas about the ineffable, both of our authors see the development of theopoetics and mystical language as an important part of theological study. Heschel writes, “words expire when uttered, and faith is like the silence that draws lovers near, like a breath that shares in the wind,” we must continue to struggle to express the Divine.<sup>32</sup> Soelle describes language as “too small, too narrow, too dusty, too unexpressive, and too misleading”<sup>33</sup> to be of theological importance, but asserts that we must develop language to attempt to reach for the ineffable or humanity will be truly lost to itself.

Within poetic language, paradox is often used to disrupt the assumed truths. Heschel and Soelle both make use of paradox quite successfully within their writings. Heschel writes that “it is the tension of the known and the unknown, of the common and the holy, of the nimble and the ineffable, that fill the moments of our insights.”<sup>34</sup> We must hold both sides of a paradox in our minds, if we are to understand the deeper theological truth. In moments of great suffering, hope must be held in tension with doubt. By holding both sides in our mind’s eye, we can reach a greater knowledge of the ineffable that speaks to our experiences of suffering. This occurs by discovering the deeper relationship between the two opposing ideas. Soelle writes that it “is not a matter of an either/or choice. Instead, it is a growth process that always develops new forms.”<sup>35</sup> The use of paradox helps us to think and talk about the

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<sup>30</sup> Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *Man is Not Alone; A Philosophy of Religion*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Young, 1951. p 15.

<sup>31</sup> Soelle, SC, 55.

<sup>32</sup> Heschel, MINA, 73

<sup>33</sup> Soelle, SC, 55

<sup>34</sup> Heschel, MINA, 61

<sup>35</sup> Soelle, SC, 210

ineffability of the Divine. We must challenge all our assumed theologies and break open our own theological language. Soelle writes, “Whoever wants everything must first be disrobed and annihilated, and must first attain to a humble detachment of the spirit. The way to everything leads into nothing and beyond.”<sup>36</sup> The paradox between hope and doubt in moments of suffering is important to hold in tension across both religions. We will see this theme also present at the interfaith vigil in Newtown.

### **A Shared World View:**

Both Heschel and Soelle see the world as “enchanted” with the Divine. This worldview in the midst of suffering is an important tool for a theologian in developing their theopoetics of testimony. In the writings of both authors, the Divine is seen as encompassing all of creation. Everything is in God. Soelle labels this notion “panentheism,” which connotes “all-*in*-God” rather than “all-is-God.” Soelle borrows these insights from the study of pantheistic theologies and mixes it with the monotheistic basis of the Abrahamic religions. “The concept of panentheism, representing a marriage of the two elements, offers a possibility of relating the mystical and orthodox positions more closely. Even though seen to be present (pantheistically) in everything, God is not diffused in the cosmos; the divine is (monotheistically) more than the world. The world is *in* God; this allows for a theology of ‘being in.’”<sup>37</sup> Heschel strengthens this concept further by making clear the distinctions between this idea and other heretical/polytheistic ideas. “God is not all in all. He is in all beings but He is not all beings. He is within the darkness but He is not the darkness. His own concern permeates all beings. He is all there, but the absence of the divine is also there.”<sup>38</sup> Heschel also uses the paradox of polytheism and monotheism, writing, “polytheists are blind to the unity that

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<sup>36</sup> Soelle, SC, 217

<sup>37</sup> Soelle, SC, 106

<sup>38</sup> Heschel, MINA, 148

transcends a world of multiplicity, while monists overlook that multiplicity of world.”<sup>39</sup> By developing a more complicated and mature vision of monotheism, both Heschel and Soelle are able to begin talking about how evil can exist in a perfectly created world. Their theopoetic language allows the theological conversation to continue even in the aftermath of great tragedy.

### **A Shared Ethic:**

Both Heschel and Soelle’s theopoetics call for ethical action, echoing Chopp’s call within the poetics of testimony. Specifically, both theologians believe that there is a command to action found in the “silent cry” of the suffering. Soelle’s notion of the “silent cry,” speaks to the Divine cry within the voices of the oppressed, which calls humanity to just action. Returning to the questions surrounding our authors after World War II, where is the Divine in tragedy? The Divine is crying out for us to take action. We are connected to the ineffable so intrinsically and yet many cannot hear the rally-cry to ethical action. Heschel writes, “there is an eternal cry in the world: God is beseeching man. Some are startled; others remain deaf. We are all looked for. An air of expectancy hovers over life. Something is asked of man, or all men.”<sup>40</sup> If we remain deaf, we are denying the ineffable that connects us all. Soelle believes we must resist evil in our world, even if that resistance is only in the form of agony. We must remain in agony as opposed to becoming numb to the call. She writes that, “Remaining in inconsolability is a way of listening to ‘the silent cry.’”<sup>41</sup> The only way to live in our postmodern world, for Soelle, is to resist the comfort of apathy, and instead cultivate our connection with the ineffable. This inconsolability can then lead to actions such as Pineda-Madrid notions of “practices of resistance,” in which people resist the evil and suffering in their communities through actions which name and denounce the evil.

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<sup>39</sup> Heschel, *MINA*, 106

<sup>40</sup> Heschel, *MINA*, 245

<sup>41</sup> Soelle, *SC*, 154

Heschel and Soelle's "silent cry" can be found within the poetics of testimony as developed by Chopp. By testifying to the suffering in our world, we call humanity towards ethical action. Specifically, in witnessing to the life that remains in the midst of suffering and death, we refuse to deny the power of the Divine. This cry of hope, which has the audacity to resist suffering and evil by imagining that something remains, is a cry which can reach across religious traditions and unite humanity in the face of great evil. We now turn to the importance of developing these interreligious poetics of testimony within our practices of resistance after suffering.

### **The Theopoetic of Public Responses to Tragedy**

In the face of tragedy, holding doubt and hope in tension while mourning loss is an important task for survivors. This task is one that can be strengthened by the use of theopoetics, as we saw above. In these moments of suffering, it is also important to acknowledge that these experiences transcend religious differences. Christians and Jews (among other faith traditions) have to grapple with standing together after tragedy. For this reason, bridges of communication between religions are important to have built before they are needed. Turning to a particular example, after the tragic shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary on December 14<sup>th</sup> 2012, in which Adam Lanza fatally shot twenty children, six adults, and himself, the families of Sandy Hook and Newtown flocked to prayer vigils throughout the weekend. At these vigils local theological authorities spoke on the presence of God in the suffering of Sandy Hook. Several interfaith vigils took place. These were spaces of prayer, contemplation, and silence, holding doubt and hope together across religious traditions. The sophistication with which many of these vigils were planned and conducted resulted from interreligious dialogue groups such as the Dan-

bury Association of Religious Communities, who were already present in the Newtown and Sandy Hook communities.

The presence of these types of partnerships in Sandy Hook and Newtown helped facilitate public spaces in which people could grieve and mourn together.<sup>42</sup> The largest interfaith vigil took place on Sunday evening, with a number of speakers from various religious traditions (Jewish, Muslim, Baha'i and a variety of Christian denominations) and public officials, including an address from President Obama. At this vigil, three themes can be seen across the varying religious speakers: *unity*, *doubt*, and *hope*. The vigil became a safe space in which people could wrestle with their doubts, ask questions of how such suffering could have been allowed to happen, and search for hope amidst the tragedy.

### **Unity:**

Standing in unity against the suffering became a powerful theme that ran throughout the evening. Reverend Matt Crebbin, the senior minister of Newtown Congregational Church, opened the evening with a call to unity. He said, "We needed to be together. To show that we are together and united. We gather in such a moment of heart break for all of us here in Newtown."<sup>43</sup> This unity was not a naïve call to forget each other's religious differences, but rather a call to transcend those differences in a moment of love. Crebbin continued saying, "We are not here to ignore our differences or to diminish the core beliefs which define our many different faith traditions, but to offer our love, care, and prayers for our families and our community."<sup>44</sup> Rather than

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<sup>42</sup> These types of community efforts do have their limits. It is important to acknowledge the cost for some people to be involved in these types of statement. For example, Pr. Rob Morris, of the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod was disciplined for his participation. (Bell, Caleb K. "Lutheran pastor apologizes for praying at Newtown vigil." Religion News Service. February 6, 2013. <http://www.religionnews.com>. Accessed on May 29, 2014).

<sup>43</sup> "Interfaith Vigil for Victims of Newton, Connecticut, School Shooting" CNN.com. Cable News Network. December 16, 2012. Web Transcript.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

hashing out doctrinal truths, this moment of suffering called for action and that action took the form of solidarity with those who were suffering. Each tradition was asked to bring their voice to this space. Crebbin said, “We wanted to offer our voices in the form of words from our sacred texts and prayers from the depths of our being, but also to have time for us to be together in silence.”<sup>45</sup> Each speaker spoke from within their tradition, and the collective message was one of unity, love, and solidarity.

The message of unity led to a sense of community to be present at the vigil that helped overcome the religious differences. Many of the speakers used this language of community, referring to the strength of the Newtown residents. Crebbin pointed to this community aspect, saying, “That we are all in this together. We want you to know that our care for this community extends beyond the walls of our various houses of worship and the people within them. We are here for all of Newtown.”<sup>46</sup> This message of community was offered again and again throughout the vigil, narrating the tragedy as a communal loss, and making the point that only in community could such suffering be faced. Rabbi Shaul Praver offered a Jewish prayer at one point saying, “I offer you this prayer from my heart to your hearts. On behalf of all of your children, all of your loved ones.”<sup>47</sup> These poetics of testimony witnessed to a greater strength of unity and support that underlined the shared experience of suffering within this community.

### **Doubt:**

The theme of doubt was also present throughout the evening. Reverend Robert Weiss acknowledged the pain and suffering of many of the community members in his prayer at the vigil. Weiss led the community in prayer, saying, “And now in this prayer we bring to you ourselves, our brokenness, our

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

questions, our doubts, our anger, and our hearts.”<sup>48</sup> The vigil did not elide these truths, but rather lifted them up. In the experience of suffering, there is knowledge to be nurtured and this knowledge of the darker side of the human experience must be witnessed. Weiss continues in his prayer, turning these doubts and pains into offerings to the Divine. Weiss prays, “And so tonight, for our community, a community deeply pained, we ask you to heal the brokenness, to answer our questions, to replace our doubts with certainty, our anger with peace, and our hurt with healing.”<sup>49</sup> Weiss does not deny the doubts or the suffering, but rather looks to them as an opportunity to stand together and witness to the presence of what remains. Weiss moves his prayer towards hope in the face of doubt, holding both in paradox.

### **Hope:**

The vigil mostly focused on the shared hope found at the core of the different faith traditions. This hope was that there was something more than just this suffering. For many of the speakers, hope came from the acts of resistance found within their community. They saw the Divine working, testifying, and answering the silent cry. There was hope in the community members, who had come to the school to pray, or opened their homes to fleeing children. Crebbin, in his opening address, said, “We gather to grieve together, to care for one another, to pray and embrace, to weep and to remember and to declare in our many voices *that these darkest days of our community shall not be the final word heard from us*. We will sigh in our sorrows, but we will also care for one another with our love and our compassion.”<sup>50</sup> The violence and the suffering does not have “the final word.” This was a bright, golden thread throughout the vigil, which came from a variety of religious traditions. John Woodall, a Baha’i community leader, read from a scripture that contained a letter written to a mother mourning the death of her child. The scripture has

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. My emphasis.

the dead child speak to their mother saying, “I am not of the lost, nor have I been obliterated and destroyed. I have shaken off the mortal form and have raised my banner in this spiritual world.”<sup>51</sup> The image of a child comforting their mother, reminding her there is something beyond the pain and suffering, would have spoken directly to the experience of many present at the vigil. These words of hope acknowledge the pain present at the vigil, while also pointing to a deeper truth shared by the community, the truth that something remained beyond the suffering.

### **Poetics of Testimony within Practices of Resistance**

The interfaith vigil, which took place in Newtown, can be an example of how poetics of testimony can help build bridges of support across religions in moments of tragedy and suffering. Theopoetics can act as a language of testimony, as developed by Chopp, which holds the paradoxical truth of hope and doubt found within suffering and tragedy. We also saw how theopoetics can become a bridge for religious dialogue, because it speaks to the universality of suffering experienced by all people regardless of their faith tradition. After the tragedy of WWII, both Heschel and Soelle responded with poetic language to make sense of their experiences and to stand in solidarity with those who suffered. The poetics of testimony shared by these two theologians can help us in the interreligious work still left to do. Specifically, poetics of testimony can help us to create practices of resistance to respond to the “silent cry.” The Sandy Hook vigil can be seen as a practice of resistance, which utilized poetics in order to stand in solidarity against suffering, holding the reality of both doubt and hope in tension. At the vigil, this created a space in which suffering was named and healing in the community was able to begin to take place. These practices are only possible when interreligious dia-

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

logue is cultivated within communities. Theopoetics can help build those bridges of support before they are called upon in these ways. Our first steps are to build interreligious communities of dialogue that focus on developing poetics of testimony to name suffering and call our communities to stand in resistance together.

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