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## The Problem of Evil and Humans' Relationship with God in Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life*

Bertha Alvarez Manninen Ph.D.

Arizona State University at the West Campus, [bertha.manninen@asu.edu](mailto:bertha.manninen@asu.edu)

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# The Problem of Evil and Humans' Relationship with God in Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life*

## **Abstract**

Terrence Malick's 2011 film *The Tree of Life* defies any attempt to be summarized in a few pat sentences. The movie tackles significant theological issues as it tells the story of one man's journey to regain his faith after the loss of his beloved brother and a difficult relationship with his father. At the same time, it is also a film about humankind's relationship to God, and about the kind of life human beings should strive to lead. In this paper, I will discuss two of the film's main themes: Malick's response to the problem of evil (or, as it is also known, the problem of suffering) and his meditations concerning what kind of relationship humans should seek with God.

## **Keywords**

problem of evil, Book of Job, Terrence Malick, Tree of Life

## **Author Notes**

Dr. Bertha Alvarez Manninen is an associate professor of philosophy at Arizona State University's West campus. Her primary areas of research interest are applied ethics, especially biomedical ethics, and philosophy of religion. Her work has appeared in journals such as *Journal of Social Philosophy*, *Journal of Medical Ethics*, *American Journal of Bioethics*, and *International Journal of Applied Philosophy*. I would like to profusely thank the organizers and participants of the 2012 "Faith, Film, and Philosophy" conference at Gonzaga and Whitworth Universities. They afforded me the opportunity to write this paper, offered suggestions and guidance that led to its improvement, and in general introduced me to some amazing scholars.

“Beauty will save the world”  
- Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*

## Introduction

Terrence Malick's 2011 film *The Tree of Life* defies any attempt to be summarized in a few pat sentences. The movie tackles significant theological issues as it tells the story of one man's journey to regain his faith after the loss of his beloved brother and a difficult relationship with his father. At the same time, it is also a film about humankind's relationship to God, and about the kind of life human beings should strive to lead. In this paper, I will discuss two of the film's main themes: Malick's response to the problem of evil (or, as it is also known, the problem of suffering) and his meditations concerning what kind of relationship humans should seek with God. In reference to the former, I will argue that, rather than trying to offer a theodicy (a justification for why God allows the innocent to suffer), Malick responds by placing the theistic argument from beauty in dialogue with the problem of evil. However, instead of using the former as an argument in favor of God's existence, Malick uses a universe impregnated with beauty to relate to his viewers on a transrational level. That is, rather than attempting to explain or justify suffering, Malick assures us of God's presence not through philosophical argumentation but through the use of images and music, and by showcasing the majesty of creation. Indeed, Malick seems to want his films to “be experienced viscerally before they are understood cognitively.”<sup>1</sup>

In relation to the second theme, I will argue that Malick seeks to criticize the way many individuals relate to God - as a being of unquestionable authority who seeks our categorical allegiance rather than as a person who wants us to engage Him in difficult questions about human existence. The former relationship with God results in a deity disengaged from our lives, whereas encouraging a relationship with God that admits of questioning and strife draws us

much closer to Him. Indeed, the two persons who most question God throughout the film are the ones who are rewarded with a meaningful communion with Him. Ultimately, *The Tree of Life* has inspired deep spiritual contemplation in many of its viewers (myself included). Film critic Roger Ebert, who regards it as one of the ten greatest films of all time, has described it as “a form of prayer. [A film that creates] a spiritual awareness, and [makes its audience] more alert to the awe of existence.”<sup>2</sup>

### **Job reinterpreted: *The Tree of Life*'s response to the problem of evil**

The recent events at Sandy Hook Elementary in Newtown, Connecticut, when a gunman broke into the school and massacred 20 small children and 6 staff members, reignites the theist's despair when reconciling the belief in an almighty, omnipotent, omnibenevolent God with the existence of profound and undeserved suffering. And yet, while apologists continue to offer different theodicies in an attempt to defend theism (e.g., Alvin Plantinga's free will defense<sup>3</sup> or John Hick's soul-making theodicy<sup>4</sup>), such attempts to *justify* evil or suffering seem increasingly vulgar. Nick Trakakis writes that “in the presence of burning children, the declarations of theodicians are shown to be not merely morally confused, but morally scandalous.”<sup>5</sup> Helen De Cruz agrees with Trakakis:

Theodicies should not only offer a solution to the abstract problem, but should withstand scrutiny in the face of concrete, horrible instances of evil, and it seems that in concrete cases, theodicies do not fare well. For it is one thing to argue that God did not intend the world as a pleasure-garden, but a challenging place fit for spiritual growth (as Hick proposed), quite another to maintain this in the face of concrete instances of evil.<sup>6</sup>

Malick echoes similar concerns in the first act of *The Tree of Life*. The very first scene establishes the dichotomy that permeates the rest of the film. As John Tavener's hauntingly beautiful "Funeral Canticle" plays in the background, Mrs. O'Brien, reflecting on her childhood and her times of play with her three sons, tells us:

The nuns taught us there are two ways through life: the way of nature and the way of grace. You have to choose which one you'll follow. Grace doesn't try to please itself. Accepts being slighted, forgotten, disliked. Accepts insults and injuries. Nature only wants to please itself. Get others to please it too. Likes to lord it over them. To have its own way. It finds reasons to be unhappy when all the world is shining around it. When love is smiling through all things. They taught us that no one who loves the way of grace ever comes to a bad end.

Throughout the film, Mrs. O'Brien is taken to encapsulate the way of grace: she is kind, gentle, faithful, and exudes a profound peace. Her husband, Mr. O'Brien, represents the way of nature: he is tough (borderline abusive) on his children, is obsessed with financial and career success, and, while faithful as well, sees religion as a set of rules that need to be rigidly followed and which will, if done correctly, ensure success. Jack, the couple's eldest son and the film's protagonist, struggles with these two ways, unsure which one he should emulate. His younger brother R.L. clearly mimics their mother. He is described by Jack as "true and kind." He paints and plays music purely in appreciation for their innate beauty (unlike his father who craved success as a musician). R.L. refuses to ever fight Jack, and is quick to forgive his brother when Jack deliberately shoots him with a bee-bee gun. R.L., like his mother, clearly follows the path of grace. Both mother and son are portrayed as innocent and righteous – certainly not deserving of any unnecessary suffering. According to the nuns who taught Mrs. O'Brien, R.L. should be

protected from calamities. Echoing this Platonic ideal, St. Augustine also maintains that “the better and more sublime the virtue, the stronger and more invincible it is.”<sup>7</sup>

Very quickly, however, Malick refutes the nuns’ teaching when Mrs. O’Brien receives a notice that R.L., now 19, has died (how he dies is not clear, but many have hypothesized that he was killed in the Vietnam War. One interesting interpretation is that he committed suicide, as did Malick’s younger brother). This sets all the O’Briens on a path of immense grief. The family is portrayed as devoutly Christian throughout the film. When R.L. was a baby, Mrs. O’Brien is spinning him in her arms, stops her dance, points to the heavens, and tells him: “That’s where God lives.” While Mr. O’Brien mourns his son’s death fueled with guilt given how he treated him (“I never got to tell him how sorry I was. One night he started punching himself in the face for no reason. He was sitting next to me at the piano and I criticized the way he turned the pages. I made him feel shame. My shame. That poor boy.”), Mrs. O’Brien experiences a religious crisis. She paces up and down the street, clearly lost and in agony, wishing she were dead so that she could be reunited with her son. Her mother (or mother-in-law, the film is not clear here) tries to comfort her:

The pain, it will pass in time, you know? [to which Mrs. O’Brien replies: “I don’t want it to.”] Life goes on. People pass along. Nothing stays the same. You still got the other two.

The Lord gives and the Lord takes away and that’s the way He is. He sends flies to wounds that He should heal.

The advice here is reminiscent of how Job’s three friends attempted to counsel him through his grief. They never waver in their proclamation of God’s justice, going so far as to say that Job must be suffering punishment for some sin (similarly, in the film’s original screenplay, Mrs. O’Brien’s neighbors whisper amongst themselves that R.L.’s death must be a punishment against

her for some unknown sin). The lines spoken by Mrs. O'Brien's mother suggest that God not only permits evil, but that He wills and actively creates it. Like Job, Mrs. O'Brien rejects these attempts to rationally explain her son's death, and poignantly retorts to the pastor's assurance that R.L. was now in the hands of God with the observation that, supposedly, he was in God's hands the whole time. Mrs. O'Brien is here illustrating De Cruz's observation; in the face of real and genuine suffering, theodicies often fail.

As Mrs. O'Brien paces in the woods trying to come to terms with R.L.'s death, we hear in her thoughts the grief-stricken challenge to the God she had always adored and faithfully followed: "My hope. My God. What did You gain? Was I false to You? Lord, Why? Where were You? Did You know [that R.L. would die]? Who are we to You? Answer me! I search for You." Malick's response to Mrs. O'Brien's angst is a 20-minute creation sequence - from the formation of the stars to the evolution of life on Earth (including the infamous dinosaur scene, which symbolically portrays the birth of morality). Malick's creation sequence is full of profound beauty and awe, and it helps make one aware of the incredible process that antecedently led to our individual and collective existence.

Although the placement of this scene may appear abrupt, it does indeed have a proper place in the story. Malick begins *The Tree of Life* with a passage from the Book of Job:

Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?...when the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of god shouted for joy? (Job 39:4-7)

This is a small part of the long speech God gives after Job calls upon Him to explain why He has allowed him to suffer. God does not answer Job directly; He does not tell him that his suffering was a result of a wager made with Satan to test Job's faith. Rather, God's answer to Job's anguish is to recount the wonders of creation, consistently reminding Job that He was the one

responsible for it all. In the film, Mrs. O'Brien is Job, her pleas are his pleas, and Malick's creation sequence is an illustration of God's response. But what light does Malick's portrayal shed on God's answer to Job? Traditionally God's reply has been interpreted as a kind of "pulling rank" on Job. Instead of explaining to him why He has allowed him to suffer so much even in the face of his perfect righteousness, God essentially silences Job and tells him that he has no right to question Him. God's majesty is so vast, His role as our Creator so magnificent, that we could never hope to comprehend the depths of what He has seen. God's tone throughout the Book of Job has been commonly interpreted as defensive or sarcastic; one full of His "protestations and demonstrations of might."<sup>8</sup> Job's questioning of God has been interpreted as "overstep[ping] the bounds of humble faith and assum[ing] a posture of Promethean arrogance. His obsessions with his righteousness borders on hubris and self-righteousness... Job wants the unthinkable – to see God face to face."<sup>9</sup>

Is Mrs. O'Brien's rebellion against God equally inappropriate, since her suffering is but an insignificant blip given the grandiosity of creation? Some film critics have indeed interpreted Malick's message thusly.

The immensity of the natural world, in its merciless indifference, has nothing to do with the concerns of human beings. The desert does not care if you pray, and the rushing cataract will not pause for pity. Nature shows its blank, grand face to us, and we are nothing. Indeed Job recants of his protest, proclaiming "for I am but dust and ashes." In the wake of the terrible loss depicted in the film, the loss of a child, Malick offers coruscating images to remind us of this indifference. In their sweep and range they awaken us anew to our insignificance... But then we are drawn back to a world so much



bigger than our hour upon the stage that we know again how essentially small is each human story.<sup>10</sup>

The creation scene does indeed remind viewers of the delicacy of life. After spending so much time chronicling the intricacies of the formation of life on Earth, Malick allows us to view, from afar, a meteor hitting our planet and its ripple effect. Malick has chosen to show the impact from a distance to emphasize how small of an event it really was from a cosmic perspective, and yet, as the following scene illustrates, it destroyed all our life and turned Earth into a barren ice-encrusted wasteland. Life is undoubtedly fragile – but does this equate to it being insignificant? And, while indeed a mother's grief at losing her child is but an infinitely small slice of existence when considered against the backdrop of creation, does this mean that God, who is supposed to be an all-loving Father, is justified in dismissing it? This interpretation of the Book of Job has always caused me inner turmoil. I find it difficult to accept the view of a God who is portrayed as an indifferent, sarcastic, easily offended entity who, instead of cradling and caring for His children in the face of suffering, shames them into silence. We would certainly look upon a human parent with disdain if he or she acted similarly – how much more should we expect from our Heavenly Father?

However, this is not the message I believe Malick wants us to take away from the film. Rather, I think Malick is urging us to react against the inexplicable anguish in the world (which he seeks neither to explain away nor justify) by focusing on the beauty that permeates every facet of our existence; for the same God that permits such suffering also gives us this beauty. This message is echoed in his 1998 film *The Thin Red Line*, when one of the soldiers, after experiencing the terror of war, speaks in a voice-over:

Darkness, light. Strife and love. Are they the workings of one mind? The features of the same face? Oh, my soul. Let me be in you now. Look out through my eyes. Look out at the things you made. All things shining... One man looks at a dying bird and thinks there's nothing but unanswered pain. That death's got the final word, it's laughing at him. Another man sees that same bird, feels the glory, feels something smiling through it.

This message is reminiscent of Søren Kierkegaard's arguments throughout many of his works, but mostly emphasized in his *Philosophical Fragments* and *Works of Love*, that truth can often be found within the contemplation of some sort of paradox. In *Philosophical Fragments*, for example, Kierkegaard (using the pseudonym "Johannes Climacus") focuses on the paradox of Christ – how He can simultaneously be fully human and fully divine. How this is possible is not something that can be grasped within the confines of human reason. It is not that belief in Christ's humanity and divinity is *irrational* (i.e., there is no inherent logical contradiction), rather it is *transrational*; in order to fully appreciate its truth, it is necessary to free it from the bonds of *human* understanding (which is distinct from understanding *per se*, for God, being a perfectly rational mind, surely understands it all). Kierkegaard/Climacus writes:

How, then, does the learner come to an understanding with this paradox... it occurs when the understanding and the paradox happily encounter each other in the moment, when the understanding steps aside and the paradox gives itself, and the third something, the something in which this occurs (for it does not occur through the understanding, which is discharged, or through the paradox, which gives itself) – consequently *in* something, is that happy passion on which we shall now give a name... we shall call it faith.<sup>11</sup>

Kierkegaard scholar C.S. Evans explains the transrational aspect of comprehending paradoxes as follows:

A paradox is an apparent contradiction. In general the discovery of a paradox is the result of an encounter with a reality which our concepts are inadequate to deal with, a reality that ties us in a conceptual knot. When we try to understand it we find ourselves saying self contradictory things, but of course this does not mean that the reality we have encountered is itself self-contradictory. It means that there is a problem with our conceptual equipment.<sup>12</sup>

In his *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard argues that all human-derived love is selfish, insofar as we love other people in relation to us (I love *my* child, *my* spouse, *my* parents, *my* friends). Although all love begins as a form of selfish love (I fall in love with someone, for example, on the basis of what they provide for me), eventually such love wills its own demise – for one ends up finding happiness in love not through the fulfilling of one's own desires, but in the happiness and fulfillment of the loved one. This is another paradox – that in order for selfish love to ultimately be realized it must become a form of selfless love. Moreover, Kierkegaard further argues that the only true form of selfless love generates from following God's commandment to love the neighbor as one loves the self, when the "neighbor" encompasses "the whole human race, all people, even the enemy, and not to make exceptions, neither in preference nor in aversion."<sup>13</sup> This is yet another kind of paradox. All loves begins as selfish love, finds happiness in the happiness of another (rather than in the self) and in the end can only truly be fulfilled when it is "wrench[ed] open... away from the person."<sup>14</sup> Mrs. O'Brien's advice to her boys is reminiscent of Kierkegaard's words here: "The only way to be happy is to love. Unless you love, your life will flash by. Love everyone. Every leaf. Every ray of light." (Indeed, Kierkegaard's

influence on Malick can be clearly seen in the words of the O'Briens' pastor, who delivers a sermon on the Book of Job; parts of his speech are a close paraphrase of Kierkegaard's words in his *Four Upbuilding Discourses*).

Kierkegaard repeatedly tells us to place our faith beyond our human understanding; that there are some aspects of belief in God that cannot be captured by human words or human thought. Malick does not align himself with the traditional ways theists try to make sense of suffering (as is illustrated by the rejection of all the advice people give Mrs. O'Brien to try to help her through R.L.'s death). Instead, his response to suffering is to show us the cosmic beauty of everything God has formed. The scene that immediately follows the creation sequence shows the audience an adult Jack wandering through an icy wasteland, praying once again to God: "You spoke to me through her.<sup>15</sup> You spoke to me from the sky. The trees. Before I knew I loved You, believed in You. When did You first touch my heart?" The response to Jack's question is to show his parents' courtship and their falling in love, followed by his birth, infancy, and childhood. (The message here is particularly striking and reminiscent of God's words to Jeremiah: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you" [Jeremiah 1:5]; Jack had begun to exist for God even before he was conceived, when his parents first fell in love.) These 15 minutes contain very little dialogue; rather it is a compilation of exquisite music<sup>16</sup> and scenes depicting infants, toddlers, and children at play all while discovering and reveling in their world. A toddler Jack is seen chasing bubbles, jumping on his bed, twitching in the depths of sleep with a focus on his dirty nails (a sign of his busy day of play), being tickled by his mother, going trick-or-treating with his father, and meeting his younger brother R.L. for the first time.

The fact that Malick situates these scenes right after the creation sequence relays the message that the beauty, awe, and grandiosity of creation are reflected in our daily lives. We do

not have to look just toward the creation of the universe to see beauty; we can also look upon a new father cupping his baby's foot for the first time to be immersed in that same sense of awe. And although in comparison to the formation of the cosmos one man's wonder at the birth of his son may seem inconsequential, Malick tells us here that this is not the case: the beauty of creation is visible anywhere, and this gift is given to us by the same entity that, for reasons unbeknownst to us, allows immense suffering to occur. (Although, in a deleted scene of the film, Mr. O'Brien comments that "some day, we'll fall down and weep. And we'll understand it all. All things." Again, along the Kierkegaardian mode of thought, it is not that deep religious truths are irrational and in principle incomprehensible, rather it is comprehensible from a perspective that surpasses our own; one that we may, we hope, come to know one day). This is the Malick/Kierkegaardian paradox: the same Creator gives us extreme opposites, and the only way to deal with evil is to embrace its contrary - beauty. Creation is a gift, and receiving it well, appreciating its awe-fullness and, like the sons of God, shouting for joy at its presentation to us, will aid us in combating suffering. This is a transrational truth - something no philosophical argument can fully convey; it is the rejection of a theodicy. And this is why, I believe, Malick chooses to express this paradox with images and music rather than with dialogue, for words alone cannot capture the message. As film critic Alan Stone writes, the "miracle of Malick's cinematography is that, like the greatest religious art of the Renaissance, it conveys the presence of God even to nonbelievers."<sup>17</sup> One particular moment in the movie encapsulates this. When Mrs. O'Brien is spinning R.L. in her arms and points at the heavens to tell him that God lives there, Smetana's "Moldau" swells and we witness a grand view of a beautiful sky – God greeting His creation.

Malick can also be interpreted as responding to the problem of divine hiddenness, which states that the fact that God does not make His existence clear to us stands as evidence against His existence. Far from hidden, Malick tells us, God's presence can be seen in the fact that the world is impregnated with immense beauty. Traditionally, theistic philosophers have appealed to the world's beauty as evidence for God's existence.<sup>18</sup> But Malick is not proposing a cinematic argument from beauty. God existence is never questioned in the film; like Job, Mrs. O'Brien calls to God in the midst of her torment because she is certain that He is listening. One version of the problem of divine hiddenness contends that, even if God could not explain why He allows us to suffer, He could, at the very least, clearly offer His comfort; if He could "lovingly reassure us, this aspect of our suffering would be greatly diminished."<sup>19</sup> Malick's point is that the entirety of creation constitutes God's lap onto which any of us can crawl, but doing so requires relinquishing the limits of thought and letting one's faith be guided by an existential reaction to His creation.

There are three instances in the film where this is clearly Malick's message. As abovementioned, Mrs. O'Brien advises her children to "love everyone. *Every leaf. Every ray of light.*" Even the most seemingly insignificant aspects of our world deserve to be revered. Second, recall Mrs. O'Brien's explanation of nature:

Nature only wants to please itself, and others to please it too. Likes to lord it over them. To have its own way. *It finds reasons to be unhappy when all the world is shining around it. When love is smiling through all things.*

Much later in the movie, Mr. O'Brien, realizing the many mistakes he has made throughout his life, admits that he was nature in this capacity; that, in his myopic desire to attain greatness and success, he ignored the everyday blessings that surrounded him.

I wanted to be loved because I was great. A big man. But I'm nothing. Look at the glory around us. Trees, and birds. I lived in shame. *I dishonored it all and didn't notice the glory.*

While Mr. O'Brein utters these lines, the camera focuses on his wife and youngest child walking down a sidewalk as she smiles at him and caresses his head. Malick's message is clear: there is beauty in creation/nature (trees and birds) and that beauty is reflected in your everyday life (in your spouse and child). In other words, our small human lives are not insignificant given the backdrop of creation, rather our lives mimic its wonderfulness.

Malick's retelling of Job provides us with an alternative manner of understanding God's retort; one that does not paint Him as callous and insensitive to Job's anguish. Perhaps when God asks Job, "Where were you when I created the heavens and the earth," He is not sarcastically pulling rank on him. Rather, like Malick does to the audience, He is reminding Job of all the beauty, awe, and, to use Rudolf Otto's term, *mysterium tremendum* that engulfs his every waking breath. His "where were you" should be interpreted as God prodding Job awake, rather than shaking His finger at him. As John McAteer points out:

God's speech from the whirlwind reorients Job's perspective on the world. God gives Job a vision of the beauty of even the wild and dangerous parts of creation, a vision of the sublime. In essence, God gives Job a God's-eye view of nature, a kind of mystical vision of the natural world, a vision of things "too wonderful" for human beings to understand (42:3). Job is no longer alienated from his life, not because he now understands why he suffers. He overcomes his alienation by seeing the beauty of life, a beauty that makes suffering bearable even apart from an explanation.<sup>20</sup>

The answer to the problem of evil will forever escape us, and it seems deeply unethical to even try to justify the suffering of the innocent (even God chastised Job's friends for similar attempts). Instead of being overwhelmed and losing our way in the midst of what is surely horrible suffering, the only way to "understand" sorrow in our lives is to immerse oneself in its opposite; we should submerge ourselves in God's embrace and comfort via His creation. Almost everything that surrounds us, from the birth of children, to the little flickers of sunlight that dance on our bedroom walls, to a sea of bubbles that flow in the air, or the water that bathes us from a hose; whether it is the awe-fullness of the creation of the universe, or the majesty of an old tree - the world is full of profound and aching beauty.

### **Questioning God, and drawing closer to Him**

As abovementioned, the traditional interpretation of the Book of Job discourages challenging and questioning God. Job's indignant cries, his desire that God explain to him the reasons why he suffers, is seen as indicative of human hubris or "Promethean arrogance"; one that God has every right to brazenly silence. In other words, according to this interpretation, God does not appreciate being questioned. To do so is offensive to Him, and His response (if you are lucky enough to receive one at all) will effectively serve to put you back in your place. Throughout *The Tree of Life*, Malick appears to reject this view of God and, on the contrary, seems to suggest that humans can draw closer to Him through constant questioning.

In embodying nature and grace respectively, Mr. and Mrs. O'Brien clearly illustrate two very different ways children can relate to their parents. Mr. O'Brien is an authoritarian figure who demands unquestioning allegiance to all his commands, grows extremely irate if his orders are not followed, is quick to dole out punishment for even the tiniest infraction, and demands that his children show affection toward him. While he certainly loves his sons, he is far more



interested in their obedience. Mrs. O'Brien, on the other hand, connects with her boys on a much deeper level. She is loving, graceful, peaceful, and playful. She teaches them about love, compassion, forgiveness – and she embodies those traits as well in practice (in contrast, Jack thinks his father a hypocrite for acting in ways he explicitly tells his boys not to). She even allows them to challenge her, and is there to embrace them even in the midst of their rebellion. Her children adore her, not because she demands love like her husband, but she deserves it through her deep adoration and respect for them.

Many theists are taught that while God loves all His children, questioning Him in any capacity is a pathway to doubt and rejection of His ways. The more traditional interpretation of the Book of Job paints God as, like Mr. O'Brien, becoming incensed at the idea of being questioned, and many traditional theists regard God as one who is quick to distribute punishment when we violate His commandments (growing up Catholic, I was certainly taught to regard God in this way). Our prayers to Him should consist of thanksgiving or petitionary prayers, not doubts and challenges. Worshipping any other kind of deity, or worshipping Him improperly, are frowned upon; God is very specific as to how He wants us to love Him. We are told that God is always watching us, keeping track of all our indiscretions. In these ways, He becomes our Mr. O'Brien.

All three of the film's main characters relate to God in this manner in one capacity or another. After Mr. O'Brien is transferred from his previous job to a far less desirable one, he laments by briefly listing the behaviors that should have made him immune from such a loss: "I never missed a day of work. I tithed every Sunday." He is repeatedly seen heading family prayers, attending church (and using it as a social and business event), lighting candles in pews, and genuflecting. His everyday behavior, however, does not reflect any of Christ's teachings.

While Christ clearly commands us to love the neighbor and our enemies, Mr. O'Brien laments with his boys that part of the injustices of the world are that "the wrong people go hungry. Die. The wrong people get loved." The implication here is that nourishment, life, and love only properly belong to *certain* people (instead of all persons given our common humanity). In his dealings with the world and his family, Mr. O'Brien, for all his Christian beliefs, has not communed with God in a way that manifests any real impact on his character. He has reduced religious beliefs to simple rule-following and going through certain motions. In this sense, he embodies one of Kierkegaard's criticisms of Christendom: what passes for religion or Christianity is just cultural imitation and has very little to do with the dramatic encounter with God that should overflow into our daily lives.

Mrs. O'Brien, acting as a "good Christian," is determined to remain committed to her faith in the midst of her son's death. She repeatedly prays to God and acknowledges her dependence on Him. She tries as much as possible to allay her grief by reminding herself that God's reasons are mysterious and unknown, and that she is foolish to try to understand it. Yet while she outwardly prays in the manner she is expected, unwavering in her commitment to God and His ways, inwardly her prayers reveal anger, confusion, and rebelliousness against Him. She is seen walking through a forest in tears, two competing prayers occupying her mind, what I call the "complacent theist's prayer" and a "rebellious prayer" (the latter of which is abovementioned):

[Complacent theist's prayer]: "I shall fear no evil, for You are with me. Be not far from me, for trouble is near."

[Rebellious prayer]: "My hope. My God. What did You gain? Was I false to You? Lord, Why? Where were You? Did You know [that R.L. would die]? Who are we to You? Answer me! I search for You."

Heart-wrenching instances of human grief, encapsulated here by a mother losing a beloved child, cannot be allayed in the ways we have been taught "good theists" are to respond. Even in the face of unspeakable evil, we are not allowed to challenge God, or ask Him to justify Himself. But such a method of purported consolation was insufficient for Mrs. O'Brien. Her faith, which had proved a source of strength her whole life, was now proving a hollow source of comfort.

Later in the film, in a scene that parallels his mother's dueling prayers, young Jack is seen on his knees in his bedroom praying (quite possibly to appease his authoritarian father). His petitions are typical of an adolescent boy: "Help me not to sass my dad. Help me not get dogs in fights. Help me to be thankful for everything I got. Help me not to tell lies..." However, in the same scene, we hear Jack's inner prayers; the ones he clearly is not comfortable saying aloud: "Where do You live? Are You watching me? I want to know what You are. I want to see what You see." Later in the film, after a friend drowns at a community pool and another friend is burned in a house fire, Jack (like his mother after R.L.'s death) starts rebelling against God: "Where were You? You let a boy die. You'll let anything happen. Why should I be good if You aren't?" Jack's growing distance from God fuels his adolescent rebellion, and he is unable to find his way back to Him until the end of the film.

From the scenes mentioned here, where both Jack and his mother struggle with their faith, I gather that Malick is commenting on the difference between how humans are taught to relate to God and how we yearn to *really* relate to Him. While adults are taught to silence their anger and grief in the face of God, children are taught to view Him as simply an omnipresent

security guard who watches all their infractions. In other words, we are generally taught to have a rather superficial relationship with God, one that admits no strife and that asks few questions. We are taught to follow God's lead and His rules, but never to really engage Him. As a result, God is distant in our lives and He fails to make any real deep personal impact (as is evidenced in Mr. O'Brien). Kierkegaard voices this concern about Christendom as well; we are supposed to *imitate* God/Christ, but instead we opt to simply love Him from afar.<sup>21</sup> But, like all intimate relationships, humans, deep down, really want more. We want to struggle with God, to be philosophers with Him, to immerse ourselves in His mystery and His ineffable awe-fullness. We want to build a relationship, not with a distant authority figure but with a being whose presence, wonder, and love is embedded in our everyday lives, even in the most seemingly mundane.

In the controversial penultimate scene of the film, entitled "Eternity" on the DVD menu, the audience is allowed a glimpse into what seems to be Jack's version of heaven. We witness an adult Jack walking through a barren wasteland which symbolizes his inner turmoil— the emotional state of many adult human beings who have been plummeted by life and have fallen into a steady and predictable daily routine to cover up their despair. Jack then comes to a doorway and steps onto a beautiful beach at sunset, where many of the people who impacted his life walk along the shore. His youngest brother plays with sea gulls; the boy burned in the house fire is embraced by what appears to be a heavenly guide (this is another possible "response" to the problem of evil: rest assured, Malick briefly tells us, that the innocent who suffer in this life are embraced and comforted by God in the afterlife). The rest of his family is also there, including a young R.L. They are all happy to be together and, for the first time since the earlier courting scene, Mr. and Mrs. O'Brien share a passionate kiss. Jack, as an adult, is seen delivering his dead brother back to his family. He carries R.L. like a parent would a child, and sets him

down in front of their overjoyed father, who then guides R.L. back into the arms of his mother. As a consequence of delivering his brother back to his family, Jack finally achieves reconciliation with his father and brings peace to his mother. Jack becomes, for them, the hero he has always wanted to be. But he achieves something more – in that single action, for a brief period, he is allowed to be God; he becomes the bringer of joy and blessings upon his loved ones. In delivering R.L. to them, he turns into, for that moment, their savior. God answers Jack's boyhood prayers: he is allowed to know what God is, and he is allowed to see what God sees. Jack returns to work after his vision. The world looks exactly the same, only now Jack sees it with new eyes. For the first time since he was a boy, we witness Jack smile. The final shot of the film is a bridge, symbolizing Jack's renewed connection with the God he had lost so many years before.

But it isn't simply Jack's craving for communion with God that is satisfied in this vision of heaven. While Mr. O'Brien is clearly overwhelmed with joy at seeing his son again, the bulk of this sequence concerns Mrs. O'Brien's acceptance of R.L.'s death and the beginning of her healing process by voluntarily surrendering him to God. In this scene, she finds a peace that serves as a response to the bitterness and anger that envelopes her at the start of the film. After her reunion with R.L., she brings him to a door that opens up to reveal what we can assume is a path to the beatific vision. It is time for R.L. to continue on to God. She leads him to the door, but he is reluctant to walk through it- he knows his mother is not quite ready to let him go. Then, what appear to be two heavenly angels descend to Mrs. O'Brien and help her release R.L. Berlioz's "Agnus Dei" plays in the background - the chorus of "Amen" repeats as Mrs. O'Brien whispers, with a mixture of pain and peace: "I give him to You. I give You my son." In this scene, God does not answer her demands to understand why R.L. was taken, but yet He manages

to lovingly and gently present her with some reconciliation. Similarly, the loving parent may not be able to explain to the child why she suffers, perhaps because the child is cognitively unable to understand the parent's motivations, but rather than chastising the child for asking questions, the loving parent comforts and showers the child with love and peace even through the mystery. It was Mrs. O'Brien, not her husband, who challenges God's goodness and wisdom at the beginning of the film as a response to R.L.'s death, and it is she that is given a special visit from heavenly beings to help her release R.L. to God. Similarly, it is Jack who displays a deeper curiosity of God as a child, and who also challenges Him when faced with the problem of evil. And yet it is he who is allowed to be God for a moment in order to help his family heal.

From this, I gather that Malick's message is that God actually *rewards* those who seek to question and understand Him, and that He longs for a much deeper relationship with us than we allow, given our learned aversion to this questioning. God wants to struggle with us, to commune with us, to be more involved in our lives than simply hovering in the heavens and watching us at a distance. He wants to share His peace, joy, playfulness, and appreciation of life with us. In other words, while theists are often taught to relate to God the way the boys relate to Mr. O'Brien, Malick wants us to relate to God as the boys relate to their mother. As a result of this kind of relationship with God, both Jack and Mrs. O'Brien inch closer to being "cured" from their despair and alienation from Him. As Kierkegaard also maintains, despair is uprooted only through a profound relationship with God.<sup>22</sup> And Malick is telling us that the only way to achieve this relationship is to dive right into God's mysteries with questions, challenges, strife, and wonder.

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- <sup>1</sup> Brett McCracken, "Why You Should Care About Tree of Life." *Relevant Magazine* (May 27, 2011), accessed January 18, 2013, <http://www.relevantmagazine.com/culture/film/features/25726-why-you-should-care-about-tree-of-life>
- <sup>2</sup> Roger Ebert, "A Prayer Beneath the Tree of Life." *Chicago Sun Times* (May 17, 2011), accessed February 5, 2013, [http://blogs.suntimes.com/ebert/2011/05/a\\_prayer\\_beneath\\_the\\_tree\\_of\\_l.html](http://blogs.suntimes.com/ebert/2011/05/a_prayer_beneath_the_tree_of_l.html)
- <sup>3</sup> Alvin Plantinga. 1977. *God, Freedom, and Evil*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- <sup>4</sup> John Hick. 1977. *Evil and the God of Love*. New York: Harper and Row.
- <sup>5</sup> Trakakis, *The End of Philosophy of Religion*, 29.
- <sup>6</sup> Helen De Cruz, "The Experiential Problem of Evil and Theodicy." *The Prosblogion - A Philosophy of Religion Blog* (December 31, 2012), accessed February 5, 2013, <http://prosblogion.ektopos.com/archives/2012/12/the-experientia.html#more>
- <sup>7</sup> St. Augustine. *On Free Choice of the Will*, Book 1, par 10.
- <sup>8</sup> Brenner, "God's Answer to Job," 135.
- <sup>9</sup> Habel, *The Book of Job: A Commentary*, 64.
- <sup>10</sup> Rabbi David Wolpe. "The Religious Meaning of Malick's *Tree of Life*" *Huffington Post Religion Blog* (May 31, 2011), accessed February 18, 2013), [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rabbi-david-wolpe/tree-of-life\\_b\\_868717.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rabbi-david-wolpe/tree-of-life_b_868717.html)
- <sup>11</sup> Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 59.
- <sup>12</sup> Evans, "Is Kierkegaard an Irrationalist? Reason, Paradox, and Faith," 353.
- <sup>13</sup> Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 36.
- <sup>14</sup> Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 34.
- <sup>15</sup> The "her" being Jack's mother, Mrs. O'Brien. Her role in Jack's spiritual life is reminiscent of Augustine's relationship to his mother Monica..
- <sup>16</sup> Ottorino Respighi's "Siciliana Da Antiche Danze Ed Arie Suite III," Gustav Hoist's "Hymn to Dionysus," and Bedrich Smetana's "The Moldau."
- <sup>17</sup> Alan Stone, "Imagining Faith." *Boston Review* (October 2011), accessed February 18, 2013, [http://www.bostonreview.net/BR36.5/alan\\_stone\\_terrence\\_malick\\_tree\\_of\\_life.php](http://www.bostonreview.net/BR36.5/alan_stone_terrence_malick_tree_of_life.php)
- <sup>18</sup> See, for example: Richard Swinburne.1996. *Is There a God?* New York: Oxford University Press; Keith Ward. 1996. *God, Chance, and Necessity*. Oxford: One World Publications; and F.R. Tennant. 1969. *Philosophical Theology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- <sup>19</sup> Howard-Snyder, "The Argument from Divine Hiddenness," 436.
- <sup>20</sup> John McAteer, "The Problem of the Father's Love in *The Tree of Life* and the Book of Job." Unpublished, presented at the conferece "Faith, Film, and Philosophy" at Gonzaga University, 2012.

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<sup>21</sup> Søren Kierkegaard. "False Christianity," accessed February 2, 2013, <http://members.optushome.com.au/davidquinn000/Kierkegaard/Kierkegaard02.html>

<sup>22</sup> Søren Kierkegaard. *The Sickness Unto Death*. Howard Hong and Edna Hond (eds). Princeton University Press.

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