

Yayın Geliş Tarihi: 03.08.2020  
Yayına Kabul Tarihi: 29.01.2021  
Online Yayın Tarihi: 31.03.2021  
http://dx.doi.org/10.16953/deusosbil.776647

Dokuz Eylül Üniversitesi  
Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi  
Cilt: 23, Sayı: 1, Yıl: 2021, Sayfa: 43-55  
ISSN: 1302-3284 E-ISSN: 1308-0911

*Araştırma Makalesi*

## **THE THEODICY OF SUFFERING AND THE COSMIC VOYAGES IN *THE TREE OF LIFE* AND *MIRACLES FROM HEAVEN*<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

*In The Tree of Life, Terrence Malick presents Jack O'Brien's attempts to come to terms with his past. The most traumatic experience in his past is his brother's death which gives not only Jack but also other members of the family a great agony. Similarly, Miracles from Heaven deals with affliction. Inspired by a true story, Patricia Riggen dives into the lives of the Beams projecting both physical and psychological agony since the 10-year-old daughter Anna (Annabel) suffers from a deathly illness. Even though Anna is miraculously healed in the end by divine intervention, both films interrogate death and suffering as a process that threatens the meaningful order of a cosmos ruled by an almighty powerful transcendental creator. Pondering on especially the term theodicy as a theoretical framework, this paper elucidates how these two films deal with the problem of suffering in which humanity loses touch with a meaningful cosmos and how they offer spiritual solutions to this problem by engaging in cosmic voyages.*

**Keywords:** *The Tree of Life, Miracles from Heaven, Max Weber, Theodicy*

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*Bu makale için önerilen kaynak gösterimi (APA 6. Sürüm):*

Ersöz Koç, E. (2021). The theodicy of suffering and the cosmic voyages in *The Tree of Life* and *Miracles from Heaven*. *Dokuz Eylül Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi*, 23 (1), 43-55.

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<sup>1</sup> This is a revised and expanded version of a paper focusing on the film *The Tree of Life* presented at the 16th International Cultural Studies Symposium hosted by Ege University.

## HAYAT AĞACI VE CENNETTEN MUCİZELER FİLMLERİNDE ACI ÇEKME TEODİSESİ VE KOZMİK YOLCULUKLAR<sup>2</sup>

### Öz

*Hayat Ağacı (The Tree of Life) adlı filmde, Malick Jack O'Brien'in geçmişi ile uzlaşma çabalarını sergiler. Geçmişindeki en sarsıcı deneyim sadece Jack'e değil ailenin bütün bireylerine büyük bir acı veren kardeşinin ölümüdür. Benzer bir şekilde, Cennetten Mucizeler (Miracles from Heaven) filmi de acı ile ilgilenmektedir. Patricia Riggen, gerçek bir hikayeden esinlenerek, 10 yaşındaki kızları Anna (Annabel) ölümcül bir hastalıkla boğuşan Beams ailesinin hayatlarını hem fiziksel hem psikolojik acıyı yansıtarak sergiler. Anna ilahi bir müdahale ile mucizevi bir şekilde iyileşse de, her iki film de ulu, güçlü, aşkın bir yaratıcı tarafından hükmedilen bir kozmos anlamlı düzenini tehdit eden bir süreç olarak ölümü ve acı çekmeyi sorgular. Özellikle teodise kavramını teorik çerçeve olarak düşünerek, bu çalışma bu iki filmin insanların anlamlı bir kozmos ile temaslarını yitirdikleri acı çekme problemini nasıl ele aldıklarını ve kozmik yolculuklar sergileyerek nasıl bu probleme ruhani çözümler önerdiklerini açıklamaktadır.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Hayat Ağacı, Cennetten Mucizeler, Max Weber, Teodise

### INTRODUCTION

Terrence Malick's film *The Tree of Life* presents Jack O'Brien grieving for his dead brother and revisiting his childhood memories in the 1950s American suburbia. These flashbacks project not only Jack's but also all family members' attempts to come to terms with the pain of the death of a loved one. The movie which has instigated academic interest due to not only its spiritual content but also its cinematographic elements is a fascinating pondering on the human need to make sense of the problem of suffering in a cosmos regulated by divine order. Similar to *The Tree of Life*, Patricia Riggen in *Miracles from Heaven* deals with the problem of suffering zooming into the lives of another Texas family whose lives are shattered when the 10-year-old Anna begins to suffer from a severe illness in excruciating pain and miraculously heals after a near-death experience. Even though *Miracles from Heaven* differs from *The Tree of Life* in that it appears to be a faith-based movie instead of a cinematic masterpiece, the plots of both movies pose intriguing questions about the problem of suffering which has been a hot issue in theological and socio-religious circles. Moreover, both movies present images of rebirth through cosmic voyages to solve or ease the problem of suffering on earth thinking the mystical beach that Jack is reunited with his dead brother in *The Tree of Life* and Anna's heavenly visit in *Miracles from Heaven*. Using mainly Max Weber's analyses of theodicy in *The Sociology of Religion* as a theoretical

<sup>2</sup> Ege Üniversitesi'nde gerçekleştirilen 16. Uluslararası Kültürel Çalışmalar Sempozyumunda, Hayat Ağacı filmine odaklanan bildirinin gözden geçirilmiş ve genişletilmiş halidir.

framework, this paper scrutinizes how these two films entangle with the problem of suffering.

## **THE THEODICY OF SUFFERING**

Theodicy is a term etymologically consisting of the Latin *theo* which means God and Greek word *dike* which means justice. The term explains why God allows bad things to happen to good people. It was first coined by Leibniz in *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man, and the Origin of Evil* and also explained by Weber's significant examination of the sociology of religion. "Weber gives [theodicy] a social rather than a theological interpretation. The question of how to reconcile the existence of God with the existence of evil in the world is either seen from a social perspective or interpreted in social terms (Swedberg & Agevall, 2005, p. 347).

Weber's analysis of theodicy is primarily identified as a process of meaning-making. As also outlined by Scott, "Max Weber's discussion of 'the problem of meaning' (*das Problem der Bedeutung*) serves as the foundation for the view of theodicy as meaning-making" (Scott, 2012, p. 9). Rationalization plays a pivotal role in this process since Weber thinks that "The need for an ethical interpretation of the 'meaning' of the distribution of fortunes among men increased with the growing rationality of conceptions of the world. As the religious and ethical reflections upon the world were increasingly rationalized and primitive, and magical notions were eliminated, the theodicy of suffering encountered increasing difficulties" (Weber, 1946, p. 275). In the transition from primitive to rational religious mindsets, the destiny of religions has been influenced by intellectualism (Weber, 1963, p. 118) and by the intellectuals who seek to solve the problem of meaning.

*The intellectual seeks in various ways, the casuistry of which extends into infinity, to endow his life with a pervasive meaning, and thus to find unity with himself, with his fellow men, and with the cosmos. It is the intellectual who transforms the concept of the world into the problem of meaning. As intellectualism suppresses belief in magic, the world's processes become disenchanting, lose their magical significance, and henceforth simply "are" and "happen" but no longer signify anything. As a consequence, there is a growing demand that the world and the total pattern of life be subject to an order that is significant and meaningful. (Weber, 1963, p. 125)*

Weber's sociological analysis of theodicy is based on a comparative view among different [religious] beliefs such as those of Ancient Egypt, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Considering the differences in these various religions, Weber emphasizes that "not every religious ethic has crystallized a god of transcendental quality who created the universe out of nothing and directed it himself"; however, "the legitimation of every distinctively ethical

prophecy has always required the notion of a god characterized by attributes that set him sublimely above the world, and has normally been based on the rationalization of the god-idea along such lines” (Weber, 1963, p. 138). Even though the manifestation and significance of this sublimity of God may vary in religious tradition, “the more the development tends toward the conception of a transcendental unitary god who is universal, the more there arises the problem of how the extraordinary power of such a god may be reconciled with the imperfection of the world that he has created and rules over” (Weber, 1963, p. 138-9). Therefore, the problem of theodicy is the inability to understand the imperfection in the world created by a transcendental and ethical God. Weber explains that the problem of theodicy is evident in ancient Egyptian literature, Job, Aeschylus, Hindu religion and even in a questionnaire in which German workers explain their rejection of God-idea as motivated not by scientific arguments but by their inability to reconcile “the idea of providence with the injustice and imperfection of the social order” (Weber, 1963, p. 139).

This is the problem of theodicy; however, there are ways in which this problem is possibly solved. Weber formulates the solutions of theodicy regarding the differences in various world religions. The solutions vary mainly according to the various conceptualizations of God, sin, and salvation (Weber, 1963, p. 139). Basically, the solutions are linked with Messianic advent which includes emergence of a powerful savior figure, transmigration of souls, coming of judgment day, belief in providence or dualism in which forces of light will be victorious over the forces of darkness in the final battle. “Weber’s discussion of theodicy is brief, serving as a bridge to his discussion of salvation” (Christiano & Swatos & Kivisto, 2002, p. 128). Weber defines the problem briefly but he presents the solution elaborately digging different forms of salvation in different religions. Generally, the promise of salvation may include the promise of wealth, political salvation, salvation from evil, otherworldly salvation, and rebirth.

### **THE TREE OF LIFE**

In *The Tree of Life*, the problem of theodicy is related to the death of a loved one and the struggle to overcome the traumatic pain of a death in the microcosmic level is mixed with snapshots providing a history of the universe in a macrocosmic level in a nonlinear, experimental, and epic structure. Thereby the human trauma on earth extends the temporal and spatial boundaries and is associated with a transcendental and eternal order. The ending of the film portrays Jack reunited with his family as well as his dead brother on a mystical beach. With such an optimistic ending *The Tree of Life* offers an insight into making sense of death which can be analyzed along with Max Weber’s examinations of the terms of theodicy and salvation.

The problem of theodicy is most noticeable in the O'Briens' internal monologues in voice-over narration in which the family members seek answers or guidance to cope up with the reality of death on earth. After a depiction of how Mrs. O'Brien was notified via a telegram about the death of her son R. L. and the families' affliction after the funeral, the film jumps ahead in time presenting Jack who turns out to be a successful architect but still trying to make sense of his pain. We hear Jack in voice-overs "How did you come to me? In what shape? In what disguise?" (Malick, 2011). Lighting a candle at the anniversary of his brother's death, the voice-over goes on "I see my brother true, kind, died when he was 19" (Malick, 2011). He is searching for answers and evidently, he is unable to overcome the pain that comes with that traumatic event. Following Jack's pondering on how his mother bared it, there is a change in voice-over narration from Jack's voice to Mrs. O'Brien's. This indicates that Jack is not the only one who has questions unanswered. Then begins Mrs. O'Brien's voice-overs such as "Was I false to you? Lord, Why? Where were you? Who are we to you? Answer me" (Malick, 2011). Mrs. O'Brien's questions which are directly posed to God pinpoint that amid a personal crisis she needs answers from a transcendental ethical God for giving a meaning to her suffering and her existence in the cosmos.

These questions in voice-over narration are embedded with a long sequence that shows the creation of cosmos which includes the Big Bang, the formation of galaxies, stars, planets, and eventually earth. Then the origins of life on earth are presented including the first fish with amphibian traits, reptiles, and dinosaurs. Manninen stresses the significance of this sequence as, "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" (Manninen, 2013, p.5). To understand the connection between the voice-overs and this long sequence of creation, it is necessary to focus on the epigraph stated at the very beginning of the film. This epigraph is a reference to 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 38:4,7." (Malick, 2011). In the book of Job, "Job wants God to show up and justify himself, to provide an answer to the question of why the innocent suffer" (Kilby & Johnson & Prusak, 2014, p. 11). This epigraph is God's answer to Job. The epigraph is also an answer to Jack and his mother who are trying to make sense of death. The voice-overs are in monologue form but if the voice-overs are examined in relation to this long sequence of creation, the film portrays a dialogue in which this creation story is an answer provided by the almighty transcendental creator God. Also, the epigraph is followed by a mysterious light wavering in a background of darkness which could refer to "the presence of God" (Fisher, 2012, p. 5). "Through careful montage, the film dialectically moves between an imagined biocentric cosmos and one that is anthropocentric – personal, particular, and located in the microcosm of Waco, Texas, in the 1950s" (Handley, 2014, p. 83).

God's answer to Job projected onto the epigraph reminds humans that besides their anthropocentric existence on earth at a micro level, there is a biocentric cosmos at the macro level and God transcends over this huge creation. The problem of suffering is justified through a presentation of a transcendental sublime divinity.

Later, there is another reference to the book of Job. The O'Briens attend to the funeral of a drowning boy and Father Haynes's sermon includes the theme of suffering in the book of Job:

*Job imagined he might build his nest on high – that the integrity of his behavior would protect him against misfortune. And his friends thought, mistakenly, that the Lord could only have punished him because secretly he'd done something wrong.*

*But, no, misfortune befalls the good as well. We can't protect ourselves against it. We can't protect our children. ..*

*We vanish as a cloud. We wither as the autumn grass, and like a tree are rooted up.*

*Is there some fraud in the scheme of the universe? Is there nothing which is deathless? Nothing which does not pass away? ...*

*There is no hiding place in all the world where trouble may not find you. No one knows when sorrow might visit his house, any more than Job did.*

*The very moment everything was taken away from Job, he knew it was the Lord who'd taken it away. He turned from the passing shows of time. He sought that which is eternal. (Malick, 2011)*

In his sermon, Father Haynes touches upon several theodical problems and tries to solve those problems referring to the book of Job since it assures that suffering is also part of the transcendent God's creation and humans cannot question it. Max Weber also comments on the book of Job highlighting how it offers an insight into the disappearance of the problem of suffering:

*As people continued to reflect on the insoluble problem of the imperfections of the world in the light of god's omnipotence, one result was inevitable: the conception of an imaginably great ethical chasm between the transcendental god and the human being continuously enmeshed in the toils of new sin. And this conception inevitably led to the ultimate theoretical conclusion, apparently assumed in the book of Job, that the omnipotent creator God must be envisaged as beyond all the ethical claims of his creatures, his counsels impervious to human comprehension. Another facet of this emerging view was that God's absolute power over his creatures is unlimited, and therefore that the criteria of human justice are utterly inapplicable to his behavior. With the development of this*

*notion, the problem of theodicy simply disappeared altogether* (Weber, 1963, pp. 142-143).

Weber examines how the problem of theodicy is solved in the book of Job with the conceptualization of an absolute God with limitless power whose ways cannot be questioned. This idea is evident in not only the priest's sermon following the death of a drowned boy in their community but also Jack's grandmother's consoling speech to Jack's mother after the funeral of his brother which emerges earlier at the beginning of the film. Grandmother says: "I know the pain will pass with time. Life goes on. Nothing stays the same. Lord gives. Lord takes away. That's the way he is. He sends flies to the wounds he should heal" (Malick, 2011). Grandmother's speech illustrates how the theme inherent in the book of Job, which is also emphasized by the priest, is internalized in society: Lord gives. Lord takes. That's it; you cannot question or comprehend his ways.

The problem of theodicy is solved not only through these references to the book of Job but also through its indication of otherworldly salvation through the end of the film. Again in a voice-over, we hear Jack uttering "Brother, Keep us, Guide us to the end of time" (Malick, 2011). This uttering is juxtaposed to the scene presenting grown Jack in a rocky desert led to a wooden door. Once he passes along the door, from the desert, Jack is led to the ocean, probably the ocean of eternity. According to Hay, his brother and mother accompany Jack "to God's door" and "These loved ones are both examples of and sources for the gifts of forgiveness, mercy, and grace that carry him towards the experience of redemption at the threshold of faith" (Hay, 2014, p. 7). On the shore, Jack is reunited with all members of his family and shares this moment with other members of the community.

*The paradisiac or apocalyptic scenes on the shoreline in which the adult Jack is reunited with his family members should not be regarded as situated in regions beyond everyday life. Rather than standing outside the realm of Jack's story as its eschatological or teleological culminations, the Resurrection of Souls and the Day of Judgment presented figuratively in these scenes are structures of possibility that subsist in the interstices between the moments of Jack's existence."* (Hay, 2014, p. 7)

These scenes are figurative depictions of how Jack learns to cope up with pain. In the ocean scenes of salvation, not only Jack but also his mother learns to make sense of death. In a ritualistic form with two female figures, Mrs. O'Brien raises her arms and in voice-over says "I give him to you, I give you my son" (Malick, 2011). This scene which is a reference to Abraham's sacrifice shows that she is ready to accept death as an integral part of life.

The scenes in this paradisiacal shoreline are followed by images from adult Jack's present life in front of his office in a skyscraper. After a shot of a low cam

on the skyscraper amid clouds, the film is finalized with the depiction of the bridge looming over the ocean. The bridge is a motif highlighting the connection with his past and present and also a connection with his personal history and the history of cosmos. He can only achieve redemption or salvation once he realizes the macrocosmic transcendent order in his microcosmic life full of suffering. From this perspective, the bridge combines the problem of suffering to its solutions.

### MIRACLES FROM HEAVEN

Just like Malick presents the traumatic past of the O'Brien's, Riggen projects the suffering of another Texas family with three kids in *Miracles from Heaven*. Based on a real story written in a memoir by Christy Beam, the film presents the troubles that a family goes through upon the news about their daughter's fatal illness. The Beams who lead a faithful and blissful life in a loving and supporting community begins to go through hard times when their 10-year-old daughter is diagnosed with pseudo-obstruction motility disorder which is a rare incurable disease. After the long terms of treatment by a compassionate and skilled doctor in a children's hospital, the medicine falls short to offer healing. Through the end of the film, Anna falls to a hollow tree and miraculously heals. At first glance, Anna's recovery poses a different plotline from that of *The Tree of Life* since R. L. was dead and the problem of suffering revolves around the family members' endeavors to cope up with this pain in *The Tree of Life*. However, *Miracles from Heaven* touches upon the same spiritual crisis that emanates from the human need to find meaning in the cosmos while grappling with agony.

The most dramatic and heartrending moments of *Miracles from Heaven* arises in the scenes in which Anna suffers from severe pains. In addition to the physical agony, Anna is psychologically devastated and begins to question her affliction together with the conceptualization of a transcendental God which is evident in her remark as "why God hasn't healed me?" (Riggen, 2016). This disease especially puts the mother Christy in a spiritual crisis evidently more than Anna. Christy who carefully listens to each of her children's night prayers before bedtime later loses her faith and witnessing Anna's torment becomes unable to pray. Reminiscent of Mrs. O'Brien's callings to God in voice-over narrations, Christy touches the tree in their garden and says "Are you there. You even hear me because I don't hear you" (Riggen, 2016). Even though Christy answers Anna's question as "there are so many things I don't know but I know God loves you" (Riggen, 2016) at the beginning of the film, she poses a similar question to Pastor Scott later at the church: "why a loving God would let Anna suffer the way she does" (Riggen, 2016). Reminiscent of Christy's answer, Pastor Scott replies: "Just because she is sick doesn't mean that there isn't a loving God. Let me tell you the lowest points of my life. I have tried it both ways. I did everything that I can to connect to God or walk away. And in my experience, one feels a whole lot better



than the other” (Riggen, 2016). From this perspective, the problem of suffering is attempted to be resolved by reminding the existence of an all-loving God.

There is also another incident that makes Christy furious: having misinterpreted Pastor Scott’s sermon about the need to try to get back on track in an unhappy situation by asking the questions “Have I sinned? Have I drifted astray?” two female parishioners relate this misfortune befalling onto the Beams to sin. They advise Christy to think about some difficult questions about whose sins, (Christy’s, Kevin’s, or even Anna’s) are preventing Anna from healing. In his article “Suffering, Prayer, and Miracles,” Paul P. Parker focuses on the commonly held association between suffering and sin in relation to Jesus and his disciples encounter with a blind man: “When Jesus and his band came upon a blind man, his disciples initiated a discussion on a contemporary theological issue: Whose fault was it? ‘As [Jesus] walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?’ (Jn 9: 1-2)” (Parker, 1997, p. 212). Parker outlines that this association between suffering and sin indicated by Jesus’ disciples is still prevalent today:

*The only theological debate in this situation was over whether the cause had been the parents’ sin (Ex 20:5), the blind man’s sin of watching parents in sexual intercourse while still in the womb, or a singularly heinous sin that the man would have committed if not born blind.<sup>5</sup> Who then sinned?*

*Folks are not so different today. When things sour, when a loved one’s undiagnosed cancer grows beyond the stage of treatment though the symptoms were apparent to everyone months earlier, when the over-weight and sedentary man is disabled by a stroke, when starvation devours hundreds of millions in a world of plenty, when urban rot consumes a city’s heart, when nations sacrifice their young for the prizes of war, the first response is recrimination. Who did it? Who is responsible? (Parker, 1997, p. 212).*

At this point, Jesus’s answer to his disciples holds the utmost significance. Referring to Jesus’s answer as “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him,” Parker explains how Jesus was uninterested in his disciples’ theological debate or fault-finding (Parker, 1997, pp. 212-213). Parker comments that “While in no way minimizing the blind man’s suffering and without any attempt to justify it, Jesus taught that his suffering had cosmic significance” (Parker, 1997, p. 213). Jesus’s approach to the suffering of the blind man is a significant means to think about Anna’s suffering in *Miracles from Heaven* since this little girl’s suffering is not related to sin but holds a cosmic value. Just like disciples, these two parishioners relate Anna’s suffering to the sins of a member of The Beams including possibly those of this little innocent girl. Remembering Pastor Scott’s response to this unfortunate dialogue between Christy

and parishioners as “I sure wish that I could give everybody a spiritual IQ test before they walk through the door” (Riggen, 2016), Pastor Scott, just like Jesus, does not believe in roughly sketched link between misfortune and sin. Anna’s suffering and her miraculous healing holds a cosmic value.

To understand the cosmic significance of suffering in *Miracles from Heaven*, it is necessary to analyze Anna’s fall into the tree in their garden which will be followed by her heavenly ascent and miraculous healing later. The fact that the place she falls is a hollow trunk of a tree holds a symbolic significance. In fact, in both *The Tree of Life* and *Miracles from Heaven* the tree emerges as an important cosmic symbol connecting this world to an otherworldly realm. Referring to the biblical tree of life, tree symbolically results in pondering on life, death, and rebirth. In both films, there are similar sequences that show the children climbing the tree or shots of swing hanging from the tree. In *The Tree of Life*, repeated camera shots of the trees from below in low angle reaching up to the clouds imply the cosmic significance of tree as an intermediary between different realms relating the human earthly existence to the upward divine residence. The bodily position of Anna inside the hollow tree trunk as a fetus is a potent image of rebirth foreshadowing her cosmic voyage.

After the fall Anna begins healing and she explains to her parents what happened when she was lying unconscious inside the tree. When she hit first everything went black, she says, and then she explains her out of body experience as weird because she could see her body but she was not in it. She sees a butterfly that flies on the trunk and as soon as she touches it, she is welcomed to beautiful and awesome heaven with colorful flowers, butterflies, white clouds, and an alluring lake. From this perspective, the tree is a boundary between this world and heaven and the butterfly is her guide in her heavenly ascent. Then she hears the words “I love you” which is reminiscent of the early dialogues that her suffering should not eradicate the presence of a loving God. Then she says, she communicated with God without saying any words: “I said I wanted to stay but he said he needed me to come back. And he told me that when I came back I will be healed. So I ask him if he was a hundred percent sure because I don’t wanna come back unless he is right” (Riggen, 2016). The words “he needed me to come back” indicates that Anna’s suffering, just like the suffering of the blind man according to Jesus, has a cosmic significance illustrating the presence of a transcendental heavenly deity.

The cosmic significance of Anna’s suffering and her healing after a heavenly ascent is later signified in Christy’s speech about the significance of Anna’s miracle in particular and miracles in general at the church. In her speech, Christy first identifies her feelings that arise with the problem of suffering: “when Anna got sick I just couldn’t understand it why was this devoted God-loving little girl going through this. I felt hopeless. I felt alone. I was angry that our prayers weren’t being answered. I lost my faith because of that I didn’t see what was all

around me” (Riggen, 2016). Then Christy assures that miracles are real and they are everywhere. Also, the medium through which miracles come through is not only a heavenly God but also earthly humans who are affectionate and supporting the people suffering. The scene in which Christy speaks at the church is intercut to images showing people who help them in this hard process such as Christy’s friend who is always there for her whenever she needs, Angela who accompanies Anna and Christy with her warm heart whenever they come to Boston for treatment, the receptionist at Boston Children’s hospital who even risks her position by trying to find an appointment from Dr. Nurko whose schedule is overloaded, and the employee at the airplane who makes it possible for Mr. Beam and the other two children to fly to Boston despite the lack of credit in Mr. Beam’s credit card. Then Christy says, “Miracles are love. Miracles are God” (Riggen, 2016). Also, Christy admits that she knows miracles do not happen to each suffering person: “Why was Anna healed when today around the world there are so many children suffering? I don’t know the answer but after everything I have been through I have realized I am not alone and whatever you may be going through I am here to tell you, you are not alone. Miracles are God’s way of letting us know he’s here” (Riggen, 2016). Christy is aware that miracles do not save every suffering human.

Probably, it would be easier for someone whose problem is miraculously solved to come up with meanings out of suffering in this world. But innocent children are dying in pain and amid this painful reality how one can justify God’s ways or how belief in a transcendental divinity may be restored under such circumstances. Even though *Miracles from Heaven* focuses on the role of miracles, it does not fall short to answer such questions. The answers come from a character named Ben, the father of Haley who is befriended by Anna in Boston Children’s Hospital. Haley and Anna share the same room and Anna gives a necklace in the shape of a cross to Haley as a present to remind the existence of Jesus and God whenever she feels afraid. Ben is among the audience at the church during Christy’s speech about miracles and when Christy is accused of a possibility that the story about Anna is a hoax, Ben supports Christy saying even though he has never been a religious person, he can see how much believing in an all-loving divinity makes a difference for the suffering: “My beautiful daughter died recently. Her name was Haley and she was 10. She had cancer and she suffered a great deal. But the last weeks of her life were different. She felt safe. She felt loved. She felt God and she felt that way because Anna gave her faith, she gave her peace” (Riggen, 2016). Thus, as Ben indicates, belief in an all-loving transcendental deity gives strength to the suffering. This is similar to Weber’s reading of the book of Job implying that human cannot understand the unlimited power of God: *Miracles from Heaven* has a message that unless suffering is miraculously averted, belief in God rather than questioning his ways is a better option for the suffering.

## CONCLUSION

Malick's film *The Tree of Life* is a rumination on traumatic human suffering on earth. The film especially focuses on Jack's and his mother's suffering which is most obvious in voice-over narration in which they seek divine guidance. This suffering on earth in O'Brien's family's story is set side by side to the scenes of biocentric cosmic history. Such juxtaposition extends the temporal and spatial boundaries of human suffering on earth and relates it to an eternal transcendental order. Max Weber's conceptualization of how theodicies may be solved by the idea of salvation in an otherworldly realm plays a significant role in understanding the message of the film relating to how humans can overcome the pain of death. Throughout the film, the characters are faced with the problem of theodicy and once they are reminded of the divine order in the eternal macrocosm, they come to understand that death is an integral part of life. This awareness is their salvation, their way of making sense of affliction.

*Miracles from Heaven* also deals with suffering by illustrating the traumas emanating from the deadly illness of a little girl. In this film, the problem of meaning-making in hard times is resolved by remembering the presence of an all-loving deity which is evident in the ways miracles come true. Rather than associating suffering with sin, humans may seek comfort in the conceptualization of a transcendental deity maintaining order in the cosmos. Even though the two films are different in their styles since *The Tree of Life* has a nonlinear and experimental structure, they share similar visions in the way they offer solutions for the problem of theodicy. In both films, the tree emerges as a sacred space as an intermediary between an earthly realm and an upward realm. Also, in both films, the human need to make sense of suffering is visualized through cosmic voyages or boundary crossings such as Jack's entrance to a wooden door into the shoreline of eternity and Anna's heavenly ascent. These cosmic voyages further maintain the existence of a transcendental deity: in *Miracles from Heaven*, miracles are ways of manifesting his presence; in the epic structure of *The Tree of Life*, the transcendental power has been present since the creation and will accompany humans to the end times. Moreover, both films talk about two ways of living and favor one way of living to another for making sense of suffering. In *The Tree of Life*, in a voice-over, Mrs. O'Brien says "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 . . . They taught us that no one who ever loves the way of grace ever comes to a bad end" (Malick, 2011). In *Miracles from Heaven*, in her speech at the church, Christy says "Albert Einstein said there are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. And the other is as though everything is a miracle" (Riggen, 2016). Both movies deal with the problem of meaning-making when humans grapple with agony, loss, or grief. However, choosing the way of grace or living as if everything is a miracle makes it easier to carry on. Now that *Miracles from Heaven* is inspired by a real story and Malick's

brother died when he was young, these films can be considered as real-life attempts to create meaning out of afflictions. In a way, both films may be thought of as mediums offering the audience how the problem of suffering in a cosmos ruled by a transcendental deity is possibly solved.

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