

The Concept of Divine Justice in Classical and Contemporary Theology

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Abstract:

The idea of divine justice has shaped religious thought for centuries, offering a way to understand how God deals with right and wrong. In classical theology, scholars like Augustine, Aquinas, Al-Ghazālī, and Maimonides viewed justice as a fixed moral order where God rewards good and punishes evil according to divine wisdom. Today, however, many theologians are rethinking this concept. The aim of this study is to explore how divine justice has been understood in both classical and modern theology, and how those views respond to issues like human suffering, inequality, and pluralism. Using a qualitative and comparative method, the study examines key religious texts and interpretations across time. The findings show a clear shift: while earlier views focused on law, order, and retribution, contemporary theology emphasizes love, mercy, and justice as relational and transformative especially for the marginalized. This change reflects a growing concern with real-world suffering and social injustice. The study recommends bridging classical and modern views to form a more compassionate, responsive understanding of divine justice. It also encourages dialogue between different faiths and ethical traditions to help theology speak more clearly and meaningfully to today's complex world.

Keywords: Divine Justice, Theology, Classical Theology, Modern Theology, Liberation Ethics.

1. Introduction:

Divine justice operates with three distinct definitions: justice as God's fair dealing with good and evil, justice as God acting according to his nature as "that than which nothing greater can be conceived," and justice as the rightness of will be preserved for its own sake. These definitions are not consistently integrated, creating unresolved tensions throughout the concept. Divine justice is not only as demanding punishment but potentially as the very foundation for salvation. Overall, the theological importance of divine justice as central

to God's nature and actions (Van Vreeswijk, 2016). Traditional theological views of divine justice as retributive goodness is rewarded, and evil is punished. However, divine justice may not always be visible or consistent with human expectations. In deeper theological ambiguity where divine action may be purposeful but is not necessarily just in human terms. Moreover, the use of Ancient Near Eastern mythological and anthropological motifs shows that divine justice operates on a cosmic level beyond human comprehension and may be influenced by factors such as celestial conflict or divine testing.

Ultimately, divine justice is not as a fixed or predictable principle, but as a dynamic and mysterious force that reflects both God's sovereignty and the limitations of human understanding. This expands the theological scope of divine justice from a simple moral equation to a profound and unresolved existential inquiry (Wagner, 2019). The notion of divine justice is a foundational concern in classical theology because it directly relates to God's nature, especially His righteousness and moral perfection. How divine justice interacts with human free will and responsibility, especially concerning predestination and the problem of evil, understanding divine justice remains crucial today for both theological coherence and moral reasoning, particularly in discussions of salvation, judgment, and divine action in the world. Divine justice serves as a means to probe deeper into God's character, reconciling divine attributes in a coherent theological system (Zangane-tabar et al., 2016). A relational, not purely formal, understanding of divine justice is necessary in modern theology. Real human freedom including the ability to choose evil is essential for genuine moral development. God's non-intervention is not neglect but part of allowing humans to shape their own moral character. Divine justice does not imply mechanical equality but allows for God's responsive, loving engagement with individuals in their unique circumstances. Suffering, while real and tragic, can be a site for deep personal transformation through divine partnership not despite but often through pain (Rojka & Halamova, 2016). Therefore, based on the background the aim of the study is to critically examine and compare how the concept of divine justice is understood and articulated in classical theological frameworks versus contemporary theological thought.

2. Literature Review:

Divine justice refers to the moral order governed by God, where all actions ultimately align with a higher purpose, even if that purpose is not immediately discernible to humans. Divine justice is not simply about rewarding good and punishing

evil in human terms, but about maintaining a cosmic and spiritual balance that transcends human understanding (Youvan, 2024). Moreover, Divine justice is inseparable from divine mercy. It is not about vengeance but about healing and transformation. Divine justice reflects God's desire to reconcile and bring wholeness, rather than to punish. Divine justice is empowered by divine love; it works not through coercion or threat but by drawing people into communion. God's justice as dynamic and transformative working within human history to redeem and reconcile (Vorster, 2024). Several studies have conducted on relation of divine justice on Theology. Kirkpatrick et al, (2021) argued that divine justice is traditionally understood as perfect, ensuring that good is rewarded and evil punished. However, the narrative exposes the limitations of classical theodicies that attempt to rationalize divine justice in the face of evil. Instead of affirming a consistent moral order guaranteed by God, the narrative also suggests that divine justice is inscrutable and cannot be fully explained through doctrine or reason. This calls into question the adequacy of classical theological frameworks in addressing real human suffering. To clarify the relation between classical theology and divine justice Zangane-tabar et al, (2016) argued that Augustine views divine justice as central to Christian theology. For Augustine, faith precedes understanding and it is essential for grasping divine truths. He portrays God as just, loving, eternal, and merciful, emphasizing that divine justice works alongside grace. While all humans deserve punishment due to original sin, salvation is only possible through God's unearned grace. Augustine's doctrine of the Trinity and his balance of justice and mercy deeply influenced the development of Western Christian theology. Within classical theology to elucidate relation between modern theology and divine justice another study has conducted by Rummo (2025) viewed that divine justice is not unfair in condemning those who have not explicitly heard of Christ, because people inherently suppress the truth they have been given. The implications of this understanding of divine justice are deeply

missiological. The church is not called to speculate about alternate paths to salvation but to obey Christ's Great Commission to preach the gospel (good news) and make disciples of all nations. Ultimately, divine justice can understand through general revelation and biblical teaching, demands a faithful and urgent response from the church to ensure that the message of salvation reaches those who are still in spiritual darkness. Though previous studies have focused on impact of divine justice in classical and modern theology, but few studies have conducted on how the concept of divine justice is understood and articulated in classical theological frameworks versus contemporary theological thought. Besides, the other objectives of this study are given below:

- 1.To explore the historical roots and foundational texts that shaped the concept of divine justice in classical theology (e.g., works of Augustine, Aquinas, Islamic and Jewish medieval theologians).
- 2.To analyze how contemporary theologians reinterpret or challenge traditional understandings of divine justice in light of modern concerns such as human rights, suffering, pluralism, and secular ethics.
- 3.To identify similarities and differences in how divine justice is portrayed across different religious traditions and time periods.
- 4.To assess the relevance of divine justice in addressing current ethical, social, and philosophical questions.

2. 1 Theoretical Framework:

This study adopts Liberation Theology as its primary theoretical framework to explore the contemporary reinterpretation of divine justice. Liberation Theology is pioneered by Gustavo Gutiérrez, According to Liberation Theology, God has a "preferential option for the poor," meaning that God is especially present in the struggles of the oppressed. Divine justice, therefore, is best understood not through abstract philosophical reasoning but through action that promotes human dignity, social equity, and systemic change. This theology aligns closely with biblical narratives of

liberation, such as the Exodus story, and interprets Scripture in a way that emphasizes justice, solidarity, and empowerment of the downtrodden (Gutiérrez et al., 2014). By applying this framework, the study critically evaluates classical theological interpretations such as those of Augustine and Aquinas which emphasize divine justice in terms of grace and moral order. In contrast, Liberation Theology reorients the discussion around real-world suffering, viewing justice as a dynamic, contextual, and ethical imperative that calls for radical change in both theology and society. This approach allows for a more grounded and socially responsive understanding of divine justice in contemporary theology.

3. Methodology:

This study uses a qualitative, comparative method to explore how the idea of divine justice has evolved from classical theology to contemporary thought. Rather than relying on statistics or experiments, it closely examines key secondary data theological writings and interpretations. Classical perspectives from influential thinkers like Augustine, Aquinas, Al-Ghazālī, and Maimonides provide a foundation for understanding how divine justice was originally framed often tied to moral order, grace, and divine will. In contrast, modern views are explored through Liberation Theology and current discussions around human rights, and religious pluralism. Themes were identified and compared to see how understandings of divine justice have shifted or remained consistent. This approach allows for a deeper look at how people throughout history and today make sense of justice, fairness, and divine action in the face of human struggles and moral questions.

4. Results:

4.1 Historical Roots in Classical Theology:

In classical christian theology according to Augustine divine justice holds that true justice is the giving of each their due, especially God. Without worshipping the one true God, no person or society can possess justice, since they fail to

give God his due. Thus, pagan societies like Rome, though politically ordered, lacked true justice and could not be called republics. For Augustine, justice is not just social fairness but righteousness right relationship with God which is essential for any real justice to exist (Chambers, 2018). But, Chabi (2015) argued that Augustine's theory of justice is fundamentally theological and cannot be understood apart from his broader Christian worldview. Augustine sees justice as the proper ordering of love, where God is loved above all, and all other things are loved in relation to Him. True justice does not exist in secular political orders because they are grounded in self-love and pride rather than divine orientation. Augustine redefines justice in a way that challenges classical and Roman conceptions by rooting it in the divine order and the ultimate sovereignty of God. Therefore, any political system that is not aligned with this divine order fails to be truly just. Moreover, Westerholm (2020) argued that Augustine's divine justice centers on the idealism of his model. It is also argued that in a world dominated by power dynamics and systemic injustice, Augustine's vision may be too idealistic and insufficient for addressing real-world moral complexities. The concern is that divine justice could be obscured by the concept of love, allowing injustices to be masked under a veneer of benevolence. Therefore, both justice and love may need to be rethought and adapted to shape a meaningful movement toward peace in today's socio-political realities. Another theory in Christian theology by Thomas Aquinas's theory of divine justice holds that humans owe God worship through the virtue of religio, which falls under justice as it involves giving God what is due. While humans cannot repay God equally, they fulfil their duty by offering what they can. Aquinas distinguishes between acquired religio, based on reason, and infused religio; a grace-filled response driven by love. Thus, divine justice is not only about obligation but also about loving devotion, transforming worship into a personal relationship with God (Nemec & Blaščíková, 2023). But, Breiner (2018) argued that Thomas Aquinas

affirms the necessity of satisfaction for sin based on divine justice, contrary to Eleonore Stump's interpretation. While Stump claims God does not require satisfaction and views Christ's death as purely remedial, Breiner shows that Aquinas teaches divine justice though freely willed by God requires that sin be punished. Satisfaction, in Aquinas's view, fulfils this requirement by involving the voluntary acceptance of punishment. Thus, Christ's death functions juridically by satisfying divine justice on behalf of sinners through substitutionary punishment.

Then divine justice has similar thought in Islamic ideology. The Islamic scholar Al-Ghazālī's theory of divine justice emphasizes God's perfect mercy and the holistic design of the universe. He acknowledges the existence of evil and suffering but argues they serve a greater purpose in God's cosmic plan. What seems evil can lead to a greater good, like a painful amputation for the body's health. Divine justice, according to Al-Ghazālī, should be understood through God's wisdom and mercy, where suffering is not injustice but part of a higher good (Kuşpınar, 2016). The Mu'tazilite school of Islamic theology placed divine justice (al-'adl) at the center of its religious and philosophical worldview. According to this perspective, justice is not determined arbitrarily by God's will; rather, it exists as an objective moral standard that can be recognized through reason. The Mu'tazilites believed that God, being all-wise and just, must conform to the rational principles of justice. This conviction led them to insist that God cannot commit injustice such as punishing innocent people or acting without cause because such acts would violate the objective nature of justice itself. This view sharply contrasted with other theological schools, particularly the Ash'arites, who argued that whatever God wills is inherently just, regardless of human understanding (Hourani, 1976). Nevertheless, in Jewish theory, Jewish scholar Maimonides understands divine justice not as direct reward or punishment from God, but as a natural consequence of human intellectual and spiritual development. According to Maimonides,

divine providence is extended only to humans and is proportional to their intellectual perfection the more one knows and aligns with God, the more one is protected from worldly misfortune. Those who fail to develop their intellect are left to chance and nature. Rather than acting like a judge, God governs through the natural order, making divine justice a matter of aligning oneself with truth and wisdom, not moral retribution (Nadler, 2013). Another Jewish Abraham Joshua Heschel understood divine justice as an expression of divine pathos God's deep emotional involvement in human life. Rather than a detached judge, God feels joy, sorrow, and anger in response to human actions. Justice, for Heschel, is rooted in compassion and moral responsibility, not just legal fairness or punishment. Prophets embody this justice by voicing God's concern for the oppressed and calling society to righteousness. Humans, created in God's image, are called to partner with God by acting justly and compassionately. For Heschel, true justice combines both righteousness and mercy, aiming to heal and restore the world (Raboteau, 2016).

4.2 How contemporary theologians reinterpret or challenge:

Contemporary theologians reinterpret or challenge traditional understandings of divine justice in light of modern concerns such as human rights, pluralism, and secular ethics. A renowned scholar Muis critiques both Kant's rationalist foundation of human dignity and Wolterstorff's theistic grounding in divine love, ultimately proposing that human rights are best grounded in God's acts of justice namely, creation, the giving of the Ten Commandments, and the justification of sinners. These acts reveal a theological basis for human rights that affirms universal human dignity while avoiding the limitations of both secular and overly subjective religious frameworks. Muis argued for a relational and covenantal understanding of rights grounded in divine justice, which upholds the moral worth of all people and aligns with contemporary ethical concerns about equality, dignity, and the protection of the vulnerable (Muis, 2014). In Human Rights and Divine

Holiness, Kevin Vallier reinterprets divine justice through a contemporary theological lens, aligning it with modern human rights concerns. He critiques traditional theories natural law and divine command for failing to fully ground human rights in both God and human nature. Vallier proposes a "holiness account," where God makes human nature holy by endowing it with the capacity to love, a central divine attribute. This dual contribution divine and human grounds moral rights and explains their binding force. Divine justice, then, is not retributive but restorative, rooted in reverence for the sacredness of human beings as bearers of divine likeness (Vallier, 2024). Besides, traditional retributive views of divine justice fall short in addressing the lasting effects of colonialism and economic injustice. Liberation theologians like Gustavo Gutiérrez instead frame justice as God's liberating action for the poor, focused on dignity and transformation. In light of rising pluralism, some advocate for a more inclusive approach that respects diverse spiritual traditions and challenges Christianity's colonial legacy. Divine justice is thus seen as lived practice aimed at confronting injustice and restoring human dignity (Clark, 2025). Instead of viewing other religions as threats, the Church increasingly sees pluralism as part of God's providence. Theologians like Karl Rahner argue that grace can operate in all faiths, while Pope Francis promotes interreligious dialogue as a form of mission centered on solidarity and the common good, not conversion. Though concerns about relativism remain, pluralism is now often seen as a transformative force deepening the Church's understanding of justice through mutual respect and shared moral action (Konigsburg, 2023). Another component Secular ethics is open to evolving with new knowledge and cultural changes, which contrasts with the relatively rigid frameworks of theological ethics based on unchanging divine revelations. Some theologians advocate for reinterpretation of sacred texts to maintain relevance in modern contexts, bridging divine justice with modern values. Contemporary theological thinkers are increasingly engaging with secular concepts (like

social justice, environmental ethics, and human rights) to reinterpret religious ethics in a way that aligns with global ethical concerns (Hamid, 2024).

4.3 Similarities and differences of divine justice across in different religious traditions and time periods:

Divine justice in many religions including Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism share core themes. Across these traditions, divine justice is linked to a moral order in which actions are judged and appropriately rewarded or punished. Symbols like scales and eyes, representing fairness and divine omniscience, are common. Judgment scenes such as the Last Judgment in Christianity and Islam or karmic retribution in Hinduism and Buddhism illustrate this theme. Justice is not only an action of the divine but a central attribute of God or the cosmic order. Over time, portrayals have evolved from communal punishment, as seen in the Hebrew Bible, to individual accountability, especially in later Christian, Islamic, and Dharmic teachings (Bader et al., 2010). Another common thread is the portrayal of divine justice as delayed but inevitable; even when judgment is postponed due to repentance or other factors, it remains certain and inescapable, reflecting a broader theological understanding found in various traditions. The role of prophetic or moral figures is also significant, as these individuals act as intermediaries who articulate divine standards and confront injustice, much like Elijah in the biblical account or analogous figures in other religious systems (Shapira, 2012). Across traditions, divine justice is often portrayed as existing beyond human temporality. Nevertheless, religious traditions commonly present divine justice as an expression of a higher moral order that demands human righteousness, compassion, and social responsibility. These parallels across time and traditions suggest a continuity in how divine justice functions as both a moral guide and a promise of ultimate fairness, even when interpreted differently within various historical and doctrinal contexts (Birnbaum, 2023). Divine justice is portrayed across religious traditions and

historical periods, highlighting both diversity and evolution in its understanding. In Judaism, justice is tied to law and communal ethics; Christianity emphasizes mercy and salvation through Christ; and Islam sees justice as absolute, rooted in divine will and eschatological judgment. Hinduism and Buddhism offer cosmic views through karma and rebirth, with justice unfolding across lifetimes. Historically, divine justice evolved from immediate, retributive acts by gods in ancient religions to delayed, afterlife-centered judgment in the Abrahamic faiths. Modern interpretations increasingly engage with social justice, human rights, and liberation theology. Responses to suffering vary some view it as divine testing, others as karmic consequence. Ultimately, divine justice adapts to cultural, philosophical, and historical contexts, showing both continuity and change across time and belief systems (Nie, 2023). divine justice is a central theme across the major religious traditions of Western Asia, though its interpretation evolved over time. Early religions like Sumerian, Assyrian, and Babylonian viewed justice as a divine command enforced by rulers, often linked to law, kingship, and order. Zoroastrianism introduced the concept of moral dualism, highlighting individual responsibility in the battle between good and evil, with divine judgment determining one's fate after death.

Judaism shifted the focus to a covenantal relationship with one God, emphasizing social justice, mercy, and protection of the vulnerable. Christianity expanded this by centering love, forgiveness, and compassionate justice. Islam synthesized previous teachings by emphasizing equality, accountability, and justice as divine duties, stressing both personal morality and societal fairness. Despite doctrinal differences, all these traditions uphold justice, mercy, and moral responsibility as core values, influencing legal, ethical, and spiritual systems throughout history and shaping modern ideas of human rights and social justice (Alsaied & Almansori, 2025).

4.4 Relevance of divine justice in addressing current issues:

Ancient religious expressions about divine justice can still inform contemporary ethical, social, and philosophical questions. Philosophical reinterpretation helps bridge the gap between ancient scriptural texts and modern concerns such as social inequality, institutional injustice, and moral responsibility. It affirms that divine justice, when understood as an active, relational, and morally charged property, remains deeply relevant in discussions about ethical leadership, public policy, and human rights. This enriched understanding encourages scholars and practitioners to engage more deeply with biblical texts in addressing today's complex social realities (Gericke, 2019). Divine justice remains a relevant framework for addressing modern ethical, social, and philosophical issues. It offers a stable moral foundation where secular systems may fall short and supports values like fairness, compassion, and accountability in the pursuit of social justice. Philosophically, it helps address problems like evil and suffering through the concept of ultimate justice. While its application can be limited in pluralistic societies due to varying beliefs, divine justice still provides a meaningful lens for navigating complex moral questions today (Weiss, 2018). Drawing from Mesopotamian and Old Testament texts, it shows that divine justice linking human actions to divine rewards or punishments promoted moral responsibility and social order. However, a later "crisis of wisdom" questioned this link, especially in cases of innocent suffering, leading to deeper reflections on divine fairness and human limitations. Today, divine justice still offers a meaningful moral framework that challenges ethical relativism and supports accountability, provided it is interpreted with compassion and flexibility (Berlejung, 2015).

5. Findings:

This study explores how the idea of divine justice has evolved from classical to modern theology. In classical thought, figures like Augustine and Aquinas saw divine justice as strict and absolute. God rewards good and punishes evil, all in perfect order. But modern theologians look at it differently. They see divine justice not just as law

and punishment, but as deeply connected to love, mercy, and the struggles people face in real life. Contemporary views focus more on justice as healing, liberation, and standing with the oppressed. Instead of a distant judge, God is seen as being actively involved in human pain and injustice. The study highlights this shift from a fixed moral system to a dynamic, compassionate force that seeks to restore, not just punish. Divine justice today is less about rigid rules and more about relationship, dignity, and making things right in an imperfect world.

6. Recommendations:

Based on the findings, it's clear that both classical and modern understandings of divine justice offer valuable insights. It's recommended that theologians, educators, and religious leaders work to bridge these perspectives, rather than treat them as separate or conflicting. Modern interpretations especially those grounded in liberation theology should be more actively brought into dialogue with traditional views to make theology more responsive to today's social realities. Topics like human rights, suffering, pluralism, and justice for the oppressed deserve more space in theological discourse. Institutions should also encourage interfaith conversations to explore shared principles of justice across different religious traditions.

7. Limitations:

This study mainly focused on theological texts and ideas, rather than on how people experience or interpret divine justice in their everyday lives. Because of this, it may not reflect the full range of religious perspectives, especially those from different cultural or local contexts. The research also leaned heavily on Abrahamic religions, leaving out voices from other worldviews that could contribute valuable insights.

8. Conclusion and Future Directions:

Divine justice is a powerful and deeply meaningful idea that has shaped the way people understand God and the world for centuries. In classical theology, thinkers like Augustine and Aquinas saw justice as part of God's perfect order

rewarding good, punishing evil, and maintaining a moral balance that sometimes goes beyond what we can see or understand. Today, however, many theologians are rethinking this idea in light of the real struggles people face poverty, inequality, suffering, and injustice. Rather than focusing only on punishment or law, modern views often see divine justice as something rooted in love, compassion, and healing. It's about God standing with the oppressed, lifting up the broken, and helping people find dignity and hope in the midst of pain. While the old and new ways of understanding divine justice may seem different, they both remind us of something important: that justice matters. Whether seen as a cosmic truth or a call to action in our everyday lives, divine justice challenges us to care for others, seek fairness, and stay connected to something greater than ourselves. In the end, exploring divine justice isn't just about theology, it's about what kind of world we want to build and what kind of people we want to be.

Future research should look at how divine justice is lived and practiced by faith communities around the world. There's also room to explore how non-Abrahamic traditions understand justice. Lastly, connecting divine justice to modern challenges like climate change or technology could help make these ideas even more relevant today.

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