

R C I A

Rite for the Christian Initiation of Adults

Evil

The “Problem” of Evil

Here are two syllogisms (logical arguments):

Thesis: God is totally GOOD in all that he does.
Antithesis: The world God made is full of evil
Synthesis: *God is not almighty (cannot control evil).*

Thesis: God is ALMIGHTY, *can do* all things
Antithesis: God *does not* eliminate evil from the world
Synthesis: *God is not good.*

These aren't arguments for scholars to play with. They're agonising questions for all ordinary Christians to wrestle with. We pray for things we honestly can't call selfish or unjust: for the cure of an innocent child or a young parent, for the protection of someone at moral risk, for the survival of some project of good work; and our hopes are overwhelmed with disaster, grief and loss, as if we had never prayed at all. *Where is God?*

We use the simplest ideas to respond to this situation: *God knows best, knows what he is doing, his ways are not our ways.* But a great number of people simply say: *I cannot use the idea of a good God to explain what has happened to me, or those I love.*

“Theodicy” is the branch of theology that tries to justify to human beings what God has done (or left undone). Some people adopt a position of extreme humility, saying: *Whatever God does is automatically the best.* Sometimes what confronts us is so extreme, that even people who can accept that are shaken. Ever since the book of Job, this question has given work to religious thinkers. So we should not think it is irreverent to question God, or to pray in a spirit of anguish or even reproach, as the Psalmist does in many places.

- We may try to comfort ourselves by importing our own sins into the argument: *it's no more than we deserve, God is punishing us for our pride, for our hidden sins, for our past.* The Book of Job, written perhaps seven centuries before Christ, knows that this one won't hold water. If God was in the business of punishment, the world would be a much tidier place than it is. The Psalms point out regularly that the prosperity of evil people is an open scandal, as is the suffering meted out to the just. This isn't how the world is arranged. Jesus, sinless, was seen as appallingly “punished”.
- A solution that is common in the Bible is that God is giving evil all the rope it needs, but that *in the end* good will triumph, and the evil will be apocalyptically smitten in the hinder parts. *Hang on the bell, Nellie! The cavalry's coming!* This is of doubtful help to the millions who are steamrollered by evil day by day; is there really no other way, we ask? Do we ever manage to bring happy endings out of the mayhem? Our Remembrance services speak eloquently of losses irreparable in this life.
- So that speciality of the house, *Pie in the Sky when you Die* makes its appearance: this life is a diluted form of hell, but relax! When you get to heaven, your investments will mature, and the jackpot will be yours. As Russian revolutionaries pointed out, this is a cheap way to make people patient whilst you put them through hell; your serfs even

die of hunger, singing “I’m heaven-bound”, and it doesn’t cost you a rouble. This answer to the problem is fraught with difficulties, and is something of a cop-out from the agony of human existence. The Communists thought it evacuated this life of all meaning, and maybe they had a point.

Simone Weil

This remarkable French Jewess (she thought becoming a Catholic might be seen as deserting her Jewish compatriots, then in concentration camps) writes very deeply about the affliction which God has mysteriously allowed to be in the world (*Waiting On God*, written just before her death in 1942). She speaks of affliction which leaves nothing untouched, leaves the sufferer with (at best) half a soul, sweeps away all trace of hope or faith, even the desire for release. Here are a few of her insights:

“ Man can never escape from obedience to God...the only choice given to men, as intelligent and free creatures, is to desire obedience or not to desire it.”

“Each time that we have some pain to go through, we can say to ourselves quite truly that it is the universe, the order and beauty of the world, and the obedience of creation to God, that are entering our body. After that, how can we fail to bless, with tenderest gratitude, the Love which sends us this gift?”

“Through joy the beauty of the world penetrates our soul. Through suffering it penetrates our body. We could no more become friends of God through joy alone, than one becomes a ship’s captain through studying books on navigation. The body plays its part in all apprenticeships.”

Embracing Suffering

Rather than responding to suffering by an immediate revulsion, therefore, we should see it in its context - a wide range of all the influences that come to us from outside ourselves, and which we do nothing to cause; beauty and joy as well as grief and pain come to us as receivers, as *passive*, (even as “patients”, if you like). Jesus received the Cross like this, because through it the utter beauty of the love of God would be planted in the heart of the world, and the supreme ugliness of a gibbeted human body would shine with the glory of a loving God. Jesus gives his body to be the time-and-space location of that epiphany. In the afterglow of the Passion, we find the way of our own suffering made beautiful despite all its destructive power. The martyrs re-present the love of Christ in every age; but so, quietly, do the most secluded sufferers who keep their desire for love and obedience alive.

Let’s Call It A Mystery

For these reasons we should think again about the presence of evil. Rather than considering it a *problem* - which calls for a practical solution - we should think of it as a *mystery* - that is, a hidden pattern which, entered into, turns into revelation. We tinker with the effects of evil, doing our best to eliminate them; that is what treating them as a *problem* is like. But if, at the deepest level, our suffering is indispensable to the way in which we find our path to the Father, we must treat it as a mystery. If our efforts to palliate and alleviate suffering cause us to forget this deeper truth, we shall be undergoing an unwilling “apprenticeship” from which we will fail to graduate. There is suffering in the heart of humanity; it is there for a purpose, and not just as an accident. If it is our destiny to be reborn or remade, to grow into something greater than this transience and weakness, clearly there is suffering to be undergone. Our faith must guide us to enter into suffering, not to spend our life trying to escape it. This is what leads us to treasure the story of the Cross: this is what leads us to Jesus Christ.