

# R C I A

## *Rite for the Christian Initiation of Adults*

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### *Evil*

A lot of people who once practiced their religion, and many people who wistfully decide they can't, are paralysed by what is commonly called *The Problem Of Evil*. Put briefly:

- If God is almighty, he *could* prevent evil, and doesn't: so how can he be good?
- If he *can't* prevent evil, he is obviously not almighty, and can't be God.

Someone once said to me:

*If there is a god behind such a cruel world, I wouldn't care to worship him/her/it,*

and the indifference of the three pronouns expressed a vivid distaste for any Being who would own up to the creation: very clearly, the message was:

*Your God is obviously crueller than I am.*

Now, as we've already seen, we can't worship anything that is less than we are without deforming ourselves: which is what happens to addicts of various sorts and those who give their lives to money or power.

But one thing we can all agree on: a god who is *cruel* does not deserve our trust, and should not on any account be worshipped. This would make us cruel ourselves.

It's strange that another person can look out on the world and give God pure praise for the sheer wonder of it - not at all because of blindness, ignorance, or insensitivity to evil, but because what they see is of ravishing beauty and goodness. Who "sees the world aright"?

Evil truly comes to us: but in recognisably different ways. There's

- sin, which is committed by human beings and involves our moral responsibility (but perhaps we feel that making us liable to sin was part of God's responsibility). Then
- there are huge tracts of evil things that seem to happen without any sense: the earthquakes, volcanoes, tornadoes, tsunamis, droughts, plagues, floods, and fires.
- Evil also comes to us through the petty inefficiencies that are human: accidents, coincidences, wear and tear, people's bad ideas, people forgetting, failing, and falling short; life sometimes just overwhelms our power to govern it. This doesn't precisely involve malice; but the damage that happens can be just as awful.

There is a whole department of Theology to try to penetrate the mystery of evil. It is called *Theodicy*, or "justifying God". It gathers together the arguments to remove from God the more disturbing conclusions that people often draw about him. This is much more than a theological problem; the theology is only there to try to help a *spiritual* difficulty. If people manage to worship a god whom they suspect of indifference, injustice, and anger, then they obviously fall prey to accepting these evils in themselves and others.

When we've tried our hardest to get God off the hook, it seems we -and he - must accept that the world he's given us is dangerous, and we are always vulnerable - quite irrespective of

what we might deserve for our faults; people often say *Only the good suffer!* - which certainly isn't true, even if sometimes it seems so. But the truth is that God seems to make no distinction; where we would marmellise the Godless and bless the good with prosperity and fruitfulness, the Most High seems to allow prosperity and affliction to fall indiscriminately on bad and good alike.

In this area we seldom take into account *all* the effects that meeting evil has on human beings. At first sight it all seems bad: tragic and senseless. But imagine a world where there is no evil: what would that be like? Without harm, there'd be nothing to fear; good! But there'd also be no call for *courage*. Without damage, there would be no pain - good! But there would be no call for *compassion* either. Without poverty, there would be no hunger: fine! But there would be no *appetite*. Without disability, every body would work perfectly. But there would be no *care*. (How far would we like to go in eliminating "evil"? Would you like to see the back of ugliness, discordance, sourness, bad smells, and rough surfaces? No more crocodiles, War Requiem, Campari, Stilton Cheese, or sandpaper....)

Let's not be frivolous; but truly, is not what we most love about human beings bound up so tightly with the presence of evil, that if it were eliminated, there would be nothing left to call "human"? Can you imagine a pure love, that wasn't aware of separation, loneliness, deprivation and death? That's what God's perfect love *is* like; but it's also part of what I can't imagine about God. I only know the sort of love that is all-too-human, and which is the brightest light I know in a dark landscape. If that sort of humanity demands the possibility of evil, it seems less than human to complain. If God had not permitted evil, there might have been somebody in his creation; but not William Shakespeare, Michelangelo Buonarotti, Ludwig van Beethoven, Alexander the Great, Charles Dickens, Vincent van Gogh, Emile Zola, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, Winston Churchill, Les Dawson, the Beatles, Bob Geldof, or Captain Mainwaring.

More personally, you and I would certainly not be there.

## *Choice*

When it comes to considering sin, there is the linked question of human freedom. People have been freer at some times than at others. When people are strung up and regulated in all their doings, they are slaves to someone else: puppets. If you want a person to *make right choices*, you have to free them from constraint. "Doing Good", when you have no choice but to do it, has no value; you could do no other. All the credit goes to the one who constrains you. To give a good deed full value, the one doing it has to have the freedom to do the opposite; if all goes well, he freely rejects evil, and freely chooses to do good. Then the trumpets sound for him in the Kingdom of heaven.

God evidently didn't want puppets, but free people. But God knew that this could only come at a great cost; inevitably some people would sometimes choose badly, and people would get hurt. How much did God value our freedom?

*Enough to hear the blood of Abel crying out from the earth...enough to watch the Holocaust...enough to send his beloved Son to die amongst criminals.*

But every day people call loudly for the curbing of human freedom, for more policemen and prisons, manacles and electric chairs: they want public vengeance on all who fall short in any way. How much do we value freedom - for ourselves...and for others?

God is unlike us in this. It is one of the areas where we have much to understand.

It is when it comes to the bearing of suffering in our own life that we find ourselves plunged into the mystery of “God’s way, which is not ours”. When we are happy and exhilarated by life, the world seems to need no explaining; because happiness brings us contentment, and this can bring us complacency and self-satisfaction - distinctly moral faults! But when we suffer, our questioning goes into overdrive; because we cannot heal ourselves from within, from our own store of peace: suffering makes us go beyond ourselves. In some deep way we are invited to become dissatisfied with our own perspective, to share God’s view of human life, and to follow his Son through the mangle that squeezes the rest of the human race.

“Every work of decency and compassion from one human being toward another springs in some way from suffering.” Discuss!