



The Discussion of Evil in Christianity

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THE DISCOURSE ON EVIL as a personal external force was brought to public attention by the blockbuster movie *The Exorcist*, based on William Peter Blatty's novel of the same name. This was preceded by cult movies like *Rosemary's Baby* and followed by the series of films starting with *The Omen*. Then we had the low-budget international sensation *The Blair Witch Project*, after which came the *Amityville Horror*. All these movies have their origins within Christian traditions. The Judaeo-Christian continuum had seriously engaged with the problem of evil and continues to do so. Therefore, it is important to precede the discussion on evil by first recapitulating how Western theologians see the problem as affecting their theologies and even culture.¹

Defining the Problem

What is this 'evil' according to Western metaphysicians? One of the definitions is provided by William Rowe, who is an avowed atheist: 'In some distant forest lightning strikes a dead tree, resulting in a forest fire. In the fire a fawn is trapped, horribly burned, and lies in terrible

agony for several days before death relieves its suffering.'² How does it serve anyone's purpose, not to speak of a loving God, that a deer somewhere dies in agony? Is God then a sadist? This is the question that has tormented Western theologians for centuries.

Biblical scholars dealing with the concept of Satan see the construction of the identity of Satan as tripartite: (i) The Jews, while moving from Egypt to Canaan, appropriated the idea of a malevolent external force through their interaction with the remnants of the Assyrian and the Hittite peoples they met en route to the Promised Land; (ii) Satan is a construct of the various councils that settled the Biblical canon within the Catholic Church; (iii) lastly, those who study the last book of the Bible, *The Book of Revelation*, see Satan more as a cultural construct and certainly compare Satan with tyrants who persecuted the first Christians. Therefore, academics within the Christian tradition have little consensus among themselves about the reality of Satan, the eternal nature of hell, and even of God being anything but love.

This heteroglossia about why evil exists is seen in some of the most prominent Christian philosophers. St Irenaeus (130–202), for example, anticipates the Jesuit archaeologist Father Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955), in seeing evil as necessary for human perfection. Irenaeus sees evil as a part of the process of becoming perfect; de Chardin sees everything rushing to the Omega point, which for him is Jesus, and the existence of evil provides an opportunity for the human person to perfect herself or himself. Thus, Process theologians like the Salesian Father Roger Burggraeve see evil today, in the ‘here and now’, as part of God’s original design for creation and, in short, necessary. Process Theology, therefore, fits within the narrative of Western philosophy at large: the culmination of which is in the works of Martin Heidegger.³ Heidegger posits, in his magnum opus *Sein und Zeit* (*Being and Time*), the phenomenological trope of interiority, with the caveat that this interiority is firmly rooted within time: Dasein.⁴ Process Theology sees Dasein as contingent, that is, this being in time—a time that God informs and dialectically forces towards the teleology of *parousia*, presence—has an authentic freedom to choose the ethical life over the life where something of value is *not* foregone. This line of thought connects with Plato’s *Timaeus*, in which we find a reference relevant to our discussion. Timaeus tells Socrates that ‘creations are indissoluble’, yet ‘all that is bound may be undone, but only an evil being would wish to undo that which is harmonious and happy.’⁵ It is as if there is some ‘alterity’⁶ within creation that resists all stability and goodness. Influenced by Plato, Emmanuel Lévinas (1906–95) said that people will see evil as ‘a datum in consciousness’, a certain ‘psychological content’, similar to the lived experience of colour, sound, contact, or any other sensation. But in this very ‘content’ there is an ‘in-spite-of-consciousness, the unassumable.’⁷

Lévinas sees evil as a means to embrace the otherwise inhospitable ‘other’. We now see the continuity and miscibility of Western philosophy and theology till our times.

St Augustine of Hippo (354–430) is more acceptable to Protestant theologians, since his main contention is that evil is a privation of the good. This is exactly what the Swiss Protestant theologian Karl Barth has termed as *Das Nichtige*; Barth sees evil as ‘an alien factor’ that is

not comprehended by God’s providence ... and which is not therefore preserved, accompanied, nor ruled by the almighty action of God like creaturely occurrence. It is an element to which God denies the benefit of His preservation, occurrence and rule, of His fatherly lordship and which is itself opposed to being preserved, accompanied and ruled in any sense, fatherly or otherwise. ... This opposition and resistance, this stubborn element and alien factor, may be provisionally defined as nothingness.⁸

Reading of ‘Evil’

Mordecai M Kaplan (1881–1983), christened the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism, had rightly questioned existing theodicies and the very omnipotence of a God, who requires human defence in the face of insurmountable evils. Kaplan observes:

None of the theodicies has ever proved convincing. The very idea of a God requiring justification is self-contradictory. The argument that whatever may appear evil to us may, from an objective standpoint, be good is just so much wasted breath, because to the extent that anything is evil, even if it be mistakenly regarded as such, it is evil and nothing else. That it is a means to the good, or that objectively considered it is no longer evil, in no way detracts from the fact that, according to the traditional theologies, it is necessary to conceive God as having to make use of means that are evil and

being the author of experiences that are subjectively not good.⁹

Kaplan's importance in our understanding of the problem of evil becomes relevant when we consider his abiding contribution to Judaic theodicy, the basis for contemporary Western reflections on theodicy. His difference from other philosophers and theologians lies in his frank secular scepticism and utter distrust of established theodicies. Kaplan would influence another Jewish commentator, Hannah Arendt (1906–75), the famous political scientist of the Holocaust, to see evil as something banal possessing nothing demonic and which fungus-like parasitically preys over everything alive. Arendt comes closest at defining evil for what it is; it just is, and the fact that it cannot be grasped with the help of contemporary hermeneutics makes it all the more frightening. Evil is an existential reality that truly defeats all social sciences and metaphysical analyses. In the face of such disparate views of what constitutes evil, we can only gesture at its true nature through allegories, metaphors, and symbols.

One certainty though evolves through our engagement with evil. The discourse of evil has to be necessarily different from the discourse of the good. This was a fact comprehended easily by the ancients. Lactantius, the third century North African Latin speaking Christian convert, apologist, and rhetorician, stresses the need for the construction of a unique vocabulary of evil and suffering since according to him vices are opposed to virtue, and thus their whole explanation must of necessity be different and opposite.

As the discourses and debates on the problem of evil continue—whether it is personal, subjective, objective, necessary for perfection, a part of creation, or God's will—ideas regarding evil are changing according to the evolution of human consciousness. The eternal opposition

between good and evil is a fact, and we know that ignorance, desires, and selfishness help increase evil. Therefore, one position to take is the one presented by Swami Vivekananda: 'Activity always means resistance. Resist all evils, mental and physical; and when you have succeeded in resisting, then will calmness come.'¹⁰ 

Notes and References

1. It is acknowledged that culture is produced by popular art forms like the cult movies mentioned in this essay. For instance, the increase of Ouija boards sales after audiences were exposed to *The Exorcist* show how the popular imagination took a morbid turn.
2. William L Rowe, 'The Problem of Evil and some Varieties of Atheism', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 16/4 (October 1979), 337.
3. See Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, *What is Process Theology?*, <http://processandfaith.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/What_Is_Process_Theology.pdf> accessed 10 July 2013.
4. 'Dasein' cannot be really translated. It is a term loaded with the burden of history and entraps the philosophy of humanity from disparate thinkers like Plato, Aristotle, Emmanuel Kant, Nietzsche, Edmund Husserl, and Martin Buber. It is ordinarily spoken of as 'existence or determinate being' in Hegelian philosophy and 'human existence' in Existentialism.
5. Plato, *Timaeus*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (Rockville: Serenity, 2009), 122.
6. The concept of 'alterity' derives from Lévinas and the work of his mature years—see Emmanuel Lévinas, *Alterity and Transcendence* (New York: Columbia University, 1999).
7. Emmanuel Lévinas, *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. Michael Bradley Smith and Barbara Harshav (London: Continuum, 2006), 78.
8. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of Creation*, Volume 3 (London: Continuum, 2004), Part 3, 289.
9. Mordecai M Kaplan, *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion* (Detroit: Wayne State University, 1994), 72.
10. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* 9 vols (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1–8, 1989; 9, 1997), 1.40.