

**THE PROBLEM OF EVIL: A CASE AGAINST THE OMNIPOTENCE
AND THE GOODNESS OF GOD.**

by

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Abstract

Evil is the opposite of good. This phenomenon has unleashed serious threat to human existence. The problem is that it is difficult to understand and even to deal with. Evil is a subject that has defied solution politically, socially or religiously. This paper examined the issue of the origin, effect and ways of dealing with evil for a better society. The research adopted the historical and literary methods of research. Various views are examined. Findings affirmed that God created evil as well as good. However, this view challenged the omnipotence and the goodness of God. The research identified bloodshed, corruption, demonic activities, human trafficking, child abuse and child dumping/abuse and many others as social vices associated with evil. This research recommends that man should learn to live with it, overcome it with good, while religious groups should lead in the campaign to end evil and/or reduce its effect on society.

Introduction

“It is only the passing sorrows which blaspheme and accuse Heaven; the great sorrows neither accuse nor blaspheme, they listen” (unknown author).

The idea of the existence of evil in the world is no longer a hidden fact. The problem of evil is evident everywhere, and is the experience of all and sundry. It is experienced at all levels of human activity. It is the topic for discussion on the lips of academicians, politicians, traders, artisans, rich and poor, men and women. It is more than what we may say a daily experience of man.

In our society today there is political violence, bloodshed, killings, bribery and corruption. The violence being experienced at the level of political elite is a witness to the current conflicts or ‘face off’ between the Executives and the Legislators. The society is plagued with evil. Armed robbery is at the increase, making our society insecure. Communal clashes are experienced in almost every state in Nigeria.

By it many have been rendered homeless and turned refugees in their homeland. The moral evidences are glaring. Moral decadence, child dumping, immorality, child abuse, human trafficking, wife battering and so on, have become great challenges of our generation. There is deceit, anger and quarrels everywhere.

There is also the spiritual dimension of evil. The issue of secret cults in our primary, post primary and tertiary institutions are great evils of our time. Lives have been lost, fear and insecurity created in the minds people. There is the problem of diabolical practices, witches and wizards to which evil has been associated with for many decades. The Bible talks about false teachers whose duties include perversion of the truth. Injustices are contained on every page of the Holy book. The fall of man (Genesis 3:1f) is one great calamity that happened to mankind. From this incident, death set in, disobedience, murder, hatred, anger and became the order of the. In Chapter 6 of Genesis it states that, "The Lord saw how great man's wickedness on earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. The Lord was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain..." (Gen. 6:5-6). Other evils in the Bible include such events as mass murder, rape, incest, fornication, criminality and wars.

In the New Testament the story of the suffering and death of Jesus Christ is the highest point of evil and wickedness. The murder of Christ's disciples and followers of the "Way" are evidences of evil manifestations. The believers experience is summarised in Romans 8:22-23, which describes the pathetic state of humanity thus: "... the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. (Romans 8:22-23). What would have caused the groaning if not the manifestation of evil?

A discussion on this topic is quite a necessity. The evidence above gives grounds for thinking that it presses with peculiar urgency upon a generation. We have known two world wars and their aftermath, and we still dread a third. In Nigeria we have gone through a nasty experience of a civil war with threatening situations beaconing for another one. According to P. C. Rodger, as quoted by James,

The growth of humanitarian feeling and practice in the countries of the world has but intensified the problem. As shadows deepen in the light; for the self-confident, modern man cannot help being affronted by the continuing will and increase ability of his contemporaries to inflict suffering upon another (to speak only evil which is palpably of human origin)" (James 7).

The researcher's wish is to warn his readers with the words of Roger, quoted by James:

"If we open this book, or the book of any Christian writer, in the hope that we shall find some 'answer' which will explain away the mystery of evil and follow us to remain inactive in the face of it, we shall assuredly be disappointed."

(James 8)

What is intended in this article is an attempt to help us understand exactly that "Christianity does not explain suffering; it shows to us what to do with it," both the oppressed and perplexed may find here a more excellent way (James 8).

Definition of Terms

A. God

The simple but complex question of "who is God?" is to be answered first. The challenge is to avoid the temptation of confusing God with what is not God. This is the danger we are warned against in the first commandment, and to avoid it is clearly an imperative that we know who God is, and how he is distinguished from what is not God.

In Christianity, God is the Creator of the heavens and the earth (Genesis 1); He has revealed Himself in Christ through the Holy Spirit. The Shorter Catechism defines God as "Eternal, whose life has neither beginning nor end, whose power has no bounds."

A more descriptive definition of God is given in the Westminster Confession of Faith. It states thus:

There is but one only, living, and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions, immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, most wise, most holy, most free, most absolute; working all things according to the counsel of His own immutable and most righteous will, for His own glory; most loving, gracious, merciful, long-suffering, abundant in goodness and truth, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin; the rewarder of them that diligently seek Him; and withal, most just, and terrible in His judgements, hating all sin, and who will by no means clear the guilty" (Carruthers 6)

The above description is a witness to the fact of human attempt to describe the indescribable. But from it we can deduce the simple fact that God is greater than all things and He is their Maker and Owner. He is immortal, invisible and only wise God.

One conception in African Traditional Religion presents God as a personal moral being, a Creator and Preserver of the universe. Side by side with this, is another conception expressed in other contexts that refer to God as if he were rather an abstract, impersonal power? These concepts show that Africans conceive God in many different ways. (Ikenga-Metuh 95)

Omnipotence of God

This is an attribute of God. It means He is all-powerful. According to Bruce Milne, "God is deemed Omnipotence because He governs heaven and earth by his providence, He regulates all things and that nothing takes place without his deliberation" ()

Goodness of God

The fundamental idea is that, He is in every way all that He, as God, should be, and therefore answers perfectly to the ideal expressed in the word "God". "The goodness of God expresses His absolute perfection and perfect bliss in Himself" (Berkhof 70). God is good in Himself, He is also good for His creature, He is the fountain of all good, and so is represented in a variety of ways throughout the Bible. All good things that the creatures enjoy in the present and expect in the future flow to them out of this inexhaustible fountain.

Problem of Evil

Hebrew word *ra'* is translated 'evil' (Grayston 73). This meaning conveys the factual judgement that something is bad, displeasing or harmful. Generally, it means anything that causes pain, unhappiness or misery, including the discipline of punishment sent by God. The context determines the exact meaning.

The word "problem" is defined as "anything, matter, person (and so on) that is difficult to deal with" (William T. McLeod 384). Astrologers in their illustration of what constitute 'problem' say that, when "theory and fact that seemed to be a variance, that apparent conflict constitutes a problem for the astronomer" (James 11). A problem always arises from an apparent conflict between theory and fact, and a religious problem is no exception. Perhaps the greatest of all religious problems is that known as the problem of evil. The conflict we feel in the instance is between our belief in God and a fact of experience.

More precisely, between belief in a God who is both loving and Almighty, and the prevalence of evil in His world.

Issues become problems to us once we attribute to God both moral character and power, once He is thought of as the Lover of men and the Governor of the universe, loving the problem is formulated. For instance, the Psalmist in an act of praise affirms both loving character and Almighty power of God in the following words,

The Lord is gracious, and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love. The Lord is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made. All you have made will praise you O Lord; your saints will extol you they will tell of the glory of your kingdom and speak of your might, so that all men may know of your mighty acts and the glorious splendour of your kingdom. Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom and your dominion endures through all generations. The Lord is faithful to all his promises and loving toward all he has made (Psalm 145:8-13 NIV).

For the Psalmist, one throne governs the universe, and this throne is occupied, not by a despot nor by some capricious deity, but by a God who is loving and gracious. James concludes, "if we so affirm divine goodness and omnipotence, we must face the problem, why should there be evil?" (James,12).

The Concept of the Existence of Evil

a) Does evil exist?

Scholars affirm the existence of evil. For instance, N. L. Geisler in his view states that "the apparent contradiction in the co-existence of evil and a good God is perhaps the commonest charge levelled by critics against theism (the belief in one God)" (241).

The Bible attests to the facts of existence of evil by its warnings to keep of from evil. Some of the passages include Deuteronomy 23:9 "...keep yourself from every evil", Psalm 97:10 "Hate evil you who love the Lord", Matthew 6:13 "deliver us from evil" and so on. Also, the Bible faithfully reflects the characteristic mixture of good and evil in human experience. It records all kinds of sorrow and suffering (given the Book of Job as an example) every mode of man's inhumanity to man of our painful insecure existence in the world. All these point to the fact that evil exists. The question is how does it come?

Philosophers agree to the fact of the existence of evil. Augustine (354-430) says “the universe is good; it is the creation of a good God, for a good purpose. There are higher and lower, greater and lesser goods in immense abundance and variety; however, everything that has a being is good in its own way or degree, except in so far as it has become spoiled or corrupted” (Hick 4).

b) **The Origin of Evil:**

The imminent question is where does evil come from? African Traditionalists see evil as originating from spiritual beings, such as wizard, witchcraft, different from God. According to Vuguru, an evil divinity exists which initially was created for good but later with some other spiritual beings turned against God to do what was evil, these spiritual beings live their existence doing evil. This was how evil entered this world (Mbiti 204). In other word evil has its origin from a fallen divinity and his agents.

The Orthodox Jews view that “evil comes from Satan and his agents (demons). They fell confronted on earth by man’s existence. This view is based on the fact that evil does not exist as a thing tangible to touch but exist in the context of suffering, calamity and ill feeling (Bright 436) A look at the Scripture on this issue is very important. There is a popular passage of Scripture that seems to clearly state the origin of evil. That is, Isaiah 45:7, there God says “I make peace and create evil”. Scholars have interpreted this to mean that God is the author of prosperity and adversity. Commenting on this text Douglas R. Jones opines:

Sovereignty of the universal creator is absolute: dualism is unthinkable. He (God) is finally responsible for good and evil.”(Jones, 522) There arose questions such as ‘if evil exist, does it not say anything omnipotence and goodness of God, because it is a contradiction? Another is ‘is God good? If God were good, we would expect it in the world. Yet another question is, if God created evil, to do what? If we reject the idea of God creating evil, there must be another power, authority contesting with God’. To resolve the origin of evil is to accept the conclusion drawn by Geisler that “...God created the fact of freedom; man performs the act of freedom. God made evil possible; creatures make it actual” (Geisler and Amanu 242).

The fact remains that there are also opinions that God is not the Creator of evil and must not be associated with it. Mbiti states “God created the possibilities of evil. He created every person with the knowledge of good and evil to enable him choose his way” (204). However, this idea of God giving man knowledge of good and evil to make out his way suggests a withdrawn God from the affairs of mankind. It does not

affirm to the fact of God the Omnipotent and good, rather it confirms with the monist materialistic theory of nature.

Why Evil?

The presence of evil and suffering in a world created by God who is unlimited in power and knowledge, loving and merciful has attracted disturbing questions by scholars. While some ask disturbing questions about the phenomenon of good God and presence of evil, others attempt justifiably to vindicate God's righteousness on the subject matter. Commenting on the reasons for such questions, (Bayley 257) assumes the disturbing questions are as a result of seeing people suffer, sometimes unjustly and innocently and will men of men at if possible, God to justify Himself or a logical explanation to advance. According to her "the question on why does God allow suffering... ask whether the Being, God is actually in charge of all events and the consequences, if He is, is He all loving and all powerful?" (258).

Another scholar questioned thus "is God able to prevent evil but he is unwilling? Or is He willing to prevent it but He is unable? Is He both willing and able? Whence then is evil?" (Uka 8). Uka is also of the view that, it is possible for the problem of evil to induce some atheistic feelings in people. For instance, he quotes Dr. River as saying "I shall refuse to love this creation until I die, where children are tortured" (8). Some people adopt idolatrous means to solve their problems since they cannot continue lifting their eyes to God who sits silently in the sky unconcerned about the affairs of people on earth.

James Churchill posits that, it is an over reality that one, however faithful or righteous will always have evil around him to interact with. That any belief on God who is Omnipotent, loving and good with the unpleasant effect of evil, since to him, it is "either God cannot abolish or He will not. How then can believers of a Deity, reconcile that with the presence of evil in the world" (85). These things are puzzling. They tend to question the genuineness of the claim on the existence of a good, loving, all-powerful and merciful God or rather ask, God, if you can speak for yourself.

In his objection, John Hick feels it will be foolish pretension for the human creature under illusion that he can judge God's act by human standards, instead of seeking to justify the ways of God to man rather than trying to justify the sinful ways of man to God...We should be like Job tremblingly silent before His incomprehensible majesty and sovereignty" (1). This position appears apologetic and not illogical. This is a mere attempt to theodicy, which does not quench people's curiosity. However, since humanity cannot predict God, it may be difficult to understand His ways. For what appear evil in the sight of men may mean good with God; therefore judging God, we are incompetent.

Evil is said to be a way of punishment, therefore God is not blamed for it. Thompson Melvyn in his book says, "Cancer or evil is a punishment inflicted on the man much in the same way as a father corrects his child for some faults..." (65). In support of this view, Hick says evil as the consequence of chastisement for wrong doing for which God should not be held responsible. It becomes a dilemma, if evil is a consequence of chastisement for wrong doing and Job remains a righteous man, how can we explain the great evil and suffering that came upon him? The answer might be that Job did wrong or he suffered innocently, then the above assertion is incorrect or some higher powers must be blame for it.

Richard Taylor in his book critically evaluated the suffering of the righteous feels evil and suffering come as a test of one's ability which some may call faith. He feels, like a two faced coin, in suffering, one finds either promise or good and fulfilment or frustration of needs (Taylor, 129) "Possibilities of conflicts are loaded with threats of evil and those of co-operation with the promise of good...as that which satisfies or fulfils..." (256).

Bayley supports the above claim by saying that suffering and evil bring one to the point of experiencing the power and care of the Almighty God. Because for her, there could be no miracle if there are no opportunities for miracle, there could be no triumphing if there is no adversity. One may ask, does the God of love wait or deal with His children only through difficulties if the above is the case, does He not care about the pains of it? (256). There is an assurance that, though some of the impacts of evil and suffering on the life of the African are excruciating, there is yet a hope that hinges, since the creatures are not self-existent, their Creator will one day restore their hope of self-actualisation and freedom. (Williamson 41).

Evil as an Atheistic Fact

The appalling depth and consequences of the problem of evil, suffering and pains has continued to be a puzzle in many minds. It has confronted many scholars with such disturbing questions to clear their curiosity on the "how" and "why" of evil. Many have been forced by circumstances to ask questions such as "Why, in spite of all her personal sacrifices and discipline has God allowed her to be attacked by a disease like cancer? Even after the attack became manifest, why did God not manifest His power and compassion to heal? (Uka 6). These questions seek to understand why evil is in the world created by an Omnipotent, loving and merciful God. There is also a quest to understand why God cannot rescue or deliver the righteous when confronted by the menace of evil but will allow them to be consumed by its power. The conclusion that "if God is able and willing, when comes evil, is atheistic. It calls people to ponder 'a priori' on the existence of evil and the God of mercy and compassion.

However, the sceptic on their part, have reasoned that God is good, complete and all-powerful. Therefore His work of creation should be complete, blissful and perfect. There should be no room for such human experience as suffering, pain and evil which constitute the great philosophical problem of evil.

The creation of evil and its associated problem created room for atheistic view. This idea is against the concept of the existence of such a great God as described above. The handicap is in their ability to reconcile the paradox of the presence of great suffering and evil in a world created by a great, loving, merciful, powerful, good and all-knowing God.

David Hume argues “the problem of evil militates against the idea of a divine creation, because the world of such evil cannot be what should be expected from an infinite wisdom and infinite good” (Uka 9).

The other great concern is on the menace of evil, which does not only befall the wicked, but also the righteous and innocent and concluded that the presence of evil in this world is a great hindrance towards the belief in God. He is unable to reconcile the stark realities of evil and the existence of an infinitely good and all-powerful God.

A medical practitioner involved in treating the victims of an outbreak of an epidemic is quoted to have resolved thus: I shall refuse until I die to love this creation in which children are tortured.... Since the order of the world is ruled by death, may it be proper to fight with all our strength against death without lifting our eyes towards the sky where God sits in silence? (Uka 9). From the above assertions, we can say that evil is a great hindrance to theism and subsequently an obstacle to the Christian faith.

Resolution: From the findings of this research we have attempted to resolve the burning issues relating to the existence of evil in a world created by a good and perfect God by examining it from the following perspectives:

Evil is part of God’s Redemptive Plan for Mankind: For the Orthodox Jewish perspective, suffering is seen as part of God’s redemptive purpose for them (Bright 436). They see suffering as preparing them for a divine purpose. They are encouraged to thrust their faith and commitment to God and an advance for disciplined life. It implies that an event of suffering opens a way to experience God’s deliverance and discipline or control. With this understanding evil could be considered part of God’s redemptive plan for humanity.

Evil is related to God’s Purpose for Humanity: From the Biblical perspective, evil may be serious, grievous but it has something to accomplish that relates to God’s purpose. Whatever leads to the fulfilment of

God's will is good. So that from creation, if there was anything evil, God does not see it as evil but good, since it is intended to accomplish His purpose. It could be in this sense that God saw everything that He had made and beheld it to be very good. Hinson affirms to this view thus: "The whole creation is so planned that it makes possible the fulfilment of the Lord's purposes for mankind (Hinson140). We draw from the scriptural text that "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28 NIV).

Evil is for the Ultimate Necessity: This view says "evil is not a problem." That it is in the imminent evil within which God is not overwhelmingly evident; but in which God may become known by the free interpretative response of faith. So, evil is an ultimate necessity. Man's interaction with evil and suffering rather opens man's understanding to the knowledge of God. Iraneus is quoted as saying "...moral evil is a necessary condition of the creation of humanity at an epistemic distance from God in state which one has genuine freedom..." (Hinson 45).

Another scholar affirms that:

If consistency and chance yielded only good events with favourable outcomes many values will be lost. No one could experience the joy of triumphing over adversity, if no adversity ever arose; and encourage, compassion and justice could never be experienced, where nothing calls forth to these virtues (Bayley 256).

In fact it is simply saying, what we think is evil is not really evil at all, or if it is, it is there for a good purpose.

Evil is in the Nature of God: Have we made the problem ourselves by over-emphasising the loving nature of God, and failing to see that there is a dark side to him as well? The Bible points to the considerable strands which talk of God as the source of both good and evil (Isaiah 45:7). They point to the savagery of God, not just in the Old Testament but also in the descriptions of his judgement day in the New. They point to the awe and dread with which biblical people viewed God. "It's a terrible thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Hebrews 10:31). If only we were prepared to follow the logic of our own experience, we would see God is still like this. Good and evil are two sides of one God, since there can be nothing which does not derive from him.

John Roth is one person who takes this line. He regards God as ultimately responsible for the suffering in the world - both natural suffering and the suffering caused by human action. For who was it

that gave freedom of will? Who made us the way we are? We didn't create ourselves. The only thing that can justify God, he says, is what he does with the world's future, for He is not justified by the way He has allowed it to go in the past. So he argues for Job as the model of religious living. It must be a life of protest to God, struggling against the evil and suffering that God has allowed. It must be a life of wrestling with God so that he will respond in love. The reason for wrestling is because the dark side of God remains.

Conclusion

It is assumed that we are asking the wrong question. All our discussions so far have been based on the assumption that it is the presence of evil that needs to be explained, but there are those who suggest that the more remarkable thing is the presence of good. The problem of good used as an argument for the existence of God, not only against it. Does the way good keeps breaking into the world not suggest the continuing action of a loving and good God?

Evidence so far suggests that human beings have a natural tendency to evil. History is full of signs of their tendency to mess things up. Human beings control the world, having power over each other and over the earth's resources. Yet there is present in the world a great deal of good. Why?

There is also another way in which the problem of evil might be asking the wrong question. It is clear that every answer we try to give has its problems, so it may be the most honest thing to say "We simply don't know." That is not an excuse for failing to work on the issue, but it is a warning against ever thinking we have the answer that summarises these assumptions. But the world is full of people who have admitted they don't know why evil and suffering are so much a part of the world, yet are perfectly clear from their own experience that they do know nevertheless that God is a God of love and goodness.

This God is not sitting above the world, impassively watching it suffer, but down here sharing in it. If God feels the suffering of every one of his creatures, and confronts with them every evil they confront, then He suffers more than we do. Anyone who will do that for us cannot be any other but the Almighty, All-powerful, good and loving.

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