

The Case for Christodicy

CHRISTIANS FORGET TO BE Christian. We forget to love one another, our neighbors, and our enemies. We forget to resist temptation, practice humility, and steward creation. We forget to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. We forget to feed the hungry and clothe the naked. We forget to forgive. We forget to pray for those who would (or do) harm us. We even forget to pray.

Christians forget to recalibrate our faith to the spirit of the age and the signs of the times. Many North American Christians find it somehow natural that Christianity would be the dominant religion in national life even though it has always been as fragmented as stale bread crumbs. Like white Americans, Christians in the US don't know how to live without privilege. We don't know how to live fruitfully in a secular, diverse, and multi-faith society alongside agnostics and atheists (people of doubt and good will) and, as a result, we are often overly apologetic or overtly arrogant.

At less immediate risk to our soul's health, we forget to *think* as Christians. We forget to engage the mind of Christ as we respond to exploitation and injustice, misery and pain, and violence and death, so an odd but oddly typical thing happens when Christians encounter tragedy, horror, or evil. We get theological brain cramps at the very moments we ask the unanswerable questions: Why do the innocent suffer? How long will the wicked prosper? Why would an *almighty* God *allow* terrible things to take place? Or, more rarely: Would a *cold-hearted* God *inflict* evil on someone? So, given the opportunity, we either say something stupid or find ourselves stupidly tongue-tied. This idiosyncrasy in

theological circles, prayer groups, pulpits, and pews is no contemporary anomaly. It is so much the norm that we fail to recognize it as a damaging glitch, a perilous gaffe, even a fatal flaw.

Questions about evil are woven into human existence. Evil's prevalence and dominance consistently deaden the mind and shatter the heart; the question of God-and-evil is "*the open wound of life*,"¹ oozing, bleeding, becoming infected, infecting one and all. It's a question we can neither answer nor ignore; the deeper our faith, the "more passionately" we agonize.² Somewhere someone—philosopher, theologian, scholar; addict, news addict, loved one; adult, adolescent, child—asks questions about evil every day in a workplace, in a classroom, in a dorm room, in a barroom, or at a graveside. These questions have no inherently logical or satisfying answers, but we stifle them at the risk of compromising our intelligence, our integrity, and any legitimate claim that faith can cohere in a complex universe.

In this universe, evil is a many and varied thing made more problematic because every culture has its own notions of good and evil, many of which are no more than quirky, collective tics. But make no mistake: evil destroys bodies, batters souls, and vexes minds; it stalks health and wholeness; it smothers faith; it dims light. As evil generates agony, despair, and fear, it undermines our sense of divine purpose and life's meaning. Its expressions are so diverse that we must differentiate "between evil and evil,"³ from fleeting thoughts to imperceptible micro-sins to indifferent neglect to systemic spite to murder to mass murder to genocide to Holocaust.⁴

Many turn to reason to make sense of evil, but reason (like religion) often becomes its accomplice—the Holocaust linked high levels of rational organization to criminally insane anti-Jewish malevolence⁵—for every unjust system is made up of internally logical expressions of irrational impulses. In the old Jim Crow South, it made political sense for whites to steal African Americans' voting rights, economic sense to segregate housing, and rational (if narrow) self-interest sense to deprive Black children of an equal education. It was even politically prudent to use white

1. Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom*, 49. Italics his.

2. Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom*, 49.

3. Bauer, "Place of the Holocaust," 21.

4. Bauer, "Place of the Holocaust," 30. I have added to his list that begins with murder.

5. Dawidowicz, "Thinking about the Six Million," 66.

terrorism to quash dreams of racial equality. But segregated drinking fountains, buses, and bathrooms, and bans from private and public facilities were symptoms of a brazenly irrational purity code and gratuitous tools of humiliation. In the apartheid system, pragmatism would have guided the South African government to build African housing closer to the white neighborhoods where Africans worked rather than spend millions of rands in public funds on public transportation but, like all unjust systems, apartheid took on a nonrational life of its own.⁶ War may begin with what appear to be logical deductions, but it inevitably degenerates into madly gratuitous ruthlessness partly because the original analyses were built on unseen and unsound presuppositions.

Inadvertently or explicitly, evil's ubiquity is also an assault on religious faith and an affront to God. So, in a nineteenth-century Russian gulag, when a guard tells a prisoner to recite the Lord's Prayer, he waits until the inmate says, "thy kingdom come" to explode with laughter and initiate a beating.⁷ So, in the late twentieth century, as Bosnian Muslim prisoners helplessly watch their captors seize teenaged girls to be raped and trafficked, the prison commander compounds their mortification as he mocks Islam's basic avowal: "I'm your God, and you have no other God but me."⁸ But lest we think evil is confined to the most debased corners of society or to chance acts of meanness, Desmond Tutu says that when any system treats people as anything less than creatures created in God's image, "it is like spitting in the face of God."⁹ His observation is spot-on, but his metaphor may be too mild. In a World War I American prison, when a sergeant pushes a conscientious objector into a cesspool and, shoveling excrement on the prisoner's head, says, "I baptize you in the name of Christ,"¹⁰ *that* is how evil debases God.

Given evil's pervasiveness, its viciousness, its power to distort reason, contort religion, and abase humanity (and divinity), people of every philosophy and faith construct cosmologies and theories to make sense of evil and help people navigate their lives around it, against it, and through it. Given the depth of Scripture and its breadth of traditions, the church ought to have fathomed enough about evil to offer insights

6. Lelyveld, *Move Your Shadow*, 119–54.

7. Dostoevsky, *House of the Dead*, 159.

8. Sells, *Bridge Betrayed*, 21, 23. This is also an assault on the first commandment.

9. Tutu, *No Future*, 93.

10. Stoltzfus, *Pacifists in Chains*, 166.

for any who yearn for guidance. In 1914 in impoverished East London, activist-pacifist Muriel Lester stated that if the words of Christ didn't help people address "the world's troubles," she would start a "shut the churches crusade" to close parishes throughout England. As a Christian, she insisted that if her faith has no practical solutions to real problems, keeping churches open is a waste of energy, money, and time.¹¹ Such a mission would only become harder in the years to come among that era's lost generation, World War I veterans whose experiences of trench warfare eviscerated their faith in faith, reason, progress, human nature, patriotism, idealism, the church, and God. Over a century later, when many have concluded that the Christian faith offers neither sagacity nor solace, when churches have closed and are closing, we need to make the same bet. Psychological analyses and sociological theories can formulate helpful hypotheses to make some sense of evil, but none tell the full story, exhaust the whole truth, or heal the world's wounds.

Churches always need to address life's real problems, and readdress *this* problem from a Christian perspective. Yet, throughout history a peculiar thing happens to otherwise trinitarian people when we contemplate God-and-evil: we become small "u" unitarians mesmerized by an omnibus of "omnis" (omnipotence, omnipresence, and omniscience) as if those adjectives were the three Persons of the Trinity instead of three attributes we attribute to God. This is how Christians get stuck in a single, logical impasse: *either* God is good, *or* God is powerful. It seems self-evident that God cannot be both, for if God were both, evil would not be everywhere.

The "mono" in our monotheism seems to obligate us to bow blindly before God's power and/or love, so Christians have gotten trapped into believing—against biblical assertions—that God inflicts suffering,¹² tests us,¹³ or sits idly by while we writhe in agony.¹⁴ Some Christians stress the sovereign power of an almighty God, but it is one thing to believe that God preordains salvation for some or all (and even that is suspect); it is another to assert that God predetermines every jot and tittle (every hour of sleep, every trip to the john) on every page in every person's life, or that

11. Lester, *It Occurred*, 51.

12. Against Lam 3:33.

13. Against Jas 1:13.

14. Against Job 19:25–27.

God decrees deadly accidents on the autobahn and terminal illnesses for infants.

There is nothing deliberately misleading about attributing omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence to God, but it makes no more sense to hallow that reductionism than to pretend we can rank the top three virtues of the saints. We can ascribe hundreds of traits to the divine and, like Islam's ninety-nine names of God, we can recite them all and still not say enough. Yet it is one thing to say we *do not* understand; another to say we *cannot*—words like “inexpressibility and incomprehensibility are closely related, but not identical.”¹⁵ We cannot verbalize, *or* we cannot conceptualize. Some things we cannot say, others we cannot know.

Yet those three omni mega-words often form the crux of our faltering attempts to explain God-and-evil. It would be truer to Jesus' message to join Muslims in calling God the Compassionate and Merciful because when we focus on omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence, it makes any discussion of God-and-evil decidedly non-Christian; not unfaithful, necessarily, not *unchristian*, not even completely unhelpful—simply *non-Christian*.

Thinking like Christians, we should know better than to believe in what C. S. Lewis derides as an all-powerful, indifferent, “managerial” God running a tidy (or untidy) universe.¹⁶ Why repent, do justice, or love kindness unless we are (or are not) preordained to do so? Why get excited about a prophet's promise that God will write on our hearts¹⁷ if everything is already written? Why anticipate the coming of God's kingdom if God is in charge now? We know better than this; we know better because we pray better. In the Lord's Prayer, we ask—we pray—for God's will to be “done.” Empirically and prayerfully, our hearts, minds, and senses tell us that God's will is *not* done, and that ought to tell us something about God's fabled almightiness.

Prayer itself commends an alternative way to think about evil. Many traditional Christian prayers end with the phrase, “through Jesus Christ.” If, as an old saying goes, we pray what we believe, why don't we approach theodicy *through* Jesus Christ? As people who believe we are in relationship with God and the world through all that Christ was, is, and will be,¹⁸

15. McGinn, *Varieties*, 361.

16. Lewis, *Four Loves*, 127.

17. Jer 31:33.

18. Rev 1:4, 8.

why don't we interpret God's relationship with evil through the one we call "the light of the world"?¹⁹

Christian views of God-and-evil have become so caught in a net of omnis that they offer barely a bow or a nod to Christ, and when they do, they focus myopically on the incarnation to proclaim God is with us, the crucifixion to declare God suffers with us, and the resurrection to pronounce God's ultimate triumph. This is all well and good and, in a theological sense, true, but just as popular culture misses out when it conflates the whole of Christian faith with Christmas and Easter, so we miss most of what Jesus offers when we abridge his significance to three topics in a PowerPoint presentation. There is more, much more, whole Gospels more, to Christ than presence, pain, and salvation.

The crucial missing piece in Christian theodicy is *Christodicy*, Jesus' *whole* interaction with evil. Just as a Christian ethicist can ask, "Can ethics be Christian?"²⁰ (are there traits that distinguish Christian ethics from the values of other faiths?), so we must ask, *can theodicy be Christian*, not to endorse Christian exceptionalism (Jesus counsels us to be humble!), but to remember that our faith is unique; not more unique, simply (like all faiths) unique, in its own way.

For most Christian theology in most of history, Christ has been—and is—the centerpiece. Christians drawn to contemporary re-creations of the historical Jesus (Jesus unplugged) share a common assertion with the early church's boldest proclamations: people *around* Jesus experienced God in an especially provocative way *through* Jesus. As Christians, we use metaphorical, metaphysical, mystical, liturgical, analytical, and poetic words to answer Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?"²¹ We assert that, through Jesus, we see God most clearly; through him, we love our neighbors most dearly.

In Jesus' teachings and ministry, we see the action of God, the presence of God, and the glory of God. The Gospels share an intuition that remains the mainstay of Christian faith: to see Jesus is to see God's work and God's face. To experience Jesus is to behold God. God's nature is revealed elsewhere—in Scripture, tradition, and reason, in creation, human love, and many religions, in ivory towers, back alleys, fields, and streets. Yet, to Christians, God's nature is *most fully* revealed in Jesus.

19. John 8:12, 9:5.

20. Gustafson, *Can Ethics Be Christian?*, 169–79.

21. Matt 16:15//Mark 8:29//Luke 9:20.

Encapsulating over three centuries of action, reflection, worship, preaching, contemplation, and debate, the Nicene Creed calls Christ “God from God, light from light, true God from true God.” Although also a product of ecclesiastical-imperial politics and sometimes abused as a litmus test of orthodoxy, “the creed is not an imprisoning wall, it is a gate, opening on a limitless country which can be entered in no other way.”²² Its phrases echo the New Testament’s brashest, oddest, and wildest proclamations that Jesus is “the Word” of God,²³ “one” with God,²⁴ equal with God,²⁵ “the image of the invisible God,”²⁶ the one in whom “the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,”²⁷ “the reflection of God’s glory,” and “the exact imprint of God’s very being.”²⁸

If, with genuine respect for all people of faith and goodwill, we want to think as Christians, we must first remember these audacious, most intoxicated views of Christ. If Jesus is the Word made flesh, the imprint of God, the fullness of God, God from God and light from light, we, as Christians, cannot consider God-and-evil without contemplating evil-and-Jesus. If we want to reaffirm, revise, and/or reform our tradition, we must sculpt a Christodicy not only to respond to age-old questions, but as an old but new way to speak of God.

Christian theodicy has usually been parsed as *God and the problem of evil*, and that is, itself, a problem. If that is all Christians have to offer, it’s time to shut down churches, because we are left to shield an indefensible God behind incoherent beliefs, but if we can break free of small “u” unitarian thinking and re-examine tragedy, suffering, and evil in light of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, we can rephrase Christodicy as *evil and the problem of Jesus*, and therein lies the grace. For Jesus is a problem. He is a problem for tucked and tightened dogmas because for Christians he is not only God’s Word, God with us, and a crucified God; he is tempted like any run-of-the-mill schmuck, he has run-ins with demons, he teaches well, he does good, and, because no good deed goes unpunished, he is killed. Yet even before he is a theological problem for

22. Hinton-Hasty, *Beyond the Social Maze*, 25.

23. John 1:14.

24. John 17:11.

25. Phil 2:6.

26. Col 1:15.

27. Col 1:19.

28. Heb 1:3.