

Evil and Christian Faith

In the Beginning

WHY? WHY DO SUFFERING, tragedy, and evil so regularly squelch, squash, or blot out our aspirations for personal happiness, community wholeness, and societal well-being? Why are things the way they are, and why have they *always* been this way? Peoples of countless cultures have long used creation stories to ruminate on such questions. Some narratives thrill with nature's majesty; others chronicle the ways willful pride contaminates creation's wonders.¹ Classical African religions tell hundreds of such stories, and they are not alone—"in a rich chord of unresolved harmony," the Hindu tradition composes its own extensive corpus.² Jesus and Buddha are silent on the matter, and mainstream Islamic thought swerves to avoid these dicey dilemmas, but add every other religious tradition's need to pose questions and posit explanations, and such tales proliferate.

Yet even these treasure troves of stories fail to satiate the "why" market. Nontheists also despair that the world is not a happier, healthier place: an idealist laments that we don't live by our principles; a humanist grumbles that *we the people* don't progress; a capitalist frets because the invisible hand so often fumbles; a Marxist worries because faultless

1. Orobator, *Theology*, 45–47.

2. Doniger O'Flaherty, *Origins of Evil*, 13.

theories fail in practice; a hedonist pouts because the pursuit of pleasure suffers frequent interruptions.

The “why” market’s concepts of creation abound because, in theory, there are an infinite number of possibilities for the universe, the earth, human nature, and human life. A perfectly wise, all-powerful creator *could* create an idyllic nature without hunters or quarry and utopian societies without victims or executioners. That is not this world. Why? Mark Twain claims to have run a two-part experiment to explain it all: he put a cat and a dog in a cage, and within an hour they got along famously. He then placed a rabbit in the cage and soon the three became friends. Over the next two days, he added a fox, a goose, a squirrel, a monkey, and some doves: “They lived together in peace; even affectionately.” In another cage he put the cream of the human race: an Irish Catholic, a Scotch Presbyterian, a Greek Orthodox Christian, a Methodist “from the wilds of Arkansas,” a Buddhist, a Muslim, a Hindu, and a Salvation Army colonel. Two days later, he returned to find nothing but “gory odds and ends.”³ Why is the world the way it is? That’s why.

We have volumes of data—it’s called history—to corroborate the truth in Twain’s joke. Given that evidence, the most obvious way to eliminate evil would be to get rid of the human race. This isn’t a recommendation but without us evil wouldn’t vandalize the earth. Our planet’s countless other life-forms have a sliding scale of capacities, but as far as we know (right now), humans are the only ones who can consciously choose good or evil, blessing or curse. If that is true, simply subtract us and (voila!) you have a world without evil. *Or* God could have designed humans to be a tad wiser, a bit smarter, more empathetic, and less gullible (a sucker could be born every *other* minute). *Or* God could create humans minus the decision-making capacity for evil; we could be mindless but contented automatons.

In the abstract, we can speculate that life without evil would have drawbacks: such a world might not promote character development, moral nobility, or heroism. Some conjecture that evil has the hidden purpose of teaching, edifying, or sanctifying us and, whether or not it *does*, it *can*. Some find this theory satisfying; it contains some truth, and it would be fine if life’s worst pain were a splinter, but what of those whose suffering absorbs every minute of their lives—what do they get out of the deal? What about those beaten down by cycles of entrenched poverty

3. Twain, “Damned Human Race,” 227–28.

or screwed up by successive generations of incest—what’s their payoff? What of those who die without having fully lived—an infant or, worse, someone living in prolonged physical pain or soul-twisting depression? What are the benefits for *them*? As Ivan Karamazov would say, the price of *that* ticket is too high. No lesson, no wisdom, and no sanctity could be worth the suffering of even one child, let alone millions.

Less abstractly, Scripture proffers its own contending ways to understand God and creation. In YHWH’s Shiva moment, God alone forms good and evil,⁴ a vision of unchecked celestial power without loyal (or disloyal) opposition. That monism (counting to one) is countered by dualism: there is a second force, an enemy, Satan. Both contrast with multilateralism: there are many tribes and nations along with uncounted individuals with unnumbered unseen, conflicting forces within them all, each free to act as they will. Biblically, there are few examples of monism, and rare samples of pure dualism, but there’s a whole lot of multilateralism going on. Christodicy, then, must not only consider everyone in the world; it must have roles for everything in creation. It turns out that it takes more than a church to nurture a Christian or the proverbial village to raise a child; it also takes a physical planet and a moral/amoral universe.

While there is not a single word about original sin in the Bible’s original text, there are tangled threads in its two creation stories: *in the beginning*, God created goodness;⁵ *from the beginning*, people’s rash decisions have resulted in alienation, dislocation, toil, and death.⁶ Both are true. Original sin is *not* a single idiotic choice two chumps made in a primordial past whose effects pass down biologically to us; it is *our* dreary, unoriginal proclivity to make the same decisions, chase the same seductions, and sink our teeth into the same juicy lies.

From these simple but profound stories, Christian theology has extrapolated that God did not intend for us to scatter evil willy-nilly, hither and yon—we took that on. God’s directive was to multiply blessings, but *from the beginning*, we have conflated freedom with entitlement, self-indulgence, license, and the gratification of every evanescent urge. In other words, the drama in which we live and move and have our being is as it has always been—the age of creation isn’t past; we live in it.

4. Isa 45:7.

5. Gen 1:1–31.

6. Gen 3:1–24.

Yet, remarkably, one of the things Christians often fail to consider is the centrality of creation: with or without God, humanity is hardly alone.

This is not to say that we have a shortage of concepts for God and creation: God is in everything (pantheism); or God is in *and* apart from everything (panentheism); or God's self-contraction makes room for everything (*tsimtsum*); or a host of permutations. When the first story in Genesis says creation is "good," it means its existence is a gift, not that it has a genteel sense of propriety. Nature can be pitiless and stunning, and Scripture paints it in incompatible icons as good,⁷ enchanting,⁸ or a biocentric anti-system forever running amok.⁹ When the human gaze rises beyond you or me or us or them to sun and moon and stars and darkness, do we feel inspired or ill at ease? Do we find our infinite worth or a sense of worthlessness? Are we little lower than angels or one notch above amoebas? Are we estranged or do we belong? To Jesus, creation is gratuitously generous and/or completely indifferent to moral order: God makes the "sun rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain" on just and unjust alike.¹⁰ Creation is made up of storms and stillness, gloom and brightness; it is an uncoordinated hodgepodge of powers that cultivates maladies and contains cures.

Not only is there more to Christian faith than God and me or God and us. Not only is the social world a major factor in life and history, so are oceans, the ozone, glaciers, rivers, hurricanes, tornadoes, floodplains, flatlands, sunsets, and swamps; every part of the earth, and the earth itself, is an independent power. At their best, the stars declare God's glory,¹¹ and everything that has breath (and many that don't) praises God.¹² To Francis of Assisi, all things in creation are one beloved family;¹³ to Teilhard de Chardin, all matter is "blessed," even though "harsh," "perilous," and "mighty."¹⁴

Each of these perspectives is vital to Christian faith, but Christodicy examines evil and chaos in creation primarily through Christ. Not only do

7. Gen 1:1–31.

8. Ps 8:1–8.

9. Job 38:1–41:34.

10. Matt 5:45.

11. Ps 19:1–6.

12. Ps 150:6.

13. Francis, *Francis and Clare*, 38–39.

14. Teilhard de Chardin, *Writings*, 44–45.

New Testament writers claim that God and Christ are one; they consider the act of creation collaborative—as it was with Hebrew Scripture’s wisdom,¹⁵ so it was with Christ. While the Hebrew Bible has two great creation stories, the New Testament has two creation mini-avowals. The Epistle to the Colossians announces that, “in [Christ] all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things and in him all things hold together.”¹⁶ In addition to (or instead of) sculpting galaxies, planets, continents, oceans, mountains, plants, and animals, God/Christ creates “powers” that have something of Christ in them and whose unity is “in” Christ. John’s Prologue proclaims more simply, “all things came into being through [the Word], and without him not one thing came into being.”¹⁷ If God/Christ creates “all things,” *evil* is one of those things.

This, too, gives Christians much to mull over, but Christodicy asserts that we best understand creation less through a cosmic Christ than through the Gospels’ Jesus. Unless Jesus’ nature is unlike God’s (which would negate Christianity), if we want to understand creation, imagine *Jesus* creating it. Of course, this raises other questions. Would Jesus create a world that is harmonious, breathtaking, and lush, *and* desolate, indifferent, and cruel? It is hard to imagine Jesus intentionally peopling the universe with autonomous malevolent forces but remember—he never *destroys* evil. Does that mean God can’t or won’t *create* without stirring evil into the mix? The rickety age-old question is: does an omnipotent God *allow* evil? Christodicy’s comparable question is: is it possible to create humans (or goodness) without evil? When Jesus says, “for God all things are possible,”¹⁸ is he speaking only of the topic at hand at that moment (salvation), or does he mean that, for God, all possibilities have existed from the beginning?

Then there are Jesus’ interactions with creation. When he quiets a storm, his disciples ask, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”¹⁹ Who indeed? It wouldn’t have taken much head-scratching for them to recall that ancient Israel’s God is the creator who dotingly

15. Prov 8:22–31.

16. Col 1:16–17.

17. John 1:3.

18. Matt 19:26//Mark 10:27//Luke 18:27.

19. Matt 8:27//Mark 4:41//Luke 8:29.

crafts heaven and earth with steadfast love²⁰ and the liberator who parts waters to free slaves.²¹ These patterns of blessing and emancipation reoccur when Jesus calms disease or frees those possessed by demons. Chaos is not only a preexisting condition for Jesus; in the first creation story, it preexists existence.²² In his ministry, Jesus works with and *within* human nature and nature—leavening, molding, planting, weeding, guiding, and healing. God turns chaos into goodness; Jesus turns it into harmony. Creation, then, is less what God *once did* than what God *is always doing*. A creator, though, has no origin story; Jesus of Nazareth does—his genealogy stretches back to Eden.²³ He is not over, above, or apart from earth's history; he generates wholeness from all that is fractured *within* creation and the social world.

Still. Why? Even if creation is an unfinished work in progress, why create the universe, the earth, human life, and human nature as they are? Christodicy's questions and answers arise from Jesus' life in which he does the kingdom's work with the hard-to-trace methodology of a drip painter, so it's hard to say. Maybe there were (and are) alternatives, but it seems as though chaos is an intrinsic ingredient in creation, evil an innate part of human nature, and it is God's Christ-nature to nurture harmony *within* creation and *among* humans. What happens in the beginning doesn't stay there; it is an epiphany of God's ongoing work.

Even a beginner's glance at creation sees a universe populated by the known, unknown, unfathomed, and unfathomable—from subatomic particles to the most basic organic life-forms to the as-yet-unidentified creatures living in the depths of the sea to an almost infinite variety of animals on earth to each person's intricate psychological makeup to every people's elaborate cultures to the stunning subtleties of dialects and languages to the incredible force of storms and seas to the dark side of the moon to stars and black holes, all with minds (and/or impulses) of their own. Whatever else they are, every one of these amazing, troubling, and/or confounding free created beings is part of God's glory.

As it turns out, the same dazzling spectacle that often sparks our sense of wonder also rouses us to wonder why.

20. Ps 136:1–9.

21. Exod 14:21–22.

22. Gen 1:2.

23. Luke 3:38.

Christ Was Born for This

Meister Eckhart tells a medieval folk story to explain why God became human. A married woman loses an eye in a disfiguring accident. Appalled at her disability and ashamed of her appearance, she worries that her husband will no longer find her attractive or, worse, will stop loving her. Nothing he says assuages her fears, so he pokes out one of his own eyes so that he, too, will be mutilated and half-blind. She need never again feel anxious or ashamed. They are equals; they are half-blind; they are ugly, but in love.²⁴ Even with his off-putting gender typecasting, Eckhart makes profound theological points. That, he says, is *why* God becomes human: love. That, he says, is *how* God becomes human—by seeing and being less.

Writers in Christianity's embryonic age never used such touching analogies to wed the concept of divine incarnation to Jesus' life. Quoting a hymn, Paul says that Christ, although equal with God, never clung to that parity with a vicelike grip; instead, he "emptied himself" (kenosis) of divinity and became human;²⁵ he who, as God's equal, had known no sin, *became* "sin."²⁶ John uses a different vocabulary to make the same point: God's beautiful, all-seeing "Word" became "flesh,"²⁷ one-eyed and ugly.

In the incarnation, Christ surrenders every omni. For Jesus, this self-emptying isn't abstract; he reenacts it in the temptation story as he refuses, in turn, power, glory, and everlasting life. To become what he is born to be, he must abandon the perks of divinity, embrace the snags of humanity, and reject the charms of evil. Paradoxically, even as Christ divests himself of divine power, he is hardly powerless: he quite efficiently defeats demons, heals the sick, and forgives sins.

But does an almighty, eternal, all-knowing God divest in the same ways? While the incarnation stresses Christ's unity *with* God, Christians often differentiate Christ *from* God: God is invisible; Jesus is physical.

God is immutable; Jesus matures.

God is immortal; Jesus dies.

And there is more.

God (we say) is omnipotent; Jesus, like any human, has an Achilles' heel.

24. Eckhart, *Sermons II*, 62.

25. Phil 2:6–7.

26. 2 Cor 5:21.

27. John 1:14.