

# Introduction

IN THE 1980s, A mentor and friend of mine wryly entitled one of his sermons “Communism, Capitalism, and Christianity . . . in about Twenty Minutes.” He made an obvious point: he was going to cover a lot of ground in a short time. If his congregation wanted depth, they could go to the nearby university library, but if they wanted insights into the inter-relationship of three gigantic topics, come to church.

That was a sermon. This book is an essay. But the point is the same, albeit in two-hundred-plus pages. Books can delve into minute detail, or they can cover a lot of ground; they can dig, or they can travel. They can be meticulous like archaeologists working an ancient site; they can be observant like pilgrims on their way to a sacred shrine. Each has its advantages, yet both are valuable.

This essay travels. It covers a lot of territory—comparative religion, philosophy, theology, biblical studies, and personal stories—any part of which could contain volumes. Such a travelogue has inherent deficiencies and may be subject to superficialities. On the other hand, travel expands horizons. It teaches experientially. It exposes the limits of homegrown wisdom regardless of whose home first found it wise.

This essay travels quickly over much spiritual terrain in order to re-think in a particular light the age-old question of God-and-evil. At times, it is incredibly broad as it finds links between religious traditions, philosophies, and faiths. At other times, it narrows its focus to the Gospels’ story of Jesus. The purpose of this approach is to find something in the Christian faith that learns from other perspectives while also claiming particular insights into God-and-evil through Jesus. The hope is that by broadening, then narrowing, and then broadening again, some conclusions will appeal to people of any faith or no faith because the problem of evil belongs to us all.

This essay begins by making a case for an alternative way to engage the problem of God-and-evil (theodicy) through Jesus-and-evil (Christodicy). Then it moves to personal stories from my forty years in the priesthood to ground the essay in real life. It moves again from there to theodicy: why we ask questions about God and evil, and how, through the centuries, others have answered them. Then it reaches the heart of the matter—rereading slices of Jesus’ story in light of his relationship with evil. The journey not yet finished, it explores what stories of evil and Jesus might say to Christian beliefs about creation, incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, salvation, and the Trinity. Finally, at the end of the journey, it asks what evil-and-Jesus can tell us about God, and how it can guide us to become better people. Each section could be a book in itself. Some have been. If this essay is provocative enough, maybe others will dig deeper here and there to unearth greater wisdom from places author and reader will travel past too quickly.

The *problem of evil*, as it’s often called, is intellectual, psychological, spiritual, personal, political, and practical, and I’ve written this essay to bridge popular and academic levels. If the names of philosophers, academics, writers, and saints are irrelevant or distracting, skip them—the journey will still pass the same places and reach the same goal. But knowing those referred to might enrich your reading with a sense of their place and their journey. I have avoided (or explained) any insider jargon while maintaining intellectual integrity; theological thinking requires no rarified vocabulary.

I cannot help but write as an accidental, everyday winner of what I call *privilege bingo* (in terms of race, class, gender, orientation, identity, physicality, and education), which means that I have had the luxury, more often than I know, to choose whether or not to face evils that give others no choice and cut them no slack. Yet, while my privileges have shielded me from being victimized in very significant ways, like everyone, I have felt evil’s sting and, like all people (especially people of privilege), I have not only witnessed evil; I have perpetrated it personally and as an unwilling participant in the unrelenting oppression the entitled inflict on the majority of the human race.

I also write as a pastor more than as a theologian—I care more about universal dilemmas than academic enigmas. I write as a priest with four decades of experience, of course, but even more so as someone who has lived six decades as a Christian, and even more than that as a human being approaching the end of my seventh decade. While some of these

questions are uniquely Christian, many belong to us all. So, while this essay will sometimes consider how best to be Christian or religious or spiritual, it also rethinks what it is to be human, for one of the things that defines us is our relationship with the evils around us, among us, and within us.

Years ago, while reading Marilynne Robinson's novel *Gilead* about a preacher who had delivered over a thousand sermons, I realized that I had passed the same milestone. Well over a thousand times, I've tried to say something meaningful in twenty minutes. A few times, I've tried to write something meaningful (an academic article) in about twenty pages. Sometimes digging, sometimes traveling, sometimes doing both, this is the fourth time I've tried to say something in a book. I have used my preaching experience to make theological points in an approachable style, grounding this essay in real life, Scripture, and my eclectic reading habits. A preacher preaches to a congregation; a writer writes for readers. Only the congregation and the readers can say if what they've heard or read speaks to them.

The library on God-and-evil is vast, so why add one more essay? Simply: who is satisfied with what they find in that library? Who is content with *any* explanation for God-and-evil? If you are, you are easily pleased! This essay may not inspire the lethargic, console the grief-stricken, or produce a hermetically sealed treatise, but I believe the terrain covered will redirect old questions and spark new insights, and if those questions are worth rephrasing, and those insights worth discovering, this essay will have been well worth writing and reading.