

JOHN HICK – EVIL AND THE GOD OF LOVE

I. THE NEGATIVE TASK OF THEODICY

At the outset of an attempt to present a Christian theodicy—a defense of the goodness of God in face of the evil in His world—we should recognize that, whether or not we can succeed in formulating its basis, an implicit theodicy is at work in the Bible, at least in the sense of an effective reconciliation of profound faith in God with a deep involvement in the realities of sin and suffering. The Scriptures reflect the characteristic mixture of good and evil in human experience. They record every kind of sorrow and suffering from the terrors of childhood to the “stony griefs of age”: cruelty, torture, violence, and agony; poverty, hunger, calamitous accident; disease, insanity, folly; every mode of man’s inhumanity to man and of his painfully insecure existence in the world. In these writings there is no attempt to evade the clear verdict of human experience that evil is dark, menacingly ugly, heart-rending, crushing. And the climax of this biblical history of evil was the execution of Jesus of Nazareth. Here were pain and violent destruction, gross injustice, the apparent defeat of the righteous, and the premature death of a still-young man. But further, for Christian faith, this death was the slaying of God’s Messiah, the one in whom mankind was to see the mind and heart of God made flesh. Here, then, the problem of evil rises to its ultimate maximum; for in its quality this was an evil than which no greater can be conceived. And yet throughout the biblical history of evil, including even this darkest point, God’s purpose of good was moving visibly or invisibly towards its far-distant fulfillment. In this faith the prophets saw both personal and national tragedy as God’s austere but gracious disciplining of His people. And even the greatest evil of all, the murder of the son of God, has been found by subsequent Christian faith to be also, in an astounding paradox, the greatest good of all, so that through the centuries the Church could dare to sing on the eve of its triumphant Easter celebrations, “O felix culpa, quae talem ac tantum meruit habere redemptorem.” For this reason there is no room within the Christian thought-world for the idea of tragedy in any sense that includes the idea of finally *wasted* suffering and goodness.

In all this a Christian theodicy is latent; and our aim must be to try to draw it out explicitly. The task, like that of theology in general, is one of “faith seeking understanding,” seeking in this case an understanding of the grounds of its own practical victory in the face of the harsh facts of evil. Accordingly, from the point of view of apologetics, theodicy has a negative rather than a positive function. It cannot profess to create faith, but only to preserve an already existing faith from being overcome by this dark mystery. For we cannot share the hope of the older schools of natural theology of inferring the existence of God from the evidences of nature; and one main reason for this, as David Hume made clear in his *Dialogues*, is precisely the fact of evil in its many forms. For us today the live question is whether this renders impossible a rational belief in God: meaning by this, not a belief in God that has been arrived at by rational argument (for it is doubtful whether a religious faith is ever attained in this way), but one that has arisen in a rational individual in response to some compelling element in his experience, and decisively illuminates and is illuminated by his experience as a whole. The aim of a Christian theodicy must thus be the relatively modest and defensive one of showing that the mystery of evil, largely incomprehensible though it remains, does not render irrational a faith that has arisen, not from the inferences of natural theology, but from participation in a stream of religious experience which is continuous with that recorded in the Bible.

2. THE TRADITIONAL THEODICY BASED UPON CHRISTIAN MYTH

We can distinguish, though we cannot always separate, three relevant facets of the Christian religion: Christian experience, Christian mythology, and Christian theology.

Religious experience is “the whole experience of religious persons,” constituting an awareness of God acting towards them in and through the events of their lives and of world history, the interpretative element within which awareness is the cognitive aspect of faith. And distinctively *Christian experience*, as a form of this, is the Christian’s seeing of Christ as his “Lord and Savior,” together with the pervasive recreative effects of this throughout his life, transforming the quality of his experience and determining his responses to other people. Christian faith is thus a distinctive consciousness of the world and of one’s existence within it, radiating from and illuminated by a consciousness of God in Christ. It is because there are often a successful facing and overcoming of the challenge of evil at this level that there can, in principle at least, be an honest and serious—even though tentative and incomplete—Christian theodicy.

By *Christian mythology* I mean the great persisting imaginative pictures by means of which the corporate mind of the Church has expressed to itself the significance of the historical events upon which its faith is based, above all the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus who was the Christ. The function of these myths is to convey in universally understandable ways the special importance and meaning of certain items of mundane experience.

By *Christian theology* I mean the attempts by Christian thinkers to speak systematically about God on the basis of the data provided by Christian experience. Thus it is a fact of the Christian faith-experience that “God was in Christ”; and the various Christological theories are attempts to understand this by seeing it in the context of other facts both of faith and of nature. Again, it is another facet of this basic fact of faith that in Christ God was “reconciling the world unto Himself”; and the various atonement theories are accordingly attempts to understand this further aspect of the experience. The other departments of Christian doctrine stand in a similar relationship to the primary data of Christian experience.

In the past, theology and myth have been closely twined together. For the less men knew about the character of the physical universe the harder it was for them to identify myth as myth, as distinct from history or science. This fact has profoundly affected the developments of the dominant tradition of Christian theodicy. Until comparatively recent times the ancient myth of the origin of evil in the fall of man was quite reasonably assumed to be history. The theologian accordingly accepted it as providing “hard” data, and proceeded to build his theodicy upon it. This mythological theodicy was first comprehensively developed by Augustine, and has continued substantially unchanged within the Roman Catholic Church to the present day. It was likewise adopted by the Reformers of the sixteenth century and has been virtually unquestioned as Protestant doctrine until within approximately the last hundred years. Only during this latest period has it been possible to identify as such its mythological basis, to apply a theological criticism to it, and then to go back to the data of Christian experience and build afresh, seeking a theodicy that can hope to make sense to Christians in our own and succeeding “centuries. ...

The traditional solution ... finds the origin of evil, as we have seen, in the fall, which was the beginning both of sin and, as its punishment, of man's sorrows and sufferings.' But this theory, so simple and mythologically satisfying, is open to insuperable scientific, moral, and logical objections. To begin with less fundamental aspects of the traditional solution, we know today that the conditions that were to cause human disease and mortality and the necessity for man to undertake the perils of hunting and the labors of agriculture and building, were already part of the natural order prior to the emergence of man and prior therefore to any first human sin, as were also the conditions causing such further 'evils' as earthquake, storm, flood, drought, and pest. And, second, the policy of punishing the whole succeeding human race for the sin of the first pair is, by the best human moral standards, unjust and does not provide anything that can be recognized by these standards as a theodicy. Third, there is a basic and fatal incoherence at the heart of the mythically based "solution." The Creator is preserved from any responsibility for the existence of evil by the claim that He made men (or angels) as free and finitely perfect creatures, happy in the knowledge of Himself, and subject to no strains or temptations, but that they themselves inexplicably and inexcusably rebelled against Him. But this suggestion amounts to a sheer self-contradiction. It is impossible to conceive of wholly good beings in a wholly good world becoming sinful. To say that they do is to postulate the self-creation of evil *ex nihilo*! There must have been some moral flaw in the creature or in his situation to set up the tension of temptation; for creaturely freedom in itself and in the absence of any temptation cannot lead to sin. Thus the very fact that the creature sins refutes the suggestion that until that moment he was a finitely perfect being living in an ideal creaturely relationship to God. And indeed (as we have already seen) the two greatest upholders of this solution implicitly admit the contradiction. Augustine, who treats of evil at its first occurrence in the fall of Satan and his followers, has to explain the eruption of sin in supposedly perfect angels by holding that God had in effect predestined their revolt by withholding from them the assurance of eternal bliss with which, in contrast, He had furnished the angels who remained steadfast. And Calvin, who treats the subject primarily at the point of the fall of man, holds that "all are not created in equal condition; rather, eternal life is foreordained for some, eternal damnation for others." Thus the myth, when mistakenly pressed to serve as a theodicy, can be saved only by adding to it the new and questionable doctrine of an absolute divine predestination. And this in turn only leads the theodicy to contradict itself. For its original intention was to blame evil upon the misuse of creaturely free will. But now this misuse is itself said to fall under the divine predestinating decrees. Thus the theodicy collapses into radical incoherence, and its more persistent defenders have become involved in ever more desperate and implausible epicycles of theory to save it. For example, to salvage the view of the fall of man as a temporal event that took place on this earth some definite (if unknown) number of years ago, it has been suggested that after emerging from his subhuman precursors man lived in the paradisaal state for only a very brief period, lasting perhaps no more than a matter of hours. Again, attempts have been made to protect the fall doctrine from the encroachments of scientific research by locating the primal calamity in a pre-mundane sphere. In the third century Origen had taught that some of the spirits whom God created rebelled against the divine majesty and were cast down into the material world to constitute our human race; and in the nineteenth century the German Protestant theologian Julius Muller, impressed by the overwhelming difficulties of affirming an historical fall, in effect revived Origen's theory as an explanation of the apparently universal evil propensities of man. All men are sinful, he suggested, because in another existence prior to the present life they have individually turned away from God.

The difficulties and disadvantages of such a view are, I think, not far to seek. The theory is without grounds in Scripture or in science, and it would have claim to consideration only if it could provide a solution, even if a speculative one, to the question of the origin of moral evil. But in fact it is not able to do this. It merely pushes back into an unknown and unknowable realm the wanton paradox of finitely perfect creatures, dwelling happily and untempted in the presence of God, turning to sin. Whether on earth or in heaven, this still amounts to the impossible self-creation of evil *ex nihilo*. If evil could thus create itself out of nothing in the midst of a wholly good universe, it could do so in a mundane Garden of Eden as easily as, or perhaps more easily than, in the highest heaven. Nothing, then, is gained for theodicy by postulating a pre-mundane fall of human souls.

As a variation which he regarded as superior to the notion of a pre-mundane fall of individuals, N. P. Williams proposed the idea of “a collective fall of the race-soul of humanity at an indefinitely remote past.” This collective fall occurred, according to Williams, during the long period between the first emergence of man as a biological species and his subsequent development to the point at which there were primitive societies, and therefore moral laws which could be transgressed. “We must,” he says, “postulate some unknown factor or agency which interfered to arrest the development of corporate feeling, just when man was becoming man, some mysterious and maleficent influence which cut into the stream of the genetic evolution of our race at some point during the twilit age which separates pre-human from human history.” This evil influence which attacked and corrupted mankind is also “the mysterious power which vitiates the whole of sub-human life with cruelty and selfishness,” and thus accounts not only for moral evil but also for the disorder, waste, and pain in nature. Accordingly the original calamity was not merely a fall of man but of the Life-Force itself, which we must conceive “as having been at the beginning, when it first sprang forth from the creative fecundity of the Divine Being, free, personal, and self-conscious.” This World-Soul was created good, but “at the beginning of Time, and in some transcendental and incomprehensible manner, it turned away from God and in the direction of Self, thus shattering its own interior being, which depended upon God for its stability and coherence, and thereby forfeiting its unitary self-consciousness, which it has only regained, after aeons of myopic striving, in sporadic fragments which are the separate minds of men and perhaps of superhuman spirits.”

Williams is, I think, justified in claiming that such a speculation cannot be excluded *ab initio* as impermissible to a responsible Christian theologian. As he points out,

Such a substitution of the idea of a corruption of the whole cosmic energy at some enormously remote date for the idea of a voluntary moral suicide of Man in comparatively recent times would be no greater a revolution than that which was effected by St. Anselm, when he substituted a satisfactoral theory of the Atonement for the view which regarded the death of Christ as a ransom paid to the Devil—a view which had behind it the venerable authority of a thousand years of Christian history.

Williams’ suggestion preserves the central thought of the Augustinian fall doctrine that the ultimate source of evil lies in an original conscious turning away from God on the part of created personal life. But precisely because of its faithfulness to that tradition his theory fails to throw any new light upon the problem of evil. Whether the self-creation of evil *ex nihilo* be located in

an historical Adam and Eve, or in a multitude of souls in a pre-mundane realm, or in a single world-soul at the beginning of time, it is equally valueless from the point of view of theodicy. In order for a soul or souls to fall there must be, either in them or in their environment, some flaw which produces temptation and leads to sin; and this flaw in the creation cannot be traced back to any other ultimate source than the Creator of all that is. Thus Williams' theory is open to the same objection as Miller's: namely, that it is a speculation whose only point would be to solve or lighten the problem of evil, but that it fails to do this.

3. THE "VALE OF SOUL-MAKING" THEODICY

Fortunately there is another and better way. As well as the "majority report" of the Augustinian tradition, which has dominated Western Christendom, both Catholic and Protestant, since the time of Augustine himself, there is the "minority report" of the Irenaean tradition. This latter is both older and newer than the other, for it goes back to St. Irenaeus and others of the early Hellenistic Fathers of the Church in the two centuries prior to St. Augustine, and it has flourished again in more developed forms during the last hundred years.

Instead of regarding man as having been created by God in a finished state, as a finitely perfect being fulfilling the divine intention for our human level of existence, and then falling disastrously away from this, the minority report sees man as still in process of creation. Irenaeus himself expressed the point in terms of the (exegetically dubious) distinction between the "image" and the "likeness" of God referred to in Genesis 1. 26: "Then God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness." His view was that man as a personal and moral being already exists in the image, but has not yet been formed into the finite likeness of God. By this "likeness" Irenaeus means something more than personal existence as such; he means a certain valuable quality of personal life which reflects finitely the divine life. This represents the perfecting of man, the fulfilment of God's purpose for humanity, the "bringing of many sons to glory," the creating of "children of God" who are "fellow heirs with Christ" of his glory.

And so man, created as a personal being in the image of God, is only the raw material for a further and more difficult stage of God's creative work. This is the leading of men as relatively free and autonomous persons, through their own dealings with life in the world in which He has placed them, towards that quality of personal existence that is the finite likeness of God. The features of this likeness are revealed in the person of Christ, and the process of man's creation into it is the work of the Holy Spirit. In St. Paul's words, "And we all, with unveiled faces, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness (*eixthv*) from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit"; or again, "For God knew his own before ever they were, and also ordained that they should be shaped to the likeness (*Eixthii*) of his Son." In Johannine terms, the movement from the image to the likeness is a transition from one level of existence, that of animal life (*Bios*), to another and higher level, that of eternal life (*Zoe*), which includes but transcends the first. And the fall of man was seen by Irenaeus as a failure within the second phase of this creative process, a failure that has multiplied the perils and complicated the route of the journey in which God is seeking to lead mankind.

In the light of modern anthropological knowledge some form of two-stage conception of the creation of man has become an almost unavoidable Christian tenet. At the very least we must acknowledge as two distinguishable stages the fashioning of *homo sapiens* as a product of the long evolutionary process, and his sudden or gradual spiritualization as a child of God. But we may well extend the first stage to include the development of man as a rational and responsible person capable of personal relationship with the personal Infinite who has created him. This first stage of the creative process was, to our anthropomorphic imaginations, easy for divine omnipotence. By an exercise of creative power God caused the physical universe to exist, and in the course of countless ages to bring forth within it organic life, and finally to produce out of organic life personal life; and when man had thus emerged out of the evolution of the forms of organic life, a creature had been made who has the possibility of existing in conscious fellowship with God. But the second stage of the creative process is of a different kind altogether. It cannot be performed by omnipotent power as such. For personal life is essentially free and self-directing. It cannot be perfected by divine fiat, but only through the uncompelled responses and willing co-operation of human individuals in their actions and reactions in the world in which God has placed them. Men may eventually become the perfected persons whom the New Testament calls “children of God,” but they cannot be created ready-made as this.

The value-judgement that is implicitly being invoked here is that one who has attained to goodness by meeting and eventually mastering temptations, and thus by rightly making responsible choices in concrete situations, is good in a richer and more valuable sense than would be one created *ab initio* in a state either of innocence or of virtue. In the former case, which is that of the actual moral achievements of mankind, the individual’s goodness has within it the strength of temptations overcome, a stability based upon an accumulation of right choices, and a positive and responsible character that comes from the investment of costly personal effort. I suggest, then, that it is an ethically reasonable judgement, even though in the nature of the case not one that is capable of demonstrative proof, that human goodness slowly built up through personal histories of moral effort has a value in the eyes of the Creator which justifies even the long travail of the soul-making process.

The picture with which we are working is thus developmental and teleological. Man is in process of becoming the perfected being whom God is seeking to create. However, this is not taking place—it is important to add—by a natural and inevitable evolution, but through a hazardous adventure in individual freedom. Because this is a pilgrimage within the life of each individual, rather than a racial evolution, the progressive fulfilment of God’s purpose does not entail any corresponding progressive improvement in the moral state of the world. There is no doubt a development in man’s ethical situation from generation to generation through the building of individual choices into public institutions, but this involves an accumulation of evil as well as of good. It is thus probable that human life was lived on much the same moral plane two thousand years ago or four thousand years ago as it is today. But nevertheless during this period uncounted millions of souls have been through the experience of earthly life, and God’s purpose has gradually moved towards its fulfilment within each one of them, rather than within a human aggregate composed of different units in different generations.

If, then, God’s aim in making the world is “the bringing of many sons to glory,” that aim will naturally determine the kind of world that He has created. Antitheistic writers almost invariably

assume a conception of the divine purpose which is contrary to the Christian conception. They assume that the purpose of a loving God must be to create a hedonistic paradise; and therefore to the extent that the world is other than this, it proves to them that God is either not loving enough or not powerful enough to create such a world. They think of God's relation to the earth on the model of a human being building a cage for a pet animal to dwell in. If he is humane he will naturally make his pet's quarters as pleasant and healthful as he can. Any respect in which the cage falls short of the veterinarian's ideal, and contains possibilities of accident or disease, is evidence of either limited benevolence or limited means, or both. Those who use the problem of evil as an argument against belief in God almost invariably think of the world in this kind of way. David Hume, for example, speaks of an architect who is trying to plan a house that is to be as comfortable and convenient as possible. If we find that "the windows, doors, fires, passages, stairs, and the whole economy of the building were the source of noise, confusion, fatigue, darkness, and the extremes of heat and cold" we should have no hesitation in blaming the architect. It would be in vain for him to prove that if this or that defect were corrected greater ills would result: "still you would assert in general, that, if the architect had had skill and good intentions, he might have formed such a plan of the whole, and might have adjusted the parts in such a manner, as would have remedied all or most of these inconveniences."²⁶

But if we are right in supporting that God's purpose for man is to lead him from human *Bios*, or the biological life of man, to that quality of *Zoe*, or the personal life of eternal worth, which we see in Christ, then the question that we have to ask is not, Is this the kind of world that an all-powerful and infinitely loving being would create *as* an environment for his human pets? or, Is the architecture of the world the most pleasant and convenient possible? The question that we have to ask is rather, Is this the kind of world that God might make as an environment in which moral beings may be fashioned, through their own free insights and responses, into "children of God"?

Such critics as Hume are confusing what heaven ought to be, as an environment for perfected finite beings, with what this world ought to be, as an environment for beings who are in process of becoming perfected. For if our general conception of God's purpose is correct the world is not intended to be a paradise, but rather the scene of a history in which human personality may be formed towards the pattern of Christ. Men are not to be thought of on the analogy of animal pets, whose life is to be made as agreeable as possible, but rather on the analogy of human children, who are to grow to adulthood in an environment whose primary and overriding purpose is not immediate pleasure but the realizing of the most valuable potentialities of human personality.

Needless to say, this characterization of God as the heavenly Father is not a merely random illustration but an analogy that lies at the heart of the Christian faith. Jesus treated the likeness between the attitude of God to man, and the attitude of human parents at their best towards their children, as providing the most adequate way for us to think about God. And so it is altogether relevant to a Christian understanding of this world to ask, How does the best parental love express itself in its influence upon the environment in which children are to grow up? I think it is clear that a parent who loves his children, and wants them to become the best human beings that they are capable of becoming, does not treat pleasure as the sole and supreme value. Certainly we seek pleasure for our children, and take great delight in obtaining it for them; but we do not desire for them unalloyed pleasure at the expense of their growth in such even greater values as

moral integrity, unselfishness, compassion, courage, humour, reverence for the truth, and perhaps above all the capacity for love. We do not act on the premise that pleasure is the supreme end of life; and if the development of these other values sometimes clashes with the provision of pleasure, then we are willing to have our children miss a certain amount of this, rather than fail to come to possess and to be possessed by the finer and more precious qualities that are possible to the human personality. A child brought up on the principle that the only or the supreme value is pleasure would not be likely to become an ethically mature adult or an attractive or happy personality. And to most parents it seems more important to try to foster quality and strength of character in their children than to fill their lives at all times with the utmost possible degree of pleasure. If, then, there is any true analogy between God's purpose for his human creatures, and the purpose of loving and wise parents for their children, we have to recognize that the presence of pleasure and the absence of pain cannot be the supreme and overriding end for which the world exists. Rather, this world must be a place of soul-making. And its value is to be judged, not primarily by the quantity of pleasure and pain occurring in it at any particular moment, but by its fitness for its primary purpose, the purpose of soul-making.

In all this we have been speaking about the nature of the world considered simply as the God-given environment of man's life. For it is mainly in this connection that the world has been regarded in Irenaean and in Protestant thought. But such a way of thinking involves a danger of anthropocentrism from which the Augustinian and Catholic tradition has generally been protected by its sense of the relative insignificance of man within the totality of the created universe. Man was dwarfed within the medieval world-view by the innumerable hosts of angels and archangels above him—unfallen rational natures which rejoice in the immediate presence of God, reflecting His glory in the untarnished mirror of their worship. However, this higher creation has in our modern world lost its hold upon the imagination. Its place has been taken, as the minimizer of men, by the immensities of outer space and by the material universe's unlimited complexity transcending our present knowledge. As the spiritual environment envisaged by Western man has shrunk, his physical horizons have correspondingly expanded. Where the human creature was formerly seen as an insignificant appendage to the angelic world, he is now seen as an equally insignificant organic excrescence, enjoying a fleeting moment of consciousness on the surface of one of the planets of a minor star. Thus the truth that was symbolized for former ages by the existence of the angelic hosts is today impressed upon us by the vastness of the physical universe, countering the egoism of our species by making us feel that this immense prodigality of existence can hardly all exist for the sake of man—though, on the other hand, the very realization that it is not all for the sake of man may itself be salutary and beneficial to man!

However, instead of opposing man and nature as rival objects of God's interest, we should perhaps rather stress man's solidarity as an embodied being with the whole natural order in which he is embedded. For man is organic to the world; all his acts and thoughts and imaginations are conditioned by space and time; and in abstraction from nature he would cease to be human. We may, then, say that the beauties and sublimities and powers, the microscopic intricacies and macroscopic vastnesses, the wonders and the terrors of the natural world and of the life that pulses through it, are willed and valued by their Maker in a creative act that embraces man together with nature. By means of matter and living flesh God both builds a path and weaves a veil between Himself and the creature made in His image. Nature thus has

permanent significance; for God has set man in a creaturely environment, and the final fulfilment of our nature in relation to God will accordingly take the form of an embodied life within “a new heaven and a new earth.” And as in the present age man moves slowly towards that fulfilment through the pilgrimage of his earthly life, so also “the whole creation” is “groaning in travail,” waiting for the time when it will be “set free from its bondage to decay.”

And yet however fully we thus acknowledge the permanent significance and value of the natural order, we must still insist upon man’s special character as a personal creature made in the image of God; and our theodicy must still center upon the soul-making process that we believe to be taking place within human life.

This, then, is the starting-point from which we propose to try to relate the realities of sin and suffering to the perfect love of an omnipotent Creator. And as will become increasingly apparent, a theodicy that starts in this way must be eschatological in its ultimate bearings. That is to say, instead of looking to the past for its clue to the mystery of evil, it looks to the future, and indeed to that ultimate future to which only faith can look. Given the conception of a divine intention working in and through human time towards a fulfilment that lies in its completeness beyond human time, our theodicy must find the meaning of evil in the part that it is made to play in the eventual outworking of that purpose; and must find the justification of the whole process in the magnitude of the good to which it leads. The good that outshines all ill is not a paradise long since lost but a kingdom which is yet to come in its full glory and permanence.

From this point of view we must speak about moral evil; about pain, including that of the lower animals; about the higher and more distinctively human forms of suffering; and about the relation between all this and the will of God as it has been revealed in Jesus Christ.