CONTEMPORARY VIEWS ON THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

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This paper focuses on the two main strands of theological thought concerning God and the problem of evil, Augustinian and Irenaean, and shows how these historical trends are interpreted in 20th century thought. Other contemporary theological perspectives will be included such as Moltmann and Tutu. The article will be organized into three sections: I) Augustinian thought with Karl Barth's contemporary interpretation of *Das Nichtige*; II) Irenaean thought with the contermporary thought of John Hick; III) contemporary thoughts on the problem of moral evil concluding with the perspectives of Tutu and Moltmann.

I. Augustinian Thought

For Augustine, God is the ultimate of being and goodness. He is both the perfect good and the infinite eternal immutable Being. God has created out of nothing "all that exists other than himself." The created order God creates is wholly good. The whole creation including the material world is good. It is also, however, because it lacks the infinite immutability of its Creator, capable of being corrupted. But for Augustine there is no level of being that is evil, only a lesser good. All of God's creation is good: sun, moon, stars, angels and human beings, birds, fish, trees, plants, light, darkness.[1]

Evil thus is not any kind of positive substance or force but consists rather in the going wrong of God's creation in some of its parts. Evil is essentially the malfunctioning of something that in itself is good. All of created order is good and yet everything other than God himself is made out of nothing and is accordingly mutable and capable of being corrupted. Evil thus is precisely this corruption of a mutable good.[2] Evil is *privatio boni* — "privation of good."[3] It is not privation of good as a simple lack of goodness but evil as the loss of good or absence of good in that which is inherently good. Evil is negative, a lack, a privation.[4] In the *Enchiridion*, Augustine states, "Evil is not a substance; the wound or the disease is a defect of the bodily substance which, as a substance, is good."[5] Thus, evil as *privatio boni* is the absence of goodness that prevails when anything has defected from the mode of being that is proper to it in God's creative intention.[6] Augustine thus makes evil secondary and dependent on that which is good: the negative and privative character of good. Nothing evil exists in itself but only as an evil aspect of some actual entity that is inherently good.[7]

Karl Barth, 20th century Neo-reformed theologian, in his work, *Church Dogmatics* Volume III/3, defines evil as *das Nichtige:* "the inimical principle of negation."[8] Evil for Barth is that which is utterly and essentially inimical to God and his creation. Barth understands *das Nichtige* as true irrenconcilable evil. Jesus Christ reveals to us that the horror of *das Nichtige* is defeated and

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overcome in him. We ourselves as sinners have become victims of *das Nichtige*, sharing its nature. Sin is a concrete form of *das Nichtige* for us.

For Barth, there is real evil and death, devil and his legions and a real hell. For Barth, *das Nichtige* is not simply sin but, more comprehensively, the enemy of God which takes the forms of sin and pain, suffering and death. Barth states, "In the physical evil concealed behind the shadowy side of the created cosmos we have a form of the enemy and no less an offense against God that that which reveals man to be a sinner."[9] The power of God in Jesus Christ overcomes *das Nichtige* and demonstrates the supreme good and redemption.

Evil as *das Nichtige* for Barth is understood only in light of God's sovereign lordship. Barth states:

> He is lord both on the right hand and on the left. It is only on this basis that *das Nichtige* 'is', but on that basis it really 'is'...As God is Lord on the left hand as well, He is the basis and Lord of *das Nichtige*, too...It is not a Second God, nor self-created. It has now power save that which it is allowed by God...It 'is' problematically because it is only on the left hand of God, under His no, the object of His jealously, wrath and judgment. It 'is' not as God and His creation are, but only in its own improper way, as inherent contradiction, as impossible possibility.[10]

Barth understands that *das Nichtige* is brought into existence by God's decision to create a good universe. By willing a good creation, faithful to himself, God has unwilled, or willed not to will, its opposite. This divine act of negation or rejection has as its object *das Nichtige.* It is perverse opposition to God and to his creatures. Barth finds the origin of *das Nichtige* in Gen. 1:2 referring to the primitive chaos that was "without form and void." Barth states:

> This negation of [God's] grace is chaos, the world which He did not choose or will, which He could not and did not create, but which, as He created the actual world, He passes over and set aside, marking and excluding it as the eternal past, the eternal yesterday.[11]

Das Nichtige is the darkness, primitive chaos God put behind him when he created the good created order. This now exists only as the rejected hostile nothingness, *Nichtige*, in contrast to God's good creation. *Das Nichtige* is the object of God's wrath and punishment and is overcome in the death and exaltation of Jesus Christ.[12] Barth thus ontologically explains evil as nothingness behind God's good creation. The darkside of God's good creation is similar to Augustine's concept of evil as lack in that which is inherently good.

II. Irenaean Thought

A brief sketch of Augustine's view of original sin serves as a backdrop to the thought of Irenaeus. Augustine, in his doctrine of the Fall, elaborates upon the account of the story from Genesis three. Augustine develops the concept that Adam's pre-fallen state is an exalted condition of original righteousness. The snake is Satan in disguise. The Fall as Adam's disobedience results in

human mortality. Adam's sin in inherited by the whole subsequent human species. It is both an imputed guilt for the sin of Adam and an inherited moral taint or disease. This for Augustine is original sin—*originale peccatum*.[13] Augustine draws upon Paul from Rom. 5:18-19 in the root idea that the taint of original sin is transmitted by physical inheritance. Augustine's understanding of the physical inheritance of sinfulness includes the idea that begetting children is also sinful because they are conceived in concupiscent lust. Further developed in Augustine is the thought that Adam's descendants share in the guilt of Adam's sin. Thus, the sin of the first man is the sin of the whole human race and thus all humanity is accordingly guilty and deserving of eternal death. Augustine states:

> For we are all in that one man [Adam] since we all were that one man who fell into sin by the woman who was made from him before the sin. . . And thus from the bad use of free will [by Adam], there originated the whole train of evil, which with its concatenation of miseries, convoys the human race from its depraved origin, as from a corrupt, on to the destruction of the second death, which has no end, those only being excepted who are freed by the Grace of God.[14]

However, Irenaeus understood humanity to be distinct from other animals in that humanity is a personal being endowed with moral freedom and responsibility. Humanity is created in the divine image of God and capable of personal relationship with his Creator but yet finite and only potentially the perfected being whom God is seeking to produce.

Humanity is thus only at the beginning of a process of growth and development in God's continuing providence which is to culminate in the finite likeness of God. Irenaeus believes humanity as originally immature. Irenaeus pictures Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden as children. Their sin is not presented as damnable revolt as in Augustine but rather as weakness. God in his compassion is to offer a relationship for humanity which fosters gradual spiritual growth.[15]

Within God's providence, humanity is being taught by his contrasting experience of good and evil to value the good for oneself and to shun the evil. The mixture of good and evil in this world thus serves to help humanity as immature creatures undergo moral development and finally to be brought to perfection as God intended.[16]

In the 20th century, John Hick has picked up this strand of thought and emphasized the value of Irenaeus' concept of evil and sin for the value of moral growth of "soul-making." For Hick, God as omnipotent could create a perfect world, a world without suffering and evil. However, if this were the case, there would be no development of moral virtue. Hick states, "It would be a world without need for the virtues of self-sacrifice, care for others, devotion to the public good, courage, perseverance, skill, or honesty. It would indeed be a world in which such qualities, having no function to perform, would never come into existence."[17] For Hick, the most important of all, the capacity

to love, would never be developed. He continues, "The most mature and valuable form of love in human life is the love between a man and a woman upon which the family is built. . .Such love perhaps expresses itself most fully in mutual giving and helping and sharing in times of difficulty."[18]

Hick's solution then to the problem of evil is that God allows evil and suffering in the world so that moral character and growth may take place. Compassionate love and self-giving for others may develop. True human goodness occurs when loving sympathy and compassionate self-sacrifice can develop. Thus, suffering in the world is "a divinely created sphere of soul-making."[19]

III. Moral Evil: Contemporary Thoughts

Contemporary theologians strive to understand humanity's sinfulness. Human suffering results from moral evil which is thus due either wholly or in part to the actions or inactions of other human beings. Human sinfulness produces inhumanity of one to another and results in man-made evil such as cruelty, greed, lovelessness, ruthless ambition, prejudice, selfishness—all producing human misery.[20] Sin then distorts humanity and results in broken, perverted and distorted relationships with fellow human beings in society and in the world.[21]

Reinhold Niebuhr, in the 20th century, has argued that huamnity's sinfulness must be understood not only on an individual level but also on a corporate or collective level. Man-made evil on the collective level results in deeper and more severe forms of evil and suffering. Niebuhr states:

> Collective pride is thus man's last, and in some respects, most pathetic effort to deny the determinate and contingent character of his existence. The very essence of human sin is in it. It can hardly be surprising that this form of human sin is also most fruitful of human guilt, that is of objective social and historical evil. In its whole range from pride of family to pride of nation, collective egotism and group pride are a more pregnant source of injustice and conflict than purely individual pride.[22]

Contemporary theologians have addressed collective and institutional forms of evil such as racism, sexism, nationalism. Theology seeks to study forms of oppression in the world today and offer words of liberation and critique in the midst of a variety of human forms of evil.

Black theology in the thought of James Cone focuses upon the idea that God is involved in the struggle to overcome the evils of racism. For Cone, God affirms humanity despite the dehumanizing conditions of slavery and oppression.[23] Cone speaks of liberation as political, social, economic freedom in the world beyond the oppression and suffering of the evils of racism. Cone states:

> Suffering that arises in the context of the struggle for freedom is liberating. It is liberating because it is a sign of Jesus' presence in our midst. Black people, therefore, as God's Suffering Servant, are called to suffer with and for God in the liberation of humanity.[24]

Cone further defines liberation as a future event not simply as other worldly but as the divine future that breaks into social existence. God's power bestows wholeness in the present situation of pain and suffering. It enables black people to know that their existing state of oppression contradicts their real humanity as defined by God's future of freedom."[25]

Other theologians such as Jurgen Moltmann and Desmond Tutu offer the response of hope in the midst of a suffering world. For Moltmann, God in Jesus Christ represents the possiblity of hope in the future. God is the power of the future. God is the power of the new. Jesus himself on the cross translates the negatives of death, suffering and evil into a new transformed reality. The resurrection hope of Jesus Christ looks forward to the final consummation in the future in which God will all in all (I Cor. 15:28). The hope for the future in which God is God in a new creation transforms the suffering of the present world. Moltmann states:

> The theodicy question, both of suffering and pain, negatively mirrors the positive hope for God's future... We begin to love the world if we are able to discover hope for it... We discover hope for this world if we hear the promise of a future which stands against frustration, transiency, and death.[26]

Bishop Desmond Tutu understands hope in the midst of suffering in the struggle for liberation from apartheid in South Africa. Tutu states that God has called us to be his co-workers in the labor of the Kingdom to work together to humanize the universe and to help God's children become even more fully human. This involves suffering and tribulation to accomplish. But for Tutu, suffering can be transmuted and transfigured in Christ (Rom. 8:18-23). For Tutu, life comes only through death. He states, "True greatness lies in being willing to empty ourselves so that we can be exalted. Our standards become those of Christ and not those of the world. It is by losing our lives for the sake of the Gospel, for the sake of others, that we shall gain eternal life (Matt. 10:37-39).[27]

Tutu states that it is part of God's mission and purpose for his world to bring about wholeness, justice, good health, righteousness, peace, harmony and reconciliation. God works to establish his Kingdom and we are to work in that hope. Tutu comments:

> These are what belong to the Kingdom of God, and we are His agents to work with Him as His partners to bring to pass all that God wants for His universe. He showed Himself as a liberator God. When He found a rauble of slaves in bondage, then, because He is that kind of God, He set them free as the God of the Exodus who takes the side of the poor, the weak, the oppressed, the widow, the orphan and the alien.[28]

Tutu believes that we rejoice in our suffering because we are participating in God's mission of bringing in the Kingdom of God in the world. That is where our hope rests. It resides in God's triumphant victory of righteousness,

justice, and peace. Tutu states, "We are not to be surprised at suffering that comes to us because of witnessing for the Kingdom of God and for the Gospel of Jesus Christ."[29]

Endnotes

[1] John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), pp. 44-45.
[2] Hick, p. 46.
[3] Hick, p. 47.
[4] Hick, p. 47.
[5] Hick, p. 48. See also Augustine, *Enchiridion* (iii.II.).
[6] Hick, p. 48.
[7] Hick, p. 48.
[8] Hick, p. 127.
[9] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* Vol. III Part 3 (Edinburgh: and T Clark, 1960), p. 310.
[10] Barth, p. 351.
[11] Barth, p. 352.
[12] Hick, p. 134.
[13] Hick, pp. 203, 206-207.
[14] Hick, pp. 207-208. See also Augustine, *City of God*, Bk. xiii, Chap. 14.
[15] Hick, pp. 212-13.
[16] Hick, p. 214.
[17] Hick, p. 325.
[18] Hick, pp. 325-26.
[19] Hick, p. 336.
[20] Hick, p. 263.
[21] Hick, p. 264.
[22] Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man. Vol. I: Human Nature* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1967), p. 213.
[23] James Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), p. 183.
[24] Cone, pp. 157, 193.
[25] Cone, p. 159.
[26] Jurgen Moltmann, "Resurrection as Hope" in *The Mystery of Suffering and Death*, ed. Michael J. Taylor (New York: Alba House, 1973), pp. 179-180.
[27] Desmond Tutu, *Hope and Suffering* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), pp. 60-61.
[28] Tutu, p. 177.
[29] Tutu, p. 188.

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