Christian Thought and the Problem of Evil part III

HENRI BLOCHER
translated by DUSTIN E. ANDERSON,
assisted by ROGER T. BECKWITH
with footnotes translated by GERALD BRAY

Résumé of the preceding articles

Man experiences evil as the unjustifiable reality, a reality producing shame and indignation. He stumbles up against the question of the origin of evil, of its 'why?'. The attempts at an explication made by paganisms ancient and modern all come down to hushing up the evil of evil. Christian thought recognizes their ultimate failure. But do the solutions elaborated by the numerous and famous doctors of Christianity better resist criticism? Understanding evil in and through the idea of universal order as something necessarily attached to finitude (at least in terms of a possible preceding actualization) and as the ransom of the greater good involves too many equivocations to be satisfactory—the line taken by Leibniz, by Teilhard, or even by the Thomists cannot be followed. To define freedom as the power behind both evil and good, to explain the origin of evil in terms of the independence of free will, and to justify the risk implied in its existence by the worth of the freedom conceived in this way is to display a sort of myopia, to immerse oneself in a pseudo-solution—Berdiaeff holds up a magnified reflection of the thoughts of this family, a family broad enough to encompass F. Schaeffer along with the Process theologians, Kant, E. Brunner, and many others. Resolving the problem by means of the dialectic which makes (originary) evil into a positive factor ends up more overtly with a justification of the horror—one must reject the dialectics of the abyss (Boehme, Tillich) as well as the dialectics involving some unnatural, distorted Good Friday (Hegel, Moltmann); even Karl Barth is a source of illusion when he speaks of the evil or 'nothingness' produced by the divine non-desire at the time of creation, a frightening evil but one already 'overcome in advance' and 'liquidated for all eternity'. In these three major efforts at a rational theodicy, our analysis has uncovered irremediable affinities with the myths and arguments of the pagans. Putting logic into action always tends to ascribe evil in some way to being and so render it more excusable for man while also imputing it to God if (and to the extent in which) being comes from and depends upon him.

Scripture's view of evil and its origin

The failure of the explanations of evil outlined and scrutinized in our previous studies according to three fundamental types 'is revealed' when the ideas are dissected and confronted with experience. But it is Revelation itself which truly reveals—and with complete certainty! Scripture, the Word of God, the 'normative norm', alone permits making the distinction between those contributions which conform to it and those all too human false trails in the systems of thought. By its light we gratefully receive the fruit of the discernment of these other systems even if we do not actually follow them. We learn from the Thomists the privative nature of evil and its close relationship to the nothingness. From the evangelical apologists such as C. S. Lewis and F. Schaeffer especially we learn that evil is a fact of created freedom and cannot come from any other source. We voluntarily concede to the dialecticians that evil, supremely represented by the crime of Calvary, enters into the plan of God in the service of reconciliation. All of these aspects are true and attested to biblically. Yet the discussions which take hold of these truths, thinking to develop them and to ultimately find a reason for evil, all stumble over the rock of Scripture and are shipwrecked ... The first type of solution blunts the biblical hate of evil, of an evil irreducibly opposed to good, and does not clearly enough affirm the perfect goodness of all things created by God. We would say that it constitutes the *temptation of the sage*, of the royal sage, respectful of hierarchy, zealous of order, admirer of the balance of nature, concerned to integrate all 'accidents' into the political plan—the one, in short, who needs a thorn in the flesh in the form of a sharp prophetic reprimand. The second type of explanation, that in terms of freedom, can find an explanation of evil in freedom only by 'forgetting' the Lord's lordship as it is taught in the Bible. Perhaps this is the *temptation of the prophet* who must in effect implicate freedom and the heart as the immediate source of evil and call for repentance—yet the biblical prophet always keeps in mind that he is announcing and denouncing in accordance with the *tôrâ* of the covenant, that he is communicating the royal *counsel* of YHWH the King. The third type, the dialectical solution, once again and in more brutal fashion than the first type, attacks both the thoroughgoing goodness of God and of his work and the affirmation of the malignancy of evil. Can we detect in this the *temptation of the priest*, the man accustomed by his link with sacrifice to the propiatory effects of innocent blood? The priest must understand, through the *tôrâ* and prophecy, that no sacrifice operates in virtue of a dialectic of reversal and that *only one* sacrifice is truly efficacious, that of the Lamb of God who freely delivered himself up for his own in fulfilling the justice of God. Over against these three temptations Scripture makes the threefold affirmation of the evil of evil, of the sovereignty of the Lord, and of the goodness of God and his similarly good creation.

We will study these three affirmations in greater detail as forming the 'T', the crux, of biblical doctrine, looking at each one in turn. Then we will ask ourselves and Scripture about a possible combination, conciliation, or synthesis of these themes before concluding with some thoughts on the results obtained.

The evil reality of evil

Scripture never leaves off denouncing the reality and noxiousness of evil—evil is totally, radically, and absolutely evil. Well-meaning non-Christians become tired and annoyed at such insistence, from the third page of the Bible to the last, not to mention sometimes shocked at the horrible crudity of the painting—they see the abscess under the lamps of the surgeon. The biblical authors obey the exhortation of the apostle: 'Abhor what is evil' (Rom. 12:9).

With respect to sin, the 'capital' evil, the generally restrained Hebrew vocabulary suddenly displays an exceptional wealth.[1] The law, Paul explains, serves to reveal the hateful magnitude of transgression (Gal. 3:19, Rom. 3:20, 5:20, 7:8ff., 13, etc.). The prophets, such as Micah (Mic. 3:8), at the risk of death but through the power of the Spirit unleash torrents of indignation against the heinous crimes of Israel. They are treated as trouble-makers (I Kings 18:17), but over against the demagogic false prophets it is their strange 'obsession' with evil, their uncompromising 'rigidity', their very intransigence (Elijah's discourse takes up two-thirds of the chapter!) which authenticate their ministry. Jesus, *the* Prophet, is definitely within this tradition—implacable with hypocrites, he unmasks the mortal infection of the heart disguised under a cloak of piety. From the day of Pentecost onward the preaching of the apostles is confrontational—it demands a turnabout in the fragmenting conduct of a perverse people and interprets the death of Christ primarily in its relation to sin. Even in John's Revelation with its hallucinating visions of evil, its deafening echo of the cries of evil and the cries against evil, the theme is sounded...[2] How can anyone read the Bible yet take evil as an epiphenomenon?

With massive obstinacy Scripture holds to the antithesis between evil and good. There is no vertiginous dream of a fall to where the opposites somehow coincide as in virtually all the pagan versions. There is heavy resistance to the acrobatic seduction of paradoxical reversals. 'Woe to those who call evil good and good evil', says the prophet (Is. 5:20). With deliberate, pedagogical monotony, the contrast swings between obedience and sin, or to use the corresponding human categories, between the just and the wicked, the faithful and the ungodly, the humble and the proud, the wise and the foolish—this systematically developed contrast is an original tract of the biblical Proverbs in comparison to the products of Egyptian wisdom.[3] Jesus certainly did not disdain its use (Mt. 7:24ff., also

12:36, etc.). Even the final page of the Bible affirms the mysterious necessity of these contraries to manifest themselves as irreducible contraries—injustice and justice, filthiness and holiness (Rev. 22:11). One recalls the reaction of the Apostle Paul to the slander circulating under his name, to those who imputed to him the thesis of the 'fecundity of the negative', of evil as the source of good (Rom. 3:8). One recalls his readiness to explain that the mortifying effect of the divine commandment came not from the commandment itself but from sin (Rom. 17:22ff.). Paul refuses to turn the antithesis into a dialectic. Hostilely facing the goodness of good is the unchallengeable malignancy of evil which signals the concentration of evil into the Evil One, the Adversary, the Prince of darkness opposed to the God of light, 'the god of this age' (II Cor. 4:4), the Deceiver at war against the true God.

Nothing better demonstrates the evil reality of evil than God's anger against it and the eternal perdition of those who choose and remained attached to it. Judgment (the certainty of which dominates Paul's thought in Rom. 3:5ff.) and the expiatory efficacy needed to appease it prove to what extent God takes evil seriously—more thinkers ought to listen to Anselm's refrain in the *Cur Deus Homo*: 'You have not yet considered the weight of sin ...' Even if evil is vanity (*'awên*) or the lack of good (privation) this does not lessen its weight, for evil borrows on the credit of creaturely goodness, diverts it from its end and turns it against its Creator—such is the weight of *deception*, the taking on of a disguised and perverted truth. Its abominable reality brings down the judgment of God.

Here, however, an initial complication brings us to a halt. Is the penalty to which condemnation subjects the guilty also an evil? There seems to be evidence for this view—the suffering and death which follow the fault as its payment in Genesis 3 are the *evils* themselves of which man complains, and Scripture ratifies this way of viewing the issue. With all due respect to Saint Francis of Assisi, death merits the title of the 'last enemy' (I Cor. 15:26). Pagan infiltrations (and perhaps mechanisms relevant to psychoanalysis) have become diffused throughout traditional Christian spirituality in the forms of dolorism and the asceticism of mortification for mortification's sake to which the Bible makes no reference (cf. Col. 2:20–3:11 to avoid any misunderstandings on this point). But the Bible clearly does not deem good loss, frustration, infirmity, illness, or persecution ('Flee ...,' says Jesus in Mt. 10:23). The classical analysis of this seems to conform with Scripture—'physical evil' afflicts humanity as the consequence and penalty of sin (considered globally). Yet as the execution of God's judgment and the restoration of justice the infliction of penalty must be said to be a *good*. It is a good for God and is thus a good for the order of the world, for all creatures, and even for the one who receives it (the good of the creature is always to

be in accordance with its Creator). The punished sinner sanctifies and glorifies the Lord and so attains the essential end of every human (Lev. 10:3, Ezek. 38:16), that which in effect all will confess at the last day (Phil. 2:10f. taken from Is. 45:23)—this is why punishment does not exclude a universal 'reconciliation' but is rather included in it (Col. 1:20).[4] Good and evil are combined here *without* the use of dialectic—the death of man is evil because God does not desire it, in the sense of Ezekiel 18:32; but once sin has established itself, death becomes good through its connection with the satisfaction of justice.

Yet other texts come to mind. Don't they teach that sometimes evil, and not simply by virtue of its penalty, brings forth the fruits of blessing? Don't they again threaten the thesis of this completeness of malignancy? Aren't we to consider trials as 'counting for joy' (James 7:2)? Doesn't the apostle tell us to give thanks in all things (Eph. 5:20, I Thess. 5:18)? Jesus excludes the connection made by his disciples between the blindness of the man born blind and some particular sin and instead gives this infirmity, this physical evil, a positive significance—'that the works of God might be made manifest' (John 9:3). Moral evil itself seems capable of fortunate effects—the most striking example of this is perhaps that of the criminal actions of Joseph's brothers against him which God ultimately used for good (Gen. 50:20, cf. 45:8). In a more general fashion 'even the wrath of men' praises the Lord (Ps. 76:10). One more step it seems and we will rejoin the parade of those singing '*felix culpa*' and praising harmonious dissonance along with the paradoxical fecundity of the negative!

Scripture, however, never goes this final step, never gives in to the temptation which so easily solicits our intelligence. Rather, it reproves and deplores sin even when God knows how to rectify the situation. If the wrath of man—a wrath which never fulfils God's justice (James 1:20)—comes in the end to be divine praise, it is in diverse ways and without any sugar-coating of the judgment involved. One finds this in the resounding failure of the wicked when he is ensnared in his own machinations (Ps. 9:17, etc.) because such evil can indeed counter other such evil—the atrocities committed by the Babylonians, for example, purged Judah of the crimes committed by King Yoyaqîm (cf. Hab. 1).[5] One also notes this in the effects which can trickle down from the evil act, though not from the malignancy itself (such a distinction is possible here because evil always perverts a previously created goodness so that the malignancy of an act is based upon a function of creation). This last idea helps clarify the case of Joseph—his presence in Egypt is an effect of an evil act but it is not as such that it becomes salutory; it is not the evil of the action which engenders the good. The text (Gen. 50:20) nowhere indicates that the evil had been 'changed into' good, contrary to many translations, but only that God 'thought for good' that which the

brothers of Joseph had thought for evil. The story displays the *intervention of God*, in comprehending all the various events and in remedying the evils, as the sole source of the beneficent effects. In the same way the evil of testing does not produce as such Christian patience or endurance—this is rather the fruit of the Spirit's work, the fruit of grace in allowing one to stand firm. Scripture never gives thanks for sins or evils as such, but rather in each case for the Lord's present help and for the sovereign direction he maintains over all that occurs. Evil comes to serve good only *in spite of* its malignancy, one form chasing out another; it only gives *occasion* to a 'greater grace' (James 4:6).

When an evil furnishes the occasion for God to manifest the supremacy of his wisdom and the power of his love, one presumes that he permitted it *to this end*. It is a good rule—Jesus' commentary on the man born blind authorizes it as do other biblical passages (for example, Rom. 9:17 on the hardening of Pharaoh's heart or Rom. 11:32 on the relation of disobedience to the two different human categories). Yet one goes beyond the teaching of the texts in believing one has found therein the ultimate explanation of evil. For in each and every case the evil is *already* present in the world—God simply channels it, orients it, breaks it down into its component expressions that these might serve his purposes. The permission granted which rationally justifies the end aimed for has to do only with the particular crystallizations, the faults and misfortunes, and the arrangement which God imposes on them. One extrapolates unduly in supposing some similarly taken decision as the first permission, the permission *of* evil. The significance is not at all the same. When evil—alas!—is already present and if God takes this hostile reality as an occasion to act and even as a means to punish and warn, this fact does nothing to attenuate the malignancy of evil nor does it insinuate in any way the idea of God's complicity; what is proclaimed rather is God's victory over evil. On the other hand, if God had permitted 'the' evil *for* his usage of it, *the evil*, counterpart to a good, *would explain and excuse itself*, at least in part. Rather than being horrified, we would have to understand that all works out for the better in the best of all possible worlds ... Scripture, if we read it closely, never follows this last route—it affirms that God, whose skill infinitely transcends the 'demonic' skill of his adversaries, knows how to play evil off and so reverse the stratagems of the enemy to serve his glory; yet he does this only in the capacity of riposte once evil has already been introduced.

No biblical given, carefully scrutinized, leads one to turn from the denunciation of malignancy. Logical rigour cannot be blunted in arguing that God makes use of evil and permits it in order to realize his ends, for good does not come out of evil as such and any linking of evil to the divine ends is not taught with respect to the initial

permission, to the origin of evil. This evil remains totally, radically, and absolutely evil.

The universal sovereignty of the Lord

Scripture never doubts God's mastery over every event, never doubts his determination of all that happens, both globally and in detail—God is totally, radically, and absolutely sovereign. Certain thinkers believe they have undermined this certitude by criticizing the translation of the divine name *Shadday* with the term 'All-Powerful' since the old Jewish interpretation *shé-day* ('who-enough', the Suffient One, the Autarkic One) carried over the Greek (ho Hikanos, 'He who can') depends more on word-play than etymology.[6] Yet it is not upon this that the affirmation of sovereignty rests! We previously argued that this affirmation is derived from the notion of monotheism and not to see this is to fall victim to an indefensible anthropomorphism. We note chiefly the massive attestation of both Testaments to the effective government of the world by the Lord of (the cosmic) Hosts, the Master (*despotês*), the *Pantocratôr*, the Lord of whom, by whom, and for whom all things are, to whom belongs forever and ever the kingdom, the power and the glory.

The multitude of spontaneous, rather accidental expressions of God's sovereignty eclipses the major proof-texts. Of course, one cannot minimize the weight of these latter texts—'Our God is in the heavens; he does whatever he pleases' (Ps. 115:3, cf. 135:6) contrasts the Lord with idols, and of course the gods of the Semitic world already have a much more 'volitional' aspect than those of the Greeks (note the wealth of volitional vocabulary concerning the 'masters', the Baals), highlighting even more the God of Israel's ridiculing of the Baals due to the efficacy and universality of his lordship (cf. also Ps. 103:19). And the dogmatic theorem of the apostle leaves hardly a loophole: 'He works all things after the counsel of His will' (Eph. 1:11). But the constantly used language of biblical piety testifies to the fact with an even greater eloquence. The Creator does not content himself with fixing the times and assigning the places (Acts 17:26)—all that happens depends on his pleasure. He is the one who causes the sun to shine for all and the one who sends down or holds back the rain (in the Old Testament, it is said, 'God rains' replaces 'it rains'). It is God who clothes the grass of the field, who feeds the birds of the sky as well as the clamouring lion cub and all the animals in the vastness of the sea. It is God the Most-High, holder of domination, who makes and defeats kings, who raises up and puts down, who kills and brings to life, who opens and shuts the matrix ... The list of such familiar expressions in Scripture goes on and on. It goes without saying that God is related not only to the course of nature and the global march of history but also to the most particular

events, to the familial misfortunes of Naomi (Ruth 1:13, 20) as well as to the occupational or hunting accident in which the person involuntarily responsible escapes from the hand of the blood avenger (Ex. 21:13).[7] Jesus, in order to demonstrate that the divine solicitude extends to the smallest facts (how much do our conceptions limit the Lord?), teaches that not one sparrow falls to the ground apart from our Father's will (Mt. 10:29).[8] Trust as well as prayer makes no sense except on this foundation.

The exercise of absolute sovereignty does not exclude the 'relative' game of secondary causes but on the contrary includes it and gives it consistency. As Jacques Maritain declares, 'The world is not a clock but a republic of natures, and it is in this way that the infallible, divine Causality, even though transcendent, makes events happen according to their proper conditions, necessary events necessarily, contingent events contingently, random events fortuitously'.[9] Given that 'transcendence' is no pretext for emptying 'causality' of meaning ('causality' being the seignorial determination within the strictly monarchical 'republic' of creation!), and given that chance does not take on the allure of being an independent factor, one could subscribe to this proposition. This is also what Calvin teaches—many things 'for us are fortuitous' or 'quasi-fortuitous', for they display no other appearance when considered in their nature or estimated according to our judgment and knowledge'.[10] Calvin also preserves the distinction between necessity and contingency in the modalities of realization of God's plan—the necessity that all occur according to the ordinance of God does not render any such event, certain though it is, 'specifically necessary or essentially necessary'.[11] Calvin throws the activity of secondary causes into relief.[12] He is thus in agreement with Scripture, which portrays the Lord unceasingly sending out and employing *servants*, servants with or without a soul, angels as fast as the wind, winds as docile as angels ... God operates through their means—he incites more often than he executes; he puts into play the laws, constants, stable properties and capacities, the 'natures' as Maritain calls them. This discernment wards off the spectre of fatalism and deters one from drawing any objection to the sovereignty of the Creator from the activity of his creatures.

Scripture also includes the decisions of free beings under the notion of divine sovereignty. Indeed, if the facts of this category are left out, what is left of history for God to govern? The sages recognize that the choice orienting the life of humans belongs to the Lord (Prov. 16:1, 9), and Jeremiah echoes the thought (Jer. 10:23). More precisely, they teach that God inclines the heart, the organ of freedom, as he pleases, even the heart of the king, the man free among all—it is like water in the hand which one swishes to one's liking back and forth (Prov. 21:1). It is in this way that God 'changed the heart' of the Egyptians with respect to Israel (Ps. 105:25). And so we find

Ephraim imploring in Jeremiah's prophecy: 'Bring me back that I may be restored' (Jer. 31:18). The New Testament confirms that God *gives* the repentance and faith he ordains. As the apostle says, 'for God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure' (Phil. 2:13). An admirable formulation, blocking in advance any temptation to get around it—if Paul had used only 'to will', some people would have explained that 'man's part' is to carry out the impulse evoked by grace; if he had used only 'to work', some would have added, 'given that *we* first desire it'—Paul himself doesn't hesitate: 'to will *and* to work'! He can be even more brutally clear about it: 'So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy' (Rom. 9:16). To many this is a hard message; to others it is sweet and savoury ...

Objections to this do not spring from actual biblical difficulties but rather from *a priori* affirmations held as evidence. In the realm of the great anthropomorphical misunderstanding wherein the *unique* relation of the Creator is forgotten—'God is wholly other than an other', as the abbot J. Monchanin put it—one presupposes that if God infallibly determines, freedom is strangled and responsibility disappears. Yet the subjective (and collective!) conviction investing this presupposition does not replace the sanction of Scripture. No part of the Bible endorses this so-called 'evidence' of common sense. Of course our decisions are free (of a creaturely freedom); of course we are responsible—God does not treat us like marionettes. As Calvin exclaims, 'Who is so foolish to suppose the man is pushed about by God in the same way as we throw a rock? This certainly does not follow from our doctrine'.[13] The appeals and reproaches, the promises and threats in which Scripture abounds are perfectly explained in this way.[14] But there is no trace, no evidence of the idea of the indeterminacy of the will as a necessary implication. In attempting to preserve a remnant of such an implication within a generally Augustinian doctrine, the Thomism of Ch. Journet displays its embarrassment.[15] We can not intellectually dominate the operation of the Kingdom which made us free, nor can we take apart the mystery of the 'how', but we can receive without balking at Scripture the revelation of God's sovereignty over our most intimate choices, even our heart.

Scripture also includes the evils, plagues, and faults themselves under the notion of divine sovereignty. Indeed, if the facts of this category were left out, what would remain of History for God to govern? Regarding the evil of calamity, there is such evidence for this thesis, from the Flood to the plagues of Revelation, that it needs no special insistence! The prophets testify to it—Amos 3:6 stigmatizes the spiritual stupidity of those who fail to see the Lord's authorship behind a city's calamity; Isaiah 45:7 proclaims that good and evil proceed from him; Jeremiah 31:28 (cf. 45:4f.) recalls God's faithful-

ness in keeping his threats. The lamenting found in the Psalms springs from the same conviction and Lamentations recognizes that the Lord in effect both determines (3:38) and afflicts (3:33) humans. Less easily admitted is the attribution of moral evil to divine decisions, which one encounters in several spots—according to a variety of texts, God seems to actually *produce* this evil, thus throwing the affirmation of his goodness into question. Jesus does not define the necessity of 'scandals' (Mt. 18:7), but according to the analogy of his other *logia* on 'it is necessary' (*dei*) one can presume that he has in mind the necessity which the Scriptures fulfil, themselves expressions of God's plan. In any case, God 'hardens whom he pleases' (Rom. 9:18, which refers back to the Exodus story) and the following verse (v.19) demonstrates that the blameworthy acts do not occur apart from God's will (Paul knows that his doctrine provokes the objection he formulates yet does not push it aside as inaccurate given his premises; in effect even the sinner does not withstand the will of the Lord). In this way God successively shuts up the nations and Israel in disobedience (Rom. 11:32). The historical books abound in illustrations of this—the sons of Eli refuse admonishment 'for it was the will of the Lord to slay them' (I Sam. 2:25); Shiméi wickedly curses David and the latter understands that God had so commanded it (II Sam. 16:10); it is the Lord, in his wrath, who incites David to take a census (II Sam. 24:1). With good reason, Calvin again cites the revolt of Jeroboam.[16] God approximates to the position of *author* in the case of Absalom's crime, where he says, 'I will do this thing' (II Sam. 12:12), and in the case of the evil-minded envoy who stirs up Saul (I Sam. 16:14 ...) or that of the spirit of deception who seduces the prophets of Ahab (I Kings 22:21 ff.; cf. II Thess. 2:11)—indeed, the evil spirit does not escape divine authority but remains, as Luther put it, 'the devil of God' (cf. Job 1)! In Ezekiel, God goes so far as to call himself the seducer of the false prophet (Ezek. 14:9) and the donor of the abominable custom of the sacrificial burning of the first-born (Ezek. 20:25). In all these cases the malignancy of evil benefits from no indulgence or attenuation; the text, on the contrary, severely condemns it. What is excluded is the illusion of the creature's independence, even with respect to evil.

The Augustinian and Reformed tradition maintains that *in one sense* God 'desires' evil and determines its occurrence. Calvin objects to the term 'permission' (though he does nevertheless at times use it), finding it too weak and also suggestive that God is simply a spectator[17] when in reality, he declares, God is involved to the extent of 'moving the will' of the wicked. Many are scandalized by this thought. Journet bitterly reproaches Calvin for speaking of God's 'willing' in such a way.[18] He can tolerate only the language of 'permission'. Berkouwer criticizes his tradition on the same grounds—even Bavinck was wrong in writing that God 'wills' evil in a

certain fashion.[19] We are obliged to stand up to such accusations, first of all because of the audacity of the sacred writers, of Paul and Ezekiel, beside which the most explosive formulations of Calvin pale in comparison—our citations are evidence enough of this. And then why dispute over words? As Calvin argues, 'Isn't God's permitting of such evil, though he has the power and authority to block it, just as if he actually did it?'[20] Not much is gained by refusing to use the verb 'to will' if one also maintains God's sovereignty. Berkouwer is obliged to concede that sin is never committed 'outside of (*praeter*) the will of God'[21]—isn't this the avowal of a certain sense of willing? In vain, Journet tries to oppose Calvin and Saint Augustine on this point.[22] One might as well stick with the tough frankness of Scripture—if evil is produced under the reign of God, his will is involved in it.

The assurance of the absolute sovereignty of God contributes to the 'fear of the Lord', a fear lacking among the people and even among the Christians of our time. This fear nourishes a humble confidence; it applies the balm of consolation—as Calvin said while tortured with disease, 'You are crushing me, Lord, but I am content that it is the work of your hand'. This fear alone can appease, beyond pardon itself, the anguish of having sinned, of having caused irreversible wrongs—even this is in the hand of God: *etiam peccata*. By including it in his plan he relieves us of the insufferable burden of being the ultimate cause (cf. Gen. 45:8). He is the First and the Last. He reigns.

The undefiled goodness of God and of his work

Scripture resolutely rejects, as diabolical slander, as blasphemy, the suggestion that God is an accomplice of evil, that he harbours the germ of it in his heart or, what amounts to the same thing, incorporates it into that which proceeds from him. God is totally, radically, and absolutely good. Versus the 'tragic' myth of divine wickedness and versus the seduction of the dialectic, God's goodness is the great biblical *a priori*, as Berkouwer calls it.[23] The testimony to the perfect justice and goodness of God is one of the constants of Scripture (Deut. 32:4 ...)—it is an unending theme of praise; the conquerors, in the song of the Lamb, make it their eternal theme (Rev. 15:3ff.). Many times this affirmation is sharpened in the face of doubt and false doctrine. The Lord who sends out the ferocious Chaldeans has 'eyes too pure to see evil' and indeed his indignation boils over at the sight (Hab. 1:12ff.). No sinner ought to imagine that he can excuse himself by imputing the causality of evil to God, for God neither tempts nor is tempted (James 1:13). John thoroughly condemns the speculation of the Proto-Gnostics (precursors of Boehme) on the presence of darkness in God (1 John 1:5). The issue cannot be put more clearly than that.

The biblical definition of evil, if needed, would corroborate this attestation. The 'capital' evil, as we have named it, is *anomia*, violation of the divine Law (I John 3:4). The so-called 'physical' evil derived from it is measured by the separation from God's original intention for man (in the sense of Ezek. 18:32). Evil, then, is that which is opposed to the will of God, to his commandments and to his 'vows' or desires, to his 'preceptive' will and to his 'votive' will. At the heart of evil, its decisive motive, hidden but ready to break out, is a hostility against the Lord—a penitent David discerned this fact (Ps. 51:6). Sinners are the enemies of God (Rom. 5:8, 10, etc.). Indeed, the biblical God is not divided against himself—he has no part in evil and evil has no part in him.

The creation as such is in the image of the divine goodness since it proceeds from no other source. That it is *ex nihilo* adds nothing to this equation according to the biblical perspectives and it certainly doesn't signify that some second principle named nothingness, *mê on*, vaguely hypostasized, is combined together with the being given by God! This formula is found only in the apocryphal books—in the canonical books everything is *ex Deo* rather than *ex nihilo*, or else the world 'comes from' the Word of God (Heb. 11:3). The work of God, in the images of its author, is thus 'good in the extreme' (Gen. 1:31) and this applies to each of its particular elements as well (this is stressed again in I Tim. 4:4). God made each thing beautiful in its time (Eccl. 3:11), especially *upright* humans (Eccl. 7:29)—their perverse subtleties have another origin, such as the subjection to futility (Rom. 8:20). Purity comes first.

It is at this point that the debate concerning *possibility* is located. What is more natural, apparently, than to conclude that since man has fallen he was *fallible*, that since evil arose it was *possible*? In the work of those authors who most readily cultivate this idea, the virtuality of fault in creation plays the explanatory role for the ideas of weakness and vulnerability, indeed for those involving a fissure, a rift, some hidden *germ*. The goodness of creation is thus at issue. In order to completely describe it one must make a place for the 'real possibility' of evil, as Kierkegaard expresses it, in such a way that its actualization one day be inevitable—the choice contrary to God specifies *from the beginning* a real ability within the real freedom.[24] Evoking evil before the Fall in such a fashion seems to us to be strictly absent from Scripture as well as hardly compatible with its affirmation of original goodness. We are pleased in this respect with the lucidity shown by Karl Barth when he says that the event of sin 'is devoid of any necessity and thus of any internal or external possibility',[25] and, when he notes that man's ability to perpetrate sin 'does not, as is often pretended, depend on his freedom as a reasonable creature'.[26] Barth realizes quite well the stakes involved: 'The result of seeing in the freedom to disobey a possibility of human

nature is that one can always excuse the freedom by considering it founded in man such as he is.'[27] And we might add that in order to excuse, one must implicitly accuse (the creation and its author). The idea is cast off in favour of an equivocation. Sin is possible in this sense only because it is not impossible. The sliding consists in making, confusingly enough, 'something' of this non-impossibility. 'In the beginning' the notion of evil enters into the idea only as the logical negation of the good which *alone* is real, enters in as an abstraction. It is related to nothing in creation, but is a radical *foreignness* for the powers and weaknesses, all good, of the work of God.

We openly confess that often the language of Scripture seems to oppose our thesis, not with respect to 'possibility' (which is significant) but with respect to the major affirmation of the goodness of God and of creation. We have cited the strongest, most shocking texts as evidence (which they are) of God's complete sovereignty over evil. One could add to these perhaps the meditation in Ecclesiastes on the disposition of time with its inclusion of hate and war (Eccl. 3:1–8) or the Lord's discourse to Job with its praise of monsters, of Bestiality and Deviousness ... But on a closer look these latter figures are seen to embody not evil but the *incomprehensible* (that Job might worship transcendence). As for the reflections of Ecclesiastes, we won't flatter ourselves on having the last word, but we believe they have in mind the enigmatic diversity of historical experience rather than the created order. For the rest, one first notes that the evil inflicted by virtue of *penalty* for the restoration of justice is in this respect a good—this principle, which we have already established, resolves the difficulty of numerous passages. When evil has to do with sin, however, even if falling into this sin sanctions previous faults (God hardens ..), a better explanation is needed since the God whose 'eyes are too pure' cannot 'tempt' anyone. Here the 'analogy of faith' guides the interpreter. In order to respect the internal agreement of the Word of God, one must assume different senses and modes, must assume forms of language which are distanced from literalness—the prophets, for example, when they deliberately shock by attributing evil to the Lord (Is. 45:7, Ezek. 14:9, 20:25), *uniquely* want better to trumpet his sovereign majesty.

Theologians distinguish between the divine will of *decree* and the *preceptive* will, or the will of *desire*—God does not will in the same manner every time. Moreover, in the decree evil is not willed *as* good—it is certainly a sovereign, but also a *permissive* will which relates to it. The divine causality is *efficient* with respect to good (every grace and every perfect gift descends from the Father of lights) and *deficient* with respect to evil (God *did not* produce the contrary willing and working).[28] Though God himself works good in making it work, evil is always the doing of a creature. These fine points, which

Revelation taken as a whole authorizes, are confirmed in detailed exegesis. The condemnation which accompanies the mention of evil 'willed' by God indicates the complexity of the willing under review and suggests that the creature alone actually *produces* evil. This sinful agent turns up often. In this way I Chronicles 21:1 explains II Samuel 24:1—Satan has been the effective tempter, but as he does not act independently of the decretive will of God the earliest text employs the same shortcut Ezekiel 14:9 does.[29] The 'deficient' rather than the 'efficient', character comes out in several expressions—God 'gives' sinners 'over' to their evil ways (Rom. 1:24, 26, 28); they 'did not receive' the love of the truth (II Thess. 2:10); in the case of King Hezekiah's sin of imprudence and vanity, 'God left him to himself, in order to try him and to know all that was in his heart' (II Chron. 32:31).[30] In specifying that God does not 'willingly' (*millibô*) afflict humans, the inspired poet gives credence to the idea of a *permissive* and paradoxical will (Lam. 3:33); even the severe statements of Romans 9 can be taken in this sense since there it says that God *endured* with much patience the 'vessels of wrath' and not that he himself actually prepared them for destruction (v.22). Genesis 50:20 with its accent on the implied *thought* (*hâshab*) is a point in favour of Calvin's analysis which demonstrates, in the same work, the difference in *intention* and in *vehicle* (in *end* and in *means*) between God and the agents of evil, a difference which separates God absolutely from all malignancy.[31] The great biblical *a priori* still stands, permitting us to praise the Lord for his undefiled goodness which extends to all his works!

The thorn in the flesh of reason

The evil of evil, the lordship of the Lord, the goodness of God—three unshakeable theses forming the 'T' of the biblical teaching! Divine sovereignty forms the trunk, the denunciation of evil and the praise of the good God form the two branches ... The real difficulty, however, is in holding them *together*! Because they stumble on this difficulty, the Christian thinkers of the three groups we have criticized tend to obscure or even reject one or another of the elements. Can we, like the magician pulling a rabbit from his hat, cause the secret of the synthesis to appear?

We maintain that the three theses do not formally contradict one another. If one accords the distinctions encouraged by Scripture itself on the different modes of the divine will, a strict incompatability cannot be proved. Such a proof demands presupposing this axiom: a good and sovereign God *cannot* permissively decree that the creature will choose against him. Many people uncritically accept this proposition as evidence. But an evidence it is not and it bumps up against the biblical testimony. As a naïve extrapolation from rules which no doubt apply in the case of human conduct, it still stands in

need of a primary demonstration. But by what means, what criteria? How is man (the sinner!) to decide without looking ridiculous what the Lord can and cannot do? Listen to Pascal laugh ... The *homo* who modestly attires himself with the title *sapiens sapiens* has in recent days forced his reason to swallow so many insults and gibes that it can no longer remain silent.

Yet our triumph is not secured for all that, we claim only to have barely escaped contradiction. The gnawing problem remains. The necessary, legitimate distinctions do not resolve this problem but only pose it again in different terms. How are those wills united in God?[32] How does God at the same time will and not will the hardening of the sinner and his death? How is one to reconcile the perfect goodness of God, his love for his creature, his hate of evil with the fact that he does not work in all the willing and the doing of good? What does sovereign permission signify? The thorn of these questions digs into reason, even into that of the renewed mind of the believer—in grasping after the 'T' of doctrine his mind strains itself and is wrenched apart.

Scripture teaches us that at least in this life we will not find the rational solution we are seeking. It does not give the solution to us, but instead goes even further and itself aims the spotlight on the difficulty, inviting us to view it from a different perspective. This at least is one of the intentions of the book of Job. The wisdom of Job's friends splinters and scatters under the divine reprobation. The authentic function of Job's suffering as condition for a testimony glorifying the Lord does not respond to the final question concerning the original permission. Again, as he does in this case, God avails himself of the original permission. Again, as he does in this case, God avails himself of evil once it has entered the world; but it would be odious if he had permitted its origin to this end. This is why Job knows nothing of the celestial episodes and why the crowning piece of the book, the theophanic discourse, also does not refer to them. There is in the Theophany not a rational solution but a sovereign Presence, humiliating and, as such, pacifying and healing. Habbakuk, too, poses the theodicy problem and one finds in his 'grievance' the three scriptural convictions. He as well receives no insight into the 'why' or the 'how' behind the permission of evil—God simply calls him in his age of darkness to live *by faith* (Hab. 2:4). And the apostle, who of course does not ignore the protests of 'natural' reason (Rom. 9:14, 19), is no more satisfying. He puts the clay creature back in its place, as if saying, 'You cannot understand' and simply glorifies the mastery of the sovereign Potter. For us, pilgrims that we are, there is no rational solution to the problem of evil, that is, to the theoretical problem of the origin of evil.[34]

Of opacity, the cross, and hope

The pain suffered by the Christian intellect in struggling with the problem of evil seems at first to be a sign of weakness. Isn't it simply confessing to its inability to solve the principal objection and so subdue the 'rock of atheism'? We suggest, rather, that upon a deeper examination the matter appears otherwise.

If consenting to the incomprehensible pulls us through each time we box ourselves in, there would be good reason to suspect a certain methodological irresponsibility and irrationality on our part—the old 'The mystery has two sides' approach. We argue, however, that the mystery of evil is the *unique* opaque mystery, unique as evil itself, *sui generis*. And, again, it involves no contradiction. All the other mysteries which go beyond us, those of the Trinity, of the union of the natures in Christ, of created freedom are mysteries of the light—the intellect, if it comes to them biblically, frolics with delight in their intricacy. It is the 'opaque' enigma of evil alone which causes the intellect pain.

If the solution proposed, rivalling the scriptural response, were capable of satisfying the mind of man, they would enjoy an indubitable superiority. But haven't we demonstrated just the opposite in our respectable sampling of these various proposals? Under the name of 'solutions' analysis uncovers—rather attempts to dodge—the givens of the problem; to deny evil and 'forget' the primary and most veracious apprehension each one of us has of the reality of evil, a reality causing us indignation and shame. Scripture *alone* does not do this. Isn't there a miracle in this 'chastity'? No Word takes away the excuses of the guilty as this one does (water down any one of the three truths and evil becomes more or less excusable, as we have shown)—would it be as true to life if it had proceeded only from man?

Our reflection on the matter continues: the meaning of evil *requires* the biblical God. In a novel by Joseph Heller we read that 'the personages who reject faith in God find themselves constrained to postulate his existence in order to have an adequate object for their moral indignation'.[35] To whom is the objection against God addressed if not to *this* God? Without a sovereign and good God the complaint is inane, the evil cannot be named. Did John Lennon, the recently assassinated Beatle, understand this fact? He sang, 'God is a concept/By which we measure/Our pain'.[36] Does one arrive at a proof for God through the apprehension of evil?

We do not understand the why of evil. But we can understand that we cannot understand. Our reason is made for the continuities of the work of God; it weaves the harmony—to understand is to unite. A rational solution to the problem of evil would necessarily signify an integration of evil into the harmony born of God! Likewise, to move back from sin to its preliminary 'real possibility' is to apply to it the

logic of continuity which prevails in the play of creation. But evil is scandal, discontinuity, disorder, foreignness; it is ultimately unnameable in terms of creation (except in negative fashion)! To look for its causal explanation, its ontological reason, its why is tantamount, due to the essence of the research enterprise, to trying to reconcile it with the rest and so justify it (the 'rest' is in effect the *justified*). To comprehend evil would be to comprehend that evil is not evil (to understand all is to *excuse* all).

The object is not to comprehend evil, but to *combat* it. The absence of a solution to the theoretical problem of evil's origin is the 'reverse side' whose 'right side' is even more valuable than righteous denunciation. This 'right side' is the solution to the *practical* problem of the *elimination* of evil. That which one thinks he has lost on the speculative plane is won on the existential plane. And we think above all in terms of the *horizon* of the practical task, in terms of the *end* of evil, an end of more interest than the beginning, the 'until when?' of more weight than the 'why?'. Only the assemblage of the three theses, the 'T' of the biblical doctrine, assures the victory. If under the disguise of evil there were good, why would one want to make it disappear? If God were not sovereign, how could he lord over that which does not depend on him? If God hid the darkness in himself, would it not be eternal as well? Yet for all this 'the solid foundation of God still stands'. When scatterbrained hopes blow away and are lost like chaff in the wind, the foundation of hope is revealed, that is, the sovereignty of God who combats evil and invites us to combat it with him.

God combats evil and conquers it. God has *already* combatted and conquered it. We have reserved for our conclusion the supreme consideration, that of that other 'T' formed of two small beams on a hill called the Skull, the place where the opacity of the mystery thickened from the sixth hour to the ninth hour, the place from which the light still radiates. In the light of the cross how can the truths we have learned be doubted? The *abominable reality of sin* is demonstrated there, as hate in the snickering of the criminals, as hateful in the weight of guilt which could only be removed through the sacrifice of the Lamb of God. Even thinking only of myself, when I see my Lord suffering I cannot say, 'Felix culpa'. Shame. Indignation, against evil, against myself. The *complete sovereignty of the Lord* is demonstrated there—all this happened 'according to the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God' (Acts 2:23), because it was necessary that the Scriptures be fulfilled, those attesting to the destiny God had assigned to his Servant. If there is a revolting 'scandal' here it is that of Judas' betrayal which, like the infamous reconciliation between Herod and Pilate, also fulfilled 'all that the hand and the purpose of God had predestined to occur' (Acts 4:28). There is no event to which it is more abundantly attested that God

'willed' it. The *undefiled goodness of God* is demonstrated there. At the Cross who would dare be so blasphemous as to imagine the slightest complacency on God's part towards evil—when in the Person of the Son he died there?! Holiness is revealed, Love is revealed, pure love—there is no greater love than this. Because of the cross we will eternally praise his goodness, the goodness of his justice, the goodness of his grace. At the Cross God turned evil against evil and realized the practical solution to the problem. He atoned for our sins, conquered death, triumphed over the devil, and laid the foundation for hope.

Is any further demonstration necessary?

Ave Crux, spes unica.

HENRI BLOCHER lectures in systematic theology at the Faculté Libre de Théologie Evangélique, Vaux-sur-Seine, France.

NOTES

1 Cf. e.g. L. Ligier, Péché d'Adam, péché du monde, in *Bible, Kippur, Eucharistie* 1 (Paris 1960).
2 See the Apocalypse by the painter Sassanova.
3 A. Barucq, *Le Livre des Proverbes* (Paris 1964), p.34.
4 Cf. H. Blocher, La doctrine du châtiment éternel, *Ichthus* 32, 1973, pp.2–9.
5 Pr. 16:4 can be interpreted to mean that God has made everything, including evil, for the day of judgment, when it will be used as a rod for the divine anger.
6 The etymology is uncertain.
7 Calvin, *Inst. chr.* I, 18, 3 cites the parallel passage, Dt. 19:5, which does *not* attribute the accident to the will of God. But earlier on (I, 16:6) he also quotes Ex. 21:13.
8 The translation of the *Traduction Oecuménique de la Bible*, which seems to be the most accurate.
9 Cf. C. Journet, *Le Mal. Essai théologique* (Paris, 1962), p.122 n.
10 *Inst. chr.* I, 16, 9.
11 Ibid.
12 *Inst. chr.* I, 17, 6.
13 Ibid., II, 5, 14.
14 Ibid., II, 5, 9–11.
15 Cf. C. Journet, op. cit., p.162.
16 *Inst. chr.* I, 18, 4.
17 Ibid., II, 4, 3.
18 Cf. C. Journet, op. cit., p.176.
19 *Sin* (Grand Rapids 1971), p.52.
20 Eighth sermon on Job.
21 *Sin*, p.148.
22 C. Journet, op. cit., p.196.
23 *Sin*, chap. 2.
24 See the previous two articles.
25 *Dogmatics* IV, 1.
26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.
28 On this distinction, see A. Lecerf, *Introduction à la dogmatique réformée I* (Paris 1931), p.253.
29 There is no question here of a forced harmonization. When Calvin says that it all holds together well, he is only recognizing his own teaching in the complementarity of the two verses.
30 An obvious anthropomorphism appears in the expression 'to know', which must mean 'to make appear'. It is particularly interesting to note the negative 'God abandoned him'.
31 *Inst. chr.* II, 4, 2.
32 Ibid., I, 18, 3.
33 *Sin*, p.131.
34 This is basically Calvin's view.
35 E.L. Mascall, *Theology and the Future* (London 1968), p.62.
36 *Time* magazine, 22 December 1980, p.25.