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them. There are evils whose point, if any, is utterly unclear to us. So there are evils that it is unreasonable to think have any point—unreasonable to think God has any morally sufficient reason for allowing. But if there are evils like that, it is unreasonable to believe that God exists.

This argument assumes that if God has a morally sufficient reason for allowing an evil, then we will be able to see what that reason is. And that seems just false; our not knowing of any such reason does not entail, or make it probable, that there is none.[7]

An interesting conclusion, though, seems to follow from these considerations. Consider some particular evil *E*—some wrong choice or human cancer or the like. How, exactly, is one to know that there is no point served by—no morally sufficient reason for—*E*, short of knowing that God does not exist?[8] Perhaps even then I would not know this about *E*; for present purposes, that does not matter. The point is that ***E exists*** and ***God exists*** entail ***God has a morally sufficient reason for allowing E.***[9] So I can know that *E* has no point—that God has no morally sufficient reason for allowing it—only if I know that ***God exists*** is false. I cannot, then, offer ***There are pointless evils*** as evidence against ***God exists***, unless I have some reason, *independent of the existence of the allegedly pointless evils*, to think that God does not exist.

One can put the point as follows. It seems to be a necessary truth (a statement whose denial is contradiction) that (1) ***God exists and there is evil*** is true if and only if (2) ***God has a morally sufficient reason for allowing the evils he allows*** is true. The critic and the Christian agree that ***There is evil*** is true. The critic thinks ***God exists*** is false. One way for the critic to argue from (1) ***There is evil*** to (3) ***There is no God*** is to infer from (2a) ***Some evils are pointless*** or (2b) ***Some evils are such that if God exists then he has no morally sufficient reason for allowing them*** and (1) to (3). But (2a) and (2b) are false if (3) is true—false, that is, if God exists. So the critic cannot know that (2a) or (2b) is true unless the critic *already* knows that God does not exist. But then it will not be the existence of allegedly pointless evils that tells the critic this.

6. Conclusion[10]

I have defended these claims: (i) ***God exists*** and ***There is evil*** is not a contradiction; (ii) ***If God allows an evil, he has a morally sufficient reason for doing so*** is not a contradiction—indeed, it is a necessary truth; (iii) the problem of evil is more accurately viewed as concerned with ethics and epistemology than with logical consistency alone; (iv) there is at least one view of ethics which is consistent with (and naturally arises from) Christianity for which the existence of evil is not morally inappropriate; (v) that there are evils whose point we cannot discern is not evidence that Christianity is false; (vi) the existence of evil could not provide evidence against God's existence unless we already knew, on other grounds, that God did not exist. If these claims are true, then much at least of the problem of evil is solved. In particular, this is so if the consistency strategy succeeds, and the epistemic situation regarding ***God exists*** and ***There is evil*** is properly stated in Section 5.[11]

FOOTNOTES

[1]The problem of evil can be stated externally (the critic accepts the truth of ***There is evil*** and claims that this is inconsistent with, or provides evidence against, ***God exists***) or internally (the critic notes that the theist is committed to both ***There is evil*** and ***God exists***, and claims that the former is inconsistent with, or provides evidence against, the latter). Here, I discuss the problem as stated externally. Exactly the same points can be rephrased to meet the objections if they are posed internally.

[2]Two articles have become contemporary classics as statements of the problem of evil: J. L. Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," *Mind* (1955) and H. J. McCloskey, "God and Evil," *Philosophical Quarterly* (1960).

[3]Standard applications of the consistency strategy are found in: George Mavrodes, *Belief in God: A Study in the Epistemology of Religion* (Random House) and Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Eerdmans).

[4]I have tried to put these matters more fully in "The Problem of Evil" recently in the *Southwestern Journal of Philosophy*. Cf. such passages as Hebrews 3:9-11 and I Peter 1:3-9.

[5]The "internal" way of putting this is: "Any ethical theory compatible with theism will deny that the existence of evil is necessary for the existence of any (important) good"—a highly implausible claim.

[6]See Charles Fried, *Right and Wrong* (Harvard University Press), Alan Donagan, *The Theory of Morality* (University of Chicago Press), and R. Downie and E. Telfer, *Respect for Persons* (Methuen).

[7]This is argued more fully in "A Premature Farewell to Theism," *Religious Studies* (1969).

[8]That God has a morally sufficient reason for allowing an evil (which is what I mean here by an evil's having a point) does not entail that a person is not culpable or wrong in bringing that evil about. See "Ethics, Evils, and Theism," *Sophia* (1969).

[9]This does not entail that it would be wrong for us to eliminate *E*. See "The Greater Good Defense," *Sophia* (1974).

[10]The argument of this section, and the paper as a whole, is developed more fully in *Christianity and Contemporary Philosophy* (forthcoming, Eerdmans).

[11]The recently-released volume edited by Stephen T. Davis, *Encountering Evil* (John Knox), discusses the problem of evil through a presentation and critique of five different theodicies, dealing with some of the questions considered in this essay as well as others.

VIDEO CASSETTES ON CHRISTOLOGY CONSULTATION

Evangelical theologians from the Two Thirds World (Africa, Asia and Latin America) gathered in Bangkok, Thailand March 20–27 for a Consultation on Christology. The ten major lectures from this significant consultation will be available at the end of April on video cassettes. Speakers will include, among others, Michael Nazir Ali, Vinay Samuel, Kwame Bediako, and Ronald Sider. For more information, write David Bussau, Partnership in Mission, P.O. Box 162, St. Ives, Sydney 2075, Australia.

THE FATHERS: IMITATION PEARLS AMONG GENUINE SWINE

By Frederick W. Norris, Professor of Christian Doctrine, Emmanuel School of Religion.

When a seminarian first stumbles upon (or is pushed into) the "Church Fathers," there are two typical responses: "those men were brilliant!" or "how boring!" Continued study usually prompts another, more significant observation: "they dealt with the same issues we face today." Fred Norris offers here not primarily an analytical article or a bibliographic guide, but an impressionistic painting. Enjoy Norris, then read the Fathers.
—MLB

My first acquaintance with that odd lot called the Fathers came during a general survey of church history as a sophomore in college. The judgment of such a wise fool as me was confused and dismayed by many of the people from the Patristic era. I could not praise ignorant monks who attacked and at times killed the opponents of their leaders. They seemed more like hired thugs than admired saints. Yet those who counted on their support have been reckoned among the Fathers of the faith. What are we to think of those such as Theophilus or even Cyril whose political desires led them to wink at such violence?

Some of the great theological debates of the early church appeared at first sight to deserve the platitudes often used to deride them. Perhaps there was only an iota of difference between certain of the Homoousians and the Homoiousians. Twenty years ago I certainly did not yet grasp its supposedly earth-shaking

consequences. As we made our way through the intricacies of the various positions I kept wondering how many, if any, of those points would be significant for my future ministry. The situation often seemed to be that of imitation pearls scattered among genuine swine.

The years spent in seminary did alter my opinion, but they also deepened some of my harsh judgements. Knowing that Athanasius wanted to stop the spread of Arianism by cutting off all grain shipments from Egypt made me wonder about his compassion for enemies. Finding out that Theodoret may well have abandoned Nestorius in order to save his own hide did not endear him to me. He had sworn his support to his friend yet in exile Theodoret included Nestorius prominently in his history of heresy. "With such friends . . ." Jerome could be quite cantankerous, and not just with Rufinus. Tertullian argued on a level with the best of legal minds, proving in one instance that heretics should not have access to Scriptures which did not belong to them. He defended his position brilliantly, but seemed completely insensitive to the necessity of having Scripture open for all to investigate, whether schismatics, heretics or unbelievers.

Yet, as a less wise fool I began finding qualities in these people which raised my curiosity so much that I pursued them throughout doctoral studies. Even now they occupy the major portion of my attention.

Responding To Their World

Those monks and their practices have been scorned rather consistently by Protestants, usually because of their world-denying posture. Particularly in the midst of Marxist attacks on Christianity, many have thought those charges to be quite telling. Yet such conclusions may be too extreme. Sweeping in from the desert to kill for the bishop is hardly a high calling, even if the opponents are pagans. But it does give the lie to an accusation that monks have no worldly concerns. Spending decades on a pillar or in a tree has struck some as terribly odd, particularly in the colder climates of Middle Europe. Probably more than the one novice at Trier was forced from his perch. But the Stylites, as strange as they were, not only fascinated but also influenced political leaders. Some of them accomplished far more than other Christians supposedly active in public life. In addition, the Abbot Shenoute cared for thousands in upper Egypt made homeless by marauding Blemmeys, while many monasteries throughout the empire offered shelter to those who could no longer pay the taxes on their meager farm plots. Withdrawal can in reality be a compassionate deed or preparation for significant activity. Besides, who is certain that American-style activism is the most exquisite form of Christian living?

While the Fathers have been charged with Hellenizing Christianity, they can be praised for Christianizing Hellenism. The early Alexandrians and the Cappadocians created a form of Christian humanism which is enlightening even today. All humanism is not secular. In some instances its opposite is the inhumane rather than the religious. Studying doctrine which was worked out in response to ancient philosophy does require concentration on historical problems which seem to have little relevance to the twentieth-century Church. Yet we can learn from the examples of many early Christian leaders that they did at least take the time to know their world, to understand its ideas and problems.

Accomplished in Intellectual Pursuits

The Fathers' frequent use of Middle and Neo-Platonic formulations can be maddening, and are often assumed to be completely out of place in our times. So even I was a bit taken aback upon hearing Carl von Weizsacker offer a different perspective while speaking at the 500th anniversary celebrations of Tubingen's Karl Eberhardt University. Von Weizsacker, head of the Max Planck Institutes, the most prestigious scientific research center in West Germany, insisted that science could indeed begin on its way without religion or theology. But the moment it wanted to ask the great questions of humanity, it would find itself struggling with the problems of the idealistic tradition, particularly those of Plato and the Platonists. Wrestling with such issues could not be far from the Church and its teachers, he said. His scientifically informed opinion grasped the value of the philosophical context in which the golden age of the Fathers appeared. As an illustration, consider the work of John Philoponos. Thomas Torrance, one prominent theologian and philsopher of science, insists that his work previews many of the most interesting puzzles of twentieth-century physics.

A number of the Fathers were quite well educated. Gregory Nazianzen has been called the greatest Greek orator since Demosthenes. We have orations, letters and poetry from his hand which taken together give evidence of his ability. He was a consummate preacher even though for us today his style seems a bit overblown. He could mount persuasive arguments for his own views and against those of his opponents, at times demonstrating a substantial knowledge of Aristotelian logic. As the relationship between ancient philosophy and rhetoric becomes clearer to us, we can see how rhetorical training led to the use of logic in fields like law and literature as well as theology. The brilliant modern observations about logic which Stephen Toulmin offers have their precursors in the reknowned philosophical rhetoricians of antiquity. And it was in those circles that the best early Christian theologians moved. Of course, we must not forget that great preaching is exposition of Scripture, and John Crysostom's homilies demonstrate how well that can be done. But preaching is always more than that; it is also sensitive argumentation about contemporary issues. Rhetoric need not be empty words. Merely being preachy is not preaching. At its best the proclamation of the Gospel is convincing because it makes sense, not merely because it feels right. It is persuasive because it reaches head and heart alike.

Augustine's writings represent as wide-ranging a group of inconsistent conclusions as one can imagine from any person with a reputation for intellectual acuity.

We remain indebted to the Fathers for many of their scholarly contributions. Eusebius's history of early Christianity is one example. Although we may be frustrated by the way his own viewpoints did color the presentations, he included very many quotations from documents which are now completely lost to us. Our work would be impoverished without his. Many took up descriptions where he left off. The student can investigate both the nature of history and the nature of Christianity by careful scrutiny of such texts.

The true genius among the Fathers, in the opinion of many, was Augustine. His command of diverse fields such as philosophy, rhetoric, Scripture, and administration is astounding. Before becoming a Christian, he sampled most of the major options open to an intellectual of the period, having been among other things a highly regarded orator, a Manichee, and a contemporary Platonist. Ambrose's intricate allegorical interpretations of the Old Testament in public homilies had a strong impact upon him, as did the witness of his mother. He had been as materialistic as most, and probably remained more sexually driven than many. His writings cover a plethora of subjects and represent as wide-ranging a group of inconsistent conclusions as one can imagine from any person with a reputation for intellectual acuity. He even-

tually published retractions in which he heroically tried to form what he had said on most sides of many issues into some sort of consistent position.

The final results do leave much to be desired. The fatalism of the Manichees which he previously rejected seeps into his understanding of God. Recent scholarship has rather forcefully questioned whether his views of providence, predestination and free will are not at least as unbalanced as those of Pelagius. Yet his penetration into perpetual human problems, his insightful observations about the commonplaces of life, as well as his comments on Scripture and tradition, make him well worth our while. One of my friends who grew up in South America speaks of a philosophy class in which the Marxist professor demanded that the students read Augustine's *City of God.* His *Confessions* are to be found in paperback editions in many bookstores; his grasp of the problems which now find their place in departments of psychology is still impressive.

Rooted in Scripture and Prayer

Histories of Christian doctrine rightly emphasize the variety of cultural and philosophical backgrounds which affected the development of doctrine. The iota of difference could be acute. When, however, one begins to read the Fathers seriously, the overwhelming impression is how much more deeply rooted in the Scriptures they were than we are. Almost every study of any Father or heretic can be troubling because of the fact that each of them knew so much Bible by heart. Conflations and misquotations, as well as uncontrolled allegorical exegesis, confront us with a disquieting imprecision—no fault to be cast mildly aside. But they lived in the words of Scripture; in fact nearly all of their debates grew from the biblical roots of the issues. Modern theologians, especially biblicists, can learn much from that. Origen may have been a rare bird (who possibly castrated himself to avoid sexual temptation), and his philosophical speculations can be mindboggling; but he preached hundreds of homilies on Scripture and even produced a remarkable, if not modern, critical edition of Old Testament texts and translations. Jerome was cranky, but his comments on the Bible can still be helpful. It is no accident that his name is affixed to the modern one-volume commentary which shows the learning of Roman Catholic biblical scholarship.

Perhaps the most valuable gift of the Fathers to any period is their concern with spirituality, with the presence of God and with prayer. I once knew a keen graduate student who continually asked the guest lecturers at Yale about their understanding of prayer. It did not matter which topic they had chosen for their presentations; he found some cogent way to introduce his concern. He was not rude, neither was he illogical. The embarrassment was often instructive. After nearly two years, the message he had heard was that religious studies have little to do with prayer. Taking those world renowned theologians at their word, he redirected his national scholarship to the study of political science, where he could make his life count. Watching that happen raised the specter of tragedy, but none of nonsense.

The Fathers are steeped in prayer and contemplation. One who tries to describe them without concentration on their devotional life cannot understand them. That facet might be explained in other than religious concepts—sometimes with insight and sometimes with a stubborn wrongheadedness—but it cannot be avoided. Among the numerous writings on spirituality, Origen has a sparkling piece. Many commented with enlightenment on the Lord's prayer. But the point is more basic. Prayer was the air they breathed. Basil of Caesarea stalked the earth as an adept political animal, a bishop who tricked his friend into becoming a bishop of a one-mule town. He could be at least gray-hearted. But he took his considerable talents into other areas. After finishing what we might properly call his university graduate education, he traveled through Syria, Palestine and Egypt learning the contemplative practices of the monks. His writings have influenced much Eastern Orthodox spirituality up through the present. Athanasius gave us a somewhat glorified portrait of Antony, but much gold shines through the glitter. Benedict's rule can still repay the time spent reflecting on it. Prayer does not answer everything, nor does it always offer evidence of Christian commitment. But it seems to be the most appropriate response to God. Perhaps because of their faults as much as anything else, these Fathers do teach us about the need for contemplative lives.

Imitation pearls among genuine swine? Yes. The Fathers' occasional superficiality and mud-hole ethics should cause dismay. Not the least of their problems is that we have so little information about the early "mothers" of the Church. Even their considerable achievements in the monastic life, philosophy, rhetoric, biblical study, history and prayerful contemplation cannot make them real pearls. Yet to speak so is not to write them off. We can see through the glowing legends which have overgrown their true biography—but in doing so we discover that we are very much like them. Perhaps because of this very fact we can learn from them. In their moments of best insight, the Fathers recognized only one pearl, and that of great price. They are interesting because of the range of their feelings and failures, of their attitudes and attainments. But they are most helpful because they witness to the need for grace and discipline. I ask no more of anyone.

Resources

English Translations:

Large Nineteenth-century Collections:

Ante-Nicene Fathers (Eerdmans)
Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers (Eerdmans)

Excellent Twentieth-century Collections:

Ancient Christian Writers (Paulist)
The Fathers of the Church (Consortium)

Handbook of the History and Literature:

Johannes Quasten, *Patrology* (Christian Classics)

History:

Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church* (Penguin)
J. G. Davies, *The Early Christian Church* (Baker)

History of Doctrine:

J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (Harper & Row)
Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition*, Vol. I (Univ. of Chicago)

Spirituality:

Louis Boyer, *The History of Spirituality*, Vol. I (Seabury)

Biography:

Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (Univ. of California)
J. N. D. Kelly, *Jerome* (Christian Classics)

Journals:

The Journal of Theological Studies
Vigilae Christianiae

Bibliography:

Wilhelm Schneemelcher, *Bibliographia Patristica*, 21 vols. through 1976.

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