

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Vox Evangelica* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_vox_evangelica.php

Evil and the God of Love by John Hick (Macmillan)

Reviewed by H. Dermot McDonald

[p.84]

We may say right away that this is an important book and is a certain must for anyone dealing with this subject from the stand-point of a philosophy of religion. In the first two-thirds of the book John Hick—the Lecturer in the Philosophy of Religion in the University of Cambridge—sets out two forms of theodicy. There is the Augustinian type in which evil is regarded as privation of good stemming from man's misuse of his freedom. The Irenaean type, by contrast, conceives man's fall, to quote a phrase on our own account from J. V. Langmead Casserly (*Apologetics and Evangelism*, p. 52), as a 'primitive failure to make the leap from innocence to righteousness at the point at which such a step is necessitated by the process of their evolution'. Dr. Hick sees the Augustinian type of thought as writ large in Catholic theology, running through Hugo of St. Victor, Aquinas and finding faithful exposition in contemporary Thomist presentations, as these are illustrated in, for example, Charles Journet's *Le Mal* (Paris 1961, Engl. tran. Michael Barry, *The Meaning of Evil*, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1963). The same Augustinian view underlies the theology of the Reformers notably Calvin's who out does Augustine in underscoring some of the 'harsher' implications of the Bishop of Hippo's teaching.

And Barth, too, is no whit behind either Augustine or Calvin in his picture of the malignant power over us of *das Nichtige*. This conception of Barth's comes under Hick's criticism but he does allow that what Barth has to say has value. Not least, he reckons, is Barth's 'distinction between the shadowside of creaturely existence, and evil in the much stronger sense of enmity against God of which the primary expression is sin' (150).

The eighteenth century optimism is to be read as a product of the Augustinian tradition—by way of reaction and acceptance however. Here the conception of evil is viewed as serving a larger good. Leibniz sets before men the present world as the best of all possible worlds—and does not imperfection belong to whatever becomes finite? Still God is sovereign; for it would be unbecoming on His part to create any sort of world. He has chosen the best—and will do His best for the best He has chosen.

But there was darkness with the light in the Augustinian type of theodicy according to Dr. Hick. There was a change of fortunes in the dual aspects of it no less. In Augustine's own constructions, theology and philosophy intertwined. Yet there were distinct theological themes there—the goodness of the created world, pain and suffering as consequences of the fall, the 'O felix culpa', and the final dichotomy of heaven and hell. On the other hand there were also distinguishable philosophical strands: evil as non-being, metaphysical evil as fundamental, the principle of plenitude, and the aesthetic conception of the perfection of the universe. Generally these two kept good company throughout the mediaeval period. But at the time of the Reformation they were severed, the reformers accepting the theological but rejecting the philosophical aspects of the Augustinian theodicy. The enlightenment era saw the choice reversed; the philosophical ideas accepted and the theological set aside. Dr. Hick has something to say on each of these aspects—the theological and the philosophical. His basic criticism of the Augustinian

[p.85]

theodicy comes on p. 199ff and is summed up in his conviction that it permits an 'impersonal or subpersonal way' of conceiving God's relationship to His creation.

Turning to the second type of theodicy, the Irenaean, Dr. Hick shows this to be more characteristic of the Eastern Church, although he does not think that there is an 'Eastern Orthodox theodicy' which is Irenaean as distinct from the Augustinian. We might note in passing that this idea of a contrasting Augustinian and Irenaean type of theology which affected the understanding of man and sin is given prominence by H. Wheeler Robinson in his book on *The Christian Doctrine of Man*. But Dr. Hick does not see a continuous Irenaean tradition of theodicy so much as a type. And therefore he jumps the centuries to the time of Schleiermacher (1768-1834) for a more thorough exposition of the Eastern alternative which had remained relatively undeveloped while the West was making effective the Augustinian alternative.

Dr. Hick's account of Schleiermacher's doctrine of man and sin is designed to show its similarities with the Irenaean type; but the details of this do not concern us in this review. What is worthy of note is that Schleiermacher does end up in a complete universalist position; 'through the power of redemption there will one day be a universal restoration of all souls' (in this connection it might be useful for the reader to look at chapter vii. of E. L. Mascall's *The Christian Universe*). Dr. Hick glances at some of the efforts made towards the construction of teleological theodices under the influences of nineteenth century evolutionism. The trouble with certain of them, particularly that of F. R. Tennant's, is that Christ is left out of reckoning. 'And in omitting altogether the significance of the life and death of Christ in relation to the problem of evil he (Tennant) still remains, with the nineteenth century evolutionary thinkers, at a distance from a fully and distinctively Christian theodicy' (255).

Dr. Hick addresses himself to this task of working out a Christian theodicy which he is convinced neither minimises the facts nor massacres the faith.

He begins by stating the fundamental reason for his rejection of the traditional Christian theodicy. It was based upon the story of man's fall read as an historic account; whereas, in his view, 'the cosmic picture, sketched by St. Paul and completed by St. Augustine' is nothing more than a 'product of the religious imagination' (284). The truth of the matter is that the 'creation-fall' story is 'myth' not 'history', and while it must be acknowledged that St. Paul and St. Augustine were in their day hindered from reading it any other way, their 'basically authentic history' approach is no longer feasible. But Dr. Hick is certain that the traditional 'solution' while 'mythologically satisfying' is open to insuperable objections scientific, moral and logical, if taken literally.

It comes unstuck on the scientifically demonstrated fact that natural 'evils'—earthquakes and the like—were there prior to man's emergence. Then, too, he thinks the policy of punishing others for Adam's sin is immoral. While the notion that sin resulted from the free act of a perfect being is, he believes, incoherent.

In our reckoning, however, not one or all of these objections cracks the traditional 'solution'. It may be agreed that prior to man's arrival nature had its earthquakes and the like. These may well belong to the natural order. But would man have ever known them as 'evil' if he had not

sinned? It seems to me that it is only fallen creatures who would be stupid enough to build their homes on the side of a volcano.

I admit it would be a bit rough if God did indeed punish 'the whole succeeding

[p.86]

human race for the sin of the first pair'. But I am sure that the great body of Christian opinion never felt this to be the case. To maintain that sin could not arise by the free act of a wholly good being begs the question. What about the case of Jesus? Were the temptations real? Later Dr. Hick himself says 'that moral perfection is compatible with liability to temptation is established' for Christ was tempted but did not sin (303). But is not that the contrast—the first man was tempted and did sin—the Second Man was likewise tempted but did not. Anyway for our own part I believe that Adam was created 'innocent' (I am with Irenaeus here!); but not 'perfect'—in the sense, that is, of being full-grown.

But be this as it may; it is Dr. Hick's contention that there is a better way for a theodicy. This is to take as a starting-point the idea that man did not appear on earth as a finished product, a perfect article that somehow, but not unwillingly, got bowled over. Man is rather in the process of creation. To be specific, we must admit 'a two-stage conception of the creation of man'. On the one hand he is the product of a long evolutionary process which resulted in his being made capable of the infinite. This stage was easy enough for the divine omnipotence for in the process the 'man-to-be' was largely the subject of divinely organised processes. But the second state in which the man-that-had-come-to-be attains perfection as a child of God the process is long and laboured. This cannot be done by any divine fiat, 'but only through the uncompelled responses and willing cooperation of human individuals in their actions and reactions in the world in which God has placed them' (291). God's purpose is to fashion many sons for glory—and He has made the world as a place best fitted for this end. The world is therefore rightly seen not as a perfect and now sin disrupted world, and not even as the best possible world in and of itself: but as that most suited to God's purposes for man. The theodicy therefore that will satisfy is, according to Dr. Hick, that which sees the world as a place of 'soul-making'. It is His purpose for mankind which determined the sort of world God should make. He didn't create a 'hedonistic paradise'. The chief end of man is not man's pleasure but that he should glorify God. Thus the world is not for man's enjoyment so much as for his discipline and perfecting unto the fulness of the stature of Christ. To think therefore of God's relation to the earth on the model of a human building a cage for a pet animal to dwell in is to miss the point of the divine intention. It will be humane to make the pet's quarters as pleasant and healthful as possible. But man is not an animal pet, he is a responsible person.

It is in the context of the two stage conception of man's creation that Dr. Hick would understand the fact of moral evil, or sin. He can go along with Flew and Mackie so far as to admit that God could have created perfect beings and constituted them in such a way that they would always freely choose the good. But he dissents from the implication that it was possible for God to make men in such a way that they should necessarily and unfailingly respond to Him in love and trust. He quotes John Wisdom's remark that 'it is logically impossible for God to obtain your love-unforced-by-anything-outside-you and yet himself force it' (309). This means, Dr. Hick contends, that some idea of a genuine freedom and independence of man overagainst God must be admitted. A limited creativity, to be sure, is this freedom

possessed by man, but nevertheless it is real. It is in this reality of man's relative independence of his Maker that Dr. Hick finds the origin of moral evil. Becoming aware of his autonomy in a world in which God's presence could not

[p.87]

be immediately and distinctly seen and felt man turned naturally towards the natural order as that which more unambiguously concerned him. The world looked to the man-coming-to-be as his natural habitat; and it seemed to him, *esti deus non daratur*—'as if there were no God'. Thus it was natural for man to respond to the natural-and sin is in essence his doing what comes naturally. 'Man', declares Hick, 'exists at a distance from God's goal for him, however, not because he has fallen from that goal but because he has yet to arrive at it' (319).

At this point the influence of Schleiermacher becomes marked; and, perhaps, that of Hegel too. At any rate, it is Dr. Hick's assurance that man was created a 'fallen' being; that he was from the first at a distance from God-and quite naturally widened the distance.

There are, however, difficulties in this way of stating the issue. Apart from his mythologising the Genesis story to his own satisfaction, and some questionable exegesis on the way, there is no reason to suppose that Dr. Hick has hit upon the hard facts. His account is no more free from 'myth' than any other. Nor do we find Dr. Hick giving any explanation of the feeling of guilt. If it were natural for man to be natural, then where does this sense of shame, *coram Dei*, come from? Dr. Hick doubtlessly has an answer, but whatever it is, his basic premise virtually allows that sin, in the last reckoning, is man's misfortune, not his fault. Need he then be so upset about it?

Dr. Hick then comes to the allied subjects of pain and suffering—both of which are usually subdivided under the heading 'natural evil'. Here his general thesis is that such a world as we have, with its quota of dystelology, is best fitted as a 'vale of soul-making'. It is at this point that Dr. Hick's theodicy becomes weak. Somehow it doesn't ring quite authentic to tell someone who has just broken his leg that it is good for his soul. Of course it might be; but that would be only because of the sufferer's attitude in his misfortune. It would surely be a job to convince him that this was the reason for it.

Dr. Hick visions a world from which all the harsh actualities have been somehow magically charmed away, or, perhaps, a world in which they never had a place. He is sure that in such a world, the virtues—love, courage, and the like—would have no meaning. Perhaps he is right. But as he notes a heaven without such virtues would be no heaven at all. He finds himself hard put to it, however, to show how these can exist without the opposites he finds so necessary in this vale of soul-making! There is, of course, the fact of excessive suffering and Dr. Hick is not blind to it. But when he has said all he can by way of its mitigation and justification he acknowledges defeat. He has, as did C. A. Campbell, to take refuge in 'the positive value of mystery' (371). Whether this is a fitting conclusion to a theodicy which promised so much is however another matter.

The view that the world is a 'vale of soul-making' can of course only be justified by results. If the soul-making purpose fails then nothing can be said at all in favour of the dystelological aspect of the present cosmos. It is at this point that Dr. Hick regards the Christian eschatology as importantly relevant. He therefore contends for an 'eschaton' in which all will be

ultimately redeemed, and out of the travail will be born a kingdom of all men having arrived at perfection. The process he thinks may have to go on beyond the grave, for 'we have not become fully human by the time we die' (383). The love of God must triumph and however 'theoretically possible' it may be supposed that God could fail, it is faith's assurance

[p.88]

that 'He will never cease to try', and 'that sooner or later He will succeed'. There is therefore no final loss; no hell—for to admit hell would be to imply that His purpose of bringing all to perfection has somehow gone awry.

This conclusion, however, raises questions which seem to be at odds with Dr. Hick's own thesis. Leaving aside problems of biblical exegesis and interpretation, there is difficulty in understanding how man come-to-be at a distance from God would ever want to come willingly to God. Dr. Hick does, of course, liken God to a chess player who knows all the moves and yet who takes the table against a novice. But where does man's free-will come in here? Would it not be better for man, the novice, to throw in the sponge right away and admit he hasn't a chance.

Dr. Hick seems to think that as time goes on it becomes easier for a man to come willingly to God. But is this either psychologically or spiritually true? Is it not rather a fact that the more often we are moved to do anything and fail to do it the less likely we ever will. Cannot man will himself into a position where he could not will himself Godward? He undoubtedly can: and if he can, does not the reality of hell appear an inescapable fact?

© 1967 London School of Theology (<http://www.lst.ac.uk/>). Reproduced by permission.

Prepared for the Web in February 2007 by Robert I. Bradshaw.

<http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/>
