

Chapter Three

*The question of theodicy:
the compatibility of suffering and injustice with a good, all-powerful God*

In our continuing inquiry into “God,” we must now broach the subject of theodicy, literally the “justification” of God, normally conceived as all-good and all-powerful but yet somehow permitting great injustices and suffering to take place in the world, which is presumably under his control. If in the higher forms of religion, as we have said, God is the defender of the weak, he is conspicuously absent when most needed, which raises various questions: is he there, does he exist, is he momentarily unavailable (though the Bible says he never sleeps, the Guardian of Israel), or does he not care, or is he simply *unable* or *unwilling* to do anything?

Here again I think we come back to the same paradigm of faith. The non-faith stance has a field day with this topic, since clearly God does not prevent horrible things from happening on earth. Any person in charge of infants, for example, would step in to protect them when they are in danger, and if they did not do so, they would be considered heartless and even cruel. And so many have rebelled against the idea of God as a monster, all-powerful but uncaring or even sadistic, or a weak old man impotent to do anything and thus laughable as a “God.” This view understandably revolts against what they perceive to be a cultural creation which more often than not serves to oppress humanity, almost always through its human representatives, the religious and political leaders, who serve themselves in the name of God and by divine right. Freeing oneself from this understanding of the deity is a noble human act of maturity and dignity and enlightenment. Some forms of this rebellion have been religious, as was the prophetic response to the priests in Israel, or Buddhism as regards the rigid Hindu caste system (which also had priests at the head), or Protestantism (with its more egalitarian priesthood of all believers) against Catholicism.

But to the believer, the problem of theodicy tests, and thus refines or purifies, faith, to the limit. The attitude of faith accepts, even resigns itself, to many things, and explains everything according to its own terms. Let us examine this attitude, to understand it as best as we can, and

with it approach the problem of theodicy in a way that lends an ear to this attitude which seemingly will never disappear.

Firstly, the world is viewed as somewhat self-standing and as the best of all possible worlds, in some versions of this attitude of “faith,” in which I include some of the principles of Stoicism. The world is a marvelous creation: one has only to examine nature closely, to see the beauty and intricacy of flowers and insects and animals, how they survive in the most unlikely ambients and climates, how wise nature seems to be, and this points to its creator’s wisdom and majesty. But this world is a self-contained system, and we alter its makeup at our own risk. We see this clearly in the effects of pollution and deforestation: one must not try to fool Mother Nature.

This view of the world is realistic, but it too depends on faith, faith that the world must have been created as it is, that God could not or would not have created it otherwise. Or if he could or might have, he chose not to, for purposes which may escape us, but which are just as wise as what is clearly manifested in nature. Accepting the wisdom of how the world is, and the obedience of how we should behave in it, is the practise of faith. That is, we should take care of the world and of each other, especially when calamity strikes (which we should do all that we can to prevent by our lifestyle), viewing it as opportunities to exercise faith and hope and love, rather than as irritating occurrences which make us hate the idea that there is God just standing by. Here Pascal’s wager comes again into play, in some way: little is changed in the world and its calamities by believing or not believing, by blessing or cursing God, in and of itself, so that we have to put up with the world as it is (I’m referring to *forces majeures*) in any case. But a proper attitude of faith helps to bear unavoidable calamities and may even prevent or alleviate the suffering they cause. A proper attitude of nonbelief can also be helpful, as in Stoic resignation that everything is as it should be in the universe, and when it includes all creation and all creatures in its caring embrace. Here again, faith is removed from the horns of the dilemma: we are stuck with the world, we cannot prove it could be better, we cannot prove God doesn’t care, we cannot prove God can’t do anything about it. The person of faith believes the world is as it is for a divine purpose, and that God can do something and wants to do something, but exactly what is not clear. Faith says wait and hope, and trials will pass and good results will follow.

The nonbeliever may scoff. Faith here seems like a blind belief based on no evidence, wishful thinking unworthy of a mature, rational person, childish, and thus ultimately

counterproductive. Perhaps the call is to full human maturity, to forgo the notion of an all-powerful God who loves us but somehow does nothing in the face of human misery. This attitude can be empowering, and can counteract fatalism and inertia, which arise out of a certain sense of destiny and that “it is all God’s will” understood as an excuse not to act. But the rebellion against God is also as susceptible of abuse as is the position of faith. Taken to extremes, as in Nazism and Communism, the notion of the superman who is above conventional morality and theistic ideas has led to great hubris and the most horrendous crimes. And yet there too religion is in the background: religion played a huge role in anti-Semitism, which paved the way for the Nazi holocaust of the Jews and others, and religion as the opium of the people also paved the way for the tremendous abuses of the Communists, who had their own form of “faith” in the writings of Marx and Lenin and Mao. The enlightened person of faith will consider the “true faith” as above these practices, as not being complicit in them, but actually opposing them.

And so the condition of the world, and the behavior of humans in it, can be an argument against the goodness or power of God, but not proof against it: it is still just “circumstantial evidence” that God is either not wholly good or not all-powerful, and can’t be both good and all-powerful at the same time. The person of faith, on the other hand, is not convinced by this circumstantial evidence, even if it seems strong, but takes it as perhaps the greatest test of his or her faith, faith being something so valuable that it is better when it is tested and comes out triumphant and stronger and more effective.

Part of this attitude of faith in regards to theodicy is acceptance of what we don’t know or can’t know or should not know. It need not interfere with action in the world. But it does contain an element of resignation which can be viewed as beneficial, as in the “serenity prayer”: “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” There can even be humor in it, as in the story of the old Jew anguished by the suffering in the world who calls a *minyán* and puts God on trial. After much prayer and deliberation, they found God guilty on two counts: setting loose the tempting evil spirit and not caring for widows and orphans.¹ The old Jew did not lose his faith, but with humor and resignation and familiarity –as only Jews can have– vented his distress with the world and with his God in a very “Jewish way.”

¹ Leo Rosten, *The Joys of Yiddish* (Pocket Books: New York, 1968), 5.

So the problem of theodicy is real, and it goes to the nature of God and his activity, which will be dealt with in the following chapter, and how we can know about it, which is also dealt with there. But it is only circumstantial evidence against God as traditionally understood; it has kept relatively few away from the faith who didn't already reject it. Rejecting the idea that God exists –it is difficult to posit a God who exists but is not “all-powerful” (although this notion and expression has to be deconstructed), or who is not “all-good,” and this too has to be dealt with and understood more clearly– may be a liberating act, but it is not a necessary one in light of the problem of theodicy. Its value as circumstantial evidence is matched –and, for the person of faith, outmatched– by contrary circumstantial evidence that God is “all-good and all-powerful,” that humans can rely and hope in him, that after the trial God will deliver. This is the essence of faith, and it is removed from proof.

The animal world provides a good view of what it is all about when it comes to creation. I watch the “Big Cat Diary” on TV. The leopards and lions and cheetahs are most beautiful, as are the other animals, though some seem ugly and nasty. They all try to survive, and most prey on others: there is no other way. Nature is beautiful, but there is much pain and danger in it; we can only dream for it to be otherwise, it simply was not made that way, perhaps could not be made otherwise. The Bible presents an ideal picture in the beginning: it was a purely vegetarian world without violence, only plants and seeds could be consumed. It is only after the Fall (and the Flood) that animals are allowed to be killed, though not humans; this is presented as a concession, since humanity cannot adhere to a higher standard. But the dream remains. In the messianic picture of the “End Time” presented by Isaiah, all animals get along, the wolf lies with the lamb, and the lion is a vegetarian eating hay like the ox.

The guilt of bloodshed is found all over the Bible. Humans are called to rise above mere evolutionary instincts, and to get along and to protect nature and all animals. And yet, even in the most “messianic” passages, depicting the renewed earth, fish are eaten. Creatureliness has these limits, and it is a dream, which can be a form of destructive escapism or counterproductive rebellion, to insist that some notion of perfection or of something better than what God created should be the case; at least this is what the believer would say. One either accepts that creation is the best of all possible worlds which we should make better (or at least not worse), or one rebels against the notion of God because God did not create the world as we think He should have.

Another lesson to be learned from nature is that of patience. Time in the universe is calculated in millions of years. The canyons and the rivers and the mountains with all their beauty took a long time to come into being; drop after drop of water carved the canyons, and processes took a long time to produce their results. Reflection on this, and on the vastness of the universe, serves to put us in our place, to humble us, to see the broad picture and how the creator's designs are grandiose and quite beyond our comprehension. This is what Job, the righteous sufferer who wanted to sue God realized at the end: he was questioning what he could not understand, but his end was a happy one. This will forever be the response of faith.

And yet, this faith can be sorely tried by the seeming absence of God when he is needed. Human beings like persons who "show up;" Woody Allen said that showing up is 90% of what is required in life. Absence does not always make the heart grow fonder; friendships can be damaged or lost by the lack of care or interest of a friend. In the animal world, God just lets animals prey on one another: it is how nature works. Many humans, especially Americans, have a soft spot for animals, and cruelty to animals is severely punished. It would seem that a different standard applies to God, and this too poses a problem for theodicy, or more probably, for the question of whether God exists at all.

Again, there are two possible responses: to deny the existence of God, at least as able or willing to alleviate suffering, or to have faith that human suffering is for the purpose of purification, of chiseling away our defects, of humbling our pride which can hurt others and fool ourselves. Of course, this is a two-edged sword: great suffering can turn one completely off from God, can cause a mental or spiritual "computer breakdown" which renders one numb with pain, unable to pray or think or feel or have any faith in God. Some have posited God as a "fellow-sufferer" who walks with us, basically unable or unwilling to interfere in our plight. This would at least "justify God" by positing that "we are all in this together," including God. But this apparently deals a blow to God's omnipotence. He would be as helpless as us.

It is here that the mystery of Jesus comes to the forefront. Christians believe that the most God could do to "remedy" our plight was to send his son Jesus to show us how to live, suffer and die in this world that we have and are stuck with, and that God the "Father" was invested in Jesus his "Son." Jesus did heal many who had faith, and was reputed even to raise the dead, and to cry for Lazarus his friend who had died. But in the end, all humans die, including God's son, who was actually sent into the world for this purpose. In this "mystery" –Napoleon was said to have

remarked that ‘he knew men, and Jesus was not a man’— we even have the issue of God’s possible sadism raised: how could he destine his beloved son to such a cruel fate, one which even Jesus tried to get out of (if this was possible, in accordance with God’s will, which came first for him). The fact remains that everything indicates that Jesus went to his fate voluntarily; he could have easily escaped the jurisdiction of the authorities and denied any messianic pretensions and thus save himself. But he did not.

Jesus found a higher purpose in his fate: to hold fast to his faith in God, whom he saw as a loving and caring father able to do all things, but wanting Jesus to suffer and die as the natural result of being just in an unjust world. In this extreme situation of innocence and horrendous cruelty, Jesus acted in the best possible manner, loving his enemies, not letting himself be defeated by them mentally or ethically or spiritually, only physically: over this he had no control, after actually putting himself voluntarily in the position of being arrested as a messianic (political) pretender, with all that this entailed in colonial Palestine ruled by the Roman empire and specifically the most cruel and arbitrary prefect Pontius Pilate.

The purpose of this was to leave us a legacy, an example, at the greatest personal cost: only thus could the example, the witness (in Greek, a “witness” is a “martyr”), be given most effectively. This is what most impressed and convinced St. Paul, that an innocent man would die for unjust sinners, and Paul saw this precisely as proof of God’s love for us (Romans 5:6-9). Thus Christians, though perhaps ultimately unable to explain convincingly why God allows so much suffering in the world, point to the mystery of God as a “fellow-sufferer” who reveals himself in Jesus his son, much like Abraham (Abram means “Great Father”) did not spare his own beloved son Isaac, but was ready to offer him up as a holocaust. But everything came out alright in the end.

And so we are stuck with this “mystery”: there is a lot of suffering in the world, and we don’t like it, but much of it cannot be avoided. Buddhists have their own response: one is to overcome desires which cause even more suffering, and to turn anger into compassion. Christians point to Jesus, their leader in faith on whom we should fix our gaze (Hebrews 12:1-3). A bit later in this same letter, the author speaks of the good fruits that come from fatherly “discipline,” a word which in the Bible connotes physical punishment. The child hates it, but it helps him grow well, when it is wisely administered.

This is the challenge of faith, to believe that our suffering is wisely-administered divine discipline, not according to our likes and doses, but according to a “mysterious” divine plan. It is the Christian approach to the suffering we are nevertheless stuck with. One can resist it, be angry at it, blame God or forget about him and deny that he even exists. Then, many Christians would say (including Pascal), the suffering would not diminish, but increase, as the consolation of faith would be lacking, and perhaps bitterness and anger would get the upper hand, actually increasing our suffering. And so “theodicy” assumes a ridiculous aspect, as it seems to do in the Book of Job: it is ridiculous to put God on trial and judge him, or try to justify him in the court of human justice. Even in this God is removed –at times yes, quite painfully hidden– from our frameworks and schemes. He is only accessible by faith, in the dark, where he has chosen to dwell (1 Kings 8:12).