

# On Evil...

by Plato Mamo

Anyone who claims to be a Christian must, at some point, consider the notorious problem of evil. If God is all-good and all-powerful he would eliminate all evil. But evil exists. Therefore, God cannot be all-good and all-powerful. It is entirely convincing: God, as conceived by the Christian, cannot exist. The only way to evade its force is to minimize or deny the existence of evil.

In fact, we have the following theological solution: Evil has no real existence; it is merely the absence of good. This can be made plausible by a number of analogies: darkness is the absence of light, etc. Still, to say that evil is not real strikes us as, at least, bizarre. Why would reasonable people hold such a view? It is because Christians have a fundamentally mistaken conception of good and evil. A good act, to them, is one that follows the divine commandments. A bad act, a sin, is contrary to these commandments. It is a morality of obedience. Issues of *feelings* of wellbeing, of happiness, of pain, are all irrelevant. If God asks me to take my boy and cut his throat, my doing so is good. I cannot consider the horror and pain, my own grief, the lost potential – these do not enter into it. If I am told to stone a man to death because he was gathering sticks on the Sabbath (*Numbers* 15: 32-36), I must do it. Not doing it is evil.

What is truly offensive in the Christian's concept of evil is this total indifference to pain, to suffering, to harming other beings. We read the Ten Commandments and the elaboration that follows and we find nothing about cruelty, about inflicting pain, about killing. Yes, God says *do not murder*, but this applies only to Israelites. All others can be killed in horrific ways, as the rest of the Old Testament makes perfectly clear. If in doubt, we can consult Moses Maimonides (12<sup>th</sup> century), a wise student of the OT, much admired by Jews today. He says if an Israelite

kills an Israelite he must die. "Needless to say, one is not put to death if he kills a heathen."<sup>1</sup> We also read that if someone speaks ill (*kakologein*) of his father or mother, he shall be put to death. Whoever lieth with a beast shall be put to death (*Exodus* 22: 19). It is this callous indifference to suffering and death that brands the writers of these texts as barbarians. And it is this indifference that enabled Christians through the ages to kill, to torture, to burn alive the heretics, the infidels, the enemies.

Who, we ask, is an evil man? That is easy: Hitler, Stalin, and their followers. They killed millions of people. What about a man who, contrary to international law, invades a country that had not attacked him, who kills hundreds of thousands, who endorses the torture of prisoners – is he not evil? Oh no, he is a man of faith. He did not disobey any commandments. We don't even have any reason to suspect that he desired his neighbour's wife.

It is this bizarre conception of evil as a negative that enables the theologian to give what appears to be a solution to the problem. Evils, you say? You mean rapes and murders? These things are done by men freely choosing to do them. God, they say, cannot interfere with the man's free choice. He has to wait until the deed is done and then he will punish the doer. Even setting aside the highly problematic free will issue, we know that this alleged solution will not do. We see, let us say, a psychopath who has abducted a young girl and he is about to rape and kill her. We care *not at all* about his freedom or his punishment. We care about the horrible suffering, the fear, the pain of an innocent child. Any one of us, sinners that we are, would do anything in our power to prevent such crime. The all-good, the all-powerful Being does nothing. He does not care about the suffering. He is actually going to cause more suffering by inflicting the punishment.

Those theologians who claim that free will solves the problem of evil have not read their Bible. Had they read the dreadful story in *Exodus*, they would see that God does not respect the autonomy of the human will. After the locusts

and the dog-flies (?), the Pharaoh is inclined to let the Israelites go, but then God “hardens his heart” and he does not. This happens not once but four times. The last time is most offensive. The Israelites have departed carrying the loot. The Pharaoh must have thought “good riddance.” But God hardens his heart again and he sends his army after them. The Israelites get through (the sea is parted) but the Egyptians are all drowned; “not one survived” is added with glee. This horrendous act was done in order to show the Israelites that God is very powerful and that he is on their side. A being that interferes with the human will and so causes mass murder but refuses to do the same to save a child is not a good being.

What is this hardening? It can only be an intervention, a rearrangement of the mass of motives and desires that make up the human will. One could even say that it changes the character of the man; it makes him hardhearted which he was not before. In any case, the Pharaoh’s decision not to let the Jews go was not free.

But even supposing that the free choice argument is a satisfactory solution to the problem, we have an enormous amount of evil which is not due to human choice. We speak of natural evil and we mean not only the frequent and devastating disasters like earthquakes, floods, tornados, fires, but also the multitude of things created by God especially in order to afflict humans: bacteria, viruses, parasites, genetic disorders. These agents cause immense amounts of pain, suffering and early death. Normal, decent people would agree that such great suffering is an evil. A being that causes it and does nothing to relieve it is not a good being, let alone an all-good one.

Some years ago, when discussing the problem of pain in a philosophy class, I used the case of a

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mortally wounded animal. We, I said, would think it was our duty to kill the animal, to put an end to its suffering. Why doesn’t God do it? One student, a budding theologian perhaps, said, “God cannot interfere and vio-

late his own laws of physics every time something gets hurt.” To which I replied, somewhat sharply I confess, that when his buddies ran out of wine he did just that.

The student was wrong. The correct Christian answer has to be that suffering, though it appears evil to us, is not. Evil is disobeying God’s commandments. If God sends floods, plagues and epidemics, he, surely, has his reasons. Very likely he is punishing us for some collective transgression, some sacrifice to Baal perhaps. (I read that some foolish but, unfortunately, prominent American opined that earthquakes that had recently occurred were due to God’s anger over Obama’s modest attempt to reform health care!)

But, you say, why punish the children? Are they not innocent? Here we meet the most offensive, the most outrageous feature of Christian dogma. No one is innocent. We are all tainted by the sin of our remote ancestors. (*Homo erectus*?) At this point, I think, our attempt to reason with the Christians must come to an end.

They, however, go ahead. They not only deny that suffering is evil, they want to say that pain and suffering are good! Is that not so in the case of punishment? Is it not better that the criminal suffers for his crime? In addition, suffering can bring forth admirable character traits like patience, humility, submission to the will of our Lord. We remember from reading the Old Testament that God is fond of putting people to the test in order to prove their total submission to his will. These tests often involve great suffering and death, as in the case of Job, whose slaves and children were killed. He however remained a steadfast worshipper of the arbitrary power of a being devoid of anything we would recognize as goodness. And,

anyway, these odd cases do not prove that suffering is good. At best, they show that some bad things have, incidentally, some good effects. Of course, they could have bad effects too as when the sufferer turns angry, bitter or suicidal.

And there is another point which seems to have escaped the devout. If diseases are willed by God either as punishment or a testing situation, our assiduous effort to find cures, to care for the sick, is contrary to God's will, an act of defiance. I have not heard of a sick Christian rejecting medical treatment on these grounds.

It is clear then that none of proposed solutions to the problem comes even close to being successful. The conclusion must be that an all-powerful, all-good God does not exist.

At this point someone will say that this emphasis on the OT is misplaced. Only extreme fundamentalists put weight on those books. We do not kill homosexuals or people who work on Sundays. Most Christians are followers of the gentle Jesus who taught us to love one another and who so loved mankind that he died for us. Jesus taught love and with love comes compassion, a sharing of another's pain and a determination to assuage it. And, in fact, far from causing suffering himself, he is moved by the plight of people he meets and, using his supernatural power, he heals the blind, removes demons from some wretch, and even restores life to a corpse. This shows that he dislikes pain and sickness and, like the rest of us, considers life and health as really good things. Our healing the sick and our efforts to prolong life are based on his teaching and his example.

That is the official story. Yet as we read the Gospels, we are struck by two things: (a) the people he heals, his "documented" cures, are relatively few<sup>2</sup> considering the length of his ministry and the large crowds that follow him; (b) all his cures are a reward for the patient having demonstrated faith in him. His entire career has one aim: to promote faith in him and the father who sent him. He who believes will be rewarded. He who does not will be punished. His cures, such as they are, are incidental; the purpose is to demonstrate his great power and thus elicit belief.

His main concern is not the suffering of humanity. Had that been the case, he would have eliminated all those agents created by his father for the sole purpose of causing pain, sickness and death. He removes the

evil spirits tormenting a poor man. Does he also order such spirits to never possess another? He does not. Does he say, speaking to the multitudes, "all you people suffering from trachoma, from leprosy, from epilepsy, from cancers, come to me and I will cure you." He does not. Any ordinary, compassionate person, given his powers, would, no doubt, do that.

The proof that he is no more concerned with the horrendous suffering of humanity than his father had been is that he reserves for the wicked, including unbelievers, eternal torments. How can a loving, compassionate person invent such a monstrous concept? Even the old Jehovah could send you plagues and fires and kill you but would not torture you for all eternity. Interestingly, we read that old Origen, who had a Greek philosophical training and was therefore no barbarian, denied that the punishment would be eternal since God cannot be so vindictive. Naturally Origen was branded a heretic.

We must conclude that the teaching of Christ does nothing to resolve the old problem of evil. The only way for Christians to maintain their belief in a good God is to deny, minimize or ignore the terrible suffering afflicting humanity and all life. And that is not an option for a sensitive and decent person.

#### Endnotes:

1. This delightful opinion is quoted by Richard Dawkins in his great book *The God Delusion* (p. 254), stressing the "needless to say." One can wonder if the Israeli bulldozer driver who ran over and killed the 23-year-old American woman, Rachel Corrie, was ever punished.
2. In the gospel of Matthew, we read that Jesus cured many people when large crowds had gathered. That is, very likely, an exaggeration. Had all these miraculous cures actually occurred, it would have made Jesus exceedingly popular and then we could not understand why these same people, a short time later, would be clamoring for his death. (Matt. 27:22-26)

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