

Evil, the Christian God, and Atonement Theology

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Introduction

When people look at the world, and see the evil in it, they are more likely to conclude that ‘god,’ if ‘god’ exists, is either passively or actively evil. On what grounds, then, do Christians argue that the God we worship is not evil? This gets us right to the heart of a practical issue: We must speak first about Jesus, then only later about God. We must do this for many reasons. But not least among them is the fact that going the other way around and defending the existence of a rather generic ‘god’ is actually not helpful for people, because by so doing, we are trying to defend the existence of a ‘god’ who, in the minds of our listeners, is either passively or actively evil. They are probably already rather bored or angry with that ‘god,’ so why would they want to be right with that entity? But Jesus gives us clarity about three key focal points when the issue of evil is on the table: humanity, the character of the one true God, and story. The responses to these questions correspond to the topics in Christian theology called atonement, theology proper, and eschatology, respectively.

Humanity and Atonement

I believe that the uniquely Christian contribution to discussions about ‘evil’ is to maintain that humanity is the source of the evil in the world. It’s not that at every moment, human beings are as bad as we could be. But at every moment, human beings are not as good as we should be. Human beings are not thoroughly evil, since there remains in us something of the image of God, however tarnished. Yet the problem is *ontological*, concerning our very being, our human nature having been corrupted. So the solution is not simply educational, as if we just needed to educate people in the correct way. It’s not simply structural or political, as if we just needed to change structures. Education and redistributing political power might help in many ways, and I am not diminishing work in those fields, as Christians must also work to bring about better education and more just political arrangements, but Jesus said the fundamental problem is *ontological*. It is in our hearts, at the very center of our will. That is a challenging thought to many, because there is no philosophy or viable political theory that even claims to deal with humanity ontologically, in our very being. To my understanding, and on the theoretical level alone, only the Christian story goes this deep and claims to have a God who heals *human nature* itself.

The source of this corruption of human nature is, famously, Adam and Eve internalizing the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Popular misconceptions need to be cleared away. The tree was not a test, not a temptation, not evil, and not God withholding scientific or moral knowledge from humans. This tree signified that the definition of good and evil was larger than Adam and Eve, more ancient than them, firmly rooted, and most importantly, external to them. In other words, God planted the tree of knowledge of good and evil to be a blessing to humanity, that we would understand the power to define good and evil does not come from inside us, but is rooted outside us, in God. It summed up all boundaries in itself and pointed to the ultimate boundary. In that sense, God was not trying to withhold the knowledge of good and evil from humanity. He was actually trying to help us gain that very knowledge. How? By commanding humanity to not eat the fruit and respect the boundaries God dignifies in His vision for human life. The only way to truly understand evil, after all, is to grow in the goodness that God called us into. The common assumption, that one must do evil in order to understand it, is false. On the one hand, in reality, when we do evil, we lose understanding of it, because we blame others (as Adam blamed both Eve and God for his own sin), rationalize it away, or suppress it. On the other hand, when we grow in goodness, we can look back down the opposite trajectory from where we have come that our lives now have more meaning, goodness, fullness, life, relationship, and spiritual connection with God; we can therefore imagine, by contrast, what it would mean to go backwards into the never ending loneliness of being self-centered.

So the fall of humanity never was *necessary* in God’s plan and moral universe. Sadly, Adam and Eve were deceived and took the fruit and ate it. In essence, they took into themselves the desire to define good and evil by themselves, on their own terms. And ever since, each human being experiences the desire and temptation to make herself or himself the locus of good and evil, defining it and naming it and imposing it on others. But s/he also thereby introduces whim, caprice, and self-centered arbitrariness into the world. Each person has become a subjective moral relativist. Yet humanity has also been haunted by a sense that there is a larger moral vision than ourselves, into which we are called to take our place. It lingers in us in our language – good and evil, right and wrong – which points to realities larger than us, which are objective, not subjective. It lingers in our consciences because we are made in the image of God, and despite the fact that we have marred and corrupted our human nature by becoming relativists God continues to whisper to us through our very humanity, for we are still tied to Him. This, I believe, is a reasonable explanation for the moral quest that people of all times and places have undertaken;

even atheists try to define morality, ‘knowing’ intuitively that there is such a thing as moral evil, seeking goodness and justice, yet unable to define it precisely or give it proper intellectual foundations without a rational connection with God.

The Old Testament pointed the Jews towards the necessity of an internal transformation. Throughout Israel’s long relationship with God, those with prophetic insight pinpointed the reason for Israel’s repeated failures: the human heart. They could not blame bad circumstances since they were in the Promised Land. They could not blame bad laws since they had the Law of Moses given by God at Sinai. The authors of the Hebrew Scriptures had the unique insight that the problem was internal. Hence, Moses, David, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel said: ‘The Lord will circumcise your heart’ (Dt.30:6). ‘Create for me a clean heart’ (Ps.51:10). [The Lord] will write [His] law upon their hearts’ (Jer.31:33). ‘[The Lord] will give you a new heart’ (Ezk.36:26). In fact, the reason for Israel’s subordination to Gentile powers in the first place was Israel’s corrupted human nature, or, to use the language above, their hearts. Yet if Israel needed the same heart level transformation as the rest of the Gentiles, and if Israel’s prophets had also foreseen the Gentile world benefiting from the transformation of Israel when Israel’s God finally acted in such a way as to bring that heart level transformation about, then the Jews would have to look hard at their past attitudes towards the Gentiles and completely reevaluate what it meant to be ‘separate’ from them. It’s not that such a distinction would no longer exist, but that the way it was defined would be reoriented fundamentally. With Jesus, it would be reoriented around himself and redefined by him.

Jesus brought about the radical transformation of *human nature itself* that the Scriptures longed for. He transformed the flesh (John 1:14) – the fallen and corrupted human nature – he took on. As he grew up, he beat his way forward in and through his flesh. Luke describes Jesus’ growth with the word ‘proekopten’ (Lk.2:52), which is a word used to describe the beating by which a metal-smith would shape a piece of metal with blows. Jesus’ wilderness temptation, where he wrestled with his flesh and the devil for 40 days (Mt.4:1 – 12, Lk.4:1 – 13), is an illustration of Jesus redeeming the story of Israel’s 40 years in the wilderness. His life was struggle and suffering, culminating at Gethsemane, his trial, and crucifixion, where the full brunt of the wrath of God was poured out within his very body, on his very flesh. God ‘condemned sin in the flesh’ of Christ (Rom.8:3) throughout the life of Jesus by Jesus’ personal decision to never sin, and climactically at Jesus’ death as Jesus killed the flesh. Jesus therefore perfected his humanity in the love of God through his life and death. In his resurrection, Jesus emerged as a new kind of human being – a God-drenched, God-soaked human being whose humanity was fully reconciled with God – in order to share the Spirit of his new humanity by his Spirit to anyone who comes into a living and dynamic relationship with him. In Jesus, and only in him, is a remedy possible for our humanity, for all humanity.

You can boil this down to a comparison: Where is the evil located? How can it be solved?

<i>In humanity</i>	<i>In bad ideas</i>	<i>In bad laws/structures</i>	<i>No solution/no problem</i>
Christianity	e.g. Education	e.g. Islam, Democracy,	e.g. Buddhism

This articulation of the atonement is called ‘medical substitution,’ which is held by the Eastern Orthodox Church. Medical substitution holds that Jesus had to physically redeem the humanity of one sin-scarred human being – his own – in order to offer his Spirit of his new humanity to everyone, for the redemption of all sinful humanity. I place it here in contrast to the atonement theory called ‘penal substitution,’ which is held most strongly by those in the Augustinian – Reformed camp. Penal substitution states that Jesus absorbed a certain amount of God’s wrath on the cross in order to forgive sinners. This is important to reconciling God’s justice (demanding that sin be punished) and His mercy (demanding that sinners be forgiven). The difficulties I have with penal substitution are many, but the two most relevant here are as follows. First, in penal substitution, Jesus absorbs the *punishment* for sin, but it is less clear what he is doing about the *source* of sin internal to us. Usually, the issue of engaging with the source of our sinfulness is relegated to the work of the Holy Spirit in our sanctification, but there are problems associated with dividing up the work of Christ and the work of the Spirit this way.

Second, penal substitution advocates have difficulty explaining what God is actively doing about *all* human evil. The chief problem they encounter is the question of why God apparently grants salvation from sin to some but not all. For, in order to explain why everyone does not avail themselves of the forgiveness offered by Jesus, penal substitution advocates have to say either that the scope of the atonement was limited by the Father to begin with, or that Jesus’ work on the cross was ‘sufficient’ for all but ‘efficient’ only for some, which then sunders the work of Christ from the work of the Holy Spirit in applying the work of Christ to sinners, since the Holy Spirit applies the atoning work of Christ only, apparently, to the ‘elect.’ This divides the members of the Trinity one way or another, which makes it impossible for us to say to any particular non-Christian, ‘God loves *you*,’ because of the uncertainty injected into the theology: We would simply not know whether God in fact loves the person right in front of us.

Furthermore, penal substitution makes it impossible for us to say, ‘God cares about *all* human evil.’ This is simply an extension of the problem. For penal substitution offers very little explanation for what Jesus is actively doing to address *all* of human evil. Once again, some argue that one can attribute ‘forgiveness’ to the atoning work of Jesus, and ‘transformation’ to the subsequent work of the Spirit in the believer, and therefore they have a God who is acting to undo human evil, but only in the ‘elect.’ I believe biblical exegesis proves that dichotomy false,¹ but regardless, the fundamental problem which I have raised, remains: What about the ‘non-elect’? Has God so arranged the mechanics of salvation so that He is only saving *some* of humanity, which means that He only wants to undo *some* human evil? If so, then it becomes disingenuous for a Christian who subscribes to penal substitution to claim that God wants to undo, heal, and transform *all* human evil, injustice, and brokenness at its very source: within each and every person. The theology simply does not support it. My basic contention is that penal substitution actually makes God complicit in human evil. For this theory posits that at the heart of Christian theology – the atonement – God is solving a problem internal to *Himself* in relation to *some* people, rather than a problem internal to *us* in relation to *all* people.

Medical substitution does not have this problem, for two main reasons. First, the objective of the atonement itself is to achieve an ontological compatibility and union between God and humanity within the loving relations of God’s Triune nature, that is, within God’s very being. This was God’s purpose from the creation, but after humanity’s fall, in order to accomplish this original purpose, God had to also destroy the corruption of sinfulness within each human being so that His love could be received as love and not as torment, since our self-centeredness would resist and resent the call of God to be as other-centered as He is. In the medical substitution theory, the wrath of God against the corruption of sin was poured out by Jesus *within* his humanity, since Jesus was both divine and human, not *upon* the person of Jesus by God, as penal substitution advocates hold. The atonement was personal in the sense that Jesus atoned first for his own humanity through his incarnation, life, death, and resurrection. Jesus forced his humanity to adjust to the radical nature of God’s other-centered love. Then and only then could he offer the Spirit of his atoned-for-humanity to all, genuinely, without any reservations or limits from God’s side. The destruction of the corruption of sinfulness within other human beings therefore begins in us fundamentally with our conversion to Jesus whereby he comes to dwell in us by his Spirit and puts our ‘old self’ to death as Paul says in Romans 6:6. God’s progressive victory against each person’s sinfulness is developed subsequently in each person’s active relationship with Jesus by his Spirit as we struggle against our own self-centeredness. Then it is consummated at Jesus’ return when he will grant us renewed physical bodies akin to his own resurrection body. Jesus deals with a problem internal to us, not internal to God. For God has always been *for humanity*, desiring to draw us up and elevate us into Himself. Because of humanity’s fall, He has also been against our sinfulness, evil, injustice, and brokenness because we contradicted our original good nature and, by this internal pollution, set ourselves ontologically against the purpose for which God created us: union with Himself.

Second, medical substitution holds that God by His grace constantly enables human free will rather than negates it, because it is against God’s character to strip human beings of their free choice to accept Him in Christ. Those who reject God in Christ do so by their own free will, thus abusing God’s grace, and will bring their unhealed, selfish human nature into the presence of the radically other-centered God who calls for all things to become consistent with His character. By seeing matters this way, the medical substitution theory is not ‘Augustinian.’ The later Augustine posited *monergism* (literally, ‘one-will’), such that God’s will alone is the sole, efficient cause of the salvation of people, apart from and without any human free will whatsoever. Augustine in the Latin West redefined words like ‘predestined’ in a way that no Christian had done before him. Augustine’s contemporary John Cassian, held up in the Eastern Orthodox Church as the one who attempted to correct Augustine, held to the *synergism* (literally, ‘working with’ God’s grace, with God’s grace being prior) passed onto him by earlier Christian thinkers. This is why Eastern Orthodox theologians are neither Augustinian, nor Pelagian, nor Semi-Pelagian.² Within the

¹ Paul, in key passages like Romans 5:1 – 11 and 8:1 – 17, Ephesians 1:3 – 14 and 2:1 – 10, and Colossians 1:13 – 14, says that the basis of God’s forgiveness of us is not because a punitive transaction whereby – as in penal substitution – Jesus absorbs the punishment for our sins due to us under God’s wrath, nor because of an equivalent economic transaction – also in penal substitution – where Jesus ‘paid’ the debt that we owed to God in that sense. Despite the use of this language at times, God extends forgiveness to us because we have died and risen again in Christ and have a radically new identity ‘in Christ’ and not ‘in sin.’ That is, by faith in Christ, we have participated in our own identity transformation whereby the old person we were no longer exists to God.

² For helpful discussion about Cassian, see Owen Chadwick, *John Cassian* (Cambridge University Press, 2nd edition: 1968). See also the dialog on Cassian and synergism between John Hendrix, founder of the website www.monergism.com, and Clifton Healy, an Eastern Orthodox lay theologian, at <http://benedictseraphim.wordpress.com/2005/03/31/st-john-cassian-on-grace-and-free-will/>. To see patristic quotations on free will, and against the theory that God coerces human beings, see my collection: <http://www.newhumanityinstitute.org/pdfs/article-patristics-on-free-will.pdf>.

medical substitution theory, God is understood as not limiting the scope of the atoning work of Christ in any way. Each and every human being must respond personally and affirmatively Jesus' work of undoing human evil at its source in every human being is truly available to every human being, with no limitations from God's side.³ God is understood to be working by His grace within each person, enabling their free will and calling out to them to come to Christ and be transformed; it is their free choice in refusal that explains their ongoing rejection and their embrace of self-centeredness. Much more can and must be said about this comparison, but I offer a preliminary comment here: I believe medical substitution allows us to treat the Old Testament story and prophecies more naturally, and does a better job making sense of the various New Testament idioms surrounding the atonement, so as to firmly undergird the claim that God really and truly wants to bring *all* people to Himself and undo *all* human evil, at its source. This articulation of the atonement clearly gives us the ability to say God is against *all* human evil, and for *all* humanity – each and every person – and all this by His love.

The Character of God and Theology Proper

The Christian God who reveals Himself in Jesus is the God who is radically opposed to human evil, but who nevertheless loves each human being. Every other concept of 'god' besides this makes that 'god' complicit in human evil. Invariably, the other 'gods' are either passively or actively evil.

The most natural conclusion a person can make about 'god' and the character of 'god' is that 'god' is both good and evil. Just look out at the world. There is good and there is evil, despite all the questions of how one defines good and evil. With the Hindu god, there is no true moral difference between actions or motivations that we call 'good' and other actions or motivations we call 'evil.' This is because in Hinduism, good and evil are held to be constructs of our own limited perspective; they are simply aspects of the same ultimate reality, as Shiva the Destroyer is merely an aspect of the one god. The Brahma Sutra 2.1.34 – 36 offers this understanding of reality as the resolution to the apparent problem of injustice, where people do not get what they deserve in this life. Where is justice? The great Hindu commentator Sankara says that the resolution involves saying that people are actually receiving the karmic rewards or consequences from a past life, and that the creation is beginningless, so that there is no true problem of injustice. Many questions can be asked of this, but one suffices: If human dignity is said to be a distinct moral good, then can a deity who makes the duality between good and evil irrelevant serve as its foundation? Such a deity would be just as much at work to neglect it or undermine it. The same is true in relation to other eastern concepts of 'god,' if they exist in those systems. Good and evil are either eternal principles that just fight each other forever (as in Zoroastrianism), or aspects of the same God (as in Hinduism) and therefore just constructs in our own minds (by implication in Buddhism).

The Islamic concept of Allah leans towards the Hindu concept of a god who is both good and evil. The Qur'an says, 'Verily, God will cause to err whom he pleaseth, and will direct whom he pleaseth.' (Qur'an 6:39; 4:88, 143) The line refers to God's determination of the fate of individuals, and this becomes the Islamic equivalent of double predestination. Though Muslims refuse to say anything about the character of Allah or a personal knowledge of Allah, claiming that Allah is beyond all human language because all words become anthropomorphic and tainted by human experience, it is hard to escape the conclusion that Allah is both good and evil, or, quite simply, evil.

This raises the thorny question for the Augustinian-Reformed tradition. Their theology, rooted in *monergism* (God's will alone is the sole, efficient cause of human activity) finds a hard time escaping the same predicament. Why is evil in the world not a direct result of some evil in the character of God? For if God's will is irresistible, then logically speaking, the reason for evil, injustice, and human sin is ultimately God's will, and therefore God's very character.⁴ It is significant that this type of theology emerged in the Latin West through the

³ This is a much more natural reading of the following Scriptures: 'He [Jesus] himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for those of the whole world' (1 John 2:2). 'False teachers were...denying the Master who bought them' (2 Peter 2:1). 'The living God... is the Savior of all men, especially of believers' (1 Timothy 4:10). 'For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men' (Titus 2:11). 'God our Savior...desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth' (1 Timothy 2:3 – 4). 'The Lord is patient towards you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance' (2 Peter 3:9) 'Do I have any pleasure in the death of the wicked...rather than that he should turn from his ways and live?...For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone who dies. Therefore, repent and live' (Ezekiel 18:23, 32 – 33).

⁴ 'Nothing is more absurd than to think anything at all is done but by the ordination of God....Every action and motion of every creature is so governed by the hidden counsel of God, that nothing can come to pass, but what was ordained by Him....The wills of men are so governed by the will of God, that they are carried on straight to the mark which He has fore-ordained' (*Institutes*, Book 1, ch.16, section 3). Calvin admits that logic implies God is therefore responsible for human sins, but he dismisses the accusation without a real basis, in ch.17, section 5. Calvinist theologian Mark R. Talbot writes, 'God does not merely passively permit such things by standing by and not stopping them. Rather, he actively wills them by ordaining them and then bringing

Scholastics via contact with Islam, through the Spanish Banezians (who also believed in double predestination) and into Calvinism. Calvin himself believed that God actively willed the fall,⁵ which would, in effect, make God both good and evil, or, once again, quite simply, evil. To make matters fairly puzzling, Calvin claimed that man was still free and accountable, and that God's reason for willing the fall is hidden but could not be unjust.⁶ For Calvin to appeal to 'unknowability' or 'mystery' in this way sounds like special pleading, like the Muslim who insists that one cannot say actually anything negative about Allah's character, despite the logical implications. Furthermore, if Jesus offers salvation to only the elect, and not for all people, and if God has a causal role in humanity's sin and suffering, not to mention some people's damnation in hell, then that would mean that Jesus reveals *only a part of God – the nice part*. There remains a frightening part, what Luther called 'the dark face of God'; in this theological system, God wills people's damnation prior to their choice and prior to history. Under these remarkable, weighty statements, the impression that God is evil does tend to be reinforced, rather quite a bit. This conclusion is staunchly denied by Calvinists, who at various points invoke the concept of 'mystery,' though many, including me, find this whole system rather troubling.

I believe that God *fully reveals Himself* in Jesus (Jn.14:8 – 21; Heb.1:4; Col.2:9; etc.), as opposed to revealing just the 'nice' part of Himself while He hides the 'scary' remainder in mystery. If this is so, then we have a revolution in how we think about God. If Jesus reveals who the Father is, by the Spirit, then there is no aspect of God that is hidden from us by Jesus. All of God's love for humanity and consequently, God's wrath upon the flesh of Christ, birthing the new resurrected humanity of Christ, is on display for us to participate in.

Now we can say that the Christian Triune God is completely and wholly opposed to human evil, and not complicit in it at all, for God is incapable of turning us into robots precisely because of His love for us, and this explains why God is not a passive partner-in-crime to human evil: it is not a choice that is even available to Him. Jesus said, 'As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you' (Jn.15:9), which means that just as the Father and Son work in free and loving partnership with one another in the Spirit, without coercion, so God's character requires, and enables, humanity's free partnership by His Spirit, even if people abuse their free will to reject God. Thus, we cannot posit a doctrine of omnipotence whereby God could overstep human free choice but simply chooses to not do so. Rather, God's grace upholds and enables human free choice, even when that choice is abused to reject God Himself. Still less can we posit a doctrine of divine omnipotence like the Sunni Muslim doctrine of Allah's omnipotence, such that our God also causes humans to err, to sin, and do evil. No! Rather, by calling us all to receive the new human nature that He perfected in Jesus, God is a very active opponent of human evil at its very source, who calls all human beings to come to Jesus. This Triune God, revealed *fully* by Jesus, is wholly good and, while utterly respecting our human free choice, calls us to join Him in healing humanity and the world.

Moreover, Jesus reveals to us what God intended for humanity from the beginning of creation – to be elevated and glorified and brought fully into the life of the Trinity. In other words, God predestined all to share in the physical, glorified humanity that the resurrected Jesus now has, regardless of whether human fell into sin or not. For those who receive Jesus, we experience God's love as love. But for those who reject Jesus, they reject their very own existence and destiny. Through their own choices, they have conditioned their nature and will to curve in upon itself with self-love, having taken even that gift from God and turned it inwards. Yet God does not give up on them in and through Jesus. He keeps calling out to them in love. But because they experience God as a hated and jealous stalker who is constantly calling out to them; they experience God's love as sheer torment. They can only experience His love with utter loathing and bitterness. In this case, hell is the wrath of God, yes, but on a more profound level, hell is the love of God. This is the most natural logical implication if God has revealed Himself as the one who becomes one with us by the Spirit of the divine-human person of Jesus of Nazareth. Father Michael Himes, a Jesuit professor at Boston College, writes:

Of course, the question of punishment, i.e. of hell and damnation will arise in many people's minds, and quite rightly. But damnation does not mean that God ceases to love the one damned. If that were true, then the sinner would be more powerful than God, since the sinner would have the power to make God, who is love, agape, something less than God. No, God's love is constant, unchanging and perfect. Damnation means that the sinner refuses finally and absolutely to accept being loved and to love in response. The damned may not love God, but God continues to love the damned. After all, the love of God is what holds

them about, yet without himself thereby becoming the author of sin.' (John Piper and Justin Taylor, editors, *Suffering and the Sovereignty of God*, Crossway Books, Wheaton, IL: 2006, p.35, footnote 7)

⁵ 'Nor ought it to seem absurd when I say, that God not only foresaw the fall of the first man, and in him the ruin of his posterity; but also at his own pleasure arranged it.' (*Institutes*, Book 3, ch.23, section 7)

⁶ Calvin, *Predestination* 122, OC 8.315

us in existence. If God does not love you, you're not damned. You simply aren't. What supports our existence and holds us in being is God's love. We exist by the fact that God gives God's self to us at every moment. Therefore, of course, God loves the damned. God loves everything that exists just because it exists. Indeed, that is what makes it exist: God loves it into being.

Let me give you an image which comes from Gregory of Nyssa at the end of the fourth century. The difference between heaven and hell is described in this story he tells: Picture yourself walking out on a bright sunny day with healthy eyes. You will experience the sunlight as something wonderful and pleasant and beneficent. Now, picture yourself walking out on exactly the same bright sunny day, but with a diseased eye. You will now experience the sunlight as something terrible and painful and awful, something to shy away from. Well, the sun didn't change. You did.

That is the point about heaven and hell. Heaven and hell are exactly the same thing: the love of God. If you have always wanted the love of God, congratulations, you got heaven. If you don't want the love of God, too bad, you are stuck for all eternity. God remains God. God makes the sun shine on the just and the unjust, the rain fall on the good and the wicked. If you don't want rain or sun, too bad, you are still going to get them. The question is not that God changes in response to us. It is that we are judged by our response to the absoluteness of God's self gift. (Michael Himes, S.J., *Doing the Truth in Love*, p.14 – 15)⁷

Hence, Jesus defines who God is and helps us to know God as He truly is. It seems to me that the gravitational pull towards Hinduism is quite strong, because if God reveals Himself through all of history, including the fall of humanity and our ongoing sin, then He would be both good and evil, or more simply, evil. To the person who 'wants to experience everything' and thinks it is 'close-minded' to make conclusions about God before experiencing everything in life, I would ask one question: If you take all of history and human experience as valid data about the character of God, then you invariably include gross human evil and the fallen creation as part of the data, thereby making God both good and evil, or just evil. This is why the gravitational pull towards the god of Hinduism is so strong, and why, logically, the Muslim Allah and the Calvinist rendering of the Christian God get pulled back to it. Only a thoroughly and consistently Trinitarian definition of the Triune God revealed by Jesus alone, and not by a fallen human history, is a God who is not responsible for any human evil, who is in fact opposed to it, and is thoroughly good.

Story and Eschatology

Will evil be defeated? What do the different faiths say? In Hinduism, you cycle through various lives by being reincarnated. Eventually, if you're ever good enough, you reach some other state, perhaps. But it's about individual attainment. Evil doesn't go away per se. The Wikipedia article *Problem of Evil in Hinduism* says, 'This shows the existence of earlier cycles of creation, and hence the number of creation cycles is beginningless. Thus

⁷ Father Himes is not alone. Irenaeus of Lyon, in the 2nd century, said: 'For one and the same God [that blesses others] inflicts blindness upon those who do not believe, but who set Him at naught; just as the sun, which is a creature of His, [acts with regard] to those who, by reason of any weakness of the eyes cannot behold his light; but to those who believe in Him and follow Him, He grants a fuller and greater illumination of mind.' (Against Heresies 4.29.1; cf. 4.39.1 – 4) Gregory of Nyssa, in the 4th century, repeated this illustration. Isaac the Syrian, 8th century: 'The sorrow which takes hold of the heart which has sinned against love, is more piercing than any other pain. It is not right to say that the sinners in hell are deprived of the love of God...But love acts in two different ways, as suffering in the reprobated, and as joy in the blessed.' (Cited in Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, p.234; and Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, p.181 – 82) Jakob Boehme (1575 – 1624) said, 'Hell is in heaven and heaven is in hell. But the angels see only the light, and devils only the darkness.' Protestant evangelical theologian Donald Baillie, 20th century: 'God must be inexorable towards our sins...not in spite of his love but because of his love: not because his love is limited but because it is unlimited.' Catholic theologian Hans Urs Von Balthasar, 20th century: 'Crucified love is something that sears and consumes, and its two aspects – redemption and judgment – are inseparable and indistinguishable.' Catholic spiritualist Thomas Merton, 20th century: 'If we refuse his love and remain in the coldness of sin then will his fire (by our own choice rather than his) become our everlasting enemy, and Love, instead of being our joy, will become our torment and our destruction.' Catholic philologist and writer J.R.R. Tolkien demonstrates this understanding in his masterful *The Lord of the Rings*, where those who are corrupted by evil lose their physical substance and find good things hard to bear (e.g. the orcs cannot bear the sun; Gollum cannot bear the light of the sun and moon, the touch of elvish rope or the taste of elvish lembas bread; the Nazgul have become wraiths; etc.). Anglican literary scholar, patristics expert, and lay theologian C.S. Lewis in *The Great Divorce* says this. In the Reformed tradition, Swiss theologian Karl Barth (Church Dogmatics) and Scottish Presbyterian T.F. Torrance (Incarnation, Atonement) and American Donald Bloesch (*The Last Things*) also describe hell this way. See also Grace Communion International, <http://www.gci.org/media/youre-included>

Sankara's resolution to the problem of injustice is that the existence of injustice in the world is only apparent, for one merely reaps the results of one's moral actions sown in a past life... On the higher level of existence, however, there is no evil or good, since these are dependent mainly on temporal circumstances. Hence a jnani, one who has realized his true nature, is beyond such dualistic notions.' That rather quickly takes away one's incentive to do social justice work! Or, perhaps you can attain Nirvana and transcend suffering by meditation (Buddhism) or asceticism (Jainism). But this is also individual. Evil per se doesn't go away here either. There are only cycles, or circles.

If you have a belief in a good God, though, then a direct corollary is that this good God will eventually be victorious over evil. Good and evil are not co-equal, or eternal principles locked in eternal combat (Zoroastrianism, or yin-yang type thinking). Hence, the three monotheistic faiths have a sense of a linear story. God promises something, then fulfills that promise. That gives rise to a sense of history moving in a direction. Ultimately, God promises to triumph over evil.

In Atheism, most will claim that the story is linear, since Darwin said that life is getting more complex, and many people are still 'social Darwinists' of the sort that says that life is therefore getting better. I think the evidence shows, however, that the Atheist story is circular with respect to evil and suffering. Just look at the fact that more people were killed in war in the 20th century due to organized Atheism than in the previous 19 centuries combined due to organized religion. Are we really getting better?

The question is, 'What kind of story do you want to live in?' I would rather live in a linear story where one day a good and loving God will vanquish evil. Will there be a happy ending? Compare:

Yes, linear story

No, circular story

Judaism
Christianity
Islam

Hinduism
Buddhism
Atheism

And in the Christian story, God is vanquishing human evil, which now corrupts our originally good nature, without vanquishing or extinguishing us, through Jesus. In Judaism and Islam, it is not clear why or how human beings will survive to be drawn into the happy ending. Some fall into anxiety or a works-orientation because of that. This, too, makes Jesus absolutely unique as we compare stories.

Implications for Ministry

Larger Framework: On my website, www.nagasawafamily.org, under 'writings', I've organized our missional discipleship material according to key questions that I believe non-Christians ask. Actually, I think Christians also ask them too, but they don't realize they're asking them. Each question has a proxe station or two attached to it. So missional discipleship in my opinion must have a missional activity connected to it, so I can train the Christian to be better equipped to do the proxe station as the activity, and to do it with me.

My Intention: Whenever a Potentially Missional Christian (PMC) or even a non-missional Christian asks to meet up with me, I ask them, 'What's it like trying to share your faith here on this campus?' Their response to that gives me something to go on. Then I start training them on the proxe station that I think is foundational to all the others: 'What Can We Do About Evil?'

Preliminary Conversation: So, when I start meeting with Christians, I start each of them on 'The Question of Evil and the Christian Response: Jesus' New Humanity.' I help them to ask the key question: 'Why is Jesus necessary?' The answer I'm trying to help them get to is: 'Evil in humanity.' That framework helps the Christian connect evangelism and social justice because God's way of undoing evil in human nature is to bring them to Jesus and transform each and every human being. This places the Christian in a missional framework. And it helps them understand why I think it's important to tell Christians and non-Christians alike, 'Jesus wants to give us the Spirit of his new humanity to transform us as we relate to him.'

If they can understand that much, they are ready to do the Evil proxe station, and any of the proxe stations that I think are most effective:

- Race - What's the Problem?
- Find Your Heart's Desire?
- What Story Do You Live In?
- Is Religion Just a Cultural Thing?

A couple other proxe stations, (How Much of an Atheist Are You? and What Are You Here For?) can stand apart from this framework, but I think the conversations go better if they are integrated into this theological framework.

Do the Proxe Station: This helps the Christian see that other people are willing to talk about the subject, and hear the Christian presentation of Jesus if it makes sense and connects to something relevant. It will also expose them to the need for more training. I have them listen to me as I engage non-Christians. I listen to them as they attempt their own conversations. We debrief it. Usually what happens is that they are still not used to thinking about Jesus as being the solution to human evil. This will press them into more personal transformation with Jesus in order to bear witness to this truth, and also more intellectual grappling. We pray missionally.

More Training: From that point, I walk them through some materials that are listed on my website. They are either past messages I've given (like 'The Role of Jesus in Revolution and the Pursuit of Justice'), comparisons with other belief systems, bible studies, or devotional reflections (on Matthew's Gospel).

Their Next Step: Based on their responses so far, I gauge whether they are ready to do another proxe, to engage with other people in a GIG (also on the topic of human evil), firm up their testimony sharing, etc. If they are comfortable enough, I give them the Evil proxe station in brochure form (1 page, tri-fold) so they can carry it around. As far as activity, I start asking them to evaluate where their non-Christian friends are at with regards to spiritual interest, and conversational paths to engaging them. I coordinate with them how I can meet and engage their non-Christian friends: either another proxe station or a lunch table or I go visit them. This helps them see more things, and I can interpret for them what I think is going on and what opportunities they have.

For missional Christians (MC's) and missional leaders (ML's): By this point, they are usually asking more advanced questions about the character of God, usually having to do with whether God does evil, and what is hell, which moves them into the next category of questions. See my website for my material on that. I ask them to help me evaluate other Christians, and how to encourage them to be more missional. I might do a training for them on how to exercise godly influence. One possibility is that the missional Christians invite PMC's to do proxe stations. Next year, BCACF will have a Frosh Discipling Team; each discipler will use the missional discipleship curriculum with the frosh that they connect with. One requirement is that the disciplers do proxe stations with me and invite

their frosh to come along and learn. This will introduce new feedback loops and opportunities to evaluate and interpret stuff, because there will be 3 levels: me, the discipler, and the frosh disciple. We'll see how that works, but I'm really looking forward to it.

For social-justice-minded people, PMC's and MC's (really everyone): I ask them to do Global Poverty Impact with me, and invite non-Christian friends. This is an 8 week small group experience where they bring friends together and learn to engage their faith and prayer life with the goal of 'simplicity, for the sake of generosity, in community.' Doing GPI is a very spiritual exercise, because it involves reading Scripture, gratitude for what we have, internal commitments to not judge other people for being more wealthy or less generous than you, a new level of awareness about money and spending, self-discipline about tracking and planning money and spending less, becoming more aware of social issues, and finally, giving actual money to global poverty. Every time we have done this (4 times on campus) there has been at least 1 non-Christian who joined us. This year, I think it has helped Justin Oh take some beginning steps of faith (1st semester), helped Theresa Lee interact with faith more (2nd semester, she joined and asked for a Bible), helped Danielle Chung and Cat Yun and I engage with Jeehye Park (a non-Christian) and seniors who were not that missional (Tim Moon, Eric Yang, Susie Min, Younggee Park). Also, this seems to be an effective way for Christians to challenge non-Christians who say, 'I think you can do service without Jesus.' I invite them to join GPI. They have not done so, but I think that was revealing. I said to them, 'You want to keep this an intellectual conversation. It's not. What we find in GPI is that we are struggling constantly against something in ourselves, our own self-centeredness. And the deeper you go with that, the more you realize what you really are, and how we need Jesus.' Small groups of students (numbering between 6 - 10) have given between \$600 to \$1600. It's incredible, in my opinion. Because my evangelistic paradigm brings together spiritual transformation and social justice within the transformation of our own evil, I strongly feel that GPI (and perhaps other Christian social justice activities) is necessary for our own integrity. KRUP is also very important, but we need something on-campus, accessible to all, and available to do whenever we need it. I now think of GPI as part of the missional discipleship curriculum, under 'The Question of Suffering and the Christian Response: The Divine-Human Partnership.'