

EVIL AND THE CHRISTIAN GOD

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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

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 regeneration and thus escape from evil-doing) 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.¹ It is significant that this type of theology emerged in the Latin West through the 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,² 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.³ 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. Furthermore, 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. This is called *synergism*, and it comes down via the patristic fathers, John Cassian as the third option rather than Augustine or Pelagius, and the entire Eastern Orthodox tradition.⁴ Even in God's undoing of human sin and evil, God's commitment to this partnership with humanity is rooted in – and modeled by – the Father's love for the Son in their perfect love and freedom in the Spirit. This is what Jesus reveals to us about God.

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. Thus, we cannot posit a doctrine of omnipotence whereby God could overstep human free choice but simply

¹ '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 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)

² '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)

³ *Predestination* 122, OC 8.315

⁴ For helpful discussion about Cassian, see Owen Chadwick, *John Cassian* (Cambridge University Press, 2nd edition: 2008). 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/>

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.

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, 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 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 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

Hinduism

Christianity
Islam

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.