

## SEMINAR ON THE NATURE AND METHOD OF THEOLOGY

### TOWARD A THEOLOGY OF EVIL: PROCESS AND TRANSCENDENTAL APPROACHES IN DIALOGUE

This year's seminar continued the consideration, begun last year, of the process approach to doing theology. Last year's study focused primarily on two different methodological emphases within the process tradition. This year, however, the aim was to compare the results of process reflection on the nature of evil with those of transcendental reflection, leaving methodological issues to emerge only secondarily. Two brief papers, continuing a dialogue initiated months before the convention, were presented by Joseph Hallman, of the College of St. Thomas, St. Paul, and Peter Drilling, of Christ the King Seminary, Buffalo, to begin the first day of the seminar. Both presenters adverted to Harold Kushner's *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*.<sup>1</sup> In addition, Hallman drew especially upon Alfred North Whitehead's *Religion in the Making*<sup>2</sup> and David Griffin's *God, Power, and Evil*,<sup>3</sup> Drilling, upon Bernard Lonergan's *Insight*<sup>4</sup> and *Philosophy of God, and Theology*.<sup>5</sup>

Hallman, citing Schubert Ogden,<sup>6</sup> suggested that the problem of evil is neatly conceived as the problem of determining which of three incompatible claims is to be rejected: (1) God is all-good; (2) God is all-powerful; and (3) at least some kind of evil is real and not just illusory. He then went on to observe that since the theologian does not doubt the total goodness of God, the erroneous claim is not the first: it must be either the second or the third. Again, however, the person who has truly listened to real-life human stories is apt to remain profoundly unconvinced by arguments that what we call "evils" are really only disguised goods—incentives to moral growth, temporary stages in the emergence of an evolutionary or redemptive good, occasions for the exercise of divine justice, etc. It would seem, therefore, that the erroneous claim can only be the second.

<sup>1</sup> Harold Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York: Schocken, 1981).

<sup>2</sup> Alfred North Whitehead, *Religion in the Making* (New York: Macmillan, 1926), esp. pt.3.

<sup>3</sup> David Griffin, *God, Power, and Evil: A Process Theodicy* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), esp. chs. 17-18 and appendix.

<sup>4</sup> Bernard Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1957), esp. chs. 18-20.

<sup>5</sup> Bernard Lonergan, *Philosophy of God, and Theology* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1973), esp. ch. 3.

<sup>6</sup> Schubert Ogden, "Evil and Belief in God: The Distinctive Relevance of a 'Process Theology,'" *The Perkins School of Theology Journal*, 31,4 (Summer, 1978), 31.

But how, then, is God's power to be conceived, if not as total? In addressing this question Hallman argued that as a matter of general metaphysics it is fallacious to think that one being can ever determine another being completely. To be actual is, in part, to be free; and every being, from greatest to least, is to some extent self-determining. Consequently even God's power, though greater than that of any other being, is limited by the inescapable freedom of each and every creature. More fully: certain biblical and theological images to the contrary notwithstanding, God is not the fundamental ground of creatures nor, therefore, of their freedom. God influences creatures only by luring them. And while at every instant he lures them along the paths that lead toward the maximum possible sum of cosmic intensity and cosmic harmony, creatures remain free to select other paths. And in fact creatures do on occasion reject the divinely appointed paths for others of their own choosing. One creature's choice may unduly favor intensity — and thus inordinately increase cosmic discord. Another creature's choice may unduly favor harmony — and thus inordinately increase cosmic triviality. But "discord" and "triviality" are nothing other than more exact characterizations of "evil." In summary, then, any increase of evil beyond the metaphysically inevitable minimum is due to creatures' misuse of their freedom; but since creaturely freedom does not even fundamentally come from God, avoidable evils cannot even ultimately be attributed to God. Hence a general solution to the problem of evil is achieved.

Hallman nonetheless proposed that the general solution provided by this standard process theodicy is insufficient by itself and must be supplemented by a strictly theological process eschatology and ecclesiology. If process metaphysics explains how evil can only be partially overcome by God in the present life, a suitably refined process appreciation of the death and resurrection of Jesus can illuminate the Christian conviction that God will finally triumph completely over evil, and that this triumph, like the evil that it annihilates, will be radically social in character.<sup>7</sup>

Drilling began his response to Hallman by accepting the set of three incompatible claims about God and evil as a fruitful starting point for thinking about the problem of evil; but he intimated that in his judgment the incompatibility would finally prove to be less than strict. He also underlined the importance of remembering that a theological, as distinct from a purely philosophical, consideration of God and evil is centrally a matter of understanding the doctrines of God and evil professed by the Christian tradition, doctrines that, for example, speak of God as "*pantokratora*"<sup>8</sup> and as the one who "*de nihilo condidit creaturam*."<sup>9</sup>

How, then, does the theologian approach the task of interpreting such doctrines? Drilling recommended that one begin by adverting to one's own

<sup>7</sup> In this regard Hallman approvingly cited Edward Farley, *Ecclesial Man: A Social Phenomenology of Faith and Reality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975).

<sup>8</sup> I Nicea (DB 54).

<sup>9</sup> IV Lateran (DB 428), I Vatican (DB 1783).

experience, especially, e.g., one's experiences of a longing to know, of profound sorrow, of pain and loss, of freedom, and, perhaps, of unrestricted love. Experiences such as these both engender questions about ultimate meaning and value and, insofar as they include the experience of unrestricted love, provide a virtual answer to those questions, an answer that is radically satisfying even though its details may remain to be worked out. And one works out those details, in turn, through a careful process of making explicit the demands of the questions that the answer satisfies. This process brings one at length to the explicit recognition of God as an unrestricted act of understanding and loving, the uniquely unlimited intelligent intelligibility and loving lovability that is both the fundamental ground and the ultimate goal of every other being. This means, among other things, that God's primary and transcendent causality undergirds the secondary and limited causality of all creatures, including free ones.

What, then, of evil? Drilling carefully distinguished between natural ills, which are things and events that bring pain into the world quite apart from any deliberation by human subjects, and moral ills, which are both disvalues deliberately chosen for their own sakes and, more basically, the very acts of choosing those disvalues. Natural ills are not, properly speaking, "evil." Rather, they are simply aspects of processes that at least in general are intrinsic to a developing material cosmos, processes that in some respects produce a multitude of satisfactions, processes that finally in faith we judge to be guided by divine providence. Moral ills, by contrast, as abuses of God-given freedom and the consequences of those abuses, strictly and uniquely deserve to be called "evil." Precisely insofar as they are abuses of freedom, however, the choices lying at the root of evil are not positive realities but surds, noughts, absences of the intelligibility and desirability that ought to be present. Hence, while both God as transcendent cause and the human agents as secondary causes are responsible for evil choices as free, the human agents — exactly as defective agents — alone are responsible for evil choices as evil. Nonetheless, divine grace offers human agents the possibility of overcoming their defects and becoming effective collaborators with the Trinity in the salvation of the cosmos.

These presentations provoked a lively discussion that took up the remainder of the seminar's first day and its entire second day. Three of the most important issues emerging into the foreground were the following. First, is the notion of "evil" fundamentally the aesthetic notion of "ugliness," with the ethical notion of "vice" and the religious notion of "sin" included within it, or are the latter notions quite distinct from the former (and, perhaps, from one another)? I.e., does the notion of "beauty" properly include the notions of "virtue" and "*agape*," or not? Secondly, is evil intrinsically intelligible, or not? I.e., does evil finally make sense, at least to God, or does even God see evil as making no sense? Thirdly, when one speaks of "God overcoming evil," does this mean that evil ultimately has some positive function, at least for God, or not? I.e., is it sin that God redeems, or merely the sinner? Proponents of the process

approach were inclined to favor the first position on each of these issues; others, including proponents of the transcendental approach, the second.

Two crucial background issues also received some attention. First, both the process and the transcendental approaches make appeal to "experience" as the fundamental criterion of the meaningfulness and truth of their claims. But what, exactly, does each mean by the term? I.e., what elements does "experience" include, and just how does it serve as a criterion? Secondly, what is the relationship of philosophy and theology for the process and transcendental approaches respectively? I.e., which — if either — determines which, and precisely how?

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