

## PASSION AND COMPASSION, HUMAN AND DIVINE: A RESPONSE TO SUSAN A. ROSS

One of Flannery O'Connor's most memorable characters in the novel *Wise Blood*, Hazel Mokes, can serve as a beginning of my response to Susan Ross's fine paper. Hazel Mokes has a rural Southern accent, but he speaks for many today. For Mokes, talk about being born again, freed from sin, washed in the blood of the Lamb, and accepting Jesus as my personal savior has an outlandish, even freakish, ring to it. Being born again is the sort of thing that goes on in rural Georgia or the hollows of West Virginia. When confronted with one of those freaks who claimed to have been saved, Hazel Mokes responded: "Nobody with a good car needs to be justified." Mokes was going to preach the truth about what this world is really like. Nobody with a good mind and the independence that is rightly the inheritance of all of us modern men and women needs to be justified or saved. A good car epitomizes this independence for Hazel Mokes. For many in our culture it is probably symbolized differently—a good degree, a successful career, a fulfilled sex life, children who get into the right schools—anybody that has these things doesn't need any salvation. As Mokes puts it:

Listen you people. I'm going to take the truth with me wherever I go. . . . I'm going to preach that there was no Fall because there was nothing to fall from and no Redemption because there was no Fall and no Judgment because there wasn't the first two. Nothing matters but that Jesus was a liar.<sup>1</sup>

But for Flannery O'Connor, Hazel Mokes was not able to live as the sophisticate he desperately wanted to be. O'Connor recounts that, despite Hazel Mokes' desire to found the new "church without Jesus Crucified," Jesus lurked in the back of his mind like a monkey swinging from tree to tree in the darkest part of the forest.

That monkey is swinging through our minds and hearts as well during this convention. We educated North Americans have to admit, when we are honest, that we are haunted by the thought that we need salvation. For good reason, too. For example, a recent weekly calendar of campus activities where I teach listed these events: a meeting of the sexual assault peer support group; a talk on facts and fiction about homosexuality and homophobia; an information meeting about volunteering to work abroad after graduation to aid the poor; a discussion at the women's resource center on abusive relationships; a brown bag lunch on AIDS

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<sup>1</sup>Flannery O'Connor, *Wise Blood*, in *Three by Flannery O'Connor* (New York: New American Library, 1983) 58 and 54.

and the one you love; a meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous; a discussion group for those grieving the death of a parent or the breakdown of a relationship. Our sense of the monkey's native habitat widens when we skim the morning paper—inner cities awash in violence and drugs; ethnic cleansing, mass rape, bombs, mortar shells, and blue-helmeted hostages in Bosnia; 18 million refugees and 24 million internally displaced persons worldwide today. These realities haunt our culture of literature, criticism, and philosophy. There is a definite whiff of absurdism, even nihilism, abroad; the sort of thing that was present in Europe after the Second World War has now shown up among optimistic American elites. The message of our so-called postmodern time often is: do not hope for too much, you will only be disappointed; do not look for big meanings, big meanings are only masks worn by the powerful who will oppress you with them whenever they get the chance and will lead to new Sarajevos. When we think about these things, the haunting thought that we and our world need to be born again floats across our minds. But our instinct tells us: this cannot really be. Like Nicodemus to Jesus, we ask: can anyone or any culture be born again? This is unreal. Fantasy. Projection.

Immanuel Kant implies as much in the opening sentence of *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*: "That 'the world lieth in evil' is a plaint as old as history, old even as the older art, poetry; indeed as old as the oldest of all fictions, the religion of priest-craft."<sup>2</sup> Is the promise of salvation by the religion of priest-craft to be judged simply as fiction in the face of undeniable evil? This is our unavoidable question.

Susan Ross's approach to seeking fragments of an answer is an important and surely legitimate one. She seeks, above all, to avoid answers that would somehow induce human acquiescence in evils that ought to be resisted and opposed. She points to how the naming of evil as privation or sin can sometimes fail to describe the complexity of the web of concrete responsibility for the occurrence of evil and for overcoming it. Her reflection on the experience of women leads her to be rightly passionate about ways the identification of sin with pride, and of the cross with self-sacrifice, have been used to silence women's voices and undermine women's agency. Her stress on mutuality as that which is deeply violated by the evil of injustice sets a positive trajectory for our response to evil. This trajectory is eloquently sketched out in her meditation on the cross as a call to presence and witness, to resistance, and to ultimate forgiveness in the face of evil. I want strongly to state my agreement with the indispensability of the kind of approach Ross has taken, for any theology that weakens hope-inspired action in the struggle against such evils is unworthy of its claim to be a *logos* about the true God.

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<sup>2</sup>Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans. T. M. Greene and H. H. Hudson (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1960) 15.

At the same time, I want to supplement Ross's paper from a somewhat different angle of vision. Her essay is concerned with showing how right description of evil, an adequate understanding of agency and mutuality, and the theological understanding of the cross can and must empower resistance to evil. The relation of hope to evil in this schema is the relation of the motivating source of action to the obstacles of injustice and affliction. Hope, in other words, is described primarily as that which leads to action, struggle and resistance. Presuming this, I want to raise a further unavoidable question: what word of hope can be spoken when resistance to injustice and struggle against affliction fail? Ross' discussion of the need for us to be present to evil and to witness to it, as Mary and the other women were present to the tortured Jesus on the cross, gives part of the answer. But I think it is incomplete. To use a spatial metaphor that is only partially adequate, her theological reflection is almost entirely "from below": it begins with historical conditions and anthropological questions about human existence and hints at what these might mean about the source of ultimate hope. This is surely a legitimate procedure in my view. At the same time I think Christian hope has important dimensions that can only be spoken of when we try to speak more directly of God than Ross's paper does. Call this an approach to evil and hope "from above" if you will. What I am concerned with is whether and how we might haltingly speak words of hope about *God* in the face of the injustices and afflictions that are not finally in our power to overcome. I think it is evident, despite all our efforts, that not every tear can be wiped away. Can any word of hope can be spoken about God when sin and death do, for all we can see, prevail?

H. Richard Niebuhr sought to describe the movements of the monkey swinging through the thickets in the back of Hazel Mokes' mind when he described what he called an "ethics of death." This is a mindset, often implicit and inarticulate, that sees so much evil and destruction in the world that it concludes that the ultimate One beyond the many fragments of our personal and social experience is hostile, even malevolent and maleficent toward us. "He" or "It" is not simply absent but appears as "enemy": "We live and move and have our being in a realm that is not nothingness but that is ruled by destructive power, which brings us and all we love to nothing. The maker is the slayer; the affirmer is the denier; the creator is the destroyer; the life-giver is the death-dealer."<sup>3</sup> This sounds like a description of the God of Qoheleth:

Vanity of vanities, all is vanity. . . . I saw all the oppressions that are practiced under the sun. And behold the tears of the oppressed, and they had no one to comfort them. . . . And I thought the dead who are already dead more fortunate

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<sup>3</sup>H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963) 139-40.

than the living who are still alive; but better than both is [the person] who has not yet been, and has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun.

(Ecl 1:2; 4:1-3)

Even more, it sounds like the goddess Kali, the Hindu deity who gives birth but who is portrayed with knife in hand, wearing a necklace made from the skulls of those she has slain.

Richard Niebuhr, and, more explicitly, James Gustafson, provide ample description of evidence for describing God not only as a benevolent power that sustains us but as the "power that bears down upon us" who does not have the well-being of individual humans or the human race as a whole as an ultimate purpose.<sup>4</sup> For Niebuhr, the question of whether salvation is a meaningful notion at all becomes the question of whether we have grounds for replacing an interpretation that sees the One beyond the many as enemy and adversary with an interpretation that can finally see God as friend. Such a transition—he calls it *metanoia*—moves us from an ethics of death to an ethics of life. It moves us from a stance of suspicion and self-defensiveness that inevitably becomes aggression to a stance of final trust even in the face of diminishment and affliction.<sup>5</sup>

Christians are led to this transition in interpretations of the all-embracing context of our lives through the life, death, resurrection, and reign in power of Jesus Christ. Like many others, Niebuhr stresses the resurrection of Jesus in effecting the change of stance that enables us to see God as friend rather than enemy. Through the resurrection, Niebuhr says, we are reconciled to God, and perhaps more importantly, God is reconciled to us. In this understanding, the resurrection is the linchpin of theodicy. It justifies God as good despite all the evil we see by promising that life will ultimately be victorious over death. The final word on the One beyond the many shards of our broken experience is beneficent, not maleficent. Thus it relativizes the realities of affliction, injustice, and death by enabling us to see them as penultimate, not ultimate. Once such a change of interpretations has been brought about by our encounter with the risen Christ, the stance of suspicion can be left behind. As Niebuhr puts it, "after enemies are reconciled they no longer ask why it was that animosity developed in the first place."<sup>6</sup>

There is, of course, much truth in this reading of the impact of the resurrection of Jesus on Christian trust that God is friend rather than adversary. I want to suggest, however, that it is not fully adequate to the powerful presence of evil in our individual and social experience today, if it ever has been. In my view, an alternative that is more promising must give more attention to the

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<sup>4</sup>James M. Gustafson, *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981) 202-203, 264, 272.

<sup>5</sup>Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self* 142-45.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.* 143.

suffering and death of Jesus as the source of reconciliation that enables us to grasp the full depth of the beneficent love of God in a broken, suffering world.

The question *Cur Deus Homo?* has been answered in a variety of ways in the history of Christian theology. Anselm saw Jesus' suffering and death as the price exacted by God as the necessary payment in atonement for human sin. Such a theology of atonement can reinforce an image of God as vindictive, even as it seeks to portray God's redeeming mercy. Such a God seems the enemy not only of sin but also of the humanity of Jesus of Nazareth and thus of our humanity as well. As Ross points out, some contemporary critics, especially feminist theologians, see this sort of atonement theology as portraying God the Father as guilty of divine child abuse toward the Son. More congenial to us is Aquinas's statement that the Incarnation is due to the divine desire for self-communication to human creatures, in accord with the Pseudo-Dionysian principle that *bonum est diffusivum sui*.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, Aquinas does hold that there is a sense in which we can say that not only the Incarnation but even the suffering and death of Christ were *necessary* for our salvation. Thomas says that, strictly speaking, human salvation could have been effected by God in any number of ways because of God's omnipotence. But for our benefit, it was "fitting" that the Word of God should become incarnate, suffer, and die, for in this way faith, hope and love are more effectively inspired in human beings.<sup>8</sup> In Thomas' theology, the Incarnation, suffering, and death of Jesus were necessary *quoad nos*, for our benefit.

Let me suggest that we can go beyond Thomas here in affirming the necessity of the passion and death of Jesus as salvific and thus as enabling us to interpret God as the One absolutely faithful friend beyond our experience of diminishment, affliction and death. I have in mind the Johannine theme of Jesus' glorification as occurring not *after* but *in* the very event of the crucifixion. This theme suggests that a *theologia crucis*, rightly understood, can itself be a *theologia gloriae*.

Gregory of Nazianzus' often-quoted statement that "what has not been assumed has not been healed" provides a clue for such an understanding.<sup>9</sup> Human beings are finite creatures. An aspect of that finitude is our vulnerability to diminishment, suffering, and death. Though the tradition has often read Genesis to mean that suffering is a consequence of sin, it is also possible to understand death as a necessity of the natural human condition. Indeed, sin can be interpreted as the denial of vulnerability to forces we finally do not control, at root the denial of death.<sup>10</sup> This is not to say that creation is evil rather than good. It is to say that a good creation is not God. Diminishment, suffering and even

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<sup>7</sup>Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* III, q. 1, art. 1.

<sup>8</sup>*Summa theologiae* III, q. 1, art. 2.

<sup>9</sup>Gregory of Nazianzus, letter 101.

<sup>10</sup>See Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: Free Press, 1973).

affliction are part of the human condition because of natural finitude. These negativities are magnified, sometimes obscenely so, by human efforts to make themselves invulnerable to them. If, then, God is to be manifest as friend to all human beings who live under conditions of vulnerability to the powers of death and sin, it is necessary that God fully embrace that vulnerability. This is what Paul sees in the cross of Jesus Christ. The cross manifests a God who embraces our vulnerability to death: "being found in human form, he humbled himself, and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross" (Phil 2:7-8). The cross also manifests a God who embraces our vulnerability to sin: "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin" (2 Cor 5:21).

In God's embracing the consequences of this vulnerability to human diminishment and affliction, the central meaning of the divine mercy is revealed to us. Thomas Aquinas writes that "mercy takes its name *misericordia* from denoting a person's compassionate heart (*miserum cor*) for another's unhappiness."<sup>11</sup> The motive of mercy is the misery or suffering of another. Through mercy or compassion one grieves for another's distress as though it were one's own. This, Thomas says, can happen in two ways. "First, through union of the affections, which is the effect of love." Relying on Aristotle, he sees friendship as the form of love that most leads to a compassionate heart. "For, since one who loves another looks upon his friend as another self, he counts his friend's hurt as his own, so that he grieves for his friend's hurt as though he were hurt himself." Thomas applies this description of mercy directly to God: "God takes pity on us through love alone, in as much as He loves us as belonging to Him," as friends. Second, one grieves with another through real union with the other in suffering, as when the cause of another's suffering actually touches not only the other but oneself as well.<sup>12</sup> Though Thomas does not say it explicitly in his treatment of mercy, it is surely true that the suffering and death of the cross really unite God to us in this second way.

For these reasons I think that the glory of God's love is manifest *quoad nos*—i.e. to us in the world bent by diminishments of finitude and afflictions of injustice—most fully and believably in the cross. The reality of the cross tells us that wherever men, women or children grieve, God is there present grieving with them as friend. Wherever human beings suffer unjust torture and death, Jesus has *already* been there, as the one who endured the curse of hanging on a tree (Gal 3:13). When such evils lead us to fear that the One beyond the many fragments of our experience is hostile, even our enemy, we need to hear the words of Hebrews, which describe Jesus as "the pioneer" of our faith and call us to "consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart" (Heb 12:2-3).

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<sup>11</sup>*Summa theologiae* II-II, q. 30, art. 1.

<sup>12</sup>*Summa theologiae* II-II, q. 30, art. 2.

This model of divine mercy, of course, is subject to human misappropriation. It could legitimate passivity when the virtue of fortitude is called for in the face of injustice. To avoid this outcome it is well to remember that Thomas saw courage, even courage inspired by anger in the face of injustice, as truly virtuous. In his words, "Now courage in civil affairs establishes a person's spirit in human justice, to preserve which he endures mortal danger; and in the same way the courage which is a gift of grace strengthens the human mind in the good of God's justice, which is won through faith in Jesus Christ."<sup>13</sup> At the same time, he maintains that mercy is in fact the greatest of all the virtues. Through compassion for the suffering of others, we become most like God, for the fullest depth of God's love for human beings is revealed in God's mercy. This suggests that in a Christian theological ethic, mercy or compassion is the foundation of all the other virtues as well, including the virtues that inspire all efforts to take the crucified people of the world down from the cross of injustice.<sup>14</sup> Mercy, Thomas says, "likens us to God as regards similarity of works."<sup>15</sup> But having a compassionate heart cannot be dependent on human success, for there are some evils we are powerless to overcome. We need finally to rely on a power greater than ourselves when faced with them. In what at first seems like a contradiction, Thomas says that the omnipotence of God is chiefly manifested in God's mercy.<sup>16</sup> This can be taken to mean that God so embraces our diminishment and sufferings that the glory of God is the power of a compassion without limit. Such a compassionate love can reveal a God who is friend even in the midst of the afflictions of history. Such a compassion makes credible Christian hope in resurrection and the final victory of joy.

DAVID HOLLENBACH, S.J.  
*Boston College*  
*Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts*

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<sup>13</sup>*Summa theologiae* II-II, q. 124, art. 2, ad 1.

<sup>14</sup>For a development of this theme, see Jon Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1994).

<sup>15</sup>*Summa theologiae* II-II, q. 30, art. 3, ad 3.

<sup>16</sup>*Summa theologiae* II-II, q. 30, art. 3.