

## THE LESSER EVIL OF THEODICY

Terrence Tilley's *The Evils of Theodicy*, published in 1991, has received ample evaluation by his peers both in reviews and in a symposium organized by College Theology Society.<sup>1</sup> Tilley's thesis is clearly stated: "My conclusion is that theodicy as a discourse practice must be abandoned because the practice of theodicy does not resolve the problems of evil and does create evil" (5).

To establish his thesis Tilley takes a three-pronged approach: first, he presents a speech-act theory with particular reference to religious discourse; second, he shows how theodicians have misunderstood the illocutionary points of the classical texts they employed to support their arguments (the Book of Job, Augustine's *Enchiridion*, Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, and George Eliot's *Adam Bede*); and third, on the basis of both his speech-act theory and his analysis of the aforementioned classical texts, he argues that theodicy as a discourse practice is "impractical," has an academic focus, misreads classical sources, and renders evil an abstraction. Theodicy, Tilley further charges, is not an assertive discourse but a declarative in disguise that contains and effaces the reality of evil, and therefore must be counteracted.

*The Evils of Theodicy* is so multifaceted and requires expertise in so many different academic fields that an adequate response to it is practically impossible, especially if it is undertaken by one person. Hermeneuts may ask whether speech-act theory is the most effective tool to recover the meaning of ancient texts.<sup>2</sup> Historians of ideas may question whether theodicy as a philosophical-theological genre could arise only in the context of the monopersonal theism of

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<sup>1</sup>For the review symposium, see "Review Symposium," *Horizons* 18/2 (1991) 290-312. Four scholars offered their comments and Tilley responded. Kenneth Surin examined Tilley's indictment of theodicy through speech-act theory; Alice Laffey, his reading of Job; J. Patout Burns, his interpretation of Augustine; and Morny Joy, his explication of Boethius. Despite minor criticisms, all four symposiasts concurred with Tilley's contention that theodicy is evil.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., Surin wonders whether a performance theory of language is able to "register (let alone provide an account of) the 'interest-relativity' of discourse," (294) the kind of interests that critical theory and sociology of knowledge detect in human knowledge. Alice Laffey points out that besides speech-act theory and canonical criticism, "historical criticism also supports Tilley's conclusion that the book of Job negates theodicy" (297); and J. Patout Burns questions whether "the analysis of individual texts according to speech-act theory provides the only means for avoiding falsifications and silencing the voice of the author" (303).

the Enlightenment, as Tilley contends.<sup>3</sup> Scholars of the Hebrew Scriptures and of the writings of Augustine, Boethius, Hume, and George Eliot may challenge Tilley's interpretation of the Book of Job and the works of the aforementioned authors.<sup>4</sup> Finally, theodicians themselves may question the accuracy of Tilley's characterizing of their works as "assertive declarations."<sup>5</sup> Rather than rehearsing these objections and challenges, to some of which Tilley himself has already provided answers of his own, I will raise the question of whether theodicy can and must in certain cases be regarded as the lesser evil and whether its negative force can be obviated by a strategy other than what Tilley describes as defense.

## I

To set the stage for my reflections, let us imagine a dialogue between the mother of one of the children killed in the recent bombing in Oklahoma City and her minister/theologian. A devout Christian, she asks her minister: "Why did God let the bombing happen and my child get killed?" Now if ever there is a loaded question, this is one. For the question *may* mean any or all of the following:

1. Has my child done anything evil to deserve death?
2. If the answer to 1 is negative, then have I done anything evil to cause the death of my child or to deserve the suffering caused by the death of my child?
3. If the answer to 2 is affirmative (which is likely, since none of us adults is totally blameless), is death a punishment proportionate to my evil deed? And, if it is, why didn't God take away my life rather than my child's?
4. If the answers to 1 and 2 are both negative, then aren't my child's death and my consequent suffering totally absurd?
5. On the other hand, if they serve any purpose at all, either in this life or in the next, what is it, or is it hidden to me at the present time?
6. If they are absurd, then isn't God unjust and therefore not good?

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<sup>3</sup>Tilley is aware of the practical impossibility of identifying the one text as the "originating event" of the theodicy genre. He discusses various candidates for this dubious honor (see 251n.2). He himself fastens on the work by Anglican Archbishop of Dublin, William King, *De origine mali*, written in 1697, published in 1702, and translated into English in 1731 under the title *An Essay on the Origin of Evil* as the classic Enlightenment theodicy. At any rate, the terms of the theodicy debate were not set by Enlightenment thinkers but had been formulated by Epicurus (ca. 324–270 B.C.E.), as cited by Lactantius, *De ira Dei* (*Patrologia latina* 7:121).

<sup>4</sup>This brings us back to the question of whether speech-act theory is the only possible methodology for retrieving the meaning of written works.

<sup>5</sup>Tilley argues that theodicy is a declarative rather than an assertive, or more exactly, a hybrid of "assertive declaration" on the basis of contextual conditions, illocutionary conditions, and perlocutionary conditions (235-51). His arguments are intricate, and it will be our task to examine them more closely later.

7. But if God is good, then why didn't God prevent my child's death and my suffering from happening? Isn't God all-powerful?

The minister, who has taken a course on the problem of evil in her seminary days, immediately detects behind the loaded question the famous triad of propositions about God's goodness and omnipotence and the existence of evil and recalls the classical distinction between metaphysical, natural, and moral evils and perhaps even the distinction between causing and permitting evil. But she has read *The Evils of Theodicy* and is cognizant of its severe strictures against theodicy (the kind usually still taught in seminaries and academic institutions). So instead of presenting a theodicy with its arsenals of arguments about human fallible freedom, divine retribution, divine pedagogy, postmortem compensation, the distinction between causing and permitting, the overall aesthetic pattern of the cosmos and human history, and the limitation of divine power as lure,<sup>6</sup> the minister opts for a "defense," that is, she attempts to show that the belief in an all-powerful and loving God is not incompatible with the presence of evil.<sup>7</sup> Hers is a minimal argument; she does not feel obligated to demonstrate the existence of God and the compatibility between the existence of evil on the one hand and belief in divine omnipotence and goodness on the other. After all, the counselee is a devout Christian who has already accepted the existence of God and who is momentarily beset with doubt about God's providence; what she needs is not allegedly neutral arguments for God's existence, omnipotence and goodness but a reconfirmation of the basic Christian beliefs by means of an argument showing their nonincoherence with the fact of evil.

The question is whether this minimal apologetics, even if successfully carried out, is innocent of the evils Tilley accuses theodicy of committing. Recall the bill of indictment: (1) theodicy is "impractical"; (2) it is more at home in the academy than in the Church; (3) it misinterprets classical texts; and (4) it renders evil an abstraction. Since Tilley himself has not offered his own version of defense, but has only indicated that such a defense is practised by Augustine in his *Enchiridion* and Boethius in his *Consolation of Philosophy*, it is not possible to determine whether his defense would be innocent of the four charges outlined above.

Nevertheless, from the structure of defense as a discourse practise, it is not clear that, firstly, it is any less "impractical" than theodicy, if by impractical it is meant, as Tilley does, theoretical. Tilley objects to theodicy because in his judgment, it "encourages readers to 'distance' themselves from the evils of the world to 'understand' them" (231). It is hard to see why theodicists can be blamed for requiring a certain "distanciation" to understand the problem of evil

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<sup>6</sup>For a brief survey of these arguments, see Barry L. Whitney, *What Are They Saying About God and Evil?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989) 19-37.

<sup>7</sup>For the distinction between theodicy and defence, see *The Evils of Theodicy*, 130-33, 145-46 and Tilley, "The Use and Abuse of Theodicy," *Horizons* 11/2 (1984) 304-19.

at hand, anymore than doctors can be blamed for assuming a certain intellectual detachment from the pains and sufferings of their patients to understand the symptoms of their diseases, diagnose their causes, and prescribe appropriate therapies. Such a distancing does not imply—and I do not know any theodicyist who has implied—lack of compassion for the victims of evil and the sick, nor is it incompatible with actions to free them from their sufferings. If a degree of intellectual distancing (in Aristotelian-Thomistic terms, “abstraction”) is necessary for understanding, then defense as a discourse practice to make people *understand* the nonincompatibility between Christian belief in God and the existence of evil must unavoidably require as much distancing as theodicy. It is difficult to see how emotional involvement with sufferings, one’s own and others’, or even personal struggle against evil structures should place either the “defensists” or the victims of injustice and suffering in a better epistemological advantage than the theodicyists—the former to produce convincing reasons for the nonincoherence between belief in God’s existence, goodness and omnipotence on the one hand and the fact of evil on the other, and the latter to understand and accept the defensists’ arguments.

Nor is it clear that defense is any less “impractical” than theodicy, if by impractical is meant not productive of action. It is true that “words are deeds,” as the title of the first chapter of Tilley’s book asserts. One can indeed do a lot of things with words, but deeds by actions (if a pleonasm is permitted) are much more than deeds by words. Speaking and writing about divine goodness, however eloquently, in defense rather than theodicy, does not of itself produce good deeds, and indeed can prevent one from doing good deeds or even mask one’s lack of the will to do good.

Secondly, with regard to the charge that theodicy has an academic focus, it is hard to see why becoming “a discourse with a home more in the academy than in the churches” (233) should by itself count against theodicy. It is true that some theodicyists tend to live in ivory towers and as academics, at least in the United States, are by and large sufficiently remunerated for their trade to be able to afford a comfortable life. But universities and seminaries are not by any stretch of the imagination fairylands or Shangri-las innocent of suffering and evil so that theodicyists are professionally conditioned to being morally insensitive. Moreover, it is not self-evident that people engaged in pastoral ministry, who “are notoriously absent from the discourse of theodicy” (233), are better equipped by their line of work to *understand* the nature, origin, and effects of evil than their academic colleagues. Furthermore, even defense must make rigorous use of scholarly tools to make its point of the nonimpossibility between divine goodness and omnipotence and the fact of evil. The defensists’ arguments require no less intellectual acumen and academic training to grasp than those of theodicyists. Finally, defense as a theological discourse must address one of its “publics,” namely, the academy which has, as David Tracy has shown, its own distinctive reference group, modes of argument, ethical stance, self-understanding of its

practitioners, and criteria of meaning and truth.<sup>8</sup> The hypothetical Christian mother who asks the question about the meaning of her child's death may be a university professor who rightfully demands "reasons" for her "hope" (cf. 1 Peter 3:15) that evil is not contradictory to her faith in a benevolent and omnipotent God.

Thirdly, with regard to the use of classical sources, it is true that some theodiscists might have misinterpreted and misused the works Tilley mentions, but two observations must be made here. First, there are texts other than the ones studied by Tilley which may be construed as proposing a theodicy. Patout Burns refers to this possibility when he correctly notes:

Augustine did attempt an argument analogous to that of a theodicy in his several treatises against the Manichees. That sect contended that the evils experienced by human beings excluded reasonable belief in a providential, benevolent, and all-powerful creator. Augustine argued the contrary in a series of treatises and in debates which should be analyzed by the method which Tilley has proposed.<sup>9</sup>

Secondly, beside the historical question of the accurate use of sources, there is the systematic question of whether the arguments theodiscists proffer are valid in themselves. Tilley has summarized the basic five-step structure of theodicy, i.e., citation of external challenges, declaration of what evil is, use of classical texts, development of arguments against the challenges, and critique of other theodiscies (p.236), but he has not given an careful examination of the various arguments of theodiscists themselves. Is it true, for instance, that explanations that invoke divine retribution, misuse of fallible freedom, divine pedagogy, postmortem compensation, the overall aesthetic pattern, and the distinction between causation and permission are utterly false, at least for some evils? Furthermore, is it not true that sometimes people suffering from evil do derive comfort from some of these arguments and find therein resources to, if not understand, at least *cope* with evil and the strength to struggle against the evil societal structures which theodicy, Tilley complains, fails to recognize and categorize as evil?

This brings us to Tilley's fourth and last charge against theodicy, namely, that it renders evil an "abstraction." In his view, since "each theodiscist mimics (with individual variations) the key declaration that evil (other than metaphysical evil) *is* the acts individuals commit and the sufferings each undergoes" (236), they are unable to recognize and declare as evil another kind of evil, no less destructive and pervasive, namely, structural or social evil. In this misdeclaration of evil, theodicy, Tilley contends, is not the assertive it ostensibly is, but a declarative in disguise, because it creates another evil, that is, the evil of not recognizing and, therefore, of erasing evil.

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<sup>8</sup>See *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981) 54-59.

<sup>9</sup>"Review Symposium," *Horizons* 18/2 (1991) 302.

Tilley argues at great length that theodicy is a declaration. Declarations, we are told, "make the world become what they say it is. . . . The fit of words and worlds is bidirectional, for *declaring* something so ipso facto makes it so" (13). Declarations can be of three hybrid kinds: assertive, commissive, and directive. Of interest here is the first kind, assertive declaration, because theodicy is said to be an assertive declaration. An example of assertive declaration is "Out!" as shouted by a line judge in tennis. The ball is *out* when the judge "calls" it "out." The judge assumes that the words she utters fit the world; but even if the assertive declaration is wrong and hence defective, the ball is still *out*, unless the player protests and counteracts and the umpire declares the ball *in*. Declarations ordinarily require that the speaker have a certain institutional position to perform the action (see 14).

In what sense then is theodicy an assertive declaration? Tilley argues that it fulfills the three set of conditions of an assertive declaration: contextual, illocutionary, and perlocutionary. Contextually, the theodicians' utterances are necessary and sufficient to create a state of affairs in which social evils are effaced. Illocutionarily, both theodicians and their followers implicitly recognize theodicy as having the point of an assertive declaration so that those who challenge their arguments are demonized and declared evil. Perlocutionarily, theodicy produces an evil state of affairs: by limiting evil to individual acts theodicians ignore evil social practices and structures and declare them to be "natural" or "passive." For those who accept theodicy, too, social evils are either divinely sanctioned or tolerated or merely "passive." Lastly, it must be obvious to both theodicians and their followers that this evil state of affairs would not have occurred had theodicy not been construed. Tilley's intricate arguments to show that theodicy is an evil discourse practice as an assertive declaration (235-47) boil down to the claim that theodicy does not and indeed cannot recognize the evilness of social evils. In failing to acknowledge this form of evil, theodicy is a destructive discourse and must be counteracted.

The question is, of course, whether this failure to recognize the reality of social evil is inherent in the methodology of theodicy as such, as Tilley claims, or whether theodicy's failure to include "social evil" as a distinct theological category beyond its classification of evil into metaphysical, natural, and moral evil is due to the absence of social consciousness on the part of theodicians. If theodicians can be sensitized to the social dimension of human actions, is it not possible for them to enlarge their understanding of evil by including social evil and elaborate a coherent account of the nature, origin, and effects of evils rather than jettison their project altogether?<sup>10</sup> Perhaps a parallel case occurs in ethics:

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<sup>10</sup>Tilley is aware of Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki's attempt to elaborate a theodicy which takes into account concrete social evils and to move beyond the individualistic approach of classical theodicy (see her *The End of Evil: Process Eschatology in Historical Context* [Albany: SUNY Press]). However, he considers her attempt unsatisfactory for three

Should the fact that we are today aware of social justice as a distinct moral category wipe out the traditional understanding of legal, distributive, and commutative justice? Again, should the fact that today we rightly talk of "social sin" dismiss the traditional understanding of original sin and personal sin?

## II

My reflections so far are not intended to defend the legitimacy of theodicy as such but only to show that Tilley's fourfold strictures against theodicy have not carried the day. Perhaps one of the reasons why he castigates theodicy as an evil discourse practice is that he regards theodicy as an attempt to "*resolve* the problems of evil" (5, emphasis added). But this is a Promethean claim which no theodicist to my knowledge has put forward, and which, were it made, should be mightily resisted. Theodicy is, or should be, a much more modest affair; its aim is to offer *a way of understanding* the fact of evil which, simply because it *is* there, demands some explanation, in spite of or rather because of the fact that it is a surd. A surd or for that matter the divine mystery can never be resolved. But it must be spoken of and somehow understood, though not justified. One should approach the problem of evil as one approaches the mystery of God: not so much in order to say something about God but in order to know what not to say about divinity, to exclude possible errors, and to establish the parameters within which a coherent discourse about God and evil can be made. Such a *docta ignorantia* does not by itself lead to apathy and resignation. Rather it is hoped that this understanding will help the victims at least cope with evil and even commit themselves to the struggle against evil of whatever kind, including evil social structures.

Theodicy, then, if it be an evil, is at least a necessary or lesser evil, since it accomplishes an important task that defense is not able to perform, namely, to point out what should not be said about God and evil. Since defense is methodologically limited to demonstrating the nonincoherence between belief in God and in divine omnipotence and goodness on the one hand and the existence of evil on the other, it cannot explain to those who do not accept the Christian faith, for example, to Zoroastrians and modern Manichaeans, why evil is not an independent being at war with God, unless it invokes the theodicy's argument that evil is *privatio boni*, whether or not this notion was used by Augustine in the *Enchiridion* to develop a theodicy.

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reasons: it fails to recognize that the community can be so structured as to produce evil; it denies that the dehumanization of humans is evil; and it focuses on the end rather than the origin of evil (see 253n.6). Are these alleged weaknesses due to the process philosophy that undergirds Suchocki's attempt? Can a theodicy based on another philosophy avoid them?

Incidentally, it is to be noted that the theory of evil as *privatio boni* is not an "impractical" construct with no social relevance. If understood not negatively but as positive reminder of something that *ought not to be*, it can be a mobilizing factor propelling victims of evil toward utopia through the historical praxis of liberation. Evil in the form of poverty and oppression, as social evils, can be "contrast experiences," to use Schillebeeck's expression, which, by a sort of negative dialectics, point to their opposites of abundant life and freedom for all and ultimately to the reign of God.<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, let us not think that metaphysical dualists are an extinct species; even among Christians, Satan not infrequently functions as the ontological counterpart of God, even though officially it is believed that he is a creature. Again, the devout Christian mother who raises questions about her child's death may be misled to think that the bombing is the work of Satan and his rule over the world. At least in these limited cases, then, even in publics other than the academy, theodicy has a useful role to play, provided its function is not conceived as "resolving" the mystery or absurdity of evil.

Lastly, Tilley's proposal of defense in face of evil looks like the strategy of minimal expectation. Like politicians who play down expectations about their policies and actions so that a minimal result seems a great success, defense has made things easy for itself when it restricts its task to "find a possibly true proposition which, when conjoined with belief in God, entails that evil exists" (130). It shifts the burden of proof upon the shoulders of those who reject the compatibility between belief in divine omnipotence and goodness on the one hand and the existence of evil on the other. The problem arises, however, when people who do not inhabit the universe of Christian convictions and hold a different view of the origin, nature and effects of evil, want to know whether the Christians convictions are not only internally coherent but also true. In this case, defense does not seem adequate to the challenge.

But even for Christians, defense seems to fall short of what can legitimately be expected of a Christian theology of suffering and evil. Though Tilley promises a fuller exploration into such a theology (see 254n.8), it is possible to offer a few hints on the shape of such a theology of evil that goes far beyond both theodicy and defense. It would seem that only a full Christology, especially one that unfolds the implications of Jesus' death and resurrection for social praxis, can make the goodness and omnipotence of God credible in a world of evil and suffering, deserved and undeserved. Such a theology will have to focus, as Stephen Duffy has argued, on the three paradigmatic figures of the biblical narrative of evil, namely, Adam, Job, and Christ. It moves "from Adam to Job to Christ; from suffering as penalty to suffering as affliction to suffering as action; from culprit to victim to servant; from evil committed to evil suffered to

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<sup>11</sup>See Peter C. Phan, "Overcoming Poverty and Oppression: Liberation Theology and the Problem of Evil," *Louvain Studies* 20 (1995) 19.

evil redeemed; from God as lawgiver/judge to God as tyrant to God as advocate and fellow sufferer."<sup>12</sup>

Such a theology ultimately aims at not only understanding and coping with evil but also transforming evil structures. Its language must include, as Gustavo Gutierrez suggests, both the language of prophecy and the language of contemplation.<sup>13</sup> The language of prophecy denounces by deed and word (in that order!) every dehumanizing situation and every form of oppression and announces that God wants justice and favors the poor and the oppressed. The language of contemplation sublates divine justice into divine gratuitousness and prevents us from imprisoning God in a narrow conception of justice. Finally, such a theology must find ways to speak not only to nonbelievers but also to nonpersons, the challenge of both the first and the second phase of the Enlightenment.<sup>14</sup>

PETER C. PHAN

*Catholic University of America  
Washington, D.C.*

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<sup>12</sup>Stephen Duffy, "Evil," in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, ed. Michael Downey (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 1993) 364.

<sup>13</sup>See his *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1987).

<sup>14</sup>On the difference between nonbelievers and nonpersons, see Gustavo Gutierrez, *The Truth Shall Make You Free: Confrontations*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1990) 7; and Jon Sobrino, *The True Church and the Poor*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1984) 30. For a discussion of this type of theology, see Peter C. Phan, "Overcoming Poverty and Oppression: Liberation Theology and the Problem of Evil," *Louvain Studies* 20 (1995) 3-20.