IS THEODICY AN EVIL?
RESPONSE TO *THE EVILS OF THEODICY*
BY TERRENCE W. TILLEY[1]

When one compares such phrases as "medical ethics," "legal ethics," "business ethics," and "theological ethics," a lack of symmetry becomes apparent. Medical ethics concerns the ethics of healthcare professionals, legal ethics that of lawyers, and business ethics that of business persons. But whatever else "theological ethics" may refer to, it does not mean the ethics of theologians as professionals.[2] What is the significance of this asymmetry of discourse?

In recent years we have been very busy sorting out the role of the theologian from that of the hierarchical magisterium, and perhaps this effort has inhibited our inquiry into the moral demands of our profession in areas that are not the focus of ecclesiastical disputes. But surely one accomplishment of Tilley's closely reasoned book is that we are challenged to face this anomalous situation head-on. *The Evils of Theodicy* is an ethical argument against a longstanding practice of our profession. This work not only invites attention to the specific question of whether theologians should continue to play the theodicy "language game," which it answers with a resounding, "No indeed, especially if you intend to play by the rules set up during the Enlightenment." This book also raises the more general question of why it is that law, medicine, and business receive such explicit scrutiny from theologians whereas our own profession does not.

You may gather that I find Tilley's argument persuasive, and that I am grateful for his contribution. He makes fine use of speech act theory, which in some hands has led to rather trivial discussions, but in his hands has been successfully directed toward two very worthwhile goals. The first is to call a halt to scholarly work that compounds human suffering because it both fails to help people deal with the evils they experience and also contributes to the perpetuation of systemic evils by distracting attention from their causes. To end the practice of theodicy because it does much more harm than good is the stated aim of Tilley's project, and we will undoubtedly want to discuss in some detail why we agree or disagree with various aspects of his argument. One question I would pose for this discussion is whether it is more practical to attempt to end the practice of theodicy or to redefine its meaning. In some ways Tilley's argument

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[1]Terrence W. Tilley, *The Evils of Theodicy* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 1991).

[2]These concerns are dealt with more fully in Anne E. Patrick, "Ethics for Church Professionals?" *New Catholic World* (January-February 1983) 21-24.

reminds one of Wilfred Cantwell Smith's *The Meaning and End of Religion*, which marshalled considerable linguistic and historical evidence against the use of the term "religion," but apparently had little influence on our patterns of speaking and writing.[3]

But we shall miss an important opportunity—maybe even an occasion of grace—if we fail to consider also the subtext of Tilley's book, which stretches toward a goal no less important for being less explicit, namely to restore a sense of moral agency to our professional lives. Here Tilley is bucking quite a tide, one that we ourselves may not be aware of because we grew up swimming in the frigid Enlightenment waters of abstractions that numb us from concern about the practical effects of our choices to study and write about this or that, in this way or that, with this or that audience in mind.

The results of our desensitization may even be noticed in the title of this afternoon's session, which asks with cold objectivity "Is theodicy *an* evil?" and can be faulted for reducing the force of Tilley's own title, which speaks in the plural of the evil*s* of theodicy, presumably because he is convinced the practice causes harm in *several* ways:

1. It devalues the practical issues surrounding evil and thereby exacerbates its effects.
2. It silences the cries of victims.
3. It marginalizes suffering.
4. It involves a falsifying declaration of what is evil and what is not because it valorizes some forms of evil and effaces others, particularly by limiting moral evil to individual acts.
5. It promotes complicity in injustice because systemic evils such as racism and sexism are rendered invisible by this practice.
6. It weakens resistance to evil. As Tilley observes, the efforts of theologians to address the concerns of Enlightenment theists have the effect of rendering people "oblivious to the commitment, practical wisdom and constancy needed to counteract some evils" (231).

Perhaps this tiny shift from the plural to the singular is not significant, and I do not want to belabor the point pedantically. But Tilley concludes his book by insisting that "our own symbolic acts must not efface evils, but identify their *multiple* forms, understand the processes which produce them, retrieve discourses which reveal them, and empower the praxes of reconciliation which will overcome them" (250, emphasis added). And so the change gives me pause, inviting reflection on whether there is a connection between this linguistic

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[3]Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1962).

reduction and the obsession with certainty and innocence that infects more than one dimension of Catholic life. If we can nail down theodicy as "an evil," then perhaps we can go on to inquire whether it is an *intrinsic* evil or merely an evil plain and simple, which will occupy us for quite a while as Rome, or Sarajevo, or Los Angeles burns.

The burden of what I am saying is that the ethical point of Tilley's book is at risk of being lost in the abstraction of our session's title, which poses a descriptive question we can argue about indefinitely without needing to get normative about our practice. Could we as professionals imagine discussing a forthrightly moral question about our own work? Tilley's observation that the oppressive society "is structured so that good people ordinarily perform acts they think good, but which ordinarily and unwittingly injure others" (238), along with his claim that theodicists "rarely, if ever, write of the evil done by and in religious contexts," challenges us to turn the ethical searchlight on ourselves and ask: "Is it right for *us* to continue the Enlightenment project of theodicy?" Or, to use religious language, "What is God enabling and requiring us to do in light of the evidence that theodicy has kept us from noticing such systemic evils as racism and sexism?"[4] Are we afraid to sin against methodological purity by asking a question that falls under the purview of a different subdiscipline of theology? Are systematicians unqualified to pose such questions because others have the specialized skills to get normative, whereas their job is to perfect theory and methodology, to get clear on descriptions and design modes of working that make sense to the very interlocutors Tilley argues are less important than the voices they have rendered silent and insignificant?

One last point, speaking of marginalization. It is worth mentioning that the thinker Tilley finds most useful for the constructive side of his argument, George Eliot, was herself marginalized from academic theology and ethics in a fashion that parallels the silencing of her fictional preacher Dinah Morris. The latter was silenced by a policy change in the evolving Methodist church, and the former was discounted by the scientism as well as the sexism of the modern academy. Although the author of *Adam Bede* had one of the most knowledgeable minds of the last century, and was quite capable of composing treatises like the ones by Feuerbach, Strauss, and Spinoza she translated into English, her practical bent led her to write fiction precisely in order to contribute to the conversion of a literate public from modes of living that cause unnecessary suffering to others. George Eliot's ethic of sympathy deserves serious attention today, as we contend with violence and hardness of heart on a scale hardly imaginable in the nineteenth century.

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[4]This question is based on James M. Gustafson's description of the task of Christian ethics, as presented in *Can Ethics Be Christian?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975) 179.

But an academy organized around clear and distinct divisions of labor marginalizes George Eliot's contribution as "literary" rather than seriously philosophical and theological, thus missing out on the insights she offers on such matters as gender, the use and misuse of power, religious pluralism, moral conversion, and, as Tilley has shown, appropriate responses to moral evil and despair. We owe a debt of gratitude to him for restoring Eliot's wise voice to theology, as well as for clearing up the static that has obscured the voices of Job, Augustine, and Boethius in recent centuries. And most especially we are in Tilley's debt for the forthright reminder that acts of speech and acts of writing, however academic, are also human acts, subject to moral judgment for their consequences as well as their intentions.

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