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THEODICIES IN CONTEXT

It is always an honor when scholars take one's work seriously. I am especially honored by the serious attention which both Anne Patrick and Peter Phan have given to my work, *The Evils of Theodicy*.[1] I am challenged by their questions and grateful for their insights. I do not believe I can do full justice to their questions and criticisms in a reasonable length of time, but I will try to do as much as I can under three headings: context, content, and a question.

CONTEXT

When I thought about preparing for today's discussion, I recollected what brought about the concerns which I have. It can be summed up by saying that I got my Ph.D. in Berkeley, but much of my graduate education was given to me at St. Mary's Hospital in San Francisco. I say that because I worked my way through college and graduate school as a hospital orderly, primarily in the emergency room, orthopedics, and neurosurgery. That work shaped and still shapes my life.

"I had carried many bodies down to the morgue." That is the way the second paragraph of *The Evils of Theodicy* begins. (I was tempted to make it the first sentence of the book, but thought that would be too shocking.) And it's true! I *had* carried many bodies down to the morgue. Some of them I carried in one arm, wrapped in a swaddling blanket; others I placed on gurneys for transport. Over some of them I grieved; over all of them I prayed.

I had also taken men out of the car which brought them to the hospital, only to find that they were dead. Theodicy is useless if one must speak to a wife who has driven her husband to the emergency room only to find out she was chauffeuring a corpse. One can only console her and help her regain her composure, if one can. One does not keep a scholarly distance; one takes one's arms and puts them around her and holds her. There is nothing else to be done.

I had also sat through the night with parents scared beyond belief that their son would emerge from the operating room a double amputee. Theodicy has nothing to say to these people. The discourse is completely irrelevant. What one does is to sit with them to talk with them, to bring them coffee and just to be present until the surgeon comes out and says, "He has a good chance of keeping his legs."

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[1](Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 1991).

The personal and comforting discourses appropriate as I worked with people closely in times of suffering and stress had no relation that I could see to the etiolated discourse I was learning in college or in some of my graduate school courses. The questions of David Hume, so important to the project of theodicy, were profound problems for me in the academic context. But when I worked in another context, I knew quite clearly that those challenges were irrelevant and the "answers" which theodicists gave to them were even more irrelevant in the hospital.

For some, the difference between the discourse of the emergency room and the discourse of the classroom is taken for granted. One is giving "pastoral" consolation, perhaps, in the former; one is doing intellectual work in the latter. And that, they would say, is the way it should be. Theodicy is one thing; mere pastoral talk about evil is another. The contrast and the facile valorization of academic discourse ate at me. Although I would continue to do academic work—and still do—I wondered how it could be that academic discourse was so irrelevant to the "mere" comforting I did in my "real job."

I did not see the problems of theodicy then; I only felt the difference. I only sensed that there was something wrong in the academic discourse. It took many years for me to figure out what that "wrongness" is. The thesis of my book was and remains simple: theodicy is a practice that creates more problems than it solves by covering over evils (especially social evils) and silencing voices that are heard outside of the academic mainstream (not only in emergency rooms, as Anne Patrick so clearly notes). My diagnosis has been and remains that theodicy is a discourse that serves no good purpose and shapes theodicists to misperceive and erase real evil. My prescription is and was that theodicy ought to be abandoned. I speak both as a student of "the (as if there is *the* single) problem of evil" and as a person who still misses the practice of laying hands on people to comfort, console, treat, and even heal them at times.

I even miss praying over and for the young and the old whose bodies I carried to the morgue.

CONTENT

The Evils of Theodicy thus arises from the practices in which I have engaged and which shaped me as a subject. Because I think speaking is a practice and that we must be responsible for what we say, Anne Patrick, unlike anyone else, has got the subtext of my work right. Altogether too often we neglect the moral agency of our professional life. We need to develop a religious ethic which is the ethic of and for our religious practice. We need to develop a theological ethic which is an ethic of and for our theological discourse. I expect that liberation theologians and others who raised their voices so clearly on behalf of the marginalized and oppressed realize this much more clearly than I. Nonetheless, my text has the purpose not of condemning any individual of the "sin" of writing theodicy, but of raising the moral question about our shared responsibility for

what we write—and whether, in fact, what *we* write as participants in the academic discourse of theodicy may indeed do more harm than good. Consider *Evils*, if you would, a first attempt to construct one part of a theological ethic, an ethic that looks at the social practice of theodicy. I thank Anne for bringing it out more clearly than I could.

Professor Patrick also asks whether we can abandon the practice of theodicy or the term "theodicy." Unlike some theologians who wanted to declare a moratorium of speaking of God at one point, I don't think we can or should declare a moratorium about speaking of God and evil. What I would like to see is the Enlightenment practice of theodicy stopped.

The term "theodicy" has been used in a number of ways, and I am not opposed to the term in itself. As I note in *Evils* (2) it is used by social scientists like Max Weber and Peter Berger to mean almost any sort of legitimation structure. Indeed, at one point Weber calls the "karma-samsara" theodicy the "most rational" theodicy of all. And this is speaking of theodicy (*theos* = god; *dikaios* = justice) without any god! In my book I use the term in the specific sense which emerged during the Enlightenment: the rational explanation of why God allows evil in the universe. This specific discourse is central to modern Western philosophical theology, and it is this practice of attempting to explain how God and evil coexist that I oppose. In this sense of "theodicy," I wrote that it was not possible "to write an 'untainted' theodicy" (249). I still think that is true; but to those who want to say other things and call them "theodicy," I have nothing to say.

In a powerful essay, Paul Ricoeur has shown that theodicy—in the specific sense used here—cannot be successful.[2] Ricoeur's analysis suggests that theodicy is a Quixotic task; I agree, but go further: it is a whitewashing practice which all too often writes "cover stories" that legitimate the destruction that social evils do. The question is why so many continue to pursue theodicy, for they really finally write indictments of God. Too often, theodicy is really hidden anthropodicy.

I have made some rather sweeping claims in the previous paragraphs, and it is Peter Phan's meticulous reading that allows me to try to give some justification for those claims. I see his comments as mostly *right*, but they may not be fully relevant to the discourse of "theodicy." I certainly must admit that in the text of *The Evils of Theodicy* I did not always sufficiently distinguish between "understanding" and "explanation." One can understand persons, events, discourses, or states of affairs without being able to explain them exhaustively. When I would in the book occasionally write of "complete understanding" I meant by this "explanation." I understood the suffering and stress of patients and

[2]Paul Ricoeur, "Evil, a Challenge to Philosophy and Theology," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 53/4 (1985) 635-48.

families in the hospital; why would I ever want to "explain" it—unless I presumed it pathological?[3]

What I want to suggest is that there are differences that Peter Phan does not see and that I do see. It may be the case that I see differences where there are none. Or it may be the case that he glosses over differences where they are significant. Of course, I'm not in position to make that judgment, but we can show where the issues are.

First, Phan asks a series of questions. What is wrong with these questions is that they are structured by the discourse of theodicy. My response is that the context in which the discourse occurs is one that is much more likely to occur in an academic situation, or after the immediacy of the evils has passed. And at that point, all one can say, in my judgment, is, "I simply don't know why this is happening to you."[4] What this means is that what is needed is not *answers* to unanswerable questions, but human presence to wailing sorrow. To think that these questions even could have answers is, in my judgment, one of the evils of theodicy.

Phan then goes on to ask whether even minimal *defenses* can avoid the evils of *theodicy*.[5] I think they can. First, Phan talks about the issue of distantiation. This depends upon the context. On the one hand, if a person is engaging in the practice of reflecting on past evils, then the person is distanced and the discourse can be academic; I am not against academic discourse, even academic talk of God and evil, only against the specific discourse practice of theodicy. On the other hand, in a different context, distantiation is just the wrong thing. Defenses show that those who speak of God and evil are not necessarily incoherent. They *are* academic. But they do not claim to *have* the answer "in theory." Theodicies *do* claim to have the answer, or at least to paint a "picture" (as John Hick once put it) that portrays a way to envision both God and evil. But the chief problem

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[3]Whether there are practically necessary internal links between thinking religion needs, in general, to be *explained*, and thinking religious practice is a *pathology* is a thesis which needs to be explored; but that is beyond the issues here.

[4]One strength of Rabbi Harold Kushner's work, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York: Schocken, 1981), is that it first moves to consolation. Where I disagree with Kushner, of course, is that he gives up on divine omnipotence, whereas I do not think that is necessary.

[5]Peter Phan here invokes a distinction central to the book. One must distinguish "defenses" (which I find of crucial, but very limited, use) from "theodicies." Defenses respond to philosophical attack which try to show that a person who believes in God and that there are evils in the world has incoherent beliefs. Defenses show that their beliefs are not necessarily incoherent. Theodicies go further by offering theories to explain just how those beliefs fit together in a rational system. Defenses don't try to say what the answer is to Epicurus's Old Questions, but to show that the questions do not land one in a dilemma. In my judgment, Plantinga's free will defense (with minor modifications) has triumphed over this logical problem of evil.

with such sketches is that they condition people to ignore so much evil, which defenses do not.

Peter secondly goes on to ask whether I have unhappily challenged theodicy with being academic and thereby missed the point. The point here is one I mentioned earlier with regard to Paul Ricoeur: systematization. The defense is a response to a challenge, not the attempt to build a system. It is legitimately academic. The problem is that I think the intent to display a totalizing discourse is one that is part of the problem instead of part of the solution.

And thirdly, about classical sources. Here again I simply agree with him and Patout Burns. My point is that we need to examine not only ancient texts but their context, their use, and their rhetoric. Let me invoke the name of Newt Gingrich here. Gingrich's bombast is often a cover for a much more reasonable position.[6] What one says in polemics is not what one would say necessarily in a treatise that is unpolemical, in which one stakes out a position for oneself and one's community. Augustine's writings were mostly polemical; what I sought and found in *Enchiridion* was a text whose provenance was pastoral and authoritative, not polemical. Most of Augustine's works need to be mined not simply for the propositions which he utters (and are over the course of his writings not fully consistent with each other), but for which of them will stand fast in spite of polemics. I admit I have not done this work and I'm not sure anyone has, but I would agree that it would be useful to see such texts.

Fourthly, Phan argues that there is a certain lack of clarity with regard to "social sin." And, here I agree with Peter that this is where the issue is truly joined. I have not yet seen a theodicist who has accounted for "social sin" or "structural evil." These are not merely omissions. In an era of individualism and rationalism characteristic of the Enlightenment mindset in which theodicy grew, "social sin" and "structural evil" are nonissues. Even those theodicies which attempt to account for social sin or structural evil[7] fail in my judgment to account adequately for social evil. Professor Wendy Farley comes close, but her prescriptions for repairing and counteracting social evils are remarkably individualistic. Until I see a theodicy that directly analyzes a social evil such as racism, sexism, or other forms of structural injustice, and asks and answers the question, "Why does an all-powerful God allow this evil to continue?" I will stick to my claim that the discourse of theodicy, in practice, forbids it.[8]

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[6]Of course, it is possible that Gingrich's bouts of reasonableness are moments of sanity in an otherwise unreasonable and bombastic position, but let that possibility pass for now.

[7]See the following: Marjorie H. Suchocki, *The End of Evil: Process Eschatology in Historical Context* (Albany NY: SUNY Press, 1988) and Wendy Farley, *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion: A Contemporary Theodicy* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990).

[8]It should be noted that I also have some difficulties with the content, not the structure, of the free-will defense as formulated by, among others, Alvin Plantinga.

Phan also points out that, in my view, theodicy would provide no apologetics. I think this is entirely correct. The problem of evil is, academically speaking, one of the great intellectual difficulties with any form of theism which has an all-powerful god (other forms of theism, of course, have different, and perhaps more debilitating problems). I don't think that theodicies will ever work as apologetics. Each of the traditions of the world has its own way of understanding evil.[9] Each of these has intellectual strengths and weaknesses, but clearly the existence of profound evil, of unmerited and unwarranted suffering, and of random or sustained violence is a problem for any tradition which finds the universe to be basically good. No apology will help; indeed, the best "apology" is not academic rhetoric, but a "beloved community" (M. L. King), a community of risk and solidarity (S. Welch), a community that lives in and lives out the love of God. The only effective apologetic is a community of witness.

At the end of his paper Professor Phan calls for a fuller exploration of a theology of suffering and evil. In this I agree with him and agree fully that the issue is not "nonbelievers" but "nonpersons." Like him, I turn toward forms of liberation theology for inspiration in this area; theodicists have nothing to say (so far as I know) about the social structures which transform God's human creatures into nonpersons and little to say about those which create the conditions for ecological disaster. In sum, when one sees the differences that I do in the structure of content in and context for different discourses—theodicies, consolations, defenses, etc.—the issues between us come down to how to account for social or structural evils. Theodicies are no help because they are blind to these sorts of evil which are different in kind from individual moral evil (sin) and natural evil (suffering). That's another of the evils of theodicy.

REDEMPTIVE SUFFERING?

I have recently read a manuscript entitled, *Why, Lord?* by Anthony Pinn, to be published by Continuum later this year. In it Professor Pinn explores the African-American religious heritages and comes to the conclusion that there's no such thing as *redemptive* suffering. I think Professor Pinn's book is splendid, although I disagree substantially with his nontheistic conclusions. Nonetheless, it is a challenge which we will have to account for in Christian theology.

Plantinga's theory works quite well as a defense. It also can be extended, I believe, to cover social evils; Plantinga has even used it to cover natural evils. Nonetheless, natural evil and social evil are afterthoughts in Plantinga's work. In this he displays much of the rationalism of Enlightenment theodicies. Nonetheless, by limiting himself to a defense, he has properly responded to challenges and not attempted to give a totalizing and systematic answer to the questions of which form "the problem of evil."

[9]See John Bowker, *Problems of Suffering in the Religions of the World* (Cambridge: University Press, 1971).

But the question that Pinn raises for me is, in what sense can suffering be *redemptive*? Of course, it is the case that suffering often brings us together. Stories told by many authors show the ways trial and tribulations, suffering and death, can bring people together. These illustrate that at-one-ment can occur *in the presence of* suffering. But the question remains whether suffering *brings about* redemption.

I, frankly, do not know how to think about this issue. Redemptive suffering has been so deeply ingrained as a concept within Christian theology since the beginning as an explanation of the crucifixion of that Just Man, that even to raise a question about redemptive suffering seems near blasphemous. But the question is in what sense, if any, can Christians valorize suffering as redemptive without falling into the traps of incoherence or oppression.

Again, I would like to thank Professors Patrick and Phan for calling us to be responsible and precise in our work. Their challenges will continue to stimulate me, I promise you, for quite some time.

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