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# BULLETIN

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tians a "specifically Christian ethic," an ethic which derives its material norms not from conventional wisdom but from the scandal of a Messiah "publicly proclaimed as crucified" (3:1). Those who believe this message and become incorporated in him will share his destiny; thus, our faith will recapitulate the faithfulness of Jesus Christ.

What are the practical political implications of such a gospel? That question must be answered with prayerful discernment in the various situations in which we find ourselves. One thing is clear,

however: there *are* political implications. According to the Reformers, "faith in Jesus Christ" sets us free from guilt; according to *Paul*, the faithfulness of Jesus Christ sets us free to serve one another in love. Thus the proclamation of the gospel necessarily leads to the formation of human communities which take the shape of Christ (4:19) and thus embody "faith working through love" (5:6).

<sup>10</sup>All of these issues concerning the shape and content of Paul's ethics are considered in greater detail in my essay, "The Law of Christ: Christology and Ethics in Galatians," in a forthcoming book on theology and ethics in Galatians, co-authored by Beverly R. Gaventa, David J. Lull and myself.

## The Good, the Bad and the Troubled: Studies in Theodicy

by Marguerite Shuster

***When Bad Things Happen to Good People* by Harold S. Kushner (Schocken, 1981, 149 pp., \$10.95).**

***Evil and the Christian God* by Michael Peterson (Baker, 1982, 160 pp., \$7.95).**

***Learning to Live with Evil* by Theodore Plantinga (Eerdmans, 1982, 163 pp., \$5.95).**

***How Can It Be All Right When Everything Is All Wrong?* by Lewis Smedes (Harper and Row, 1982, 132 pp., \$5.95).**

Of all the thorny problems in theology, none commands more existential and philosophical concern than theodicy—the problem of justifying a perfectly good, omnipotent God in the face of the myriad evils besetting this world. No problem provides a more potent weapon for the skeptic; none, a greater challenge to the faith of the simple believer; none, a stickier logical dilemma for the scholar. Attempts to deal with the issue seem to rise like waves and then subside, each carrying some in its sweep but leaving most dissatisfied. For instance, Alvin Plantinga's brilliant demonstration of some years ago (*God and Other Minds*) that no amount of evil can be proved inconsistent with the existence of a perfectly good, all-powerful God, may satisfy the canons of symbolic logic, but it fails to still the protests of the wounded human spirit. And so the attempts continue.

Naturally, the Gordian knot unravels quite simply when either of its two primary strands—God's absolute goodness and his omnipotence—is dissolved. Many modern efforts, like those of process theology, take this tack, doing away with the problem and with Christian orthodoxy at a single stroke. A number of other options do exist, however, five of which I shall enumerate.

1. "The best of all possible worlds." Many argue that, *all things considered*, no *better* world than this one could be designed; and, therefore, this world is consistent with our beliefs about God. For instance, could we know what "good" and "beautiful" are if there were no "evil" and "ugly" (contrast necessary to our perceptions)? Would we not lose an arena for "soul-making" (posited as a primary value) if there were no opportunities for struggle, heroism, sacrifice? Is it logically possible to design a rich, varied world, populated by numerous individuals who are not mere machines but have choices (see #3, below), without conflicts which produce evil arising?

2. Eschatology, or "pie in the sky bye and bye." Many believe that looking just at our temporal lifetime is taking much too narrow a view. When we get to heaven, we not only will be rewarded in a way that turns our earthly sufferings to nothing, but also we will see clearly why our lives and the lives of others were ordered as

they were; and we will rejoice at the perfection of God's plan.

3. Free will. Traditionally, theologians have placed heavy emphasis on the genuine freedom God bestows upon moral agents (including angels; so demonic sources of evil fit here). In order to love God freely—the ultimate good—we must also be free to turn from him, to put something or someone else in his place. When we do, evil results. God voluntarily limits his power to curb evil by preserving our freedom.

4. Theophany (here used to mean not necessarily an actual, physical appearance of God, but rather a psychologically or spiritually compelling manifestation of God to an individual). Christians often report that in times of trial, God makes his presence and love known to them so powerfully that they are certain "everything will be all right"—*no matter what happens*. Their subjective experience of God's goodness and care overwhelms all logical evidence to the contrary. In its extreme form, such an experience resembles mystical experiences of "unity," in which distinctions between good and evil are dissolved.

5. "I don't know." At its worst, the "I don't know" response is an intellectually and/or emotionally dishonest, head-in-the-sand evasion of a faith-disrupting problem. At its best it is a frank admission that we must walk by faith and not by sight; that our logic will surely betray us if we deify it; that we will not by our searching find out God.

Having set the stage, then, let us turn to four recent, highly diverse approaches to the problem of evil. Although all are clear and non-technical enough for the general reader, there the similarity among them in style and content ends.

In *Evil and the Christian God*, Michael Peterson sets out not only to demonstrate that the Christian God and evil are not incompatible, but more, that the nature of evil in the world actually supports a theistic understanding of reality. To address the problem at its most difficult, he accepts at face value the common human feeling that much evil we experience is pointless; and then he argues that precisely this gratuitous evil is what we should expect if a good God, concerned for our freedom and for soul-making, were in control (see #'s 1 and 3, above; Peterson explicitly denies that this is the best of all possible worlds, but many of his arguments follow almost exactly the same lines as those of persons who make that affirmation). All he needs to do to reach this conclusion is to reject what he calls "the doctrine of meticulous providence"—namely, belief that a truly good, omnipotent, omniscient God would not allow truly pointless evil; that, indeed, such a God would be "fastidious" in preventing it. Once one has scrapped that belief, one can quickly proceed to argue that true human freedom plus the lawful natural order needed to provide a "neutral moral environment" for human development together easily produce the devastating array of evils we actually observe. God's integrity remains unimpugned.

I find this book logically unpersuasive, humanly callous, and

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theologically disastrous. At the logical level, Peterson continually shifts between arguing how *necessary* (e.g. to soul-making) gratuitous evil (e.g. in nature) is, and insisting that it really is gratuitous. At the human level, to call a God who is concerned for every fallen sparrow "fastidious," and to suggest that a great benefit of rejecting "meticulous providence" is that doing so makes the doctrine of hell (the ultimately gratuitous evil) more tenable, is simply offensive. And at the theological level, this profoundly Arminian piece provides no reason to hope that God won't finally be thwarted and that

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***Kusher's or Peterson's schema may permit psychologically appropriate rage or Titanic heroism, but hardly promotes faith and trust.***

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we won't end up devouring one another. That God exerts "some controls" to achieve his "general purposes" is simply asserted and fits nowhere in the argument. Of course, so-called "meticulous providence" is classically understood, and it can hardly be waved away without jeopardizing the whole scriptural account of salvation history. In all, Peterson's book provides more food for debate than for the soul.

Turning to traditional Calvinist Theodore Plantinga's **Learning to Live with Evil**, we find ourselves in a different world entirely. Actually, Plantinga denies that he is intending a theodicy at all. He rather insists that eschatology is an alternative way of dealing with the problem of evil, and he implies that it is a more appropriate way for those who take seriously the sovereignty of God. Undertaking to "justify" God's ways toward his creatures suggests a sort of hubris from the start. Still, we may with profit analyze the evil we experience now in this age and attempt to formulate appropriate responses. Hence Plantinga's title. The first half of his book deals with types of evil and the way evil has been conceived in various traditions—with an emphasis on moral evil and the mystery of our sinful, corrupt will. The second half deals with specific evils like violence and suffering, asking when we should avert our eyes. When will we become hardened? When must we allow ourselves to be moved? When will we be unnecessarily tempted? If such questions are simpler than questions regarding the problem of evil as a whole, they are nonetheless worthy ones that we face daily.

The first half of this book is helpful not because of any particular originality, but because it treats profound matters with admirable clarity. The second half provides provocative, stimulating guidance regarding issues about which we seldom think as deeply as we ought. True, no perspective but the Calvinistic party line is given much credence. And pushing to extremes the well-taken warning against human-centeredness can leave us with no meaningful way to define what is good. On balance, though, this unpretentious little book is definitely worthwhile, especially for those willing to work with Reformed presuppositions.

If Peterson and Plantinga write essentially for the student, Rabbi Harold Kushner and theologian Lewis Smedes write with an eye toward the person in the pew. Their concerns are with existential crises more than theoretical dilemmas, and they write with a sort of highly personal urgency.

By now most people have at least heard of Rabbi Kushner's best-selling **When Bad Things Happen to Good People**, a book often recommended as a source of comfort for those who have experienced devastating suffering. It does not qualify as a genuine theodicy because it does not play by the rules: it flatly denies God's omnipotence. Since God is not all-powerful, he simply can't do anything about the terrible evils visited upon us by "fate." These evils are, in a sense profounder than Peterson's, genuinely gratuitous and can have meaning only as the sufferer bestows meaning upon them.

This view, which Kushner presents most engagingly and pastorally, has certain psychological advantages. For instance, it can free people from paroxysms of guilt, self-doubt, and self-blame in the face of tragedy. A few may even find a "poor-God-who-can't-do-any-better" more approachable than the Deity as traditionally understood. Most

theists, however, will find such a God scarcely worthy of worship. And, as a pastor myself, I am surprised if it is really Kushner's doctrine of gratuitous evil and not his pastoral touch that has brought peace to so many. My own parishioners, in time of tragedy, say to me again and again, "Tell me that this has some meaning." "Tell me that this isn't all for nothing." And I do. Meaningless evil in either Kushner's or Peterson's schema may permit psychologically appropriate rage or Titanic heroism, but it hardly promotes the faith and trust that are usually seen as contributing to soul-making.

Lewis Smedes offers even less argument than Kushner but rather presents carefully described and analyzed experiences. A great virtue of **How Can It Be All Right When Everything Is All Wrong?** is its immediacy. It resonates with the common stuff of our everyday lives and does not try to rob evil of its experiential power. Right here—right in the midst of the human mess—God's grace crashes or trickles in, persuading us almost in spite of ourselves that things are mysteriously, fundamentally, all right.

This "theophanic" approach, presented in chapters complete in themselves and enlivened by Smedes' obvious enjoyment of language, should engage many readers who complain that mere theories about God never quite connect with the ordinary, daily pain of their existence. Smedes foresees the objection of others that he puts too much weight on notoriously unreliable feelings and counters with the oft-forgotten truth that our heads are as deceitful as our hearts. However, I think he neglects rightly to emphasize the connection between believing and feeling, or to acknowledge that beliefs may sustain us when feelings flee—and provide grounds for their return. Neither should be asked to stand alone. All in all, though, his overriding emphasis on grace has power to tap both faith and hope. And something is indeed all right about a book which can do that.

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**HABAKKUK—MULTI-MEDIA FALL TOUR 1983**

Habakkuk is a multi-image adaptation of the writings of the ancient Hebrew prophet. In a world worshipping itself; filled with violence, declining morality and international power struggles, Habakkuk questioned the sovereignty and purpose of God. His struggle to understand his own situation encourages us to re-examine God's activity in our own world. History is our tutor. The show raises events of our contemporary world against the backdrop of Habakkuk's poetry. The similarities hit close to home. The issues Habakkuk raises span the centuries. *TSF Bulletin* readers who are interested in evangelism and adapting biblical themes to modern culture will not only be impressed with this multi-image production but will also learn about effective communication.

The show uses over 25 projectors and a multi-track sound system to create the stage upon which the events are cast. 3,000 images, a computer, and the expertise of a travelling team make it happen. *Habakkuk* is produced and shown by *Twentyonehundred Productions*, the Multi-Media Ministries of Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship. For information on the *Habakkuk* Fall Tour 1983, call the project directors as listed: Fitchburg State Univ., Fitchburg, MA, (617) 752-3817 (Oct. 16-19); Wesleyan Univ., Middleton, CT, (203) 562-7851 (Oct. 21-23); Assumption College, Worcester, MA, (phone contact not yet available) (Oct. 25-27); SUNY, Potsdam, NY, (315) 265-4709 (Nov. 2-4); Syracuse Univ., Syracuse, NY, (315) 422-3548 (Nov. 8-11); Cornell Univ., Ithaca, NY, (607) 798-2262 (Nov. 12-14).

**WELLSPRING SEMINARS**

Many students and pastors have benefited greatly from the retreat ministries of the Church of the Savior in Washington, D.C. Best known through the writings of Elizabeth O'Connor, the church provides resources and direction for the inward journey (meditation and community-building) and the outward journey (mission). Many orientation sessions and special workshops are held throughout the year.

Orientation is a time to experience firsthand those ideas and practices which are the cornerstone of the Church of the Savior: God's Call, or purpose in your life, discovering your gifts and the gifts of others, the spiritual disciplines of prayer, meditation, Bible study and keeping a journal, working and praying together in small groups. Orientation includes a brief silent retreat, visits to different Church of the Savior missions in Washington, D.C., group discussions on the "inward-outward journey," worship and play. Orientation schedules are as follows: Nov. 10-13; Jan. 30-Feb. 2; Mar. 15-18; Apr. 23-26; May 24-27. For more information, write to Wellspring, 11301 Neelsville Church Rd., Germantown, MD 20874. Tell them you are a *TSF Bulletin* reader.