

"The Great Debate"

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A certain question has vexed countless minds for centuries: If God is all-powerful and all-good, why does evil exist?

One answer is to doubt God's power but not his goodness. Rabbi Harold Kushner, author of the best-seller *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, writes, "I can worship a God who hates suffering, but cannot eliminate it, more easily than I can worship a God who chooses to make children suffer and die." But are these the only alternatives?

A second solution does not doubt God's power but his goodness. A Holocaust survivor blames God for permitting six million Jewish deaths under the Nazis. "How can God redeem Himself?" he asks. "I don't know. I suppose He cannot." Another philosopher who acknowledges God's power but not his goodness contends that believers should protest for human justice and compassion thereby atoning for divine injustice. This attitude ends in worshipers who are better than the God they worship. Sophocles' complaint, "When gods do ill, why should we worship them?" thus has great cogency.

In this great debate, are the only alternatives to believe in a God who is loving but pathetically inadequate, or a God of power who simply does not care? Neither entity is worthy of our worship.

We Christians believe, as John states in I John 4:16, that God is Love. But, as I have said before, it all depends on what you mean by "God." And most assuredly, it also depends what you mean by "Love." For many people the phrase "God is Love" is the maximum of ambiguity and absurdity in the minimum of words. Such a statement, unexplained, which blindly ignores the kind of world in which we live is more likely to lead thinking people to discard God than to reverence Him.

The world is full of hungry, homeless, wandering, unhappy people, full of contradiction in which the good and the grim exist side by side. It does not appear to be the progege of a loving, powerful God. We think of the wickedness in men and women expressed in murder, war, slavery, torture, persecution, and the gas chamber. Civilization often seems to be a thin veneer covering something inherently worse than just the nature of the beast. Yet, while mankind's evil produces great pain and horror, it is perhaps less perplexing than the other grimness that seems to leap out from the very scheme of things.

In nature, completely free from man's intervention, we still find suffering and fear, cries of pain not praise - for instance from the little birds, victims of the butcherbird or shrike who impales them alive on thorns and eats them later. Ornithologists tell us that the robin's song is not a paen of praise to the creator, but a vocal warning to other birds that this is his territory and he will fight for it if necessary.

An irreverent limerick makes a valid point against all shallow thinkers who would glibly speak of God's goodness as self-evident:

There was a young lady of Ryde

Who was carried away by the tide.

A man-eating shark

Was hear to remark,

I knew that the Lord would provide.

We have to admit that we live in a world where one species of fish or animal feeds upon another in an atmosphere of fear and hostility; a world of viruses, germs earthquakes, hurricanes, famines, and floods. All living matter is subject to disease. Nothing is exempt. Everything would seem to be poisoned almost at the source.

Life is obviously a desperately serious business. We can see that others who differ from us in their conclusions about God have certain grounds. It is no wonder that a philosopher like John Stuart Mill said in the last century that God was either good, but not powerful; or He was powerful, but not good. Here we have the old accusation against God for His tolerance of evil. If God is Love, they argue, He could not let mankind suffer in agony unless he were powerless to prevent it; if He were powerful enough to prevent it, He could not be Love to allow it. This naturally leads many to discard God entirely, for how can we worship One who is less kind than ourselves? Or loving, but quite inadequate?

Consider the position in which those who feel this way are now left. They have disposed of the problem of evil by denying that it is of any significant meaning and accepting that it is the less pleasant side of the way things happen to be. Once they deny that there is a purposive Power, Mind, Being and Creator behind the universe, obviously everything just "happened" by sheerest accident. What we call "evil" in mankind is therefore reduced to the level of growing pains, vestiges of his primeval fight for survival that may well be eradicated by increased enlightenment and self-knowledge. This we have yet to see.

The real problem for those who thus dispose of God is that they now have to explain good. Where did "good" - as revealed in a love of truth, justice, beauty, healing and compassion, unselfishness, and humility - come from? Such qualities have been the highest mark of human development worldwide through the centuries. If these also are the product of accident (as they must be according to this view) why should they be regarded as better than lies, injustice, ugliness, destruction, selfishness, and hate? We could understand if it were more pleasant and self-regarding for men and women to seek the good, but the usual fate of those who have sought it has been at best, misunderstanding, and at worst, martyrdom.

Many fine humanists seek and value the good. Why? For the sake of others? For the sake of the race? Again, why? If all life is a purposeless accident going nowhere at the end of the day - why? They claim to seek the good for their day and age without prejudice and with true zeal for human brotherhood and sisterhood. How noble! Yet how ungracious to crave the true but then logically have to deny that it has any source other than their own "accidentally created" minds. To revere the goodness in mankind while rejecting a God of goodness is like praising the play *Hamlet* while denying Shakespeare.

My contention is that while the Christian cannot have a cut-and-dried, irrefutable, here-and-now answer to the problem of evil in the world, the Christian has clues from the way God in Christ deals with evil. Clues that there is a solution - a solution more true to the realities of good and evil than the humanistic denial of the existence of a loving God which reduces evil to "just one of those things" and goodness to a stream without a source which will eventually peter out in the sands of time. A solution, moreover, that does not end up with the worship of an indifferent Almighty or a loving inadequate.

What then is God's way of dealing with evil, and remaining consistent with His being both loving and powerful? It is a twofold attack.

First, despite all appearances to the contrary, God demonstrates His Love. He does this by entering the setup Himself, by experiencing firsthand through Jesus the malignancy of human sin which is more potent than many people seem to realize. Sin will not be defeated by mere benevolence. Good intentions in the head are no more effective against sin than flowers in the hair. A soft tolerance - "If you won't bother me, Jack, I won't bother you" - cuts no ice against hatred and viciousness, prejudice and pride, selfishness and greed. To incant "All you need is Love," ad nauseum, will not alter the real situation of evil one whit. It all depends what you mean by Love.

When we Christians say that God is Love, we mean that God in Christ tackled sin and bore its full brunt. Injustice, malice, betrayal and beating, denial and despair, forsakenness and desolation, jealousy and envy, taunting and mockery, rejection and condemnation fell upon Him. And He took it, for our sake. It is all very well for those who don't want to make very much of sin to talk glibly of a gentle, kind, beneficent attitude as being sufficient to put mankind right, and call this shallow, wishy-washy thing "Love." Those who have experienced for themselves something of the insidiousness, the resilience, the scope, and the depth of evil know that no Love can be said to have borne it that has not faced evil at its worst, plumbed its depths and challenged its power with sheer goodness, not mere geniality or good intentions. Only One has done this - Jesus Christ.

Whatever else the Cross shows, it reveals two things unmistakably. One is the basic evil in humanity. For Jesus was done to death not by peculiarly bad people, criminal types, but by "decent" people who knew better. It is ever the way, for sin is no respecter of persons or status. The Cross also declares the Love of God, which challenges this evil with goodness. "Forgive them," cries the Sinless One as He hangs there. Even in the face of death's victory and with a sense of utter aloneness upon Him, Jesus' words are, "Father, into Thy hands I trust my Spirit."

No one can go further for another in love than God in Christ has gone for us. That is the first prong of God's way of dealing with evil: He bears it and thereby shows His Love. The world can never again be an utterly tragic, desolate, God-forsaken place. The Cross shows that God has not forsaken it or us, then or now.

The second part of God's twofold attack on evil is to work through it and achieve His end despite it. This is where we see God's power. Many people think they would know how to use godlike powers. They would put down dictators, stop wars, eliminate disease, prevent crime, do away with drugs, save the environment, and so on. Now if God really has power, why doesn't He do this? Why doesn't He act like a good person?

It is here that we have to ask what God's purpose is in the whole human setup. The Bible is the record of His revelation to men and women and it tells us that God made us for fellowship with Himself. This is His purpose. We are neither robots nor puppets. We are beings with choice, free to love or to hate, to accept or reject Him. But this end does not justify the use of any means. The end determines what the means are to be. For example, a teacher with a large and difficult class could no doubt get on splendidly

by excluding the lazy, the backward, and the disobedient. But then her purpose would be strictly limited to the education of the bright and the biddable. Yet her purpose is to teach them all and this she can do only at the cost of keeping them all in class.

This world is full of God's children. That is what He wants us to be. Certainly, it would look impressive if He used His power dramatically in a draconian way to get rid of the bad. Yet it would really be an admission of weakness, for it would defeat His purpose of not being willing that any should perish, but that all might find life in Him. If people perish spiritually it will not be because He has shut them out, but because they have rejected Him.

God's power is to be seen in His ability to achieve His purpose despite everything that stands against His will and everything that seems God-denying, despite all allegations that if He is good, He is powerless. He is not powerless. His purpose, to bring us all to Himself, determines the use of His power. He uses it in the face of evil to work good with those who cooperate with Him.

The Resurrection of Christ is the unmistakable guarantee of this. Here was mankind's representative who cooperated fully. From that first Easter morning, the worst that sin could do at Calvary was transformed into the best that God has done. The grave became an empty tomb, the tragedy a triumph. Sinners who believed in Him were now sons and daughters who lived new lives. History has a goal and this Cross was the signpost.

For twenty centuries men and women worldwide who have staked their lives on God's Love have known this power of Christ's Presence. With one accord they would state with John:

God is Love, and His Love was disclosed to us in this:

That He sent His only Son into the world to bring us life.

The Love we speak of is not our love for God, but the Love He showed to us.

Friend, that vision can do for us what nothing else ever can. It can give us a new life now, as we accept God's purpose for us and experience His Loving Power in us to see it through - the ultimate answer in the great debate, this side of death. This is the God we adore. Loving. Powerful. Present.

HOLY LORD, who revealed yourself in all humility and weakness in the child in the manger, therein is your power brought low. Your power is also brought low in the Cross of Christ, yet we can barely realize such Love as is shown there. Help us now to see your Love: caring for us, revealing yourself, bearing our sins, taking them away, undergoing the maximum that we have to face. Help us to see your Power saving us: despite our sin, despite our wrong-headedness and self-will, despite the evil we bring upon ourselves and do to others. Lord, grant us a new vision of your sacrifice to see that you are Loving Power and Powerful Love combined and present in Jesus our Savior. This we ask in His name. Amen.