

exception, he claims, is Joseph Conrad and the latter part of his paper includes a sustained analysis of *Heart of Darkness*. Finally we publish Brian Wicker's entertaining but impressive survey of Samson the Hebrew terroriser of the Philistine people in the Book of Joshua, in Milton's *Samson Agonistes*, in Handel's oratorio and in Camille Saint-Saens's opera *Samson and Delilah*. Samson's martyrdom and killing of innocent onlookers (Judges 16.28-30) and the cultural transformation 'Samson' has undergone to express new sensibilities provokes a reflection on current terrorisers of the innocent in political causes.

That last point allows me to report that, outside the academic papers and formal discussion, the CTA members who were present at the conference were moved – precisely as Catholic theologians – to draw up and vote to accept an unequivocal statement that the invasion of Iraq that seemed imminent, and which hardly seems less imminent now despite recent UN resolutions and the despatch of inspectors, would be contrary to the Catholic tradition of what constitutes a just war and would be a great evil leading to unpredictable destruction and the unavoidable death of many innocent Iraqis.

**Geoffrey Turner**  
CTA Secretary

## **The Cross: The Non-Apocalyptic Overcoming of Evil**

**John Hemer**

One oppressively hot night in 1985 in the south of Pakistan I lay on my bed punching the wall. I was very angry. A local landlord was mistreating some of our Christians in a dreadful way. I had been several times to speak to him and at first thought I was doing some good, but now realised that my intervention would change very little. The landlord was a particularly violent man, but the system itself was brutal and too old and too ingrained to give way just because one Western missionary thought it should. The people I was trying to help were powerless and so was I and that made me furious. The landlord had lots of enemies. If only one of those enemies would take a revolver to him, put out a contract on him – it happened all the time in this violent society – then our problems would be solved.

I realised with a start what was happening to me, where this was leading. I was dealing with great evil, but this evil was drawing me in. In opposing evil I was in danger of becoming just the same myself. I realised that if I had come here in the name of Jesus to preach the gospel and my only response to violence was more of the same, then I really had no business being there. The only thing I felt I could do there and then was to pray for the man, which I did. I would never think of myself as a violent man, quite the contrary. I hope I can honestly say that it was the desire for justice and my outrage at seeing it flouted that made me feel that way. And I would suggest that indignation, even anger in a situation like that is not a bad thing. It may even be a godly thing — the Bible is full of it — but it slips so easily into violence and hate. Here is one of the central problems for all who take the Bible seriously. How does God deal with evil and how do *we* deal with it without in some way becoming tainted ourselves?

We all know roughly how Israel's thought developed on that subject. The pre-exilic prophets promised disaster on account of people's injustice and idolatry. Later, people like Jeremiah and Ezekiel saw the punishing hand of God in the dreadful events of the exile. The early wisdom tradition had a simple *quid pro quo* idea of retribution but people's experience suggested that things were not quite as simple as that and the Book of Job questioned and, in some ways, debunked these ideas. Fuelled by near despair at continued foreign invasions on the one hand and an unshakeable belief in the ultimate justice of God on the other, the apocalyptic tradition posited the hope that God would in his own way at some later stage in history put everything right. For instance Dan. 7, referring to Antiochus Epiphanes, says:

He shall speak words against the Most High, and shall wear out the saints of the Most High.... But the court shall sit in judgement, and his dominion shall be taken away, to be consumed and destroyed to the end.... And the kingdom and the dominion and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven shall be given to the people of the saints of the Most High. (*Daniel 7:25-27*)

Although the language and historical expectations of apocalyptic literature differ from what had gone before the hoped-for result is still the same: the good are finally rewarded and vindicated and the wicked get it in the neck. This is the hope John the Baptist holds out to his followers, a hope he believes will be fulfilled very shortly in Jesus. Amos and John the Baptist were 800 years apart but they still basically agreed on what God's answer to evil would be. Everyone would simply get their just deserts.

John the Baptist speaks eloquently for this hope when he says (of the messiah): *'His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his*

*threshing floor and gather his wheat into the granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire'* (Matthew 3:12). The position of Jesus could not be further from that.

An often overlooked detail in the passion narrative is how when Jesus cries out, '*eli eli lama sabach-thani*', people misinterpret this as a cry to Elijah for help. Why should native Aramaic speakers make such an obvious gaffe in understanding their own language? Because they expect that the only way out of this is for Elijah to come and rescue the just one (if he is just). They hear Jesus calling on Elijah because that's what they expect him to do. If Jesus really is right then God will send in the cavalry. Matthew makes this very explicit. The onlookers say, '*wait and see if Elijah will come to save him. But Jesus again crying out in a loud voice yielded up his spirit*' (27:49-50). That silence of God on the cross, that absence of a heavenly rescuer is very disturbing. Surely if anyone in the history of the world merited miraculous rescue it was Jesus. If God had done that there would be no possibility of unbelief, no seemingly conflicting resurrection stories, no possibility of debunking. But it is essential to the truth of Jesus that this does not happen, that there is no *deus ex machina*, no cavalry to arrive at the last minute. Matthew mentions the onlookers at this moment because he does not want us to miss that point, he wants us to chew on it and digest it. For hundreds of years prophets and others had looked forward to God's intervention to vindicate the just. And right there, when you think it must happen, he remains silent. The problem of God's silence at Calvary is surely the same as that of his silence at Auschwitz. Different in scale certainly, but not in nature. This is not a modern problem. The evangelists make sure we are aware of this, that we do not sidestep or miss the issue here. The taunts of the passers-by echo something of this at the beginning of Jesus' public life:

You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross. He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he desires him; for he said, 'I am the Son of God.' (Matthew 27:40-43)

Earlier, the Devil had tempted Jesus with similar words:

If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will give his angels charge of you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.' (Matthew 4:6)

The desire for an apocalyptic solution, for a dramatic intervention

by God, is a temptation, part of the devil's strategy in fact, but a temptation to which Christians continually fall prey. Many still look forward to a violent bloody apocalypse. Perhaps the underlying idea is that 'OK, God played softly softly and didn't kick his enemies in the teeth the first time round on Calvary, but he's not going to let them get away with that again.' Well, we have to ask, if God is consistent, is he going to bring about the final answer in any other way but the way he chose on Calvary?

On the cross, then, God overcomes evil in a non-apocalyptic way by a) showing that what happens is evil, even though the people who do it think they are doing the will of God, b) not resisting the evil but absorbing it, taking it on and turning it into good, into revelation. It is to the consideration of these things that we now turn.

The work of René Girard and others following his insights has suggested that part of biblical revelation is the revelation of the violent origins of human society and culture and the violent means used to maintain order. Almost all human conflict is the result of people modelling themselves (albeit unconsciously) on others and then entering into rivalry with others. All human conflict is about desiring what others desire: money, land, prestige, a spouse, a friend, power etc. Every human society is threatened by this desire which becomes rivalry and which leads to conflict. Developed societies have mechanisms for keeping this from getting out of hand. In a society with no police force and no judiciary the basic mechanism to stop this internal violence is scapegoating and sacrifice. Girard suggests that a group achieves initial unity by falling on a scapegoat and uniting against him and killing or expelling him. Because all the internal tensions disappear when this mechanism kicks in, the experience is one of the scapegoat bringing peace, so the whole thing takes on an air of holiness. Scapegoating is still the way many groups bring about peace – politicians threatened by unpopularity start a war to unite people against a common enemy. Tensions in the workplace are solved like this, sometimes even in the church. Whenever this happens three things are worth noting: a) people are always unconscious of what is going on, b) they always assume that God is on the side of the mob, bringing about peace by killing or ostracising the victim, c) they always assume that the victim is guilty and that God is therefore against the victim. The opinion of God and the opinion of the crowd are therefore identical. So when Jesus says, '*Father forgive them for they know not what they do*', this is not just piety or Jesus being kind. None of them have any idea that they are caught up in a process of scapegoating frenzy. They have no idea that the unity of purpose between the Jewish and Roman authorities is the result of this

frenzy. The Jews explicitly believe that they are doing the work of God. The Romans believe this killing is necessary to keep public order, so it amounts to the same thing.

Girard claims that this process is at the basis of human culture. The Bible comes to birth in a society where this scapegoating, or single-victim mechanism, is fully operational, but it is the genius of Biblical revelation that it slowly unmask this process, shows it up for what it is and offers an alternative. Societies use one sort of violence to expel another sort. The violence expelled is deemed 'bad', the violence used to expel it is deemed 'good'. The Old Testament, slowly at first, tells of these events but tells them from the point of view of the victim. This is not universally clear in the OT but is dazzlingly clear in the Gospels. The central event in world history is the Son of God becoming the victim of this process, and then rising. In the passion story Caiaphas says, *'It is better that one man should die for the people, rather than that the whole nation should perish'* (John 11:50). His is the voice of everyman, every individual, every society which has tried to solve its problems by scapegoating. His is the voice of reason, the voice of political common sense, the voice which speaks up for the 'common good'. It is the voice of pogroms, ethnic cleansings and final solutions, and has been heard countless times in history and has resulted in untold human suffering. But it is not the voice of the gospel. The gospel speaks with another voice, with the voice of the victim. That's why the Gospel as well as being a unique piece of theology is a unique piece of anthropology.

Paradoxically the thing which Caiaphas wanted to avoid – the destruction of the nation by the Romans – did happen in 70 AD. And it was brought about not by Jesus or his followers, but by rebels and zealots, precisely the people who *did* believe in violent confrontation as the way to overcome evil and establish the kingdom of God. They were people with an apocalyptic mind-set.

In the passion narratives all the opponents of Jesus believe that God is with them in condemning Jesus, everyone believes that he is guilty, but the accounts are written in such a way as to show us that this is not true. They are written from the point of view of the victim. It is always possible for people to justify their violence against another, be they a group of medieval witch hunters, a Southern lynch mob in the sixties or a state declaring war on another. The victim is always guilty. But when the victim happens to be the sinless Son of God, that argument falls down.

Jesus has been relentlessly exposing this kind of behaviour throughout his ministry. He has shown that the victimisation of certain people is not the work of God. With the adulterous woman in John 8 he denies a religious mob its legitimacy and sends them home in confusion.

The authorities have to stop this, to silence this process. In doing so, they not only fail, but they blow their own cover, they expose their activity for ever for what it is. They give the world the means by which to decode this behaviour and neutralise it for ever. In 1 Corinthians, after Paul has just made his famous statement about the cross being the power and the wisdom of God, he goes on to say,

But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glorification. None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory (*1 Cor 2:7-8*).

Note that he is *not* saying that the rulers are basically decent even though they play a bit too rough sometimes: 'Let's face it, they have to be tough and sometimes they might even get the wrong man. Of course if they had known who Jesus really was they would have done the decent thing and let him go.' This is not what Paul means. It is much more like when a restaurant critic goes to a much vaunted restaurant anonymously, is served a tasteless and grossly overpriced meal and writes up his experience the following Sunday. The owners might well say: 'If we had known it was you, we would never have let this happen.' They do not mean; 'We would never have allowed this regrettable but momentary slip in our otherwise faultless standards to happen.' What they really mean is: 'We would never have allowed this to happen to you because we don't want the entire readership of the *Sunday Times* to know what a total rip-off our joint is.' Paul means something like that. 'If they (the princes of this world) had been able to read the future, not only would they not have encouraged the crucifixion, but they would have opposed it with all their might.'<sup>1</sup>

The single victim mechanism is Satan's doing and the trial and crucifixion of Jesus is a crystal clear example of how it works. But with the cross it is shown up for what it is, it escapes from Satan's hand and becomes God's instrument. During the Vietnam war, when Americans learned that their soldiers were dropping napalm on innocent women and children while defending freedom and democracy, many who had supported the war completely changed their opinion about it. Not only were they horrified by that particular action, but the magnitude of that evil made people question the entire war effort. Under another regime and another time the whole thing could have been sanitised by the rhetoric of propaganda and even this sort of barbarism could have been seen as a victory for freedom, the necessary price to pay for right. Our Western nose for that kind of false propaganda is very much the result of the gospel having worked on us for centuries. Reporters knew that telling the truth about the use of napalm would damage national

solidarity but they preferred truth to myth. In that sense they were doing a similar thing to the Gospels. The use of napalm and the barbarity it involved became a powerful weapon in the hands of the anti-war lobby. To be sure there were some who still came back holding their heads high and claiming they did what they had to do for the sake of good and would do it again. Yet the only way to maintain those views after people have seen footage of naked children running in terror from burning villages is to become even more evil, probably a little mad.

The powers killing Jesus are rather like that. A large number come to arrest him with swords and clubs. This is to convince themselves and the onlookers that he is dangerous and guilty, but Jesus shows this piece of theatre up for what it is:

Have you come out as against a robber, with swords and clubs to capture me? Day after day I sat in the temple teaching, and you did not seize me (*Matthew. 26:55*).

If Jesus had advocated violence in any way, the reader, while still taking his side, would be able to understand, even sympathise with the authorities. But because he doesn't and their violence and rage increases the more Jesus refuses to retaliate. We see this violence for what it is. Even people who believe scapegoating is necessary must be prepared to admit that in the case of Jesus it was unjustifiable. Yet once you do that for one case, then the whole mechanism must be called into question. If the mob were deluded when they called for Jesus' blood, might not every mob be similarly deluded? The first stage in the overcoming of evil is exposing it for what it is. Luke waves this in our face when after the death of Jesus we read,

Now when the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God, and said, 'Certainly this man was innocent!'. And all the multitudes who assembled to see the sight, when they saw what had taken place, returned home beating their breasts (*Luke 23:47-48*).

Two of the lies of scapegoating are exposed here: the victim is not guilty and this does not produce unity or solidarity. Once evil is exposed, people can either turn from it – which many do – or harden their hearts and defend it once again, often by using religious arguments. (Think how those who still defend white supremacy in the southern US look increasingly bizarre, but remember that most of those who do, use biblical arguments to support their position.) This is not mere coincidence. If people do not really believe in the fullness of what Jesus revealed about God, then they will continue to believe in the violent excluding god whom Jesus exposes and debunks. That god lurks at the base of all human culture and all natural religion. It is that which



underlies Jesus argument with the crowd in John 8:41-44:

'You do what your father did.' They said to him, 'We were not born of fornication; we have one Father, even God.' Jesus said to them, 'If God were your Father, you would love me, for I proceeded and came forth from God; I came not of my own accord, but he sent me. Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires.'

The crowd claim to have God as their father, their guiding principle, but their behaviour shows that it is something else which is guiding them, and that something is what Jesus calls the Devil.<sup>2</sup>

Had Caiaphas and others been the ones who told the passion story rather than the evangelists, the historical details would have remained substantially the same, but they would obviously have been distorted to show the rightness of what happened. This is what we mean by myth. In the Gospels they are accurately represented, without any justification or glorification – this is revelation. It is this revelation, working away on our culture for centuries, which gives modern Western people their 'antenna' for victims. Whenever we hear of this kind of thing, whatever the circumstances, we are suspicious. The Cross is doing its job. The passion narrative starts as an attempt to obscure the truth – the summary trial, trumped up charges and the refusal of the authorities to accept what Jesus says. It becomes a vehicle by which the truth of this entire process is laid open – for ever. The power of the scapegoating mechanism lies in the fact that it is hidden and unconscious. The Cross reveals it for what it is and so starts to undo its power.

Does this really change anything? Caiaphas, Pilate and Herod were all still in power six months later and their subsequent demise has nothing to do with the resurrection or the Church, nor is there any suggestion in the NT that their fate is a punishment for what they did to Jesus. This is not a moral tale. The forces which enslaved people, Jewish and Roman, remained in power for a long time.

So much of the thinking of Jesus' contemporaries – and so much of ours – was conditioned by the idea that in one way or other the enemies of God must be punished and the righteous vindicated. Jesus continually struggled to resist drawing clear lines between the good and the bad, but recognised rather that the whole world has fallen under the power of evil. Paul would later identify the problem as: *'all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God'* (Romans 3:23). For Jesus, to throw one's self into the struggle against the 'evil' Romans or against 'wicked' Jewish sinners was to pursue a red herring. It made people waste their spiritual energy and become either violently nationalistic or unpleasantly self-righteous. It was



with the evil power at its source and not just with its various historical manifestations that Jesus struggled. If this is the locus of the struggle, it is here also that we must look for the locus of the victory. And, to qualify things even further, Jesus overcomes evil precisely by not struggling with or resisting it. Because of the subtlety of sin a direct answer or confrontation only makes the thing worse.<sup>3</sup> Blowing on a fire to put it out will often increase it. In opposing evil people do evil themselves. Jesus rather than directly opposing sin takes it on himself and neutralises it.

Those who had Jesus killed had no idea that they were involved in evil. In many ways they were also victims of evil. If that evil had triumphed, Jesus would be at the most a footnote to history. But the fact that Jesus lives is his victory over evil. It shows that those powers do not have the last word, they are in fact powerless to hold Jesus. The resurrection shows that God has absolutely nothing to do with any of the powers and systems that killed Jesus. To those who killed him, Jesus does not appear to show them that he was right and they were wrong. He does not 'sort his enemies out'. Nor does he berate his disciples for having deserted him. The resurrection is not merely the triumph of Jesus' ideas. If the apostles still have to expend their energy proving Jesus right and his opponents wrong, then evil still exercises considerable power over them. Their words and actions will be carefully considered responses to evil. The apostles did not seem to have grasped his ideas anyway and they were as surprised by the resurrection as anyone else. There is no 'I told you so, I was right all along,' because the resurrection vindicates Jesus in a way which is totally unexpected and unprecedented. Peter when he preaches the risen Jesus does not seek to blame the authorities. He also maintains that they just didn't know what they were doing. Speaking to the people of Jerusalem he says,

But you denied the Holy and Righteous One, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, and killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead.... And now, brethren, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers (*Acts 3:14-17*).

The risen Jesus overcomes evil first of all simply by being alive. He is not immune to the effects of evil, he did die and the risen Jesus bears the marks of that death. But the effects of evil have no binding power on him. The resurrection is the longed for victory of God over his enemies, but God really has only one enemy -- evil itself. This is the locus of the victory. On the road to Emmaus the disciples express their disappointed hopes: '*We had hoped that he would be the one to redeem Israel*' (Luke 24:21). Jesus then makes it clear that this is what had happened, in a completely unexpected way, but in a way that the scriptures had been pointing to all

along. Given who Jesus was and the way he behaved while on earth, no other mode of appearance would have made sense. Had he appeared to his killers they would have perceived the appearances as adversarial and accusatory. The only relationship they had had with him was one of hate. If the apostles' first reaction to the risen Jesus was fear, Caiphias, on the other hand, would have run a mile from him and probably taken some valium or its first century equivalent. If he were to make a public appearance to confound his detractors, his surrender to death, his losing his life to gain it, would be seen merely as a temporary measure and the revelation of a God who uses no coercion would be undone.<sup>4</sup> Secondly, if his opponents had found reason to disbelieve him while on earth, there is no reason to assume that their opposition would change by witnessing some miracle. There are always those who *'will not believe, even if someone should rise from the dead'*.

Above all, the presence of the risen Christ is a forgiving presence, and in Luke and John the apostles are to bear witness to this by preaching forgiveness. Forgiveness seems to be the only thing God wants to do with evil. Since the time of the prophets people have been waiting for God to deal with evil — well, this is the way he will do it. Perhaps the encounter of Peter with Jesus in John 21 illustrates how this happens. Commentators sometimes suggest that in asking Peter three times whether he loves him, Jesus is making sure that he does not forget his betrayal, rubbing his nose in it as it were. This seems completely out of character with the way Jesus deals with every other human failure. Some years ago I was counselling someone who had a very low opinion of herself. After several meetings, during one session she lifted up her head and with a smile said, 'So I am a good person, really!' I got her to say it again several times and told her to say it every morning. Something deep inside her told her this was true but her conditioning and history cast doubt on it, so it needed plenty of reinforcing. Likewise with Peter. He does love Jesus, but he wonders if, after his denial, he can really hold his head up, look Jesus in the face and say so. So Jesus makes sure that he does. Jesus recognises that there is something to be forgiven but makes no direct reference to it. He does not deal with sin by confronting it directly but by gently making sure that its effects are undone and that the sinner is free from its effects. This is surely one example of the non-apocalyptic overcoming of evil.

A postscript. I went back to Pakistan some years later to visit. The family who had been so oppressed were happily settled elsewhere, but they told me that their cruel landlord had since fared very badly and suffered continually from poor health. And, they told me, he was convinced that I had cursed him or at least was in some way responsible for this. They laughed and I laughed, and they believed it no more than I

did. But the look in their faces seemed to say: “But it makes you think doesn’t it?” It would be tempting to draw a conclusion like: “Well, if you oppress the poor, what do you expect? If you oppress the poor, don’t expect God to bless you!” Tempting, but not the gospel.

- 1 R. Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, Maryknoll 2001, p.150
- 2 For a thorough treatment of this read ch.3 of James Alison, *Faith Beyond Resentment*, pp.56-86
- 3 cf. R.Schwager, *Jesus in the Drama of Salvation*, New York 1999, p.190
- 4 R.Schwager, *ibid.*, p.136

## Evil and the Limits of Theology

Karen Kilby

How ought evil to be dealt with in Christian theology? In what follows I will approach this question by reflecting on what is arguably a different intellectual tradition—the production of theodicies—and on the relationship between theology and this other tradition. What I shall try to show is that Christian theology ought *neither* to construct theodicies, *nor* ignore the kinds of problem theodicies try to address. It ought instead to acknowledge itself to be faced with questions it cannot answer, and to be committed to affirming things it cannot make sense of.<sup>1</sup>

### I

A classic articulation of the ‘problem of evil’ is put by David Hume into the mouth of Philo in Part X of *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*:

Is he [God] willing to prevent evil, but not able? then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil?<sup>2</sup>

Posing this or a closely related problem, developing answers to it, discussing and dissecting other people’s answers, are staples of the trade of philosophy of religion—the so-called problem of evil comes second only perhaps to the study of proofs of the existence of God as a centrepiece of courses and textbooks in the subject. Many of those who have proposed the most influential theodicies in recent decades—Hick, Plantinga, Swinburne—are those who have been the most influential