

THEOLOGY AND THE PROBLEM OF EVIL by Kenneth Surin. Basil Blackwell. 1986.

The bulk of this book consists in an attack on the approach to the problems of evil and suffering, as found in such philosophers and theologians as John Hick, Alvin Plantinga and Richard Swinburne. The author considers them as victims of the delusion that human reason can perceive truth from an atemporal perspective, outside the sphere of historical activity; whereas for Surin our thinking is determined and rendered intelligible by the social and material reality in which it is grounded, and therefore all philosophical and theological reflection inevitably mediates a certain social and political praxis.

The folly of hankering after an abstract, universal intelligibility is nowhere more evident to Surin than in relation to human evil, for its radical 'particularity' indicates that evil 'per se' cannot be made intelligible. He therefore rejects Professor Swinburne's plea for 'open-mindedness' about the possibility of Divine purpose in 'the screams of the innocent', condemning it as at its worst 'irremissable moral blindness', or at least unshakeable moral coarseness which reveals that one has lost one's humanity and any possible accordance with the truth.

'In profound reticence' the theologian must begin instead by 'registering the stories of the victims of evil'. This 'first-order' language (which will almost certainly *not be* a specifically theological discourse) will be 'praxis-generating' by serving as an instrument of interrogation and critique for all (second-order) theological affirmations. These can in no way be vindicated by philosophical or systematic theology, and must rely solely on or resort to 'a theology of revelation open to the word of God as "given" in Holy Scripture', which must be a theologia crucis in which 'divinity itself', in the person of the Son of God on the cross, endures the sufferings that affect us. In this way divinity is 'accessible' without being 'knowable' to humankind in this action of God on the cross.

The Achilles heel of Surin's approach is that the claim that all human thinking is socio-historically determined must implicitly regard itself as having transcended determinatory factors. Particular forms of the self-contradiction involved here are evident to the careful reader at many points. One example is that in his rebuke of Swinburne, Surin contradicts his own epistemological theory by assuming that we possess a capacity to discern a common 'humanity' in all people, and therewith universal moral obligations towards them, transcending all socio-cultural boundaries.

What is the difference between the 'human' per se and the merely animal, which Surin himself here assumes should be somehow self-evident, despite his theory of knowledge? One traditional Aristotelian answer is 'irrationality', meaning a constitutive tendency of the human consciousness to seek to place particulars in a 'universal' perspective. Evil, because it is, by definition, *prima facie* absurd, is an affront to the search for meaning in which *all* human beings are engaged, not merely those committed to some specific theological tradition.

Surin's one-sided particularism and situationalism tends to throw the 'baby out with the bath water'. If we are to avoid moral, spiritual and epistemological despair we need assurance that the universal can be found in the particular, and vice versa. Many would find this in the doctrine of the Trinity, in which the opposition of the Father (the universal) and the Son (the particular) is reconciled in the living unity of the Holy Spirit. Tellingly, although Surin repeatedly calls for an 'irreducibly Trinitarian theology', he mentions the Spirit only once in passing, speaking instead of a 'rupture' between Father and Son to be settled by praxis rather than healed by the Holy Spirit.

Despite his sometimes ferocious polemic, Surin is scrupulously accurate and lucid in his accounts of both ideological foes and friends, and this book—which is more than anything else a text-book on theodicy—can be recommended as a challenging expression of a significant current in contemporary theological writing.