

A MODERN IRENAEAN THEODICY —

PROFESSOR HICK ON EVIL

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In attempting to deal with the traditional problem of evil Christian theologians have had recourse to the presentation of theodicies. The two most influential kinds (though advocates of either can agree on some points) have been the Augustinian and the Irenaean and today the latter is the most popular largely as a result of its exposition by Professor John Hick¹. I have no distinctive theodicy to offer, nor am I sure either that one can be offered or that the Christian is bound to offer one. Perhaps, after all, what Alvin Plantinga calls a 'defence'², coupled with an appeal to mystery³ is in order. I do, however, find the Irenaean theodicy in Hick's form difficult to accept and am therefore disturbed to find it currently so influential. In what follows, and in the briefest possible manner, my aim is to indicate why others should feel the same.

The problem of evil is a problem for the theist. According to theism the following propositions are true:

1. God exists.
2. God is an all-powerful, all knowing and all-good agent.

The problem is how to square acceptance of these propositions with the acceptance of the facts of evil. By 'evil' here is meant (a) moral evil [viz. morally undesirable actions of human agents who frequently inflict suffering and harm on each other], and (b) natural evil [viz. pain producing events in the world of nature and undesirable though not necessarily pain producing natural events and states of affairs]. The core of Hick's attempt to reconcile evil with the above two propositions about God is an argument which can be schematised thus (other details will emerge as my discussion proceeds):

¹*Evil and the God of Love*, Macmillan, 1966. See also *God and Universe of Faiths*, Macmillan, 1973. Hick of course, has been criticised but criticism of him has often been based on a misunderstanding of his position. Cf. *Religious Studies*, April 1967 and *Religious Studies* 3, pp. 539-546. For useful discussions of Hick the reader should note Illyd Trethowan's article in *Journal of Theological Studies*, October 1967 and Keith Ward's *Ethics and Christianity*, Allen & Unwin, 1970.

²*God, Freedom and Evil*, London, 1975.

³For a useful treatment along these lines see H.D. Lewis, *The Philosophy of Religion*, English Universities Press, 1975, Chapter 26.

- (1) X may be a morally good agent even though he brings about superficially evil states of affairs, E, (or if he is responsible for E) on condition that E is a necessary condition of an ultimately good state of affairs which X brings about.
- (2) A personal relationship of love and trust between men and God is an ultimately good state of affairs.
- (3) Evil of the kinds (a) and (b) above is a necessary condition of a personal relationship of love and trust between men and God.
- (4) In bringing about (a) and (b) God can still be called a morally good agent.

In Hick's presentation of the argument (3) is elucidated thus. Man is created at an epistemic distance from God. This means that the world appears to man as ambiguous in the sense that it does not thrust the fact of God's existence upon him. In order to accept that there is a God in the first place, therefore, one has to persevere or, in some way, make an effort. Even when one thinks one has found God this effort cannot be relaxed. One must bear life's trials in such a way that inner purification results. The ultimate relationship with God is thus founded upon a constant struggle both to know God and to trust him.

In creating finite persons for fellowship with himself God has given to them the only kind of freedom that can endow them with a genuine (though relative) autonomy in relation to himself, namely cognitive freedom, the freedom to be aware or unaware of their creator...This world has an ambiguous character in that it is capable of being responded to either religiously or non-religiously...the full monotheistic conception of God...has come to require for the religious experiencing of life a willingness to live consciously in an infinitely holy presence which confronts us with judgment and demand as well as grace and new life...We only become aware of God by an uncoerced response, the interpretative element within which we call faith...it follows that our initial distancing from God through our immersion in this natural order, and our morally imperfect nature, have their place within the divine creative purpose. Our actual human situation with all its ambiguities, is not the work of the Evil One seeking to thwart God's will, a phase in the outworking of God's intention... God...is responsible for his creation in the sense that his will is the primary necessary condition of its existence, and in the sense also that its character can be justified only by the successful fulfilment of the divine purpose for which it exists.⁴

⁴*God and the Universe of Faiths*, pp.67-69.

The first important drawback in this account is, I suggest, that it refuses to take seriously the mystery of human freedom. How are we to regard a genuinely free action? Some would argue that we regard it as in some sense determined. This account produces a compatibilist view of freedom and determinism. As I understand it however, and certainly as much classical theology has understood it, an action is free only if it does not necessarily follow from some causally effective state of affairs outside the complete control of the agent whose act it is. In other words, "When we say that Jones acts freely on a given occasion, what we say entails...that either his action on that occasion is not causally determined or else he has previously performed an undetermined action that is a causal ancestor of the one in question".⁵ Now although Hick is concerned to preserve the freedom of men—the state of affairs where men freely accept God is the ultimately good state of affairs willed by God and Hick allows that men now freely go wrong—he locates this freedom in a world where human action (including moral failure) is naturally evil because God has brought it about that human nature is such as to produce morally evil actions which are themselves a means to an end, viz. the free acceptance of God, the goal of creation. But such a world could not in fact exist at all since where genuine moral failure exists there just cannot be any state in nature or God that produces it or brings it about. Hick, in other words, is asking us to recognise the inevitability of sin. But if sin is a certain kind of free decision, as it seems it must be, it cannot be inevitable at all. To say that 'X is inevitable' must, strictly speaking, be to say that X is determined, but if free choices are to exist or be realised at all these cannot be causally determined and in an obvious sense they are inexplicable or mysterious. According to Hick one has to see purpose in the fact that people constantly fall short in moral matters. The absurdity of sin has to make sense and it makes sense in terms of what God has brought about. It seems to me however that the whole point about sin is that, considered as a free act, it does *not* make sense and is not brought about except by the one who sins. (One can speak of bringing about a situation where someone *can* sin but that is another matter and neither implies the reality of sin nor suggests its unreality.) This, of course, does not mean that we cannot explain (or make sense of) someone's sin *up to a point*. Nor does it imply that we cannot predict it with some degree of confidence. It can be said that John is likely to be cruel to Mabel because Mabel has spent all his money. But if John chooses to be cruel to Mabel, if his being cruel involves a morally wrong act, we have not fully explained his action until we say that John decided to be cruel. And 'he decided to' like 'God made it so' is in fact not

⁵Plantinga, *God and Other Minds*, 1967, p. 134.

ultimately explanatory at all. It actually puts a halt to explanation. Free action has to be accepted as ultimately mysterious. Hick does not seem to see this.

The topic of freedom leads one naturally into Hick's theory of man's acceptance of God. In his attempt to resolve the problem of evil Hick is understandably anxious to preserve the traditional Christian insistence that faith is a free response to God and it is this which leads him to the fundamentally important notions of cognitive freedom and epistemic distance. But why should we introduce such notions at all in connection with the problem of evil? Do they really help to resolve the problem? If we are, on various grounds, convinced of the genuine impossibility of God's existence then obviously not. That, however, introduces a whole set of considerations to be sorted out by Hick and his atheist opponent. But even assuming the reality of God must we speak of man's acceptance of this in Hick's terms? I think not. Hick's idea that man is epistemically distant from God presupposes that a clear awareness of God's existence (either directly via religious experience or indirectly via argument) is incompatible with a free response to God. This view can quite sensibly be challenged. Why should the free acceptance of God be incompatible with a clear awareness of him? In spite of its logical tone this is really a question where psychological considerations are most obviously relevant. The problem is whether one could be utterly convinced that God exists and still ignore or reject him. Hick does not think that this is possible. Consider, however, what is involved in the acceptance of God. Judging from the statements of Christian theology, included in this is a denial of self, an effort of realism, a willingness to trust in what is ultimately mysterious to one, love, charity, obedience to the teachings of Christ and suffering. Trite though it sounds to say it, this is a programme which human nature finds daunting. The acceptance of God is naturally regarded as a threat and this accounts for the Gospel's declaration that being a Christian means taking up one's cross daily. It is also the *reason why Christian writers, particularly St. Paul, have constantly stressed the need for perseverance, self-scrutiny and vigilance.* Bearing all this in mind, does it sound odd to suggest that even when convinced of the reality of God man may still draw back from the practical implications involved in it? I can only say that to me it does not sound odd at all. Commitment is both logically and psychologically distinct from assent. Cognitive freedom is not a necessary condition for the acceptance of God, therefore, and since Hick's theodicy depends on saying that it is we have quite reasonable grounds for rejecting that theodicy. Hick argues that PR (the problem of evil is resolvable) because (and only because) of CF (cognitive freedom). Take away CF and what becomes of

PR? It seems to be left undefended.

Passing over this problem, let us now grant that unless a man is created at an epistemic distance from God he cannot accept God and, thus, that the ultimately good state of a realized God–man relationship depends on man being created at an epistemic distance from God. Can we still regard the creation of man (with all that this entails on Hick’s account) as the work of an absolutely good God? This question leads us to the third limitation in Hick’s theodicy. One answer to it would be that we can so regard the creation of man because absolute goodness is a mystery and hence cannot be held to be something which contradicts anything. In spite of its logical strength (only clear statements can contradict each other) Hick does not adopt such a view and in this I think he is right. To throw a cloak of mystery over God’s absolute goodness seems to evacuate the notion of any significance thereby laying the theist open to the most familiar analytic charges of unintelligibility (Anthony Flew etc.). On Hick’s account therefore God can be defended as good without contradicting our conventional understanding of goodness. This is because according to Hick one can regard as good the state of affairs for which the world and its constitution is a necessary condition. But can one really do this? Hick’s answer is to allow that unless all men eventually gain the happiness of union with God the divine purpose would be thwarted in such a way that either God’s omnipotence or his goodness could be challenged. “There remains, as Hick expresses it, “an eternal (or more strictly a sempiternal) dualism of God and the evil that he is powerless to undo”. (p.71) Hick’s solution is thus to advance a doctrine of universal salvation. He clearly feels that it would take a lot to justify the vale of soul-making posited on his account but he is satisfied that universal salvation does the trick. “The only real alternative”, he tells us, “to a doctrine of lost souls, whether living in misery or having totally perished, is the contrary doctrine of universal salvation”. (p.71). He continues, “This does not entail that human choices are unreal and not of eternal significance, or that hell does not stand before men as a terrible possibility. It means that this terrible possibility will not in fact be realised. In mythological language, hell exists, but is empty. It is ‘there’ awaiting any who may finally be lost to God; but in the end none are to be finally lost”. (pp. 71-72).

I find this last passage of Hick quite baffling but in order to assess it properly consider two propositions:

- (1) It is possible that I will not live to finish writing this article.
- (2) All things being equal, it is unlikely that I will die before this article is completed.

If these two propositions make sense together it can only be because I *could* die soon. If no attempts to shoot, poison or beat me could bring about my demise, if no heart attack or brain haemorrhage could finish me off, then 'I will not live to finish writing this article' is not the statement of a true possibility. 'X is possible' where X is future means 'X may come about'—not as a matter of logical possibility (where X and notX are both possible) but as a matter of factual possibility. Someone or something has the power to bring X about. According to Hick, however it is possible that a man might not achieve salvation but, as a matter of fact, (a *certain* matter of fact) no man will actually fail to achieve it. Thus God's purpose is fulfilled and the problem of evil is resolvable. This means, however, that Hick is working with an utterly confused notion of possibility which seems, in so far as one can understand it at all, to assimilate logical and factual possibility while refusing to acknowledge this. How can men really have the possibility of choosing God if they cannot also have the possibility of rejecting him and how can they have the possibility of rejecting him if, as a matter of fact, nothing that could happen could interfere with them gaining salvation which, on Hick's account, is the fruit of a free acceptance of God?

Hick might reply to this by saying that the notion of universal salvation is still a coherent one. He might urge, in the manner of Ladislaus Boros⁶, that one may posit a universal and definitive experience of God unclouded by obscurity with which the notion of God in this life presents us and that when this comes about men will automatically choose God. This would still seem to involve an acceptance that might prove painful and there would still seem to be the possibility that not everyone would accept God even if they enjoyed definitive and unclouded awareness of him. But waiving this point, either the choice of God will be free in the sense that it could as a matter of fact have been otherwise or it is not a genuine choice. But again, let us concede a point to Hick and agree that all will be saved and that all must be saved. How is this to come about? The obvious answer is 'by all men fulfilling the conditions for salvation', which for Hick means 'by all men accepting the offer of an uncoerced response to God'. Clearly, however, not all men do this in the present life and so some would have to accept God after death. But how are they to do this? Presumably, on Hick's account, by freely choosing God because, as Hick sees it, salvation (the reason behind the evil in the world) can only result from a free acceptance of God—hence the emphasis on cognitive freedom. But if all men sooner or later find themselves saved we cannot be sure that this will be because all men freely choose God. Hick holds that salvation is the fruit of

⁶*The Moment of Truth*, London, Burns & Oates, 1965.

an *uncoerced* (cognitively free) response to God and so some men might refuse to make this. If all men are to be saved therefore in the case of some of them it must be possible to be, so to speak, *in spite of themselves*. Following out the logic of Hick's account it is thus possible for men to be saved without freely choosing God in a state of cognitive freedom. But it follows from this that all men could in principle therefore be saved involuntarily, and this in turn suggests that cognitive freedom and epistemic distance are not after all necessary conditions of salvation. One then wonders what becomes of Hick's proposed theodicy. This maintained that PR because (and only because) of CF. It looks in fact as if the means to a good end posited by Hick and central to his theodicy are not justified at all. Hick's universal salvation undermines any strength possessed by his insistence on the need for a free response to God.

At this point Hick might understandably retort that even if there are difficulties in his Irenaean theodicy it is nevertheless only by trying to cope with evil along Irenaean lines that one can proceed in the light of Christian theism. I disagree with this reply and this brings me to my final major reservation with Hick's attempt to solve the problem of evil. The question to bear in mind here is 'Can Hick's thesis really be called Christian?'

The notion of suffering as an indispensable condition of great good is clearly Biblical and has certainly played an important role in Christian theology. One thinks here of the atonement of Christ brought about through his death and of the themes of asceticism, martyrdom, self-sacrifice and so forth. To present a Christianity minus a positive evaluation of suffering would be to offer a much emasculated version of the genuine article. (This seems to me to hold even though there is lively inter-confessional disagreement over what 'true Christianity' actually is). It is therefore a point in Hick's favour that his theodicy tries to cash in on the benefits of what those outside the Christian fold would probably or possibly regard as disastrous or pointless. Perhaps no theodicy which fails to do this can really ring true and it is significant, I think, that the *O felix culpa* theme is common to both Irenaean and Augustinian theodicies. It would however, be rash of the contemporary Christian simply to hold that Christianity unswervingly and unequivocally upholds that all evil out of which good may come is *ipso facto* such that it can be regarded as positively willed by God. A Christian is surely within his rights in maintaining that the crucifixion was not willed in this way, that what brought it about was the action of Christ's enemies. The same Christian can also intelligibly argue that regardless of the benefits involved in it the predestined damnation of some people is also quite unjustifiable and therefore cannot be directly willed

by God. It is not therefore obvious that Hick's theodicy is useful *qua* Christian theodicy simply because it gives suffering or evil a positive place, and it seems to me that it is in fact hard to accept precisely when it is considered *qua* Christian theodicy. For according to Hick God directly wills (in the sense that he takes positive steps to bring about) man with a sin-prone nature. Hick, I take it, means that man is created with a natural attraction to moral evil. Since such an attraction is surely only conceivable as something positive, we seem to be dealing here with a specifiable characteristic which is not *acquired* by man through his own efforts (or lack of them) but which is, so to speak, something with which he is landed in the same way that he is landed with his sexual inclinations. We are thus asked to consider the possibility of God deliberately constructing a creature which is recognizably flawed. It seems inevitable on this account that what theologians call the Fall was (is) inescapable and this is actually what Hick says. "Man as he emerged from the evolutionary process", we are told, "already existed in the state of epistemic distance from God and of total involvement in the life of nature that constitutes his 'fallenness'."⁷ In that case, however, God has directly brought sin about and, presumably, the Christian must now say that the Incarnation should be viewed as God's attempt to remedy the situation brought about by him in the first place. 'How odd of God' one may think, but surely more can be said. For it is a Christian principle that God is utterly opposed to sin. If this is so, to argue that he manufactured the wretched thing in the first place is to go beyond the Christian concept of God. It is to introduce into God the characteristics of being both opposed to and creative of one and the same thing. This is unintelligible as well as unchristian; yet on Hick's account it is perfectly in order.

One seems forced to conclude therefore that as well as depending on a difficult view of freedom, and besides failing (a) to show the necessity of evil and (b) to justify the evil that exists, Hick's thesis is suspect as a coherent statement of Christian theism. It thus seems deficient on at least four counts and even though a Christian may be unable to offer an alternative solution to the problem of evil he is well advised to steer clear of it.

⁷ *Evil and the God of Love*, p.323.