

Good, Evil, Sin

Good, Evil, Sin: A Christian View

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Christianity stands in fundamental awe that anything at all exists. Simply to exist is good, and so Christianity's first concern in respect to goodness is to understand what we and all other things are, and why we exist at all. A technical way to say this is that goodness is an ontological concern (*ontos* is the Greek word meaning "being," and so ontology is the study of existence) before it is a moral one: we seek to understand what reality is and who we are before we dare to make judgments about whether particular things or actions or persons are good or bad.

From its conviction about the goodness of existence, Christianity next concludes that nothing we see or experience needs to be. Our own existence is a completely unmerited gift. So from thinking about the goodness of existence, Christianity is led to posit the existence of something that is the cause of all other existing things and of their goodness, the good in itself. As St. Thomas Aquinas put it, the good in itself is God, the only being whose essence is to exist (*Summa Theologiae*, I.3.4). The contemporary Catholic philosopher and theologian Herbert McCabe sums up Aquinas in this way: "The mystery which is the answer to the most profound problem of all, the problem of why there is anything at all instead of nothing, this mystery which we label 'God,' lies far beyond anything we can conceive or put into words" (McCabe, 215).

God, the mystery at the heart of existence, intends that all things be good by being what they are: a rock is good by being a rock. Human beings are a special case, since we *become* fully ourselves through a process of growth. This is where talk about goodness becomes talk about morality: we are morally good to the extent that we really are becoming human. There is mystery here, since our human goodness has its source in the "mystery which we label 'God'" (see above). We know *that* moral goodness is possible more than we know in precise detail in *what* it consists. We are not automatons confronted with a completed list God's demands for the attainment of goodness. Human moral goodness is achieved by developing and disciplining our capacities of thinking and desiring by means of virtue. This is what Christians mean when we speak of human beings as the image of God: we participate in our own becoming good.

In the Christian tradition evil also is not only or immediately a moral category, but a physical one: natural disaster, human illness, and deformity are primary instances of evil. Moral evil (or sin, and more on that below) is a conscious refusal by rational human beings fully to become ourselves through the moral and intellectual virtues. Its commitment to the goodness of God, or to God as goodness, confronts Christianity (and Judaism) with a fundamental paradox: evil should not exist, but it does. Articulated as a question: *Why does God allow us to suffer?* (see Rahner).

Both Judaism and Christianity reject the Manichean cosmic solution of proposing two competing primordial powers. (The third century Persian seer Mani was born of a Jewish-Christian family.) From the opening verses of their common Scripture, Judaism and Christianity set two truths next to each other: creation in God's image (and thus the reality of goodness in the world) and the brokenness of creation (and thus the reality of evil in the world). Catholic theologian Monika Hellwig summarizes the teaching of the Bible's first book in this way:

We exist because God calls us into existence and sustains us in existence ... and above all because God intends that we be happy in being like God, with God, and for God....

[Yet] the world as we know it is not simply God's good creation but in some ways a distortion of that creation by sin... The story [in Genesis, chapter three] seems to be an effort to take the origin of evil in human affairs and in the world one step further back behind any human failure. The ancient story-tellers ... found themselves unable to assign the whole blame to human beings because the damage seemed to go so far beyond what human beings might have caused... The entry of the serpent into the garden in the valley of delight begins the biblical account of sin. (Hellwig, 33, 46-47)

Two points summarize Genesis on evil. First, its treatment is humane, not laying evil fully at the feet of human beings. Second, it does not fully "explain" evil's origins: evil is not entirely from us, but it is certainly not from God. Christianity has pushed the point about the supra-human origins of evil further than Judaism, seeing humanity as (in the words of Paul in 2 Thessalonians 2.7) confronted by a *mysterium iniquitatis*, a "mystery of lawlessness" in the cosmos in the face of which we are unable to save ourselves. This emphasis on the power of evil has its corollary in the Christian understanding of Jesus Christ as "savior" from both moral and physical evil (see below).

The magnitude of evil in the 20th century is a challenge to all Christian theologizing. Hannah Arendt characterized the Nazi Holocaust against the Jews as an "administrative massacre," underlining both its "banality" and anonymity (see Hidber, 2006, 99-100). Catholic theologian Bruno Hidber adds the term "logistical massacre" to describe the terrorist attacks in the United States on 9-11-2001, and says a "chastened" Christian theology faces at least two tasks in the face of enormous, faceless evil (Hidber, 2006, 101, 116).

First, it must articulate its understanding of God in full recognition of the scandal of evil. In this respect, Hidber says Christian theology "has lived through a decisive paradigm shift from a vindictive God toward the God of reconciliation" (Hidber, 2003, 527). For Christians, the crucified Jesus is the full revelation of this God who is "completely free of the desire to punish" (Hidber, 2003, 528). Referring to the Book of Revelations' vision of the "slaughtered" lamb now standing alive in heaven (Revelations 5.6), Hidber sums up Christian faith in Jesus as savior from physical and moral evil:

This is the searing truth about evil: It has such power that to exorcise it the intervention of God himself is required; it even possesses the power to inflict wounds on the Son of

God himself for all eternity... Still we turn to God who, through the cross of Christ, has conquered all evil and has freed us from it. (Hidber, 2003, 518)

In its second task, Christian theology must unmask the lie of "anonymous" evil by talking clearly about sin. Moral evil always includes the choice by human beings to cooperate (actively or passively) with the forces of disintegration in creation.

Sin takes two primary forms in a human life. First, original sin is the name Christians give to human participation in the *mysterium iniquitatis* mentioned above. Original sin consists in the tendency toward disorder and lack of integration in our desires. Christianity claims that all human beings, except Jesus (Catholics also exempt Mary of Nazareth), inherit this tendency to disorder, and that it distorts our perspective even before we become conscious of ourselves as responsible moral agents. Second, personal sin consists in our decision to cooperate with the disorder. A third category of social or structural sin has come into Catholic thought to indicate that both original and personal sin have long afterlives in the external world, building up structures making it harder for others to be morally good.

Practically, Christianity asks perhaps three things of believers. First, we must continue to pray, incorporating "lament" into our public and private prayer:

Human death by famine, torture, war, genocide, and one-on-one violence and the death of living creatures and the earth's life-systems by human cruelty and greed disrupt the harmony of one generation's witness to the next... The ancient prayer of lament, flung in outrage and grief to God, arises from remembrance of these things.... [T]he powerful memory of those who died senseless deaths deprived of dignity demands that the praise of God be suffused with their tragedy. (Johnson, 248)

Second, we must acknowledge that evil is hidden in our own hearts and deeds, and we must repent by asking that what is hidden in our own hearts become clear to us. Christians, in fact, might take a lesson from Dutch Jewish writer and Holocaust victim Etty Hillesum (1914-1943) here: "Why is there a war? Perhaps because... I and my neighbor and everyone else do not have enough love" (Hillesum, 95). The concluding petitions of Jesus' prayer to the Father point to the needed humility of the believer here: "forgive us our trespasses," "lead us not into temptation," and "deliver us from evil."

Last, "chastened" believers must return from prayer to act in the world. Johnson says our prayer "becomes a social force confronting unjust ideologies and structures. It calls us out of passivity into active engagement against all premature death caused by human beings. Along with the prayer of praise, it shifts our responsibility to praxis" (Johnson, 250).

The believer does not expect the disappearance of evil in her lifetime, but seeks to cooperate with the good God who "works for good in everything" (Romans 8.28) – even, somehow, in the horrors of our day.

Sources:

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Good, Evil, Sins: Muslim View

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Islam, like Judaism, does not accept the notion of "original sin." Every soul bears its own burden (6:164; 17:15; 29:52), though God does not overburden anyone (2:286). Thus, all human beings are born good and sinless. No one inherits the sin of anyone else nor is there a need for a redemptive figure who will redeem the sinners. This is contrary to the Christian view which affirms that human beings are born sinful and that Jesus died to redeem their sins. From an Islamic perspective, evil is the result of a lack or due to the removal of good.

The Qur'an contains numerous accounts of the prophets sent to various peoples in different times and places reminding them of the obligation to worship God and to establish His commands on the earth. As verse 28:59 reminds us, God does not destroy any community to whom he had not first sent a messenger reminding them of God and of their covenant with him. Qur'anic narratives of Prophets and their ultimate rejection by the peoples to whom they were sent underline the view of evil action as a willful act of disobedience.

The Qur'an indicates that doing evil is not the result of ignorance that God exists or ignorance of his commands. This is because knowledge of God and of doing good is self-evident. Doing evil is a conscious decision to disobey God's commands. According to the interpretation of Q 38:27, it is those who regard the creation of the heavens and earth as being without purpose, who will, as a consequence of their actions, be cast into the fire of hell.

Muslim theologians have differed as to whether a thing or act is good or evil in itself or not. The Mu'tazilis, the rationalists of Islam, maintained that an act is good or evil in itself, regardless of whether the lawgiver (God) pronounces it as such or not. Thus, based on this view, we know right from wrong as God has inspired in us the good or evil nature of an act (Qur'an 91:8-10). The Qur'an posits the presence of an objective and universally binding moral standard that is accessible to all intelligent beings. A striking feature of the Qur'anic discourse is the emphasis on the capacity of human beings to use their innate intelligence to comprehend moral truths. It is on the basis of their innate capacity and shared moral values that human beings can deal with others based on the principles of fairness and equity.

The Mu'tazilis also stated that God cannot perform or will evil as good is an essential part of His essence. Since He is just, He cannot do evil since that would be contrary to what is just. They had recourse to complex methods to prove that God was not responsible for evil events in this world. However, many of their explanations were challenged by their interlocutors.

The Ash'aris, another theological school that flourished in the classical period of Islam, opposed the Mu'tazilis. They emphasized God's power rather than justice. An act is evil because the lawgiver declares it to be so. Thus, they maintained that God creates everything, including evil. Things are good and evil only in relation to us, not in relation to God. Based on their formulation, God's absolute power means He creates everything even if it may appear as evil to us.

Sins

The Qur'an promises that God will forgive minor sins if human beings abstain from the major ones (4:3 53:31-2). The most common characterization of "major" sins in exegesis and theology is *kaba'ir* (literally the "big ones"), a term that occurs in this sense in the Qur'an (Q 4:3; 42:37; 53:32). All deeds, major and minor are recorded, and their register will be presented to each individual on the day of judgment.

The Qur'an does not enumerate or provide a ranking of sins. However, it states unequivocally as to what it considers to be the worst of them: the associating of anything or anyone with God (shirk), a "great sin" that God will not forgive though He might forgive everything else (4:48). Sins also have evil consequences during one's present life, so that whatever harm one is afflicted by is "what your hands have earned". The punishment visited by God upon particular communities is also the product of their sinfulness and evil deeds (17:16-17; 22:45). However, human beings have the ability to erase their sins

through good deeds (11:114). The Qur'an also makes it clear that God is most forgiving and will forgive many sins (42:30). Indeed, were God to hold people to account for all that they do, no living being would remain on the face of the earth.

The Qur'an suggests both that each individual will be judged according to his or her own conduct (Q 2:286) and that the decision to punish or pardon people for their sins rests ultimately and solely, with God. The Qur'an also allows the possibility of intercession without explaining who has the rights to intercede. Although all human beings are prone to sin (2:53), the pious seek God's forgiveness (3:193-5). Indeed, this is a major trait that distinguishes them from the sinners and the unbelievers, who are not only unmindful of the consequences of their actions but also too arrogant to repent for them. Verse 39:53 holds out God's promise to forgive all sins and therefore instructs those who have exceeded the bounds not to despair of God's mercy.

While all sin involves transgressing the limits laid down by God, Muslim jurists made a distinction between the violation of "the rights of God" and that of "the rights of human beings". The rights of God, to be upheld by the ruler or his representatives, involve the *hadd* (punishment). On the other hand, infraction of the rights of human beings, a category that also included homicide, was negotiable in the sense that the wronged party might decide to forgo punishment or opt for monetary compensation rather than for physical retaliation. Absolution from the sin of violating the rights of human beings required not just the seeking of forgiveness from God but also the legal punishment entailed by the crime in question or forgiveness from the wronged party.

See Good and Evil; "Sins" in *Encyclopedia of the Qur'an* ed. Jane McAuliffe

Points of Agreement:

Both Muslims and Christians would see God as the Creator and hence as the source of all that is good.

Moreover, Muslims and Christians have similar ideas as to what constitutes righteousness. Believing and worshipping God, caring for the sick, widows, and orphans, befriending strangers, working for a just distribution of wealth and power in society, and struggling against selfish tendencies in oneself, all these are commended both in the Bible (see Matthew 25: 31-46; also Matthew 5-7) and in the Qur'an (see Q 2: 177) as the attitudes and works of the righteous.

Thus, if a Muslim and a Christian were to draw up a list of actions and attitudes which were good, and those which were evil, the list would be similar, though not identical. Christians, for example, might regard worshipping Jesus the Lord as virtuous, whereas Muslims would not. But even here, Christians would agree with Muslims that idolatry (*shirk* in Islam), that is, worshipping anything which is not God, is a major sin. They would also agree that if Christian worship stops at the human Jesus, and does not worship God in and through Jesus, it tends to idolatry (see the entries on "Jesus" on this website).

Points of Disagreement:

Traditional Christianity believed in original sin, a doctrine which is rejected by Muslims. However, many Christians today might question the doctrine of original sin themselves. There is a larger question behind this, however. To what extent is evil entirely a human responsibility, and to what extent does the mystery of iniquity transcend human causality and responsibility? Christians hold that before humans fell, Satan fell, so the origin of evil is not entirely due to humans—evil has a larger sphere of activity, which includes even the evil angels. Moreover, many Christians would not agree that God's existence is self-evident (from nature) and that therefore anyone who is ignorant of God and God's message is guilty. Many, possibly most, Christians today would hold that ignorance of God is a factor in human sin and evil, and that ignorance of God may not be entirely the fault of those humans who are ignorant of God. Sin, in this conception, is larger than the sin of individual persons; it encompasses also the sin of whole societies, which can be blind to terrible social evils or sins in their midst, for example, slavery. Christians would say that the guilt of a particular person can only be judged by God. This is the meaning of Jesus' injunction to "Judge not, that you be not judged." Not judging in this context does not mean refusing to judge what is good and what is evil; any rational person has to do that; it means not judging the degree of guilt of any person before God.

Points for Further Discussion.

This last point is also a point for further discussion. Is ignorance of God and God's law always culpable? Or are there circumstances in which a person might be trained to steal, for example, in which their own guilt is minimal (because of the training they received from their sinful culture)?

Another point for discussion is this: How do we explain natural evil, that is, evil which is not caused by human agency, but which is the result of a natural disaster, like an earthquake, a tsunami, etc., or a genetic defect? Muslims tend to explain this as God's testing. Christians probably would explain these events in other ways—for example, by arguing that God gives to His creation a certain amount of freedom to make itself, and that this freedom, which is the gift of love, necessarily entails some unavoidable for sentient creatures.