



Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies

Volume 29 *God and Evil in Hindu and Christian
Theology, Myth, and Practice*


Article 2

2016

Editor's Introduction

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Recommended Citation

Malkovsky, Bradley (2016) "Editor's Introduction," *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies*: Vol. 29, Article 2.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.7825/2164-6279.1625>

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Editor's Introduction

ONE of the oldest and most persistent challenges to faith in an all-good and all-powerful Creator is the reality of evil and suffering. This issue of the *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies* addresses the perennial issue of theodicy in a wide-ranging way, examining both well-known and lesser-known Hindu and Christian approaches, even going so far as to question the very legitimacy of theodicy itself.

In the opening essay Lance Nelson focuses his attention on what it means to say that God is good, pointing out how contemporary atheists frequently argue that God cannot be “morally good.” Drawing on both Christian and Hindu thinkers, he shows that it is more appropriate to speak of God as being “transmoral” rather than moral. God transcends the limited and customary understanding of goodness applicable to people. Aquinas, for example, while positing that God is good, does not define goodness in moral terms. God is neither possessed of virtues nor is subject to external moral obligations. Attributions of goodness, truth, and mercy can only be used in reference to God in an analogical fashion. Similarly, classical Advaita Vedanta teaches that Brahman is beyond both good and evil. But from a lower or relative standpoint Śaṅkara does defend God's moral goodness in his commentary on the *Brahma-Sutra*. Yet from the higher standpoint of truth Brahman is for Śaṅkara neither a creator nor a moral agent. Nelson then turns his attention to nondual Śaivism, represented especially by Abhinavagupta, who takes a very different approach than that of Śaṅkara: creatures are one with Brahman, even in their experience of happiness and suffering.

Brahman, moreover, inflicts suffering on them but also bestows liberation. God is thus the source of both experienced good and evil. The various experiences people make are finally for the purpose of helping them rise to a divine consciousness beyond all duality. And finally, the author refers to the rituals and beliefs of Balinese Śaivites, who, like Abhinavagupta's school, attribute both good and evil to the divine. Nelson thus advises philosophers and theologians to avoid thinking the relation of God to goodness in too restrictive or narrow terms.

Graham Schweig next presents the theological approach of the Caitanya school of bhakti on the relation of God to evil. Here, despite the presence of evil and suffering in the karmic order, ultimately speaking in God there is only goodness and light. But since the world exists in God, worldly suffering and evil do participate in the being of God. Yet there are other dimensions of existence within God, too, without a trace of evil and suffering. These are the inner and outer realms of divine energy, in between which the karmic order is situated. Ultimately the highest reality and the highest truth is Love itself, which is expressed in the love exchanged between Śrī Krishna and Śrī Rādhā and is most perfectly embodied in Śrī Caitanya. God's descent into our world is for the purpose of vanquishing all suffering and evil in the karmic realm, and so the karmic scheme brought forth by God and which is finally beyond all human comprehension is ultimately purposeful. Humanity is given free will, a freedom that is to culminate in the bliss and freedom of divine love. The evil we experience in this world is the necessary condition for our

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attainment of pure love or *prema-bhakti*. The author concludes his essay with the observation that in this theology darkness and evil might serve to enhance or illuminate all that is good in the world and more clearly reveal God's beauty, playfulness, and love.

In the third essay Lavanya Vemsani offers a summary of a very different Hindu theodicy, one that is centered on Narasimha, the man-lion incarnation of Vishnu. She examines classical texts, local legends, and rituals pertaining to the lion motif for their portrayal of how evil and God are related. The stories connected to Narasimha, who displays the multi-faceted nature of the divine, are complex, portraying "reversals, transformations, and transitions" with regard to the overcoming of evil. Narasimha represents the transitional or liminal nature of the divine as both avatara and vyuha, which is able to transpose the good vs. evil divide, in order to reestablish world order. Only by temporarily assuming the characteristics of a world under the sway of evil could Narasimha restore the world to its proper original harmony.

Rico Monge places Eastern Orthodox spirituality in conversation with classical Hindu and Western Christian theologies in order to show the limitations, even illegitimacy of theodicy. Theories that would absolve God from blame for the world's evil and suffering often result in people becoming reconciled to evil as something legitimate and necessary. They therefore become less inclined to combat it. But evil must be actively resisted instead of passively accepted as a supposed necessary component of the divine plan. The author then references Nietzsche's and Weber's critiques of classical theodicy as infantile reactions to the brute reality of evil and suffering that can have no ultimate meaning or purpose. After all this

Monge finds an alternative to theodicy: instead of legitimizing evil by attempting to impose meaning on it, he cites F. Dostoevsky's Elder Zosima, in the novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, who actively combats evil through radical love, a love that has the power to transfigure everything. Zosima will go so far as to teach how patient grief can mysteriously give way to joy. Monge develops the idea of the value of mourning through the thought of Paul Ricoeur. The one who suffers may pass through five stages of interior change, culminating in loving God without thought of reward. This final stage is characterized by inner liberation and empowerment.

In the fifth and final essay, James Ponniah focuses on subaltern ways of dealing with evil in two modern Hindu (*Ayyā Vali*) and Christian (Bible Mission) Indian movements. These movements respond to social discrimination and religious exploitation in parallel ways in order to critique domination and overcome marginalization. Their focus is not on the formulation of theodicies but on the exercise of subaltern action to rectify human relations based on manipulation and control. The leaders of the two movements invoked the direct communication and authority of God to oppose religiously sanctioned oppressive authority and to empower the oppressed with a new religious self-understanding. The two leaders initiated strategies to identify and overcome marginality, adopted and modified indigenous beliefs and practices to implement their new vision, encouraged new ways of religiosity, and reinterpreted traditional beliefs in a more inclusive way. Both communities were empowered to combat demonic forces and to also keep themselves both spiritually and physically clean and thereby emulate God's

purity and holiness. They understood the symbolic value of visible external purity in a hierarchically structured society built on the distinctions between purity and pollution. The author notes the continued success of these two

movements today in terms of their sheer numbers.

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