EVIL AND THE JUSTICE OF GOD

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In memory of those who died
in New York and Washington on September 11th 2001,
around the Indian Ocean in December 2004,
in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast in August 2005
and in Pakistan and Kashmir in October 2005

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Preface

After working for some years on a major book on the resurrection, I resolved at the start of 2003 that I would turn my attention to the meaning of Jesus' crucifixion. But as soon as I began to think how I might approach the subject, I realized that there was something else I had to do first. When Christians talk about what Jesus accomplished in his death, they usually say something about his cross as the answer to, or the result of, evil. But what is evil?

The same question presented itself to me for a quite different reason. Between September 11th 2001, when terrorists flew aeroplanes into the Twin Towers in New York and into the Pentagon in Washington, and my reflecting on the cross and the problem of evil in early 2003, the topic of 'evil' had suddenly become hot. George Bush had declared that there was an 'axis of evil' which had to be dealt with. Tony Blair, the British Prime Minister, announced that the task of the politician was to rid the world of evil. Commentators to left and right expressed doubts about both the analysis and the solution – doubts which the war in Iraq, and its aftermath, have amply justified.

I turned my reflections into five lectures which I delivered at Westminster Abbey, where I was then working, in the first half of 2003. I then attempted to summarize my thesis in a television programme, made by Blakeway Productions, and first screened on Channel 4 in the UK on Easter Day 2005; copies of this film are available from Blakeway (www.blakeway.co.uk). I am very grateful to David Wilson, the producer, and to Denys Blakeway himself, for understanding what I was trying to say and enabling me to communicate it in a very different medium. Those who saw the programme and were puzzled by what I did not manage to say in the 49 minutes available to me may perhaps be mollified by the fuller version offered in the present book.

Having said that, I do not pretend for a moment that I have here provided a full, or even a balanced, treatment either of the problem of evil or, more especially, of the meaning of Jesus' crucifixion. The central chapter of this book approaches Jesus' death from one angle,

which I believe to be deeply fruitful, but I am well aware that a more complete account of the meaning and saving effect of Jesus' death would need to raise, and answer, far more questions than I have even mentioned, and to deal with biblical passages, and theological and philosophical ideas, for which there is no space here. However, I hope that this will at least point in the direction of further work.

In the first lecture – now the first chapter – I used as one of my controlling images the biblical picture of the wild, untamed sea. I was then all the more horrified when, on Boxing Day 2004, a tsunami ripped across the Indian Ocean, smashing people and communities to pieces. Then, like the rest of the world, I had an awful sense of déjà vu when Hurricane Katrina drowned New Orleans and a large section of the American Gulf Coast in August 2005. When I asked myself to whom the present book should be dedicated, I could think of no better answer than to honour the memory of those who died in those two disasters, and the subsequent earthquake in Pakistan and Kashmir, along with the victims of September 11th 2001. They are a reminder that 'the problem of evil' is not something we shall 'solve' in the present world, and that our primary task is not so much to give answers to impossible philosophical questions as to bring signs of God's new world to birth, on the basis of Jesus' death and in the power of his Spirit, even in the midst of 'the present evil age'.

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Evil is still a four-letter word: The new problem of evil

Introduction

In the new heaven and new earth, according to Revelation 21, there will be no more sea. Many people feel disappointed by this. Looking at the sea, sailing on it, and swimming in it are perennial delights, at least for those who don't have to make a living by negotiating its treacherous habits and untimely bad moods. As myself a regular looker and occasional swimmer, I share this sense of surprise and disappointment. But within a larger biblical worldview we can begin to make sense of it.

The sea is of course part of the original creation. Indeed, it appears earlier in Genesis 1 than the dry land, and both the land and then the animals come out of it. It is part of the world of which God says, at the end of the six days, that it is 'very good'. But already by Genesis 6, with the story of Noah, the rising waters of the flood pose a threat to the entire world which God has made, from which Noah and his floating zoo are rescued by the warnings of God's grace. From within the good creation itself, it seems, come forces of chaos, harnessed to enact God's judgment.

We then hear no more of the sea until we find Moses and the Israelites standing in front of it, chased by the Egyptians and at their wits' end. God makes a way through the sea to rescue his people, and once more to judge the pagan world; it is the same story, in a way, though now in a new mode. And as later Israelite poets look back on this decisive, formative moment in the story of God's people, they celebrate it in terms of the old Canaanite creation-myths: YHWH is King over the flood (Psalm 29.10); when the floods lift up their voices, YHWH on high is mightier than they are (Psalm 93.3f.); the

waters saw YHWH and were afraid, and they went backwards (Psalms 77.16; 114.3, 5; YHWH is the biblical name of the God of Israel). Thus, when the Psalmist describes his despair in terms of being up to his neck in deep waters, as in Psalm 69, this is held within a context where YHWH is already known as the one who rules the raging of the sea, and even makes it praise him (69.1, 34).[1] But then, in a passage of enormous influence on early Christianity, we find in the vision of Daniel 7 that the monsters who make war upon the saints of the Most High come up out of the sea. The sea has become the dark, fearsome, threatening place from which evil emerges, threatening God's people like a giant tidal wave threatening those who live near the coast. For the people of ancient Israel, who were not for the most part seafarers, the sea came to represent evil and chaos, the dark power that might do to God's people what the flood had done to the whole world, unless God rescued them as he rescued Noah.

It may be, indeed (though this might take us too far off our track), that one of the reasons we love the sea is because, like watching a horror movie, we can observe its enormous power and relentless energy from a safe distance. Alternatively, if we go sailing or swimming on it, we can use its energy without being engulfed by it. I suspect there are plenty of PhD theses already written on what's going on psychologically when we do this, and I haven't read them. We would, of course, find our delight turning quickly to horror if, as we stood watching the waves crash in, a tsunami were suddenly to appear and come crashing down on us, just as our thrill at watching a gangster movie would turn to screaming panic if a couple of thugs, armed to the teeth, came out of the screen and threatened us personally as we sat innocently in the cinema. The sea and the movie, seen from a safe distance, can be a way of saying to ourselves that, yes, evil may well exist; there may be chaos out there somewhere; but at least, thank goodness, we are all right, we are not immediately threatened by it. And perhaps this is also saying that, yes, evil may well exist inside ourselves as well: there may be forces of evil and chaos deep inside us of which we are at best only subliminally aware; but they are under control, the sea wall will hold, the cops will get the gangsters in the end.

Of course, in the movies of the last decade or two things may not work out so well, which may tell us something about how we now

perceive evil both in the world and in ourselves. That perception, and the Christian attempt to understand it, to critique it, and to address it, is the subject of this book. I began by wanting to write something about the meaning of Jesus' crucifixion; having written at length about Jesus' resurrection, it seemed the appropriate balancing subject. But the more I thought about that, the more I realized that in order to speak meaningfully about the cross one must say at least something about evil, the problem which in classic theology the cross has decisively addressed.

But as soon as I thought of speaking about evil, I realized that this is a timely, not to say urgent, topic. Everybody is talking about evil. After September 11th, 2001, President Bush declared that there was an 'axis of evil' out there somewhere, and that we had to find the evil people and stop them doing any more evil. Tony Blair declared ambitiously that we should aim at nothing short of ridding the world of evil. The day I drafted this chapter I glanced sleepily at the newspaper being read in the seat in front of me in an aeroplane and saw an enormous headline inviting us to look at 'the evil faces' of two members of the Real Irish Republican Army. The public and press cried 'Evil' at the terrible murder of two little girls in the English town of Soham in 2003; and we say the same about the sudden rise of gun crime in the streets of our cities, or the violence which followed the devastation of New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina in August 2005.

The odd thing about this new concentration on evil is that it seems to have taken many people, not least politicians and the media, by surprise. Of course they would say that there has always been evil; but it seems to have come home to the Western world in a new way. The older discussions of evil tended to be more abstract, with so-called natural evil (represented by the tidal wave) and so-called moral evil (represented by the gangsters). Just as in the previous generation, at least for those who allowed themselves to reflect on it, Auschwitz posed the problem in a new way, September 11th 2001 on the one hand, and the 'natural' disasters of the tsunami in the Indian Ocean and the hurricane on the American Gulf Coast, have now kick-started a fresh wave of discussion about what evil is, where it comes from, how to understand it, and what it does to your worldview

whether you're a Christian or an atheist or anything else. And, not least, what, if anything, can be done about it.

From the Christian point of view, there will be in that sense no more sea in the new heavens and new earth. We are committed, within the worldview generated by the gospel of Jesus, to affirming that evil will finally be conquered, will be done away. But understanding why it's still there as it is, and how God has dealt with it and will deal with it, how the cross of Jesus has anything to do with that, how it affects us here and now, and what we can do here and now to be part of God's victory over evil – all these are deep and dark mysteries which the sudden flurry of new interest in evil open up as questions, and to which many of us, myself included, have not been used to giving much attention, let alone to offering answers. I put it like this because (if you see what I mean) I am not an expert on evil. There are those who do engage in that dubious specialism; I have learned from them already, and I hope to do so in the future. I am, to this extent, standing in the noble tradition of continuing my theological education in public. I am in implicit dialogue at various points with some recent writing on the subject, though I make no pretence to have mastered the field.[2] What I want to do can be seen in three stages, each of which subdivides into a further three.

First, I shall try to lay out the problem as it appears in our contemporary culture (chapter 1), and to place beside it the classic statements of God's saving justice in the Jewish and Christian traditions, focused particularly on the cross of Jesus Christ (chapters 2 and 3). Then I shall propose a way of speaking Christianly and creatively about the problem of evil and about what, under God, Christians are supposed to be doing about it (chapter 4). At this point I shall raise three areas of great contemporary interest in each of which the problem of evil, if not articulated and addressed, will cause terrible difficulties and dangers: the questions of global empire, of criminal justice and punishment, and of war. In the final chapter I shall continue to examine these by considering the corporate, as well as the deeply personal, meaning of forgiveness.

In this initial chapter, then, I shall try to describe some ways in which the problem of evil presents itself today in a new form; or, to put it another way, I shall argue that our politicians and media have

tried to live as though it weren't so much of a problem after all, and that they are having to wake up to the fact that evil is still a four-letter word. I shall then suggest that the new ways in which the problem of evil has been articulated within postmodernity – and postmodernity is, importantly, precisely a restatement of the problem – are deficient in certain important respects. I then want to propose that if we are to see more clearly what is going on we need to factor certain things into our understanding which are normally screened out. Finally I shall suggest ways in which this question impinges on Christian thinking.

(A) The new problem of evil

So to my first and longest section: the new problem of evil. Why 'new'?

The older ways of talking about evil tended to pose the puzzle as a metaphysical or theological conundrum. If there is a god, and if he is (as classic Jewish, Muslim and Christian theology all claim), a good, wise and supremely powerful god, then why is there such a thing as evil? Even if you're an atheist, you face the problem the other way up: is this world a sick joke, which contains some things that make us think it's a wonderful place, and other things which make us think it's an awful place, or what? You could of course refer to this as the problem of good, rather than the problem of evil: if the world is the chance assembly of accidental phenomena, why is there so much that we want to praise and celebrate? Why is there beauty, love and laughter?

The problem of evil in its present metaphysical form has been around for at least two and a half centuries. The earthquake which shattered Lisbon on All Saints' Day 1755 shattered, as well, the easy optimism represented by the previous generation. Think of Joseph Addison's great hymn, 'The spacious firmament on high', with its repeated affirmation that all who look at the sky, the sun, the moon, the stars and the planets are bound to realize that they are the good workmanship of a good creator:

> In reason's ear they all rejoice,
> And utter forth a glorious voice,
> For ever singing as they shine,
> 'The hand that made us is divine.'

We may venture to doubt whether Addison could have written that after 1755 or, if he had, whether anyone would have been quite so willing to sing it. We who have heard of so many further disasters, both natural and man-made, can only perhaps continue to sing it either because we have learned a hard-won natural theology in the teeth of the negative counter-evidence or because we have not stopped to think. But my point is that from 1755 on, as Susan Neiman has shown in her brilliant recent book, the history of European philosophy can best be told as the history of people trying to come to terms with evil. Lisbon precipitated, indeed, the now standard distinction between natural evil (the tidal wave, the earthquake, the hurricane) and moral evil (the gangsters, the terrorists), and that has remained a feature; but the wrestlings of the great enlightenment thinkers like Voltaire and Rousseau, and the massive schemes of Kant and Hegel themselves, can be understood as ways of coping with evil. And when we come further forward to Marx and Nietzsche, and to the twentieth-century thinkers, not least Jewish thinkers, who have wrestled with the question of meaning following the Holocaust, we find a continuous thread of philosophical attempts to say what has to be said about the world as a whole and about evil within it.

Unfortunately (in my view) the line of thought which has emerged from this, and which has characterized the popular understanding of the Western world as a whole, and of Britain and the United States perhaps in particular, is very unsatisfactory. I refer to the doctrine of progress, as expounded loftily by Hegel and as, in watered down forms, we find as a constant in much contemporary thinking. Hegel suggested, more or less, that the world was progressing, by means of the dialectical process (first (A), then its opposite (B), then a synthesis of the two (C), and so on). Everything was moving towards a better, fuller, more perfect end; and if there had to be suffering on the way, if there had to be problems as the dialectic unwound, so be it; such things are the broken eggs from which delicious omelettes are being made.

This belief in automatic progress, which we find at the same time in poets such as Keats, was in the air in the pantheism of the Romantic movement, and in the philosophy of Malthus which was so influential in generating and sustaining the Western belief that

Europe and North America were on the leading edge of human development, and that this justified the imperial economic expansion which was such a feature of the nineteenth century. This belief, already well established in the prevailing culture, was given an enormous boost by the popularization of Charles Darwin's research and its application to fields considerably more diverse than the study of birds and mammals on the Galapagos. The heady combination of technological achievement, medical advances, Romantic pantheism, Hegelian progressive Idealism, and social Darwinism created a climate of thought in which, to this day, a great many people, not least in public life, have lived and moved. In this climate, the fact that we live 'in this day and age' means that certain things are now to be expected; we envisage a steady march towards freedom and justice, conceived often in terms of the slow but sure triumph of Western-style liberal democracy and soft versions of socialism. Not to put too fine a point on it, when people say that certain things are unacceptable 'now that we're living in the twenty-first century', they are appealing to an assumed doctrine of progress – and of progress, what's more, in a particular direction. We are taught, often by the tone of voice of the media and the politicians rather than by explicit argument, to bow down before this progress. It is unstoppable. Who wants to be left behind, to be behind the times, to be yesterday's people? The colloquial phrase 'That's so last year' has become the ultimate put-down: 'progress' (by which we often simply mean a variation in fashion) has become the single most important measuring rod in society and culture.

This belief in progress has received at least three quite different challenges, and it is remarkable that it has survived them all and still flourishes. For many, the First World War destroyed the old liberal idealism. When Karl Barth wrote his first Romans commentary in 1919, his main message was that it was time to listen for the fresh word of God coming to us from outside, instead of relying on the steady advance of the kingdom of God from within the historical process. Dostoevsky, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, has a haunting passage in which he considers the possibility that the world might advance towards perfection at the cost of torturing a single innocent child to death; and he concludes that the price is already too high. Auschwitz

destroyed, one would have thought for ever, the idea that European civilization at least was a place where nobility, virtue and humanizing reason could flourish and abound. The deep roots of the Holocaust in several strands of European thought – not least Hegel himself, who regarded Judaism as a manifestation of the wrong sort of religion – have to be unpicked and deconstructed.

Thus, as I said, it seems remarkable that the belief in progress still survives and triumphs. The nineteenth century thought it had got rid of Original Sin; of course, it had to find replacements, and Marx and Freud offered some, producing explanatory systems and offering solutions to match, new doctrines of redemption which mirror and parody the Christian one. And somehow, despite the horrific World War I battles of Mons and the Somme, despite Auschwitz and Buchenwald, despite Dostoevsky and Barth, people still continue to this day to suppose that the world is basically a good place, and that its problems are more or less soluble by technology, education, 'development' in the sense of 'Westernization', and the application to more and more regions of Western democracy and, according to taste, either Western social-democratic ideals or Western capitalism, or indeed a mixture of both.

This state of affairs has led to three things in particular which I see as characterizing the new problem of evil. First, we ignore evil when it doesn't hit us in the face. Second, we are surprised by evil when it does. Third, we react in immature and dangerous ways as a result. Let me unpack each of these in turn.

First, we ignore evil except when it hits us in the face. Some philosophers and psychologists have tried to make out that evil is simply the shadow side of good; that it's part of the necessary balance in the world, and that we must avoid too much dualism, too much polarization between good and evil. That, of course, leads straight to Nietzsche's philosophy of power, and by that route back to Hitler and Auschwitz. When you pass beyond good and evil, you pass into the realm where might is right, and where anything that reminds you of the old moral values – for instance, a large Jewish community – stands in your way and must be obliterated.

But we don't need to look back 60 years to see this. Western politicians knew perfectly well that Al-Qaeda was a force to be reckoned

with; but nobody really wanted to take it too seriously until it was too late. We all know that chronic national debt in many of the poorer countries of the globe is a massive sore on the conscience of the world; but our politicians, even the sympathetic ones, don't really want to take it too seriously, because from our point of view the world is ticking on more or less all right and we don't want to rock the economic boat. We want to trade, to build up our economies. 'Choice' is an absolute good for everyone; therefore if we offer both Coca-Cola and Pepsi-Cola to starving, AIDS-ridden Africa, exploiting a huge untapped market while adding tooth decay to its other chronic problems, we are furthering its well-being. We all know that sexual licentiousness creates massive unhappiness in families and individual lives, but we live in the twenty-first century, don't we, and we don't want to say that adultery is wrong (we should perhaps note that only two generations ago many communities regarded adultery the way they now regard paedophilia, which is worrying on both counts).

I grew up at a time when censorship was being dismantled right, left and centre. Censorship, we were told, was the only real obscenity. Whatever people wanted to do or say was basically good; we should celebrate whatever instincts we found inside ourselves; people shouldn't be allowed to control what other people did. Indeed, to this day the word 'control' is spoken with a sneer, as in the phrase 'control freak', as though the basic moral norm was for there to be no control – just as the basic slogan of large McWorld-type companies is that there should be 'no boundaries'. We live in a world where our politicians, media pundits, economists and even, alas, some late-blooming liberal theologians, speak as if humankind is basically all right, the world is basically all right, and there's nothing we should make a fuss about.

So then, second, we are surprised by evil when it hits us in the face. We like to think of small English towns as pleasant, safe places, and are shocked to the core when two little girls are murdered in Soham by someone they obviously knew and trusted. We have no categories to cope with that; but nor do we have categories to cope with the larger renewed evils, with renewed tribalism and genocide in Africa or the renewed 'Balkanization' of the Balkans themselves. We like to fool ourselves that the world is basically all right, now that so many

which I believe to be deeply fruitful, but I am well aware that a more complete account of the meaning and saving effect of Jesus' death would need to raise, and answer, far more questions than I have even mentioned, and to deal with biblical passages, and theological and philosophical ideas, for which there is no space here. However, I hope that this will at least point in the direction of further work.

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