1

Theodicy

Philosophy of Religion and the Problem of Evil

THE PRESENCE OF EVIL IN THE WORLD

Evil is everywhere. We can experience it in different ways, but it is certain that such a reality surrounds us. We see people suffering, and when we watch the news, we hear about wars, conflicts of various kinds, unending wills of power, constant violations of human rights, oppression, poverty, lack of freedom and equality, etc. Even in the developed countries, we perceive the huge social differences that build barriers between human beings, and within the most privileged groups of these affluent societies, evil is still present, taking the shape of illnesses that affect both the rich and the poor, learned and unlearned, and of deprivations of many other types. And, in ultimate terms, death puts an end to our projects and illusions.

Of course, it could be argued that evil is the result of a subjective perception. There is no evil in nature, but the fulfilment of immutable laws that may affect us in a favorable or in an unfavorable way for our interests. Within the human world, however, suffering is regarded as evil, and the existence of suffering that disables many people to live freely and happily is a fact. I cannot think that the 2010 catastrophe in Haiti—in which tens of thousands of people died and more than three million people were injured—is subjective. There is evil there. There is evil in the fact that nature, which we sometimes praise and exalt as the source of life and of beauty ("*On m'appelle nature, et je suis tout art*," —"they call me nature, but I am all art"—as Voltaire wrote[1]), is also the source

1. "La Nature. — Mon pauvre enfant, veux-tu que je te dise la vérité? C'est qu'on m'a donné un nom qui ne me convient pas; on m'appelle nature, et je suis tout art." Voltaire,

of terrible ways of destruction that generally affect the poorest of the poor. Nature means the triumph of the fittest, of the strongest over the weakest. Nature means the consecration of the defeat of victims. This is the reason why I am quite sceptical about the idea of a natural law that might be applied in the human world. We know that we belong to nature, but we also know that our aspirations transcend nature.

Nature is not the only source of evil, and we can keep hope in the power of science and knowledge to gradually overcome its arbitrariness. The principal source of evil in our lives is humanity itself, because both nature and humanity are ambiguous realities, and we seem to be condemned to live with that contradiction.

According to the World Bank Development Indicators of 2008, at least 80 percent of humanity lives on less than ten dollars a day; the poorest 40 percent of the population accounts for 5 percent of the world's income, whereas the richest 20 percent accounts for 75 percent of the global income. The richest 20 percent of the population accounts for 76.6 percent of total private consumption. Some people live well because others live badly. There is a mechanism of dependency between nations and social groups, which has been brilliantly analyzed by Immanuel Wallerstein in his world-system theory.[2]

The world's 497 wealthiest people of 2005 accounted for over 7 percent of world GDP. In 2004, 0.13 percent of the population controlled 25 percent of the world's financial assets. According to UNICEF, twenty-five thousand children die everyday of severe hunger. In this precise moment, in this specific second, an average of seven children will be dying on account of poverty. In the developing world, about seventy-two million children who should be enrolled in primary schools do not take part in the education system. However, education is regarded as a universal right in the Declaration of the Rights of the Children, article 7, approved by the UN General Assembly in 1959. Nearly one billion people remain illiterate, incapable of enjoying the pleasure, which is also a human necessity (let us recall Aristotle in the beginning of his *Metaphysics*: "all men naturally want to know"), of learning some of the most valuable treasures that human wisdom has accumulated throughout the centu-

Questions sur l'Encyclopédie ("Dialogue entre le philosophe et la nature").

2. Cf. Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System*.

ries. This lack of proper education constitutes a severe obstacle to the exercise of our freedoms and capacities, as Amartya Sen has shown.[3]

In addition to these facts, it is even more discouraging to realize that less than 1 percent of the money spent in weapons every year all over the world might have sufficed to put every child into school in 2000. Regarding health, the panorama is devastating: about forty million people are infected with HIV, with three million deaths in 2004. Malaria affects between three hundred and fifty and five hundred million people a year, and 90 percent of the deaths due to it occur in the poorest continent, Africa. Some 1.1 billion people in the world have improper access to the most elementary condition of life, water, and some 1.8 million children die each year as a result of diarrhoea.[4] Rigid inequalities afflict women as well as racial, sexual, and religious minorities. Of course, this is not only a scandal, the result of a system, which is incapable of satisfying everyone's basic needs, and a clear injustice that should be avoided: it is also a loss of human resources. Let us think of how many of these children could help their countries become developed; let us think of how much human potential is wasted. But, beyond these pragmatic criteria, let us think of how much inhumanity is involved here.

In the world, there are approximately 2.1 billion Christians, 1.5 billion Muslims, and 14 million Jews, to mention only these three monotheistic religions.[5] This means that about 3.6 billion people believe, in one or another way, in a personal God who has created the world and who will grant eternal life. The question is legitimate: If such a God exists, why does He/She allow all of these horrible things to happen? Where is God in a world in which thousands of children die of hunger every day? Some people might pose the question in a different manner: Where is mankind to allow this? But we want to analyze the problem of evil in the world, the so-called *theodicy* (a term that means "the justice of God," coined by Leibniz in his *Essais de Théodicée sur la Bonté de Dieu, la Liberté de l'Homme et l'Origine du Mal,* published in 1710 as a response to Pierre Bayle's scepticism on the goodness of God and creation in his *Dictionnaire Historique et Critique*), from the perspective of monotheistic religions, and especially of Judaism and Christianity.

3. Cf. Sen, *Development as Freedom*.
4. For the data, cf. http://www.globalissues.org/article/26/poverty-facts-and-stats/.
5. Cf. http://www.adherents.com/Religions_By_Adherents.html/.

Let us delve into the challenges that the problem of evil offers to theology and philosophy of religion. Theologians and philosophers of religion must feel still committed to dare to cope with evil. It is impossible to speak of God in the traditional terms, as an omnipotent and benevolent creator who wants the best for humanity, without first examining the reasons behind so much suffering and so much injustice, just as it is impossible to speak about God in the traditional terms after the critique of Feuerbach, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud to the anthropomorphic image of God.

Evil has been a true rock for atheism. Atheism stems from three fundamental roots: scientific progress (which makes it unnecessary to believe in the supernatural), liberty (the existence of God challenges our freedom), and evil.

The French Jesuit theologian Henri de Lubac wrote a book titled *Le Drame de l'Humanisme Athée* (1944), in which he studied the atheistic philosophy of Feuerbach, Marx, Comte, and Nietzsche, and the Christian approach to life found in authors like Dostoyevski. One of the principal reasons for the so-called humanistic atheism is the search for freedom: a God who watches over men and women would put our freedom into danger. If God exists, we are not free. A little girl in Nietzsche's preface to *The Gay Science* asks her mother if it is true that God is everywhere. The mother answers yes, to which the little girl replies, "I think that's indecent!" Sartre insisted on this point: our freedom and dignity as human beings demand our full responsibility in our actions and our full capacity to build up a history without the interference of a deity. Dostoyevski said that without God, everything is permitted, but Albert Camus changed the sense of the sentence: without God, nothing is permitted, since the full responsibility belongs to us.

In any case, I believe that there is a deeper reason for atheism: the problem of evil. Even in a deistic conception that conceives of God as some sort of primeval watchmaker, as the universal architect of Voltaire, as the author of the pre-established harmony of Leibniz who has set everything in function, but who is alien to the problems of the world, so that the universe is a truly self-sufficient reality, it is sill possible to account for the coexistence of God and human freedom. But this God would be meaningless for many people. Many people believe in God because they need to believe in some entity that cares about them and that is immediately significant for their concrete existence. No one prays to

a concept. Almost no one prays to the *Ipsum Esse Subsistens* [Subsistent Being Itself] of Scholasticism. Religion introduces a historical mediation in the access to the universal, omnipotent, eternal being, so that such a being may become significant to people. And the problem of evil directly challenges the pretension of a significant, meaningful God. For if he were significant to us and he really cared about our problems and our sufferings, how is it that He allows that there be so much suffering?

In a debate between Peter Singer and Dinesh D'Souza on the topic of the existence of God and its meaning for human beings,[6] Singer made the point that if an omnipotent, omniscient God really existed, He should know how much suffering there is in the world. He could have created a world that, if not totally good (to leave a margin of action to dialectics), at least might be less bad. Apologists have traditionally explained that God has granted us free will, but as Singer notices, this does not justify the fact that there is much suffering which does not come out of free will. Let us think of natural catastrophes, of the so-called physical evil by Leibniz (in opposition to the metaphysical and the moral evils). And Singer draws attention to an even more appealing consideration: animals suffer with no apparent guilt.

And regarding individual responsibility, how should we find it in a child who is born with Down syndrome? This takes us to a very important aspect in which we cannot delve into its proper terms, but which is extremely compelling for both theologians and philosophers: we have not chosen to exist. Existence has been given to us. It seems that we have been thrown into this world: according to Heidegger, we are a *Dasein*, a "being-there," thrown into the world. This element plays a central role in many of Samuel Beckett's plays: no one has asked us for permission to exist. No one asked you or me if we wanted to exist. The fact is that we are here, and that this *factum* certainly generates a responsibility for being, a responsibility that is shared by the whole of humanity, both the past generations and the future generations (to whom we shall not ask for permission on whether or not they want to come into existence). But apart from this *factum*, there is no *ius*, no "right" that may account for our existence: the fact is that we exist, but the fact is also that we do not know why we exist and that we do not have any responsibility in our having come into existence.

6. Cf. Singer, "The God of Suffering?"

DIFFERENT INTERPRETATIONS OF EVIL

One can identify four major solutions to the problem of theodicy.[7] Here, I am not referring to the explanations of how to reconcile divine goodness and divine omniscience with evil and human freedom (as in the traditional theses of Calvinism and Molinism), but to the justification of the fact of evil itself from a theistic point of view.

Relativization of Evil

Evil is not, after all, so important in comparison to the advantages of life. There is evil, there is negativity, but it does not constitute a true antithesis to the goodness of creation. Evil is *prope nihil* ("almost nothing"). Evil means nothing for the goodness of creation. The suffering of the world adds almost nothing to the beauty and wisdom of creation. As it is written in Wis 11:20: "You have disposed all things by measure and number and weight." Knowledge, love, beauty, pleasure, welfare . . . they mean more than evil and suffering.

This perspective also appears in traditional Christian theology: both St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas define evil as *privatio boni debiti*, the "deprivation of the good which is owed." As the Bishop of Hippo explains:

> And in the universe, even that which is called evil, when it is regulated and put in its own place, only enhances our admiration of the good; for we enjoy and value the good more when we compare it with the evil. For the Almighty God, who, as even the heathen acknowledge, has supreme power over all things, being Himself supremely good, would never permit the existence of anything evil among His works, if He were not so omnipotent and good that He can bring good even out of evil. For what is that which we call evil but the absence of good? In the bodies of animals, disease, and wounds mean nothing but the absence of health; for when a cure is effected, that does not mean that the evils which were present—namely, the diseases and wounds—go away from the body and dwell elsewhere: they altogether cease to exist; for the wound or disease is not a substance, but a defect in the fleshly substance,—the flesh itself being a substance, and

7. I am very grateful to Prof. Manuel Fraijó for his suggestions. For a more detailed account of the different answers to the problem of theodicy, see Fraijó, *Dios, el Mal y Otros Ensayos*.

> therefore something good, of which those evils—that is, privations of the good which we call health—are accidents. Just in the same way, what are called vices in the soul, are nothing but privations of natural good. And when they are cured, they are not transferred elsewhere: when they cease to exist in the healthy soul, they cannot exist anywhere else.[8]

In *Summa Theologica*, when addressing the question about the existence of God, Aquinas answers the following objection: "It seems that God does not exist; because if one of two contraries be infinite, the other would be altogether destroyed. But the word "God" means that He is infinite goodness. If, therefore, God existed, there would be no evil discoverable; but there is evil in the world. Therefore God does not exist."

His response goes as follows: "As Augustine says (*Enchiridion* xi): "Since God is the highest good, He would not allow any evil to exist in His works, unless His omnipotence and goodness were such as to bring good even out of evil." This is part of the infinite goodness of God, that He should allow evil to exist, and out of it produce good."[9]

The position of both St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas may be well named "de-ontologization of evil." Evil turns to be in function of goodness. It is the denial of the substantiality of evil. Evil is not a substance, but an accident, something that, in Aristotelian categories, exists *in alio*, but not *in se*. It does not constitute an ontological reality, and hence, it cannot be put on the same level as goodness, which is indeed a reality in its full sense.

In a parallel relativization of the gravity of evil, for Hegel history itself is theodicy, because the fulfilment of the goals of the spirit, which are its self-realization as absolute spirit, demands suffering: "nothing in history was done without passion", as he writes in *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*. The achievement of the highest form of the spirit as absolute spirit needs the existence of a dialectical antagonism within history, within the temporal determination that the spirit assumes in order to gain a richer knowledge of itself. There is no reason to complain about the presence of evil because evil has to exist so that what is necessary may emerge, so that the spirit may recognize itself as absolute spirit.

8. Oates, *Basic Writings of St. Augustine* 1:662: "Malum est omnis et sola privatio boni debiti."

9. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* part I, question 2, article 3.

Dualism

For many religious and philosophical traditions, reality is composed of two co-principles: good and evil. There is a constant fight between Good and Evil that either will be decided at the end of time or will endure for ever. Zoroastrianism, Manicheism (to which St. Augustine belonged in his youth), Gnosticism (with its differentiation of the bad God—the God of the Old Testament—and the good God, the God that teaches men and women how to achieve their salvation by their self-knowledge) are examples of a dualistic worldview. There is evil because, in the same way as there is a God, to whom all the goodness can be attributed, there is an evil principle with an equal degree of majesty and power, which is responsible for it.

This conception remains, although in a different sense, in the late Jewish and Christian idea of the devil as a personal being. However, Judeo-Christianity and Islam have repeatedly reminded us that the devil is not of divine nature, and that his power is severely limited. Also, the importance of the devil, at least in the context of Christian theology, has radically decreased in the last decades, especially after the historical-critical examination of biblical texts, the project of demythologization of Rudolf Bultmann (who considers the belief in demons to belong to ages past, when the scientific method for the inquiry of reality had not been born), and books like *Abschied vom Teufel*, by Herbert Haag, in which he analyzes the dramatic psychological consequences that the constant reiteration of the danger of the devil has caused to many people. The persistence and strength of evil, however, make many men and women believe that there must be some sort of demi-god, invested with sufficient power to challenge the will of God of goodness.

In dualism, there is a struggle between Good and Evil, between God and his radical antithesis (like Ohrmazd and Ahreman in Zoroastrianism), whose outcome has not been decided yet. In the scenario of this struggle, sometimes the good principle triumphs, and sometimes it is the evil principle that wins.

But there is, of course, a fundamental problem: we have two gods instead of one. Is it possible for two hypothetically absolute beings to coexist?

Substitution of Theodicy with Anthropodicy

Theodicy tries to justify God, but for many thinkers it is mankind, instead of God, that needs to be justified. This is so in Karl Barth's theology and in his *Offenbarungspositivismus* ["positivism of revelation"]. God needs no justification, for He is perfect. He is the absolute reality, the totally-Other [*Das ganz-Andere*] to the world. It is the world that needs to be justified. This brings to my mind Nietzsche's famous remark in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* about how the person who has climbed the highest mountains laughs at the tragedies of life and drama. Depending on the position in which we stand, we look at reality in different ways. And if we make theology from God, from above, all the contradictions and contingencies of the world seem almost insignificant.

According to this perspective, mankind is to blame for evil. This is the case in the Augustinian doctrine of original sin, which, up to a point, results from a misreading of Rom 5:12 ("Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned"). The Greek text goes: ef\ w pantej hmarton, but is nonetheless read as *in quo, id est, in Adam, omnes peccaverunt* by St. Augustine: "in whom [referring to Adam] all sinned."[10] This reading is also in St. Jerome's *Vulgate*.

St. Augustine's doctrine of original sin (which may be drawn back to St. Irenaeus of Lyon in the second century CE) was accepted by the Second Council of Orange in 529 against the disciples of Pelagius, who denied original sin. For St. Augustine, original sin is transmitted from one generation to another, and is reflected in the presence of *concupiscentia* in the human spirit, that affects our intelligence and our will. Human creatures are therefore corrupted, and baptism is necessary so that divine grace may clean the original stain [*macula originalis*]. In a more radical way, Luther and Calvin taught that even after baptism the stain is so severe that it remains: human nature is radically corrupted. The Council of Trent, in its fifth decree, condemned the Lutheran absolute identification of original sin and concupiscence but maintained Augustine's doctrine of original sin transmitted through sexual intercourse. Even in the Enlightenment, Immanuel Kant's idea of radical evil, as expressed in his famous book *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der blossen Vernunft*

10 .Augustine, *Contra Duas Epistolas Pelagianorum,* book 4 chapter 7, in Migne, *Patrologiae Cursus Completus.* 549ff.

[*Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*], of 1793, seems to keep some relation with original sin.

Mankind is responsible for evil. No one has the right to blame God for evil, because it is a result of our free will, a consequence of our capacity to act. It is interesting to consider that such a perspective, which theoretically seeks to justify God, is actually taking God away from the discussion. In this point of view, God is, after all, meaningless: evil is human responsibility, so why do we have to speak about God? He is not a significant actor. His role is merely passive. As Feuerbach put it, God is eternally exonerated. God is always free from any responsibility. He has no guilt in what happens to us. The difference between this and an atheistic conception is not so big, after all. Why do I need to believe in a God that is absent from my worries, from my suffering, just because I am, as a human being, to blame for evil? What is the sense in keeping a hieratic God, eternally sitting in his divine throne as a *Pantokrator*, who is free from all possible accusation?

On the first of November of 1755 something terrible happened. A huge earthquake destroyed the beautiful city of Lisbon, with its romantic, melancholic buildings looking at the Atlantic Ocean, met by the Tagus, the longest river in the Iberian Peninsula, creating one of the most extraordinary views in Europe. It was the Feast of All Saints, and most people were attending Mass in the churches of Lisbon. The earthquake took place at about 9:40 a.m., and it is estimated that it reached 9 on the Richter scale. It was one of the most destructive natural phenomena of modern history. Some people think that about thirty thousand to forty thousand people died, in addition to ten thousand others in Spain and Morocco. Shocks from the earthquake were felt as far away as Finland.

José de Carvalho e Melo, the marquis of Pombal, the great figure of the Portuguese Enlightenment, decided to look forward: "Bury the dead and feed the living," even though, as the great Portuguese writer and Nobel laureate José Saramago recalls, these words were actually pronounced by an army official, deprived of his own creativity in favor of someone who was more powerful, as often happens in history.[11]

11. "Conta-se que à pergunta inevitável "E agora, que fazer?" o secretário de Estrangeiros Sebastião José de Carvalho e Melo, que mais tarde viria a ser nomeado primeiro-ministro, teria respondido "Enterrar os mortos e cuidar dos vivos." Estas palavras, que logo entraram na História, foram efectivamente pronunciadas, mas não por ele. Disse-as um oficial superior do exército, desta maneira espoliado do seu haver, como tantas vezes acontece, em favor de alguém mais poderoso" ("Quantos Haitis?" in

Pombal launched a plan for reconstructing Lisbon, and he undertook policies of modernization in the huge maritime empire. He also managed to limit the influence of the Jesuits, eventually expelling them from the Portuguese territories in 1759 (a measure that would be followed by France in 1762 and by Spain in 1767). He even named his brother Inquisitor General of Portugal, with the intention of condemning the renowned Jesuit preacher Gabriel Malagrida to death (as a priest, he could not be executed by a civil tribunal), as a sign of the fighting between "lights" and "obscurantism" (Malagrida had attributed the earthquake to the revenge of God). Malagrida was, in fact, the last victim of the Portuguese Inquisition.

The Lisbon earthquake inspired many great thinkers of the Enlightenment, like Voltaire, Rousseau, and Kant, to meditate about the problem of evil in the world. Voltaire's novel *Candide, ou L'Optimisme*, his famous satire of 1759, uses the catastrophe to ridicule Leibniz's theory that one world is "the best of all possible worlds." The metaphysical wisdom of Doctor Pangloss is useless at explaining the magnitude of evil. Voltaire challenges the Christian idea of God: such a God would have never allowed this to happen. People were in Mass in the Catholic city of Lisbon, but God did not care. He did nothing to avoid it, as He did nothing to avoid the tsunami of 2004 and hurricane Katrina in 2005. For Voltaire, to think that this had happened "for the greater good," following an unredeemable optimism, made no sense and was simply absurd. Alexander Pope, on the contrary, had written:

> Remember man, the universal cause,
> acts not by partial, but by general laws.
> And makes what happiness we justly call,
> Subsist not in the good of one, but all.[12]

According to Pope, "One truth is clear: whatever is, is right." The same person who had written of Newton, "Nature and its laws lay hid in night; God said 'Let Newton be' and all was light," admiring the progress in natural sciences, shared an equally invincible optimism regarding human life.

Outros Cadernos de Saramago: http://caderno.josesaramago.org/2010/02/08/quantos-haitis/).

12. Pope, *An Essay on Man*, epistle 4.

For Voltaire, however, things did not look so easy. The suffering in Lisbon was simply meaningless, escaping from all power of understanding. The catastrophe could not be attributed to human sinfulness and to the wrath of God. As Voltaire writes in 1755 in his *Poème sur le Désastre de Lisbonne*, a preparation for *Candide*:

> And can you then impute a sinful deed
> To babes who on their mothers' bosoms bleed?
> Was then more vice in fallen Lisbon found,
> Than Paris, where voluptuous joys abound?
> Was less debauchery to London known,
> Where opulence luxurious holds the throne?[13]

Voltaire was endorsing Pierre Bayle's scepticism, and he was directly attacking the idea of Providence, which had been central to many interpretations of history, for instance those of St. Augustine and Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet.[14]

Voltaire sent a copy of his poem to Rousseau, who replied in a letter on August 18th 1756.[15] For Rousseau, God is not to blame: humanity is to blame. Who asked people to build tall buildings that could easily fall under the effects of the earthquake? Who asked people to gather themselves in huge cities instead of remaining in the pleasant dispersion of the rural areas? Voltaire's text gives no consolation to a man, like Rousseau who, expressing the sentiment of so many others, is in a deep need of consolation:

> All my complaints are . . . against your poem on the Lisbon disaster, because I expected from it evidence more worthy of the humanity which apparently inspired you to write it. You reproach Alexander Pope and Leibnitz with belittling our misfortunes by affirming that all is well, but you so burden the list of our miseries

13. The translation is taken from Clive, *The Riches of Rhyme: Studies in French Verse*, 208.

14. St. Thomas Aquinas defined Providence as "Ratio ordinis rerum in finem in mente divina preexistens" (*Summa Theologica* prima pars, q. 22, art. 1). According to Aquinas, Providence establishes a link between causes and natural ends. The Dominican philosopher rationalizes Providence, which is not regarded as a manifestation of unpredictable grace but as the existing coordination between the world and its metaphysical end.

15. The letter can be found in Rousseau, *Oeuvres Complètes*, 4:1060. The English translation is taken from the following website: http://geophysics-old.tau.ac.il/personal/shmulik/LisbonEq-letters.htm/.

> that you further disparage our condition. Instead of the consolations that I expected, you only vex me. It might be said that you fear that I do not feel my unhappiness enough, and that you are trying to soothe me by proving that all is bad. Do not be mistaken, Monsieur, it happens that everything is contrary to what you propose. This optimism which you find so cruel consoles me still in the same woes that you force on me as unbearable. Pope's poem alleviates my difficulties and inclines me to patience; yours makes my afflictions worse, prompts me to grumble, and, leading me beyond a shattered hope, reduces me to despair . . . I do not see how one can search for the source of moral evil anywhere but in man . . . Moreover . . . the majority of our physical misfortunes are also our work. Without leaving your Lisbon subject, concede, for example, that it was hardly nature that there brought together twenty thousand houses of six or seven stores. If the residents of this large city had been more evenly dispersed and less densely housed, the losses would have been fewer or perhaps none at all.[16] Everyone would have fled at the first shock. But many obstinately remained . . . to expose themselves to additional earth tremors because what they would have had to leave behind was worth more than what they could carry away. How many unfortunates perished in this disaster through the desire to fetch their clothing, papers, or money? . . . I have suffered too much in this life not to look forward to another. No metaphysical subtleties cause me to doubt a time of immortality for the soul and a beneficent providence. I sense it, I believe it, I wish it, I hope for it, I will uphold it until my last gasp . . . I am, with respect, Monsieur, Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

The literary genius of Rousseau shines with unmatched brightness in the last line: "I sense it, I believe it, I wish it, I hope for it, I will uphold it until my last gasp . . ." It is the power of sentiments, whose fighting is meaningless. Rationality cannot eclipse the presence of God in the realm of human sentiments. God is, as St. Augustine said, "*intimior intimo meo et superior summo meo*," ("more intimate than the most intimate of mine, and higher than the highest of mine"). God "exists" there, and even the most compelling arguments regarding the impossibility of believing in

16. Society, and not nature, is to blame: this is a fundamental idea in Rousseau's philosophy, found in his celebrated *Discours sur les Sciences et les Arts* (1750), in which he denounces the evils generated by the development of human civilization.

an omnipotent God who leaves humanity alone in her struggle against evil lose their capacity of persuasion.[17]

Rather than about evil, in its generic expression, Rousseau speaks about "evils": the different evils that we experience. God is not to blame, because there is no evil, in its radical connotation, but evils whose causes may be rationally explained. These evils are necessary for the general good. Rousseau needs to believe in God, as dramatic as these evils may seem. This necessity that makes Rousseau keep his faith in a provident God in spite of the evidence of mankind's loneliness in a hostile world, is very much connected with Feuerbach's critique of religion in *Das Wesen des Christentum* [*The Essence of Christianity*] of 1841: God is a necessity (in German, *Bedürfnis*) for mankind, a necessity which emerges out of suffering and lack of meaning. We need to project our anxieties, our deepest wills, onto a divine being that satisfies all our needs. God is a necessity, the result of our finitude and earthly misery. Marx will basically accept Feuerbach's critique of religion ("*Die Religion . . . ist das Opium des Volkes*" ["Religion is the opium of the people."]) in his *Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie* ["Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right"] of 1843:

> The struggle against religion is, therefore, indirectly the struggle against that world whose spiritual aroma is religion. Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people. The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness. To call on them to give up their illusions about their condition is to call on them to give up a condition that requires illusions. The criticism of religion is, therefore, in embryo, the criticism of that vale of tears of which religion is the halo.[18]

In the context of critical theory and the Frankfurt School, Max Horkheimer characterized religion as an expression of protest. According to him, religion possesses a critical function, as a relativization of the

17. For a deeper analysis of the intellectual exchange between Voltaire and Rousseau about the Lisbon earthquake, cf. Marques, "The Paths of Providence: Voltaire and Rousseau on the Lisbon Earthquake."

18. Marx, "A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right. Introduction," 251.

present and as a sign of a wish for a new, better, more humane world. Religion assumes the inextinguishable impulse against reality, claiming for it to change and for justice to overcome the curse of its absence.[19] Religion is the "longing for the Totally-Other" [*Sehnsucht nach dem ganz-Anderen*], linked to praxis of resistance and of solidarity in history.

In fact, many people, like Rousseau, still feel that they need to believe in God. The greatest natural disasters, the most astonishing and inexplicable presence of the biggest evils in the world, are not enough to shade the power of the faith in a provident, omnipotent God: why do we have those illusions, those so high aspirations, which even in a classless society would still remain?

Omnibenevolentia *versus* Omnipotentia

Hans Jonas was a German philosopher of Jewish origin, who was born in Mönchengladbach in 1903 and died in New York in 1993. He was a prominent scholar of Gnosticism, the ethics of a technological civilization, bioethics, and the philosophy of biology (heavily influenced by Heidegger). His mother was killed in a gas chamber in Auschwitz.

In 1987 he published *Der Gottesbegriff nach Auschwitz: eine jüdische Stimme* [translated into French as *Le Concept de Dieu après Auschwitz: une Voix Juive*], in which he suggests a radical distinction between a God who is almighty and a God who wishes the best for his creation. Both of them are incompatible. The almighty God would have done something to avoid the horror of Auschwitz after which, as Theodor Adorno said, it is impossible to write poetry. But God did not: "*aber Gott schwieg*" ["but God was silent"]. Jonas prefers to choose a God who wishes the best and who sees everything, but who is not omnipotent, than a God who is omnipotent and does not see everything that is happening to humanity.

Jonas demonstrates that we need a humane God, a God who may be meaningful for humanity, and humanity asks for a meaning. In a postmodernist way, such a quest for meaning might be regarded as illusory and misleading: both Foucault and Derrida show that a genealogical survey and a deconstruction of the knowledge and the reality we experience take to no final point: there is no final point, no ultimate sense, no hidden meaning that unveils the absolute truth of history.[20] But many

19. Horkheimer, *Anhelo de Justicia: Teoría Crítica y Religión*, 226.

20. An example of this can be found in Michel Foucault's preface to *Les Mots et les Choses*: "Une étude qui s'efforce de retrouver à partir de quoi connaissances et théories

religions and philosophical traditions continue to pursue the quest for an ultimate meaning, to which the idea of God is so closely associated.

Jonas prefers a God who wishes the best and who sees everything that is happening on earth to the traditional almighty God who, in spite of his power, did not act in Auschwitz. The contradiction between omnipotence and omnibenevolence had been already stated by Epicurus. According to Lactantius, a fourth-century writer and philosopher, Epicurus offered a famous argument regarding the impossibility of reconciling the infinite goodness of God with his infinite power, for there are four options which show the incompatibility of certain divine attributes:

1. God is able and is willing to eradicate evil, but then, why doesn't he do it?
2. God is able but unwilling, therefore he is bad.
3. God is unable but willing, therefore he is not omnipotent.
4. God is unable and unwilling, therefore he is not omnipotent and he is bad.

For Jonas God was willing, but unable. God was not absent in Auschwitz: He was seeing everything, but He could not do anything to avoid it. The relevance of eschatology resides in its accounting for a final end of times in which God will reveal himself in his full power, and the victims of history will be finally vindicated. However, the danger of a Hegelian conception in which present suffering is the necessary path to

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ont été possibles; selon quel espace d'ordre s'est constitué le savoir; sur fond de quel a priori historique et dans l'élement de quelle positivité des idées ont pu apparaître, des sciences se constituer, des expériences se réfléchir dans des philosophies, des rationalités se former, pour, peut-être, se dénouer et s'évanouir bientôt. Il ne sera donc pas question de connaissanes décrites dans leur progrès vers une objectivité dans laquelle notre science d'aujourd'hui pourrait enfin se reconnaître; ce qu'on voudrait mettre au jour, c'est le champ epistémologique, l'épistéme où les connaissances, envisagées hors de tout critère se référant à leur valeur rationnelle ou à leurs formes objectives, enfoncent leur positivité et manifestent ainsi une histoire qui n'est pas celle de leur perfection croissante, mais plutôt celle de leurs conditions de possibilité; en ce récit, ce qui doit apparaître, ce sont, dans l'espace du savoir, les configurations qui ont donné lieu aux formes diverses de la connaissance empirique. Plutôt que d'une histoire au sens traditionnel du mot, il s'agit d'une 'archéologie'" (Foucault, *Philosophie: Anthologie*, 230–31).

the accomplishment of the omnipotence of God is also latent in these considerations.[21]

For Jonas, God saw what happened in Auschwitz, but He did not do anything because He was unable to do so. In this point Jonas, who knew the Jewish Kabbalistic tradition very well (he was a good friend of Gershom Scholem), is adopting a very similar approach to the sixteenth-century Jewish thinker Isaac Luria's idea of *tzimtzum* ("contraction"): in order to create the world, God has been forced to give up some of his "space."

If, to express it in Spinoza's terms, there can be only one infinite, absolute substance, the creation of other beings necessarily involves that such an absolute substance must "renounce," so to speak, its infinity. God has to leave margin for the creatures to exist, otherwise everything would be "overwhelmed," eclipsed by the existence of God, and totality would encompass everything. According to Luria, when God decided to create the world, He "contracted" Himself in the very center of His light, so that there remained a hollow empty space in which the new beings might subsist.[22]

The reception of Luria's concept was important in the context of German philosophy, especially in the thought of Jacob Böhme (1575–1624) and in the idealistic system of Schelling (1775–1854). According to Schelling, the almighty God shows his omnipotence in the emergence of another, yet equally divine "god": an *alter deus*. By virtue of His omnipotence God can think of Himself as being the origin of another god. However, and as a consequence of this, God compromises His own fate. The risk assumed by God becomes real when the *alter deus* uses his freedom in a misguided and rebellious way, "falling" in history and making the primeval God fall with him.[23] Therefore, the destiny of God is related to the destiny of history and to the destiny of humanity, and His contraction gives birth to a construction (that of history and humanity).[24]

21. A similar approach (namely, that God is walking with us in history, fighting against evil together with us) appears in Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil.*

22. Cf. Vital, *Etz Chayyim*, Heichal A, K, anaf. 2. On Isaac Luria, see Fine, *Physician of the Soul, Healer of the Cosmos*; Scholem, *Die jüdische Mystik in ihren Hauptsströmungen.*

23. Schelling, *Werke*, 4:331.

24. Habermas, *Teoría y Praxis,* 175–85.

For both Luria and Schelling, the contraction of God does not consist of an occlusive turning into Himself, but of delivering His own destiny to someone else. Love is capable of overcoming divine selfishness, and God becomes a captive of love.

The only necessity that constrains God is His unlimited self-disposal. The only possible liberation from this necessity comes from the emergence of a being like Him. God demonstrates His absolute power over everything when He allows the emergence of another absolute entity, but there is a danger: that of rejection. The other god can freely decide to reject the primordial God. By doing so, an inversion of principles takes place, and a corrupted world arises with an inverted god: humanity.

The contraction of God gives rise to the "age of the world" [*Weltalter*]. God is not the author of evil but evil is the result of the wrong use of the absolute freedom which God granted to His *alter deus*, to His "counter-image." In opposition to dualism, in Schelling's philosophy evil is not an eternal co-principle but has a historical origin in the misuse of freedom, and because it has an origin it can also have an end.[25]

Humanity is the *alter deus*, which has rejected the love of God.[26] Humanity possesses a divine condition, manifested in its capacity to edify history, and it must finally respond to the offering of the love of God. However, can humanity save itself or was Heidegger right when he said "only a god can still save us"?[27]

An essential concern arises after learning about this interpretation of the problem of evil: it seems that God is no longer God. Has God actually died? Are we condemned to having no absolute being? Can God reject his own divinity? If God, in traditional metaphysics, is a necessity of the world (*Ens Necessarium*), how is it that there is no God any more?

25. As Habermas remarks, Schelling did not draw the materialistic consequences of his idea of an "age of the world." He preserved a conception in terms of "historical idealism" which was not inverted, just as in Marx, by "historical materialism." As Habermas indicates, in his analysis of the development of productive forces Marx is based on Hegel's "dialectics through objectification" rather than on Schelling's "dialectics through compression/contraction." On the relation between Schelling and Marx, see Habermas, *Teoría y Praxis*, 206–10. On the philosophical and historical effects of the idea of a "contraction of God," see Habermas, *Teoría y Praxis*, 185–92.

26. There is a connection between the notion of humanity as *alter deus* and Feuerbach's atheistic critique of religion as an anthropological projection, as noted by Habermas, *Teoría y Praxis,* 189.

27. "Nur noch ein Gott kann uns retten" ("only a god can still save us") is a famous statements made by Heidegger in an interview with *Der Spiegel* in May 1976.

Wasn't it a universal philosophical assumption the fact that if God exists, He is beyond space and time? The difficulties of making God too meaningful for mankind are obvious, and the suspicion of projection is completely legitimate.

The philosopher of religion may limit his analysis to the phenomenological account of the different approaches to the problem of evil in both religion and thought, and may even give his own interpretation of the gravity of evil and the human necessity to find a meaning for it. But the theologian faces a greater challenge, with which he or she has to cope to follow the imperative of 1 Pet 3:15: "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect." Asking God about the meaning of evil is not a blasphemy or an offence but an act of piety. It is also the duty of the theologian.

We shall examine the treatment of the problem of evil in one of the principal contemporary Christian thinkers, the German theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg (1928–), as an example of the relevance that the topic preserves nowadays.

WOLFHART PANNENBERG'S PROPOSAL OF THEODICY

Wolfhart Pannenberg is one of the most outstanding Christian theological minds of our time. He has been in constant dialogue with the principal philosophical streams of the last century.[28]

The programmatic manifesto *Offenbarung als Geschichte* [*Revelation as History*], co-authored with Rolf Rendtorff, Ulrich Wilckens, and Trutz Rendtorff, constituted a turning point in twentieth-century Protestant theology. It represented the foundational act of a new theological approach which intended to challenge the prevailing "theology of the word" of Barth, Bultmann, and others. In opposition to the Barthian and Bultmannian accentuation of the word as the *locus theologicus* of the revealing act of God, this group of authors defended the centrality of history in the dynamics of divine revelation. The philosophical background was the Hegelian conception of history as the self-unfolding of the absolute, so that history itself, in its universal condition, unveils the divine being. Pannenberg was in charge of writing the chapter "Dogmatische

28. Braaten, "The Current Controversy in Revelation," 233–34.

Thesen zur Lehre von der Offenbarung" ["Dogmatic Theses on the Revelation"].

God reveals himself in history. This synthetic statement allows us to envision the advantages and the risks involved by Pannenberg's approach. Without analyzing the problem generated by the idea of a "universal history" through which, according to Pannenberg, God reveals himself to the creatures, we can immediately realize that one of the most compelling questions to be met by this approach is that of the meaning of history. The notion that God reveals himself in history implies an ultimate meaning of history as a whole.

The acceptance of a meaning in history has been a defining element of Christian theology. St. Augustine in *The City of God,* Bossuet in his *Discourse on Universal History,* and Hegel in *Lectures on the Philosophy of History,* assume this perspective. The theologian who thinks about the meaning of history is admitting the premise that history is driven by a plan, by an *economy.* However, Christian tradition has been aware of the deep contrast that exists between the theoretical construction represented by the theology of the sense of history, and the presence of an inexorable reality: evil. Who can understand the meaning of history, those who have won or those who have lost (the victims, all those who suffer in the different realms of human life: sociological, psychological, and physical)?

The *theologia gloriae* of meaning, beauty, and harmony in creation and in history is radically opposed by the *theologia crucis* of pain, evil, and suffering. What a great paradox, undoubtedly, but what a great Christian paradox, because Christianity is characterized by the simultaneous assumption of both realities: good and evil, meaning and lack of meaning, glory and cross. Luther wonderfully described this apparently contradictory state when depicting the human being as *simul iustus et peccator*, "just and sinner at the same time." Evil poses a challenge to Christianity, but this challenge belongs to the essence itself of the Christian message.

A Persistent Problem

Pannenberg has tried to provide a global understanding of the Christian faith and of its relation to a philosophy of a history. The problem of evil brings a very serious objection to the possibility of finding a meaning for the course of times.[29]

29. On Pannenberg's approach to the problem of evil, see also his articles "Der Gott der Geschichte: Der trinitarische Gott und die Wahrheit der Geschichte," in *Metaphysik*

According to him, the whole history of salvation points to the act of creation. The salvation of God starts with creation, in itself a convergence of divine creating will and of divine will of salvation. Hence the importance of faith in creation for Christianity: nothing in this religion can be understood without the idea of creation and without the conviction that the different beings are dependent upon their Creator. The beings of the world are "creatures," the result of the divine act of creation. So is mankind. In the same way, ethics of Christian inspiration is based on faith in creation: its fundamental orientation consists of stating that human being is a creature coming from God and going towards God. This notion shapes the means and ends which are present in the individual's actions. Human beings have an origin and a destiny: God, the creating God.

Heidegger's *An Introduction to Metaphysics* begins with the ultimate question of metaphysics, which is capable of encompassing every possible question: "why being instead of nothingness?" Leibniz had posed the same question centuries earlier. Heidegger acknowledges the fact that Christianity offers an answer to his question: the reason why there is something instead of nothing is the divine act of creation. An intelligence possessing a creating will has produced that "something." Such a creating intelligence must be eternal and omnipotent. Classical Christian theology has followed this argumentative direction. It seems clear that the idea of God in Christianity is deeply linked to the concept of creation, so that "when theology fails to take up this task the danger threatens that the word "God" will lose any credible meaning."[30]

Some texts from the Holy Scripture express the conviction that created things manifest the glory of God. Ps 19 raises a hymn of praise to the Creator: "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows His handiwork. Day unto day utters speech, and night unto night reveals knowledge. There is no speech nor language where their voice is not heard. Their line has gone out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world."[31]

St. Paul says that the invisible power of God has become visible through created things (Rom 1:20). Creation is contemplated as a sign

und Gottesgedanke, 112–28, and "Die christliche Deutung des Leidens," in *Beiträge zur systematischen Theologie*, 2:246–53.

30 Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 2:162.

31. We will be using the New King James Version.

of the eternal, omnipotent, good, and merciful God. Creation is good because it is the work of the good God. This conscience prevailed in the faith of the people of Israel and in the Christian community since its earliest beginnings, and it is the same conscience underlying the attempts of a rational demonstration of the existence of God, whose paradigmatic instance is Aquinas' "five ways" [*quinque viae*].[32]

However, there are serious reasons to doubt that world and history are actually the result of the work of God. Just as theologians and philosophers have recurrently found legitimacy in elaborating cosmological and teleological proofs of the existence of God throughout the centuries, the inverse situation has taken place too: thinkers and scientists have found legitimacy in elaborating anti-cosmological and anti-teleological proofs. The issue resembles the so-called antinomies of pure reason in Kant's *Critique*: examples in which both the thesis and the antithesis have the same argumentative weight. Depending on the clues one values more, it will be possible to argue in either way.

Reality itself is contradictory: on the one hand, it stands as a transparent mirror of God and His glory for the person who believes; on the other hand, it exhibits the character of an autonomous entity which functions on its own, often hostile to humankind and whose imperfections are improper for a good, omnipotent, perfect God. The autonomy of the natural and historical world represents a verily complicated problem for all Christian theologians. The advancement in the field of scientific knowledge has gradually unfolded the structure of matter and the laws behind it. Is God an unnecessary hypothesis? Was Laplace right when telling Napoleon "*Je n'avais pas besoin de cette hypothése-la*" ("I had no need of that hypothesis")?[33] Human mind has been capable, itself alone, of unveiling—incompletely—the processes of nature. The world functions on its own, autonomously, and a peculiar combination of chance and necessity (following Lucretius and Jacques Monod) explains the

32. Aquinas' five ways are cosmological, in the sense that they try to prove the existence of God from the facticity of the world, in opposition to the ontological argument (which reasons from the idea of God itself). The five ways are the following: motion (there must be a primeval mover), efficient causes (there must be a first, non-caused cause), necessity (there are things that can either be or not be), the degrees of perfection, and the teleology or finalism which exists in nature. Cf. *Summa Theologica*, I pars, q. 2, art. 3.

33. Ferrater Mora, "Laplace," in *Diccionario de Filosofía*, vol. 3.

current state of things. Divine intervention is out of play, and the idea of a provident God seems superfluous.

As Pannenberg writes, echoing these considerations, "the independence of creaturely forms and processes . . . leave the impression that they need no divine Creator to explain them."[34] This autonomy emerges out of both the natural and the social processes. Experimental science grants us a rational vision of the universe out of purely material principles, with no reference to a transcendent Creator. Twentieth-century physics, with Quantum Mechanics and Relativity, gives us a description of the laws of nature, and nowadays it is directing its efforts to identifying the unifying principle of the four fundamental physical forces. Life sciences received a great impulse in the mid-nineteenth century, with Darwin and Wallace's theory of evolution of species, and in the twentieth century with the discoveries in the field of Genetics, the structure of DNA, and the human genome project. Natural reality, even in its most detailed aspects, finally finds a scientific explanation and a place within the great edifice of science.

Social sciences end up attributing all social change to the action of individuals and to the over-individual structures generated by those actions. Where is God? Rather than finding a place for God to dwell, a problem posed by the evolutionary biologist Ernst Haeckel (1834–1919), it is a matter of underscoring the theologian's commitment to admit the legitimacy of the question, how is it possible to "see" God in nature and in history? Both the natural and the social sciences promote what, following Max Weber, one could call the disenchantment of the world. There is no mystery in the world. Reason is ultimately capable of explaining how it functions. But, on the other hand, every scientific answer conceals a new question. There is still place for a *docta ignorantia* (Nicholas of Cusa), since we know that we will always be ignorant.

The autonomy of world and history and the presence of evil and suffering both offer an important challenge to the assumption that "the work of creation is good according to the creative will of God."[35] The scepticism about the goodness of creation is caused by reality itself. It is by no means an arbitrary speculation but a concern provoked by how reality manifests itself.

34. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 2:162.

35. Ibid., 163.