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Rethinking Global Philosophy of Religion

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The Philosophy of Religion. By Gwen Griffith-Dickson. London: SCM Press, 2005.

In the opening lines of her Preface to *The Philosophy of Religion*, Gwen Griffith-Dickson rightly notes that "The academic area of 'philosophy of religion' has traditionally worked almost exclusively with the philosophies and religions of Western civilization." In recent times there have been a few notable attempts to address this situation by way of authoring textbooks that include the work of thinkers, both traditional and modern, from other non-Western cultures in the treatment of central issues in contemporary philosophy of religion. In my judgment, Griffith-Dickson's text is by far the most comprehensive, inclusive, and insightful of its kind. She at once exposit and interprets the major thinkers in the Hindu, Buddhist, Islamic, Jewish, and Christian traditions (with passing references to East Asian cultures) as well as leading mainline Western philosophers such as Aristotle, Plotinus, Descartes, Leibniz, Hume, Berkeley, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein.

The book consists of three parts. The first is largely introductory and focuses on questions of religious pluralism, similarities and differences between religious-philosophical debates within and between different faiths, and the nature of religious language. The second part consists of an analysis of various metaphysical and epistemological themes such as creation, natural theology, and "how the world seems." Part 3 is labeled "The Divine and Human Relationship" and includes discussions of the persistent problem of evil and the nature of various forms of religious experience.

The Philosophy of Religion is designed as a textbook for advanced undergraduate students and is written with great clarity and precision. The author is able in her expositions and interpretations to get into the heart of an amazing range of quite different thinkers and the diverse styles of reasoning embedded in the traditions she explores. She is also able to present forcefully some of her own ideas.

I would like to illustrate this briefly by her sophisticated treatment of the problem that from the beginning has been the most challenging to Theism, the problem of evil, and pose a final question to her. In chapter 11, "Explanations of Evil," Griffith-Dickson covers the usual territory regarding the reality (or non-reality) of evil, various theodicies that seek to justify "God or the gods for allowing evil," and related issues. She concludes:

There seems to be no way that the measurement, definition, contextualization and interpretation of good and evil can be put on a universally agreed and public footing (made objective, in other words), in such a way as to justify a claim that there is some 'dys-teleological' [gratuitous] suffering which requires a special theodicy. Perhaps, if we were strictly logical, we would consider all human death as dysteleological evil. God allows everyone to die someday in any case, and perhaps is no less 'guilty of mass murder' in

virtue of the fact that God allows billions of people to die peacefully of natural causes. God is either 'justified' or not for all human deaths. Certainly atrocities raise questions and demand explanations that natural or accidental deaths does not. But is it of *God* that we require this explanation? Is it not *human action* that marks the profound moral difference between accidental death and genocide, not God's apparent allowance of evil? It may not be so much God's ways that are inscrutable as humanity's. . . . (p. 340)

Griffith-Dickson further points out:

John Hick has created a theodicy of great influence in our time, based on the idea that suffering is necessary for our personal growth and development. . . . The mixture of good and evil, he says, is because the world is a 'vale of soul-making'. . . . For Hick, God's purpose for creation surely determines the nature of that creation. . . . God's intent is not to create a hedonistic paradise, filled with all earthly delights, but an environment in which we grow into 'children of God.' (p. 332)

In my review of Hick's major work *An Interpretation of Religion* (published in the October 1990 issue of *Philosophy East and West*), I noted that he follows Augustine somewhat when the latter pleads that though evil is a privation (the Good alone really *is*), evil nevertheless can, from the big perspective, be seen to contribute to the beauty of the whole. Just as a work of art requires contrasts and tensions, so a universe, if it were good and harmonious, requires the dark as well as the light to achieve its perfection. "Our human existence on this planet," Hick claims, "is part of a much larger process through which personal spiritual life is being gradually brought into its own freedom to a perfection that will justify retrospectively the evils that have been part of its slow creation" (p. 119).

So the Holocaust, the Gulags, and the rest are *justified* after all, or will be justified in the long evolutionary climb to spiritual perfection. But the old schoolboy response to the traditional theodicies remains. What kind of all-good, creator God need go about His business in this way?

Nicolas Berdayev, in a somewhat different manner, claimed that "The positive meaning of evil lies solely in the enrichment of life brought about by the heroic struggle against it and the victory over it." But to give "positive meaning" to moral evil, if only of an instrumental sort, is to allow some strong value to this degradation of any genuine spiritual quality of life. I would argue that evil needs to be understood historically, psychologically, hermeneutically; it needs to be addressed and ameliorated socially, institutionally, politically; it does not need to be, and it cannot be *justified* either by theists or nontheists. I ask Gwen Griffith-Dickson: would we be in agreement here?

Students of the philosophy of religion, and anyone interested in the many issues discussed in her excellent textbook, should be grateful for having the opportunity to enrich considerably their understanding of the many complexities involved in the study of religion and the many insights regarding ourselves as human beings and our primary relationships to each other, to the natural world, and to whatever we may hold as sacred that may be found there. So many of the terrible conflicts and confusions that characterize our present age are grounded in our failure to achieve

the various kinds of wisdom that a philosophical inquiry like Griffith-Dickson's *The Philosophy of Religion* can afford us. It is indeed *the* textbook in the philosophy of religion most needed for our times.

Accounting for Evil—Justification or Explanation? A Response to Eliot Deutsch

Gwen Griffith-Dickson

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I am both grateful and gratified that Professor Deutsch has taken the time not only to read what was intended as an undergraduate teaching text, but also to comment on it with characteristic thoughtfulness and perspicacity.

Deutsch has put his finger unerringly on a muddled point in contemporary discussions of the problem of evil. As in everyday discourse, there is potential ambiguity about the seemingly innocuous English word 'understand,' which in colloquial speech is equivocal, indicating either cognitive mastery or an empathy verging on implicit agreement or consent: 'It's all right, I understand.' Intending the one provokes reactions directed at the other; comprehending the significance of evil and suffering in our existence is treated as if it somehow 'justifies' evil states of affairs. For example, Mesle has written that if good comes from evil, that means evil is really good, and to say, as many religious people do, that all things ultimately work toward the good is to say that nothing is really evil.¹ More subtly, a commentator such as Terence Tilley can argue that the act of theodicy, understood as 'justifying evil,' is in fact evil itself.² Deutsch is unusual in teasing apart these senses in his neatly framed dichotomy: evil needs to be *understood*, but it cannot be *justified*.

Let me immediately and briefly answer Deutsch's question on my own view about 'understanding' and 'justifying' evil. Any evil act can be *understood*—yes, *any*, if we have the courage, the wisdom, and the empathetic imagination—even the most unspeakable atrocity. But none of it, perhaps, is or ever should be *justifiable*. Not even the smallest act of petty spite.

Contemporary writing on the problem of evil in Western philosophy of religion is full of good impulses; but it is like walking on a narrow mountain trail: one slip and you've overbalanced in a way that can take everything down with you. Here is my attempt to clarify some of the issues that form the foundation for Deutsch's question and our shared response. We also share a commitment to seeing the contributions of Eastern philosophy recognized and taken up in Western seminar rooms, to the profit of reflection on the issues themselves.

Some suffering or 'evil' is not *evil* in an absolute sense, as signifying moral viciousness. It causes real distress, but is bound up in the nature of things, a universe