

# What About Evil?

## NORMAN PITTINGER

This world is not a nice place.

Of course there are times when most of us think that it is - the times when things are going well with us and we are happy. But then there comes some tragedy which disturbs our confidence that everything is for the best in what a famous thinker once styled 'the best of all possible worlds'. Somebody whom we loved dies of malignant cancer, for instance. Or there is an appalling airplane crash, about which we read in the newspapers; dozens of innocent men and women and children die in that catastrophe. Or we hear that somewhere there has been a devastating earthquake with hundreds of people killed. Or again, famine strikes some part of the world, perhaps like that one which caused untold misery in Ethiopia not so long ago. Or, finally, there is what Tennyson called the spectacle of 'nature red in tooth and claw'; the animal kingdom seems to be an arena in which cruelty predominates and one beast preys upon

another, perhaps tearing its victim to pieces in a struggle for existence. Only a fool could think that this *is* 'a nice world', once we come to hear about, recognise, or experience such things.

In a world like that, many of us are brought to think, it is non-sensical to talk, as religious people often do, in sentimental and easily cheerful fashion, about a benevolent deity who in some fashion is ultimately in control of things and must (also in some fashion) be held responsible not only for there being a world at all but also for its being the kind of world in which such appalling things happen. And besides all this, there is the obvious fact that men and women are not themselves always 'nice' people; they can be, often they are, selfish, lustful, destructive, careless about their human brothers and sisters. All of these things mount up in such a way that we are confronted, whether we like it or not, with what is commonly known as 'the problem of evil'.

If we believe in God, we must somehow reconcile these appalling facts of human experience with the belief that God is good and caring. If we are not believers in God, if we are agnostics or maybe ready to say that we are atheists who deny the existence of God altogether, we are still confronted with the reality of evil and must come to terms with it. In either case, we face a dreadful question: what and why is there evil in the world and in human experience.

In this Foreword we are considering precisely this situation. We are facing it from the specifically Christian perspective - although many do not share that perspective yet are equally concerned in the matter. And however we may happen to think or believe, we dare not evade the issue, unless we pretend to be like the ostrich which is said to bury its head in the sand when a disastrous storm sweeps over the desert. If there is any positive, and more cheerful, way of seeing things, we can entertain it only by looking honestly and frankly at the facts. As Thomas Hardy once put it,

If way to the better there be  
It exacts a full look at the worst.

Some good and pious people attempt to evade this. There are groups of supposedly Christian people who tell us that 'evil is an illusion', a mistake which our little minds are prone to make, a too ready

reading of the world and of ourselves in terms of what seem to us bad things. Whereas, such people say, this is nothing but what they style 'mental error'; if we were genuinely 'spiritual', they say, we should see through such 'apparent' evil to the abiding good which is the genuine truth about us, the world, and whatever divine power is in and behind both. To my mind, this attitude really amounts only to 'kidding oneself' or 'living in a fool's paradise'. It is unrealistic and false. There is evil; with it we must come to terms and for it we must find, if we can, some solution which is itself realistic and honest.

So it is indeed true that 'if way to the better there be', it can only be discovered when we have dealt with the facts which to most of us (who cannot subscribe to the optimism of those groups of blandly cheerful people) are patently *there*. As it happens, authentic Christian faith through the ages has sought to do just this, but often with indifferent success. Why is this?

I believe the answer to that question is that far too much of the time defenders of Christian faith have entertained a 'model' or 'concept' of God which is not only inadequate but actually mistaken. Let me explain, starting with a simple question to the reader: how do *you*, if you say you believe in God, picture that deity?

The distinguished Anglo-American thinker Alfred North Whitehead once remarked that what he styled 'the apostasy' of much Christian thought consists in taking for granted that God is, in his own words, like 'a despotic ruler' who is in complete control of everything that happens in the creation and hence is ultimately responsible for it, either by direct action or by permissive acceptance. Insurance policies used to express this idea when they spoke of natural catastrophes and the like as being 'acts of God'. And ordinary people have often asked, in the face of some disaster, 'Why does God do this to me or to others?' When to this notion of God as despotic ruler we add the often-associated ideas that God is a moral tyrant, who punishes and rewards us according to some standard which we do not understand, and that God is in the last resort uninfluenced or unaffected by what goes on in the creation, the resultant picture of deity is indeed appalling. So the basic issue, prior to everything else for those who say they believe in God, is '*What sort of God is it and how does that God act in the world?*'

This is not the place for a long and technical discussion of what is essentially a theological matter; it is the place, however, for a straight-forward and fairly simple presentation of a picture of God that will help to make sense of our experience and that will also (for Christian people at least) be in accordance with what has been disclosed to us in the historical event we indicate when we say the name 'Jesus of Nazareth' who is 'the Christ of faith'. I shall now try to say something about this all-important matter; if for no other reason, because how we envisage deity will have a great deal to do with what we may properly say about the so-called 'problem of evil in the world'. For a fuller, but not overly-technical, discussion, I may refer the reader to a little book of mine entitled *Picturing God* (London, SCM Press, 1982).

If the great central Christian affirmation is that the clue to God's 'nature and activity' (in Whitehead's words) is the event of Jesus Christ which has its significance in providing what St. John's Gospel (when correctly translated) calls 'the way of truth and life', then we must say, with that same gospel's writer in his First Letter, that 'God is Love' - and that we know this not as a speculation or interesting idea but because that same God 'sent' this Jesus that we humans might 'live through him'. In other words, a Christian ought to understand that whatever else may be true of God, the basic reality is that the divine character and the divine way of activity are to be found in sheer self-giving, caring, and concern - in other words, to repeat St. John's phrase, 'God *is* Love'.

But does not this make the fact of evil all the more inexplicable to us? It may seem so; but here we need to introduce a further consideration. Since God is Love or Lover, God does not act coercively, by sheer fiat or dictate, but rather acts persuasively; and what is more, in so acting, respects and values *and uses* the freedom which is part of the created order we know. Hence it is not as if the world were some sort of object which God can and does shove around, intrude upon and manipulate, or in some other fashion compels to perform in this or that manner. On the contrary, the world is *there*, a given fact with its own characteristics, notably a freedom to 'do its own thing' and the requirement that the consequences of that 'doing' shall be what they must be.

This can best be exemplified by what we know in our own human experience. In our relationships with others, when they are genuinely

human, there is the granting to the other in that relationship both the right and the capacity to decide whether and how that other will respond to our attitude and action towards him or her. Furthermore, the end-product in the relationship will always be reached through what we call 'personal' activity, not through compulsion or force exercised by one upon the other. This is true in our experience as men and women; and the Christian claim, once the fact of Jesus Christ is taken as the clue to how things really 'go' in the world, is that the insurance policy's notion that 'act of God' means that which is non-human or 'natural' rather than 'human' is entirely wrong. If we want to identify an 'act of God', a Christian must assert, we shall find it represented by a human existence in which rationality, imagination, respect, moral integrity, and the like are most present and most visible. An ancient Christian thinker; Irenaeus, once said, 'The glory of God is man fully alive'; and what he intended was just what we have been saying: the fullest disclosure of deity, of the divine 'glory' (which means real self-expression), is to be found at the human level - for Christians supremely in Jesus Christ and what that name signifies.

With these two points clearly in mind - that God is Love and that God acts supremely where there is free response and free acceptance of the consequences of decisions made in that freedom - we may now go on to indicate something of what God must be. I cannot here argue in detail for what will follow; a fuller discussion will be found in my own book mentioned above and in George Newland's excellent study of *The Theology of the Love of God* (London, Collins, 1980), among many others which seeks to 'reconstruct' our model or image of deity so that the centrality of God's character and activity as Love are made crucial in the picture. But briefly, the resultant picture of God is like this: Deity is *not* arbitrary power acting immediately upon the world, controlling everything in it and therefore responsible directly for what happens. That is an idea which is associated with ancient tyrannies and despotisms and by it much Christian (and other) thought has been highly influenced. Nor is God unaffected by what goes on in the creation; on the contrary whatever goes on there matters to God and makes a difference for and to God. The analogy of human relationships is to the point here, once again, and it needs to be taken with utmost seriousness. God is Love-in-act or Lover-in-action. And since this is the case, God's exercise of power is the exercise of God's strong, unfailing, inexhaustible, and indefatigable love.

In that context, furthermore, the world has its own independence, its own freedom, its own accountability. At the human level, we can see this vividly as a matter of conscious experience. And we can and must generalise from that human level, taking it as indicative of what is going on everywhere and always. At the level of inanimate nature, for example, such qualities are not *obviously* observable. Yet we know that human existence emerges from and is a part of the total natural world; therefore that natural world can only properly be interpreted when we begin from where we are, in human life with its relative independence, freedom, and accountability. Far too often in the past and far too frequently even today, thinkers have argued the other way on: they have assumed that human existence is to be understood in terms of the non-human. The result has been disastrous; it is the explanation of much that is wrong in our human living. Perhaps there was some excuse when the ancients thought in this fashion; for us today, with our awareness of an evolutionary creation, there is no excuse to continue in so mistaken a way.

Therefore, divine omnipotence does not mean sheer exercise of 'almighty power'. Omnipotence means the strength of divine Love-in-act, at work in a world which has its own independence and freedom. Omnipotence means that Love, God as Love, is all-knowing of what goes on in the world and hence able to envisage its possibilities of good and the way in which that good may be achieved. Omnipresence means that the divine Love-in-act is everywhere and always present and at work, often in very surprising places - a Christian would point to a humble human life, birth in a manger, a young man often rejected, death on a Cross, as the place in which such active presentness is most clearly seen.

Does this signify that God is 'finite' or 'limited'? *Only* if we have begun with the presumption that sheer coercive power is at the heart of things and that God is that power. But God is not 'finite', if it be true that Love is the ultimate reality, as Christians ought always to maintain. And God is not 'limited', excepting insofar as Love cannot - literally cannot - control everything but must wait upon such response to its prior invitation as is found, in differing ways and with varying intensity, in the world we know. The response at the natural level, as at the so-called 'animal level', may be minimal. Yet it is there when, for example, an electron 'decides' - that is to say, 'cuts off' (which is what 'decide' means etymologically) *this* present

possibility by adopting another present possibility. In modern physics, quantum theory and 'particle physics' demonstrates this genuine, if extremely tiny, freedom of action. And so up the scale, through more complex natural phenomena, until at the human level the freedom, with its independence and its consequences, can be clearly seen and more or less adequately understood.

The things which we call 'evil' in the natural order, like hurricanes and earthquakes and tidal waves; in animal existence; like the struggle for existence which takes place among many species - although never with the intentional aim of inflicting pain, since at that level there can be little if any intentionality present; and with us humans self-centredness, neglect of others, infliction of injustice and anguish, with all that happens in consequence of such human decisions, attitudes, and actions, show vividly and clearly what can go wrong. Our world is a world which is not predestined in this way or that; it is not regulated by 'laws which never shall be broken', save only by the law of inevitable consequences for what is done, whether for good or for ill. As modern scientists more and more insist, it is 'an open world', where choices make a difference and where that difference has its own results in further ongoing. Thus God is not responsible for what we, or any other element or aspect of creation, choose to do. God accepts the facts for what they are and deals with them as they are. The divine purpose ultimately is what the French scientist-priest Teilhard de Chardin called increasing 'amorisation' - the wider and more inclusive working of Love-in-act, on God's part, and responsive love-in-act, on our part. Or in St. Paul's words, 'God works in every respect towards a good end', which is how his sentence in I Corinthians (8:28) should be translated; or again, in St. Paul's words, 'We are God's fellow-workers'. My own master-thinker, Whitehead, put it in a different but similar sentence: 'we are co-creators with God'!

Having said all this, it may now be proper to suggest, about the fact of evil in creation, what might be styled some 'ameliorating considerations'. For however black may be the picture as many of us look at it, there are things that may be said on the other side. Let me now mention some of these.

First of all, this world was not 'created', exactly as we now see it, in one single all-at-once act. Thanks to evolutionary science we know that it is a world in which for untold millenia creation has been, still

is, and will continue to be, a process or development. In a way we might say that it resembles a shop where an artisan is engaged in making something or other; there are loose ends here and there, bits and pieces which are not yet completed, remnants of earlier efforts which did not quite fulfil the artisan's plan. It is an 'unfinished world', as somebody has put it. We cannot expect, if that is true, to find everything perfectly accomplished; on the contrary, what we are bound to find is a continuing work in which the aim is to create something splendid and beautiful - but that final aim is not yet achieved. In Christian thought - in biblical writing, for instance - there is talk of 'eschatology' or a future-to-be-realised one day. Doubtless in the biblical material on the subject, this talk is in highly metaphorical, poetic, or (if you will) mythological language. Such language is natural to all religious discourse; we cannot talk literally about matters like that because we cannot penetrate into the divine nature, purpose, and goal. Nonetheless, the material helps us to see that 'there is more to come'; and Christian faith would insist that God is actively engaged in working towards that end, not remote from and unconcerned with what takes place but genuinely and vigorously acting towards it with respect for and use of creaturely freedom and accountability.

Second, a considerable part of what is often styled 'natural evil' is called that only when and as human life is involved. A tidal-wave which devastates an uninhabited island in the South Pacific is not usually called evil. But when there are men and women who suffer from the results of the wave, we are more likely to call it that, and only then. A good deal that takes place in the natural order is tied in with continually providing what L.J. Henderson, a great Harvard scientist, has called 'the fitness of the environment', in which conditions are maintained so that human existence may be possible now and in the future. Furthermore, without at least some such happenings, human life on this planet would long since have disappeared.

In the third place, if as I have just urged, there is no *intentional* inflicting of evil in natural disasters, there is also no such intentional aspect to most if not all the suffering in the animal world. Unlike humans, who can and often do set out to make others suffer, animals are concerned rather to 'protect their territory', as students of their behaviour tell us, or save their young from attack, or secure necessary supplies of food to support their lives. It is also to be noted that if

experts in this area are to be trusted (and here I recall what a world-famous biologist once told me) the actual suffering in most parts of the animal kingdom is very much less severe than often it seems to us to be. We project our own sensitivity upon them, said my biologist friend, who went on to inform me that when one crab tears away the claw of another crab, the probability is that what the latter feels is more like a human twinge than the anguish which the tearing of a limb would cause in us. Incidentally, this particular scientist was a highly humane person who was utterly opposed to our human use of animals for experimentation: and who warned me that what he had said should not be taken to be a naive dismissal of the pain that was actually felt by lower species of living creatures but only to prevent our committing 'the pathetic fallacy' of reading our own feeling-tones into the animal world.

Fourth, in a world where things can and do often go wrong, the existence of parasitic life is not surprising. Nor is it surprising that parasites thrive on their 'host' and therefore damage or even destroy that upon which they depend for existence. And often enough, the suffering caused in this fashion (as with cancerous growth in a human, to give one example) has its origin in some human misuse or lack or infection - again without malicious intention on the part of the parasite. Furthermore, when we consider a good deal of physical - and even more obviously psychological - suffering, we should remember that the same conditions which make this suffering possible also make possible the sense of well-being, even the joy, which marks human life so much of the time. If we could not 'feel pain', neither could we 'feel joy', did we not have just such a psycho-physical human equipment. Laughter and tears, so to say, are intimately related, as folk-wisdom knows and as many poets have told us in their writings. It is also the case that the fact of our human solidarity, our participation in a common life, our 'sociality' (as somebody has put it), occasions much of the suffering which we men and women experience. When another human being suffers, especially if that person is someone for whom we care deeply, the 'spiritual anguish' can be enormous for those who thus care or who can sympathise deeply with others of their kind.

I must emphasise that the several points just made do not in any way reduce the reality of evil in the world. However, they help us to avoid that totally pessimistic interpretation of such a world

which can so easily be mistaken for true realism in understanding it. Or, to use again the words of Thomas Hardy, if there is indeed ‘a worst’, most of us also recognise that there is a ‘better’ which is also in need of our appreciation and gratitude. Total gloom is just as unrealistic as bland optimism. Yet on the whole most of human and animal life is enjoyed, giving considerable satisfaction in the living of it. At the same time, my scientist-friend’s insistence that we ought *never* to inflict unnecessary pain, at any level of sensitive existence, is to be remembered - which, by the way, is why he vigorously opposed the needless slaughter of animals by persons who engage in ‘blood sports’.

I have not discussed the reality of moral evil at the human level, nor have I spoken about what we usually call *sin*. These topics are far too big to receive here the attention which they deserve. However, I may say simply this: such moral evil and sin are tied in with the freedom and responsibility which men and women know and value. They are matters of relatively free choice or they are caused by the social situation in which we humans necessarily find ourselves. *We* are accountable for them, either personally or because we belong to a society which is often based upon and often creates injustice, oppression, servitude, and the consequences of human decision when this is permitted its exercise. There is another Foreword in which sin and moral wrong are given full attention and I may refer the reader to that discussion.

But to return to the question of ‘what sort of God’, I can go on to point out that if deity is not unrelated to but is affected and influenced by the creation, yet not working within it in a sheerly coercive fashion - indeed exerting what we call ‘power’ only to maintain that creation as a cosmos or ordered pattern rather than allow it to fall into chaotic and anarchic confusion - God must therefore be deeply concerned about it. For relationship *is* concern, whether positive or negative. Perhaps the concern which we humans show to others with whom we are in relationship is not always obvious; it is *there*, however, sometimes minimally but now and again with a vivid intensity. And the central Christian conviction, to which I referred above, affirms that this concern, with a highly positive quality, is part of what we mean when we say ‘God’. Or, to repeat St. John’s words, ‘God is Love’.

The love which God *is* must be an *active* love: 'a thing *is* what it does', as Whitehead said. And an active or concerned loving always seeks to identify itself with the beloved; it cannot remain aloof but must participate, so far as possible, in the beloved's own cares and worries, pains and difficulties, as well as in that beloved's joys and happiness. This is precisely what the central Christian conviction declares about God as disclosed, expressed, enacted, or 'incarnate' in the total event of Jesus Christ. Here, with a distinctive clarity, God is said to be actively present. Here God has made himself one with, and therefore has genuinely shared in, creaturely existence at our human level. Whatever idiom we may wish to use in saying this, the reality of it is the specifically Christian 'word'.

But if that is true, then it is also true to say that God is a suffering God, participating in the anguish of the creation in the presence of evil, yet not overcome or destroyed by that evil. For a corollary of the Christian conviction is that divine Love, enacted in the human existence of Jesus, was not overcome or destroyed by evil but triumphed over it. This is what the various stories which tell about Jesus' 'resurrection', as we put it, are all about. Love expressed in the world, sharing in the world's pain, knowing from inside the creation's anguish, 'cannot be holden of death', in the New Testament phrase. That this was the case is shown by the strong awareness of the earliest Christians, reported to us in the same New Testament, that in some genuine if not easily describable manner this very Jesus was still with them and among them. The reports about this cannot easily be reconciled in a straightforward consecutive narrative; yet the *fact* of it is plain and unmistakeable.

This tells us that for a Christian God must be seen as 'the fellow-sufferer who understands' - that is how Whitehead once phrased it. As such a 'fellow-sufferer' God is *in* this world; God knows this world from the inside and not as a mere external observer. What is more, God is actively engaged in overcoming evil, in all its differing modes. God's aim or purpose, in a world which has its own independence, its freedom, and its accountability (as we have insisted earlier), is to overcome and destroy evil. Now that is not to be done at one fell swoop; it must be done by a continuing and persistent effort on God's part. To say this is only to state in plain words the inescapable corollary of the basic Christian faith that 'In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself'.

For us there is a further consequence: we are called to be what St. Paul styled 'fellow-workers with God' or ourselves God's 'ministers of reconciliation', working with God in furthering the creative advance of goodness, truth, justice, righteousness, care, love, in the world. Such is the practical Christian vocation. Therefore our attitude towards whatever is evil is one of positive rejection of that evil and earnest effort against it, so that so far as may be possible, such evil will be negated, overcome, removed, from our world. Of course we can do little if anything against much 'natural disaster'; we cannot remove or defeat tidal waves or earthquakes, although we *can* see to it that people do not live in places where these may happen. We can do something to alleviate animal suffering, if only by refusing to inflict suffering on the animal kingdom. We can work against illness and disease, by the use of such knowledge as can be acquired through special study of these ills. And we can open ourselves to the forces for good which are present in the world, so that human self-centredness, cruelty to fellow-humans, oppression, hatred, and contempt shall not prevail amongst us. This is the challenge to us in our Christian discipleship. God will ask of us, when the time comes for judgement upon our loyalty and dedication, a question like that put by the captain in the Hundred Years War when he came upon a soldier who had skulked in his tent while the fierce struggle was going on, 'When we fought at Arques, were you there?' If we were not there, in that continuing struggle for the good, we are condemned as 'unprofitable servants' - we have been judged, and indeed we must judge ourselves, to be unworthy of our 'high calling in Christ Jesus our Lord'.

Thus, even if there is no simple and straightforward and easily understandable explanation of whatever evil is in the world, there is an obligation upon us to work with God, the 'all-great' precisely because that God is the 'all-loving', in the warfare in which God is engaged. The depth of Christian faith is to see, with Mother Julian of Norwich, that in and with God 'all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well'; but this final conviction can be entertained meaningfully and realistically only if first of all we have played our part in God's suffering yet triumphant loving activity.

There are some final matters which should be considered. One is whether our liturgy, our worship, and our prayers are such that they express vividly the reality of God as Love-in-action and ourselves as

God's agents in this active loving. Anything and everything which denies or minimises that reality should have no part in our worship, our prayer, or our meditation. Fortunately our new services (as in the ASB) are in this sense much more deeply Christian than earlier services. Again, in theology it is necessary to eradicate every suggestion of God as despotically in control of everything. Here much remains to be done; yet one of the encouraging signs in our own day is that more and more responsible theologians are at work on the task. And our discipleship, which often has tended to be moralistic in a highly legal sense, needs to be reconceived so that love has the pre-eminence, rather than coldly moralistic interpretations of the divine purpose for humans.

For any genuinely dedicated Christian, today and always, faith and practice, worship and work, go hand in hand. Despite our ignorance of much that we might like to know, and in honest recognition that we do not 'have all the answers' to 'all our questions', we have enough to impel us to be responsible and zealous in thought and word and deed. As a distinguished English Modernist of an earlier generation put it, Christian 'faith is not belief in spite of evidence, but life in scorn of consequence'. In fact, that faith is a call to action - and part of the action is to serve as God's instrument in overcoming evil wherever we see it and to the degree that we are enabled to turn it into an occasion for good.