

# School · of · the · Prophets

Theological Animation for Discipleship

## School of the Prophets (SOPs) 6<sup>th</sup> June 2010 - Session 6 @ Ultimo University Church – Brief Notes and Summary

### God and evil: Christian witness in a damaged world

Presented by **Dr. Ben Myers**

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#### Part 1: The “problem” of evil

Philosophers will often discuss evil in this way:

Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? (Then God is not omnipotent.)

Is God able to prevent evil, but not willing? (Then God is not good.)

Is God both able and willing? (Then evil would not exist.)



Many philosophers and theologians have devoted large amounts of time of energy in attempting to solve the problem of evil. In a famous article on theodicy, J. L. Mackie argued as follows - Evil obviously exists. So if God is good, he could not be omnipotent; or if God is omnipotent, he could not be good. This is “the problem of evil” in a nutshell. But can the reality of evil really be reduced to such an intellectual “problem”? Can the “problem” of evil be resolved through theological or philosophical arguments? Or does the reality of evil itself resist such tidy resolution?

#### Part 2: What is evil?

Auschwitz. The Boxing Day tsunami. These are symbols of evil that we can easily recognize – Auschwitz as moral evil, the tsunami as natural evil. Both represent the idea that there is something deeply wrong and horrifying with ourselves and the world that we live in.

Some Christian arguments regarding evil:

**Augustine** – Evil as the deprivation of good. Evil is not something that exists in the world. Evil is not a thing, rather it is when something that is good is used in a bad way.

**Karl Barth** – Evil as the Nothingness (Das Nichtige). Evil occupies a mysterious space between existence and non-existence. The Nothingness is an immense power that attempts to take everything that exists and drag it into non-existence.

**Terry Eagleton** – Evil as the deep monstrous suction that seems to pull us towards self-annihilation. There is something within each of us that wants to destroy ourselves.

## Part 3: A tragic gospel

There is something tragic about human life. We know tragedy all too well. And so we compensate by turning the Gospel into a *triumphant* gospel. The true gospel is Good News to our damaged lives and damaged world, but it is not a nice easy fix. There is something tragic about the Gospel.

Nicholas Lash, the Roman Catholic theologian writes: "All theodicies – in the sense of theoretical attempts to demonstrate the compatibility of 'tragic disorder' with the goodness of God – are suspect as rationalisations of other people's meaningless suffering. Armed with a satisfactory theodicy, the need to contribute, in practice, to the redemptive liberation of human beings is sometimes less sharply felt. Christian hope remains a form of the tragic vision."



## Conclusion

A Christian response to evil is not theodicy, but struggle – the struggle of taking God's side against the world's disorder, and of refusing to treat evil as an acceptable part of a larger harmonious vision.

*"to clasp hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of the world."*

Karl Barth

## Further Reading – from Ben Myers' blog *Faith and Theology*

<http://faith-theology.blogspot.com/2010/06/readings-on-god-and-evil.html>

- **David Bentley Hart**, *The Doors of the Sea: Where Was God in the Tsunami?* (Eerdmans 2005) – A very poignant meditation on natural evil, and on the fact that atheist protests against theodicy retain an authentically Christian insight (often strangely absent from Christian attempts to "justify" evil).
- **Fyodor Dostoevsky**, *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880) – A compelling dissolution of the project of theodicy. It's a betrayal of humanity to render evil meaningful within any larger harmonious system.
- **Donald MacKinnon**, "Order and Evil in the Gospel," in *Borderlands of Theology: And Other Essays*, (Lippincott Press 1968), 90-96 – A gripping and moving account of the gospel not simply as triumph, but as tragedy.
- **Terry Eagleton**, *On Evil* (Yale 2010) – This is Eagleton's Freudian analysis of evil and the death-drive. His example of the alcoholic is especially good, since it illustrates the way evil manifests itself in a surplus of will (the alcoholic doesn't have too little will-power, but too much) directed towards self-annihilation. Evil is not a "thing" in the world, but the ontological gravity that pulls each thing towards its own annihilation.



### SEE YOU AT THE NEXT SOPs MEETING

School of the Prophets Session 7

**When:** Sunday 1<sup>st</sup> August 2pm - 4pm

**Where:** Ultimo University Church, Cnr Bulwara Rd & Quarry St, Ultimo

<http://www.schooloftheprophets.org.au>