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Evil and the Mystics' God
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THE PROBLEM OF EVIL is a most serious complexity for Christian theology and the philosophy of religion. Alvin Plantings has advanced our understanding of this issue by distinguishing between a "defense," which attempts only to show that God's existence, power and goodness are logically compatible with the fact of evil; and a "theodicy," which attempts to show that belief in God is reasonable despite the evils that afflict our world. My inclination is to hold that defense is the task of the philosopher only, while theodicy is the task of the theologian. A Christian theodicy, though not for a Jew or a Muslim, will appeal to the redemptive sufferings of Christ.

Stoeber, however, does not fit into this picture. He is not a Christian theologian: Christ appears in his book only in quotations from other writers, although one of his chapters is cast in the form of an exposition of some verses from the Gospel according to St. Mark. And, though he uses Hindu as well as Christian authorities, he cannot be placed in any theological tradition.

He appeals to authority more than a philosopher should and demands consolatory power from explanations of evil in a way that carries him beyond what may be expected of philosophical analysis. And he does follow the procedure dictated for intellectual clarity and attempts to establish the consistency of his sum of theism before addressing the questions of coherence and plausibility. Nor is he

content, as a mystic might be, with the assurance that "all manner of things shall be well:" he advocates controversial doctrines such as soulmaking rebirth, a suffering (and limited) God, and a mitigated version of hell. I would place him in the marshy and syncretistic borderland between philosophy and theology — a region also occupied by John Hick.

We can resolve the problem of evil, Stoeber says, only by arguing that evil is necessary to fulfill some divine purpose. The best non-mystical explanations of evil possess serious defects, but these defects are overcome in a theology for which the end that justifies the evils of the world is discovered in mystical experience. A mystical theology of this sort can explain the impulse to evil by appeal to a God-creating process that distances God from evil and accounts for evils that do not contribute to the reconciliation found in mystical experience by appeal to the doctrine of rebirth. According to Stoeber's version of this doctrine, people who die without attaining mystical reconciliation will have a chance to attain it in a subsequent life. He believes — I am not sure why — that his version of reincarnation can escape the personal identity problems that afflict the belief that present sufferings are the result of misdeeds committed in previous lives. He connects the free will defense — that evil is the result of human freedom misused — with Jacob Boehme's doctrine of the *Urgrund*, "a fundamental impulse to evil that is intertwined with the very notion of the Divine Essence, somewhat like Carl Jung's notion of the dark side of God.

He endeavors to show that the doctrines he advocates do not have morally or politically quietistic implications. He believes that his theodicy not only establishes the intellectual coherence of theism, but is pastorally useful as well.

The best thing about the book is the quotations from mystics, some of which would otherwise have escaped our attention. Thus an anonymous mystic, whose reflections have the unpromising title of *Meditations on the Tarot*, describes Kant's postulates (God, freedom, and immortality) as a faith "where one believes without any

support, either from within or without. It is the faith of the 'voice crying in the wilderness' (Mt 3:3) — the voice itself of the soul who cries, i. e., postulates in complete solitude ('in the wilderness'), the things without which it could not live."

Stoerber bases his argument on the assumption that mystical experience is separable from its interpretations and thus also independent of the religious tradition in which it arises. It can, therefore, be invoked radically to revise that tradition. The antinomian and narcissistic possibilities inherent in this position will be a source of constant concern to those responsible for the welfare of religious communities.

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