

DISCUSSION OF THE ORIGIN AND OVERCOMING OF EVIL AND SUFFERING IN BUDDHISM, ISLAM, AND CHRISTIANITY

Presentations:

JAE-RYONG SHIM: Evil and the Overcoming of Suffering in Buddhism

ADNAN ASLAN: The Propositions of the World Religions about the Origin and Overcoming of Evil: An Attempt at a Synthesis from an Islamic Perspective

JULIO TERÁN DUTARI: The Origin and Overcoming of Evil: Original Sin and God's Suffering in Christianity

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1. What role does philosophy play in the answers to the question of evil in the religions represented here?

The theodicy question is also discussed in Islamic theology, but this theoretical discussion does not play a role for those who are suffering. It is, nevertheless, important to eradicate evil. Islam is similar to Buddhism at this point: In the Qur'an there are many practical hints about how the human person can cope with and overcome suffering. The rational perspective should not at all be neglected, but what we really need is practical assistance in dealing with evil and suffering. (ASLAN)

Buddhism also includes attempts to examine the question of evil and suffering philosophically. Ultimately, however, only praxis, not speculation, can liberate from suffering. The historical Buddha placed value on not discussing the so-called metaphysical questions about the origin of the world, finiteness, suffering, etc., but instead treating the problem of suffering practically and seeking ways to overcoming it. (SHIM)

The meaning of liberation (for instance, from suffering) cannot be understood if the dogmatic statements of the Church regarding sin and redemption are

not taken seriously, and indeed in their anthropological and anthropological-social dimension. A rational understanding of faith, however – according to the opinion of the Church – does not need Marxism as a tool (as many representatives of liberation theology believe), but instead corrects its understanding of faith with the same result of a social engagement. – The most important differences between Christianity and Islam have to do with the philosophical background. The position advocated by Islam, to push thinking aside in speculative difficulties and to ask only about how to deal with it practically, is an attempt to which Christian theologians are often liable. In the end, however, one cannot combat evil forcefully if one does not deal with certain intellectual questions here. Bad thinking often also leads to evil thinking. (TERÁN DUTARI)

In the question of dealing with the problem of evil practically, we can come to a union of the religions. In the domain of praxis, we have to rely more on traditional rules and concepts that can help ordinary people. Religion as such has the task of eliminating moral evil. Of course, it can give no simple answer to the question of why God tests people to such an extent, for instance by (non-moral) physical evil such as natural catastrophes, but in the traditional teaching it offers a concept of how one can cope with evil. The Qur'an interprets moral and non-moral evil as tests of the individual who needs patience and trust in God. (ASLAN)

In Buddhism there is no problem of theodicy in the form in which Christianity or Islam know it, since there is no concept of a personal creator. (SHIM)

Faith in a good Creator-God (as a rational core expression of Christian faith) is of central importance to answering the question of evil and suffering. Within the context of an interreligious conversation, one should not emphasize so much the exchange of intellectual viewpoints, but instead the testimony of the faith and of religious experience, which draws from the tradition and also emphasizes the value of the respective faiths within the intellectual confrontation. The same truth appears in the different religions, because the lives of their believers testify to it powerfully. (TERÁN DUTARI)

2. How do the religions understand, from their own perspective, the essential answers of the other religions to the question of the discourse? For instance, how does Buddhism assess Christianity, how does Islam assess Buddhism?

Christianity and Islam place the emphasis on trust in a good Creator-God. The tension between reason and faith, however, still exists. An answer to the question of the origin of evil and suffering still remains to be found today. One cannot accept faith and trust in God as a real answer. (SHIM)

As far as the emphasis on the practical side of the question of evil is concerned, Buddhism and Islam are similar. It appears, however, that Buddha's

teaching may indeed have been helpful for earlier societies, but must be and also is reinterpreted in the present age to conform with the conditions of a completely changed society. Traditional Buddhist teaching is, for instance, modernized along the lines of Christian liberation theology or socialism; as Buddhism borrows from other systems, however, it gives up its own religious tradition. (ASLAN)

3. What role does the idea of evil as “God’s punishment” play in the religions represented here?

According to the testimonies of the Old and New Covenants, evil is not only the consequence of sin, but also God’s punishment, imposed by him. Understanding and interpreting this is a task for the rational philosophical interpretation of the content of our faith. There have been various attempts in the tradition to interpret this. From the contemporary Christian perspective, punishment is understood as a consequence contained within the sin itself, for which God is not responsible, but which he leads to the good. (TERÁN DUTARI)

On one hand, Islam holds the interpretation of evil as a warning and stimulus to the good. Evil is more warning than punishment. The latter comes only after this life. On the other hand, evil is also interpreted as an aid in the spiritual development of the individual, as a process of purification of the soul. The perception of evil and dealing with it are to a certain degree culturally specific. The example of holy wars shows this. The believing Muslim actually understands the holy war as a mission of God, not as evil. From the European point of view, that seems to be unacceptable. With the Arabic word “Jihad” (effort, struggle), however, the struggle against moral evil in one’s self is meant above all. Many interpret it as a struggle against persons of other faiths, but it primarily means, according to the teaching of the Qur’an, fighting against evil in one’s self. (ASLAN)

Buddhism understands the interpretation of evil and suffering as a consequence of ignorance. The category of punishment assumes the concept of a personal God, which does not exist in Buddhism. In the discussion of the question of evil, the representatives of Islam and Christianity move between two extremes: TERÁN DUTARI holds a universalistic position, ASLAN a so to speak postmodern position. However, we do not live in these extremes. Neither the universal claim nor perceptual relativism help us with the practical solution of this question. Habits, rules, and laws of ethics exists at the level of praxis. We must find a middle way, which we can discuss theoretically in the common conversation. (SHIM)

4. How do the representatives of the religions evaluate the thesis of the necessity of mediation between theory and praxis in the faith?

The current tense situation in the Christian Church and also the inner-ecclesial praxis require in fact a middle way between absolute (universal) and relative positions. This middle way lies in the acceptance of the historicity of truth. Does Islam not strive for a middle way between theory and praxis, when it presupposes and pursues an interpretation of the Qur'an? (TERÁN DUTARI)

Of course, there must be mediation between theory and praxis. The faith itself is the theory, which is interpreted concretely (practically). As Abrahamic religions, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity have a common basis for the dialogue. Islam tends to unite the traditions of all three in itself and to develop universal laws from them. What is the case with the identity of Buddhism? Can one still attribute its own tradition to it, when it borrows from other traditions? (ASLAN)

The problems of contemporary society force Buddhism to include other traditions, which are originally foreign to it. One can help oneself as a student of Buddhism with the concept of the bodhisattva: Thus one can as a Buddhist also recognize Jesus, for example, as a bodhisattva, and thus borrow from Christianity. That means that one uses the same concept for completely different interpretations. That is disturbing at times, but is explained by the fact that in Buddhism it is not primarily a case of a certain system, but instead of how one can help other people cope with evil and suffering. This flexibility of thought creates more difficulties for the Christian or Islamic religion. (SHIM)

5. Answers to Questions from the Audience

In response to a question about how Islam concretely deals with suffering, ASLAN explained that this is a psychological problem. Concretely experienced suffering can elicit both the reaction of denying God and the optimistic attitude of understanding the suffering not only as evil, but also as a challenge to more patience and trust in God.

In contrast to TERÁN DUTARI, who believes within certain limits in the existence of anonymous Christianity and, therefore, in the possibility of a discussion of the question of the causes of evil at the general-religious level (question from the audience), ASLAN emphasizes that the religion of Islam could not represent its viewpoint realistically without talking about God. He granted this to philosophy, but not to religion.

Concerning the theme of Hans Küng's project, "Global Ethic" – "No world peace without religious peace" – TERÁN DUTARI said that the understanding of the other religions must proceed with every activity in approximately the sense

of the idea of mission. Each religion must draw for itself the practical consequences from this process of understanding with the intention of discovering the one common truth that we (ideally) have.

Concerning that, ASLAN remarked that Islam also recognizes mercy, compassion, and peace as the highest commandments. But no theory of faith can be constructed upon them. The dialogue could indeed move at the level of these aspects of faith, which are thoroughly compatible with the principles of the Qur'an and the history of Islam, but this could not be permanently satisfying.

When asked about evil in the field of contemporary technology (genetic technology) and in the Church's past, TERÁN DUTARI emphasized the meaning of the papal public confession of guilt, which belongs as such to the core of the Christian faith. To be sure, the Church as the "Body of Christ" cannot sin; but since its members are sinful human beings, the admission of guilt must also officially take place by the representative of the Church.

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