

# THE ORIGIN AND OVERCOMING OF EVIL AND SUFFERING IN THE WORLD RELIGIONS

## *Introduction*

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The question of the origin and the overcoming of evil and suffering is one of the fundamental questions of religions. All religions attempt to explain how evil and suffering came into the world and continue to exist. The philosopher Friedrich Schelling wrote cogently in his *Philosophy of Revelation* at the middle of the nineteenth century that the concepts of the will and of evil and the belief that the world is transformed distinguish religion and philosophical traditions that have originated under the influence of religion from ancient philosophy, which recognizes neither evil nor the will nor the transformations of the world. One could extend this idea and say that the emphasis on the significance of the will and of human deeds for the condition of the world, the attempt to speak about evil and suffering and to “cope” with them, and the view that the world, as it is, is not original, but is instead the consequence of transformations caused by evil, represents the characteristic trait of the religions that most distinguishes them from philosophical traditions.

### **1. Evil as the Transformation of the World for the Worse, and Hope in the Transformability of the World for the Better**

Religions do not accept the world simply as it is, but instead recognize in the world something that is not as it should be: evil and suffering. For the world religions, the evil and suffering in the world are contingent; they do not belong to its essence. Religions – in contrast to science and to the unreflective, everyday relationship of human persons to the world – recognize the world not only as it is, but also as it has become, as it has become in the religions’ interpretations of history. It is characteristic of religions and the religious understanding of the world that they accept a reality existing before and beyond evil and suffering, and a transformability of human persons and the world from a state of evil and suffering to one of the good and of freedom from suffering.

This conviction of the transformability of the world and human beings fol-

flows from the difference between God and the world, the absolute and the finite, which all world religions acknowledge in one way or another. God guarantees by his absoluteness that evil and suffering are not likewise absolute, that they have not always existed and will not exist for all eternity. The world religions' conviction, contrary to present appearances, that evil and suffering are not original and their assertion of the transformability of reality for the better correspond to the deepest hopes of humankind. The conviction of the transformability of the world is the precondition of the possibility of salvation. The hope in salvation from evil and suffering is, therefore, a second conviction that belongs, along with the conviction of the transformability of evil and the world, in one way or another to all of the world religions.

The question of how this liberation from evil and the changing of the world will take place distinguishes the religions from each other, of course, just as much as they are distinguished from one another by their stories and theories about the origin of evil and thus the world's need of salvation. But it is common to at least the three Abrahamic religions that evil has come into the world as a change, that it is not original, and that it can likewise be overcome by a second change. One task of this second Discourse of the World Religions is to clarify how Hinduism and Buddhism address this question.

If evil does not belong to the original and integral constitution of the world, but has entered into it as a disturbance and a change for the worse, it raises the question of how it is compatible with the existence of God. Although this question is frequently called the theodicy question, it is broader in meaning than the theodicy question and concerns all religions, even if not all of them have developed the specific form of the philosophical theodicy question. The theodicy question, as it is found in seventeenth-century European philosophy, is a very specific form of the answer to the question of evil and its compatibility with the conviction of the omnipotence and the goodness of God. In this philosophical theodicy discussion, it became the question of the compatibility of the assumption of God's omnipotence and perfect goodness with the undeniable existence of evil in the world. The critics of the thesis of God's omnipotence argued that God either is not omnipotent, if he could not create a world better than this one, or is perhaps omnipotent, but not perfectly good, because he obviously did not wish to create a better world.

Our discourse will not become lost in the *aporiai* of the compatibility of God's omnipotence and the existence of evil in his creation, but will instead pose the more modest and concrete question of how the deficient condition of the world, the evil and suffering in it, are compatible with the idea of God and which answers the world religions provide to this question, which concerns all of them in their core convictions.

## 2. God's Perfection and Suffering

The question in the world religions of the existence and origin of evil is closely related to the problem of how God's perfection and absoluteness relate to history and the occurrence of the contingent or accidental, and of evil in history. Does the perfection of God stand outside evil and history, or is God himself subject to history and, therefore, to the evil and suffering that occur in it? Is the Absolute or God a becoming-absolute or an unchanging-absolute? Does, for example, Brahman in Hinduism become Shiva and Vishnu in history, or is it super-historical, above and beyond the world and history? Is the creation seen as a self-realization or as a self-expression of God, as God becoming himself or as a free production outside God in the expression of his word?

The question of God's immutability or becoming is tied to the question of the relationship of God to suffering. Does God also suffer evil and becoming, or is he beyond all suffering and becoming? The world religions have given quite different answers to this central question. Islam dismisses the theological idea of the suffering God and reproaches Christianity for having God suffer and perish in the suffering Christ. Christianity itself, of course, has for the most part rejected and dismissed the idea of a God subject to suffering and, consequently, to evil. It maintains, against such conceptions of a God subject to suffering, that God in Christ only freely co-suffers with humans, but is not subject to suffering.

All three Abrahamic religions criticize the gods of polytheism or, as they call it, heathenism, which suffer contingency and evil, just as humans do. They see the finite gods of heathenism, which are subject to the world or the powers of the world, as false gods, or even idols. It will be seen in this volume how the world religions view this and how a discussion between the monotheistic religions and Hinduism and Buddhism, which at least do not exclude a multitude of gods, will develop.

The question of the perfection or imperfection of God is closely related to the question of his relationship to suffering. The Christian answer to the question whether God himself suffers or whether he, as a perfect being, does not share in human suffering at all, was to choose the intermediate, third alternative that God does not suffer, but sympathizes or co-suffers with us. How this Christian solution to the problem of the tension between the absence of suffering and the perfection of God, on one hand, and his love and compassion, on the other, relates to the solutions to the problem of suffering and the perfection of God in the other religions is another important aspect of the theme of this book.

### 3. Evil as a Consequence of Liberty and the Transmission of Evil

The religions that regard the world as creation begin by assuming that evil and suffering are not constitutive for the creation, but are instead the consequence of a contingent event in the creation, a fall. This event is seen both as singular, as an act and occurrence in history, and as continuing to have consequences. In Christianity, this interpretation of the origin of evil as a singular event and as a continuing disposition toward evil is linked to the doctrine of original sin, which is common to all human persons. From the doctrine of original sin, in turn, the doctrine of the need for redemption of *all* human persons follows.

The doctrine of original sin finds itself again and again the object of criticism, both from philosophy and from other religions. It is criticized for being tragic or pessimistic in nature. It does in fact contain a tragic element, because it assumes the guilt of the entire human race, which is not caused by every person individually as a result of morally free transgressions, but is inherited by all persons, as members of the human race, from their parents.

Two questions related to the doctrine of original sin appear to be of central importance to the reflections and the theme of this book. The first is its thesis that the origin of evil and every evil act are singular, because there is no substance and no universal of evil. Evil is instead a particular, singular reversal and “perversion” of the principle of the good. Its origin does not exist in a substance of evil, but in the will of the human person, who responds deliberately, singularly, and evilly to a singular situation of temptation and intentionally acts wrongly. Every other theory of evil that recognizes the origin of evil outside the human will or in a substance of evil leads into Manichaeism and dualism, which define evil as a substance of the world, as a universal power of evil in the world. Consequently, if one finds in the world something like a universal disposition toward evil or structures of evil, they cannot stem from a substance of evil, but only from free acts of evil. If, however, evil is not only individual, but also social, and can stem only from free deeds, it is completely sensible to assume that evil is transmitted individually in the entire human race, that it thus is inherited by children from their parents.

If evil, understood as a reversal of the principles of being, reverses and corrupts the good singularly each time it occurs, this means that each evil act possesses within itself features of the singular reversal of the good. It does not react to a situation incorrectly and act wrongly in a universal way, but always in a specific way. However, if evil is at the same time so universal, it can only be a disposition that is inherited by persons individually in a universal way.

At the same time, the doctrine of original sin assumes a predisposition to wrongness in all human persons, not only in the Christian or only in the non-Christian. This reinforcement of the disposition of humanity toward evil in the world modifies the singular character of the evil act, in that original sin has cre-

ated dispositions toward evil that encourage the singular evil act, the realization of evil in the individual act, and make its occurrence more probable, but without negating the individual guilt of each evil act. The conviction of the change in character of the entire human race brought about by evil and original sin not only creates pessimism concerning the ability of human persons to act rightly, but also contains an encouraging and liberating statement about the equality and solidarity of human persons as sinners. The doctrine of original sin creates a solidarity of humanity in its equality as humanity endangered by the evil within its own heart.

All human persons are equal in the respect that they carry within themselves both a predisposition to good and a predisposition to evil. They not only mutually support themselves in the good, but also are in solidarity with one another in the struggle against the evil within themselves. They can also strengthen one another in their ability to perform and in their performance of evil actions. The doctrine of original sin rules out declaring themselves to be “pure” and others – whether other nations or other religions – to be “impure.” All human beings and all religions are affected by the inclination and the ability to become evil, and must be in the position to counteract this predisposition.

The ability of the entire human race to perform evil actions and the singular character of the evil act also forbid characterizing, for philosophical or theological reasons, a people or a nation as especially or singularly evil and a particular action as uniquely evil and beyond comparison to all other evil in the world. All nations are affected by the ability to be evil, and every evil act bears features of the singular in itself. Another theory of evil would attribute to a nation the substance of evil and, therefore, lead to a dualism that understands evil as an independent substance in the world, as a national or racist characteristic, and therefore as a power and substance independent of God.

A dualism of a good substance and an evil substance can be accepted neither in God nor in the world, however, without destroying the unity of God and of the world.<sup>1</sup>

All religions deny that evil is the last word and the ultimate reality. The hopes of humanity in an end to evil are too closely related to the idea that evil is not an eternal substance equal to the eternity of God, but instead a singular and temporary disturbance of reality, which does not affect God in his essence. The world that is influenced and affected by evil is not imperishable and substantial. Everything evil in the world is singular, perishable, and insubstantial. For the world religions, the finite world, affected by evil, is only the veil laid over imperishable reality, which is determined by God alone.

If evil is neither a substance equal to God nor one created by him, the origin

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<sup>1</sup> On the centrality of the problem of evil and overcoming it to the philosophy of religion, see P. Koslowski, *Philosophien der Offenbarung: Antiker Gnostizismus, Franz von Baader, Schelling* (Paderborn, Munich, Vienna, Zürich: Schöningh, 2001).

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