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Rupert Shortt, *The Hardest Problem. God, Evil and Suffering*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2023, 130 p., ISBN: 978-1-3998-0271-0.

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The problem of evil is admittedly one of the hardest challenges Christian theology must face. In fact, for many it acts almost as a difficulty test for any theological endeavor, the supreme test case for theological thought. This comes at least in part from the fact that, – to give just one example – no matter how complex or intellectually gratifying the controversies and discussions about the existence of God are, the problem of evil and suffering touches and affects us at a very personal level, going far beyond our urge for logical consistency and rationality. It is partly for this reason that, powerful as they may be, classical responses to the problem of evil almost always leave us with the feeling that something is still missing or escaping us. That is not of course to underestimate the force or need of this type of philosophical discourse, and there are excellent scholarly studies – Alvin Plantinga comes instantly to mind – that are a valuable resource for anyone wanting to tackle this problem at an academic level.

Yet one can feel the need for a fresh approach to this perennial question, one that can get beyond the often reductive answers that have been given, and that's exactly what Rupert Shortt's study offers us: a concise, humble, compassionate yet intellectually rigorous account, developing, in Shortt's words, "in a roundabout way", circling the central problem from different angles and perspectives, unapologetically intertwining insights drawn from theology, philosophy, science or literature.

The author's long experience in high quality journalism plays a major role in the way he handles what we can call "religion's weak flank", i.e., evil and suffering, providing us with an engaging, lively, and passionate read. Yet for all this lightness of style, Shortt demonstrates a solid handling of philosophical and theological sources.

This is not a dogmatic study of theodicy in any classical way, even if it succeeds in presenting us with an *apologia* of some of the classical church teachings, because in the end what we probably need today is not another "rationalistic" or philosophical explanation of evil, not another type of justifying discourse which tries to exonerate God for the moral predicament the world finds itself in, but a response that can give fresh credit to old beliefs in a manner that engages honestly with the full

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scope of our limitations as human beings. Shortt does not make any claim to give final explanations, guaranteed answers, to find easy meanings of evil and suffering. Instead, he opens ways to cope gracefully and credibly with adversities, suffering or meaningless evil, so that even if we cannot find anything meaningful in the pain and evil that surround us, we can still allow ourselves to be transformed into better persons. In this regard, Shortt commends Eleonore Stump's work *Wandering in Darkness* for taking on the problem of evil "at a psychological narrative level" (p. 15). This kind of narrative argument, or "narrative theodicy", as he calls it (p. 67), presents the important advantage of not having that sting of theological self-sufficiency which unfortunately blemishes many explanations of evil or suffering. They allow for people to better understand their individual contexts of life so that even if the abominable nature of suffering remains unchanged, they can at least get a better perspective over it.

I will not go into details regarding all the specific themes or topics that Rupert Shortt approaches in his book. Suffice to say that he touches upon many of the *loci communes* that one would expect when dealing with the question of evil. I mention but a few: the existence of God in relation to evil and suffering, the meaning of creation, atonement by crucifixion, the issue of universalism, providence, or eschatology, challenges to the goodness of God such as the famous one posed by Dostoyevsky's Ivan Karamazov, etc. But, as I emphasized above, all this is done by pulling threads from many angles and perspectives of human knowledge, be they from philosophy, theology, science, literature, or psychology. Interesting and rewarding as seeing more closely how Shortt tangles with these topics may be, I think it would be of value to speak in more general terms about Shortt's approach, underlining those aspects that I find particularly telling.

The author doesn't delve directly into the subject. The qualification "directly" is important as it shows that the way he chooses to get started is of no small consequence for the topic of the book. In fact, of the four main chapters, the first two are, in the author's own words, "preparatory work in relation to our main theme" (p. 52). These chapters take on the subjects of chaos and meaning, and the old venerable reason versus faith debate. Why do these issues have so important a bearing – as preliminary work – on the topic of evil? Briefly put, because they offer the context in which we can properly and coherently speak about evil in relation to God's creation and goodness.

It is crucial to understand the contemporary intellectual context in which the problem of evil arises. It is a context that took roots in

the outbreak of the modern world in the XVI and XVII century along with the Reformation and the scientific revolution. Charles Taylor gave us a most competent and profound account of the tremendous changes that took place after 1500, in his acclaimed work *A Secular Age*. I mention only two aspects with a direct bearing on the problem of theodicy. Accompanying what Taylor has called the disenchantment of the world, the scientific revolution led in the end to an image of the universe which could be as far as possible from the one held previously. Whereas people thought they lived in a "cosmos", a well-ordered world laden with meaning and values, they now found themselves immersed in a cold, vast universe, devoid of values or inner meaning. It was just the beginning of a process that finally – though not at all as easily as pop science likes to boast – ended by imposing naturalism and atheism as the default position for reasonable people. A massive change occurred also in the way people understood evil. As Taylor explained, until then the framework of significance was an understanding of suffering as punishment, or an act of pedagogy or penitence from God. But that framework collapsed bit by bit as the anthropocentric shift gained firmer and firmer acceptance.

I find all of this particularly significant for any rigorous discussion on evil. In the first place, we can demand a sense of suffering, or be indignant toward evil only in a universe that has meaning, because otherwise it would be of no use. We get angry at seemingly pointless suffering and at the wickedness of human beings only because we relate ourselves to them or expect life to have meaning. It is of no avail to revolt against evil's lack of meaning in a universe that we believe to be void of any meaning or goal at all. In the same vein, it is useless to point out God's cruelty or lack of power unless we accept the possibility of God. You cannot rage at a God you don't believe in. As Shortt poignantly underlines, many find in evil a confirmation of their preexisting atheistic beliefs. We might add that in this case the whole problem of evil gains the appearance of a mere rhetorical technique.

Enough has been said to get the idea that in order to talk with sense about evil we must have a substantive understanding of the larger framework in which we operate: does the universe have any meaning or goal at all? Is the existence of God possible and how do we understand God in relation to his creation?

Chapters three and four directly confront the problem of evil, building on the foundation laid in the first chapters. Shortt deals with the divine action and intervention in the world, divine causality, the question of

prayer, suffering and different levels of evil: evil suffered and evil inflicted or performed, and finally atonement and providence. Drawing on David Bentley Hart's *That All Shall be Saved*, Shortt links the moral destiny of creation to the moral nature of God himself. He stresses that "the explanation of evil in a universe created by a good and all-powerful creator must be sought eschatologically" (p. 74) and does not hesitate to describe himself as a "hopeful universalist" (p. 76). But again, Shortt humbly appeals to the provisional character of our answers. Admitting that evil is a mystery we must live with, Shortt emphasizes that "there is no theology capable of taking away the sting of suffering" (p. 80), no analytic solution or rational argumentation that can dissipate the clouds of evil. Therefore, what people can do is to emulate the example of the monk Zosima from *The Brothers Karamazov*, whose response to the challenge was "moral and existential rather than abstract (…) radical compassion" (p. 79). Instead of giving intricate theological solutions, what we can do for people in suffering is to serve them with our presence amidst their afflictions.

The question of atonement and providence is of great importance for the theme of the book, functioning as a key to a better – though still partial – understanding of the mystery of evil. No talk about evil or suffering can eschew what stays at the heart of Christian faith: the Crucifixion, the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus for the sins of the world. This conviction "matters fundamentally to a Christian engagement with evil and suffering" (p. 85). Shortt acknowledges that the doctrine of atonement, with its emphasis on Christ's suffering and death for mankind, is hard to swallow in our contemporary intellectual milieu. This reminds us of Taylor's similar contention that "gratitude at the suffering and sacrifice of Christ seems incomprehensible, or even repellent and frightening to many" (*A Secular Age*, p. 650), but for all that, Christianity is inconceivable without sacrifice and Crucifixion cannot be reduced to an accident or second-rate teaching that can be sidelined in order not to interfere with our modern sensibilities. The kind of response to evil that Stump or Dostoyevsky, through monk Zosima, talked about can be performed, and gets meaning only in the light of Christ's suffering.

Finally, one more step must be made, otherwise all our journey so far would come to a sudden and unsatisfactory stop. As Shortt says, "faith usually goes hand in hand with a belief in providence" (p. 107). History as we witness and experience it appears devoid of any meaning, littered with cruelty, wickedness, and suffering. Christian faith cannot give a definitive solution here and now to all this senseless evil in the world. It is bound

to point – through a "still-to-be-realized eschatology" – to a time when in hindsight things will get a better perspective. To have a cogent and powerful answer, Christian theology needs to display coherence. Hence, the importance of eschatology. In the end, evil cannot be fully vindicated in this part of history. All the parts will be drawn together eschatologically.

Rupert Shortt's book will establish itself as a classic book on the problem of evil, both by its fresh approach and depth of insight despite its size. It is not within everybody's reach to say so much – and no less on the problem of evil – in such a concise and condensed form. Will it be convincing to nonbelievers? Or in the end will it just assist believers in strengthening their already held convictions?

As for the first question, no satisfactory answer can be given for someone who doesn't believe in a meaning of the universe and life however dim that could be, or who is not willing to accept the possibility of God. To express this according to the economy of the book, no chapters three and four without chapters one and two. It is an act almost of perversity or dishonesty to ask for sense and meaning in a world you declare to be meaningless. Shortt's work makes clear the importance of conducting the discussion in terms proper to the subject. If we expect honest answers from Christian theology, we should at least make the effort to understand what it says in its specific and right form, before rejecting it, otherwise we would just be dismissing a strawman.

In regards to the second question, Shortt's work is a beautiful reminder that classical or orthodox Christianity – despite human limitations that make its theological pronouncements provisional and tentative – continues to display valuable resources and answers for our world of grief and when confronted with great challenges. Especially important is the personal character of God. The problem of evil gets another perspective in this view, as opposed to Deism or other impersonal definitions of Divinity. Human beings are flesh and blood, so they need comforting, presence, meaning, and goals. Our condition as frail human beings living in a world that looks cold, meaningless, and inhospitable is precisely what gives Christian answers more substance and coherence than exclusive humanist or naturalist alternatives. But, then again, this is of course a matter of faith.