Catharina Rachik and Georges Tamer (ed.), *The Concept of Evil in Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, Key Concepts in Interreligious Discourses 16, Berlin-Boston: Walter de Gruyter 2025, 175 p., ISBN: 978-3111586229

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Like the previous titles in the *Key Concepts in Interreligious Discourses* (KCID) series, this volume also grew out of a conference held in Erlangen in February 2020, bringing together presentations on the problem of evil in the three Abrahamic traditions. While earlier volumes in the series addressed concepts such as sin, predestination, economy, tolerance or revelation,[1] this volume tackles what is arguably the most challenging theological problem shared by the monotheistic traditions: how a religion that affirms a good and omnipotent God accounts for the presence of suffering and wrongdoing in the world that He created. The volume brings together contributions by Lenn E. Goodman (on Judaism), Bruce Little (on Christianity), and Nasrin Rouzati (on Islam).

Goodman's contribution on Judaism (p. 1–47) covers a wide range of texts, from Genesis through the Psalms to the Book of Job and into rabbinic and medieval sources, with particular emphasis on Saadia Gaon and Maimonides. His interpretation of Genesis 1 deserves particular attention. He argues that repeated judgement about Creation being *good* must be understood as an *aesthetic* rather than a moral verdict. As Goodman writes, the "first value judgement in the Torah […] is not a moral but an aesthetic thought" (p. 2). Value is intrinsic to *being* rather than instrumental to some further end. This reading has significant consequences for theodicy. Evil is therefore not the opposite of goodness but its privation.

For Goodman, Abraham's negotiating with God over Sodom remains exemplary in showing that divine justice is accountable to independent moral standards (p. 3, 44), expressed most memorably in the rhetorical question: "Will not the Judge of all the earth do justice?" (18.25). The same ethical standard is to be found in Habakkuk, Jeremiah and several Psalms (10, 37, 73, 92). His analysis of Job also challenges, among other things, Russell's "characteristic of atheistic polemics", namely his "caricature of God", according to which "God is at once non-existent, evil and

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[1] See the review of *The Concept of Revelation in Judaism, Christianity and Islam* by Georges Tamer (ed.) (Berlin-Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2020), in *Review of Ecumenical Studies* 17, no. 2 (August 2025): 339–44, https://doi.org/10.2478/ress-2025-0025.

uncaring" (p. 8–9). Accordingly, Goodman argues that Russell, together with some contemporary theologians and biblical critics, concludes too hastily that the Book of Job offers no answer to the problem of evil.

Goodman further analyses three post-biblical thinkers. Philo is credited with being the first to formulate the problem of evil explicitly in philosophical terms. Drawing on the concept of Demiurge as established by Plato (*Timaeus*, 28-29, 48a) and middle Platonists, Philo argues that God delegates the fashioning of humanity's "irrational soul" and material substrate to subordinate powers. Moral evil thus resides in human freedom, whereas natural evil in matter. The longest, and the most technically detailed, discussion is dedicated to Saadiah Gaon's commentary on the Book of Job, which, in his Arabic translation, he entitled *The Book of Theodicy*. Goodman follows Saadiah's line-by-line engagement with Job's four interlocutors (Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar, and Elihu), showing how he pointedly rejects the midrashic interpretation that Job "sinned in his heart" (p. 17). Instead, he reads the dialogue as presenting, and then rejecting, every "easy answer": that Job was not really innocent, that the wicked do not really prosper, or that reward in afterlife retroactively justifies present suffering. Saadiah's most distinctive argument is that a trial whose outcome is disclosed in advance is thereby trivialized (p. 28), and genuine testing requires the sufferer's authentic uncertainty.

Maimonides (p. 31–44) breaks with Saadiah on two points. First, he rejects the rabbinic doctrine of the "sufferings of love" (the view that God afflicts especially those he loves, for their ultimate benefit) as both unbiblical and empirically untenable. Second, he relocates the origin of evil in matter itself, interpreting the adversary (*ha-satan*) as an allegory for matter. The result is a fully Neoplatonic privation theory, according to which evil is never a positive reality. As Goodman puts it, "the Absolute remains absolute, and evil is privation. But privation is inevitable if finitude is to exist" (p. 34). Among the three contributions, Goodman's chapter is the most philosophically compelling. His overall conclusion is that theodicy remains an unresolved dialectic.

Little's chapter on Christianity (p. 49–99) is organized quite differently, presenting the Christian response to the problem of evil primarily through a chronological history of doctrine. It begins by defining "classical theism" as the affirmation of a Trinitarian God who is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent. It then surveys the biblical vocabulary of evil and of Satan, the latter treated as a real personal agent whose fall is reconstructed from Ezekiel 28 and Isaiah 14, before tracing a continuous

line of development from Augustine through Aquinas to Leibniz. The chapter concludes with the twentieth-century critics and revisers of the classical tradition John Hick and Richard Swinburne.

The section on Augustine (p. 61–65) forms the doctrinal keystone of the chapter. Little reconstructs Augustine's argument in two parts. First, the will is a "middle good," capable of turning either toward the unchangeable good (God) or toward changeable, lesser goods. This turning is itself uncaused by anything external: "perverted will… is the cause of all evil" (p. 63). Second, evil itself has no positive essence but is *privatio boni*. For Aquinas (p. 66–68), God is only the "accidental" cause of evil, which should be discussed only with regard to the ontological implications of God's existence. As Little puts it, "a discussion about evil can only be understood correctly if viewed in light of the evidence that God does exist" (p. 66). Little relies primarily on Eleonore Stump's interpretation, according to which suffering functions "medicinally" (p. 69): those closest to God may also be the most likely to suffer, since God can trust them to endure affliction without spiritual collapse. Finally, Leibniz (p. 69–75) is credited with relocating the ultimate root of both moral and physical evil in "metaphysical evil."

The final sections deal with John Hick (p. 76–85) and Richard Swinburne (p. 85–91), and here Little's treatment becomes more critical. He reconstructs Hick's "soul-making" theodicy in detail (e.g., the distinction between the "image" and the "likeness" of God, the doctrine of "epistemic distance" required for an authentically free love of God), before pointing to what he regards as several genuine inconsistencies. Hick seeks to deny that any evil is ultimately gratuitous, yet when confronted with Nazi atrocities he retreats to "the positive value of mystery" (p. 84). Swinburne's libertarian "good-of-being-of-use" theodicy, which extends as far as arguing that the slave trade afforded "innumerable opportunities" for the exercise of virtue by those who opposed it, is likewise subjected to criticism. Little argues that the account of the final "annihilation" of a corrupted soul sits uneasily with his earlier claim that a good outweighing all evil must eventually be secured for everyone. He therefore remains unconvinced that Swinburne succeeds in demonstrating the ultimate prevalence of the greater good. Little thus concludes that neither Hick's nor Swinburne's version of the greater-good theodicy ultimately succeeds in eliminating the possibility of gratuitous evil. As Rachik and Tamer state in the *Epilogue*, "If the greater good is not always obtained, gratuitous evil is possible" (p. 160).

Little's final section turns from theory to *practice*. The "practical application" of theodicy (p. 94–95) asks what, precisely, a theodicy is meant to accomplish. He identifies four practical functions. First, the truth question. A theodicy responds to the atheist's argument from evil, and therefore bears directly on the question of God's existence; if this fails, "the entire message of Christianity collapses." Second, the nature of reality question. Little frames this through the example of 9/11: whether we are cosmically alone, or whether suffering occurs within a meaningful order. He is explicit that the purpose of a theodicy here is not evangelistic – it need not bring someone to faith – but rather to establish that life is not ultimately meaningless. Third, the pastoral application. Little contrasts a cancer patient seeking a treatment plan with a grieving parent for whom "it's a mystery" is pastorally useless. A theodicy, on this view, shapes what a counsellor can and cannot responsibly say to someone who is suffering. Fourth, the apologetic function. A theodicy provides a means of testing a religion's account of evil against reality. As Little puts it, "it would be a way to test the different monotheistic religions in terms of the truth values of their claims about God and evil" (p. 95). This is precisely the question that the volume as a whole seeks to address. In conclusion, Little acknowledges that no available theodicy fully answers the atheist's evidential challenge: "the Greater-Good theodicy has committed the theist to a position almost impossible to defend on evidentiary grounds" (p. 96).

Rouzati's chapter on Islam (p. 101–151) approaches the problem from several perspectives, from philology to theology to biography to mysticism. It opens with a semantic analysis of the term *sharr* ("evil"), following Toshihiko Izutsu's method of intra-Qur'anic contextualization (p. 104–11). Across the majority of Qur'anic occurrences, *sharr* denotes not misfortune but moral failure. Rouzati's aim is to reconstruct the semantic field of *balāʾ* and *fitna* ("trial" and "test") by examining how these concepts operate across four interrelated narrative categories: trial as the foundational principle of creation (11:7, "He created… to test you"); trial as manifest in both adversity and prosperity (21:35); trial expressed through characteristic forms such as fear, hunger, and the loss of property and life (2:155); and trial as experienced in a distinctive way by the prophets and their communities.

Rouzati's analysis challenges a common misreading of the Qur'an by arguing that it rejects the equation of suffering with punishment (24:61, "no blame will be attached to the blind, the lame, and the sick"), reserving the punishment narrative for a different category, namely communities

that persistently reject a prophet's message. This argument is illustrated through extended prophetic narratives (p. 112–17): Abraham's near-sacrifice of his son, Joseph (Yūsuf)'s betrayal, enslavement, false accusation and imprisonment, and the Qur'anic account of Job (Ayyūb), which Rouzati interprets as a "reward narrative" that differs significantly from its biblical counterpart. Unlike the biblical Job, the Qur'anic Job (38:41–42; 21:83–84) never questions divine justice; rather, he exemplifies patience because he does not know how his trial will end.

Rouzati then turns (p. 118–26) to the classical theological and philosophical dispute between the Mu'tazilites, who grounded human free will and a strong doctrine of divine justice (*'adl*) in the claim that God cannot create evil (since evil, if created, would compromise that justice), and the Ash'arites, who held that God's justice is identical with whatever God wills, a position Rouzati notes was challenged on different grounds by Averroes, who argued that justice cannot mean the same thing predicated of God as it does predicated of man. She argues that the philosophers' resolution was ultimately ontological rather than theological: Ibn Sina's distinction between "essential" evil (a privation intrinsic to a thing's own nature, such as congenital blindness) and "accidental" evil (a privation imposed on a thing from outside, such as fire destroying eyesight), before turning to Mulla Sadra's identification of existence itself with goodness, according to which every finite and contingent being possesses goodness only to a limited degree and is therefore necessarily imperfect.

The most distinctive section (p. 127–40) is the treatment of al-Ghazali's dictum that "there is not in possibility anything more wonderful than what is" (*laysa fī l-imkān abdaʿ mimmā kān*), a formula that anticipates Leibniz's similar argument. Rouzati is careful, however, to distinguish the two. Whereas Leibniz addresses philosophers by comparing this world against an infinite set of alternative possible worlds that God might have actualized, al-Ghazali's dictum functions primarily as a practical foundation for *tawakkul* (trust in God) addressed to ordinary believers. Rouzati further relates the dictum to al-Ghazali's own biography, interpreting his abandonment of a prestigious professorship in Baghdad as a lived instance of *balāʾ* that validates his theological position. She also compares al-Ghazali's dictum with John Hick's soul-making theodicy, noting that both treat adversity as necessary for the attainment of a higher good. Whereas al-Ghazali argues from the divine perspective (the world reflects God's wisdom and therefore cannot be improved), Hick argues from

the human perspective (this world provides the optimal *environment* for soul-making).

In the final section (p. 141–49) Rouzati turns to Rumi and the Sufi tradition, discussing Rumi's cosmology of return, the human soul as a "reed" separated from its origin, the way suffering strips away worldly attachments and becomes a means of spiritual learning, etc. In conclusion, Rouzati convincingly argues that the "problem of evil" does not map neatly onto the Qur'anic worldview, since the Qur'an places greater emphasis on the function and meaning of suffering rather than on any justification for its basic existence. Her contribution thus offers a valuable corrective to the tendency to read the Qur'an through categories derived primarily from Christian philosophical theology.

Taken together, the three chapters differ considerably in both method and emphasis. Goodman develops a philosophical argument rooted in Jewish sources; Little reconstructs the Christian doctrinal tradition while critically engaging modern theodicies; and Rouzati combines philological analysis with theological reflection to question the applicability of the Western category of the "problem of evil" to the Qur'an. A common thread running through all three chapters is their convergence on a privation theory of evil (Goodman's Maimonides, Little's Augustine and Aquinas, Rouzati's Ibn Sina and Mulla Sadra). The volume thus demonstrates the profound influence of Neoplatonic metaphysics across the three Abrahamic traditions and suggests that their responses to the problem of evil were formulated within a philosophical framework as much as within a theological one.

A co-authored *Epilogue* (p. 153–69) by Catharina Rachik and Georges Tamer provides a valuable synthesis of the three chapters, and I found it particularly useful and well structured. It summarizes each chapter's central argument, then draws out convergences. All three traditions ultimately treat evil as parasitic on, or privative of, a prior good, and develop some account of eschatological compensation. As for the points of divergence, these include the weight that the doctrine of Original Sin carries in Christianity, in contrast to its near absence in Judaism and Islam, as well as the differing status of human free will as an explanatory resource, contested even within each tradition (libertarian versus compatibilitist accounts in Christianity, Mu'tazilite versus Ash'arite in Islam, and comparatively less formal doctrinal elaboration of the question in the rabbinic tradition of Judaism).

Overall, the volume is a rich, well-documented resource for scholars and advanced students of comparative theology and philosophy of

religion, particularly for those interested in how far the shared vocabulary of "theodicy" travels across religious traditions that did not originally formulate the problem of evil in the same conceptual terms.[2] The book provides a list of contributors and a helpful index of persons and subjects. This volume deserves a place on the shelf of any scholar interested in comparative theology, the philosophy of religion, or the enduring question of evil in the Abrahamic traditions.

[2] Readers wishing to explore the problem of evil in greater depth may also consult the two special issues of the *Review of Ecumenical Studies* devoted to the topic: Florin George Călian (ed.), "Religion and the Problem of Evil / Religion und das Problem des Bösen I," *Review of Ecumenical Studies* 16, no. 1 (April 2024), https://doi.org/10.2478/ress-2024-0001, and "Religion and the Problem of Evil / Religion und das Problem des Bösen II," *Review of Ecumenical Studies* 16, no. 2 (August 2024), https://doi.org/10.2478/ress-2024-0015.