GENDER, EVIL, AND GOD: A DIALOGUE

Reginald Williams

Reginald Williams offers a novel approach to the problem of evil.

The dialogue below raises several gender issues of current importance – for example, whether women in society should be expected to have children and to raise a family. On a deeper level, though, this dialogue is probing the age-old problem of evil from a unique angle. In other words, the dialogue below is fundamentally concerned with the question of whether the existence of 'evil' (for instance, murder) is consistent with the existence of an all-good, all-powerful, all-knowing God (for instance, the God of Christianity). As will be seen, the point of this dialogue is that the conversation which it presents about gender represents an illuminating analogy for thinking about an important dimension of the problem of evil. Specifically, this conversation provides a way of asking whether it makes sense to think that an all-good, Christian-like God would create the sort of world in which we live. The suggestion is that this does not make sense, or that it is minimally difficult to understand.

– I can't believe we find ourselves in such a predicament, Lorna.

– Me neither, Teresa.

– My worst dream, a reality.

– I agree.

– Ever since I can remember, I've revered mothers. I adored my mother and the way she nurtured me. I loved my mom's mom. And I've always idolized the great mothers of our time: Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, Princess Diana, and the like. Not a day has gone by, Lorna, that I haven't envisioned myself as a mother.

– I, too, have always seen myself as a mom. My college major and career path were decided by my expectation of having a family. My very choice of a husband was motivated

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by my wish to be a mom. James always seemed like he'd be the greatest dad.

– Yes, and kids are just the greatest thing, you know? I knew this the first time I babysat as a teenager. The kinds of questions kids ask, the sorts of concerns they have, even the looks on their faces when they get upset – these are sheer delights to me.

– It seems that women are also expected to be mothers in our society. It's customary to be asked, 'How many kids do you have?' as if to say 'You either have kids or there's something wrong with you.' What's more, Teresa, it's acceptable to tell a woman what she's 'missing out on' by not having kids. But, of course, you're not supposed to inform mothers of the countless things they miss out on by having kids: a good deal of their income, their undivided attention, and independence.

– That's right, Lorna. We're conditioned to see ourselves as mothers nowadays. It's part of the very air we women breathe. I can't go anywhere without seeing depictions of happy families: a tall husband and two children minimum for the good life apparently.

– I can't even drive across town without seeing pictures of blissful parents with bountiful progeny. Just on my way to your place I was accosted by a billboard insinuating that the American Dream now calls for a husband and three kids!

– Not to mention the biological proclivity for motherhood. The drive to be a mother has to be part of our constitution. Mother nature wouldn't risk otherwise.

– I concur, Teresa. And yet here we are faced with the most absurd of realizations: that we must decide to abandon our identity as women, violating our social and biological duty to procreate, or else we shall give birth to children who will grow up to slay innocent persons.

– I know, Lorna. It's the cruelest of fates. Paul and I have been in denial from the moment my doctor told us. We can't get our heads wrapped around the fact that I carry the serial killer gene.

– Me neither.

– I've been healthy all my life.

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– And peaceful. Who'd expect peace in one generation, serial killing in the next?

– Not me, Lorna.

– Not James, either. He's had a tough time fathoming how someone with my gentle disposition could carry the serial killer gene.

– But, of course, the evidence is overwhelming. Gone are the days when you could doubt genetics. Now, when your gene analysis says your kid's going to be a serial killer, he's going to be a serial killer – end of story. And when your analysis says that your kid's predation is going to be unstoppable, you can't afford to deny the prediction.

– That's for sure.

– And so we face this most difficult of situations: We are forced to choose between realizing our personal dream as mothers and promoting the collective good, between embodying the ideal that we have always associated with women and usurping our maternal instincts, between foregoing children and giving birth to a serial killer.

– Our predicament couldn't be more sad, Teresa, because you and I have always dreamed of being mothers. I wouldn't describe our situation as the most difficult, though, because while the choices you mention are tragic, while it's tragic that women like us would have to live without children, this is clearly the sort of life we must live. We must seek out new models of how to live as women, or we must create such models ourselves, because clearly we can't have children.

– My predicament is not just tragic, Lorna. It's the worst of all possible predicaments. My biological and God-given right to have a child is being violated here. Furthermore, if I don't have a child, a child of my own, I will lose out on the opportunity of having someone love me.

– What? What do you mean, Teresa? Lots of people love you. And do you mean to tell me that adopted children can't love their adoptive parents?

– Sure, people love me, Lorna. And adopted children can love those who adopt them. But not in the sense that a biological child loves you.

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– Meaning?

– Biological children depend on you in a way that no one else ever could, not even your husband. They depend on their parents for their very existence, and they come to know that they would have never existed had it not been for their parents.

– Fair enough, Teresa. But what of it?

– Lorna, I'd say that when you realize two people made a conscious decision to bring you into the world, you develop a kind of love for those people, and a bond with them, that can be cultivated in no other way. And I want to experience this sort of love. I want there to be someone to love me in this sense, you know? I want it more than anything.

– I guess you have a point. I never really thought about children's love for their parents in this way. And now that you mention it, it would be great to have someone love me in the way you describe. But, of course, neither of us can experience this sort of love. It's just not an option, knowing what we do. The fact is that if either of us were to have children, they would grow up to do heinous things. They would be killers. And I shudder at the mere thought of knowingly bringing a killer into the world so that I might be loved in a way that is otherwise impossible. I might as well be a killer myself at that point.

– Lorna, there's a difference between being a killer and giving birth to one. There are parents of killers out there right now, but that does not make them killers themselves.

– The parents you mention might not have actually killed anyone, as their children have. But if these parents knew all along that their kids would grow up to be killers – if these parents knew this prior to conception – I'd say they're essentially killers. Or at the very least, I'd say they're culpable. If you don't want to call them killers, Teresa, that's fine with me. Call these folks abettors of killers. Either way, they're contemptible. And we can't have children, lest we be contemptible as well.

– You're probably right, Lorna. Your logic seems awfully strong. But I'm still torn. On the one hand, there's everything you've said; I would seem culpable were I willingly to bring

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into the world someone I know will commit atrocities. On the other hand, there are my instincts, my conditioning, and the life I have always envisioned for myself. ... I can't resolve this conflict within me. I can't decide for myself whether to have children. I shall let the Lord be my guide. I shall ask God whether I should have children. I shall seek my answer in Him.

– If this decision is difficult for you, Teresa, it's a difficulty that God can't ease. Indeed, if you so much as question whether you should have children, you can't conceivably find your answer in God. Don't you see, Teresa? God is the very question you ask.

– What? I don't see at all, Lorna, not your way anyhow. You don't think God can answer my question?

– No, I don't, my friend. God can't answer your question because your question is whether you should have a child knowing the whole time that he will go on to commit atrocities. Your question is whether it's acceptable for you to knowingly create someone who will do evil. And God can't answer this question because God is said to have done the very same thing Himself.

– So you're saying that God can't inform me of whether I should have a child? That God doesn't know the answer? I'd say you're crazy myself. God knows everything, Lorna. He's omniscient, remember? And I don't know where you get off insinuating otherwise.

– Oh, Teresa, you've got me all wrong here. I'm not doubting God's omniscience. In fact, God's omniscience is the whole problem. It's precisely God's omniscience that makes me doubt His ability to tell you whether you should have a child.

– Exactly how could God's omniscience pose a problem here? How is God's infinite wisdom supposed to speak against His ability to advise me on having a child? This is a real revelation you have going here, Lorna, omniscience that somehow undermines one's ability to give advice. What a concept!

– If the Lord exists, Teresa, He bears the same relation to those who have done evil that we would bear to any evil

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offspring we produce. God would have to bear the same relation to the Ripper, to Manson, and to Hitler that you bear to your child.

– And why is this?

– If God's omniscient, as alleged, He would have to have known, prior to creating them, that Hitler and the others would go on to commit atrocities – just as we know, prior to conception, that any child we have will grow up to commit atrocities. So if it's unclear whether it's acceptable for us to have a child, it's equally unclear whether it would be acceptable for an omniscient God to create the sort of monsters I just mentioned. If, in short, it's even questionably wrong for us to have children, it's equally questionable that an all-good, all-knowing God could exist as the Creator of the evildoers who abound.

– Am I to take you seriously here, Lorna? Am I to believe that you now see God's omniscience as but alleged? Are you now doubting the very existence of our Lord God Almighty because He knowingly created people who went on to choose evil?

– What can I say, Teresa? I can't avoid these doubts. It would be wrong for us to knowingly create a person who will go on to do evil. It would be dreadfully wrong, and this isn't something God can make right.

– Amazing – simply amazing. First, you tell me that I can't have a child, Lorna. Now, you're telling me I can't believe in God, either. I can only imagine what'll be next.

– Nothing more, Teresa. You've heard me out, and you understand me. I've said my piece at this point.

– Alright then, Lorna, I guess it's time I said mine. Your points have been interesting. I'll give you that. But interesting is all they've been. And your points don't trump God's plan for me and my life. God exists, Lorna, omniscience and all. I know He exists. There's not a doubt in my mind, and there's also no doubt that He wants me to have a child. I'm sorry if you don't agree.

– I'd like to agree because I'd like to have God and a child in my life. But I can't believe that it's acceptable for us to knowingly bring into the world someone who will commit atrocities. I can't believe that someone who knowingly creates a monster

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deserves the name 'good.' And I can't believe that an all-good, all-knowing God could create a Hitler, either. The two just don't go together, Teresa. They don't add up.

– If they don't add up, Lorna, this is where I stop adding. Adding will only take you so far in life, you know? After that, you have to do what feels right. I feel I should have a child, even if he chooses evil. You feel you shouldn't. That's fine: We just have different feelings.

– We do have different feelings, Teresa, no doubt about it. And our feelings couldn't be much further apart. You feel it's okay to knowingly have a child who will go on to kill people. You feel it's okay to knowingly introduce a monster into our midst: a monster that could kill me, a random stranger, even you. I denounce these feelings, Teresa. I denounce them because they're scary. You leave me feeling fearful – fearful of any child you have and fearful for the public at large.

– I'm sorry you feel that way, Lorna.

– I'm sorry, too. I'm sorry for all of us.

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