Religious Studies **39**, 421–426 © 2003 Cambridge University Press
DOI: 10.1017/S003441250300667X Printed in the United Kingdom

Response to David Myers

WILLIAM LANE CRAIG

Talbot School of Theology, Biola University, 13800 Biola Avenue, La Mirada, CA 90639

Abstract: **David Myers's critique of my proposed Molinist solution to the so-called soteriological problem of evil miscontrues that solution in several key respects. Once those misinterpretations are rectified, it emerges that his proffered critique of my Molinist solution is really quite unrelated to that solution, but constitutes instead an independent argument against the tenability of a religious epistemology of evidentialism in the context of Christian orthodoxy.**

I am grateful to David Myers for his interesting and irenic interaction with my proposed Molinist solution to the so-called soteriological problem of evil. I hope to show, however, that he has misunderstood that solution in several key respects and that once those misinterpretations are rectified, it emerges that his proffered critique of my Molinist solution is really quite unrelated to that solution but constitutes instead an independent argument against the tenability of a religious epistemology of evidentialism in the context of Christian orthodoxy.

Some misunderstandings

First, what is the problem which my Molinist proposal hopes to solve? I dismissed as tangential the alleged problem that 'the very notion of hell is incompatible with a just and loving God' on the grounds 'those who make a well-informed and free decision to reject Christ are self-condemned, … and God deeply mourns their loss'.[1] I also dismissed the alleged 'inconsistency of a loving and just God's condemning persons who are either un-, ill-, or misinformed concerning Christ', since God 'judges them according to standards of general revelation vastly lower than those which are applied to persons who have been recipients of His special revelation'.[2] Rather, 'the real problem', I said, 'involves certain counterfactuals of freedom concerning those who do not receive special revelation and are lost', that is to say, those persons who do not respond to the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S003441250300667X Published online by Cambridge University Press

general revelation that they do have but who would have responded to special revelation had they been given it.[3]

Myers, on the other hand, is troubled by the concern: 'The eternal punishment of all non-Christians simply because they are non-believers, regardless of the reasons for their non-belief, seems arbitrary and ultimately unjust.'[4] But this more general problem is not one which my Molinist proposal intends to address. My proposal specifically focuses on that group of people who constitute the most difficult case for the orthodox theist: those who reject God's general revelation and so are lost but who would have responded to His special revelation in the Gospel, had they heard it, and been saved. My proposal is that God in His mercy so providentially orders the world that any person who would respond with saving faith to the Gospel message, were he to hear it, is born at a time and place in history where he does hear it. Thus, it is no indictment of my proposal that it does not provide 'a plausible explanation of why a just God would damn every person who does (or would) freely reject the offer of salvation through Christ'.[5] The condemnation of these sorts of persons was explicitly dismissed as outside my concern, since I took it that there was already justification for God's judgement in such cases.

Second, what is the goal of my proposal? My primary aim is to show, not only that no logical impossibility has been proved in God's condemning persons who have never heard the Gospel of Christ, but that this is, in fact, logically possible. This is achieved by asserting the possibility of

> (9) God has actualized a world containing an optimal balance between saved and unsaved, and those who are unsaved suffer from transworld damnation.

But I also add that (9) strikes me as not merely possible but plausible as well. Myers notes that I claim 'to be providing a theodicy and not just a defence'.[6] But he interprets this to mean 'that, if his argument is successful, we should be convinced that the exclusivist viewpoint is actually true'.[7] This is not my understanding of the aim of a (soteriological) theodicy. A theodicy does not aspire to prove the truth of exclusivism or even of the proposed solution but merely to provide an explanation of the compatibility of God and the relevant evil which is not merely possible but plausible as well. I do not presume to know, much less to be able to prove, God's actual reason for not bringing the Gospel to the unevangelized, but I claim that, for all we know, my proposal, or something very like it, may well be true, and, hence, the proposal provides a plausible explanation. Because the Christian theodicist is not trying to prove the truth, but merely the plausibility of his account, he is free to avail himself of the resources of his Christian world view, such as doctrines of life after death, human depravity, Christ's atoning death, and so on, without begging the question. After all, his claim is that Christian theism, not some bare-boned theism, is what explains the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S003441250300667X Published online by Cambridge University Press

evil in question. Only if it could be shown that the doctrines to which he makes appeal are implausible would his theodicy be in trouble (but then, of course, Christian theism itself would be in trouble, never mind his theodicy!). Hence, Myers's charges about begging the question are out of place, since the theodicist is not claiming to prove (or even know) that his proposal is actually true.

Third, my proposal does not presuppose the doctrine of original sin. I take the doctrine of original sin to be the teaching that all persons are somehow implicated in Adam's sin and therefore morally culpable before God in virtue of Adam's fall and that, moreover, all persons are born with a sort of innate tendency to sin as a result of that fall. While my proposal presupposes the universality of sin among those who have reached an age of sufficient reflection to be morally responsible agents, it presupposes nothing about original sin. Hence, Myers misunderstands the proposal when he says that in order to make it plausible I must 'appeal to the doctrine of original sin'.[8]

Fourth, the proposal holds that God is neither unjust nor unloving to judge the unevangelized on the basis of their response to His general revelation in nature and conscience, since those who fail to respond appropriately to general revelation and never hear the Gospel would not have embraced the Gospel even if they had heard it. Notice that it is no part of the proposal that God judges the unevangelized on the basis of what their response to the Gospel would have been had they heard it. This quite different Molinist solution strikes me as very problematic and incompatible with God's love and justice.[9] But some of Myers's remarks, as well as the structure of his argument, lead me to suspect that it is this problematic solution which Myers attributes to me.

For example, he asks, 'How can those who never have an opportunity to hear the Gospel message be justly condemned for not accepting Christ?'[10] He summarizes my response to this question as follows:

> The Molinist solution to the soteriological problem of evil is therefore this: uninformed non-Christians are persons who *virtually* reject the offer of salvation. Individuals who never actually hear the message of Christ are as culpable as those who hear this message and actually freely reject it, because in any world in which the former were presented with the offer of salvation through Christ they would also freely reject it … . From this perspective, every person who ends up in hell is there as a result of either her actual or virtual free rejection of Christ.[11]

But the above question is not the operative question which my proposal seeks to address. Rather the operative question is: 'How can those who never have an opportunity to hear the Gospel message and who reject the light of general revelation be condemned for that rejection when they would have responded to the light of special revelation if only they had been given it?'. I would reject as untenable any claim that the un-evangelized end up in hell as a result of their virtual free rejection of Christ.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S003441250300667X Published online by Cambridge University Press

The structure of Myers's argument betrays this same misunderstanding. Distinguishing uninformed non-Christians from informed, conventional non-Christians, Myers aims to construct a sort of equivalence of these two groups with informed, reflective non-Christians, in order to argue that if the latter cannot be justly uniformly condemned, neither can the former. Key to their moral equivalence seems to be the former's virtually doing what the latter actually do, namely, reject Christ. Myers claims 'the two categories of non-Christians … are, in counterfactual terms, *virtually* equivalent to the category of informed, reflective non-Christians: that is, according to Craig, this is what uninformed and conventional non-Christians *would be*, if given the opportunity'.[12] Unfortunately, the claim and its explanatory gloss are neither synonymous nor materially equivalent nor, in my view, true.[13] I take it that Myers is claiming that if informed, reflective non-Christians cannot be uniformly condemned for their actual rejection of Christ, then neither can uninformed or informed, conventional non-Christians be uniformly condemned for their virtual rejection of Christ. Without this crucial link between these categories of persons, Myers's argument becomes merely an objection to the condemnation of unbelievers who have done their rational best and so is not a discussion of the fate of the un-evangelized at all.

Myers's critique

With these misunderstandings corrected, we may now turn to an assessment of Myers's critique. Myers argues that 'a fully informed and reflective person can reasonably question the truth of special revelation', which Myers takes to mean 'it is reasonable for a fully informed person to reject the Christian message'. If we assume that such a person is not culpable for his rejection of Christ, it follows that a just God will not condemn him.

The reader has probably already discerned the irrelevance of this critique to my proposal, properly construed. Without the mistaken assumption that God judges the un-evangelized on the basis of their virtual rejection of Christ, Myers's critique has nothing at all to do with their fate, and thus with the problem as I have defined it, but raises a quite independent concern: whether God's condemnation of unbelievers who have done their best to fulfil their rational duties with respect to belief in God can be just. That concern is quite independent of whether the unbeliever has been presented with general revelation only or with some special revelation. Even if my proposal were entirely correct in its assertions, the Christian particularist will still have to face Myers's objection. That objection therefore is not incompatible with my proposal, nor is it to be answered by reasserting the truth of that proposal.

This would be sufficient to undercut Myers's defeater of my proposed solution to the soteriological objection of evil, but I should like to add a word about where I think his critique of particularism goes wrong. I think his critique errs in

https://doi.org/10.1017/S003441250300667X Published online by Cambridge University Press

presupposing some form of theological rationalism, or evidentialism, according to which rational faith in God is founded on evidence. I reject this evidentialism. So, when he asks,

> Does Craig think that *any* person could be fully informed and freely reject Christ without being culpable? Does Craig assume that the evidence for the truth of orthodox Christianity is so compelling that no informed, thoughtful person can reasonably and justifiably doubt or reject it, or rationally choose another religion?[14]

I should answer both of these questions 'No'. For on the religious epistemology that I have advocated the fundamental way in which a person knows that Christianity is true is through the inner witness of the Holy Spirit, which constitutes, in Alvin Plantinga's terms, an 'intrinsic defeater-defeater' with respect to any objection brought against it.[15] Thus, even persons who have no good evidence to believe and persuasive evidence to disbelieve are culpable for their disbelief because their unbelief is ultimately rooted in their rejection of God's own witness. Indeed, as Plantinga has emphasized, such persons are cognitively dysfunctional, for their belief-forming processes are not functioning as they ought. Their rejection of Christ is therefore irrational in that sense.

So while I agree with Myers that for variously situated persons, the evidence may not be sufficient for faith on the part of a well-informed person, that does not warrant the conclusion that such a person is not culpable before God should he choose not to believe. In his quotation from my *Reasonable Faith* Myers catches a glimpse of this non-evidentialist religious epistemology, but he misses the point about the witness of the Spirit and misinterprets my remarks in terms of the doctrine of original sin. In the penultimate paragraph of his article, Myers addresses this epistemology more directly:

> The problem is that there seems to be no good reason for asserting that this is true of *every* informed person who rejects Christ. Craig, of course, is free to affirm, as a matter of faith, that all reflective, informed Muslims who reject the divinity of Christ are really deliberately resisting the spirit of [the Christian] God who draws on their hearts, but a Muslim could assert with equal force that all informed Christians who reject the truth of the Qur'an are really culpably resisting Allah's attempt to draw them to him. Such claims, on either side, are dogmatic not philosophical.[16]

These objections are familiar ones which have received adequate replies. Plantinga emphasizes that he is not arguing that his religious epistemology is true, but that for all we know, it may be true. Myers gives no reason to think that well-informed Muslims like Suzanne Haneef are not willingly resisting the drawing of God's Spirit on their hearts. On the contrary in Haneef's case, at least, her rejection of Christianity for Islam is clearly not motivated by the evidence, for no unprejudiced person who is well-informed could think that the Qur'an passes all (or, really any) of the criteria she lays out for discerning special revelation. (Just for the record I should say that neither would the New Testament pass these stringent criteria.) Myers's assumption that the Christian particularist must prove

https://doi.org/10.1017/S003441250300667X Published online by Cambridge University Press

that it is true that every well-informed non-Christian resists the drawing of God's Holy Spirit is a result of his misunderstanding the aim of a theodicy and his conflation of the concerns of theodicy with the evidentialist objection to religious belief. Finally, as to the parallel Muslim claim about Allah's drawing persons to faith in Him, Plantinga affirms that such a religious epistemology is, indeed, available to all of the monotheistic faiths, but he explains that such a situation neither implies relativism nor undercuts the plausibility of the Christian's claim.[17]

The overriding point, however, is that all of these concerns are simply independent of the problem of God's judgement of the unevangelized. Myers's immediate target is really evidentialism and, secondarily, Reformed epistemology. My Molinist theodicy does not even come into view.

Notes

1. William Lane Craig ' ''No other name'': a middle knowledge perspective on the exclusivity of salvation through Christ', *Faith and Philosophy*, **6** (1989), 176.
2. *Ibid*.
3. *Ibid*.
4. David Myers 'Exclusivism, eternal damnation, and the problem of evil: a critique of Craig's Molinist soteriological theodicy', *Religious Studies*, **39** (2003), 407–419.
5. *Ibid*., 418.
6. *Ibid*., 408.
7. *Ibid*.
8. *Ibid*., 417.
9. I allude to this view in passing in William Lane Craig *The Only Wise God* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Bookhouse, 1987; repr. Eugene OR: Wipf & Stock, 2000), 138. I correct a similar misinterpretation of my view on the part of David Hunt in William Lane Craig 'Middle knowledge and Christian exclusivism', *Sophia*, **32** (1995), 120–139.
10. Myers 'Critique', 409.
11. *Ibid*., 411.
12. *Ibid*., 413.
13. They are neither synonymous nor materially equivalent because, although it is true that an unevangelized person who rejects the light of general revelation would be an informed non-Christian were he to be accorded the benefit of special revelation, nevertheless, it is false that such a person is guilty of virtually rejecting Christ and so cannot be said to be virtually equivalent to the informed non-Christian who actually does commit the sin of rejecting Christ. Moreover, the explanatory gloss is false because it is only unevangelized non-Christians who reject the light of general revelation who would not have embraced special revelation if they were given it; in the case of those who do respond salvifically to general revelation they would, I think, have also responded affirmatively to special revelation, had they had the opportunity, since the same God disclosed vaguely in general revelation is revealed more fully and marvelously in His special revelation in the Gospel.
14. Myers 'Critique', 413.
15. See my reflections on this head in *Five Views on Apologetics*, Steven B. Cowan (ed.) (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 2000).
16. Myers 'Critique', 418.
17. See Alvin Plantinga *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 350–351. For discussion, see my final response in William Lane Craig and Antony Flew *Does God Exist?*, with responses by K. Yandell *et al.*, Stan Wallace (ed.) (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S003441250300667X Published online by Cambridge University Press