Dealing with Evil

2002 Conference of the Catholic Theological Association of Great Britain

Our previous conference had been held in Leeds on 9-12 September 2001 and during the course of the last morning but one, word came through of the spectacular assault on tens of thousands of civilians in New York. Some had watched it live on television after breakfast. By midday we had learnt that the twin towers of the World Trade Centre had collapsed with many people inside. Outrageous and brilliantly executed as it was, we quickly realised that it was one more example of an assault on innocents in a political cause to add to Srebrenica, Tel Aviv, Jenin, now Bali and so many others. Whatever the political injustices, real or perceived, they could not justify such an assault on ordinary people. Here evil was at work.

Suggestions for the next conference inevitably included: forgiveness, reconciliation, Christian-Muslim relations, but in the end the committee decided to pull several themes together under the topic *Dealing with Evil*. The purpose was to have a moment of theological reflection on an ever-present theme without getting caught up excessively in the crises of the moment.

The conference opened with the paper by John Hemer on how God dealt with evil through Jesus on the cross. Here, we were told, is God's rejection of an apocalyptic overcoming of evil in some dramatic resolution. The God incarnate in Jesus Christ is no *deus ex machina* who stops the forces of destruction in their tracks. Jesus confronts evil by suffering it and refusing to perpetuate it.

Karen Kilby examines the tradition of 'theodicy' where philosophers of religion try to answer the question of why an omnipotent and loving God allows evil to flourish in our world. She looks at the work of Kenneth Surin and Terence Tilley and concludes that the question is a legitimate one, but one to which Christian theology has no answer. When faced with the problem we have to remain silent. Pointing to the involvement of God in the cross does not answer the question. We are not in a position to answer and must keep silence. This is an response similar to that of Denys Turner who spoke about Julian of Norwich but whose paper it has not been possible to publish.

Brian Horne spoke generally about the portrayal of evil in modern literature and the failure of almost all authors to engage with, not so much good and bad, but with the metaphysical nature of evil. The great

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exception, he claims, is Joseph Conrad and the latter part of his paper includes a sustained analysis of *Heart of Darkness*. Finally we publish Brian Wicker's entertaining but impressive survey of Samson the Hebrew terroriser of the Philistine people in the Book of Joshua, in Milton's *Samson Agonistes*, in Handel's oratorio and in Camille Saint-Saens's opera *Samson and Delilah*. Samson's martyrdom and killing of innocent onlookers (Judges 16.28-30) and the cultural transformation 'Samson' has undergone to express new sensibilities provokes a reflection on current terrorisers of the innocent in political causes.

That last point allows me to report that, outside the academic papers and formal discussion, the CTA members who were present at the conference were moved – precisely as Catholic theologians – to draw up and vote to accept an unequivocal statement that the invasion of Iraq that seemed imminent, and which hardly seems less imminent now despite recent UN resolutions and the despatch of inspectors, would be contrary to the Catholic tradition of what constitutes a just war and would be a great evil leading to unpredictable destruction and the unavoidable death of many innocent Iraqis.

Geoffrey Turner
CTA Secretary

The Cross: The Non-Apocalyptic Overcoming of Evil

John Hemer

One oppressively hot night in 1985 in the south of Pakistan I lay on my bed punching the wall. I was very angry. A local landlord was mistreating some of our Christians in a dreadful way. I had been several times to speak to him and at first thought I was doing some good, but now realised that my intervention would change very little. The landlord was a particularly violent man, but the system itself was brutal and too old and too ingrained to give way just because one Western missionary thought it should. The people I was trying to help were powerless and so was I and that made me furious. The landlord had lots of enemies. If only one of those enemies would take a revolver to him, put out a contract on him – it happened all the time in this violent society – then our problems would be solved.

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