

Bosnia, Rape and the Problem of Evil

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Greg responds to a letter to the editor in which the writer's pain causes him to ask the age-old question of why God allows evil to exist.

I was reading the *L.A. Times* today in the letters to the editor section and there was a letter written by a gentleman in Newport Beach that was a response to a tragic story that the *Times* had carried a few days ago. Maybe some of you had seen that story or have read about it in the local papers about not just the rank and file tragedy in Bosnia- Herzegovena, not about the general tragedy of war. The article was about the problems of the refugees and also a women being victimized by soldiers.

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This respondent writes, 'Glancing at your April 10 paper my eyes fell upon the tragic story 'Ordeals Put Off Bosnia Rape Victim's Healing.' My heart ached for Amira, the 35 year old Muslim woman, mother of two children, suffering the loss of her husband, wandering about the countryside begging to survive. Placed in a detention camp, raped repeatedly by Serb soldiers acting as animal pigs rather than humans, the woman became another tragic victim of human wickedness. Where is mankind headed? My thoughts turn to God and ask, 'Why, God? Why did you create such monsters? God, are you for real?' If this is God's way of teaching or testing my faith', he continues, ' then my beliefs and faith are being shattered with contempt instead. Having just lost my wife to cancer, maybe my feelings are more prone and fragile to be torn apart and my feelings turn more intensely to those who are suffering also.' It's signed Victor Jashinski in Newport Beach.

There's probably hardly a person listening to this account that does not feel the same emotion with him. First of all, we feel the sense of horror as we

read about the kinds of things that other people do to each other. Just a couple of days ago was the last of a five part series of 'The Holocaust' that was on the Family Channel which was re-aired for the first time in fifteen years. But in any event, seeing again in vivid portrayal what man is capable of doing, our hearts and our minds are taken with this situation. Not only that, but we are also touched by evil in the world ourselves as we look at circumstances and we're horrified. We also look at pains in our own life as this man has reflected and we say, 'Why, God? Why me? Why this pain? Why this difficulty?' And this is really one of the most thorny problems and one of the most complex problems that anyone, regardless of their philosophical avocations or persuasions, has to address.

There is no way that I'm going to resolve this in ten minutes because this problem in its fullness, in its entirety resists a thorough resolution. I think there's some good responses, but for the most part it is something that we kind of have to live with . But I would like to give some thoughts that may provide a few guidelines for you in dealing with this yourself and people like this gentleman as they face these circumstances both outside of their life and inside of their life.

My policy in dealing with a difficult, tricky problem that defies a thorough-going solution is to work from the known to the unknown. There are some things I think we can know about this issue. We can draw some conclusions that will at least clear the deck a bit and help us to focus on those things that are less clear and less resolvable, and maybe demystify the question for us, and maybe make our hearts feel a little better about the issue.

One of the things I need to say at the outset, by the way, is that's it's very important to distinguish between the issue of evil and suffering as a philosophic problem and the problem of evil from a pastoral perspective. Actually, both were raised in this letter. Why does God allow evil in the world such that a female Bosnian refugee might be subjected to repeated rape by Serbian soldiers? Why does the problem happen out there (which is the philosophic question) but why does evil hurt me? That's a different kind of question because that's an emotional response. Even people who have resolved the issue of evil philosophically still shudder under its impact when it hits them.

Even though their mind may have answers their heart still asks 'Why?' when they become victimized by evil in the world. So we see both kinds here.

I'm going to start out by trying to deal with the philosophic problem and then make a comment about the pastoral problem. They are distinct questions.

By the way, when someone comes to you with the pastoral issue, you can't resolve that by giving them a philosophic answer. It just doesn't work. That's not their need. Their need isn't their mind at that point or their intellect; their need is their heart, the grief they are going through. There's a different kind of approach there. I'm actually better at the first than the second. I'm better at the intellectual part than the pastoral part. That's why I'm a radio talk show host and not a church shepherd as many pastors are. My gifts are different. In any event, let me try to deal with the philosophic problem first and then briefly address the pastoral issue.

So if there is no God, there can't be any evil, only personal likes and dislikes--what I prefer morally and what I don't prefer morally.

One thing to note, by the way, is that this man presumes that God made man this way ('Why, God, why did you create such monsters?'). Now if you are thinking from a Biblical perspective, you know that that is not the case. The Bible does not teach that God created monsters. It teaches that He created human beings that were not monsters at all but were good. They didn't have this propensity and proclivity for evil. He didn't make man with that. But He did make man with the possibility of going wrong and the writer's response here is really a response questioning the character of God. 'How could You do this? What kind of God are you? Are you for real?' are other questions which are the approach that most people usually take when struggling with evil. In other words, when they see this kind of thing they don't question the character of man, which in my point of view would be a sensible response. (You'll understand why I say that in just a moment.) Instead they attack the existence of God. In other words, they say since there is evil in the world then God can't exist. This is not a reasonable response. It is not a rational response.

It is not a fruitful answer to the philosophic problem of evil and I'm going to tell you why that just can't work.

What doesn't make sense is to look at the existence of evil and question the *existence* of God. The reason is that atheism turns out being a self-defeating philosophic solution to this problem of evil. Think of what evil is for a minute when we make this kind of objection. Evil is a value judgment that must be measured against a morally perfect standard in order to be meaningful. In other words, something is evil in that it departs from a perfect standard of good. C.S. Lewis made the point, 'My argument against God was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust. But how had I got this idea of just and unjust? A man does not call something crooked unless he has some idea of a straight line.'^[1] He also goes on to point out that a portrait is a good or a bad likeness depending on how it compares with the 'perfect' original. So to talk about evil, which is a departure from good, actually presumes something that exists that is absolutely good. If there is no God there's no perfect standard, no absolute right or wrong, and therefore no departure from that standard. So if there is no God, there can't be any evil, only personal likes and dislikes--what I prefer morally and what I don't prefer morally.

This is the big problem with moral relativism as a moral point of view when talking about the problem of evil. If morality is ultimately a matter of personal taste--that's what most people hold nowadays--then it's just your opinion what's good or bad, but it might not be my opinion. Everybody has their own view of morality and if it's just a matter of personal taste--like preferring steak over broccoli or Brussels sprouts--the objection against the existence of God based on evil actually vanishes because the objection depends on the fact that some things are intrinsically evil--that evil isn't just a matter of my personal taste, my personal definition. But that evil has absolute existence and the problem for most people today is that there is nothing that is absolutely wrong. Premarital sex? If it's right for you. Abortion? It's an individual choice. Killing? It depends on the circumstances. Stealing? Not if it's from a corporation.

The fact is that most people are drowning in a sea of moral relativism. If everything is allowed then

nothing is disallowed. Then nothing is wrong. Then nothing is ultimately evil. What I'm saying is that if moral relativism is true, which it seems like most people seem to believe--even those that object against evil in the world, then the talk of objective evil as a philosophical problem is nonsense. To put it another way, if there is no God, then morals are all relative. And if moral relativism is true, then something like true moral evil can't exist because evil becomes a relative thing.

An excellent illustration of this point comes from the movie *The Quarrel*. In this movie, a rabbi and a Jewish secularist meet again after the Second World War after they had been separated. They had gotten into a quarrel as young men, separated on bad terms, and then had their village and their family and everything destroyed through the Second World War, both thinking the other was dead. They meet serendipitously in Toronto, Canada in a park and renew their friendship and renew their old quarrel.

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Rabbi Hersch says to the secularist Jew Chiam, 'If a person does not have the Almighty to turn to, if there's nothing in the universe that's higher than human beings, then what's morality? Well, it's a matter of opinion. I like milk; you like meat. Hitler likes to kill people; I like to save them. Who's to say which is better? Do you begin to see the horror of this? If there is no Master of the universe then who's to say that Hitler did anything wrong? If there is no God then the people that murdered your wife and kids did nothing wrong.'

That is a very, very compelling point coming from the rabbi. In other words, to argue against the existence of God based on the existence of evil forces us into saying something like this: Evil exists, therefore there is no God. If there is no God then good and evil are relative and not absolute, so true evil doesn't exist, contradicting the first point. Simply put, there cannot be a world in which it makes any sense to say that evil is real and at the same time say that God doesn't exist. If there is no God then nothing is ultimately bad, deplorable, tragic or worthy of blame. The converse, by the way, is also true. This is the other

hard part about this, it cuts both ways. Nothing is ultimately good, honorable, noble or worthy of praise. Everything is ultimately lost in a twilight zone of moral nothingness. To paraphrase the late Dr. Francis Schaeffer, the person who argues against the existence of God based on the existence of evil in the world has both feet firmly planted in mid-air.

No, the existence of the problem forces us into some kind of theistic solution. This is a good thing, which brings me to my third point. If atheism is a self-defeating philosophic solution to the problem, and some kind of theism is necessary, then it seems to me that theism is one of the only satisfying pastoral solutions to the problem.

Let's say for example that you are suffering with some kind of pain and evil in your life and you come to the conclusion that there is no God. What is the solution to the problem of your personal pain? The only solution I can think of is that your personal pain and suffering are meaningless. They are useless. They are helpless. And, in fact, it reminds me of Os Guinness in his fine book *The Dust of Death*, which has just been re-released, where he makes the point in regards to eastern religion that many eastern religions hold that the world is just an illusion--Hinduism characteristically. He quotes from a poet of the Eastern tradition who had just experienced tremendous tragedy in his life. He went to his avatar to get some comfort from his religious leader after his wife and children had been killed. His religious leader simply said to him in the face of this terrible anguish, 'The world is dew.' His point was that it's all an illusion anyway. The poet went back and he wrote this poem, a simple poem, only four lines: 'The world is dew. The world is dew. And yet....And yet....' In other words the religious answer his religious leader was that the evil simply didn't exist. But he knew personally that it wasn't dew, that it wasn't an illusion. It was there. It was real and it was impacting his life. But what comfort was there in that--nothing whatsoever.

If God wiped out all the evil in the world tonight at midnight, where would you and I be at 12:01?

If there is no God then there is no answer to the pastoral question of personal suffering and evil. It's not there--your suffering is meaningless. But if

there is a God, and if that God is the God of the Bible, then at least we have the potential of an answer. There's some kind of comfort there. God is ultimately good and just, and one day the accounts will be perfectly balanced. We can place ourselves in the hands of a powerful Creator who, by all other evidence, loves us, cares for us and comforts the afflicted. One Who will not break off a bent reed and Who will not put out a smoldering wick. One Who will hold us close to Himself. There is at least the possibility that this suffering and pain can make sense because God can use it for good in our lives.

We might ask ourselves the question, Why does God put up with this kind of evil in the world? The rapes, the war in Bosnia Herzegovina, for example? My response is that God puts up with that kind of evil for the same reason he puts up with your evil and with my evil for the time being. I'm not going to try to explain what that reason is now. The point I'm making is that this justice issue cuts both ways.

If God wiped out all the evil in the world tonight at midnight, where would you and I be at 12:01? See, the fact is that God's going to do a complete job when he finally deals with evil. C.S. Lewis makes the point when he says, 'I wonder whether people who ask God to interfere openly and directly in our world quite realize what it will be like when He does....When the author walks on the stage the play is over.' [2] Evil deeds can never be isolated from the evil doer. Our prints, yours and mine, are on the smoking gun.

What's curious to me in dealing with this issue is that no one raises the issue of whether one ought to continue to believe in the goodness of man after these kinds of tragedies. We see things like the Holocaust, the crime level, the innocent suffering at the hands of other human beings more often than not, and instead of shaking our fists at humankind who perpetrate the action we shake our fists at God. I don't get it.

Dennis Prager says, 'Whenever I meet someone who claims to find faith in God impossible, but who persists in believing in the essential goodness of humanity, I know that I have met a person for whom evidence is irrelevant.' (*Ultimate Issues* , July- September, 1989) I like that. I think that hits the nail on the head.

The last thought I will offer is just another curious one from my perspective as I hear these kinds of responses. We live our lives in rebellion to God, constantly disobeying Him, constantly disregarding him, refusing to live according to His precepts and according to His rules, and then we wonder where He is when things go wrong.

Let that one sink in a little bit.

<fn id="fn1"></fn>1 Lewis, Clive Staples, *Mere Christianity*.

<fn id="fn2"></fn>2 *ibid*.