God and the presence of evil

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I lift up my eyes to the hills.
From whence does my help come?
My help comes from the Lord,
who made heaven and earth.

He will not let your foot be moved,
he who keeps you will not slumber.
Behold, he who keeps Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.

The Lord is your keeper;
the Lord is your shade
on your right hand.
The sun shall not smite you by day,
nor the moon by night.

The Lord will keep you from all evil;
he will keep your life.
The Lord will keep
your going out and your coming in
from this time forth and for evermore.

PSALM 121 DESCRIBES A DEEP PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP with God, who is omnipotent, omniscient and benevolent. While fully aware of the presence of suffering and evil, the concept of ultimate dependence and pure receptivity in terms of devotion, feeling and piety is in place. The foundation for a stable community in a benevolent and life-sustaining order has been created. Now all will be well . . . But all is not well, because the forces of disorder, injustice, affliction and chaos are ever-present and life-threatening. The anguish expressed in the psalms of lament is also our anguish. And for many today, faith is undermined by despair, doubt and unbelief, when God seems conspicuously absent.

It is not surprising that sociologists discover that there is a decline in the plausibility of religious beliefs, even among regular church attenders.[1] For a growing number of people this represents a genuine crisis of faith – not to be confused with lack of faith. For many, religious beliefs are only acceptable providing normal criteria of truth

apply. The traditional image of God will no longer wash. Friedrich Nietzsche wrote in 1887: 'The greatest recent event . . . that "God is dead", that the belief in the Christian god has become unbelievable . . . is already beginning to cast its first shadows over Europe'.[2] After the unparalleled cruelties that this century has witnessed, it is surprising that not every Christian has a crisis of faith. Listen to the story told by the theologian Johann Metz:

> Toward the end of the Second World War, when I was sixteen years old, I was taken out of school and forced into the army. After a brief period of training at a base in Wurzburg, I arrived at the front, which by that time had already crossed the Rhine into Germany. There were well over a hundred in my company, all of whom were very young. One evening the company commander sent me with a message to battalion headquarters. I wandered all night long through destroyed, burning villages and farms, and when in the morning I returned to my company I found only the dead, nothing but the dead, overrun by a combined bomber and tank assault. I could see only dead and empty faces, where the day before I had shared childhood fears and youthful laughter. I remember nothing but a wordless cry. Thus I see myself to this very day, and behind this memory all my childhood dreams crumble away. A fissure had opened in my powerful Bavarian Catholic socialization with its impregnable confidence. What would happen if one took this sort of remembrance not to the psychologist but into the Church? and if one did not allow oneself to be talked out of such unreconciled memories even by theology, but rather wanted to have faith with them and, with them, speak about God? Whoever talks about God in Jesus' sense will always take into account the way one's own preformulated certainties are wounded by the misfortunes of others.[3]

The diagnosis of Nietzsche was not right: he should have warned about the death of people, millions and millions of innocent people. But then again, perhaps he did. In 1981 the warning of Johann Metz was unambiguous when he wrote that after Auschwitz, every theological 'profundity' which is unrelated to people and their concrete situation must cease to exist.[4]

A crisis of faith

Nicholas Lash places the crisis of faith in a philosophical context in a paper he wrote in preparation for a conference in Germany in

1995 of the European Society for Catholic Theology. The theme of the conference was '*Gott – ein Fremder in unserem Haus?*' ('God – a stranger in our house?') focusing on varied and sometimes contradictory ways in which God's existence is understood or rejected at the present time ('*Die Krise des neuzeitlichen Gottesbegriff*'). He explained:

> . . . we might set out from the self-evident observation that a crisis in our thinking about God is a crisis about truth. Some people interpret this in epistemic terms, as referring to a crisis of credibility; the culmination of 300 years' erosion, by the acids of secular modernity, of reasoned belief in God's existence. Others, however, construe it in ethical terms: it is trust in God's reliability and loving kindness, his unswerving faithfulness, rather than belief in his reality, which is now under the more fundamental threat.[5]

There is 'a jarring juxtaposition of the hymnic affirmation of God's world-ordering power and endless faithfulness and the grim reality of historical experience'.[6]

To discern theological truthfulness requires some understanding of theological reasoning and religious language. This language has greater affinity with poetry than with technology. It deals with religious imagination revealed within a particular narrative tradition, or as David Tracy has written:

> The history of theology is the history of the ever-shifting relationship between the reality of God and that divine reality as experienced and understood from within a *logos*, i.e. a particular horizon of intelligibility.[7]

Of course, there is no word more difficult to use well than 'God'.[8] And today, for many, talk of an omnipotent, omniscient and benevolent God lacks intelligibility; normal criteria of truth rule it out – particularly in the face of so much suffering in the world.

A crisis of faith is justified, and today, surrounded as we all are by indifference or militant rejection of religious beliefs, this is a sign of life and of hope. This is not to underestimate its seriousness and the sense of desolation and dislocation that may be part of it. In London, in the 1997 Cardinal Bea Memorial Lecture entitled 'Jesus Christ and Auschwitz', Nicholas de Lange concluded:

> The post-Auschwitz generation is a forlorn and bewildered generation. So many certainties have been shattered, so many false gods toppled. Where then is the true god? That is the question to which we strive to find an answer.[9]

Nicholas de Lange and I teach a course together on Jewish and Christian responses to the Holocaust and I am always painfully aware that, particularly in the Gospel of John, devastating anti-Judaic statements are put in the mouth of Christ, which are read in our churches without any comment whatsoever or, what is even worse, are read in a triumphant tone of voice. So when he asks 'Where then is the true god?', I hear a pointed but justifiable accusation, though not intended.

Where then is the true God?

It is entirely appropriate to look first of all for resources that may help to formulate an answer and provide directives in the Wisdom literature of the Bible. Without wanting in any way to diminish the seriousness and legitimacy of the crisis in our time, a return to the Bible is a reminder that there is nothing new under the sun.[10] The fundamental wisdom of Jeremiah sets the scene.[11] It states confidently and authoritatively, 'Thus says the Lord'.

> Thus says the Lord:
> Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his arm,
> whose heart turns away from the Lord.
> He is like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see any good come.
> He shall dwell in the parched places of the wilderness, in an
> uninhabited salt land.
> Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord.
> He is like a tree planted by water, that sends out its roots by the
> stream,
> and does not fear when heat comes, for its leaves remain green,
> and is not anxious in the year of drought, for it does not cease to
> bear fruit.

As already said earlier, trust in the Lord has been shaken and even abandoned, not just by the sceptical attitude that nourishes scientific discoveries and overturns longstanding social conventions, but by everything the word 'Auschwitz' has come to represent.

That crisis of faith is not just confined to the contemporary world: the anger and total bewilderment can also be found in the Psalms, in

Isaiah, Daniel and Ecclesiastes, and the Christian Bible tries to provide a definitive answer. But it has first and foremost been given a poetic and theological home in the Book of Job. The assumption that Wisdom is rooted in the structure of creation, in the way God has designed the moral coherence of the world for the well-being of people, is fundamentally challenged. Job must find Wisdom outside the consensus of the community. The basic theodicy, on which his community (and ours!) relies for stability and fairness, has collapsed; the credibility of a covenantal relationship with God is gone. He rightly asks: 'But where shall wisdom be found? And where is the place of understanding?'[12]

Two theodicies

A theodicy brings together God and a particular understanding of justice. The Book of Job clearly illustrates that there are two schools of wisdom reflecting different theodicies. One is the wisdom of prosperity; the other is a wisdom of adversity. The wisdom of both is indispensable, despite the inherent contradiction. Ordinary life functions more or less within the boundaries set by proverbial wisdom – the wisdom of deeds and consequences. It is contingent wisdom and its boundaries are rather arbitrary. From the perspective of the dispossessed, the wisdom of Proverbs is not functioning until they have a stake in it. Supported by general consent, by and large, proverbial wisdom provides moral coherence, social order, peace and prosperity. It is a world to strive for. Proverbs offer social arrangements, full of common sense, which are necessary, for example, when you bring children into the world. Clear boundaries are set and ambiguities avoided.

But in the Book of Job, the contrivance of Proverbs is exposed. The conventional wisdom of the friends of Job, who believe without question in a moral system of deeds and consequences, is unmasked, even though it is still in place for them. Job suffers, therefore Job must have sinned. Job tries to hold on to this theodicy as well when he challenges God and demands to know why he has to suffer such calamities when he has done nothing to deserve them. When bad things happen to good people, there is a theodic crisis. Why does God allow it? Where is wisdom to be found now?

A woman's perspective: Mrs Job

When Mrs Job sees her husband, covered in boils, scraping himself with a potsherd and sitting among the ashes, she cries out: 'Do you still hold fast your integrity? Curse God, and die!'[13]

Job accuses her of being a foolish woman and he is quick off the mark to defend God. 'Shall we receive good at the hand of God and shall we not receive evil?'[14] Job is an upright, reasonable and blameless man – a solid citizen. His God is not just a fair-weather God either.

But there is great wisdom in the common sense of Mrs Job. The two sentences she utters provide two responses to the situation Job finds himself in. Two voices are represented; two perspectives – one of God and the other of Satan. Mrs Job, far from being the foolish woman, is both wise and radical. She presents Job's stark choice in his predicament: hold fast to your integrity, or curse God and die. Is Job going to listen to the voice of God, or the voice of Satan?[15] This, in fact, is the ultimate challenge – the touchstone of Job's faith. Stubborn rebellion is unproductive because it is (mis)directed at the human construct of what God ought to be. His real task is to understand what it means to be human.

Job holds fast to his integrity, if only just, and he therefore is able to hear the wisdom in the voice that comes out of the whirlwind. The mystery that is God can neither be manipulated nor bargained with. Let God be God.

And the divine blessing that is hoped for and received in the end is found in the work that has to be done and in attitudes that have changed. 'It is the work of the human community that makes Job's experience of God's justice possible':[16]

> Then came to him all his brothers and sisters and all who had known him before, and ate bread with him in his house; they showed him sympathy and comforted him for all the evil that the Lord had brought upon him; and each of them gave him a piece of money and a ring of gold.[17]

Family and friends not only restored his fortunes but also his sense of belonging. They made it their responsibility that Job was no longer the non-person to whom things 'somehow' happened. The question of God's justice turns into a general question of social responsibility, of attentiveness to the quality of life – to each life and to all of life. People are not optional extras, but God's hands on earth – or, as Simone Weil has said, the only power God has in this world is the love God inspires in us. That's the only power on offer.[18]

Wisdom is found when it is understood that 'the search for God is not the search for comfort and tranquillity, but for truth, for justice, faithfulness, integrity: these, as the prophets tirelessly reiterated, are the forms of God's appearance in the world'.[19] Our relationship to God is in the nature of 'search', not of certainties; a search for holiness.

Genesis 1: creatio ex nihilo?

And yet, once we have learned to let God be God, and not retain the human construct of what God ought to be like, the designations earlier rejected on grounds of unintelligibility, namely those of omnipotence, omniscience and benevolence, have to be reinstated. Anything less will not do.

For this, let us go back to the beginning, to Genesis 1, to the creation story that was put in place after the destruction of the first Temple, during the exile in Babylon. It is ascribed by most scholars to P, the Priestly source in the Pentateuch. Chronologically, it is the second creation story – the Garden of Eden/Adam and Eve story is older. Genesis 1 is a powerful and systematic affirmation that in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth – out of nothing; the earth was without form and void (*tohu wabohu*) and darkness was upon the face of the deep. The venerable doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is an affirmation of an all-powerful God. The affirmation that God is the creator of the world at the same time denies validity to anything that claims existence outside of God's creation. So, where do the forces of destruction and evil come from? For as long as Jewish and Christian theologians have existed, they have argued about this. In fact, the story that Elie Wiesel tells about the rabbis who, in a death camp during the time of the Holocaust, put God on trial and found God guilty of every charge, is often used to illustrate the timelessness of the dilemma. After the trial was over, they are reported to have said with great humility: 'Now let us pray'. That response is equally timeless, and extraordinarily moving in the circumstance.

Creation theology

The reason why I bring to your attention the fundamental inconsistency in our creation theology – a benevolent Creator God and the presence of evil – is connected with the Holocaust. We have lived with this perplexing theology for so long that it may have contributed to our refusal to take the forces of evil and destruction in

the world with the seriousness that is required. Jon Levenson, Professor of Jewish Studies at Harvard, writes:

> . . . although it is now generally recognised that *creatio ex nihilo* . . . is not an adequate characterization of creation in the Hebrew Bible, the legacy of this dogmatic or propositional understanding lives on and continues in the perceptions of scholars and laypersons alike. In particular, a false finality or definitiveness is ascribed to God's act of creation, and consequently, the fragility of the created order and its vulnerability to chaos tend to be played down. Or, to put the point differently, the formidability and resilience of the forces counteracting creation are usually not given their due, so that the drama of God's exercise of omnipotence is lost, and a static idea of creation then becomes the cornerstone of an overly optimistic understanding of the theology of the Hebrew Bible.[20]

If the 'nothing' out of which God created the world is equated with a void, then the belief in a primordial, uncreated order is obviously a denial of this doctrine. Jon Levenson doubts whether the ancients actually held this rather abstract conception of 'nothing'. It seems to him more likely that 'nothing' was identified with disorder, injustice, disease and death. In other words, nothing *is* something – something negative. It is not the privation of being (as evil is the privation of good in some theodicies) but a real active force with a charge that is entirely negative. Levenson points out that when order emerges where disorder has reigned unchallenged, when justice replaces oppression, when disease and death are replaced by health and longevity – with this amended understanding of 'nothing' – this is indeed the creation of something out of nothing: the replacement of the negative by the positive, the replacement of that which is life-denying by that which is life-giving.

Conclusion

With this understanding there is also no longer a sharp distinction between creation and redemption. Creation is also redemption – order out of chaos. Creation, furthermore, is ongoing and we are part of the dynamic process. The crucial point of this argument is also lost if we follow the long-standing (Aristotelian) philosophical tradition of identifying God with perfect Being, so that God's opposite is non-being or nothing, in the sense of a void. In any case, the God of Israel is generally better understood in relational than in

classical philosophical terms – think of the central place of covenant, for example. But what is most worrying of all is when a creation theology is firmly in place with the static affirmations of God's total power and divine action, accompanied by the dubious affirmation of the goodness of whatever is. That is a paralysing image of the world.

Levenson writes:

> The contradiction between the God of the myth and the God of the current historical experience has risen to the level of consciousness. The myth continues to provide the language of transcendence that the great act of deliverance demands and deserves. Yet the invocation of the myth can only underscore the absence of that act of deliverance. To acknowledge openly the ground for doubting the stirring affirmations of the religion has itself become a religious act. The present is bereft of the signs of divine triumph. It is a formidable challenge to faith and a devastating refutation of optimism.[21]

> The identification of nothing with void rather than with chaos has a certain affinity with the extreme forms of the theology of grace. Both have the indirect effect of denying the moral and interactive character of God's action – the cultic community is reduced to the status of beneficiary of God's arbitrary and unmotivated action.[22]

The cosmology that affirms creation out of nothing – or indeed that makes no assumptions of what came before, is also at home with modern science, which seeks to relate space, time, matter and light but never morality or the justice of the political order, these being thought of only as cultural and social constructs. The view that the physical and moral world are entirely separate is then the logical consequence.

The important point made by creation theology is not the production of matter out of nothing, but the emergence of a benevolent and life-enhancing order.[23] God's omnipotence as dramatic enactment – not apart from people but with their active and necessary participation: a God-shaped world in which the vitality of evil and the fragility of creation are taken seriously – this is not an optimistic creation theology, nor a Manichean interpretation. It demands that each and every one of us plays a dynamic and responsible part in keeping the ever-present forces of disorder – within as well as without – at bay so as to protect and sustain God's world. This is not only a matter of social and political action: we must also take ser-

iously the capacity of liturgy to effect substantial change in the world. By liturgy is not meant just prayer and the eucharist, but also the observance of purity laws and fasting and feastdays. Our liturgical life must have a tangible shape. Discipleship is creative ordering. That is a positive and strong beginning.

In the extraordinary book *Fugitive pieces* written by Anne Michaels, which is contemporary Wisdom literature, the main character, Athos, who has courageously taken a Holocaust victim into his care, starts rebuilding a world, and says:

> It's a mistake to think it's the small things we control and not the large, it's the other way around! We can't stop the small accident, the tiny detail that conspires into fate: the extra moment you run back for something forgotten, a moment that saves you from an accident – or causes one. But we can assert the largest order, the large human values daily, the only order large enough to see.[24]

And in that order: 'Important lessons: look carefully, record what you see. Find a way to make beauty necessary; find a way to make necessity beautiful.'[25]

Next time we pray 'Our Father . . . deliver us from evil', remember that it is a joint venture, a truly inclusive 'God with us'.

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NOTES

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4 Johann Baptist Metz, *The emergent Church: the future of Christianity in a postbourgeois world*, trans David Smith (London: SCM, 1981), p 55.
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7 David Tracy, 'The return of God in contemporary theology' in Claude Geffré and Werner Jeanrond (eds), *Concilium: Why theology?* (1994/6), p 37.
8 See Nicholas Lash, 'Watching our language about God' in *Priests and People – Finding God in secular society* vol 7, no 10 (October 1993).
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10 Ecclesiastes 1:9.
11 Jeremiah 17: 5–8.
12 Job 28:12.
13 Job 2:9.
14 Job 2:10.
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20 Jon D. Levenson, *The creation and the persistence of evil*, Preface, p xxxviii.
21 *Ibid.*, p 24.
22 *Ibid.*, Preface, p xxvi.
23 *Ibid.*, p 12.
24 Anne Michaels, *Fugitive pieces* (Bloomsbury, 1998), p 22.
25 *Ibid.*, p 44.