

# The Divine Burden

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*In "The Divine Burden," Goetz further develops one of his key insights: that there is a surplus of evil and suffering in God's world that cannot be satisfactorily explained by human sin. This "tragic ecology" of history, established by God and used in the furtherance of his eschatological purpose, and not solely human sin, constitutes the principal threat to God's honor and a principal object of Christ's atoning work. Goetz reworks elements of Anselm's satisfaction theory to suggest that the death of Christ has a double object: it atones both for human sin and for "the unmerited suffering of the world."*

If God had not acted in history, if he had remained far removed from events, or if Jesus had not instructed us to pray, and to pray hoping and expecting that God can and does help us, then the problem of evil would not take on the special significance it has for the Christian faith.<sup>1</sup> A God removed from events, a God who has not promised to help us, is not directly involved in the terrible ecology of historical existence. There is, indeed, such a delicate balance in the order of things that it is not possible to act, however lofty our motives and wise our implementations, without creating a ripple effect that inevitably brings hurt or grief to other people.

Often those hurt worst are innocent bystanders. God liberates the Israelites and gives them the Promised Land at the cost of how many Canaanite lives? What had the Canaanites done except to get in the way? The modern Jews, understandably desperate to escape the crematories and the memories of racist Europe, sought a homeland—and in the process displaced the Palestinians. The Palestinians were not responsible for the centuries of Christian persecutions which culminated in Hitler. Rights come into conflict with other rights. Just causes contradict just causes.

## **Tipping History's Ecological Balance**

At every level—world-political, social, economic, class, family, individual—the ecology of existence reveals itself. Our acts have consequences beyond our reckoning. Our innocent good fortune can be the cause of someone else's grievous disappointments.

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Enact a law to aid one oppressed group and you tip the balance so that another group experiences deprivation. Do nothing—which of course is actually to do something—and the process of oppression continues unabated. The issue of quietism versus activism is usually misstated. Activists are usually quietistic when the abuses inherent in a society can be acceptably rationalized within the justifying structures of their ideologies; e.g., the leftist who somehow feels that communist tyranny is more tolerable than fascist tyranny, or the rightist who believes the opposite. Quietists for their part are usually remarkably active when the status quo on which their quietism has been calculated is disturbed.

But whether we style ourselves religious activists or quietists, the fundamental ecology of history is such that even our best acts or most patient waiting can produce more ultimate harm than good; the *very* best we can do is more good than harm. Where a high degree of justice has been accomplished, a great deal of grace has been granted. But it is always a matter of degree. No one, not even God, can act in this world without bringing unintentional suffering to others.

The New Testament is frank to acknowledge this reality. The most gracious act of goodwill conceivable is the sending of God's son, and yet no sooner was Christ born than the innocents were slaughtered. Consider Western Christendom and the suffering that Jews, heretics and unbelievers have undergone as the historical consequence of the incarnation. The greater the truth that is revealed, the greater the danger of fanaticism. The greater the justice of a cause, the greater the danger of fanaticism. Once a new reality is introduced into history, the ecological balance is disturbed. We can never do just one thing; we cannot control the shock waves of even our most gracious deeds. Such is the character of existence.

The ancient problem of evil, given the ecological character of history, is acutely a Christian problem. Malevolence is in no way necessary in order for tragedy to ensue. Somebody experiences tragedy whenever there is change. It is no longer quite so fashionable to speak of moral ambiguity as Reinhold Niebuhr never ceased to do, but surely Niebuhr was quite unambiguously correct.

The unique character of the problem of evil for Christianity is not that God is indifferent—far from it. The problem is that God acts in the world. A God who is not involved in events is, to that extent at least, not caught up in the ongoing ecology of existence. If one would want to indict God for doing evil, *à la* Job or Ivan Karamazov, then a deistic God, for example, would have only one crime to answer for: creation itself. The God of deism simply leaves his world ticking away like a watch. Once it is made, it is on its own. Deism's God is not constantly getting blood on his hands as is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

The Greek philosophic tradition produced several great statements of the fundamental human options for dealing with the terrors wrought by the historic process or by change. All these options were predicated on assumptions that preclude the possibility of a God who acts in history. The philosophies of Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics were grounded in radically different metaphysical systems. They conceived of human “salvation” differently. Plato saw evil as overcome in the ultimate immortality of the soul. The final human destiny was not in this world of appearances but in the souls transcendental returning. Aristotle had a tragic view of human existence. The soul dies with the body. Yet Aristotle’s conception of God as an unmoved mover provides humanity some solace in a world of change. At least we are derived from a changeless eternal source, though our individual tragedies are inevitable. The Stoics were pantheists. God’s will was embedded in the inevitable law of nature. Nothing can be changed; therefore those who are wise achieve an apathetic disdain for their individual fate as they know it is according to the wisdom of God and cannot be changed.

I mention these great Greek options not only because they are important in themselves, but also because they are found in variant forms in our modern world. In fact, not many fundamentally different options are even conceivable. If it is true that there has been no really new theology since the second century, it is also probably true that, in a broad sense, there have been no genuinely new philosophical options since the Greeks. This is a finite world, and the basic possibilities for human self-understanding are finite.

What these three positions have in common is a sense that the ultimate reality, or God, can help us *only* if that ultimate reality or God remains changeless and impassive. The Greek philosophic reaction against the gods of Greek paganism lay in a realization that once God or the gods became involved in the events of this world, in a free and dynamic way, divinity becomes involved in the tragic structure of existence—involved in the dreadful ecology of change. In classic Greek philosophy, God “helps” only as God transcends, or is at least unmoved by the maelstrom of human existence, unmoved by the fate of individuals.

### **The Culpability of God**

It is not my purpose here to be critical of any of these views. They derive from some of the most basic approaches to the riddle of human existence imaginable. Each of these options and their variations have sustained and continue to sustain vast segments of the human population in their attempts to cope with life and death, and are living options today. I cite these philosophies not so that they might be despised in the name of Christ,

but because I admire aspects of all these systems. They admirably avoid the fundamental question that haunts Christian theology: if God who wills to be involved has created a world in which not even he can act in perfect blamelessness, how can God avoid the accusation of guilt—ultimate, primordial culpability for human suffering; culpability for that which we experience as evil?

The very phrase “the culpability of God” grates on one’s sensitivities—and for a variety of good reasons. Not the least of those reasons is the fact that we have been radically conditioned by our Western Augustinian tradition to emphasize humanity’s culpability. In fact, Western Christianity has sometimes been downright morbid in its view of the human being as sinner. A great deal of psychic hurt has been done by the churches as they have drilled home to us our carnal natures. Once we get too morose about ourselves, it gets very difficult not to become quite depressed in our understanding of God. If we are really only vile worms, God’s love becomes unbelievable, and even if we could believe he loves us, what kind of God is it whose highest expression of his inner nature as love is the creating, cultivating, redeeming and deifying of worms?

There is power and wisdom in Augustine’s doctrine of original sin as an existential and phenomenological analysis of the human condition. However, when Augustine tells us that the whole human race is a “mass of perdition”; that we inherit from Adam and Eve not only their sin but their guilt as well; that original sin is rather like a spiritual venereal disease passed from generation to generation through the concupiscence of the sex act; that the only “cure” is baptism and that the road to hell is paved with the bones of unbaptized infants—something has gone terribly wrong.

Not only have we here a rather dark view of humanity; the implication is that God is pretty sinister as well. Add to this Augustine’s doctrine of election, which amounts to double predestination, and it is a little hard to see how such a God can unambiguously be called Love, or how his acts are innocent. Yet ironically Augustine gets into these problems partly because he is so determined that humanity, and humanity alone, bears the terrible burden of evil.

As has often been observed, Augustine rather incomprehensibly comes very close to teaching that Adam, in his sinful pride, created evil *ex nihilo*. Paradoxically then, human beings create evil, but God can “make good use of evil.” In a discussion of Judas, Augustine once argued that Judas was chosen by God so that he might precipitate the redemptive death of Christ. The same act which brings us salvation brings damnation to the predestined Judas. Christ must die so that sins may be forgiven, but God must be absolutely blameless in the death of his Son. Therefore, the unhappy Judas, “chosen for the task which suited him,” is elected for a work which is, at the same time, both dam-

nable and divinely necessary. Judas is damned for doing a work necessary to the salvation of the rest of us. The righteousness of God? It sounds more like Catch-22.

### Reigning in the Wreckage of History

The fundamental point here is that once God sends his Son into our world, the attempt to rationalize God's burden so as to shift to humanity the full responsibility for all the evil that occurs once Christ enters the world must be rejected once and for all. If Christ died according to the "definite plan and foreknowledge of God," is there any justice in seeing the pathetic Judas or Pilate or the Sanhedrin as the exclusively, or even primarily, accountable moral agents?

God does not need such tortured rationalizations in order to protect his virtue. Of course he is responsible for the death of his Son—of course he is *ultimately* responsible for creating a world which is "groaning in travail," a world in which sin can enter in, a world in which he uses sin redemptively. Of course, God bears a greater burden than any person, be he Adam or be he Judas, could ever bear. Precisely because of the burden God bears, his Son had to die his atoning death.

This is not in the least to suggest that human beings are not responsible for great evil in the world. By sins of thought, word and deed we create great suffering for ourselves and others. Through our incredible sloth and indifference, we tolerate and inflict suffering and injustice. However, when we search ourselves and accuse ourselves and acknowledge as fully as we are able all our guilt, still we know in the depths of our consciences that not all of the evil in this world is our doing. There is the ecology of history, to say nothing of natural disasters and disease. We might wish it were otherwise. Better to blame ourselves for everything so that the total innocence of God might be maintained. But it won't do. The nagging thought is there: God is the Lord of history, and he reigns eye-deep in the wreckage of history.

It was not because people of faith shouted defiance to heaven that God sent his Son. It was not because God's people could stand it no longer and cried to God, "Come and die, for you are guilty"—for the people of God have kept the secret hidden in their hearts that there is more suffering in this world than can be accounted for by our sin. How can *we* accuse God? Better that we bear the guilt ourselves in a kind of reverse Prometheanism. If God were accused and found guilty, then human existence would be unbearable.

We cannot psychologically bear to accuse God, not on a sustained basis. The dread alone would do us in. But in his atoning death, Jesus Christ has taken the unspoken accusations implicit in the ecology of existence up into himself. Jesus Christ came to

die for human sin. As Son of Man he died on our behalf. But Jesus Christ also came to die for the unmerited suffering of this world. As Son of God, he died on God's behalf.

God could, if naked power were his nature, atone for nothing. But he cannot act in a manner inconsistent with his nature. His nature is love. And if, in the economy of love unfolding in the world, there is unavoidable suffering, God the lover *must* share that suffering, bear that suffering—for our God is a lover. Lovers suffer with their beloved ones.

Now how do these reflections relate to the tradition of Christian thought about the atonement? The saving work of Christ is so rich and multifaceted a work that all the great "theories" of the atonement contain vital insights into what Christ's death accomplished: The ransom theory, so widely held in the patristic period, and the satisfaction theory most commonly associated with Anselm both contain indispensable motifs. They ought not to be seen as canceling each other out. Christ did ransom us from the power of sin and death. Christ did die on our behalf as a substitution for us before God. He has thus achieved satisfaction for our sins despite our helplessness. Similarly, there is profound truth in the Abelardian-liberal atonement theory. Surely in the example of love Christ has shown, by ransoming us and atoning for our sins, he has demonstrated divine love in such a way that we, for our part, are moved to repent and be reconciled to God.

### Contradicting Anselm

I have suggested the need for still another way of access into the meaning of Christ's death—an understanding which grows out of and yet at one level contradicts Anselm's satisfaction theory. Anselm's theory, stated in his classic *Cur Deus Homo*, runs as follows: because we cannot satisfy God's honor, which our sin has violated, Christ volunteered to become human and die for us—thus making good our past disobedience and satisfying our debt to God. Therefore, having earned a reward by his sacrificial death, we can avail ourselves of the eternal salvation he has merited.

Much of the older liberal criticism of Anselm's theory derives from a semi-Pelagianism which produces an inadequate sense of the seriousness of sin and the brokenness of our relationship with God. It fails to comprehend the tragic ecology of human existence. However, Anselm's view, which has been essentially repeated intact by the Western orthodox tradition, cannot be maintained without criticism. There are a number of serious problems in the theory, the most pertinent of these as follows:

1) Anselm's whole theory rests on the assumption that God the Father cannot freely forgive us without exacting punishment, for if the injustice of our sin is not punished, then injustice would seem to be subject to no law. This would make injustice

more free than justice. It would, indeed, make injustice godlike, for injustice would be subject to no law.

This argument is forceful to a point. However, in the end Anselm holds that the God-man can and must make satisfaction for sin. How is it possible that the incarnate Son can freely forgive when the Father cannot—especially as Anselm was a trinitarian? Though the Father must extract satisfaction from the sinner, the Son volunteers to die for the sake of sinners. A major premise of Anselm's theory is dislocated by this objection. If Jesus was the God-man freely forgiving humanity, then how can Anselm claim that God the Father cannot freely forgive?

Surely Anselm is right when he contends that forgiveness cannot be the result of a benign fiat bloodlessly decreed from heaven. Given the shattered relationship between God and humanity, given the reciprocity of outrage between God and humanity over our sin and the tragic inequities which mar God's world, simple forgiveness will not do. A "price" must be paid, but this requirement cuts both ways. Unless in his *humanity* the God-man makes satisfaction for sin, the full import of human involvement is evaded. Yet if theology in its anxiety to protect God's innocence denies that the *divinity* of the God-man has in fact made satisfaction to humanity for the evil inherent in the structures of existence, we fail to acknowledge the full passion of God's commitment to and involvement in his world. Christ had to come to humanity. There was no other way reconciliation could be achieved. However, the sending of God's Son was not the result of a divine schizophrenia. An orthodoxy that tries to shift all burden for tragedy and evil solely onto humanity cannot help polarizing the Father and the Son in the work of salvation. In reality the Father and Son are of one accord in the work of salvation. True salvation is a terribly costly gift, but it is a gift freely bestowed.

2) Anselm was not able to transcend the Greek philosophic categories of divinity. The Greek idea of the impassibility of God at certain crucial points won out in his theology, which ironically found its soteriological focus in the sacrifice of the God-man. Therefore, Anselm taught that it was Christ's humanity and not his divinity which suffered the cross. He even went so far as to insist that in the last analysis, only the appearance of God's honor was violated. The actual honor of God was not in the least violated.

Surely the cross of Christ entailed the real suffering of God, and the issue Christ died to resolve was an issue more terrible than the mere appearance of God's honor. The real honor of God is at stake in both human sin and in the ecology of history. God's honor, which is his love, can never finally be satisfied if humanity is left to bear the brunt of evil alone. God must suffer.

### **The Mystery of the Atonement**

3) Finally, Anselm's thought about the atonement, so centered in an awe-full sense of human sin, always left unanswered the question: If the human creature is subject to eternal damnation for having eaten of one miserable apple, how much more unforgivable is the murder of God's son?

To be sure, the crucifixion was done in ignorance that Christ was the Son of God, but there is more than ignorance at stake. No one wanted a messiah who came to suffer. And insofar as there was a hint of recognition on humankind's part, in the crucifixion the messiah was being returned unopened to his sender. The rejection of Christ was the rejection of his suffering, nonresistant ministry as well as blindness as to who he was. Israel, and humankind in general, has seen enough of tragedy. How dare God send a "deliverer" who plunges us further into the morass of suffering?

On the cross, Christ has borne all wrath—God's righteous anger against sinful humanity and human fury against the tragedy of existence and the creator of such a vale of tears. On the cross, the God-man was abandoned by both God and humankind. In his crucifixion all enmity found its focus, and now it is consumed in the God-man's passion. In the resurrection we have God's final comment, his last word. He can do no more. He has exacted a full measure of satisfaction from humankind, and he has borne, in the anguish of his Son, all the wrath that humankind can express, and now he offers to have done with all that. The collecting of injustices is obsolete. There is no possibility left in the world but a new beginning. Alienation has been taken up in new life. The suffering God has "earned" the right to ask us to wait and trust his promise of the final victory of life over death.

Reinhold Niebuhr, writing in these pages nearly 50 Easter seasons ago, reflected on these matters: "The whole creation groaneth and travaileth; and if God is love rather than power, it follows that He gains his victories by pain rather than by force."