

GOD DOES UNTO US AS WE DO UNTO GOD (AND VICE-VERSA)



MAŁGORZATA
WRÓBLEWSKA

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How is it possible that God allowed the camps in
Auschwitz-Birkenau and Kolyma to exist and operate as
they did? How can He calmly watch as the Mediterranean
Sea becomes a watery grave for thousands of His children?
Where does evil come from? Is God indifferent to it?

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One of the underlying foundations shared
by the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim
understanding of man and God is the creation myth
written down in the Bible and in the Koran. Another,
second pillar is the question *Unde malum?* – Where
does evil come from? And, by the same token: Where
do suffering and death come from? The most frequent
answer is that we should blame it all on Eve and par-
tially on Adam. As punishment for their disobedience
and defiance of God's commands, they were banished
from the Garden of Eden, and we are indeed still deal-
ing with the consequences of their actions. In a word,
it is people who are responsible for suffering. But not
only them. The Bible and Tradition suggest there are
more culprits.

Readers searching for the origins of evil in the Bible
are taken outside of time and space. Before the visible
world was ever created, God was defied by members

of His household and His most faithful servants – the
angels. The reason for their rebellion was the hubris
of the most powerful of angels, who just like the first
people, wanted to take God's place. Some scholars,
like Roman Zając M.I., believe that “the cause of Sa-
tan's fall was originally not hatred of God, but greedy,
egoistic envy of God's love, which ruled out the possi-
bility of sharing this love with others. Satan felt hurt
when God bestowed his love upon man, which – from
the perspective of that spiritual being – was a creature
made of mud.” Consequently, we should look for the
sources of evil – and by the same token of suffering
and death – in God's immediate surroundings and in
God Himself. Consequently, if we are to answer the
question “Where does evil come from?” in a way that
takes into account all possible factors, we must not ig-
nore transcendence. If it is said that God did not create
evil but merely let it happen, we must be consistent
and conclude that He bears responsibility for this fact.

Satan in the hands of Gods and people

The Book of Job tells us: “Again there was a day when
the sons of God came to present themselves before the



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The father gently strokes his son's back with his right hand, like a mother or a female harp-player, and places his left hand, sinewy like a stonemason's, hand, on his son's shoulder, using both hands to bring him out of the dark into the light.

Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn,
The Return of the Prodigal Son (1668)

LORD, and Satan came also among them to present himself before the LORD.” When God found out that Satan had come from the earth, He asked Satan, “Hast thou considered my servant Job, that there is none like him in the earth, a perfect and an upright man, one that feareth God, and escheweth evil?” (cf. Job 1:8). Satan replied that he had and, in a way consistent with his nature as a liar and a conflict-monger, cast doubt on Job’s moral and religious perfection. We all know what happened next. Over time, that courtier of God and perverse snake we know from the Book of Genesis became Satan – an enemy, an adversary, a trouble-maker, a slanderer, and a liar. Satan put God’s Son, Jesus Christ, to the same test as Job, ultimately leading to His death. No wonder Satan was hated more than anyone else – albeit not by everyone and not everywhere.

In the first centuries of the existence of the Church, this relentless and sworn enemy of humankind and all creation actually gained advocates. Christians remembered very well the judgment that God made against Satan: “And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it

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shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel” (Genesis 3:15). Above all, however, they were guided in their thinking about reality by Jesus of Nazareth’s style of thinking: “Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust. (...) Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect” (Matthew 5:43–48).

The matter appears simple, but this is not obvious to everyone. If demons are our worst enemies, what they deserve from us is at least compassion, if not something more, perhaps even love. Heresy! Well, not necessarily. After all, those who looked at demons through the prism of Christ’s commandment to love enemies include such great Christians as Gregory of

Nyssa, who was never condemned for that. On the contrary, he is revered as a saint of the Church, just like two other saints: Gregory of Nazianzus and Isaac of Nineveh, who even wrote a prayer for demons. Pope Francis has made references to that tradition. Commenting on the Parable of the Lost Sheep, the Pope said, “The most perfect lost sheep in the Gospel is Judas (...). He did not know the sweetness of gratuity that comes from living with everyone else. (...) And Judas was a bishop, he was one of the first bishops, no? The lost sheep. Poor things!”

God’s non-indifference

As I mentioned earlier, Jewish theologians look at the first two chapters of the Book of Genesis from a different perspective than the Christian ones. Christians see the behavior of Adam and Eve through the prism of the dogma of original sin, in terms of fault and punishment, whereas Jewish exegetes look at it in terms of love and mercy.

God banishes the first parents from the Garden of Eden for their disobedience, Christian theologians say. The Jewish scholars agree, but they add that He wants to save them, not to mete out punishment. When He expels them from Eden, He is not guided by anger. He does not make them stand before Him as defendants before a judge, but He first discreetly reminds them of His presence, pretending that He does not know anything. He encourages them to come out of their hiding, but when His efforts prove futile, He sews warm leather clothes for them. He knows that He cannot keep them with Him and they will live a life in which the snake will often do harm to them and their offspring. The Creator’s tenderness towards creation is described by Jerzy Liebert in the poem *God and Bumblebees*, for which he was sued for what we could now call offending the religious feelings:

*God is a fickle, harum-scarum child,
Who sweet red clover in tall grasses hides,*

*Then down from heaven He throws bumblebees,
So their bellies have shelter from sun and great heat.*

*Later the bees are heavy and full of sweet drink,
They can’t fly, stumble slowly, and in the grass sink,*

*So they glare up, reproachful, blaming God for all,
But He only smiles slyly – pretends not to know.*

Jews and Christians believe that the most privileged way of getting to know God is by reading the Bible. But the difference is that Christians look at the Bible through the prism of the Son of God, Jesus of Nazareth, which means that they learn the truth about God from His way of living. In the understanding of Christians, Jesus’s mentality reflects the mentality of God.

That is why Prof. Leszek Kołakowski could say about Jesus, “Was [He] God? I have no idea. But if there ever lived God’s man on this earth, it was Him.” A few centuries before Kołakowski, the Christian priest Johannes Scheffler (also known as Angelus Silesius), and therefore someone convinced that Jesus of Nazareth is indeed “true God and true man,” wrote:

*Here in the midst of Time God doth become what He,
The Unbecome, was not in all Eternity.*

When we read this distich, we witness the poet’s polemic with Paul the Apostle, an author with a poetic flair who wrote in the Letter to Philippians that Jesus, “[w]ho, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.” For Silesius, to use the technical language of theologians, the incarnation of the Son of God, His becoming of man, did not belittle, humiliate, or deprive Him and therefore God of anything – on the contrary, through the incarnation God gained what He was deprived of when He existed only “in the form of God.” Becoming human opened up the opportunity for God to experience the world in a human way, and it was only then that God became credible. Otherwise, His assurances that He loves human beings and He is a Father guided in His actions by generous selflessness would have been merely beautiful yet empty words. After all, you cannot love a human being without sharing with them the beauty and ugliness of human life.

The Gospel of Mark states: “And at the ninth hour Jesus [who was hanging on the cross] cried with a loud voice, saying, *Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?* which is, being interpreted, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? (...) And one ran and filled a sponge full of vinegar, and put it on a reed, and gave him to drink (...). And Jesus cried with a loud voice, and gave up the ghost” (cf. Mark 15:33–37). The last sound that dying Jesus made was a heart-rending cry. It was not a sound that could be expressed in the form of words. Words were no longer needed, because the greatest pain and the greatest joy are expressed either through such a cry, or through silence.

Jesus dies completely alone. Abandoned by His disciples, save for His mother, a few other women, and “His beloved disciple, Joseph of Arimathea, and Nicodemus.” Abandoned also by God, whom He called Father. He who had sacrificed all His life to God experienced the most profound unbelief at the moment of His death. In other words, this human experience, atheism, is not foreign to God. If so, then the time has come to look with more kindness at atheism. Is atheism indeed the worst enemy of faith? “The worst sin

in the history of theology and the Church’s teachings is the belief that it is very easy to speak about God. This recklessness and cheap piousness have opened up room for countless naive, comical, and perverse or toxic images of God,” Tomáš Halík, professor and priest, argues.

The Oxymoronic God

God’s only Son, being equal to God, indeed being God, dies without God. So illogical! True, but is human life logical? Is love, as the most important thing for humans, logical? Once again, Silesius:

*In vain the Cross on Golgotha
Was raised—thou hast not any part
In its deliverance unless
It be raised up within thy heart.*

It is not without reason that Jewish teachers of the Scripture describe the Song of Songs as the heart of the Bible. An erotic poem, a wedding song, in which God is only mentioned once, quite casually at that. So

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we ask how it is possible that God, who is all-powerful love, allowed the Auschwitz-Birkenau and Kolyma camps to exist and operate, how God could calmly watch the Mediterranean Sea and the Sahara becoming cemeteries for thousands of his children before our eyes, and whether it is true that God, to keep the facts serious, also created the coronavirus, and so on. There is no good and impossible to challenge answer to this question! The only thing that a Christian can say is that God, who in some way or another contributed to the existence of evil, also experienced evil. Czesław Miłosz says:

*To proclaim a man who bleeds from his wounds
A God and the ruler of the universe,
One must be crazy—a sufficient proof
That our species tends to reach for the impossible.*

What is meant by “the impossible”? It means: hope. However, if God does not stand on the sidelines of the reality as it is happening, looking with indifference or

pity upon the monstrosities of this world, but is rather present within this hell, it means that these monstrosities are in His hands. This means that it is possible that evil will result in good. “It is possible” is of course not much, but enough to agree with Wisława Szymborska, who described death as a relentless companion of all life in her poem *On Death, without Exaggeration*:

*(...) Whoever claims that it's omnipotent
is himself living proof
that it's not.*

*There's no life
that couldn't be immortal
if only for a moment.*

*Death
always arrives by that very moment too late.*

*In vain it tugs at the knob
of the invisible door.
As far as you've come
can't be undone.*

Consequently, we must answer the question *Unde malum?* by saying that it was born in God's closest surroundings, and so we must look for the meaning of this *malum* there, close to God.

A Non-Indifferent Man

Catholics have spent centuries waging disputes with Protestants over man's moral condition. One group argued that human nature was only partially corrupted by the sin of the first parents, the other claimed that this corruption was total. Critics of Christianity regarded the whole of the battle as unworthy of their attention. For that matter, rationalists and scientists treated not only this issue but also the whole of Christianity as a superstition, and an admission to believing in God as a sign of cultural – if not mental – backwardness. Consequently, “being a Christian is something shameful,” as Kołakowski observes. According to Kołakowski, theologians also felt such shame. Hence, “the last thing you hear about in faculties of theology is God.” He sums this up in the following way: “What a spectacle! The age of enlightenment and reason is breaking down, the lights of enlightenment are going out everywhere, but not in Churches and among theologians.” This “scientification” of theology has caused our civilization to lose the ability “to distinguish good from evil” in the belief that “it has liberated itself, if not entirely than at least to a considerable extent, from funny Christian superstitions.” Sin was regarded as one of such fundamental superstitions.

However, it turns out that “this great liberation means (...) liberation from sin, from the sense of guilt, or from personal responsibility. If I imagine that I sin,

I simply need to see a therapist who will cure me of these delusions.” A therapist will help me believe that everyone and everything but me are responsible for evil: “Let us profess this: this is our everyday philosophy, the philosophy of the complete innocence of an individual, the rejection of personal responsibility, the negation of evil and sin, and the ultimate negation of man by forgetting about Jesus.” We must add here that similar effects are produced by egoistic religiousness, which commits a sin that Saint John of the Cross describes as spiritual gluttony. It is committed by those who believe that it is enough to engage in many religious practices as possible to lead a pious life.

In the Book of Genesis, God tells the fratricide Cain, “If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted? and if thou doest not well, sin lieth at the door. And unto thee shall be his desire, and thou shalt rule over him.” One day, the two brothers were in the field. “Cain talked with Abel his brother,” and we do not know what he told him. But we do know what Cain told God when He asked him, “Where is Abel thy brother?”. To which Cain replied, “I know not: Am I my brother's keeper?” Therefore, the absence of a sense of guilt and sin leads directly to indifference. No one and nothing matters, apart from me, my self-fulfillment, self-accomplishment, and well-being. Paradoxically, however, it is the sense of guilt that makes us responsible for the fate of another human being, who ceases to be an individual, a person, and a citizen and becomes a brother. In turn, the more magnanimous and generous this openness is, as Saint Ignatius of Loyola would have it, the more effective it is in making us sensitive to the fortunes and misfortunes of all creation, currently on the scale of not only Earth but also the whole of the Universe. After all, we are children of the stars.

Kołakowski argues that “there are no purely technical solutions to some of mankind's great problems,” but they do require *metanoia*, or a spiritual change. It involves “recognizing that the roots of evil are inside us, inside each and every one of us, before they become part of institutions and doctrine.” The philosopher says, “The ability to feel guilt is a condition of being human. This ability makes us humans, as the Book of Genesis rightly says. (...) Unless we can feel guilty, we cannot distinguish between good and evil. The inability to do so would be suicide for mankind.” Is this warning not taking on special significance these days? What is the source of this paralyzing fear inside us that underlies everything that comprises our lives? We are trying to fight fiercely against this fear, and the more bravely we fight, the more intense it becomes, ultimately plunging us into bleary indifference.

Getting back to Kołakowski's assessment of ideologized and dogmatized rationality and scientism as well as ritualistic, superstitious, and magical religiousness, let us try to give philosophy, theology, and art the same rights as those enjoyed by mathematical and

natural sciences in the cognition of reality. It is important that we know that two times two makes four, but dreams are also important, and so is tenderness in our approach to the reality, which we are trying not only to study and describe but also to understand and communicate with. But can we find any kinship between religious people and atheists? Is there any common denominator that is possible for atheist and religious views? In one of his homilies, Pope Francis said, “Often we feel the temptation to be Christians by keeping a prudent distance from the Lord’s wounds.” According to the Pope, those wounds now mean all those who have been hurt for any reason, also through their fault. “Jesus touches human misery and he asks us to join him in touching the suffering flesh of others.” Proclaiming our faith with our lips and our hearts is not enough, as Francis puts it, because the evil one has taught Christians how to keep their distance from those who suffer and simultaneously be decent people, at least in their own opinion. Francis calls these methods of establishing distance to reality pretexts that “keep us far from real human dramas, that preserve us from contact with other people’s concrete existence and, in the end, from knowing the revolutionary power of God’s tender love” (cf. *The Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Gaudium on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today’s World*, 270).

Hurt by God

But there was a time when God demanded inhumane behavior from man, as was the case with Abraham of Ur and Jephthah of Gilead. God commanded the former to offer his son, Isaac, as a sacrifice, while the latter vowed to thank for a victory over the Ammonites by offering whatever first came out of the doors of his house to meet him. In the Book of Judges, we can read the following words, “And Jephthah came to Mizpeh unto his house, and, behold, his daughter came out to meet him with timbrels and with dances: and she was his only child; beside her he had neither son nor daughter. And it came to pass, when he saw her, that he rent his clothes, and said, Alas, my daughter! thou hast brought me very low, and thou art one of them that trouble me: for I have opened my mouth unto the LORD, and I cannot go back” (Judges 11:34–35). We know from the Book of Deuteronomy that God commanded his followers to stone those who believed in other gods, and the first to throw a stone at such a person should be his or her father. Consequently, we have a horrifying image of God and the man related to Him. Some will say that these are old times that are not worth remembering. Unfortunately...

In the mid-20th century, in the ruins of the Warsaw ghetto, a few weeks before his death, the poet Władysław Szlengel, says this to God, taking his cue from the Old Testament prophets:

*It is time! High time!
How long the day of reckoning frightened us!
We have enough of prayers and penance.
Today You will stand before our tribunal
And humbly await a verdict.
We will hurl at Your heart the tremendous stone
Of a blasphemous, terrible, bloody accusation.*

The poet then goes on to remind God that “for centuries” the Israelites were his “faithful children,” recalling those murdered in “the circuses of Caesar, of Nero, / On the crosses of the Romans, the pyres of Spain,” and finally the pogroms in the tsar’s empire and the ghettos of his times. He writes:

*You, the Almighty accused,
Will listen to every one of our words,
How the chosen people indicts You.
There is no absolution! No absolution!!!
(...)
For death in Treblinka, bent under the whip,
We the degraded, we the exhausted,
We will pay You back! We will pay You back!
You will no longer escape Your end ——
(...)
And when the executioner prods You forward,
Drives and crams You into the steam chamber
Sealing the hermetic lid behind You,
The hot steam will begin to suffocate, suffocate
And You will cry out, You will want to flee.
When the torture is finished and the agony of death
They will drag You and cast You into a hideous pit,
They will tear away Your stars —— the gold teeth
in Your jaw ——
Then burn You.
And You will be ash.*

Are these words not echoes of another Jew that went by the name Yehoshua, in whom the Christians saw God and who shortly before his death on the cross, or in fact on the gallows, cried, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46).

Here we must again refer to Czesław Miłosz’s poem *Caravels*, quoted earlier. The God of the Jews and the Christians is not, regardless of what this means, a personal or impersonal creature that knows nothing of suffering. He is not an all-powerful ruler dressed in an ermine coat, and he can be most easily found where no one expects Him. God feels most at home among sinners, whether real or purported.

The mound covering the ashes of those murdered at Majdanek bears the inscription: “People brought this fate upon people.” Not only upon people but also upon God. But neither God nor man have said their final word yet. We still live and dream, and dreams give us hope that the impossible is achievable. ■

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