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Facing evil: theological reflections

ABSTRACT

This article suggests some possible responses, drawn from the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition, to Theo de Wit's analysis of evil, narrativity and reconciliation. It is argued, first, that the problem of evil is rightly seen, not as a question relating incidentally to faith, but as an existential challenge arising from the human condition, to which the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition has sought, from its inception, to provide answers. Secondly, that the theme of not downplaying evil, but facing it in its full reality, is central to this tradition, inter alia in the longing for, and expectation of, the resurrection of the dead as a way of approaching the unresolved problem of past evil. Some related theological concepts and questions are also brought to bear on the questions raised by De Wit.

ABSTRAK

Hierdie artikel doen, uit die Joods-Christelik-Islamitiese tradisie, 'n aantal moontlike reaksies aan die hand op Theo de Wit se ontleding van die kwaad, narratiwiteit en versoening. Dit word eerstens betoog dat die probleem van die kwaad gesien moet word, nie as 'n vraag wat insideneel met die geloof verband hou nie, maar as 'n eksistensiële uitdaging wat uit die menslike kondisie voortvloei, waarop die Joods-Christelik-Islamitiese tradisie reeds uit die staanspoor antwoorde probeer vind het. Tweedens staan die tema van die weiering om die kwaad "op te smuk", en van die noodsaak om dit in sy volle realiteit onder oë te sien, sentraal in hierdie tradisie, onder meer in die verlange na, en uitsig op, die opstanding van die dode as a manier om met die probleem van onopgeloste kwaad in die verlede om te gaan. 'n Aantal ander teologiese begrippe en vrae word ook met die vrae wat deur De Wit geopper word in verband gebring.

1. EVIL AS PRIOR TO FAITH

In a recent article Theo de Wit (2010) highlights the problematic moral and existential implications of the relations between narrativity, evil and reconciliation.¹ The impression left by the article, at least to this reader, is that De Wit ultimately gives a negative answer to his opening question, which he formulates as follows: "Are we able to *recognise for what it is*, that phenomenon which in contemporary political opinion, in our philosophical and theological traditions, but also in prayers such as the Lord's Prayer, is designated 'evil' ... are we able to *think it without betraying it*, without 'changing the subject', without reducing it to something more reassuring, not *reconciling it prematurely*, but at the same time without being seduced by it, by positing it as omnipotent or imbued with an implacable necessity, to see it for what it is?" (231; italics in original)

¹ See Martin 2010, Slenczka 2010, Thesnaar 2010, Van Niekerk 2010 and the article by Vasti Roodt in this volume for more discussions relating to the themes dealt with in De Wit's article.

A number of aspects of De Wit's argument are of great theological significance.

One of these is the focus on evil itself, and on the question of theodicy related to it. The so-called "problem of evil" is sometimes portrayed, in both theological and philosophical discussions, as one that arises only after a second order account of the faith of the Judeo-Christian-Islamic ("Abrahamic") tradition has been given – as if only at that point, when the merits of this faith tradition is being considered, one is suddenly faced with the unexpected question: "Yes, but what about evil?" Given that Christians, Jews and Muslims confess the omnipotence and perfect goodness of God, it is argued, how is it possible that there is evil in the world (see e.g. the structure of the arguments in Plantinga and Tooley 2008)?

Attempts to answer this question – including Augustine's classic and very influential so-called "free will defence" (see Brümmer 2006: chapter 21; and for a Thomistic critique McCabe 2007: chapter 6) – often start from the assumed validity of this manner of putting the question. By contrast, the Biblical narratives only very seldom approach the problem of evil starting from assumptions about how things ought to be, given, as the Psalmist puts it (Ps. 62:11b-12a), "That power belongs to God (and) to You, O Lord, belongs mercy". And where the question is occasionally approached in this way, as in the book of Job, the whole point of the narrative is to call that manner of posing the problem into question. Contrary to the impression created by many discussions of theodicy – whether in criticism or in defence of faith – the problem of evil is logically prior to, and historically the starting point of, faith.

Faith is in essence a response to evil (see Sarot 1999), not a speculative cosmological hypothesis about the nature of God that is subsequently challenged by the potential defeater of evil in the same way as, say, scientific discoveries of the origin of life or logical puzzles about the Trinity may function as such potential defeaters. Such defeaters may or may not be answerable. They differ from the problem of evil, however, in that they arise *from* a particular doctrine rather than being the original source giving rise *to* the doctrine in question. The confession in the Apostles' Creed that God is "the almighty Father", for instance, is (part of) Christianity's answer to the existential problem of evil. It acquires its meaning from within that existential context, and is not based on considerations wholly unrelated to that context. Put differently: the problem of evil arises prior rather than subsequent to the confession of faith.

2. FAITH AS REFUSAL TO 'CHANGE THE SUBJECT'

But precisely the fact that faith starts from the problem of evil, rather than facing it only secondarily – as illustrated in the Psalm already quoted, which has as its starting point the cry to the Psalmist's enemies: "How long will you assault a man?" (Ps. 62:3) – means that the tradition of Biblical faith (to which the Qur'an also belongs) has constantly struggled, from its inception, with precisely the kind of question posed by De Wit in his article: How can evil be looked in the eye? It is a characteristic element of this tradition at its best that it insists on (in De Wit's words) thinking evil "without 'changing the subject', without reducing it to something more reassuring, not *reconciling it prematurely*, but at the same time without being seduced by it, by positing it as omnipotent or imbued with an implacable necessity, to see it for what it is".

The cries of the psalmists can only be understood from this perspective: Evil is not good at some deeper level. Evil is evil. Evil should not be. Evil is against God's will. Evil must be overcome. At this point CS Lewis has it exactly right when, in reply to William Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, he writes his eschatological fantasy *The Great Divorce* (Lewis 2001). In the preface to the book he argues that the attempt to make a marriage between heaven and hell "is based on the belief that ... granted skill and patience and (above all) time enough ... mere development or adjustment or refining will somehow turn evil into good", and adds: "A sum can

be put right: but ... never by *simply going on*. Evil can be undone, but it cannot ‘develop’ into good. Time does not heal it.” (xiii)

In Christianity the central symbol of this insistence to see evil *as evil* is the cross, which, however its salvific power is interpreted, points to the conviction that evil cannot be somehow sidestepped or relativised, but must be dealt with, and that confronting evil inevitably leads to enduring and suffering it. This is the meaning of sacrifice: not that evil is to be accepted as a means to an end, but that evil can only be overcome if faced head-on, regardless of the consequences to oneself. It is to refuse evil by refusing to sacrifice others, even if that means sacrificing oneself instead (see Brand 2002: 160-169 for a more extended discussion).

3. REDEEMING THE EVIL OF THE PAST?

There is yet another aspect to this. As De Wit clearly indicates in his article, evil is not overcome once the evil of the past has been replaced by a better, happier situation in the present, for the suffering of those who have died without entering the promised land cannot be undone while they remain dead and buried. It is at this point that the Christian tradition offers its most audacious – and to many its most absurd – claim: that of the resurrection.

It is a notion that Christianity inherited from the faith tradition of Israel. It lives on in both Judaism and Islam, and probably first arose during the so-called “inter-testamentary” period when many Jews were martyred in the Maccabean revolt against imperial oppression and persecution. The faithful, as they may aptly be called, refused to accept that the death of the martyrs (note that the word “martyr” derives from “marturion”, meaning witness) was the last word. They insisted, not that the martyrs are now “in a better place”, as the cliché goes, nor that their immortal souls have survived their broken bodies, but that there will be a resurrection of the body, a setting right.

It is noteworthy that, among first century Jews, it was the Sadducees, the privileged priestly class who collaborated with the Romans, who did not accept the rabbinic teaching of the resurrection. As a privileged class who had the luxury of not having to face evil in its full horror, they had no need for a resurrection (Wright 2003: 332; see also Bartholomew 2004: 226). In fact, because the hope of the resurrection was linked, in Jewish teaching, with the expectation of God’s judgement – just as, in the Psalm quoted earlier, God’s power and (perhaps surprisingly) God’s mercy are linked with God’s judgement, and with the claim that God will “render to each one according to his work” (Ps. 62:11-12; see also Rev. 22:12) – it is understandable that those who benefit from the status quo will not be attracted to a rising from the dead (see Zeindler 2004 for a systematic treatment of the link between judgment, grace and resurrection). In the poetic words of Kurt Marti (quoted by Zeindler; English translation by GB):

It would perhaps suit many lords
if in death all were balanced out
the lordship of the lords
the servility of the servants
confirmed for evermore

it would perhaps suit many lords
if forever they
remained lords in costly private graves
and their servants
servants in cheap graves in a row

but a rising is coming
which is other wholly other than we thought
a rising is coming which is
the uprising of god against the lords
and against the lord of all lords: death²

To the subversive Jewish faith in resurrection the New Testament witness adds an even more audacious – and to many an even more absurd – claim: that the hoped for resurrection in the age to come has already occurred in Jesus Christ – not only his bodily glorification, but also God’s judgment.

The elements of resurrection and judgement are closely related in the New Testament. As the apostle Peter proclaims in Acts 2:36: “God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah.” The hearers understand the implication of Peter’s proclamation: “When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, ‘Brothers, what shall we do?’” (37) On the one hand, then, the resurrection reveals or unmasks the evil of the crucifixion: the One who has been resurrected is none other than the One “you” have crucified. At the same time the resurrection is God’s victory over the evil of the crucifixion, which represents all the crosses, all the injustices and cruelties in history in which Christ shares – especially since, in the New Testament, the resurrection is sometimes portrayed as (resulting in) “first fruits” (Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 15:20), and the gift of the Spirit flowing from the resurrection as a “first instalment” (Rom. 8:11; 2 Cor. 1:22), of the promised end, when God’s people will also “be changed” (1 Cor. 15:52) as Jesus has been. That is to say, in one and the same event, evil is both looked in the eye as pure evil with no redeeming quality and overcome in an act of grace.

4. 1 CORINTHIANS 15 AS A WAY BETWEEN DENIAL OF AND SEDUCTION OF EVIL

Of particular relevance with regard to the implications of the resurrection for the victims of the past whose sufferings are not erased by a better situation in the present is Paul’s argument in 1 Corinthians 15. The question Paul confronts there is stated thus in verse 12: “But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?”

Various suggestions have been put forward as to what was actually being denied by the “some of you” referred to in the question. Are those to whom Paul is responding denying that Christ was raised from the dead? This is highly unlikely, given that the proclamation of Christ’s resurrection was the centrepiece of the first Christians’ teaching – as is evident in all New Testament texts. Being a Christian meant confessing Christ’s resurrection. Moreover, it would make little sense to argue for the resurrection of Christ by referring to that very resurrection as evidence! Another theory is that Paul’s opponents in Corinth, while confessing, like all Christians, that Christ had been raised from the dead, denied that a similar resurrection was awaiting Christ’s followers; a view that would amount to a radical form of “realised eschatology” – the conviction that the end or *eschaton* has already been fully realised in Christ’s death and resurrection and that no further fulfilment is thus to be expected. Yet another hypothesis suggests that the bodiliness of the resurrection was the issue at stake in Corinth – that Paul’s opponents showed Gnostic

² “Das könnte manchen herren so passen / wenn mit dem tode alles beglichen / die herrschaft der herren / die knechtschaft der knechte / bestätigt wäre für immer // das könnte manchen herren so passen / wenn sie in ewigkeit / herren blieben im teuren privatgrab / und ihre knechte / knechte in billigen reihengräbern // aber es kommt eine auferstehung / die anders ganz anders wird als wir dachten / es kommt ein auferstehung die ist / der aufstand gottes gegen die herren / und gegen den herrn aller herren: den Tod”.

tendencies in that they could accept that Christ and the believers' spirits could survive death in a Platonic sense, but not that their bodies would be raised. Depending on which interpretation is correct, Paul would then be arguing either that Christ was indeed raised, or that the believers will also be raised like Christ, or that the resurrection is a bodily affair and not purely spiritual.

Taking leave of all three these accounts of what Paul's opponents were denying, Notger Slenczka (2003: 228-230) argues convincingly that the question at stake in 1 Corinthians is in essence the same as that in 1 Thessalonians, namely, whether those believers who have already died would share in the new glorified life when Christ returns. The early Christians, seeing Christ's resurrection as the inauguration of the promised day of the Lord, the arrival of God's kingdom, expected the last day to arrive at any moment and were looking forward to experiencing it. The problem of the "delayed parousia", as it is often referred to, was not merely that Christ's followers had to wait longer than expected, but rather that, because of the delay, they or their loved ones may no longer be alive when the Lord returns. Evidently, those in Corinth who claimed "that there is no resurrection of the dead" held that those believers who are no longer alive when Christ returns will not share in the *eschaton*.

As in 1 Thessalonians Paul wants to put at ease those in Corinth who are worried about this claim. Over against those who deny the resurrection of Christians who have already died, Paul claims: "We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed— in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed." (51-52) In other words, Paul relativises the difference between those who will be alive and those who will have died when Christ returns: the living will have to be "changed" just as much as the dead will have to be "raised", since "flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable" (50).

While Paul's argument in 1 Corinthians 15 is a reaction to "some among you" who deny the resurrection of those who "sleep", his insistence that the dead will be raised, just as the living will be glorified, is clearly not an *ad hoc* solution to an unforeseen problem, but of central importance in his understanding of the Gospel. He goes so far as to say that if the deniers are right, "our preaching is useless and so is your faith" (14). Implicitly, then, Paul's position resonates with the question posed by De Wit concerning the evils of the past: Like De Wit (and like Walter Benjamin to whom De Wit appeals), Paul does not regard mere hope in a better future world as a satisfying answer to the problem of unresolved evil in the past: "If only for this life we have hope in Christ" – i.e. if the best we can hope for is that at least we will still be alive to experience the new world – "we are of all people most to be pitied." (19)

Apart from the pastoral purpose (those who die before Christ returns will also be raised) and the moral logic (the new world will only be good if the dead also share in it), Paul's position also has practical implications, as pointed out by Slenczka (234-236): If the believers' hope rests on the possibility that they may still be alive when the world is finally put to right, why would they put their lives at risk for the sake of proclaiming the Gospel? "And as for us, why do we endanger ourselves every hour? I face death every day—yes, just as surely as I boast about you in Christ Jesus our Lord. If I fought wild beasts in Ephesus with no more than human hopes, what have I gained? If the dead are not raised, 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.'" (30-32) In that sense the resurrection not only promises hope concerning the evil of the past, but also gives meaning to the present in the midst of evil (see Slenczka 240-242).

Paul's message, we may say in terms of De Wit's words quoted earlier, steers the believers between, on the one hand, the Scylla of "betraying [evil], ... 'changing the subject', ... reducing it to something more reassuring [or] *reconciling it prematurely*" and, on the other, the Charybdis of "being seduced by it, ... positing it as omnipotent or imbued with an implacable necessity". Believers should not deny or downplay the evil of the past by hoping only for a world to come

in which those still alive will be better off, nor should they give in to the hopelessness of not believing that evil can ever be overcome.

5. QUESTIONS REMAINING

In the above analysis of the cross and resurrection of Christ as one possible answer to the questions posed by De Wit, I have stuck to the logic of the texts discussed. If the message so vigorously proclaimed and defended by Paul is accepted, one can see how it might serve as such an answer. However, for many contemporary hearers that message is implausible. How can the dead become alive again? Do we not know from modern science that this is impossible? Does not the early church's confession of the resurrection fail to meet the criteria of modern historiography? Questions such as these deserve detailed attention and careful reflection on the relevant considerations, which cannot be provided here (see Sarot 2006: chapter 6 for a thoughtful and informed discussion of the epistemological questions involved in both scientific and historical questions regarding the resurrection). Broadly speaking, however, I would argue that it is unreasonable to measure religious faith by scientific or historical standards for the simple reason that faith is not a theoretical but an existential matter. This does not mean that questions of rational plausibility and truth can be avoided, but it does mean that the way in which these questions are considered should start from the primary function of religious faith, which is to provide meaning, rather than from the function of scientific or historical research, which is to provide explanations (on criteria of rationality in general and plausibility in particular as these relate to views of life, see Brand 38-45, 75-82). This applies not only to the Christian faith, but to all meaning-giving frameworks, including those that are "non-religious" in nature (on the inverted commas, see Brand 2011: 132-134).

Closely related to the previous question is the problem classically formulated by Gotthold Lessing (1729-1781) in his talk of the "ugly broad ditch" (Lessing 1956: 55): "Accidental truths of history can never become the proof of necessary truths of reason." (53) It is the strength of the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition – also with regard to the problem of evil at stake in this article – that it takes history, and therefore historical evil, seriously. However, it is also a weakness, since the historical outlook indeed takes leave of the kind of "necessary truths" required by Lessing. Christianity's answer, in terms of the cross and resurrection of Christ, to the problem of evil does not rely on timeless truths but on contingent facts of history that can be called into question. Unlike, say, Plato's solution to the problem of evil, which makes history irrelevant, resting, as it does, on what are taken to be purely logical conclusions about the nature of reality, Christians, like Jews and Muslims, base their faith on what they interpret as acts of God in the past – acts that might just as well not have occurred – and the expectations for divine saving actions in the future awakened by those memories. The hope of the resurrection is one that is always in question, one that can easily be denied. It does not provide a cheap answer, but one that demands commitment and risk.

Finally, the greatest challenge to the message of the cross and resurrection as an answer to the question of the evil of the past is neither that of scientific or historical plausibility, nor that of contingency, but rather the defiant statement by the character Ivan Karamazof in Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazof* (1927). Ivan does not deny the existence of God or the truth of the resurrection. He grants this possibility: "I understand, of course, what an upheaval of the universe it will be when everything in heaven and earth blends in one hymn of praise and everything that lives and has lived cries aloud: 'Thou art just, O Lord, for Thy ways are revealed.' When the mother embraces the fiend who threw her child to the dogs, and all three cry aloud with tears, 'Thou art just, O Lord!' then, of course, the crown of knowledge will be reached and

all will be made clear.” (631) However, Ivan objects to this: “I can’t accept that harmony. And while I am on earth, I make haste to take my own measures ... Is there in the whole world a being who would have the right to forgive and could forgive? I don’t want harmony. From love for humanity I don’t want it. I would rather be left with the unavenged suffering. I would rather remain with my unavenged suffering and unsatisfied indignation, even if I were wrong. Besides, too high a price is asked for harmony; it’s beyond our means to pay so much to enter on it. And so I hasten to give back my entrance ticket, and if I am an honest man I am bound to give it back as soon as possible. And that I am doing.” (362-364)

One could, perhaps, ask whether Ivan’s refusal to accept the hope of resurrection is indeed a reflection of his “love of humanity”. Would that love not move him to long for the day when the mother and her little girl can have joy? Perhaps one finds comfort in the knowledge that God will not accept Ivan’s “entrance ticket” back so that Ivan will find when the day comes, despite his present refusal, that he can share in their joy: “perhaps it really may happen that if I live to that moment, or rise again to see it, I, too, perhaps, may cry aloud with the rest, looking at the mother embracing the child’s torturer, ‘Thou art just, O Lord!’” (632) Yet Ivan’s objection always remains a possibility, because it does not depend on scientific or factual considerations, but on “ultimate values”, as Vincent Brümmer (2006: 232-234) argues. Ivan’s objection is, after all, an expression of faith, not unbelief: “It’s not God that I don’t accept, Alyosha, only I most respectfully return him the ticket.” (634) What it shows is that faith is, as has already been pointed out, always in question. Dare one hope in the resurrection of the dead, as Paul suggests, or would one judge, even when the evil of the past will have been avenged and the victims restored, that it is “better never to have been”, as the philosopher David Benatar (2008) maintains? Does the latter answer amount to “being seduced by [evil], ... positing it as omnipotent or imbued with an implacable necessity”, or does it express “love of humanity”?

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TREFWOORDE

Theo de Wit
Die kwaad
Kruis
Opstanding
Verlede

KEY WORDS

Theo de Wit
Evil
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