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ABSTRACT

This chapter traces the central dynamics of Christian theological perspectives on evil in the early twentieth century. Using a later framework from Paul Ricoeur, the chapter distinguishes four "myths" of evil - the Christian theological "Adamic" and three alternatives: "chaos", "tragedy" and "embodiment". The chapter argues that the classical Augustinian perspective on evil that the twentieth century inherits contains three basic points of tension, regarding sin, privation and theodicy. It further argues that resurgences of the alternative myths of evil put further pressures on the classical Christian account of evil, leading to the development of significant new theological perspectives that seek to integrate the insights of the alternative myths of evil into the Adamic account. The chapter briefly considers in this framework the proposals of three theological giants of the period, Karl Rahner, Paul Tillich and Karl Barth.

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"If there is one human experience ruled by myth, it is certainly that of evil"
Paul Ricoeur, 'Evil' in Encyclopedia of Religion (ed.) Mircea Eliade (1987), V. 199.

INTRODUCTION: THE CHRISTIAN THEOLOGICAL MYTH OF EVIL

I begin with some general remarks about the Christian theological perspective on evil. Christian theologians have traditionally approached discussions of evil through the lens of what Paul Ricoeur calls the "Adamic myth" that seeks to locate the origin of evil in an anthropological fall from a pristine created paradise (Ricoeur 1987: 203). By developing a particular interpretation of the Genesis narrative of the disobedience of Adam (and Eve), the Christian tradition has tended towards a view on evil that separates it from the original divine act of creation and places responsibility for evil upon humanity (a position that has its philosophical outworking in the distinction, vital for Kant and almost all moral philosophy since, between "natural" and "moral" evil). On the basis of this Adamic myth

of the origin of evil, Christian theologians have developed a particular interpretation of the theological and ontological character of evil, as well as a characteristic ambivalence about the appropriate way to respond theologically to evil. The former concerns the distinctive Christian discussions of sin and of the non-being of evil. The latter finds expression in the uncertain hesitation between what Ricoeur calls "the path of theodicy" and "the path of wisdom" (Ricoeur 1987: 204).

Before developing these three points (sin, non-being, and theodicy) in further detail, it is helpful briefly to contextualise the Christian "myth" of evil. Whilst acknowledging that there are significant overlaps between the different perspectives, Ricoeur helpfully distinguishes between three alternatives to the Christian mythological imagination of evil. These we can characterise as myths of chaos, tragedy, and embodiment. According to the first perspective, evil arises as the result of the primordial cosmic victory of order over chaos; evil is the residue of unordered chaos present in the world notwithstanding the imposition of order. On this view, the world is thoroughly ambiguous and forever flawed by the persistence of chaos. Evil is thus an unavoidable fact about the world; natural and ubiquitous; and to be resisted (and potentially overcome in the future) by the ongoing activity of ordering.

For the second perspective, by contrast, evil is more thoroughly interwoven into the fabric of reality as an unavoidable, if tragic, aspect of the world. Evil, on this view, is not opposed to order as such (indeed as Hannah Arendt (1963) makes explicit in her account of the tragic nature of evil, order can as easily nurture evil as it can resist it), but is identified with the insurmountable negativity of life. Dramatised in the Greek tragedies, such as Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, as Ricoeur puts it, "the tragic myth produced a spectacle, rather than a speculation, a spectacle that makes the spectators participate through the catharsis of the emotions of terror and pity" (1987: 202).

The third perspective differs importantly from the first two in that it identifies the origin of evil in the act of creation, rather than assuming the eternity of evil as either chaos or tragic flaw. Associated with the Platonists (and neo-Platonists), this view finds the source of evil in the imprisonment of a pristine ideal reality in the physical. Just as the immortal soul inhabits the corruptible body, so the eternal pre-existent goodness of reality is tainted by the fall into actuality. This approach has been given more recent philosophical articulation in the existentialist tradition that promotes "resoluteness" and "authenticity" in the face of the indissoluble presence of evil to reality. Thus, evil is identified with

existence itself and the appropriate response to such an awareness is to seek to escape from the conditions of being to "return" to the essential unblemished ideality.

Of course, the Christian "Adamic" perspective shares some aspects of these alternatives (and indeed has been variously synthesised with versions of all three at different times) yet it differs markedly in its unflinching refusal either to grant evil primordial status (as is the case for the first two) or to locate it as a consequence of creation itself (as in the embodiment myth). Instead, Christian accounts of evil insist that the origin of evil lies within creation in the human historical act of disobedience to God (of sin); that as a result, evil has no "positive" ontological status; and that evil can only – indeed has only been overcome by a free act of God.

THE CLASSIC AUGUSTINIAN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY PERSPECTIVE ON EVIL

Augustine provides the classic statement of this Christian theological perspective on evil (Evans 1982) and one which is broadly accepted by theologians in the first half of the twentieth century, although with interesting qualifications as we shall see. Explicitly interpreting the Genesis narrative of the fall of Adam, Augustine answers the question of the origin of evil by pointing to the uncompelled will of the first man to turn away from God and to elevate himself above his creator. On this Augustine is clear: humanity is responsible for the coming of evil; the corruption of creation is the result of human sin. Importantly, though, Augustine is also clear about the further question: why did Adam choose to sin? To this Augustine affirms that the only appropriate answer is ignorance: no reason can be given to explain the evil will that chose to disobey God, indeed one must not attempt to justify that decision, as to do so would be to qualify evil as in some sense a lesser good. The reason for the Fall is a mystery and must remain such (Brown 1978). Sin, then, is inscrutable and impenetrable; there can be no excuse offered for the terrible crime of disobedience. Further, the effects of sin are universal such that all of creation (originally good) is infected with evil. Thus, insomuch as we are creatures of God, we are created good (even in God's image) and yet, as fallen, we are thoroughly corrupted. To exist is a good – the existence of the sinner is a good and thus the sinner is a worthy object of love – and yet evil has a hold over all that is. As such, no created thing is "pure evil" and yet nothing escapes the taint of negativity that Adam's fall initiated. Theologically, then, evil is a surd; an outrage that incomprehensively sets creation against God. Evil is thus not of God nor a cosmic force to rival God, but instead it is apart from God; homeless in

the impossible place of distance from God. From this theological perspective, evil is untruth; it is the "murderous lie" (Jüngel 2008:704, referring to John 8.44) of the denial of the unsulliable goodness of God.

It is in this way that Augustine's account of the ontological status of evil resembles and yet differs importantly from the neo-Platonic account of Plotinus by which he was greatly influenced. Augustine shares with Plotinus the firm conviction that evil has no positive ontological status: it is "non-being" or thoroughgoing privation. However, whilst Plotinus equates the coming into existence of the material world as a fall from the plenitude of being (the One) towards the non-being of inanimate "dead" matter, Augustine exempts none of the created world from full participation in God's goodness. God is, in Augustine's vision, equally proximal to all of His creation, such that the non-being that is the ontology of evil is not one of distance (as in Plotinus' image of ripples spreading from a pebble dropped in water and steadily dissipating), but instead one of refusal. Here, the theology of the untruth of evil is once again apparent: the evil of evil is its touting of its loss of being as a gain in being. Hence, evil, from this Christian theological perspective is not simply the lack of goodness (the evil will is not simply the failure to act according to the good) but _is_ non-being (the evil will is the paradoxical act of opting for that which is not).

Finally, and this is perhaps the key-stone of the classical Christian account of evil as exemplified by Augustine, the consequence of evil results in a thoroughly ambiguous situation. It is fundamental to Christianity that God, in Christ, overcomes evil in an ongoing act of new creation, in which Jesus Christ reverses the Adamic fall and humanity is saved from sin. As such, in some sense at least, the basic narrative of Christianity is a theodicy, albeit one in which the gratuity of God's saving act is never compromised by rational necessity. It is thus no surprise that theodical arguments have been central to the Christian tradition, even before the modern formulation of the "problem of evil" and its responses. However, at the same time, it is equally basic to Christian theology that it is a mistake to interpret God's saving revelation in Jesus Christ as an "answer" to anything whatsoever; to do so is to misdirect the economy of salvation. Jesus is not the "second Adam" by virtue of being a solution to the lapsed state of existence brought about by human malfeasance, instead it is only in the light of God's redemptive work in Christ that the extent of human fallenness is made manifest. In other words, the Christian gospel brings both liberation and judgement.

In broad terms, the Augustinian account of evil provided the basic framework for Christian theological perspectives on evil in the first half of the twentieth century. Within this framework though three points of tension can be identified at each of the central *loci* of the account (sin, privation and theodicy) and it is these tensions that are central to the distinctive character of early twentieth-century theological writings on evil.

The account of sin given within Christian writings on evil generates the first significant tension for such a classical theological perspective. In essence, the Christian account of the origin of evil in sin, interpreted as the incomprehensible first will away from God, sets up an ambiguity of responsibility. Humanity is portrayed as responsible for the Fall, symbolised in the free uncompelled Adamic choice to disobey God's prohibitions. Yet the very lack of rational justification suggests that no reasons can be given for the Fall and it is by no means clear that Adam can be blamed for that which he cannot comprehend. By consistently striving to absolve God of any responsibility for evil, yet affirming his absolute sovereignty over his creation, Christian theological perspectives on evil tie themselves into the knot of at once ascribing responsibility for the Fall to humanity (the fault lies with Adam and not with God) and at the same time exempting the Fall from explanation (that which is explicable is "comprehended" by God). In short, as sinful, humanity is both culpable and able to plead ignorance.

The second point of tension in the classical Christian account of evil lies in its conviction that evil is characterised ontologically as privation in the form of a withdrawal from God. Here the key concern is whether evil is wholly negative and as such not at all of God or whether the withdrawal from God is the realisation of a loss potentially given to creation. The assertion of evil as privation seems, in other words, to demand both that it be wholly other from all that is and, as such, qualitatively unrelated to all that is (which seems ironically to elevate evil into an impenetrable and thus sovereign other to being) and that it be dialectically related to all that is precisely as its negation (and thus has existence, at least potentially, within creation).

The final tension lies in the ambiguity already mentioned between theodicy and wisdom; between the Christian theological assertion that God in Christ has overcome evil and the simultaneous theological conviction that what is required in the face of evil is not triumph but the cultivation of wisdom. The plurality of models of the atonement is itself indicative of this basic ambiguity in Christian accounts of evil – from triumphalist images of *Christus*

victor to compassionate depictions of Christ as the suffering servant (both of which received renewed attention in the first half of the twentieth century). Beyond this soteriological instability, however, this ambiguity generates a tension for Christian accounts of how to respond in the face of evil. On the one hand, Christian theology affirms that the problem of evil (whether formulated as a logical puzzle or an existential challenge to faith) is answerable – the Christian narrative as a whole is the definitive theodicy able to provide a morally sufficient reason for God's permitting of evil, namely the love shown in his revelation in Christ. On the other hand, Christian theologians tend to side with the figure of Job against his theodicising comforters: God's ways are mysterious and the risen Christ still bears the marks of his crucifixion. In both cases, the hesitation between the theodical impulse to justify evil and the counsel of wisdom to learn to accept evil sustains the defining tension within Christian theological ethics and political theology, namely whether to work tirelessly to combat evil or whether to strive to trust faithfully in God's redemptive work.

EXACERBATING AND RESOLVING THE TENSIONS BY EXPANDING THE CHRISTIAN MYTH OF EVIL

Whilst these three points of tension characterise Christian theological accounts of evil in every period of their development, they become particularly acute in the early twentieth century under the impact of the rise of alternative non-theological or non-Christian accounts of evil. Returning to Ricoeur's four myths of evil, it is helpful to correlate each of the tensions outlined above to alternative myths of evil and to indicate how the intrusion of elements from the different myths both serves to exacerbate the tensions in the Christian theological account and provides resources for the resolution of these tensions. Where the revival of alternative myths of evil threatens to pull apart the Christian myth by exacerbating its internal tensions one of the poles of contention is overemphasised, such that the dynamic instability of a tension tips over into a contradiction. Counterwise, when alternative accounts of evil are used as resources to resolve the tensions in the Christian myth, this resolution is achieved by re-conceiving the poles as dialectically inter-dependent and thus no longer destructively competitive.

SIN & CHAOS IN EARLY TWENTIETH-CENTURY CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

To take the points of tension once again in order: sin, privation, and theodicy. The basic tension of the indeterminacy of sin is given new impetus in the early twentieth century

under the impact of the rise of Freudian psychology and its emphasis on an uncontrollable subconscious that lies behind what superficially appears to be the rational self. The idea of the operative influence on thoughts and behaviour of a pre-rational drive can be seen as a revived form of Ricoeur's chaos myth of evil; human life is recast as thetheatre of the rational self's struggle to impose order upon an always unsuppressable chaos. Reflected in the artistic movements of cubism, surrealism, and indeed certain forms of abstraction, the idea of humanity as culpably sinful is robustly rejected in the wider culture of the early twentieth century in favour of a vision of humanity as constantly at the mercy of an uncontrollably chaotic subconscious (indeed often conceived of as a creative gift). In this light, the Christian theological attempt to assert human culpability for evil seems increasingly unrealistic and restrictive. Far from the free-wheeling anthropology of the creative ferment of life as a stream of consciousness, the theological insistence on responsibility for sin comes to be associated with a narrowly rationalistic and paternalistic account of the human person. In order to combat the permissive irrationalism of modern psychology and the chaos myth of evil that it repristinates, the Christian theological account came to overemphasise the pole of sinful culpability, which then becomes impossible to reconcile with the equally Christian theological insistence on the incomprehensibility of sin. In essence, with the imcomprehensibility of sin lost to the chaos myth, Christian theology distorts itself to promote the idea of sin as guilt precisely at the moment when the wider culture within which theology is articulated has lost confidence in the rationalist anthropology that is necessary to sustain such an account.

At the same time, the revival of forms of the chaos myth of evil can serve to resource a Christian theological account of evil. Crucial here is the idea that the unavoidable presence of the chaotic within an otherwise seemingly ordered world serves to undermine any strong accounts of both rationalism and irrationalism. If, as both the human sciences and the physical sciences increasingly seem to argue during the twentieth century, the order that we seem to perceive is sustained (and thus constituted) by a radically chaotic substrate or highly complex systems that defy linear articulation, then the Christian theological tension between the Fall as the culpable human act and as incomprehensible is dissolved. What a chaos account of evil can give to a Christian theological one, in other words, is the insight that the Fall can be the result of a deformed will that is neither wholly culpable nor wholly incomprehensible. Indeed, the realisation

of evil can be seen to be an unfortunate necessity entailed in the very act of resisting it. Unlike a pristine Platonic realm of Forms, the (real) world on such a view is marked by a persistent chaos that eternally resists the attempts to eradicate it by the imposition of order, precisely because order is itself constituted by chaos. Thus, the utopian Kantian vision of a transparently rational ethical commonwealth in which evil is overcome by the perfect coincidence of human will with human reason is dislodged by the more realist Kantian insistence upon the "crooked timber of humanity" that both absolves us of our moral failure and holds us to account as guilty.

In early twentieth-century theology, the position that comes closest to realising the constructive possibility for Christian theology of evil of the incorporation of the chaos myth is that of the Catholic theologian Karl Rahner (1904–1984). For Rahner, in the light of modern psychology, the twentieth-century mind can no longer grasp the idea of real guilt and responsibility. Instead of self-affliction, Rahner perceives that his contemporaries are more inclined to think that the "absurdity and universal misery" of human life is due to an evil fate to which humans are subject than that it is due to an act for which they are themselves somehow responsible. Rahner's response – driven by a desire to make the idea of "man as a sinner" credible to the modern mind – is to dissolve the polar opposition of guilt and innocence by proposing the idea of the "transcendental nature of sin" (Rahner 1978). Extending the Kantian analysis of humanity as subject to certain conditions, which whilst never demonstrably provable must be assumed in order for us to be the way that we seem to be, Rahner suggests that humanity is characterised by a radical freedom that in turn permits an equally radical bondage.

Rahner distinguishes between two senses of freedom: on the one hand freedom of choice, such as the freedom to choose between two finite objects or alternatives, and on the other freedom of disposing of the self before God. For Rahner, the human freedom for God is precisely not a freedom of choice – as though there were a range of alternatives to chose from– and as such can never be demonstrated empirically. Rather, it must be assumed as the condition for the freedom to choose; a condition that is itself dependent on the free act of divine grace that gives to humanity the possibility of a free, subjective "yes" or "no" to God. It is in this sense that the transcendental idea of freedom supports the contention that the nature of human freedom is not best captured as a purely autonomous self-determination, but instead is grounded in the possibility of a decision for or against God. In other words, contrary to the dominant assumptions of the twentieth century, human

freedom is not a morally or soteriologically neutral phenomenon, but is always marked by that which determines it, namely the possibility of a fidelity to or a rejection of God. Further, the transcendental freedom towards God is not itself a neutral possibility that could equally well be fulfilled in a decision for God as in a decision against. Instead for Rahner, it is freedom's destiny or nature that it be realised in a human decision to accept God's gift of self-revelation.

However, whilst for Rahner transcendental human freedom is fulfilled in its decision for God, the possibility of a "no" to God remains unextinguishable within human nature, such that the decision to have faith in God is at the same time "in the most radical way the capacity to say 'yes' or 'no' to God" (1978: 101). Thanks to the instability of transcendental freedom, in the persistence of the chaotic possibility of the denial of freedom in its very condition, humanity is both culpably responsible for its failure definitively to decide for God and yet incapable of doing so without denying the very freedom that would make such a decision possible. Evil, in other words is both the result of culpable human sin and the unavoidable consequence of the nature of reality.

PRIVATION & EMBODIMENT IN EARLY TWENTIETH-CENTURY CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY
The basic tension inherent in the second element of the Christian theological myth of evil is that between evil as an absolute privation and as an unrealised potential within creation. If the Christian claim is that evil is without being because uncreated by God, then the question becomes whether its stands wholly apart from creation or whether it is in some way derived from creation. In the first half of the twentieth century this tension became exacerbated under the influence of a revival of the embodiment myth of evil in the form of the anxiety-stricken protest of existentialism. From the existentialist perspective, the coincidence of creation and fall is apparent in the absurdity of a life lived towards death. For Heidegger (1962) and later Sartre (2007), the problem of evil is identified with the problem of finitude – a predicament that seems both unavoidable and insurmountable. If to be is to be thrown towards death, then evil is, in effect, a constitutive characteristic of existence itself. Far from the absolute privation of the Christian account, on this view, evil is all too present in the very fact of finitude.

The danger of such a development for Christian theological accounts of evil is twofold. On the one hand, Christian theology risks being associated with an otherworldly ignoring of the very real sufferings and anxieties of the age. Talk of privation and the non-being of

evil may suggest a reluctance to accept the "reality" of evil and a privileged nostalgia for the comfortable rectory gardens that caricatures of William Paley's naively optimistic natural theology routinely invoke. Unable to accommodate itself to the harsh uncompromising Darwinian world struggle of a world (and not just a nature) "red in tooth and claw", theological accounts of evil seem to retreat to highly abstracted ontological speculations that can have nothing to say to the modern era. On the other hand, there is a danger in those Christian theological responses to this challenge that attempt robustly to respond to the reality of evil by abandoning the privation account as a piece of antiquated metaphysics and turning instead to particular worldly phenomena as manifestations of evil. Of course, the overly close alignment of theological prophetic critique to historical realities is a persistent and recurring problem for theology. From Babylon in the Old Testament to "the Jews" in the New Testament and the Muslim infidels for mediaeval crusaders, theologians have long been quick to identify evil in particular embodiments; indeed, the polemics of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation provide a vivid illustration of the theological tendency to assert the very tangible embodiment of evil. In the early twentieth century, this move reccurs with a particular vengeance in response to the (broad) existentialist identification of evil with existence by suggesting particular specific targets for evil, be those the capitalist oppressors of the masses, the revolutionary disrupters of the *status quo*, whichever foreign nation is at odds with that of the author, and – most disturbingly for the future course of evil in the twentieth century – the Jews . As Robert Ericksen's (1985) analysis strikingly demonstrates, in light of the broad acceptance of the existentialist protest, twentieth-century theologians have few resources available to them to respond to the real manifestation of evil when it takes hold in the form of the Nazi programme of the "final solution" yet plenty of energy available to rail at the usual suspects by invoking the sadly traditional theological motif of demonization, a move that (perhaps unsurprisingly given the ethical-political trajectory of Heidegger's thought) sits well with the existential turn of early twentieth-century philosophy.

An alternative, more constructive, yet equally radical, response to this situation is to extend the embodiment myth, as it were, such that God himself is no longer free from the taint of evil. Of course, the intention is not to compromise the omnibenevolence of the divine nature, but rather to predicate that nature precisely on an overcoming of an always unavoidable possibility of evil. In other words, God is not God because He is without evil;

but rather because He perfectly and absolutely overcomes evil – a victory that is repeated within finitude, subject to its conditions.

The early twentieth-century theologian who most develops this perspective is the Lutheran Paul Tillich (1886–1965). Tillich is often thought of as an existentialist theologian and he famously affirmed existentialism as "the good luck of theology" and yet, in important ways, Tillich's theological project is a sustained rejection of the existentialist identification of evil with existence. For Tillich, existence is characterised as "estrangement" or a separation from that which is its creating and sustaining "ground". And yet, such estrangement can never be total: to be is to be conditioned and as such is to participate in "being-itself", which is unconditioned. Thus Tillich's affirmation that Creation and Fall coincide is precisely the opposite of the existentialist condemnation of existence as absurd, but is instead a theological affirmation of the worth of existence as divinely created. This is a Romantic-Idealist theology that takes Ricoeur's embodiment myth of evil right into the heart of a Christian perspective on evil. This is not to say that, for Tillich, existence is unambiguous – as in MacKinnon's (1979) interpretation of Tillich as the theologian of the Weimar Republic consciously denying the tragic in favour of an idealised theoretical quick-fix – in fact, on the contrary, for Tillich, existence is riven with ambiguity, with "the demonic" as well as "the kairotic" present throughout. Evil is not identified with existence itself but it is an avoidable reality within existence.

Decisively influenced at this point by Schelling, Tillich's perspective on evil is itself grounded in his distinctive doctrine of God as a dynamic, living God in whom the power of non-being is both acknowledged and overcome. For Tillich, if God is to be anything more than an abstract principle (and thus soteriologcally ineffective) without being thought of as a being (and thus subject to finitude's conditions), then God must be characterised in terms of life. Fundamental to life is the idea of a dynamic movement; in the case of God, this is the movement from non-being to being; God, in other words, must initiate non-being (thereby "actualising" its power) if He is to "become" being-itself. A radical mono-theism, Tillich's doctrine of God rejects the idea that anything – including non-being – can be "outside" of God, who as ultimate reality "grounds" all existence, including His own. Non-being is thus not presented as an antagonist to God, but rather is, as it were, realised by God in His own self-actualisation. In other words, God is creator of all, including non-being – and thus of evil. That this dynamic is not unstable is the

achievement of Tillich's re-casting of the Trinitarian nature of God, according to which the Holy Spirit is held to be the power of reconciliation within the divine life.

THEODICY & TRAGEDY IN EARLY TWENTIETH-CENTURY CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

The theological engagement with evil has long struggled to reconcile the divergent intuitions that the Christian gospel is both a theodicy and a path to wisdom and this tension became particularly exacerbated in the early twentieth century as a result of what might be called the disintegration of the religious imagination. Whilst the question of the history of "the secularization of the European mind" can easily descend into academic parlour games, it is undeniable that the early twentieth century was marked not only by institutional and epistemic secularisation, but perhaps more decisively by a cultural secularisation that had the effect of splitting apart religion and culture with a previously unprecedented intensity. In both the sciences and the arts, the issue of autonomy was paramount – and as the assertion of "autonomy for" tends to be predicated on "autonomy from" – this entailed a widespread resistance to religious "interference" in culture. As a result, the very possibility of Christian theology as, in Ricoeur's words a "spectacle" rather than a "speculation" comes under threat and alternative, secular enactments of the tragic myth of evil become more and more compelling to a cultural imagination increasingly tone-deaf to Christian imagery. From the sciences, of course, the most striking secular narration of evil as tragic myth came from the presentation of Darwinian evolution by natural selection as the explanation of life with all its lamentable yet unavoidable imperfections. As a result of Huxley and Haeckel's transmission of Darwin's ideas beyond the strict confines of evolutionary biology, Darwinism acquired the cultural status, in effect, of a tragic myth of evil for a scientific age (Alexander and Numbers 2010). Likewise, the emergence of "modern art" (essentially a twentieth-century category) brings the idea that the aesthetic has definitively divorced itself from the religious. Beyond even the Romantic aspiration that art might replace religion as the principal conveyer of transcendence, the modernist agenda is to leave ideas of transcendence behind in a total concentration upon the artwork itself. In a similar vein, the emergence in the course of the early twentieth century of the now dominant style of "analytic" philosophy is of one piece with the desire to separate culture from religion by systematically restricting the domain of philosophy from the expansive theologically-engaged nineteenth-century idealisms and post-idealisms. In this latter case, evil, when it is thought of at all, is

marshalled into the narrowly constrictive form of "the problem of evil" – the exercise of resolving an apparent dilemma using purely philosophical resources. As a result, just as culture and religion are pulled apart and the opportunities for mutual engagement are denied, so too in the case of the question of evil, the contrasting tendencies towards theodicy and wisdom are wrenched asunder.

The danger of such a situation for theological perspectives on evil is primarily that of the acceptance of the disjunction of religion and culture and the corresponding temptation to retreat into religion as the assumed natural home of theology and thereby to leave off any form of "theological spectacle" whatsoever. In its most extreme, this approach tends to an ascetic withdrawal from the idea of theology as apologetics and promotes the notion that theology be identified with religious practice or with a re-engagement with its own tradition. Such a cloistering of theology, whilst an attempt to seek wisdom in response to evil rather than to articulate a theodicy, in fact delivers neither simply because it fails to engage with the cultural "problem" of evil on its own terms at all. If evil is recast as a problem solely within and for Christian life and its theology, then the potential contribution of the perspective provided by the tragic myth is wholly obscured (as indeed it is for the purely philosophical dilemma-crunching). Located exclusively as an internal religious matter, evil can have no tragic dimension within Christian theology. In stark contrast to the image of the Promethean tragic hero, Kierkegaard's account of Abraham as the "founder of faith" exercised a great influence on much early twentieth-century theological thinking about evil. For Kierkegaard, the tragic is essentially a moral category, whilst the "knight of faith" transcends morality in the steadfast pursuit of the religious life. There is no tragedy in the story of Abraham's near sacrifice of his son, Isaac, as Kierkegaard retells it in *Fear and Trembling* (1843), only the unstinting affirmation of faith. If tragedy is motivated by a combination of the unbending outworking of heartless fate and the proud boastings of those who think that they can outwit the *moirai* (*the Fates*), then Christian faith consists precisely in the "resignation" of the believer to the mysterious yet utterly transformative divine purposes. That Abraham should be condemned as a murderer within a secular court of law – saved only by the lucky appearance of a ram caught in the thorn bushes – is irrelevant to Kierkegaard's account. Tragedy has no role in such a theological account of evil, in which everything is subordinated to the uniquely religious attitude of faith.

There is, however, an alternative theological perspective in which the resignation of faith remains the starting point for theology, but also combines a critique of religion with an appreciation of the role of the tragic in theological thinking about evil. In the early twentieth century this stance is best developed by the Swiss Reformed theologian, Karl Barth (1886–1968). Barth's leading role in the development of "neo-orthodoxy" or "dialectical" theology in the early years of the twentieth century may seem to align him with a strongly counter-cultural position and, indeed, his robust dismissal of the legitimacy of any form of natural theology certainly supports this characterisation. For Barth, theology is always responsive first and foremost to the revealed Word of God in Jesus Christ as witnessed to in Scripture and is undertaken in the service of the Church as "dogmatics". However, whilst Barth's theology is no "theology of culture", this by no means indicates that he sides with the alternative pole of religion. Rather, Barth's critique of religion is as fierce as his critique of culture – if not more so, given that religion commits the higher sin of standing in for revelation. Thus, whilst Barth has no intention to answer the cultural-philosophical question of evil in its own terms – and distort theological terms and concepts out of shape in the process – neither does he deny the tragic a place within a dogmatic theological perspective on evil.

In *Church Dogmatics* 3/3 (first published in 1950, but part of his *magnum opus* begun in 1936), Barth identifies evil with "nothingness" (*das Nichtige*) and develops a complex (and, to be honest, confusing) account of it as contradiction and opposition, what he calls a "disruptive element", that "can never be considered or mentioned together in the same context as other objects of God's providence." (1960: 289) For Barth, nothingness is not part of creation and yet he writes of it forcing itself into creation, notably in its "concrete form" as sin. (310) And yet, there is more to nothingness than sin, otherwise nothingness would simply be a part of creation. In effect what Barth is arguing is that the reality of nothingness exceeds creation (it is not simply to be equated with sin, as in some interpretations of the Augustinian account that seek to lay total responsibility for evil at the feet of humanity) and yet is no threat to the absolute sovereignty of God. Thus nothingness does not exist, in the sense that created things exist, and yet Barth insists that "nothingness 'is'…in its connexion with the activity of God. It 'is' because and as and so long as God is against it". (353). Thus, God is "the basis and Lord of nothingness" (351) as creation's *other* "from which God separates himself and in the face of which He asserts Himself and exerts His positive will". (351) As such, in his attempt to avoid either

trivialising evil as a created phenomenon or over-evaluating evil as a pre-existent reality alongside God, Barth seems to accept the tragic account that accepts God as the cause of evil (nothingness).

Barth acknowledges that in his account evil in the form of nothingness has an "ontic peculiarity" (353) impenetrable to our "common logic" (351) such that it is finally not fully satisfactory as a coherent theodicy. Yet, where Barth's account fails as speculation, it succeeds as a spectacle that attempts at least to enact theologically the Biblical picture of evil, in which God rules with both His right and His left hands. For instance, whilst Tillich invokes the category of "the demonic" to articulate "antidivine forces in individual and social life" (Tillich 1963: 102), Barth talks unapologetically in the New Testament language of "demons". He argues that it is a fundamental mistake to compare demons to angels, insisting that the two have nothing whatsoever in common:

> "The demons are the opponents of the heavenly ambassadors of God, as the latter
> are the champions of the kingdom of heaven and therefore the kingdom of God on
> earth. Angels and demons are related as creation and chaos, as the free grace of
> God and nothingness, as good and evil, as life and death, as the light of revelation
> and the darkness which will not receive it, as redemption and perdition, as
> *kerygma* and myth." (Barth 1960: 520)

For Barth, such a relation is precisely that of a dialectical opposition with no possible mediatory analogy. The God-opposing powers of demons do not originate in God's creation and hence the existence of demons is "improper" (522); but still nonetheless, they do have their origin – as everything must in Barth's view – in the gracious and redemptive activity of God. This, then, is Barth's Christian theological tragedy, according to which evil as nothingness is

> "chaos, the world which He did not choose or will, which He could not and did not
> create, but which, as He created the actual world, He passed over and set aside,
> marking and excluding it as the eternal past, the eternal yesterday. And this is evil
> in the Christian sense, namely, what is alien and adverse to grace, and therefore
> without it." (353)

CONCLUSION

This chapter has not provided a survey of discussions of evil by early twentieth-century Christian theologians; instead it has focused on the articulation of some of the main Christian theological perspectives on evil that developed in that period. Inevitably, any

Christian theological perspective will be a complex mixture of fidelity to Scripture and tradition along with a response to the context of its development. Perhaps surprisingly, however, the question of evil seems not to have been a particularly prominent one in early twentieth-century theological work, with very little innovative explicitly written on the topic. As such, this chapter has delved into the internal dynamics of the Christian perspective on evil and using Paul Ricoeur's image of the four myths of evil has traced how the traditional Christian myth has been challenged and augmented in this period by the resurgence, for underlying cultural-historical reasons, of the three non-Christian myths of chaos, embodiment and tragedy. In these ways, decisively twentieth-century Christian perspectives on evil have emerged and something of the richness of the theological discussions of the question can be seen.

Further Reading

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