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Religious Interpretation of the Meaning of Evil

Abstract: Building on the Christian and far-eastern understanding of evil, the author points out that evil that affects us can have a positive meaning. Troubles and suffering that we experience serve as a means of our purification from sin or are trials through which we gain the winning crown. God's punishment, which primarily has an educational role, is nuanced. The guilt of an individual for violations of the divine moral order depends on the level of their consciousness, life circumstances and their social position. Since God is love, His mercy prevails over justice. God does not allow evil if good does not flow from it. Awareness that the meaning of evil that strikes us is to tear us away from a superficial, hedonistic lifestyle and turn us to God, contributes to an attitude deprived of hatred towards the enemy and those who harm us. If we understand that the enemy is merely a tool used for our moral improvement and spiritual transformation, we will focus primarily on fighting against the evil within ourselves.

Keywords: Evil . Religion . Justice . Spirituality . Temptation

The existence of evil in the world has always been given as one of the strongest arguments for denying the existence of God. It is claimed, namely, that evil in the world, which is otherwise obvious, in itself proves that God is either not good or not omnipotent, whereas both these properties would have to be contained in the concept of God. The argument is as follows: assuming that God is absolutely good, the existence of evil would deny His omnipotence, because, according to His nature, He certainly does not condone evil, but is simply not able to prevent it. On the other hand, if God is omnipotent, he could prevent evil in the world. The very fact that evil still exists, proves that God, allegedly, does not want to prevent evil, i.e. that He is not absolutely good. As much as it may seem to a rationalism-oriented person that this logical argument disproves the existence of God, the interest in it has mainly been shown by philosophers and theologians, and not by believers.¹ Its serious shortcoming is that on the one hand it immodestly claims to be able to understand the one that is beyond human cognitive powers, while on the other hand it observes the problem of evil exclusively from the perspective of this world thus ignoring the sphere of the world beyond, thus hampering complete insight into God's mercy and justice.

¹ The problem of theodicy for an ordinary man appears in moments of great suffering, both individual and collective. While for the individual suffering, as much as it seems undeserved, some "higher" reasons may be offered, the crimes such as the Holocaust make a man simply dumbstruck. Is it possible that God allows something like this? Is he good and just at all if he does nothing to prevent it? Facing an incomprehensible horror there have been those like Primo Levi who would come to the following conclusion: "If there is Auschwitz, there is no God" (Svenson 2006, p. 38). Of course, there are no fewer of those who even and in such extreme situations do not lose faith in the fairness of God.

Although the secret of evil undoubtedly inspires thought, religions have always put more emphasis on the practical way of dealing with evil than theoretical reasoning about its origin and meaning. Of course, the answer to these issues has usually not been overlooked. Although primarily focused on fighting with evil, religions have offered their interpretation of the meaning of evil in the world, either regarding the experience of a spiritual trial or a revelation. Regardless of what an enlightened man may think about the credibility of these interpretations, it is still worth considering several justifications of evil in the world.

However, before we expose these, it should be pointed out that in religious questions, in contrast to the modern science, which insists on causality, teleological observation has always been prevalent. In correspondence with this way of experiencing and interpreting reality, the existence of evil in the world has been assigned a certain place in God's plan and providence. Those who would immediately discredit such an approach as unscientific, and thus false, should be reminded that in the meantime the teleological or holistic way of observation has penetrated even exact science, replacing the once inviolable deterministic, causal-mechanical approach.² As for alternative medicine, since a human body is not seen as a mere mechanism, disease is not viewed as a mechanical malfunction, but as a symptom of a deeper, existential illness. According to the holistic model, a disease develops gradually, due to the long-lasting disturbance of a harmonious energy flow in the body. A disease itself is a witness to a wrong, or sinful, way of life.

The holistic approach to health reveals that what is usually seen as evil, pain and suffering, in fact have the purpose of healing the man. Pain is certainly something unpleasant, something to be avoided, but the function of pain is to warn us that something is wrong with our health, to encourage us to find its cause and not to allow the disease to develop. Without the warning signal of pain a man would proceed to an incurable state. In the same way, a disease itself has its own role. It testifies to the wrong, unbalanced way of life. Being inclined to competition and acquisition, tied to the material, exposed to stress, we have lost not only inner peace and harmony but also a balanced relationship with our environment. A disease makes us examine our way of life, to distinguish between the important and the unimportant, and to perceive the value of the spiritual sphere. If we want to be healed, i.e. to remove the causes of a disease, we have to change our hitherto lifestyle radically. That is why for some a disease represents a possible turning point, an impetus to seek meaning of our lives, the road towards religious faith. Even though alternative medicine is primarily aimed at physical health, it acknowledges that this is impossible without spiritual health. Experience shows that spiritual healing is usually followed by an improvement in physical health.³ As for the religious approach to health, the primary goal is in fact not physical health but spiritual.

However, returning to the religious interpretation of the meaning of evil in the world, it is important to point out that almost all religions believe that the aim of God, i.e. of the a-personal divine order, is human salvation. The whole world has been established in such a way as to make a person turn to this aim, which, otherwise, he often for-

² Contemporary science, in contrast to the modern one, which has been significantly constituted in opposition to theology, is revealing more and more contact points with the religious approach to reality. For the similarity between quantum physics and taoism see: Capra 1976.

³ For the alternative approach to health, not only consistent with ancient experience, repressed by modern medicine, but also with modern holistic approach to reality, see: Brennan 1988 and Capra 1982.

gets, especially when is able to live a comfortable, carefree life. Even when a person is not conscious of God's providence and his own spiritual task, he is not given life simply for enjoyment and leasure, but for self-perfection, which reaches its climax in illumination and divinization. If a person forgets this aim, a fine spiritual mechanism will give him opportunities, very often through the evil that strikes him, to reconsider his previous wrong behavior and eventually to turn to God. We can rightfully say that life's circumstances have a cognitive-nurturing role.

A typical religious belief is that all that mankind experiences as evil, be it wars, diseases, earthquakes, droughts, or floods, are not caused by chance, but definitely have a deeper meaning, even if we are not able to comprehend it at the moment. One of the most common ways of interpreting reasons for evil that affects us certainly is seeing it as the expression of God's punishment for violations of his commandments. In agnostic religions or in those which put the emphasis on a-personal cosmic moral order, the punishment is interpreted as the automatic result of disturbing this order.⁴ Although the punishment in religion may also be interpreted in a juridical sense, the emphasis is still on the nurturing function of the punishment. Just as a caring parent, with pain in his or her heart, resorts to punishing the misbehaving child to divert him from evil and direct him to good, so God does the same. This insight is expressed in the Biblical saying "the Lord disciplines those he loves" (Heb 12:6). Although in some religions there are images of furious, or even capricious deities, who cruelly punish culprits, developed religions departed from such ideas, which matched the former spiritual level of mankind's consciousness, and they insist on passionless justice of God, or on the automatic action of the cosmic mechanism of justice.⁵ Since God is love, even when he imposes punishment, he actually does it out of love. The famous saying that a man reaps what he sows, despite variations in its interpretation, is universally accepted in religions and undoubtedly expresses the spiritual experience of mankind.

However, no matter how universal it is, this insight has not been left without objections. The disturbing fact that sometimes righteous people suffer whereas sinners enjoy themselves, seeks an answer. If such a state is short-term, it is not hard to find a satisfac-

⁴ No matter whether it is the *Vedas* or the *Upanishads*, the evil that affects an individual is interpreted as a consequence of their impingement on the universal cosmic moral order. This divine order, whether it is called *rita* or *dharma*, is superior to deities who protect it. The all-seeing Vedic god Varuna, from whom no offense can remain hidden, is "the highest representative of the world order, and therefore it is his duty to measure and punish human transgressions. But he is just an executor, not the one who adjudicates suffering. It is the man who bears responsibility for it; he is the only creator of his fortune as well as misfortune, as it is expressed in the *Upanishads* in the idea of karma" (Hoheisel, in Kochanek (Ed) 2002, p. 37).

⁵ Anthropomorphic representations of an angry, jealous God, who severely punishes individuals and nations for their transgressions, are characteristic of the Old Testament. It is true, though, that Yahweh is also "the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness" (Ex 34:6) to those who are faithful to him. For advanced consciousness "God is love" (1Jn 4:8), and therefore nothing bad can arise from Him. Commenting on the artistically successful description of Zeus's character, which is undoubtedly the result of the artist's extraordinary feeling for the divinity, Father Porphyry notes that the described god "throws lightning at people, but his face is calm." "He's not angry, he is passionless", concludes Elder Porphyry, and according to his spiritual experience he emphasizes that "God has no passion even when he gives punishment" (Porfirije 2005, p. 140). If it is only punishment that is seen as something bad, and therefore alien to God's goodness and love, it is possible to give a theological interpretation according to which God only allows punishment but does not execute it. Pointing out that the notion of God who punishes corresponds to a lower level of religious consciousness, Macukas claims: "Punishment is a purely human invention – it does not exist in divine love." According to him, "the more one experiences God as the punisher, the more one moves away from divine love" (2005, p. 138).

tory answer: God, who is not only just but also merciful, waits patiently for sinners to repent, or tests the strength and spiritual zeal of the righteous. The problem arises if the given situation, which conflicts with man's experience of God's justice, is too long extended, if the sinner, at least in old age, does not experience punishment, and the righteous is not rewarded. The only satisfactory answer is provided by belief in the afterlife. Only if in the sphere beyond there is a reward awaiting the righteous, and a punishment awaiting the sinner, can God's justice be preserved. And indeed, in many religions there is a notion of the righteous enjoying heavenly bliss while sinners are being tortured in hell.

The suffering of the innocent, especially young children, is certainly a big problem for those who believe in cosmic justice. Namely, if God is just, and if there is any cosmic justice, it seems illogical that the innocent should suffer. The possibility of a quite satisfactory answer to the question of why this happens is offered by far-eastern religions, referring to their teaching of karma and reincarnation. Provided that this teaching is true, the person who apparently suffers unduly and unjustly, is in fact not innocent as it seems at first sight. The doctrine of karma and reincarnation claims that a soul which moves from body to body in the next life pays off its karmic debt from previous lives.⁶ Accordingly, even a child who has just been born, and who has not had an opportunity to commit sin, is actually not absolutely innocent, but it expiates the sins of previous lives. All this happens automatically, according to the inexorably cruel cosmic law. However, since the structure of the world is teleologically directed, the purpose of cosmic justice is not mere retaliation or reestablishing the cosmic balance that has been violated, but primarily has an educational function.

Sometimes, even during his lifetime, a man experiences the wrongness of his behavior⁷, thanks to the radical change of position in which he is. However, sometimes this does not happen. Nevertheless, according to the teaching of reincarnation the cosmic law of sowing and reaping is inexorably achieved, if not in this, then in the next life. It is necessary that the oppressor experiences on his own skin, even if it is in the next incarnation, how the victim feels, in order to comprehend the wrongness of violent behavior. Moving from body to body, collecting different experiences from many lives, the soul learns from its own example how to be better and nobler. It experiences the same or similar situations until it learns the necessary lesson, i. e. until it realizes what it has been doing. After many wrong choices, punishment that a man endures, or suffering that he experiences, not only leads him to the final choice of good but also directs him to salvation, which cannot be achieved without burning one's ego. So, all the painful and unpleasant experiences that one experiences throughout life are needed in order to repay karma and to develop spiritually. The teaching of karma concludes that no one suffers unjustly.

Regarding the disturbing question of why young children suffer, religions that reject the doctrine of reincarnation often respond by claiming that the sins and merits of

⁶ It would be more accurate to say that what moves from body to body, and what remains identical is self, atman or divine spark, rather than soul, but since the term "migration of soul" has been long established, and we do not want to discuss different Indian schools' interpretations of this problem, we have retained the usual term.

⁷ The Bible refers to the example of Nebuchadnezzar, who, because of his vanity, suffered a fall from his position as the most powerful ruler to the level of a mindless creature. The meaning of punishment was to teach the vain ruler not to glorify himself but the Almighty, who is able to humble "those who walk in pride" (Da 4:37).

our ancestors pass to their offspring. It depends on their behavior whether their children will be affected by God's blessing or curse. The Bible says that God "punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation" (Ex 34:7). This response is based on the belief that neighbours, whether they are alive or dead, are inextricably linked, so that the behavior of one affects the others. Our energy, be it positive or negative, affects our neighbours, the same way as theirs affects us. Everything we think, speak, and especially do, with our energy, in accordance with the subtle cosmic mechanism, causes consequences to the whole world, and especially to our fellow men.⁸ No matter how strange it seems to the modern individualist view, religions offer teachings not only about individual but also about collective responsibility. However, although individual responsibility is undoubtedly primary, collective responsibility should not be neglected.⁹ Religious emphasis on the importance of community, mutual ties of fellow men, from family and friends, compatriots, to all mankind, and even the whole being, inevitably leads to deep spiritual insight about both personal responsibility for sin that someone else has committed and the desirability of joint efforts for salvation.¹⁰ Unlike far-eastern religions, which emphasize the individual path to salvation, Christianity is characterized by the teaching that the Church is an ark on which people are saved together.

No matter whether they teach the doctrine of reincarnation or not, religions have very subtle teachings on divine justice. God, or the cosmic moral order, takes into account the level of consciousness of the perpetrator, his situation, social status, and accordingly weighs the punishment. Certainly, the effects of wrongdoings will be greater for those who know that what they do is wrong, than for those who do not know. The one who steals something out of necessity commits a lesser offense than the one who does it without lacking anything. The higher the position one has in social and ecclesiastical hierarchy, the worse one's offense is.¹¹ And yet, even ignorance of the divine law does

⁸ Referring to the universal connection of everything existing, on which the same seal of God is embedded, Father Tadej gives a word of warning: "Our thoughts do not just affect us and reasonable beings, animal and plant world, but they also affect the eternity. With our (bad) thoughts we not only disturb the peace on the earth, but we multiply evil in the universe" (Tadej 2005, p. 118). If, on the other hand, we have peace and love within us present, the radiation of our positive energy will spread out all around us.

⁹ In the Bible, thanks to the centuries in which Jewish people spiritually matured, the conviction that individual responsibility has the primacy gradually grows. Referring to the ancestral proverb "The fathers eat sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge" (Eze 18:2), after the Babylonian captivity God says: "The soul who sins is the one who will die. The son will not share the guilt of the father, nor will the father share the guilt of the son. The righteousness of the righteous man will be credited to him, and the wickedness of the wicked will be charged against him" (Eze 18:20).

¹⁰ Referring to the teachings of St. Silouan, Archimandrite Sophrony writes: "For most people, justice is a juridical term. They dismiss taking responsibility for somebody else's guilt as something that is not just." However, it is in the spirit of Christ's love "to bear the responsibility for the guilt of the one we love, what is more, take upon oneself all the responsibility." Contrary to those who do not want to take the responsibility for evil in the world, inspired by the mystical experience of the being of the whole mankind permeating his own, St. Silouan says: "It is through taking responsibility for someone else's sin that true love comes to the fore" (Sofronije 1998, p. 117). Great spiritual fathers have always felt personal responsibility for people's sins and evil in the world. Thus Elder Paisius says: "We are responsible for everything that happens, do you understand it? When someone tries to be better, he makes an impact on those around him and on the whole world. If I were a saint, I would help a lot with a prayer" (Pajsije 2005, p. 364).

¹¹ About the proportion of the divine gifts and responsibility, Jesus Christ says: "The servant who knows his master's will and does not get ready or does not do what his master wants will be beaten with many blows. But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with

not quite justify the violator. For bad, wicked behavior even very small children as well as animals are punished by higher justice.¹² The reason may be found in the fact that the punishment for them is actually a potential means of learning.

It is characteristic for humans to qualify as evil whatever threatens or causes damage to them. Although people have always tried to avoid suffering and problems, wise men from ancient times realized that evil can have a positive side, because it often makes a radical break with the former unspiritual or non-authentic lifestyle. As long as a person feels comfortable as he immerses himself in enjoyment, his thoughts are, almost invariably aimed at the material and not the spiritual sphere. Well-being, wealth, health, and worldly success usually entice him to forget God. Rather than thank the Supreme for the gifts and well-being that surrounds him, an individual often thinks that this is something quite natural and understandable in itself, achieved with his own effort. Or, in spite of his enviable state, he may still feel dissatisfied because of a series of unfulfilled wishes. Only when he gets into trouble, usually because of his sins, might a person remember God and cry out for help. The proverb “where there’s no trouble, there’s no prayer” testifies to the deep spiritual experience that the evil striking us can often be a blessing in disguise.

Of course, a person does not have to experience suffering personally, on his own skin. It is sufficient that he, like the Buddha, becomes aware that it is an integral part of life. As long as Siddhārtha Gautama, protected from meeting the dark side of life, enjoyed the comforts of life, surrounded by well-being and beauty, his thoughts were far away from the spiritual sphere. However, facing the inexorable fact of disease, old age, and death seemed a shock to him and aroused him from the sleepy state of clinging to this empirical world. But for this first awakening, induced by the experience of what we usually try to avoid, and which we would prefer not to think about because it spoils our pleasant mood, Gautama would never have started his search for the life-saving medicine, he would never have really awakened and become a Buddha.

Therefore, in God’s plan of salvation evil is used to separate humans from an unconscious, inert state of being. As long as our lives are immersed in the material world, and we are preoccupied with enjoyment and trivial problems, we actually waste our valuable time, given to us as preparation for eternal life. Since the level of one’s consciousness at the time of death determines one’s afterlife position, it is important that one makes an effort to purify the soul and achieve the highest possible level of consciousness. If we bear this in mind, things thought of as good (wealth, power, fame, health) are actually often bad for us, because they focus on our own ego rather than on God.¹³ On the other hand, the physical harm that affects someone may prove to be for his spiritual good. The crisis and suffering experienced are certainly uncomfortable states, from which people try to emerge. After unsuccessful attempts to do so in one’s own power, feeling one’s own weakness, one may finally turn to God for help. This is when a spiri-

much, much more will be asked” (Lk 12:47-48). Refinement and subtlety of God’s justice is reviewed by St. Nicolai of Serbia in his writings “Nomologija” (5-90) and “Rat i Biblija” (139-230), published in: Nikolaj 1996.

¹² Father Paisius noted that “when animals will not listen to what they are told, it is seen later that they have paid for their disobedience” (Pajsije 2005, p. 270).

¹³ Christ’s famous words “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Mt 19:24) show that our so-called goods often tie us to the sphere of this world and become an obstacle to us fully directing ourselves towards the divine. Of course, if we are not tied to what we have, if we use it for the benefit of loved ones, this wealth does not necessarily need to be seen as evil.

tual adventure can begin, a search for the saving way out from the maze of this empirical world. Even evil in a person himself, or more precisely, awareness of it, may have a stimulating role. While the lukewarm, who are neither hot nor cold, spend their lives lazily and inertly, neither outstanding in good nor evil, it is often those who have greatly defiled themselves, who are even immersed in evil, that experience a moment of disgust with their own evil filth, and with deep repentance, crave for purity and turn to God. Instead of worldly pleasures and human vanity, they direct their passion towards purifying spiritual asceticism. God, who is love, who wants everyone to be saved, including demons, provides for all the conditions to leave evil and choose good. Of course, God does not force anyone into this, as he respects everyone's freedom.¹⁴ With deep repentance and a changed mind, a fallen person can be transformed with God's help. The experience of many saints, who were great sinners before their conversion and repentance, proves that this is possible.

Although the law of sowing and reaping is universal, this does not mean that the one who suffers really deserves it. We are warned about the danger of such conclusions by the biblical story of Job, whose friends rather than comfort him, demand that he admit that his actions deserve such a fate. The evil that affects a person need not be a consequence of deserved punishment, although this is usually the case, but rather the means through which he improves himself with patience. Generally, people are neither very good nor very bad, although one of the two prevails in them. While the bad pay off their debts by suffering, the meaning of suffering for the innocent is to make them even better, to cleanse them from any trace of inner darkness through the purifying flame of calamity, until they shine like pure gold.¹⁵

God, as the source of all good, does not allow evil if good does not flow from it, whether for an individual or for the community. If we recall righteous Joseph, undoubtedly one of the most positive Biblical characters, we see that it is definitely due to afflictions that he not only spiritually perfected himself but also plays a crucial role in saving his family from starvation. From his dreams it can be concluded that even young Joseph, although good-natured, had an ego. These dreams testify to both his high opinion of himself and to his wish, albeit unconscious, to be acknowledged by the others, by having his brothers and parents bow before him (Ge 37:5-10). The afflictions helped to deflate his ego, and after being put to numerous spiritual tests Joseph shone with the splendour of the righteous one. Therefore he was able to easily forgive his brothers for having wronged him. Moreover, he realized that the wickedness and envy of his brothers were

¹⁴ God wants to save everyone, even fallen angels. A prerequisite for this to happen is free consent, manifested as repentance, i.e. understanding that the previous choice of evil was wrong and opting for good this time. However, demons persist in their decision. Elder Paisius had an insight into this while, with pain in his heart, he prayed for the salvation of demons, feeling the universal love for the whole creation: "And as I uttered it with pain I saw a dog's head next to me which was mocking me, with its tongue stuck out. Perhaps God allowed this in order to show me that He wants to save them, but they do not repent" (Pajsije 2005, p. 105).

¹⁵ Purifying fire, gold and light are symbols characteristic of many religions. All mystical traditions speak about illumination by supernatural light. According to religious belief, "the birth or illumination of the great saviours and sages is announced by a profusion of supernatural light" (Eliade 1976, p. 96). Gold being a symbol of superior spirituality and immortality, the goal of alchemists and yogis is to "cleanse" "impure substances" (outside and in themselves) and, after improvement, convert them into "gold" (Eliade 1982, p. 141). The reason why so many relics do not decay is to be found in the cleansing fire of divine grace. Imbued and filled with supernatural light, the body resists the natural law of decay.

mere tools for the general good that would result later, thanks to his status in Egypt.¹⁶

As for Job's testing, this is certainly a borderline case, as there are no signs in the *Bible* that there was anything bad in him at all, unlike Joseph's case. As it goes, God, at the heavenly council, praises his exceptional righteousness. However, it is not impossible to assume that even Job made some tiny mistake, "for there is no-one who does not sin" (1 Ki 8:46). On the other hand, since the essential nature of sin is not a small mistake or transgression, but a fundamental failure, i.e. turning one's back on God and forgetting one's own self, it can rightfully be assumed that Job was really perfect.¹⁷ But his original perfection, the one that God praises at the beginning of the story, cannot be measured with that which characterized Job after he successfully overcame a series of trials, after he had passed a multitude of spiritual tests. In addition, these tests grew harder and harder, because God allowed Satan to deprive Job first of his material wealth, then his children, and finally, without any guilt on his part, he was afflicted with painful sores, subjected to pressure from his wife to renounce God and that of his friends to admit the fairness of his state.¹⁸ Without considering the ultimate reasons for Job's suffering¹⁹, since they seem to be beyond our comprehension, it can be said that at the beginning Job was perfect in human sense, whereas at the end he reached a state of perfection in the divine sense.²⁰ In fact, there are levels of righteousness and holiness, just as there

¹⁶ We can see this in Joseph's words to his brothers who were fearfully expecting well-deserved revenge, "And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. ... So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God" (Ge 45:5, 8).

¹⁷ The Hebrew word *hata'*, which is commonly used to refer to sin, indicates that the essence of sin is miss or shortfall. This word, according to Adalbert Rebić, "means *miss the target, go astray, get lost, turn off the right way*". Therefore, rightly pointing out the inferiority of juridical approach to sin and guilt, the quoted theologian states: "If we keep in mind the fact that the aim of man is to find God and get together with him, then the truest meaning of human life is to seek and find God and be united with him forever. To miss means to sin" (1996, p. 193). If every violation by a creature is seen as a manifestation of violence, as Jains believe, then man is inevitably guilty, because in the physical world it is impossible not to hurt anybody. In the material world, man is directed to action for self-preservation, and, willingly or unwillingly, by his very existence, he wrongs somebody. He has to eat something, take space at the expense of somebody else, etc. However, much more important than taking care not to step on an ant is the effort to become godlike, because with one's spiritual self-realization the whole creation rises to a higher level.

¹⁸ Although God lets the righteous suffer, which is unjustified according to human measure, he did not completely leave Job in the lurch. Job's words "as long as I have life within me, the breath of God in my nostrils" (Job 27:3) testify to divine grace, i.e. the presence of God in Job even at the moment when he seems to have abandoned him completely. According to the interpretation of St. Seraphim of Sarov, Job's feeling of divine grace is the best answer to the charge of blasphemy against God: "How could it be, when I feel the breath of the Almighty in my nostrils? That is, how could I blaspheme God, when the Holy Spirit abides with me? If I blasphemed God, the Holy Spirit would depart from me, but, behold, I feel His breath in my nostrils" (Levitski 1998, p. 456).

¹⁹ Some authors believe that the problem can be solved by attributing responsibility for innocent Job's suffering to El, and exempting Yahweh from it. Old Testament scholars have observed that El and Yahweh are the two main Jewish names for God. Relying on Girard's book *Violence and the Sacred*, Baudler insists that El is characterized by unrestrained strength, willfulness, violence and cruelty, while Yahweh as a God of justice and protector of the covenant, is characterized by the protection of moral order. As God with whom the Jewish people made a covenant at Sinai, Yahweh is careful to ensure the welfare and salvation of his chosen people, and he manifests force only against his enemies, and those Jews who violate contractual obligations. Just as he subjects Job to unjustified suffering, El also demands of Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. The execution of this irrational act is prevented at the last moment by Yahweh's angel. According to Baudler, El hides traces of the oldest biblical layer, which match the spiritual level of the Jewish people at that time, whereas Yahweh is an expression of more developed religious consciousness. See: Baudler 2005, pp. 77-82. Of course, the question is whether such a rational approach can deal successfully with what transcends the human mind.

²⁰ There have been a lot of righteous people in history, but probably none has reached Job's level. As a synonym for the suffering of the righteous, Job is a pre-image of the later suffering of Christ.

are many different “rooms” in heaven. Some righteous people enjoy more, and some less bliss, according to their perfection. The more perfect one is and therefore more godlike, the closer one is to God.

The Holy Fathers emphasized the importance of temptation for an individual, because it brings him closer to God. Thus Abba Evagrius, opposing the common human desire for comfort, says: “Remove temptations and no one will be saved” (Pajsije 2003, p. 69). Since nothing great is achieved without effort, the challenge of temptation is required so that man can actualize his potential. The winning crown, as is known, is not achieved without a hard and grave struggle. While most of us want to avoid temptations or have them as small as possible, there are those who bravely face them, opting for asceticism. They know that the greater the temptation, the greater the prize.²¹ Their conviction could be formulated in the form of a saying: the worse it is (in this world), the better it will be (in the world beyond).

When it comes to the difficulty of temptations, we should keep in mind that they are always in accordance with one’s capacity for endurance. St. Paul points out that the Almighty undoubtedly takes care about this: “God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear” (1 Co 10:13). By God’s providence, therefore, everyone is tested in proportion to their spiritual power. For those spiritually advanced temptations are greater, for beginners, they are smaller. As one is cleansed from the consequences of sin and spiritually develops through the fire of temptations, if these are too easy, the development will be slowed down, while if they were too difficult, one would be crushed, because one would not be able to deal with them. Therefore it should be left to the Almighty, who is omniscient, to determine the optimal degree of our temptations. Most importantly, we should not trust in ourselves but in God. Whatever we are assigned we should bear patiently, without protest, and not flippantly attempt spiritual feats which are beyond our present capability.²² Taking the middle path is recommended not only by Buddhism and Christianity but other religions, too. Of course, the so-called middle path differs from person to person. Actually, the most important thing is to use the conditions God’s providence has prepared for each individual, to destroy the ego, because it is the toughest stronghold of evil. Just as Satan fell from his high position because of vanity, our ego, even when we try to be good, subtly conceals our selfishness, while trying to rise above others.

People usually want to change their given environmental conditions, with the justification that they would advance more spiritually in different circumstances. Those who are sick often justify their cry for healing by saying that if they were healthy, they would

²¹ Concerning joy in temptation, the Apostle James the Just wrote in his epistle: “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, when you face trials of various kinds, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience, and patience must finish its work, so that you may be perfect and complete without any defect. ... Blessed is the man that endureth temptation, for when it is tested will receive the crown of life which the Lord promised to those who love him” (Jas 1: 2-4, 12).

²² Although the New Testament commends those who help their neighbours to bear their burdens (“Carry one another’s burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ”, Gal. 6.2), the Holy Fathers nevertheless remind us that we should not flippantly and voluntarily expose ourselves to temptations which are too heavy. The experienced spiritual guide is present to assess someone’s current strength for the appropriate spiritual feat. Exposure to excessive asceticism is not only dangerous but also testifies to vanity. The goal of a spiritual feat is to destroy the ego, while a selfish feat, hidden and disguised by a godly mask, actually feeds it. The Evil one himself helps disobedient novices to bear harsh asceticism in order to sow in their consciences high thoughts of themselves.

be readier for a spiritual feat.²³ Others, on the other hand, call for a disease, because they believe that they can be cleansed best through this kind of suffering. However, it is important to know that no matter how hard it is for us, the very situation in which we are in at the moment is the best for us, and therefore we should not grumble at God about it, but we should rather use it to mature spiritually. Striving to overcome the temptation which is best suited for our current strength, we show that we respect the one by whose permission it has been given to us.

Theologians would say that God is not the one who leads us into temptation, or exposes us to evil, but that it is the devil, who takes advantage of our passions for this purpose. As a basis for such a theological interpretation the words of St. Apostle James the Just may be used: "When tempted, no-one should say, 'God is tempting me.' For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed" (Jas 1:13-14). According to apocryphal writings and the Koran, Satan fell, plunging from celestial heights into Hell, or rather below heaven, not only because he outrageously wanted to ascend to God's level, but also because he showed disobedience to God's demand to revere man. Since then, Satan has hated mankind. The devil, according to his evil nature, desires to inflict as much evil as possible upon man, to drag him down to hell, whereas God only allows people to be subjected to temptations for the purification of sins and for spiritual progress. God is there to help when people turn to him. He actually uses the devil as an unconscious tool to advance good. As the Venerable Elder Paisius said, "The Devil plows, but Christ sows" (Pajsije 2005, p. 390).²⁴ Demonic attacks are allowed to the extent that man, if not completely fallen into evil, can bear them. While small demons descend upon spiritual beginners, Satan himself attacks spiritual giants.²⁵ This was not only so with the temptation of Christ but for other great saints as well. According to Buddhist tradition, before his illumination, Buddha endured a three-day temptation by Mara and his demonic troops. Only after having been tempered in the battle against demonic forces in which they perfected themselves, did spiritual giants start their mission.

From everything that has been said here so far we may conclude that God transforms short-term and partial evil that affects an individual or a community into a long-term common good. Of course, this transformation does not happen automatically, without a person's free consent. The way we respond to trouble influences what turn it will take – for better or for worse. Those who, in spite of God's patience, warnings and opportunities for repentance, stubbornly persist in evil, defiantly refusing to improve themselves, are on the path to inevitable disaster. Since man does not take many opportunities to divert from evil given to him by God's mercy, only the enforcement of divine justice

²³ Regarding the meaning of illness, which is usually the result of sin, St. Seraphim of Sarov said, "The body is the servant of the soul, while the soul is queen. Therefore the destruction of the body by disease is a mercy of the Lord, because passion weakens and the man comes to himself. ... Bearing disease with patience and thanksgiving is equal to a spiritual feat, or is even greater" (Levitski 1998, pp. 422-3).

²⁴ According to his followers, this Mt Athos monk claimed not only that "God does not allow evil to happen if it will not produce some good, or at least prevent a greater evil", but that "God plans to use even evil created by Satan for good" (Pajsije 2005, p. 390 & 312).

²⁵ Paisius the Elder states: "Satan does not arise against lukewarm people, but against saints, to tempt and destroy them. ... He sends a devil beginner after a beginner" (Pajsije 2004, p. 114). Just as Satan does not waste time on those who have already fallen into sin and are thus in his power, but tries deviously to entice the ascetics, so God ensures that the strength of the enemy and the weight of a temptation are proportionate to one's power to endure.

remains. No matter how difficult or even cruel it may sometimes seem to us, especially if it affects us, it is certainly not more severe than we have deserved. After all, the most profound definition of God is not righteousness. Since the essence of God is actually love, he is more characterized by grace than by justice.²⁶

When speaking of God's justice, it is worth emphasizing the proportionality and compliance of sin and punishment. The evil that a man has done usually comes back to him in a similar way so that he can see the wrongness of his actions. "If you observe how men die, you will see that the death of a man usually resembles his sin", notes St. Nicholai of Serbia. Recalling the words of Christ, "all who draw the sword, will die by the sword" (Mt 26:52), he says: "Every sin is a knife and men usually are slain by that sin which they most readily commit". As an example, St. Nicholai speaks about the death of Salome, the daughter of Herodias, who, having enchanted Herod with her dance, at the instigation of her mother, received the head of St. John the Baptist on a platter, as a gift that she asked Herod for. During her exile in Spain, "Salome set out one day across the frozen river Sikaris. The ice broke and she fell into the water up her neck. Icebergs squeezed around her neck and she wiggled, dancing with her feet in the water as she once danced at the court of Herod. However, she was unable either to raise herself up or to drown until a sharp piece of ice severed her head. The water carried her body away and her head was brought to Herodias on a platter as was the head of John the Baptist at one time" (Velimirovich 1986, pp. 620-621).²⁷

Even if we have not committed a sin, but we judge our neighbour who has, thus rising vainly above him, we may easily succumb to the same temptation.²⁸ The purpose of our fall is to become aware by abasement, to learn how illusory our smugness at our moral stainlessness is. With a self-awakening blow to our vanity, this experience makes us realize how false it is to condemn others, and how necessary it is to focus self-critically on ourselves instead of judging others.

As for the punishment for the impingement of the divine moral order, experience shows that this happens very quickly for a smaller offense, whereas for a great sin is usually postponed for a long time. God, who does not want to ruin the sinner but desires his conversion,²⁹ gives a lot of time to repent both to an individual and to nations. If they do not, the punishment is usually detrimental. On the eve of the punishment God sometimes allows the sinner to rise to a very high position, probably in order to make the fall more dramatic in the eye of observers.

²⁶ St. Siluan says: "We cannot say that God is unjust, or that there is injustice in Him, but we cannot say either that he is just in the way we understand justice." Recalling the words of St Isaac of Syria "Do not dare to call God just. For, what kind of justice is that – when we have sinned, and He gave His Only Begotten son on the cross?", St. Siluan shows that God did not only provide angels in the salvation of fallen man, but that the whole of nature was submitted to decay due to the sin of the firstborn. God's approach to man "is not the law of justice, but is the law of love" (Sofronije 1998, p. 118). is one and only Sonehis On

²⁷ As a punishment for the sins committed in secret, adultery with Bathsheba and guilt for the death of her husband, King David had to experience not only the death of his child – the fruit of adultery, the rebellion of his much-loved son Absalom and exile, but also his son had sexual intercourse in public with this concubines (2Sa 16:21-23).

²⁸ Based on his own experience, Paisius the Elder warns: "You should be careful when it comes to the condemnation of other people, because God will allow you to commit the same sins that you condemn" (Pajsije 2005, p. 213).

²⁹ In the *Old Testament*, God through the prophet says "I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather am pleased when they turn from their wicked ways and live" (Eze 18:23).

The usual attitude, typical of most of us, which expects and even demands God to punish enemies that do us injustice, but to be gracious and have long-standing tolerance towards us, proves unspiritual. This kind of attitude overlooks the fact that our enemies are actually an unconscious tool in the hands of God for our cleansing, conversion and spiritual growth. Although they can genuinely be very evil and unjust in themselves, their attitude towards us is justified from the standpoint of God's plan for our salvation. If we can overcome, within ourselves, the natural tendency to hate an enemy, especially if he is evil incarnate, we will surely gain spiritually. Evil, namely, is not defeated by evil, but by good. Managing external evil by responding to it in the same way, using bad means, would mean that we have suffered a spiritual defeat, since in this way, the cosmic evil would triumph.

Spiritual insight into the potential benefits of the evil which we are exposed to, contributes, to a large extent, to the suppression of negative emotions of people who cause injustice to us. Elder Porphyry says: "When injustice is inflicted on us, – by slander, insults, or something else – we should think that it is our brother behind it who has been taken by the adversary. ... We should feel the malice of another man like a disease that torments him, from which he suffers and from which he cannot be delivered" (Porfirije 2005, pp. 387-8).³⁰ Instead of anger and hatred for the enemy, a spiritual man cultivates feelings of pity. Like God himself, he also hates the sin but not the sinner. Of course, treating the enemy in this way remains an elusive ethical ideal, if not accompanied by mystical experience of the ontological unity of our own personality with the whole being.³¹

Those who have personally experienced the involvement of the being of the mankind in their own self, may be expected to take "all the evil that happens in the world not like something alien, but as their own" (Sofronije 1998, p. 118). Even those who only have intellectual knowledge about it, are able to understand that the struggle with the cosmic evil begins by fighting the evil in oneself. A saying, which occurs in several ancient cultures, that a greater winner is the one who wins himself than the one who wins a fortified city, testifies to the graveness and decisiveness of this struggle. "The nature of every human being implies that man, suppressing evil in himself, strikes a strong blow to the cosmic evil, the consequences of which have a beneficial effect on the fate of the whole world" (Sofronije 1998, p. 198). The same way the purpose of the external evil is to encourage man to face the evil within himself and overpower it, so cleansing of evil within a person, especially if he or she takes the quality of holiness, contributes to the reduction of evil in the world.

As a conclusion to the previous discussion about evil, it can be said that the existence of evil in the world does not question the existence of God. Suffering experienced by man is either a result of his unrepented sins or of a temptation, thanks to which a righteous man is being spiritually perfected. While we can be certain that God measures the

³⁰ In a poetic way, St Nikolai of Serbia states with inspiration: "Bless my Enemies Oh Lord. And I bless them and do not curse them. My enemies have turned me towards You more than my friends. My friends have bound me to earth, enemies have lifted me from the earth and destroyed all my hopes in the earth ... Enemies have taught me to know – what only few know – that man does not have an enemy in this world apart from himself" (Nikolaj 1993, pp. 114-5).

³¹ According to Siluan the Elder, "where 'enemies are', there is a rejection. By rejecting, however, a man unavoidably falls from God's fullness and is thus no longer in God" (Sofronije 1998, p. 113).

level of temptation we can bear, and allows only evil that can turn to good, it would be too presumptuous to expect that, in each individual case, we can understand the meaning of the evil which we are exposed to. Regarding humility in the interpretation of God's justice and His plan of salvation, we are guided by the words of warning pronounced by God through the prophet Isaiah: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, ... as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts" (Isa 55:8-9). Refraining from frivolous claims to interpret God's justice with the confidence of Job's advisors, we still know from experience that a struggle between good and evil is taking place both in the world and within ourselves. Although we are exposed to enticement and seduction by demonic powers, it is up to us whether we will opt for good or for evil. The whole world is like a stage on which our existential drama is being played. It is for us to overcome our old, sinful, inert personality, and accept the hand that God, respecting our freedom of choice, graciously offers.

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