

BOOK REVIEWS

Who Rules the World: Divine Providence and the Existence of Evil. By Hans Schwarz. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2021. x + 210 pp.

Prolific German theologian Hans Schwarz examines theodicy, the defense of God, in his latest volume. If God is beneficent and omnipotent, then why is there evil? Before offering constructive thoughts, he surveys the major world religions, including those from antiquity which influenced Judaism and Christianity, the various presentations of evil in the Bible, and Christian thinkers from ancient times until the present. All the while he is sensitive to modern developments in the natural and social sciences. Schwarz is ever diplomatic, balanced, and charitable to whichever voice he is entertaining. The question of theodicy is urgent because, in the words of Georg Büchner, suffering is the “rock of atheism.”

The Bible presents a number of perspectives about the relationship between God and evil, including that God is himself the cause of good and evil (30). Even so, Genesis does not present the tempter, presumably the devil, as a participant in God’s heavenly court (though the Adversary is presented so in Job) (26). Jesus’ ministry included exorcism, a frontal attack on evil. Paul acknowledged that human nature is itself overshadowed by evil (49), and that humanity as a whole is alienated from God.

The mature Augustine, in contrast to his Manichean youth, which adhered to a conflict between an all-good spiritual deity and an all-evil bodily deity, argued that everything evil somehow contributes to goodness, indeed, ultimately the perfection of all created things. In contrast to Augustine, who viewed evil as a privation or lack of goodness, Martin Luther saw evil as having its own agency over against God. That said, Luther also acknowledged that God worked through evil “instruments,” evil persons. He also described God as doing an “alien work,” punishment designed to bring us to God’s mercy or grace. Nevertheless, God does not cause Satan or people to be evil; but, if they happen to be evil, that does not inhibit God’s agency to work through them. Indeed, God punishes thieves through other thieves.

In the early modern period, Leibniz, like Augustine, interpreted evil as a privation in our universe. In contrast to the Enlightenment's tendency to affirm natural human goodness, Kant actually affirmed that the human will is prone to evil, apt to heed desires as opposed to ethical directives provided by reason (91). Twentieth-century thinkers, such as Dorothee Sölle, John Hick, or Process theologians, in light of world wars, the holocaust, nuclear proliferation, and the like, have been apt to emphasize the "weakness" of God.

Schwarz is at his best when he assesses matters. It is clear that God has made a universe with various levels of interdependence amongst creatures and that he does not govern by coercion. Appealing to Martin Luther, Schwarz agrees that God orders all things in the world (154), but there are degrees of freedom, especially in matters of human choice, in which humans can either accord with God's will or not, as codified in the Decalogue (whose statutes are echoed in many other cultures) (158). Luther's great insight from his theology of the cross is that because God reveals himself under the "sign of his opposite," that is, in the crucified Jesus, we cannot trace God's working in history (164). God's agency is not transparent. Unlike Calvin, God is no puppeteer "who simply pulls strings or who preordains every detail of history. While God is above and beyond the details of this world, allowing creation and humans freedom and a degree of independence, God is also in his creation and in history providing, where necessary, predictability in the natural processes and help from self-destruction through moral norms" (166). Thereby we need neither to buy into a facile optimism nor a fatalistic pessimism (183). It is clear that Job is onto something: bad things do happen to good people (191). Hence, evil is no mere privation but a power in its own right (193). Schwarz's conclusion is that "God's working toward fulfillment and perfection of creation is, so to speak, on the home stretch. Nevertheless, the evil forces in both nature and humanity should not be taken lightly" (193).

This book is accessible to pastors and educated laity. It deals with a topic of perennial interest and Schwarz handles it in a thorough, judicious, and responsible way.

GRAND VIEW UNIVERSITY
DES MOINES, IOWA

Mark Mattes