

THE HOPE BOOKLETS

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IS IT GOD WHO TAKES OUR LOVED ONES AWAY?
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IS IT GOD WHO TAKES OUR LOVED ONES AWAY? **About the problem of ill and evil**

Bad things form part of life, we have to face them continuously and, if we have even the least inclination to reflect, we cannot but ask ourselves the reason why there are so many things that make us suffer physically and morally, at times in an altogether intolerable manner.

And if we have a religious life, if we believe in a good, all-knowing and provident God, we shall necessarily wonder about the relationship between the reality of such a God and the reality of the bad things that are often so grave, tremendous and atrocious. Sooner or later we shall therefore ask ourselves: How can a supremely good God permit so many ills?

God is said to be omnipotent, and we are therefore tempted to pose the following alternative: If God permits certain ills, that means that he is good but not omnipotent or, alternatively, he is omnipotent but not good.

And hence a conclusion that is very close to the heart of a religious person: If God is not omnipotent, how can I respect him? In other words, what kind of a God is he? And if he is not good, how can I love him?

This twofold question, always rather dramatic, ceases to be generic and assumes very precise connotations when we apply it to the particular case with which we are here concerned: the death of our loved ones, above all, the death of a son, of a very young person.

Believe me when I say that I do not pose this problem light-heartedly. I hesitated for a long time before proposing this theme and giving it preference over others that would have made it easy for me to say things readily accepted by all. If I have decided to come to grips with this topic, I do so because I know that when I speak to the members of the Hope Movement and the friends of the Convivium, I know that I am speaking to mature people who, even when they are traumatized by grave sorrows, do not just want to be consoled, but look for the truth and want to understand the reason for things in real and not imaginary terms.

Though I am more than convinced that I am addressing a public fully prepared to face certain themes, I yet want to do so with every possible delicacy, with respect for the convictions and beliefs of those who may see things differently from the way I do.

Especially those who have lost a son may be passing moments of authentic and profound despair. They may arrive at cursing a God who “took” a child, a girl, a youngster “away” at such a tender age, when still full of hope, quenching a life in full flower.

Here one is tempted to say to the Lord: “You are all-powerful, but were not good with me: even though you may not have acted in the first person, you have at least permitted something that you could easily have prevented in your omnipotence, with just a simple act of your thought”.

And then there are those who formulate the theme in antithetic terms, refusing to set themselves problems. Can a creature argue with its Creator? they ask. God’s logic is far above the logic of us men. There undoubtedly is a reason, it is simply too far above our capacity of understanding.

Another solution is the one adopted by people who, rather than refusing to think and to avail themselves of any logic at all, have recourse to a logic that is human and therefore (as we well know) quite insufficient to justify God in

some way in their eyes. Such people will tend to say: “God is all-powerful, but also good. If he has permitted this ill, it is for some greater good. He has taken my boy away or, rather, has allowed him to be taken away from me, but did so because, contrary to all appearances, the time of his life on this earth had been completed and a loftier mission was waiting for him in heaven”. So the conclusion is that God wanted or permitted an ill with a view to a greater good.

There are also those who say that, precisely after some great grief, they were converted to a more intensely religious and far more significant life. It was God himself, so they conclude, who disposed or allowed not only that the young soul should ascend to a better condition, but also that the parents should gain great spiritual benefit. This good, rather, came to them through the mediation of the departed, who in some way – so they are convinced – acted as the vehicle of divine grace. So that an initially desperate person ends up by seeing his grief as motive of gratitude to the Divinity, for praising God.

But, as some others will wonder, could not God, being all-powerful, have given us that greater good without that anguish of the soul, that atrociously painful passage? Does not the wisdom of the good administrator consist of obtaining the best results with the least possible outlay? The construction of the pyramids and the other grandiose monuments of antiquity called for sweat and blood and suffering without end. That may have been inevitable in the conditions of the times if those projects were to be achieved. But how would we judge a modern building contractor who fails to do everything possible to enable his men to work in conditions of safety and without having to toil beyond the strictly necessary? What, then, shall we say of a God who procures us good through such great suffering? Would he not reveal himself to be rather worse than the worst administrator of the things of this world? Could God be less provident even than the ill-famed builders of certain homes, certain dams?

Here one becomes tempted to put the Divinity on trial. There are even some who are altogether merciless in formulating the accusation, concluding that God’s only valid defence could be that he did not exist.

On the other hand, there is also a line of defence that could consist of diminishing the entity of the ill. In the limit this leads you to denying the reality of the bad as such. What appears to be bad on first sight is really something good.

You begin by saying that all the things that appear bad on first sight, when considered in a more all-embracing vision, end up by revealing themselves to be merely the shadows of a picture that have no esthetic function other than making the light parts stand out better.

But people who take this view, who delight in contemplating the overall harmony of the picture, should really be interviewed after they have suffered some great personal grief to see whether they still see things the same way.

They may well insist, if only to avoid giving us the satisfaction of having won the point, but I think that – at least deep down within them – something would change in the attitude, they would no longer contemplate other people’s woes with such pure beatitude.

Be it clear, however, that I am saying this in purely theoretical terms: I should be a real monster if I concretely wished people to experience grief for

no other reason than the satisfaction of hearing them say that I was right, that bad and evil things really do exist!

Is sin an evil?, one may wonder. And here many people, step by step, produce an answer of the kind that follows. Sinning, so they say, means acting in an erroneous manner. And one errs because one does not know enough. But even a limited knowledge is yet a starting point for arriving at better and more complete knowledge. Therefore, if limited knowledge is a lesser good, that must be true also of sinning. Sin is good, albeit a tiny good, a seed that will grow. And they conclude that sin as evil, i.e. as sin in the proper sense of the term, does not exist. Here we have a somewhat strange and paradoxical conclusion, to say the least. And yet there are lots of people who today seem ready to underwrite it.

But the bad, so one may say, consists also of grief, of suffering. At this point those who insisted on minimizing the bad at all costs continue by saying that suffering tempers the soul, forms one's character. Here we have another overhasty conclusion, no less approximate than before, that lumps all suffering together without discernment: if suffering tempers the soul, they say, it is not something bad.

Here they completely forget that, though there undoubtedly exists suffering that causes a positive reaction, there is also a suffering that crushes and annihilates you. And it is precisely this decidedly negative aspect of suffering that our friends refuse to see.

A variant of this denial of suffering as possessing the character of something authentically bad is often associated with certain sufferings like the just punishment of one's guilt. The faults on one side of the scales have to be compensated with suffering of an entity that will bring the balance back into equilibrium. But a suffering that re-establishes equilibrium and harmony is once again not something bad: rather, it is clearly something good, as these people will conclude.

"But what faults have I committed", is the question that may well be asked by somebody born blind, a person come into the world with such a grave handicap, "to merit this infirmity even before I was born?". Here, once again, our friends have a ready explanation, not of their invention, but inherited, tested by centuries and even millennia. "Undoubtedly, you must have done something bad in a previous life. And what you now accept to suffer is a means of purification for you". Here, too, they strain to show that the bad in question is only apparent: it really turns out to be something good.

In short, everything is good, and all we do is to go from good to better. If I may now express my own opinion, I have to say quite frankly that I can't agree with all this optimism. As far as I am concerned, bad really does exist as such. Both moral bad, i.e. guilt and sin, and physical bad, namely grief and suffering, are two tremendous and unquestionable realities.

If anybody has doubts about the existence of moral bad, all he need do is look around or, better still, scrutinize within himself. I am accustomed to judging myself before I judge others. It makes me lose less time, waste less energy when I take cognizance of my own evil, which I can remedy more readily if I so desire. Very well, if I may make this confession to friends, I often have committed and still commit wrong actions not because I illude myself that they are right, but fully aware that they are wrong and negative. I

am fully aware and convinced of the existence of moral evil by direct and personal experience.

And I also have direct and primary experience of physical bad. That is how philosophers call the bad that for them consists of grief, of suffering, and which can nevertheless be also of a spiritual nature. Though certain sufferings have been spared me, at least until this moment, considering and analyzing the ones that have come my way so far, I have a fairly clear idea that, broadly speaking, there are two great categories of afflictions: there are those that temper you (that's an undeniable fact) and there are afflictions that do not temper you at all. Do not form you at all. They just crush you. In the Nazi concentration camps, for example, a certain Father Maximilian Kolbe became a saint, performed the sublime action of offering himself to be put to death in place of the father of a family, and the Church raised him to the honour of the altars, but how many people, on the other hand, became humiliated there to the most paltry degree of abjection!

The reality of evil is more than obvious for me, there is primary evidence wherever you look. Not that for this reason I want to make even the least effort to convince anybody of the existence of bad and evil. If it is a question of attesting the existence of good, the existence of God, of which I am equally convinced and persuaded, I am quite prepared to do so with everything I have! But just to let a person know that bad and ill exist... well, frankly I wouldn't lift a finger. Not just because of laziness, but for respect of the person I have in front of me.

The reality of evil, if only one paints it to the full, is so dramatic that not all people can take it. And thus quite a few face it only as and when it comes (though the wait is rarely very long) and even then, when it comes in massive proportions, they try to reduce it to more reasonable doses. They do so for the purpose of rendering the ill more bearable. They achieve this purpose, above all, when they succeed in – as we say – “finding a reason” for their affliction.

Though I like calling things by their proper name and examining them with relentless rigour, this remains only my personal manner of conducting an inquiry. I can be pitiless with myself, but would not wish to be excessively severe in correcting somebody who denied the reality of bad and evil for the essential purpose of facing and bearing it better.

Even before we seek the truth, we seek to survive, and each one of us has his points of support; each one of us, let's be frank about it, has his crutches. Here I should like to limit myself to saying how I face this fundamental problem, profound and tremendous as it is.

For me the bad exists, and exists in all its gravity. The drama can be put in a nutshell as follows: inasmuch as it really exists in life, there is no reason for the bad. The bad is irrational and unreasonable. If it were rational and reasonable, it would no longer be bad, but rather a quasi-good, as proposed by the friends we were talking a while ago.

Bad exists, and God also exists. As I said before, the de facto reality of ill and evil is attested by experience, but it is equally experience that for me attests the reality of God. The experience in question here is a spiritual experience. An intimate experience, the most intimate conceivable, if it is true that God is to be found abyssally deeper down within us than anything else we may have deep down in our being.

In short: this experience tells me that God exists and, what is more, that he is good, that he and good are but one. Deep down within me I profoundly feel the presence of God as the pure principle of good without even a shadow of bad and evil. This makes me altogether incapable of attributing to God any initiative that is not pure good. I simply fail to conceive that God could do or permit anything bad, not even for the sake of a greater good. Nemmeno riesco a concepire che in Dio si possa dare una molteplicità di atti, una successione di atti l'uno diverso dall'altro

I cannot even conceive that in God there could be a multiplicity of acts, a succession of acts that differ from each other. I absolutely fail to see God as a kind of joiner who creates the way, for example, one creates a table, i.e. by first working out a project and setting it down in a drawing, then passing on to fabricating a piece and then another and a third, and so on, eventually putting them all together. Creation is not a “now I do this and then I do that in order to obtain something else again”.

As far as I am concerned, divine action can be conceived only as continuous, ceaseless, infinite radiation of truth and good, of being and value, which – all said and done – are nothing other than the various aspects of one and the same reality that is absolutely simple in itself. As far as I am concerned, creation is a simple act, a unique act, by means of which God gives us every possible good, every possible being, without limits.

The limits are ours. We receive the infinite good that God gives us to the limited extent to which we open ourselves to him. The sun radiates its light with great power, but the earth is far away and therefore receives it only weakly. And then, the sky at this moment is covered by clouds. The room in which we are has a very small window. What is more, the window panes are very dirty. And thus the tiny ray that comes into the room gives only an extremely wan and pallid light.

God creates the world; but the world also creates itself, to an ever greater extent. To convey some idea of how a creature also has to create itself to some extent, let me give you an example, albeit inadequate, and yet reasonably clear and comprehensible.

The parents certainly do not create, but procreate a son. The son at first is part of the mother, then becomes detached from her, and little by little learns to walk on his own, eat on his own, study, work and take ever more important decisions. In the end he becomes completely autonomous. Morally he is not master of his destiny, because he has duties; but he is free to decide whether or not to do his duty, is free to make himself as he wishes.

And thus God's creature is ever more autonomous and free to obey God, to cooperate in the creation of the world according to the divine will, or to act in a different way, in the direction of evil. This freedom is real and effective, not just nominal.

The parents bring the son into being not only by procreating, but also by educating him. As the work of education proceeds, they leave their creature ever greater space of freedom. If they failed to do this, the son would not become autonomous, would grow up like a puppet. At fifty years of age he would still be attached to mummy's apron strings. He would undoubtedly grow up badly, come to be an incomplete man. And thus even God tends to withdraw as he creates and to leave ever more room to his creatures.

This means that the creature himself cooperates in creation: both in his own creation and that of other beings. Each creature is free to offer his collaboration to God, but also to refuse it. Each creature is even free to act as if God did not exist, to center his life not in God but in himself.

And when the creature turns his back on God, God can say with Jesus: "My kingdom is not of this world". In fact, God rules the earth only to a limited extent. This is borne out by the very prayer that Jesus taught us: "Our Father who art in heaven... thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven". For the moment the kingdom of heaven is concentrated in that absolute sphere that seems the peculiar dominion of the Divinity. It is concentrated in what we call "heaven" in the spiritual sense and of which the star-studded vault is the symbolic image. On this earth God is for the most part unrecognized, ignored, offended and, in the limit, crucified.

It is clear that God cannot be crucified in his absoluteness, but only in his presence in the world. We can kill God every day: but not God in himself, only God inasmuch as he is part of us, incarnated in us, in his being present in the creation.

Here, on this earth, the presence of God is weak. All the same, we know that in the end he will prevail and extend his kingdom over all things. And then the creation will be completed, the world will be perfect. The prophecies of Judaism, of Christianity and even those of Islam concord in this vision of what will be the final outcome of history and of all cosmic evolution.

In the end God will reign also on the earth, just as today he reigns in the heaven of the souls who live only of him and for him. The final triumph of God will come about also by means of men: his creatures will have to cooperate. Therefore, as we are told also by the title of a very beautiful film, God stands in need of men.

As a prior condition this calls for the conversion of the whole of humanity, its purification from all sin and tendency to sin. This is what will happen on what the Bible calls the Day of the Lord, the Day of Universal Resurrection, the Last Judgment, the Parusia of Christ. And the Palingenesis or Regeneration of all mankind and even nature itself, the entire cosmos.

But now I should like to return to the starting point of these considerations. A parent who has lost his son asks himself: "Why has my son been taken away from me at such a tender age and full of hope?" Albeit schematically, we considered the various possible answers, apart from the atheist one, an answer that many people give themselves in harmony with convictions that must nevertheless be respected.

"God has taken my son away unjustly, or didn't lift a finger to save him. He was unjust and bad with me". That may sound like blasphemy. But what can we say to those who live this situation in keeping with this particular conviction? Their suffering has to be respected.

"God has done this, or at least permitted it, to achieve some greater good". The way I personally see things, the affirmation that God could do or permit bad things for any reason whatsoever in a certain way sounds just as blasphemous. Though, be it clear, that is not how it sounds in the intentions of those who feel and reason in this way. I do not agree with them, but respect them. Probably this sister, this brother has to see things in these terms in order to find a reason for his grief, to be able to face and bear his adverse fortune. And what is there that I could tell him?

Lastly, there are those who, if they are to bear the ill that has struck them, have to call it 'good'. I am not anxious to convert such people to my own ideas.

I limit myself to expressing my personal convictions without any pressure. Because if my friend has to organize his mind in this other way, it would be quite illicit on my part to deprive him of this help, even if it were nothing other than a pair of crutches that helped him in some way to keep on his feet.

In my personal vision God gives us everything good and nothing but good, but the diffusion of this good is limited by the contrary action of his creatures. The world has to be liberated from sin, so that the creatures, all of them, can cooperate with God and help him complete the creation. For the moment the presence of God on this earth is crucified. God himself is crucified within us by our sin. Is our religion not the religion of the crucified God?

And is our religion, this religion of a crucified God, not the most difficult, the most unpalatable and even the most scandalous in the eyes of those who have always been accustomed to thinking of God only in terms of power?

It is up to us to give back to God the space we have taken away from him by our sin, allowing him to be resurrected within us and, through us, also in all the realities.

Our loved one has been taken away from us not by God, but by a series of circumstances that form part of a reality of sin and death from which God has been partially excluded. If on the occasion of the death of someone we love a conversion is produced within us, it is undoubtedly God who brings it about. But he does so by intervening in a situation that he did not exactly want. God neither does bad things nor does he allow them to be done, but intervenes in a situation that is in some way negative to cull some good from it. It is up to us to offer him every possible help. It is up to us not to become resigned. It is up to us to avoid calling ill by the name of good. It is up to us to avoid wanting to see a presumed will of God in things that should really be defined as negative and dissociated from the divine will. We shall know God's full will only when it triumphs in the end, and in the meantime we have to accept our responsibilities in a conscious and adult manner.

I have expressed my point of view fully aware that it may not be shared by all, though all of us can and must agree about the need for loving each other, understanding each other, helping each other in this common search for God, absolute and supreme truth, our only real good.

ILLS, GRIEF AND THE MYSTERIOUS DESIGNS OF THE GOOD GOD

When we talk about ills and grief, those who react with an act of faith often speak of a mysterious design of God.

On the occasion of the Jubilee of the Sick (11 February 2000) even Pope John Paul II acknowledged that *it was right to fight against sickness, because health was a gift of God*, but immediately added that one has *to be able to read God's design when pain and grief knock at our door*.

Being able to read God's design in relation to ills and grief means at least beginning to understand something about it. What, then, does God's design, that is so often talked about, consist of?

A reasonable interpretation of such an aspect of the divine will is that the creature struck by ills and grief should accept them as an occasion for improvement. The temptation to despair, to let oneself be overwhelmed may be strong, but accepting one's cross when this is inevitable can be a means of purification.

In this sense, as the Pope went on to say, *the reading key is constituted by Christ's cross*. In such a perspective, ills and grief do not come from God. They come to us, rather, due to the sins of the creature: and in the first place not from the sins of men, but from the sins of the angels.¹

The Bible dedicates significant remarks to this even more original sin, and we can readily grasp them by reading such passages as Gen 3, 1-5; 1 Chr 21, 1; 2 Sam 19, 23; Ezek 28, 1-19; 31, 1-18; Mt 4, 1; 4, 10; 12, 28; 13, 28; 15, 22; 25, 41; Mk 16, 17; Lk 9, 1; 9, 42; 10, 18; 11, 20; 13, 16; 22, 31; 25, 41; Jn 8, 44; Acts 26, 18; 1 Co 5, 5; 7, 5; 2 Co 2, 11; 12, 7; Ro 5, 10; 16, 20; Eph 6, 11-12; 2 Tim 2, 26; 1 Jn 3, 8; Jude, v. 6; Rev 20, 1-3 e 7-10.

God does not inflict ills. Every illness has its etiology, just as every accident has its dynamics. Once ills come to us due to some "secondary earthly cause", God intervenes to transform the grief into an occasion for improvement, into a means of ascesis for purification and interior maturation, for the elevation of the spirit: in short, he intervenes to transform that ill into something good.

But there is also another, rather different interpretation that is well rendered, and with rare power of synthesis, in Manzoni's image of "the God who strikes down and raises, troubles and consoles" (last strophe of "The Fifth of May", an Italian poem).

Millennia earlier, the same idea had already been expressed in Job's verse: "Yahveh gave, and Yahveh has taken away; blessed be the name of Yahveh!" (Job 1, 21).

Does that mean that God himself inflicts ills? It is an idea that undoubtedly conflicts with the concept of an absolutely good God.

What shall we say about a sun that casts shadows? The shadow comes from an object that interposes itself between the sun and us.

The sun may have "sunspots" in its imperfection,. But God, in his absolute purity, cannot have within him and cannot therefore cause any shadow.

I prefer to think of a God crucified by his creation rather than of an all-powerful God who either wants evil or, to make a subtle and hypocritical distinction, limits himself to allowing it.

What kind of God would that be? An impotent God? Strange idea. But certainly, and why not? A God whose kingdom is not – or is not yet – of this earth, whereas we humans invoke: "Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven", that is to say, "may Your kingdom come also to this earth, where it has so far been present only in germ".

A germ in full development and rich of future, like the famous mustard seed, as yet tiny, but growing and destined to become a great and luxuriant plant (Mt 13, 31-32; Mk 4, 30-32; Lk 13, 18-19).

To an omnipotent but ambiguous God, an omnipotent God with the tough, short-handed and merciless manner of a great barbarian king I frankly prefer

an incarnate and crucified God who in the first person suffers in all the creatures who suffer, a God who stands in need of us men and who calls upon us to be his Samaritans, his liberators, cooperators in his creation.

But to most people an ill that escapes the control of even God himself seems something decidedly intolerable. Many people end up by attributing evil to God for no other reason than that they are even more frightened by the idea of ills that become unleashed blindly, that have to be attributed to pure chance.

Affirming that God decrees evil for one reason or another means diminishing the entity of the bad, means reducing it to a quasi-good.

God punishes me; therefore the next time I shall try to do better, so that in place of a punishment I shall merit a reward.

Or again: God inflicts this ill upon me, but does so for a hidden design of his that for the moment I cannot grasp, though some day I shall understand it.

In any case, in inflicting the ill or allowing it to be inflicted, a good God will always mete it out within precise limits, so that for me it will constitute only a trial or a means in keeping with his mysterious ends and will never become something that will overwhelm and crush me.

And yet, to be quite truthful, how many times these ills, rather than forging a person, crush and annihilate the sufferer!

But people who talk in this particular way simply will not recognize this fact, taken as they are by their personal case, which in their personal vision of faith seems to be the prelude to something good.

A mother who has lost her child and struggles to find a reason therefor certainly does not think of the millions of dead of the two World Wars and the concentration and extermination camps. She does not think of the innumerable people who live at the very subsistence limit, the prisoners in jails, but also of vice, and their infinite prejudices and fanaticisms and superstitions and rancours, the sick suffering from cruel illnesses, those oppressed by their own likes, or those corrupted by the environment in which they have grown up, forcibly induced to prostitution and criminality as the sole means of survival.

The mother who has lost her child and then found it again in an experience of faith, or in a paranormal experience with a strong religious impact, will have found not only her creature, but also the very Creator against whom she rebelled in a first moment of despair: "God, why have you taken that darling child away, who was my whole life? That is something I have asked you many times in my despair. But now I firmly believe that you wanted it or permitted it for his good and mine. I cannot yet see what this good consists of, except the fact that I am now less superficial than I was before, and that I have become more spiritual. But I have within me the ever stronger feeling that, in spite of all appearances that may suggest the contrary, you are good, infinitely good, and in the end will give us all the good without limits. I am fully convinced of this, and therefore I entrust myself to you with all my heart".

What shall we say of a person who, struck by ill fortune, ends up by concluding that, no matter how black things may look, we are in the hands of an infinitely good God?

I fully accept the conclusion. Only that I explain the present raging of ills with the idea of the crucified God.

It is a very original idea and peculiar of Christianity, seeing that previously no religion had ever dared to conceive God as anything other than a triumphant, all-powerful sovereign.

Was there ever a religion that associated the idea of the Divine with the painful, frightening image of a man condemned to an abject death?

If God himself is crucified by bad and evil, that means that evil truly represents the most tragic reality: a tragicalness that even the thought of man finds it hard to bear, ever concerned as it is to diminish the reach of ill and evil and to multiply the safety anchors.

What, then, shall we say of a person who gives herself courage, who finds a reason for the calamities that have struck her to the point of accepting them with a serene spirit and, notwithstanding appearances, conserves and even strengthens her trust in God?

The way I see things, the reasoning that led her to this conclusion is full of obvious incongruities. But does that matter, if the conclusion is right?

There are even those who believe in the eternity of infernal punishment and yet see God as infinitely merciful.

Muslims make every event of the world depend on the divine will, so that God becomes the author, the cause not only of all the good, but also of all the bad. And yet they nurture a very profound and live sense of the supreme goodness of the God who at the beginning of every sura of the Koran is called “the Merciful and Compassionate”.

There are those who imagine God as a kind of Great Cosmic Criminal Madman, attributing him misdeeds and inanities that not even the most wicked and insane of men would commit, and yet believe in him and entrust themselves to him as to a perfect Being, an infinitely good and loving Father (and Mother at the same time).

What, indeed, shall we say? Let’s agree about the conclusion, the point of arrival, the finished product. As to the road, well, let’s not contest it more than is absolutely necessary: we find ourselves face to face with persons who are altogether reluctant to follow a different path.

I think that in an authentically religious soul all human reasoning is ultimately overwhelmed by the fundamental, all-compelling and irresistible evidence that God is Love, only Love, Light, Good, Truth, and all this to an infinite power and the total exclusion of all bad, all shadow, all “human too human”.

Face to face with the splendour of this evidence, all human stammerings come to an end, so that silence lasting at least a few instants will open us to full and intense harkening to God.

A GOD WHO STANDS IN NEED OF MEN

The God in whom I do not believe is the title of a book of spirituality by Juan Arias. And, more specifically, is also the title of the book’s final chapter, where Arias list the qualities that many people attribute to God: but to a God that he does not want to accept. Arias decidedly rejects the God that many people, created in his image, end up by re-creating in their own image. Indeed, they paint a picture of him that is not by any means seductive.

Let me give you just a few examples from this long list of unflattering attributes that a far from inspired imagination has pasted onto the Divinity: “The God who wants to be feared... The God who ‘plays at’ condemning... The God who ‘sends’ you to hell... The God who ‘makes you pay for your misdeeds’... The silent God who remains insensitive to the anguishing problems that mankind is suffering... The God of those who want the priest to bless with holy water the white-washed sepulchers of their dirty dealings... The God who destroys the earth and the things most dearly loved by man rather than transforming them... The God incapable of divinizing man by making him sit at his table and giving him his heredity... The God incapable of making man fall in love with him...” That should be sufficient as far as examples are concerned: I think we understand each other well enough.

But let me dwell awhile on “the God who loves grief”. And then, above all, on “The God who ‘causes’ cancer, who ‘sends’ leukemia, who ‘renders’ women sterile or ‘takes away’ a family father and leaves five creatures in misery”.

Here we arrive at a delicate point. For I am about to criticize an attitude that is unfortunately very common. And I feel the need for saying that I do so with the greatest respect for those who see things in a different way. We are here not to prove to each other at all costs that we are right, but rather to discuss problems, to confront points of view that could even be at the antipodes with respect to each other. The important thing is that we should do all this in a truly friendly spirit and the greatest possible kindness and tact.

Many people attribute their misfortunes to the divine will. When they lose a dearly loved person, they say “God gives, and God takes away”. With all due respect, I don’t think that this is a correct solution of the problem. And as a religious attitude it certainly does not seem to me to be particularly justified.

All the same, it undoubtedly has a psychological motivation. The irrational frightens many people. Whatever happens, even if extremely negative, there must be some reason, so they say. We are, as they go on, in the hands of an omnipotent and good Divinity, and if he has taken this person away from us, he has done so for good reasons, even though we may not be able to comprehend the justice and goodness of some of his motivations.

We console ourselves by saying that God has taken this dear person away for his own good, or also for our good (no matter how mysterious and difficult to understand this may be). However, he will give this person back to us when we, too, pass on to a better life in the other dimension, where we may meet him again and be no longer kept apart.

But there remains the problem of how God may want certain atrocities, or at least permit them. If we say “God did not want it, he did not do it, he only permitted it”, the distinction is subtle, but ultimately does not change things, does not diminish the responsibility of who limited himself to permitting or allowing.

A child has fallen into a fountain and drowned in it. I could have saved him with just a little effort, but didn’t lift a finger. “What harm did I do?”, I could say to myself, “it wasn’t I who threw him into the fountain!”. Would a justification of this kind not sound false and hypocritical and altogether abject?

Why therefore should we imagine God in equally monstrous terms? Quite spontaneously I should say, paraphrasing Arias: there you have a God in whom I do not believe, in whom I refuse to believe. I would prefer a clean atheist horizon to feeling myself in the hands of such a God.

Even before I need a God to love and adore, I need a God whom I don't have to curse. So that certain images of our Creator that render him so difficult to love and even more difficult to esteem I should willingly give as a gift to those who ask so little.

At this point one may object: if even a leaf could move without God wanting or at least allowing it to move, that would mean that God is not all-powerful.

Omnipotence: there we have an attribute that the Bible confers upon God and, what is more, the Koran does likewise. It is an essential attribute of the monotheist God.

Omnipotence is reassuring. The Jews felt reassured in thinking that the God of their fathers is also the Creator of the heavens and the earth. Our God, so they thought, will help us overcome all adversity.

Certainly, not all his decrees are equally comprehensible. Like Job, many could feel to be badly treated or neglected by such a God. But the Jews felt greatly comforted in thinking that if God punished their sins, he would in the end reward their good behaviour. Better to feel yourself in the hands of a God who is a little irascible, a little vindictive and, as I would add, a little "strange", who acts with excessive haste, than at the mercy of chance, a wholly blind fatality.

Many of us share a mentality of this kind. I would nevertheless invite those who do so to consider all the facts and data in our possession to see whether and to what extent their interpretation can really stand, whether it can explain things to the full.

God "permits", so it is said, all the ills of this world. He permitted two world wars, sufferings and cruelties without end, tortures, massacres, genocides, and then, even in times of peace, typhoons, earthquakes and an infinity of calamities of every kind.

I personally have been lucky. So far I have not suffered more than a little scratch every now and again. The ills of the world have so far passed me by.

But there comes a day when a dearly loved person dies. So now my affections are directly involved. And thus I suddenly discover the reality of bad and ill, pose myself the metaphysical problem of the bad. But let's be careful here: the bad in question is a personal grief, because the ills of others did not exist. I say: "My God, you do take it out on me! But why me? What have I done to you?" I ask myself what evil I may have done to merit this punishment.

Or I may put it on a somewhat different plane: it is not a punishment, quite contrary, it is a reward, a benefit in any case.

That person was too good and saintly and pure to have to keep on living on this earth.

God stood in need of this flower and wanted to transplant it into his garden in Paradise.

Or again: the destiny on earth of that person had by now been completed.

Or again, mixing in a touch of the East, be it even rather superficial: his karma had become exhausted. He had done everything he had to do. He had learnt everything he had to learn. And now his mission is different and loftier.

Relating things to myself, I could even say: that person died, so that, following the trauma, I should discard the false values to which I had previously dedicated my life and thus discover my true vocation of apostle of a more universal cause.

A little aside may not be out of place here. I do not by any means contest that a soul, be it incarnate in a body or disincarnate, can or, indeed, ought to have a personal vocation. Many ‘communications’ tell me that each deceased is called upon to evolve and also to assist the evolution of other souls in his particular manner.

Karol Wojtyla is called upon to be a great pope, but even my postman is called upon to be a good postman and, let me add, even a great postman. Our postman in Via dei Serpenti in Rome is a courteous little man, very diligent and extremely solicitous. Somewhat jokingly, we call him “the saintly postman”. Indeed, he does his job as if he felt himself called upon by heaven to do his work to the very best of his ability. All of us have a vocation, not just the priest. The important thing is to be conscious of it. In the other dimension a beautiful soul will undoubtedly be another flower in God’s garden. And thus a person left on earth may discover a new and far more significant vocation through his experience of grief. And it is God who brings all this about: for me that is absolutely certain.

But not because God made somebody die. That person died on account of some fact that has nothing whatever to do with God. God simply inserts himself in a situation that involves an ill he did not want and transforms it into something good by inspiring a vocation. He thus burst into a life that up to then was perhaps a little trite and banal and transforms the person concerned, possibly an ordinary little woman or some gray and average man, into an apostle (just as Jesus did with fishermen and publicans and other people “low down” in the human scale).

In short, God gives life, not death, just as the sun gives light and nothing but light. Shadows are caused by other bodies that interpose themselves between us and the splendour of the sun. But let us come back to our principal argument. That death, which seemed to me the worst of ills, eventually revealed itself as something good for me. I had risked to be overwhelmed by a terrible event, a boundless ill: but now it seems to me to be circumscribed by the good things that accompany it and even outweigh it.

The important thing is that the ill should seem to me limited and reduced to tolerable doses, that the sum of the good should prevail. In the limit, I could arrive at saying: “Thank you, Lord, for the good you have done me by taking that person away and also the good you have done for him”.

In this way I resolve my personal problem and continue to survive in the course of an existence that is often very tough. But let’s watch our step here: up to a certain point of my life I did nothing but think of myself and, unless I am mistaken, still do nothing else.

I found an explanation for the ill that had struck me personally, certainly, but what about the atrocious sufferings of innumerable other people? What about the sufferings that certainly did not redeem the sufferers,

as happened in my case, but rather completely destroyed and annihilated them?

A Maximilian Kolbe became a saint in the Nazi extermination camps, but how many others became degraded to a subhuman condition! Let's think of those who were called "Muslims", though I don't really know why: the innumerable men and women that the tragic routine of those camps had reduced to beings who no longer had either will, personality or feelings, who would have sold their mother and their father for a piece of bread. What was the mysterious good at which such an intolerable and crushing sum of sufferings and degradations was supposed to have been aiming?

There is thus little or no point in isolating our own ills and misfortunes, no matter how terrible they may be, to give them a justification that will inevitable be limited and circumscribed. Let's rather look at universal reality. We shall see it constellated with moments of felicity and richly endowed with good and valid things, but also tragically interwoven with a sum of ills that it would be arduous to try to justify en bloc.

Such is the world: can we say that God reigns there, that he is fully in charge? We could, undoubtedly, admit that God is to some extent present in things. But how limited is that presence! It is a germinal presence, dynamic, growing.

Dante commences his "Paradise" with the following verses: "The glory of Him who moves all things / penetrates the universe, shines forth wherever / but more in some parts and less in others".

Put in less poetic terms: the presence of God in the world, the world as it is today, is partial. God gives himself to the things of the world, but only to a limited extent: "more in some parts and less in others".

Even Jesus said very clearly: "My kingdom is not of this world" (Jn 18, 36).

But he also taught us the prayer where man says to his heavenly Father: "Hallowed be Your name, Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven (Mt 6, 9-10).

There is thus a dimension of existence called "heaven" where God reigns to the full and his will is done, where his name is hallowed, where the creatures recognize and adore him.

But there is also another dimension, the "earth", where God does not reign in more than a rather imperfect manner. Paraphrasing a well known proverb, we could really say that many "leaves" move or "fall" there in a direction that God does not "want".

Does that mean that God is not all-powerful? That would indeed be bad news for many people who would prefer to have an omnipotent sovereign, albeit a little petulant and capricious, but also liable to be rendered more amenable with adulations and supplications, rather than a good but impotent constitutional king.

The monarchs of today don't amount to very much, and yet there are still very many monarchists around: it certainly is not their fault if the monarchies are in crisis.

Many people need an omnipotent God to reassure them that the world makes sense: in a rational reality each one of us is protected and sheltered from the uncertainties of uncontrolled catastrophe.

And then, if the supreme Monarch is a little strange and eccentric, well, you can't have everything. They are quite prepared to keep their eyes closed, not to see the many tragedies, as long as the Despot extends his personal favour to them.

I should say that we decidedly ought to free ourselves of this somewhat infantile need of being always reassured. We ought to open our eyes and take note of what the things of this world are really like. The world is filled with a frightening sum of ills that are far from reassuring.

And yet a principle of good is at work in the heart of reality. It is the hidden presence of the Spirit of God that, little by little, transforms each and every reality and will certainly end up by establishing the divine Kingdom over all things and at all levels.

But this is a horizon of future events. It is the eschatological horizon, that is to say, it regards the *ta éskata*, the ultimate things. Our experience of faith tells us that in the end the kingdom of God will triumph over all contrary forces. *Portae inferi non praevalent*: the gates of hell shall not prevail. They will be thrown down in the end, when the Kingdom of God will triumph over sin, over death and all the ills and evils that oppress us at present.

But in the meantime the Kingdom of God resembles a mustard seed (Mt 13). It is in the process of becoming. In the end it will be a big plant. The future belongs to it. It is in this sense that God is all-powerful: he can do all things and will triumph over all things, but in the dimension of the eschatological future. We have to be patient, just as God is patient and tenacious.

We are not in a world that is already perfect, where everything happens rationally and we can feel reassured at every step.

Neither do we live in a reality that is wholly and exclusively precarious, irrational and desperate, as in an atheist horizon.

We are simply in a situation of struggle with the irrational and with every form of negativity, but entrusted to forces of unbounded good that will triumph in the end.

God is absolute in his sphere, but only incarnate in ours. Here the presence of God is limited and unequal; still "more in some parts and less in others", as Dante tells us. But how can we explain this limitation, if not of God as such, but of the divine presence in our midst?

God limits himself when he creates, this in the sense that he brings into being consistent and autonomous creatures.

What does this mean? Let me try to explain myself with the help of an analogy taken from our human life. Many of those who will read these lines are parents. Parents do not create, but simply procreate; which is something much less, and yet sufficient to institute a term of comparison.

Procreating a son means also educating him, because putting him in the world and then leaving him there and going away would be equivalent to doing things incompletely, leaving the job unfinished. Other persons and institutions collaborate in this education, especially the institution we call school.

Can we agree? Let's take another step, then. As the son grows, he will be granted ever greater autonomy. At the beginning he and his mother form a single whole. Then he separates from her, but she continues to feed him, at the breast at first and then with a bottle or a spoon, and then she holds him as he

attempt his first steps. Later still, the child learns to eat and walk by himself. The teachers assist him in all things, but then, little by little, they leave him ever greater autonomy. In the end, when he arrives at the university, it is assumed that he has learnt to study by himself and to take his own decisions.

To the extent to which the child, the boy and then the youngster becomes more and more autonomous, the parents know they have to step back.

There are eternal children, who even in senile age are still attached to mother's apron strings and depend on her for everything; but that is no more than a pathological abnormality. Woe when things are like that.

Generating means leaving space gradually as the son comes to need this space for himself.

Comparisons are always inadequate, but this earthly image gives us an idea of what may be the very logic of God's creative action. He creates us and, to the extent to which he gives us autonomous consistency of being, he withdraws, takes a step back, to grant us ever greater space.

We creatures can do good or evil, we can condition the creation and upset the process. We can kill the very Presence of God within us. We certainly do not kill God as such, in his absoluteness, but undoubtedly we can imprison and suffocate his Presence at our level.

Creating us, God withdraws from us and the space he accords us is real space, just as the consistency that we creatures assume is real. And equally real is our capacity of moving in an anti-evolutional, negative direction. The harm we can do to the whole of creation and ourselves is very real.

The freedom that a schoolmistress accords her little pupils is very limited. When the children make too much noise or risk getting hurt, a vigilant teacher will clap her hands to bring a break to an end and send her over-lively pupils back to their desks to take dictation or grapple with some arithmetic problem. "That will teach you to behave better", she will tell them.

But it would seem that God does not intervene in this manner when a war threatens to break out. The conflict explodes with all its succession of atrocities. For millennia the history of the world has moved ahead with all the cruelties and the quarterless struggles, the premises of which were already present in the much longer evolution process of the whole of nature, where each being could survive only by eating other and weaker beings.

That is the situation in which dramatically we find ourselves. The drama is that there is no schoolmistress who suddenly claps her hands and sends us all back to our desks. We are not playing a game controlled by a referee who blows his whistle every time he sees us break the rules. We are not acting a play with a director who assigns the parts and corrects us whenever we do not follow the script.

The reality around us is very tough. If we revolt against it, we can get seriously hurt. No God can put an end to the ills that afflict the world by simply beating his stick on the music stand like an orchestra conductor does when one of his players strikes a false note. The situation is such as it is. God will put things to rights, but only after a long travail through the epochs. And that is why God stands in need of men. All creatures are called upon to collaborate in the divine creation of the universe until such time as the process becomes completed and attains perfection.

A universe “where no leaf falls unless God wants it” is a static reality. One presumes (perhaps a little too readily) that everything will be alright. There is no need to get very busy. On the other hand, a universe that God continues to create with the cooperation of man in a constant tension towards a final goal of perfection is a dynamic reality. A reality that evolves.

Here we have an evolution entrusted to forces that, even though today they often find themselves committed in a dramatic manner, will eventually triumph. Here we have God’s true omnipotence.

It is no longer, as in an atheist vision, the construction of a sand castle on the seashore, something that just a single wave could sweep away at any time, but the construction of a far more solid building, founded on rock.

An undertaking, if you insist, not devoid of adventure and risks, backward steps, phases of involution, errors to correct, interventions to be improved. But an undertaking destined to be brought to a proper end. Because it is God himself who guides it through the evolution of the cosmos, the history of salvation and the progress of the sciences, the arts and human initiatives in general.

God stands in need of his creatures to bring the creation to completion. God is undoubtedly omnipotent in prospect, but weak in actual practice. The Russian philosopher Nicolai Berdiaev has written that God “is less powerful than an ordinary police force of the world” (*Self-Knowledge*, Chapter VII).

In some out-of-the-way island in the Caribbean there is a tiny republic with an operetta dictator who has put together a thoroughly shabby police with which he oppresses a handful of unfortunate inhabitants, imprisons them, has them tortured. God is weaker than that dictator, weaker than his police.

God himself is crucified in every person who suffers, is persecuted, falls sick, and also in every sinner who is a prisoner of himself. God is our creator, and yet we are called upon to be his Samaritans. We have to become brothers and father and mother to God every time we feel called upon to take care of a human being in whom we well know that God, through Christ, incarnates himself.

Let me conclude by citing a poem by Danilo Dolci, an authentic apostle who in Sicily promoted social initiatives in favour of the disinherited of the Partinico area, to the west of Palermo. When I visited him in 1953 he had gathered around him a small fraternal community of children, some of whom were the children of bandits, others the children of people killed by bandits. I lived with them for a month in summer and during that time made more experience than in ten years of life.

Here is the poem, as I tried to translate it into English: “And You, my God / for whom I walk / under the immensity of this sky / among clouds of worlds, / my God, You are poorer / and more alone than I. / I saw You racked with pain / under the bistoury / healing an ulcer in Your bowels. / I saw You dead drunk / staggering with empty eyes. / I saw You tense / dragging a laden wheelbarrow / cheerfully jumping for a new suit / and a pair of brilliant shoes / and calling me with outstretched hands / happy for a smile and a kiss.

“I pity Your eyes / those eyes of Yours like a curious sparrow.

“If I am to live / I must be a brother for you / and also a father. / And I have to clean / Your running nose / and hold You up / in Your unsteady steps / and build for You / a steady house of stones / truly massive and four-square, / and cure You / when a fever scorches your front / abandoned on my knees /

and give you bread and soup / and honey and fruit / which You like. / That's my way / of adoring You".

DOES GOD WANT OR PERMIT ALSO ILL AND EVIL?

How can the reality of ill and evil be conciliated with the existence of a supremely good God? Here we have the problem the "theodicy" or justification of God. In other words, how God can be deemed to be just (*díkaios* in Greek) in spite of the terrible reality of ill and evil in creation.

This reality of the bad is so evident that it can be denied only by paradox. There is what philosophers "physical ill", or pain, with all its vast range of sufferings of the body and the soul that, in the limit, crush the individual, destroy his personality, reduce him into a poor being no longer capable of anything other than suffering and moaning.

And there is also what the philosophers call "moral ill" and the theologians "sin". Here we have two expressions that not all people understand fully. To acquire consciousness of this second modality one has to have an ethical sensitivity that is not equally developed in all people; and also a religious sensitivity, which nowadays is very scarce indeed.

The reality of physical ill is far more within the reach of all! Whoever doubts this need do no more than put his hand in the flame of a gas cooker or two fingers into an electric socket, he will be convinced right away!

Apart from the ills that can strike our persons at any time, we can get a more than sufficient idea of pain in the world by considering the two world wars of our century, the genocides, the cruelties of every kind and the infinite series of calamities that man limits himself to suffering for no fault of his own: illness, cyclones, eruptions, earthquakes, floods, tempests, and so on.

As far as moral ills are concerned, one may note that egoism, violence, lechery, aggressiveness and abuse of power are negative characters that man carries within him as heredity from the animal species from which he is derived by evolution. They are the very arms – if we want to call them so – that helped these species to defend themselves and not to succumb in the struggle for survival. Man still carries with him a heavy residue of these arms, which today, in times of far greater security and civilization, seem to have exhausted their function and yet remain within him as negative character traits that are extremely difficult to shed.

Whoever believes in God, or assumes his existence, will ask himself how a good Divinity could possibly permit his creation to be afflicted by the presence of so many ills and evils and indescribable sufferings. Schematically there are two possible answers.

1) "God's best excuse is that he does not exist", was the way Albert Camus put it. That is the conclusion of one of the most widespread forms of atheism of our epoch.

2) Many people who believe in God, on the other hand, deny the existence of the bad or, at least, seek to justify it: in other words, they reduce it into a quasi-good, as it were, or an ill that is not all that bad, after all, and seems less dramatic than one might think when one looks at it more closely.

These two answers can be condensed into just a few words:

- 1) Ill and evil exist, therefore God does not exist;
- 2) God exists, therefore nothing can be bad.

If we now consider the various forms of this second position, we may recall the attitude of those who say: "God is always just, no matter what he wants or does. He would be just even if he desired ills. His will is law. Therefore an ill can be attributed even to the divine will, which is always just and unquestionable and has to be absolved of all accusations".

Others, in a less voluntarist vision, say that God inflicts ills on those he wants to punish. In a more archaic manner of conceiving justice, the equilibrium upset by man's fault is re-established by an adequate punishment. Here we have the concept of "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth". In other words: "You have deprived me of an eye, therefore I deprive you of one of yours. That's right and just, because it makes us equal again, just as we were before". If justice is a re-established harmony, here we have an example of an ill inflicted for a good purpose.

Delving further into the concept, *punishment* could be seen as *correction*: "I do not punish you", God would thus say to man, "I just correct you, give you a salutary lesson, teach you to live". So we have another thrashing that the good God inflicts on us for a good purpose.

Another variant is the one in which God procures ills for us in order to make us pursue a greater good. The loss of a son could induce his mother to abandon a superficial way of life to become a more authentic person (because purified by her grief) and even an apostle of good. That is the reason why God took her son away, possibly making him die after the atrocious sufferings of a long illness or from the wounds of a frightful accident.

Or he made him die so that the youngster could arrive sooner in the Paradise for which he was destined, so that God's garden could boast another fine flower. It doesn't really matter whether the symbolic flower has been gently gathered or simply torn out, root and all: we need not bother about such subtleties!

So far I have mentioned cases in which God is held to have *wanted* a certain ill. Circumstances that furnish ample food for speculation to theologians. But there are also theologians who do not like to say that God wanted a particular ill and prefer to say that he simply *permitted* it.

I don't know to what extent one can share these various interpretations. Let's be quite frank: the idea of justice obtained by balancing one ill with another may satisfy a desire for vengeance or assuage some rancour, but in rational terms it seems prohibitive, at the limit of the ridiculous.

Justice is the greatest good of all. Divine justice is God giving perfection and felicity to all. God is Father and Mother to us. Can we imagine a father, and even more so a mother, who would take umbrage at the wrongs their child has made them suffer to the point of inflicting that kind of "justice" upon him! Any self-respecting father or mother will desire nothing other than the greatest possible good for their creature! The very last thing that would come to their mind is that sad kind of accountancy that seeks to inflict equal sufferings upon the author of a wrong. For what purpose? Some will say: to re-establish the original harmony. Of what? Do we want to think of a God who is worse than that squalid couple of maniacal parents?

Ills inflicted as a means of correction? There are ill that will do anything but act as a correction, for the simple reason that, rather than straightening a person, they will crush him, reduce him to zero.

Ills inflicted for some good purpose? What waste of energies, what suffering inflicted even on innocent people, to obtain that good purpose! A pharaoh constructing his pyramid could do as he wished, but who would re-elect a mayor who caused a road to be built and paved with the skulls of innumerable workers and their family members who died in the course of the work? And yet the great revolutions have this macabre cost, to say nothing of the other unspeakable sufferings that their historical travail implies.

As if he were talking to the Divinity, one of Dostojevski's characters expresses himself more or less as follows: "If even entry into Paradise has to be obtained at the price of the massacre of innumerable little innocents, I refuse to go there and respectfully return the invitation to God".

Ills not wanted, but simply allowed? What a subtle and hypocritical distinction! A schoolmaster sends his children to play and at a certain point realizes that their playing is becoming thoroughly dangerous. And yet he does nothing to stop them. So that eventually one of his pupils is killed. But the teacher, wholly unrepentant, declines all responsibility. "It wasn't I who killed him. I didn't do anything. I just permitted it!"

Some ultra believers would object: "You reason well, but as a man, forgetting that God has a logic of his own, a logic that transcends our capacity of comprehension". Thus a very convenient smoke curtain places that supreme Personage outside the reach of all human judgment.

One is tempted to reply: "If everything is as mysterious as all that, it would be better if you refrained from talking about it, rather than attempting some illogical reasoning that you have to abandon at the first serious objection, taking refuge behind the mystery". If silence is golden, there can hardly be a better occasion for remaining silent right from the beginning.

In any case, on several occasions I have heard people formulate the following rather more serious objection: "Whether or not we can understand the reasons for acting in this way, it is not possible to say that God *does not want* certain things. Given his omniscience, he should have foreseen that, creating a world like ours, he would have made certain things possible even though he did not actually want them".

The conviction that the events of the world are always in one way or another conditioned by the divine will is reassuring for many believers, whose prime fear is that everything may fall prey to chaos. What frightens them more than anything else is the idea that ill and catastrophes may be unleashed in a wholly irrational manner as pure and simple ill without any control by the Divinity. To feel themselves in the hands of a God, be he even mysterious and incomprehensible, gives them security. To blind chance they prefer a divinity, no matter how weird, from whom they can yet obtain protection by means of supplications, offers, promises and, if necessary, fulsome adulation, just as they would do with the powerful of this earth, whom they presume to be always amenable to this type of courtship.

Obviously, I am not referring to God as such, but rather to his deformed image that has emerged from this characterization. This image does not seem to me to be such as to inspire all the well-merited love that I feel for the God who creates us from nothing for the plenitude of the good.

I am personally convinced that God is the giver of all good, and of nothing but good, and never of anything else. He is absolutely pure and spotless in his infinite goodness and also devoid of machiavellisms. Just like the sun, he gives nothing but light. Shadows are caused by objects that interpose themselves between the sun and us.

The Bible is certainly a series of highly inspired books, but we must never forget that it was written in a succession of epochs and in the midst of an archaic people. The cultural limits of that people undoubtedly conditioned the image, no matter how suggestive and powerful it may be, that the Bible gives us of God, whose traits nevertheless seem to be highly anthropomorphic in many respects.

It shows us a passionate God, a God who suffers from the betrayal of Israel and the people's fornications with foreign gods, a God who punishes Israel with extreme severity, abandoning the people into the hands of cruel enemies and seemingly repudiating them forever; but then he seems to repent having been so hard and unrelenting, remembers his former love and forgives them, bringing them back into his grace and favour and promising them the advent of a messianic era.

Reducing these comments to the aspect that interests us at this moment, we could say, still somewhat schematically, that the God of the Bible wants ill and then doesn't want it, and that in any case his life passes through a succession of different moments. And that he seems a God who intervenes in many different circumstances.

It is true that the Bible every now and again speaks of angels and represents them just like the presence of God, which articulates itself in the multiplicity of the situations and the becoming of the world through time. However, the fact that the Bible accentuates the divine will and divine intervention to regulate all things has the effect that God ends up by seeming excessively involved in the multifarious events and the becoming of the world.

Basing itself on the conceptual structure of Greek metaphysics, Christian theology elaborated a more rigorous concept of the Divinity. Here there lack all the images that the Bible had proposed with such wealth and power to give us its powerful and suggestive idea of God, so full of the sense of the sacred. The Bible gives us a vivacious vision of things that theology was later to reduce into an arid and grey conceptual pattern. And yet I think that this rationalization is not by any means devoid of positive aspects and merits: first and foremost that of teaching us to treat God in more appropriate terms, even if they be less poetical and, in other respects, also less pregnant with significance.

After these words of clarification and introduction to the new aspects to be considered, it will be as well to return to the line of thought we were following and develop it further. Let us say therefore that theology helps us to define certain attributes of the Divinity in a more rigorous manner than is done by the biblical texts, no matter how inspired they may be.

There is an attribute of the Divinity on which not only all theologians tendentially agree, but even the metaphysicians. What is it? The absolute simplicity of the divine Being. God is absolutely simple: neither multiple nor becoming, but one and eternal.

This has considerable consequences for the line of thought we are developing. It enables us to relegate to myth certain representations that always portray God as immersed in a temporal succession to perform first one action and then another, every now and again changing idea and impressing some new turn on his manner of acting.

If God is absolutely simple, his action cannot but consist of anything but a single, infinite, eternal act, an act without becoming.

The becoming of God through time and the multiplicity of his manifestations in space are evident.

He is certainly present in the succession of events and the variety of situations, but through the angels we mentioned a moment or two ago.

Just what are the angels? Theology defines them as purely spiritual beings, whose mission is to be vehicles of the divine manifestation. In his single but infinite act of love God gives life to other beings: and it is only appropriate that these beings springing directly from the divine Spirit should share a purely spiritual nature.

Though of a spiritual essence similar to that of God, the angels are always creatures immersed in space and time, articulate and becoming. In this sense they, too, already seem to possess a certain materiality. We are here concerned with a materiality, and therefore a corporeity, that must undoubtedly not be confused with the one that in our visible world is attributed to minerals, animals and plants.

The Bible mentions an original sin of the angels preceding the one of the first men. Men are undoubtedly entrusted with a great and very particular responsibility in the administration of creation.

And today, more than ever before, we are in a position to realize that the very survival of the earth, gravely menaced as it is by many forms of pollution, depends on the behaviour of man, depends on our economic and technological choices.

All this, however, cannot imply that animals became violent only after man's sin. They were violent even before that: this very aggressiveness armed them for sustaining the struggle for survival. Violence, egoism, competitiveness that became pure conflict and spirit of domination undoubtedly have far more remote origins.

Since God creates beings similar to himself, he also gives them space of autonomy and capacity of free self-determination. And thus, in full autonomy, many spiritual creatures – that is many angels – assume an attitude of concentrating on themselves, which leads them to acquire an ever greater degree of materiality. In this way their subtle materiality becomes degraded into an opaque and brutish materiality.

The evolution of the species and the advent of man mark slow, uncertain, difficult, but nevertheless essential steps for the reconquest of matter by the spirit. The divine work of redemption is committed to doing everything still necessary to bring about the final triumph of the kingdom of God amid a fully spiritualized humanity, a fully spiritualized creation. The original sin of the angels, and then the evolution of the cosmos and the earth and the living species – and eventually also the history of man – explain also how ill and evil came into being in all their forms, without any part of this process having to be attributed to God.

One may say that God acts through his angels and all his creatures, who are all called upon to perform the function of the angels of manifesting him and collaborating with him in the creation of the universe until this creation will be completed.

And since all creatures, starting with the angels, can be imperfect and deviating and act in a direction different and even opposed to the “vital drive” (Bergson’s *élan vital*) impressed by God, each creature will vehiculate divine creativity in a manner that is different in both degree and direction.

Divine action, albeit in a manner that is imperfect but nevertheless cumulative and progressive (though we may wish this progress to be more linear and continuous), thus becomes articulated through the multiplicity of the existing and the places and the situations and through the succession of events and epochs. This variegated articulation does not make divine action consist of anything other than a single and infinite act that always remains itself and equal to itself: an act of limitless love and donation; an act with which God gives us the whole of his being and everything good and nothing but good.

God’s action therefore expresses itself in a single and unique act, so that attributing to him a plurality of acts means contradicting his nature, formulating a proposition that is intrinsically contradictory. Let’s be quite outspoken: it means affirming an absurdity. It is therefore altogether improper to say that God *first* knows and ponders the outcomes that each of his creative acts could have and *then* decides what to create. To be completely serene, the valuation of the possibilities would have to take place at a moment preceding the moment of the decision. But such a succession of moments is wholly incompatible with the absolute simplicity of the divine Being.

But somebody could object: “It is not a question of moments of time, but rather metaphysical moments. Is it not true that God is triune, that is to say, can be distinguished in several different modes that are yet contemporaneous and co-eternal?”

Let us try to consider all these operations as contemporaneous. Let us imagine that God sees the effects that could spring from, respectively, creative acts X, Y and Z – and also an infinity of others – and that at the same time he decides to create X, excluding all the other possible creations. In short, he sees even everything that is not and decides what is to be, and all this at one and the same time. It seems to me that here we have a plurality of acts inevitably incompatible with God’s simplicity, and this even if we assume them to be contemporaneous.

On the other hand, what is incompatible with this simplicity is not just creating *first* this and *then* something else, but also deciding *to create* this and *not to create* something else. Even creating is a single and unique reality whenever this implies the production of various parts, or systems, implements, organs cells of which the existing is to be made up. God does not draw up plans, nor does he put pieces together. His creating is not similar to that of an artisan or an architect. The widely used expression “God’s project” (or “divine plan”) is purely symbolic: it must not be taken literally.

God’s creating cannot but consist of a single infinite act. It is exactly the nature of the originary act of love and donation of himself that gives rise to the refractions of God that are the angels. And all the rest comes to us from these selfsame creatures. The angels receive and continue to receive support

and sustainment from the fundamental creative act of the Divinity. Thus every new creation will receive its fundamental being from God, only accidentally from other creatures, and also to a certain extent from itself. No creature could ever be truly *alive* if did not to some extent create itself.

God not only gives the infinite, eternal impulse that brings creation into being and moves and sustains it and enables it to complete and perfect itself. In a different modality of his being (or, to put it into theological terms, by virtue of a different Person of his Trinity) God gives its “sense of being” to everything that exists in creation. That is what he does in the act of all-comprehensive consciousness that, thinking all things, “poses them” or “brings them into being” (to express the concept in idealist philosophical terminology).

Because, indeed, how could any reality exist if it had not been thought by some consciousness? The relationship with a consciousness is essential if something that exists is to have a sense, a “sense of being” of its own. These are propositions of which the truth cannot be demonstrated in any way by pure ratiocination; they can only be sensed, perceived by intuition in a spiritual, interior experience.

And therefore: whereas I, as an individual man, can give sense of being to something only *inasmuch as it appears to me* and for as long as I see it or think it, the fundamental sense of being of all things *as they are in themselves* is given by the divine Consciousness. Now, the divine Consciousness is universal and eternal. It thinks and sees all things, everything that exists. Not only, but it also thinks them and sees them in a frame that transcends all temporal becoming: just as we should do if we were to read a book not page by page, but rather all of them, from the first to the last, in just a single act.

But can one conceive a dimension that transcends becoming? Contemporary physics would seem to be arriving at just such a way of seeing things. Today there is much talk about a supratemporal fourth dimension and also about “space-time”: a geometric figure in which the passage of time is graphically expressed as a fourth dimension of space, where successive moments are all represented in a contemporaneous overall framework.

On the other hand, parapsychology records phenomena of clairvoyance, seeing in the future, where many future events are grasped before they happen, and this with such a set of details as to make it immensely improbable and – inversely – probable only to an infinitesimal extent that they could have been foreseen by pure chance.

As regards the concept of a divine Consciousness that, thinking all facts and all events, gives them their fundamental sense of being, one could also object that the contemporaneous vision of several things could contradict God’s simplicity. What is the answer to this objection? I personally would answer as follows: such a becoming conscious would be exercised with respect to matter that, though manifold, would be self-structuring, so that there would be no need for any creative act of the divine Consciousness, but only a pure and simple taking note, that is to say, a unique and absolutely simple action.

To come back to the problem from which we started and the guiding thread we have so far tried to follow, I think that, putting matters in a nutshell, we can conclude as follows. All the ills that there are in the world, as also all the good that may stem therefrom, have to be attributed to the creatures,

considered as a vast range that starts with the angels and continues right through to pure matter. Whereas God is responsible for the good in the pure state, the good that is lavished upon creatures is proportioned to their different capacity for receiving it.

God's action is thus fully justified: justified even in our human terms, imperfect and fallible as they may be. So that our Creator appears worthy only of gratitude and praise and love and adoration and cooperation without reserve and without limits. This could well be a reasonable theodicy, and I here propose it in all humility.
