



Paul Ricoeur's Myths of Evil in Biblical Perspective

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HERE IS A FASCINATING EXERCISE. FILL IN ALL THE BLANKS WITH THE SAME WORD that best completes the following sentences:

[Blank] accepts us. No matter how great our faults, [blank] will embrace us. [Blank] tells us we're all right. [Blank] does not ask us to feel guilty.

When I have conducted this experiment, the most frequent answers have been "God," "Jesus," "the gospel," or "mother." But, according to Gregory Curtis, the author of these sentences, the answer is "evil."¹ Students are shocked—both at being exposed as proponents of cheap grace and at the obvious and terrifying correctness of the answer.

Evil is not only real, says Curtis, it "seeks us out."² Other observers are equally clear: each of us, every individual and every culture, has to come to terms with evil.

¹Gregory Curtis, "Why Evil Attracts Us," in *Facing Evil*, ed. Paul Woodruff and Harry A. Wilmer (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1988) 94. The sentences are Curtis's; the fill-in-the-blank exercise is mine.

²*Ibid.*

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Each of Paul Ricoeur's four myths of evil—cosmogonic, Adamic, tragic, exiled soul—finds some support from biblical texts. Modern Christians will need to find a proper balance that makes sense also of the modern "myths" of natural causality and random chance.

I. SYMBOL, MYTH, LOGIC

In his major study, *The Symbolism of Evil*, Paul Ricoeur recognizes both the universality of evil (or fault or defilement) and the differing ways particular cultures have attempted to come to terms with such reality.³ Not everyone will speak in the same way of “sin” or “guilt,” but every culture will have its own “primary symbols” to describe the experience of fault (9). One might say that everyone, in moments of honesty, will recognize the truth of Eliphaz’s observation that “human beings are born to trouble just as sparks fly upward” (Job 5:7), but not everyone (especially not Job!) will agree with Eliphaz that no one “that was innocent ever perished” (Job 4:7).⁴ The more primal the symbols of fault, the more recognizable they will be to different people or different groups of people. The more developed the explanations of evil, the greater the distinctions between one culture’s story or doctrines and those of another.

In Ricoeur’s terminology, the primal symbols are first put together in myths, which, in turn, give rise to philosophical speculation and logical explanation. The movement is inevitable, because “the symbol gives rise to thought” (347-357); thus, while Ricoeur appreciates and learns from the primal symbols, he recognizes that stories and doctrines will and must emerge from them. Still, though there is a certain chronological reality to the several levels of language (symbol produces myth produces logic), symbol and myth remain operative also for people who have developed sophisticated philosophical and theological systems of thought.

II. THE FOUR MYTHS

In Paul Ricoeur’s definition, a myth is

not a false explanation by means of images and fables, but a traditional narration which relates to events that happened at the beginning of time and which has the purpose of providing grounds for the ritual actions of men [*sic*] of today and, in a general manner, establishing all the forms of action and thought by which man understands himself in his world. (5)

Ricoeur describes four myths or “mythical ‘types’ of representation concerning the origin and the end of evil,” i.e., four ways in which human societies have typically understood the problem of evil (172).⁵

1. “The drama of creation and the ‘ritual’ vision of the world”

This is the dualistic view of conflict between good and evil. Good and evil are both primeval. Creation is the work of the good god struggling with an evil chaos.

³Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (New York: Harper & Row, 1967). Page numbers in the text of this article are from the Beacon Paperback edition, published in Boston in 1969.

⁴According to Stanley Leavy, psychology too must see the “human condition as it is, not as we might wish it to be.” And, in truth, “[The human] is a discontented animal”: Stanley A. Leavy, *In the Image of God: A Psychoanalyt’s View* (New Haven: Yale University, 1988) 67.

⁵The four myths are briefly characterized by Ricoeur on pages 172-174. Fuller consideration of each follows in the subsequent four chapters (175-305).

The theogonic and cosmogonic myths of the Mesopotamian cultures are the most striking early illustrations of this perspective, though it is shared in one way or another by many ancient and contemporary religions in which the good and evil spirits (or spirit) are in conflict. This myth deals well with the human experience of an evil that is above and beyond oneself. "[The human] is not the origin of evil; [the human] finds evil and continues it....[E]vil is as old as the oldest of beings." Though chaotic evil lives on, its defeat has been marked by the good act of God's creation, an act that is regularly renewed in the ritual recitation and re-enactment of the myth. Thus, "evil is the past of being...that which was overcome by the establishment of the world....The question will be to know whether the confession of God as Holy will have the power to exclude the origin of evil completely from the sphere of the divine" (178-179).

2. "The 'Adamic' myth and the 'eschatological vision' of history"⁶

This is the anthropological myth, the account of human fault—the classical "fall" narrative. It has three characteristics: (1) "the etiological myth relates the origin of evil to an *ancestor* of the human race as it is now whose condition is homogeneous with ours"; (2) "its intention is to set up a *radical* origin of evil distinct from the *primordial* origin of the goodness of things"; (3) though there are other agents in the story (serpent, other human, tree), "the central intention of the myth is to order all the *other* figures in relation to the figure of Adam, and to understand them in conjunction with him and as peripheral figures in the story which has Adam as its principal protagonist" (233-235). In its purity, this myth clearly exonerates God of all complicity in evil. God remains good and holy. "The 'Adamic' myth is the fruit of the prophetic accusation directed against [humans]; the same theology that makes God innocent accuses [humanity]" (240). The question will be whether or not all experience of evil can be subsumed under human fault.

Salvation in this view comes not in ritual but in history. Creation is completed and "recedes to the position of 'cosmological' background for the *temporal* drama played in the foreground of the world"; the work of salvation is "still pending, until the 'Last Day'" (173).

3. "The wicked god and the 'tragic' vision of existence"

This is the world of Greek tragedy. Its "perhaps unavowable" theology involves a "god who tempts, blinds, leads astray. Here the fault appears to be indistinguishable from the very existence of the tragic hero; he does not commit the fault, he is guilty....[T]ragic salvation...consists in a sort of aesthetic deliverance issuing from the tragic spectacle itself, internalized in the depths of existence and converted into pity with respect to oneself" (173).

"[T]he non-distinction between the divine and the diabolical is the implicit

⁶Although, for Ricoeur, "Adamic" does in fact refer to the figure of Adam in the story of Genesis 2-3, Adam stands for all humankind: "Eve, then, does not stand for woman in the sense of the 'second sex.' Every woman and every man are Adam; every man and every woman are Eve" (255).

theme of the tragic theology and anthropology” (214). The witches in *Macbeth* make the point exactly: “Fair is foul, and foul is fair.”⁷ “While the myth of chaos tends to dissociate a more recent kind of divinity, ethical in character, from an older and more brutal kind, the tragic myth tends to concentrate good and evil at the summit of the divine” (216).

Other writers make the point that the tragic vision is defined by the concepts of fate and flaw:

From one perspective, the tragic hero is doomed by dark forces that are captured in the term ‘fate’....Thus fated, the tragic hero is flawed as well....Tragic heroes make decisions, act and live by their choices and actions in ways that make them responsible for their suffering and often their death....The hero’s flaw works hand in hand with fate to bring about a denouement that is genuinely tragic.⁸

4. “*The myth of the exiled soul and salvation through knowledge*”

This, too, is a dualistic myth, but one of anthropological dualism, dividing the human into soul and body. Evil is inherited with human nature; suffering comes because the soul, the true self, is trapped in the prison of the body. “The soul is not from here; it comes from elsewhere; it is divine; in its present body it leads an occult existence, the existence of an exiled being that longs for its liberation” (287). This is the Greek Orphic myth, described as follows by Ricoeur:

[T]he infant Dionysos was assassinated by the cunning and cruel Titans, who thereupon boiled and devoured the members of the god; Zeus, to punish them, blasted them with lightning and from their ashes created the present race of men. That is *whymen* today participate both in the evil nature of the Titans and in the divine nature of Dionysos, whom the Titans had assimilated in the course of their horrible feast. (282)

Salvation in this myth comes through knowledge (*gnosis*). “[T]he act in which man [*sic*] perceives himself as soul, or, better, makes himself the same as his soul and other than his body—other than the alternation of life and death,—this purifying act *par excellence* is knowledge” (300).

III. THE LAMENT PSALMS

It will already be clear to the reader that the biblical story of God and humans partakes in greater or lesser ways of each of the four myths. Although it will be misleading simply to respond to Ricoeur’s phenomenology from biblical perspective with an indiscriminate “all of the above,” it is obvious that different biblical authors and stories find themselves in different places, and different interpretive traditions put their emphases on different understandings of God and evil. Calvinistic double predestination is based in a thoroughly tragic worldview, while the Protestant emphasis on human freedom and responsibility is an “Adamic” per-

⁷William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, I.i.10.

⁸W. Lee Humphreys, *The Tragic Vision and the Hebrew Tradition* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 3-6.

spective; evangelical descriptions of the raging conflict between the forces of God and Satan are clearly within the cosmogonic “drama of creation,” while early gnostics and present new age seekers often see themselves as exiled souls. Although he begins with the pre-eminence of the Adamic myth, Ricoeur recognizes the ongoing contributions of each myth in an important chapter on “The Cycle of the Myths” (306-346).

Three of the myths (all but the Orphic—the exiled soul) clearly predominate in the Bible.⁹ They come together most intriguingly in the repeated three-fold complaint of the lament psalms:

I-lament:	“Against you, you alone, have I sinned” (Ps 51:4)	Adamic
you-lament:	“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me” (Ps 22:1)	tragic
they-lament:	“They gave me poison for food” (Ps 69:21)	cosmogonic

It is, of course, not the case that there are three clearly distinguishable categories of laments, corresponding to the three myths. The same psalm will often combine all three elements:

“How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?” (Ps 13:1)	tragic
“How long must I bear pain in my soul?” (Ps 13:2)	Adamic
“How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?” (Ps 13:2)	cosmogonic

To be sure, the elements are not “pure” in Psalm 13. The I-lament does not confess fault, though such a confession is never far from biblical declarations of suffering (“There is no soundness in my flesh because of your indignation; there is no health in my bones because of my sin”—Ps 38:3). The you-lament does not ascribe all suffering to God, thus avoiding the full terror of the tragic vision. The enemies in this they-lament are apparently human, not demonic, though in their wickedness they oppose God and thus align themselves with other forces. Nevertheless, though not fully exemplary of the pure myths, the prayer flirts with each of them, recognizing a certain validity in all.

Better, we might say that such psalmic outbursts are closer to Ricoeur’s primal symbols than to fully developed myths. Thus, it is not surprising that they can be taken in different directions, since each of the myths, to be credible, will have to be true to the human experience of trouble as it is actually voiced. Our own la-

⁹The biblical worldview, dominated as it is by Hebraic realism (even in the New Testament), provides less room for the Orphic myth.

ments are often similarly undifferentiated, despite our developed theologies and doctrines. Tragic Calvinists and Adamic liberals discover that they, too, have real enemies whose onslaughts feel quite demonic.

In these psalms, the Bible is true to the human experience of trouble, pain, suffering, and evil. Such experience can never be neatly quantified and pigeon-holed. The different complaints within the lament feed off of one another. If I have a God problem, I will also have a neighbor problem, and vice versa. If I am overwhelmed by pain, I will not have time for others and perhaps no ear for God. Mired in my own guilt, I will often cut myself off from God, and friends may become enemies. The theologian and the preacher will need to recognize that the human experience of evil is multidimensional and respond accordingly. To silence the person railing at God because “our” myth (or doctrine) requires a different target will fail the test of fidelity to primal human experience and thus to biblical truth. Certainly, developed theological systems have great importance. They can expand horizons or close them down; but it is the systems that must be tested by (true) experience, not vice versa.

IV. SURELY, NOT I, LORD?

In both Old and New Testaments, the Adamic notion that evil is a human product, for which all are equally responsible, is easily demonstrable.

The LORD looks down from heaven on humankind to see if there are any who are wise, who seek after God. They have all gone astray, they are all alike perverse; there is no one who does good, no, not one. (Ps 14:2-3)

Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned.... (Rom 5:12)

Indeed—although, as we have seen, other viewpoints are also represented—one might say that the Adamic myth is uniquely the Bible’s own, its particular genius. Other religions know of tragedy and the twin dualisms (theological and anthropological) that mark the other myths, but the biblical insistence on human fault is radical, at least in its single-mindedness.

Still, to read the Bible only “Adamically,” through the systematic theological structure of creation, fall, redemption or through the typological structure of first Adam, second Adam, is to read it in a highly selective way. Much is omitted in the process. After all, Genesis does not begin with Adam, but with a modified cosmological account. Although in Genesis 1 chaos, sea, deeps, and dragons have all been demoted (uncapitalized—the ultimate fate!) because of its uncompromising monotheism, the common ancient near eastern dualistic myths clearly still lurk in the background.

Even in Genesis 2-3, Adam is not the sole agent. The tree beckons, the serpent theologizes, Eve suggests, and God made the world with the built-in possibility of

temptation.¹⁰ Recognizing human fault does not dismiss the role or the responsibility of other players. The biblical stories will not remain simplistic.

Nevertheless, biblical religion would not be biblical religion without the Adamic myth. It lies behind the moral and ethical demands of Torah and the deuteronomists, the Sinai covenant, and the prophetic insistence that justice not ritual is God's highest good—and therefore humanity's as well. Moreover, its assertion of the universality of sin and its evil effects sets up the second-Adam christocentricity of the Pauline, Augustinian, and Lutheran emphasis on the justification of sinners through faith alone and grace alone.

V. GOOD VERSUS EVIL

Despite its never ending insistence on human responsibility, the Bible also recognizes that evil can be (or at least can become) an external reality; it therefore allows an openness to a modified dualism, a form of the "drama of creation." Indeed, some texts at some times will embrace such a perspective quite fully.

As we have seen, Genesis 1 already plays off the backdrop of the Mesopotamian cosmogonic myths. Other texts do so much more directly:

Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the LORD!
Awake as in days of old, the generations of long ago!
Was it not you who cut Rahab in pieces, who pierced the dragon?
Was it not you who dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep:
who made the depths of the sea a way for the redeemed to pass over? (Isa 51:10)

We see here an obvious use of the Babylonian *Enuma Elish* myth in which Marduk creates the world out of the pieces of the defeated Tiamat.¹¹ Particularly interesting is the way in which the myth is quite suddenly historicized and turned into an account of the exodus, the crossing of the sea. The Song of the Sea (Exodus 15) had, of course, done that already, providing the background for Second Isaiah's oracle.¹² There is a difference, however. Whereas Isaiah starts with the myth and moves to history, the Song of the Sea moves in the other direction. First come the references to "horse and rider" and "Pharaoh's chariots" (Exod 15:2, 4) and only later the mythic "floods" and "depths" (15:5, 8).

One wonders whether this does not make it possible to postulate some kind of appropriate *Sitz im Leben* for the different myths. The narrative account of the crossing (Exodus 14), in its older form (JE), speaks quite naturally of the water be-

¹⁰According to Douglas John Hall, *God and Human Suffering* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986) 54-56, loneliness, temptation, limits, and anxiety are given within creation itself, not yet aspects of a fallen world.

¹¹*Enuma Elish* 4.93-104, 137-140; see James B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1950) 67.

¹²Cf. Frank Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1973) 143-144: "The Canaanite mythic pattern is not the core of Israel's epic of Exodus and Conquest. On the other hand, it is equally unsatisfactory to posit a radical break between Israel's mythological and cultic past and the historical cultus of the league. The power of the mythic pattern was enormous. The Song of the Sea reveals this power as mythological themes shape its mode of presenting epic memories. It is proper to speak of this counterforce as the tendency to mythologize historical episodes to reveal their transcendent meaning."

ing driven back by an east wind causing the Egyptian chariots to get mired in the mud. Whence then the Cecil B. DeMille special effects—the wall of waters and the dry land in the midst of the sea—now also found in the later form of the narrative (P)? Are they not taken from the song (Exodus 15), which, appropriately for hymns and liturgical dramas, has given transcendent and mythic significance to this relatively minor (on the world's screen) historical skirmish? Then, in rewriting the history, the priestly writer incorporates the hymnic features into the narrative. There is no problem in this except for literal readers. Now, for them, God's work—in order to be God's work—will have to *look* mythic, not only be extolled as mythic. Perhaps it is such disappointed literalists who, in a later age, wonder why God no longer does the kind of past great acts about which “our ancestors have told us” (Ps 44:1-3).

Although even a limited dualism grates against the biblical God's insistence that “I am the LORD, and there is no other” (Isa 45:6), it comes to be allowed, no doubt, because of the human experience of evil forces and because of the difficulty in ascribing all catastrophe to Yahweh while at the same time maintaining that God is good. The Bible doesn't have to invent evil spirits, of course. They populate the religious world everywhere. Strict Hebrew monotheism had pushed them into the shadows where, occasionally, they again make themselves known. How does the translator decide, for example, whether or not to capitalize the “terror of the night” or the “pestilence that stalks in darkness” (Ps 91:5-6)? Eventually an Evil One arises—Satan—first as the “devil's advocate” in God's divine council (as in Job 1-2), but then taking on the mythic dimensions of a fallen day star (Lucifer—Isa 14:12-20) or the chaos dragon (Leviathan—Isa 27:1). The relative independence of Satan grows through the intertestamental period and into the New Testament. There the demons are back in full force—at least until Jesus shows up. Finally, though, the New Testament's view reflects that of the Old. God alone is God, and when God shows up—including in the person of his Son Jesus—the demons scurry like so many cockroaches when the light is turned on in an infested kitchen. In the biblical view, the demons and spirits are not for speculation and fear, they are for driving out. The oneness of God and the refusal to give up human responsibility provide difficult terrain for dualism to thrive.

VI. THE TRAGIC VISION

Those same elements, however, can and sometimes do push the biblical writers toward a tragic vision. John Morreall argues that “unlike classical tragedy, which is humanistic, monotheism is God-centered. The monotheistic religions discourage the self-concern of tragedy.” Further, “The sting of tragedy is that someone's suffering does not serve a higher purpose, but is unredeemed, pointless. In monotheism, on the other hand, God is provident: He controls all events for our good.”¹³ Biblical religion, however, is far from a theoretical or philosophical “monotheism.” The biblical God,

¹³John Morreall, *Comedy, Tragedy, and Religion* (Albany: State University of New York, 1999) 76. Morreall, recognizing also the pro-tragic features of monotheism, numbers these factors among the anti-tragic features.

being both personal and remarkably willing to share power, is not bound so firmly by Morreall's strictures. As Morreall recognizes, Job raises serious questions about pointless suffering, but so do many of the psalmists before him. Jephthah and his daughter, King Saul, and the Preacher of Ecclesiastes have often been seen as other biblical tragic figures.¹⁴

It may be that a clue to the Bible's push toward tragedy can be seen by reflecting on the hard passage in Second Isaiah: "I form light and create darkness, I make weal and create woe; I the LORD do all these things" (Isa 45:7). How is possible to make such a statement and still maintain the goodness of God?

It is important to recognize at the outset that, in its context, Isaiah's statement is clearly meant as good news. Why? What we see in Second Isaiah is the triumph of Hebrew monotheism, the insistence that Yahweh alone is God, asserted in the face of a very real alternative: the apparent victory of Marduk and the forces of Babylon. Dualistic and polytheistic religions can conveniently ascribe good things to good gods and bad things to bad gods, but monotheism's counterclaim will inevitably run the risk of turning God into a tragic monster, the source of both good and evil. Second Isaiah comes close and would probably have succumbed had he not maintained at the same time the Adamic insistence on human responsibility and Yahweh's profligate willingness to employ the elements of creation (human and otherwise) in doing his work.¹⁵ Second Isaiah certainly does not want to make Yahweh the author of moral evil, nor does he claim that if it happened God did it. In the face of the options available to him or his hearers, however, that the suffering of the exile was the result either of Marduk's superiority or the intervention of other "evil" gods or spirits (evil from Israel's perspective), Second Isaiah holds fast to Israel's central creed: Yahweh is one. God seems to be saying to Israel: Whom would you rather have in charge of "evil"—me, whom you know and who you know means you well, or somebody else, indeed, anybody else? If you can believe I got you into this mess, you can believe I can get you out. Believing that Yahweh got Israel into exile, however, is not a statement of tragic fate, but an Adamic and prophetic assertion that exile was the deserved consequence of Israel's sins of injustice and apostasy. Thus, this sharp statement ("I make weal and create woe") necessarily borders on the tragic in order to exclude the dualistic, but never finally deserts the prophet's Adamic roots.

There are clearly tragic features in the Bible and in Christian tradition. Many Lutheran emphases on the bondage of the will and the terror of the hidden God come close.¹⁶ Viewing Judas as the blessed traitor (because his treachery brought

¹⁴In addition to the work by Humphreys cited in note 8, see also J. Cheryl Exum, *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1992).

¹⁵See also my discussion in "'To Whom Then Will You Compare Me?' Agency in Second Isaiah," *Word & World* 19/2 (1999) 141-152, and the comments of my colleague Terence Fretheim in this issue, "To Say Something—About God, Evil, and Suffering," *Word & World* 19/4 (1999) 339, 346-350.

¹⁶Though, see Steven Paulson's very helpful essay, also in this issue, "Luther on the Hidden God," *Word & World* 19/4 (1999) 363-371.

our redemption) or Adam's sin as a *felix culpa* or "happy fault" (because it resulted in Jesus' incarnation, death, and resurrection) push them into the tragic mode. Here, too, fair becomes foul and foul fair. The Bible itself cannot stay there, however. Good is not evil, and evil is not good. God is good and not evil. The mystery and the wrath of God remain, because God remains God; thus, events often take what appears at least to be a tragic turn. Pastors and Christian counselors will need to recognize this and avoid explaining too quickly or getting God too easily off the hook; but finally God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is a God who is firmly and forever for us and for all creation. As a final solution, tragedy will not work.¹⁷

VII. THE LURE OF THE EXILED SOUL

While, according to the Old Testament, it is the breath of God blown into the mouth that makes the human a living נֶפֶשׁ (nephesh), נֶפֶשׁ here does not yet mean disembodied "soul" as it can later when it has come to be translated by the Greek ψυχή (psyche). There is no living נֶפֶשׁ that is not both body and spirit, flesh and breath. As Ecclesiastes mournfully notes: "For the fate of humans and the fate of animals is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and humans have no advantage over the animals; for all is vanity" (Eccl 3:19). In this worldview, the myth of the exiled soul will find little purchase.

Nevertheless, once נֶפֶשׁ had become ψυχή and Yahweh's name in Exod 3:14 had become, in the Septuagint, ὁ ὢν (the Being One), the Greek myth had an inroad. It became possible, for example, to speak of killing the body without killing the soul (Matt 10:28). Generations of interpreters would go on to read the Pauline distinction between flesh and spirit as the anthropological dualism of body and soul rather than a theological argument about the nature of the whole person, unredeemed or redeemed. A body-denying otherworldly Christianity had found its justification.

Anthropological dualism could not, however, survive the move to modernism. It was denied both by biology's materialistic view of the human and neo-orthodoxy's rediscovery of the biblical worldview.¹⁸ But count nothing out: post-

¹⁷Or, put another way, tragedy will destroy. Orleanna Price, the wife of a zealous missionary to the Congo in Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*, facing a harsh and dangerous African existence, knows this all too well. If God is capricious (as God would be were he the God of her daily life), neither constant nor good, religion is a tragic curse. She speaks of singing in church, "*Tata Nzolo*," which in the tonal Kikongo language "means *Father in Heaven* or *Father of Fish Bait* depending on just how you sing it, and that pretty well summed up my quandary. I could never work out whether we were to view religion as a life-insurance policy or a life sentence. I can understand a wrathful God who'd just as soon dangle us all from a hook. And I can understand a tender, unprejudiced Jesus. But I could never quite feature the two of them living in the same house. You wind up walking on eggshells, never knowing which *Tata Nzolo* is home at the moment": Barbara Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible* (New York: HarperFlamingo, 1998) 96. Orleanna shares her worldview with Beret in Ole Rolvaag's *Giants in the Earth*. For both, living in a kind of first naïveté, God was epitomized in the forces of nature, which they confronted in the raw as most moderns do not. Nature as God is essentially tragic, for it gives and takes with no notice. For Orleanna, the Congo River breathes "behind the curtain of forest, preparing to roll over us" (98). For Beret, the enemy was the relentless wind and the uncaring prairie, as Rolvaag notes in the title of his final chapter: "The Great Plains Drinks the Blood of Christian Men and Is Satisfied": Ole Rolvaag, *Giants in the Earth* (New York: Blue Ribbon Books, 1927).

¹⁸For a now classic challenge to an Orphic reading of the New Testament, see Oscar Cullmann, *Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead? The Witness of the New Testament* (London: Epworth, 1958).

modernism has resurrected immortality! The myth has a new seductive power, seen, for example, in new age neo-gnosticism, in the attraction of the eastern religions, and in Kevorkianism's notion that death is the solution to life. At their worst, such views become atheistic narcissism;¹⁹ at their best, they can be expressions of a dimension of the human that eludes materialistic analysis. Pastors and theologians will need to listen carefully and to meet the postmodern challenges by reasserting the Bible's holistic view of the human as the creature of a just and gracious God, disallowing both hedonistic materialism and neighbor-denying escapism. German novelist Heinrich Böll comes close to getting the human right:

[It is impossible for me] to despise that which is mistakenly called physical love; it is the substance of a sacrament, and I pay it the same respect I give to the unconsecrated bread, also the substance of a sacrament; the separation of love into so-called physical love and the other kind is open to criticism, perhaps inadmissible; no love is either purely physical or purely of the other kind; both always contain a portion of the other, even if only a tiny one. We are neither pure spirits nor pure bodies, and it may be that the angels envy us our ever-changing mixture of both.²⁰

VIII. CYCLING THE MYTHS ONCE MORE

Walter Brueggemann wrote once that the regularized speech of the lament psalms both limited and enhanced experience.²¹ It gave language where there was none, thus enhancing experience. It disallowed some expressions of grief as roads to destruction, thus limiting experience. The four myths of evil do the same. Certainly, as stated earlier, a community's myths and stories (and later their doctrines and theologies) must mesh with the primal symbols of human experience; otherwise they are, by definition, false and useless. By the same token, however, people's experience will be shaped by the stories they tell themselves and the theologies to which they adhere. Therefore, what we say about suffering and evil and how we say it is profoundly important. Shall we let perpetrators go because the "devil made them do it"? On the other hand, shall we push Adamic responsibility to the limit and blame the victim? Shall we be so keen to draw everything under the will of God that we define a deterministic deity whom we then must despise as a monster? Shall we encourage an otherworldly escapism that threatens the neighbor and the environment because our eyes are set so firmly on heaven?

Clearly, all the myths have their limits. Each can be abused. Nevertheless, though orthodox Christians will continue to live under the pre-eminence of the Adamic, they will not be able to do without the tragic and the cosmogonic. An in-

¹⁹A particularly crass example is Shirley MacLaine's assertion, "Our bodies are only the houses wherein our souls reside. When we leave our physical bodies, our souls become energy until we choose to reincarnate in a different form"; cited in Ted Peters, *The Cosmic Self* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991) 72.

²⁰Heinrich Böll, *Brief an einen jungen Katholiken* (1958); cited in Othmar Keel, *The Song of Songs: A Continental Commentary*, trans. Frederick J. Gaiser (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994) vii.

²¹Walter Brueggemann, "The Formfulness of Grief," *Interpretation* 31/3 (1977) 263-275.

sightful theologian will maintain a balance that allows her to say something of meaning to the person in the dark night of the soul, resorting neither to nihilistically vacant silence or imperialistically imposed structure. To be sure, not all silence is vacant, and not all meaning is imposed, but both can be. The careful pastor will need to know the difference.

Moreover, none of us lives any longer in the ancient world that composed the four myths in their original forms. For better or worse, all of us are creatures of the enlightenment and have developed ways of thinking that are not always immediately theistic. The pastor/theologian will have to be at home in that world, too, helping people come to terms with the act/consequence relationship that exists in both the physical and moral realms and with the probabilities of random chance that none can avoid.

Modern thought retains its affinity to ancient thought, of course. It is certainly possible to talk of the natural act/consequence relationship (driving against a brick wall and unsafe sex kill) as a non-theistic form of Adamic responsibility. Deuteronomy would see this immediately as the work of God. Paul would say that the wages of sin is death. Some modern Christians live still quite directly in this worldview. Others, though, need a way to make sense of what they know about the natural world and human agency without becoming atheistic. Both groups will need careful and thoughtful help from faithful Christian teachers.

Similarly, one could speak of randomness and chance as a contemporary form of the drama of creation. Now the dangerous “other” is not an evil spirit, but simply the principle of uncertainty or probability built into all of nature. Indeed, even physicists sometimes refer to probability as “Maxwell’s demon.” Jesus, too, knew about chance (witness those 18 upon whom the tower of Siloam fell, who were not “worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem”—Luke 13:4). The psalmists’ experience of the hiddenness of God seems at times a way to speak of what we would call randomness from their theistic, but thoroughly puzzled, perspective. Contemporary Christians will need theological counsel about how to sort this all out. Many, especially those from developing countries, will remind us that we give up the notion of genuine forces of evil (or Evil) at our peril. The experience of others has given them profound respect for, perhaps even terror of, the “evil” possibilities of chance. Again, pastor/theologians need to bring an appropriate theistic (and monotheistic) balance to all of this—maintaining the biblical confession of one God who is both strong and good, and doing this in a way that gives proper voice to the various modern “myths” as they are experienced by Christian people.

The ancient myths remind us that from the beginning of time humans have tried to make sense of evil, while at the same time avoiding the danger of oversimplifying or overexplaining. Symbols and myths were their proper forms of expression. Yet, these *will* give rise to thought, so thinking, too, is brought into the mix. For us, such thought is guided and informed by the scriptural witness to God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in whose presence, finally, we shall “fear no evil.” ⊕