THE PROBLEM OF EVIL: Theodicies from the Natural Sciences, the Social Sciences and World Religions

Course Number: Religious Studies 2030.01

Institution: Webster University

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Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then God is impotent? Is God able but not willing? Then God is malevolent. Is God both able and willing? Whence then evil?

...Epicurus

A world allowed to make itself through the evolutionary exploration of potentiality is a better world than one produced ready-made by divine fiat. In such an evolving world there must be malfunctions and blind alleys...John Polkinghorne

Requirements: Class participation (5%), readings, three writing assignments on specific course questions (15% each), and a final research paper (50%). The final research paper (10-15 pages) will examine some facet of theodicies and the model of the divine. Students may write and present precises on recommended readings for extra credit.

Required Texts:


Plus book chapters and articles on reserve.

Subscription to META list serve and Internet Assignments

All Recommended Books and Articles on Reserve at the Eden Webster Library:

Additional Resource: *Zygon*
Classes:

Unit 1 Why Evil? Why a Science and Religion approach to theodicy?

What is theodicy? Why theodicy as a subject?
How have had science and religion historically interact?

Why religion, natural and social scientific approaches to the question of theodicy?
Can the natural and social sciences provide a means of revising religious theodicies?
Can we develop a dialogue and integrationist model of relating science and religion?

January 18- Introduction: Religion & Science and the Nature of Evil
January 20- Science and Religion

PBS Video: Faith and Reason
Worthing, pp. 1-37

Recommended:
January 25- Worthing, pp. 38-94
Swinburne, "The Need for Theodicy," Providence, pp. 3-29.

Unit 2 Do cosmological processes prefigure evil?

Why is there something rather than nothing?
Can God be found in the passage of the universe from its origin to the distant future?
Why doesn't contingency or chaos prevent novelty and order from emerging?
Are black holes physical expressions of evil?
Is entropy on a cosmic scale a prefiguring of evil?
Why does God function in a world where disorder exercises such a significant role?
Can God survive the consummation of the universe?

January 27- Creation from Nothing vs. Creation from Something
**Video:** Universe 2000: Beyond the Millennium

Worthing, pp. 95-159

Recommended:


**January 30- Quantum Physics, Chaos and Complexity**

**Lecture:** Dr. William Eidson, "The Quantum Universe"

Worthing, pp. 160-210


Recommended:


Alan Wallace, *Choosing Reality A Buddhist View of Physics and the Mind*, Ithaca, Snow Lion, 1996, pp. 70-118

**February 1- Entropy and Evil**


**Unit 3 Natural Selection and Selfish Genes**

After Darwin, can religion hold that God is a God of power and might?

Why is nature ordered, yet open to disorder? What are the functions of evolutionary blind alleys or malfunctions?

Why did life have to take so long to be come complex, to be endowed with self-consciousness?

What is the role of death within nature? The extinction of species?

Why does God not intervene to prevent pain and suffering?

Can we speak of design without a designer within evolution? What model of the divine would result from speaking only of design?
Does evil spring from chance and the freedom that chance allows?

Is there a divine lure or eros within evolutionary creation?

February 3 - Evolution and Natural Selection

Dawkins, pp. 1-45


February 8 - Video: Genetics: Patterns of Diversity

Dawkins, pp. 46-108


Recommended:

See the responses of Ralph Burhoe and Michael Ruse to Williams’ article in that same edition of Zygon


February 10 - "Evolutionary Stable Strategy"

Dawkins, pp. 109-165

Recommended:


Haught, God After Darwin, pp. 57-80.

February 15 - Selfish Genes

Lecture: Dr. Andrew Davis, "Natural Selection or Genetic Drift or?"

Dawkins, pp. 166-201

Recommended:

Haught, God After Darwin, pp. 81-104.

February 17 - Memes: Cultural Equivalence of Genes?


**BBC Video:** The Soul of the Universe

Dawkins, pp. 202-266

Recommended:

See Gilkey’s response to Dawkins’ selfish genes: Langdon Gilkey, in *Biology, Ethics, and the Origin of Life*, ed. by Holmes Rolston, Boston, Jones and Bartlett, pp. 163-190.


**Unit 4 Sociobiology and Evil**

Does natural selection determine the way we are? Effective reproduction? Enthusiastic nepotism?

Do our ancestors’ division of their world into friends and enemies express biological drives?

Is violence and aggression endemic to human nature? Do ethnic, racial, religious, and national social divisions express biological imperatives?

Does nature need to be redeemed?

In what sense may human morality contribute to the evolution of the universe?

Can the social evolution of altruism overcome the directionality of selfish genes?

What is the role of religion in creating ideals of altruism? The role of the sciences?

Why does God require the human race to go through a painful learning and developmental process?

February 22- The Ecology of Evil

Watson, pp. ix-88.

Recommended:


February 24- Natural Evil? The Ethology of Evil

Watson, pp. 89-140
Recommended:


1st Paper Due

February 29- Human Nature: The Anthropology and Psychology of Evil

Watson, pp. 141-222

Recommended:


Unit 5 Naturalist Views of Evil

Are natural disasters evil or rearrangements of life on earth?

What is the role of pain and suffering within the animal world? Within human life?

Does tragedy adequately replace the concept of natural evil?

Does survival at the genetic, individual, and social levels relativizes goodness?

Is there a hidden pattern behind evil within nature? Is evil nature’s builder? How can this be reconciled with theistic models?

March 2- Evil Nature?

Watson, pp. 240-292

Swinburne, "Natural Evil," *Providence*, pp. 160-192


Recommended:


March 7 - Pain as a Structure of the World: Theodicy of Natural Evil


March 9 - Contemporary Approaches to Evil

**PBS Video:** Facing Evil (Bill Moyers interview of Maya Angelou, Philosopher Philip Hallie, Jewish scholar Raul Hilberg, Samuel D. Proctor & Barbara Jordan at a Conference on Evil)

Pagels, pp. 3-34

**March 13-17 - Spring Break**

Unit 6 Monotheistic Theodicies

How do Jewish, Christian, and Islamic aetiologies of evil, suffering, and death compare?

Can the Christian notion of original sin be salvaged? Can it be reinterpreted as the patriarchal fall to violence? Are there biological reasons?

Does the myth of Satan express sociobiological imperatives or what Harold Blooms calls the “Lucifer principle”?

How do we envision sin on a personal, social, and planetary scale?

How do we attempt to re-envision theodicies from Augustinian free-will defense? From the Irenean soul-making? Correlate them with scientific models of theodicies?

How do we envision social evil and environmental oppression? Biocide and ecocide on a scale unimagined?

What is the meaning of human tragedy and suffering?
Can we move beyond the divine persuasion (process) and divine coercion (classical) models of God? Divine guidance? A model from the future?

What can scientific theodicies contribute to the revision of theistic theodicies?

March 21- Mythic Narratives on the Origin of Evil, Suffering, and Death: Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Interpretations of Genesis 2


Pagels, pp. 35-111

Recommended:


March 23- The Origin of Satan: Mythic Representations of Cosmic Evil

Pagels, pp.112-184

2nd Paper Due

March 28 & March 30- Jewish Solutions to Theodicy

Cenkner, pp. 3-42

Neusner, pp. 92-119

March 30- Monotheistic Solutions: Christianity

Cenkner, pp. 43-69, pp. 183-198

Swinburne, pp. 30-48

Recommended Highly:

Swinburne, pp. 49-124

April 4- Augustinian and Irenean Theodicies: Free Will and Soul-Making

Swinburne, pp. 49-110
John Hick, “The Two Theodicies: Contrasts and Agreements,” in *Evil and the God of Love*,

Recommended:
Hick, pp.43 -75 and pp. 207-241.

April 6- Mythologies of Sin: Scapegoating and Plagues
Beozzo & Elizondo (ed), *The Return of the Plague*, pp. 9-23
Swinburne, 111-159.

Recommended:

April 11- Evil as Social and Environmental Oppression, the Possibility of Geocide?
Swinburne, 223-252.


April 13- Process Theology: Divine Persuasion or Divine Coercion or?

**Lecture**, Dr. Don Arthur, “Guiding Directions: A Response to the Process Theology”
Cenkner, pp.223-240


Recommended:

April 18- Islamic Responses
Unit 7 Karmic Theodicies

How do Buddhists and Hindus explain the origin of evil and suffering?

What does the decline of the dharma from the myth of a golden age? From a cosmic perspective?

Do the Buddhist notions of dependent origination and emptiness express a non-dualistic model for speaking of evolutionary design without a designer?

What can scientific theodicies contribute to the revision of theistic theodicies? Non-theistic theodicies?

April 20- Hindu Theodicies: Evil, Rebirth, and Liberation

Cenkner, pp. 116-155

Neusner, pp. 7-35

Recommended:


April 25- Buddhist Notions of Karma and Compassion

**Video:** Excerpts from Palden Gyatso, a Tibetan Buddhist monk imprisoned for 33 years in Chinese prisons


Neusner, pp. 36-66

Recommended:


Unit 8 Radical Evil: Antitheodicy, and Challenges to Models of the Divine

How do we re-envision theistic models from radical evil and suffering? Divine Impotence or Divine Apathy? Dynamic compassion?
How do we compare Jewish (tikkun ha-olam, renewal of the universe), Christian (divine suffering), and Buddhist (pratitya-samutpada, dependent origination/compassion) responses to the holocaust?

Can we create a model of theodicy encompassing scientific and religious theodicies?

April 27 - The Trial of God

Wiesel, Night.


Highly Recommended:


Thomas Altizer, “Buddhist Emptiness and the Crucifixion of God,” Emptying God, pp. 69-78.

Eugene Borowitz, Dynamic Sunyata and The God Whose Glory Fills, pp. 79-90.


May 4 - Re-envisioning the Model of the Divine

Research Papers: Due May 11

Appendix A

Recommended Readings


