

“Above all, the hardest teaching to accept (for it is the principal of all the other teachings) is that our society cannot survive without openly honoring Jesus Christ as the King of Nations, and following the directions of His Catholic Church” (134). What sets this book apart from so many others that wish to explain Catholic social teaching is that it gives us again what Augustine first gave in the fifth century: the fundamental alternative between two cities, separated not by distance but by love (137).

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God and the Evil of Scarcity: Moral Foundations of Economic Agency

Albino Barrera, O.P.

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A theodicy is an argument aiming to show that the existence of evil in this world is not incompatible with God’s attributes of omniscience, omnipotence, and benevolence. Failure to establish such compatibility would undermine the belief in the existence of God, or at least, the perfect and benevolent God of Christianity.

In the Jewish religion of old, an explanation for misfortune and misery was provided that was not only consistent with God’s existence but also firmly grounded on it: Yahweh punished anyone who did not observe his law or the agreements made with him. This doctrine was in itself quite satisfactory but did not square with the alarmingly iniquitous schemes whereby rewards and punishments were meted out. It would be tempting to see in the book of Job the first text in which the need for a theodicy in the modern sense is expressed. Indeed, Job, convinced of his irreproachability in the midst of the many misfortunes befalling him, reclaims a theodicy from God; he challenges Yahweh to show him his justice! Not for a moment does Job harbor the thought that God might not exist.

The general attitude of the Christian religion is well summarized by Leszek Kolakowski in *Religion* (1982), in which he explains that suffering, whether resulting from natural causes or directly inflicted by human beings upon themselves or others, “is ultimately reducible to the same source: moral separation from God.” The Christian view of suffering as a punishment for man’s sin “is a biblical view which, particularly in Saint Augustine, has become a part of orthodox teaching.”

Now, there is a mythical aspect to Genesis that requires an interpretation. If we should not wish to accept the crude biological-penal doctrine of original sin formulated by Augustine, how should we understand the state of “moral separation from God” in which mankind is supposed to lie?

Many Christian philosophers preferred to attempt to produce an explanation of evil while remaining within the bounds of natural theology rather than by way of an inter-

pretation of Genesis, or indeed of other parts of the Old or New Testament. The issue arose for the first time in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century when, after the religion wars, several writers in Europe (e.g., Pierre Bayle) were ready to entertain the thought that God might not exist. Leibniz provided an answer of great philosophical depth in his *Theodicy* (1710): The best possible world, the one that a benevolent God would choose, may include evil.

In the history of philosophy, after Leibniz comes Kant, whose *Critique of Pure Reason* was published in 1781. Kant's strictures on natural theology, and more generally on ontology, were such that after him on the Continent the genre of theodicies was abandoned. Yet, in 1798 Thomas Malthus devoted the last two chapters of his *Essay on Population* to a speculative discussion of the role of his "principle of population" in God's providential design for the destiny of man. (Malthus' principle of population says that the human species' capacity to reproduce exceeds its capacity to produce foodstuffs. It is only the resulting systematic undersupply of subsistence goods that holds in check population growth.) His answer was that the hardships to which mankind had been bound by God in scraping subsistence from the earth were conducive to humanization or, in Malthus' own words, "to the formation of the mind." Already Victorian in 1798, Malthus concluded, "Evil exists in the world not to create despair but activity."

The specificity of Malthus is that in his argument are interwoven: (1) a somewhat heterodox interpretation of Genesis ("The original sin of man is the torpor and corruption of the chaotic matter in which he may be said to be born."); and (2) some ideas drawn from Leibniz ("Both reason and experience seem to indicate ... that the infinite variety of nature ... is admirably adapted to further the high purpose of creation and to produce the greatest possible quantity of good.") Thus, he thought to have found "a satisfactory reason for the existence of natural and moral evil, and, consequently, for that part of both ... which arises from the principle of population."

Now Barrera commends Malthus "for broaching the need for a theology of scarcity"; that is, for posing the question "of why economic privation is tolerated in divine providence" (14). However, Malthus, as the last quotation above makes clear, proposed a theodicy, not "a theodicy of scarcity." An obvious objection to the plan of a partial theodicy, even if it were carried out successfully, is that perhaps the worst evils (say, Auschwitz) fall outside its scope. Barrera does not discuss it. He separates out the two aforementioned strands of Malthus' argument, drops the first, and tries to improve the second by infusing some Thomistic ontology into it. In this respect, he makes two proposals. First, he suggests that the purpose of God's design in confronting humans with "scarcity" is not humanization but, more piously, "participation in God's goodness, righteousness, and providence" (xi). Not surprisingly, he concludes that "it is scarcity, not [God given] overflowing abundance, that gives us access to the heights of human perfection" (200). One then wonders how high these "heights" should be in order to offset, (only) God knows how, the evils of permanent undernourishment and mass starvation.

His second proposal is the claim that it can be deduced from the nature of God that the world must have been endowed with at least “conditional material sufficiency,” that is, “sufficiency contingent on human response and cooperation” (199). One could object that this amounts to denying the very problem that an economic theodicy should face. More pertinent is perhaps the question of whether there are conceivable properties or states of the world that this ontological principle excludes. If not, a skeptic might object that it is just a piece of defensive rhetoric. Here, we are led back to Malthus, who conceptualized “misery and vice” as necessary concomitants of the “principle of population,” aspects of the inexorable working of what he thought was a law of nature. Luckily, the principle of population is not true. Even in the last decade of the eighteenth century Malthus could have found in Adam Smith the observation that the size of the family is in almost all societies inversely related to the height of their income class. (See Mark Blaug, *Economic Theory in Retrospect*, 4th ed., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985, 73.)

If the principle of population were true, would it be compatible with Barrera’s principle of conditional sufficiency? One should think not. Barrera seems unconcerned. Indeed, he expresses the belief that the principle of population holds (16). Then in a footnote argues that, even if it may not, “Malthus’ basic theological question remains valid: Why does God permit a world characterized by material scarcity?” (240). After his 287-page treatment, the meaning of the question, let alone the answer, is somewhat more obscure.

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A Church That Can and Cannot Change: The Development of Catholic Moral Teaching

John T. Noonan

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It is my hope that John Henry Cardinal Newman is in heaven—not only because he was a wise and saintly man but also because he would then be spared the indignity of spinning in his grave every time his important work on the development of doctrine is abused. Since the Second Vatican Council, one hears of theological “developments” here, there, and everywhere. The claim to a “development of doctrine” nowadays often masks a chronological snobbery, in which the attitudes and prudential judgments of modern men are, by that fact, superior to those found in preceding times.

A Church that Can and Cannot Change is John T. Noonan’s most recent exploration of the development of doctrine in moral theology that, as Noonan notes, goes untreated by Cardinal Newman (3). After eleven books in this area, Noonan’s thesis is familiar to most: namely, that the ordinary magisterium has declared certain practices to be morally acceptable in one age that it has denounced later on (e.g., slavery) and has denounced