Chapter 1

Introduction

Is it possible for a person who has a proper regard for his or her rational faculties, and for the evidence afforded by experience, to believe in the God who is the object of worship by Christians?

In this world there is so much suspicion, hatred, and cruelty, and so much grievous suffering, that is impossible for anyone with even a modest degree of open-mindedness to avoid questions or doubts about this God. Is this God, if indeed there be such a God, perhaps indifferent to the sufferings of humans? Yet Christians affirm that God is perfectly loving, that he gave his own son to make it possible for humans to overcome suffering. Is this God, if indeed there be such a God, perhaps too weak to defeat and banish the powers of evil? Yet Christians affirm that their God is omnipotent and that, by his divine providence, he is the ruler of the world.

Without doubt the so-called problem of evil constitutes the greatest intellectual obstacle to the Christian faith, or indeed any form of theistic belief. Though this problem has most often been discussed in connection with Christian theology, as I shall do, it was formulated before the Christian era, and it has a wider application. It is a central theme of the biblical book, Job. Perhaps the earliest precise formulation was given by Epicurus (342–270 B.C.), who wrote:

> God either wishes to take away evils, and is unable; or He is able and is unwilling; or He is neither willing nor able; or He is both willing and able. If He is willing and is unable, He is feeble, which is not in accordance with the character of God; if He is able and unwilling, He is envious,

> which is equally at variance with God; if He is neither willing nor able, He is both envious and feeble, and therefore not God; if He is both willing and able, which is alone suitable to God, from what source then are evils? Or why does He not remove them?[1]

Within the Western theological tradition the effort to provide a solution to this problem has in modern times been called theodicy, adopting the terminology of the philosopher Leibniz.[2]

In this work I want to focus on the free will defense. The free will defense argues that God is responsible for none of the evils in the world, but that they are rather due to the misuse of free will by humans (or initially by the rebel angels and then by humans). According to the traditional argument, God has a great goal for all humans: namely, the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is so infinitely good that it outweighs any and all evils which may be unavoidable in the process of its attainment. The Kingdom of God is a society in which humans freely love God and one another. This goal requires that humans be created with free will, for no relationship can be a genuinely loving one unless the love is freely given. Having granted free will to humans, even God logically cannot prevent them from choosing evil; and it is the misuse of free will that is the origin of all evils. In its original state, as created by God, the world contained no evil at all. All evil is either sin (misuse of free will) or the consequence of sin.

It has been widely held by Christian theologians that this defense provides us with an adequate theodicy. Moreover, none of the other arguments or defenses, which have been developed, come anywhere close to cogency, certainly not on their own and not unless included as an aspect of a free will defense. Since my purpose is to see if the free will defense can be formulated in a maximally cogent way, I shall not dwell at length on other arguments. The so-called contrast theory will later be discussed in some detail because, though it cannot stand alone, it constitutes an important element in the traditional free will defense, and also in the revised free will defense which I shall develop. The eschatological argument clearly does not belong in a theodicy; for theodicy seeks to offer rational arguments and evidences to show that belief in the Christian God is compatible with the fact that the world contains so many evils. The eschatological argument is not really an argument at all; it is an appeal to what, according to the traditional Christian faith, the believer will experience and come to know in the world to come after death. According to this belief, we will then understand how the evils suffered in this world are overcome, compensated for, and justified in the great cosmic plan of God.

In evaluating the traditional Christian free will defense, I shall focus on the formulation developed by Aurelius Augustine (354–430 A.D.). Not only was Augustine the first to develop this argument in its connection with the broadest possible treatment of Christian theological views, but his formulation has dominated subsequent traditional Christian theodicies in western Christendom.[3]

Though I note some serious difficulties with the Augustinian free will defense, I maintain it includes a very important, central, and valid insight, but an insight which could be rendered even more compelling. Indeed, the insight is embedded in a network of views and arguments many of which seem quite dubious or even on occasion offensive. However, to state this important insight baldly and briefly, it is the understanding that some of the greatest goods (including those essential to the Kingdom of God) could not exist except in contrast to, and indeed in struggle with, opposing evils. The cogency of the insight to which I refer depends, as we shall see, upon a certain basic value judgment which, though in my view reasonable, is yet debatable.

There are two judgments that are essential to the credibility of my own thesis: (1) the Augustinian insight to which I refer may properly be regarded as valid, and (2) the revision of the free will defense, which I shall develop strengthens the claim that it is valid. The Augustinian argument also has the virtue of indicating that there is a necessary connection between God's goodness and the evils of the world. My revised argument goes one step further and shows why there is and must be such a necessary connection. The necessity of this connection depends, in the version I develop, not merely on theological views, which unfortunately for any theodicy, rest upon revelation rather than evidence and reason; rather, the connection depends on logical implications of the very concept of free will.

By way of introduction I should also like to indicate some of the context for my thinking about evil and the free will defense. This may help the reader to understand where I'm coming from.

Both by education and by inclination I find congenial what might be called a rational-empirical approach to theology. It seems to me that humans have been created with rational capacities and that the Creator intended us to use them. I cannot agree with those who regard theodicy—the effort to give a rational answer to the question as to how there can be so much evil in a world created by God—as blasphemous.[4] The demand for the suppression of independent thought and reasoning is not consistent with the concept, certainly implied in Christian theology, that the goal God has in mind for humans is that they come to offer, with a free will, their love

to God, and to one another. As we shall see, acquiring the abilities that constitute free will depends, among other things, upon the development of our rational control of our desires and volitions (see chapter 6). The empirical aspect of my orientation has to do with the conviction that, for human beings, any religious experience or concept acquires meaning for us only to the extent that it chimes in with, and is illuminated by, our other human experiences. For example, the notion that God is love would be unintelligible to us unless we had some ordinary human experience of love.

By education and conviction I accept as valid the modern historical-critical study and interpretation of the Bible, and indeed of all religious texts. This is implied by the comments and illustrations in chapter 4.

I have been impressed and influenced by so-called feminist theology. For one thing, the traditional application of male gender to God reflects a time and culture-bound bias, as well as an anthropomorphic view. Moreover, that bias has generally been coupled in the tradition with a view of God as a completely domineering, and indeed rather tyrannical, power. For my further criticism of this traditional bias, see the section headed, New Perspectives, in chapter 8.

My rejection of the anthropomorphic and male gender bias mentioned above has also been influenced by one aspect of what is called post-modernist thought. This aspect has sometimes been given the awesome label of nonfoundationalism.[5] The gist of this view is that no human claims to final and indisputable knowledge of any sort of reality are valid. There are no bedrock foundations of certainty with regard to any such knowledge claims. It is, no doubt, the aspiration of humans to attain such knowledge, and it is the feeling of many modern folk that such knowledge is attained in some of the basic natural sciences. But such aspirations are never fully and completely fulfilled. Quite a long time ago, Immanuel Kant made it clear that such limitations apply to all claims to know the truth about anything that transcends the spatio-temporal world, which is our natural human environment. (See footnote number 34 on page 99).

This nonfoundationalism chimes in well with another modern movement that has influenced me: namely, logical positivism or logical empiricism. After a considerable flirtation with that way of thought, I came away with the conviction that they had made at least one positive contribution: namely, a clarification of what is implied in any claim to knowledge in any rational, scientific sense. This has led me to a view regarding the relationship between knowledge and faith—a view which still seems valid to me. We do not know God; our specifically theological beliefs do not constitute knowledge. This is to concede that the term knowledge in our modern culture

has come to mean statements with regard to observable states of affairs, which are in principle replicable and verifiable in a public way by other humans without regard to special cultural or religious background.[6]

To concede this is by no means to deny that faith plays a very important and valid role in our lives and beliefs. But belief is not knowledge in the sense described above; nor is faith. The statements of faith go beyond what is in principle verifiable in the sense given above. But the statements of faith, which I shall offer in a number of places in this work, and especially in chapter 7, and also in the rather speculative chapter 8, must, in order to be valid in my own view, be logically coherent and consistent with our ordinary knowledge. We do not know God, but we have intimations, feelings, and experiences, which come to human beings quite universally in visions and myths, dramatic, poetic, and prophetic utterances, and writings. These things are by no means to be despised as a lower or less important aspect of our thoughts; for it is through such revelations that we discover purpose, guidance, and value for our lives.

So much, then, for the context of my thinking. Whether it bears worthy fruit must be judged by the reader in view of what follows.