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GOD AND EVIL: ZOROASTER AND BARTH

WHY IS THERE EVIL if we assume that there is a good God? In seeking to find an answer to this age-old question, it may be useful to compare the beliefs of Zoroaster, a Persian prophet of the sixth century B.C. and those of Karl Barth, a Christian theologian of the twentieth century.

In spite of some difficulties, it is possible to discover the answer of Zoroaster, or Zarathustra, by drawing mainly upon his own writings without entering, except incidentally, into the complex history of Zoroastrianism. As has been shown by R. C. Zaehner, Zoroaster's thoughts on the problem have been much maligned by subsequent history.¹ What does the Persian philosopher himself have to say? Ahura, the source of all goodness and righteousness, is himself holy and pure. But so strong is the element of free will that is imbedded in the thought of Zoroaster that Ahura himself must make a choice; speaking to some of his creatures, Ahura proclaims: "Holy and good devotion do we choose for ourselves" (Y.32.2).² This choice (perhaps easy) having been made, Ahura goes on to create; concerning the origin of the world, Zoroaster queries:

This I ask thee, O Lord, answer me truly;
What artificer made light and darkness?
What artificer sleep and waking?
Who made morning, noon, and night,
To remind the wise man of his task? (Y.44.5)

By means of the rhetorical question, Zoroaster unmistakably affirms the creatorship of the one God, Ahura. There is no suggestion that any part of the created realm belongs to the Evil Spirit, Angra Mainyu. "There is no attempt to divide the various parts of creation between two creators, and it is especially significant that light and darkness are attributed to the one creator, though darkness is commonly, in [later] Zoroastrianism, the province and creation of Angra Mainyu."³ And in creation, the Holy Spirit, Spenta Mainyu, would seem to have a particularly close relationship to Ahura. "Thou [Ahura] art the holy father of this [Holy] Spirit" (Y.47.3). So far, no difficulties. But

other statements by Zoroaster complicate and compromise this manifest and unmistakable monotheism. The confusion arises with the definite entry of Angra Mainyu, the Evil Spirit:

I will speak of the two spirits

Of whom the holier said unto the destroyer at the beginning of existence;

"Neither our thought nor our doctrines nor our minds' forces,

Neither our choices nor our words nor our deeds,

Neither our consciences nor our souls agree" (Y. 45.2).

Here the Good and the Evil Spirits seem ranged implacably, the one against the other. The Good Spirit, as we have already seen (Y.47.3) is the "son" of Ahura. But what is the relationship between the Evil Spirit and the Good Spirit? What is the relationship between the Evil Spirit and Ahura? The only answers seem to be these statements by the prophet: "Now at the beginning the twin spirits have declared their nature, the better and the evil . . . (Y.30.3). And between these two spirits, man must make his own unavoidable choice: "between the two [spirits] the wise ones choose well, not so the foolish" (Y.30.3). Now what are we to make of these statements? The following points emerge:

1. Ahura, the one God, is good. He precedes all things, including the Good and Evil Spirits.
2. God himself chooses righteousness. So fundamental is the principle of the freedom of the will in Zoroaster's theology that God himself is not precluded from the necessity of making a choice.
3. Ahura is the creator of the world: "the artificer of light and darkness".
4. Ahura is the father of the Good Spirit; their relationship is inevitably close, though distinct (a point not always remembered in later Zoroastrianism).
5. The Evil Spirit is the twin of the Good Spirit.
6. Therefore, although Zoroaster himself does not say so, it is very difficult to escape the conclusion that the Evil Spirit is also the "son" of Ahura. Such a conclusion is impossible, however, when we remember that Zoroastrianism is the religion of free will *par excellence*. If destructive, the Evil Spirit chooses to be so, he is not so created. Rather he "*chose* to do the worst things" (Y.50.5, emphasis supplied); he is not forced to do so either by God or by any inner compulsion of his own nature.⁴
7. Ahura therefore creates two secondary spirits; both of whom make decisive choices; the one for good, the other for evil. These Spirits

confront man; and each man must choose for himself the way that he will go.

Such a theology establishes the supremacy of Ahura, and therefore assures the ultimate triumph of the Good over the Evil Spirit. Yet the Evil Spirit is no phantom; his path is a live option for every person.

Despite the difference in the immense amount of writing that has come from the hand of Karl Barth, as compared with the somewhat scanty sources that seem to have emanated from Zoroaster himself, it is possible to state Barth's ontology quite briefly:

1. "God's being". God is being. All real power is his power. All actual capacity is his capacity. Every genuine possibility is his possibility. His being, essence, and life are constantly the being, essence, and life of real power, actual capacity, and genuine possibility as such. God not only has these things, but is these things (See *CD*, II/1, p. 542).⁵
2. "God's right hand". God's *opus proprium*. That and that alone is real in which God recapitulates and confirms himself. There is nothing real outside God which has not been created and is not based on him. What is real in this world is what is confirmed by God, that to which he says "yes", that which he loves and affirms, that which he creates, upholds, and promotes.
3. "God's left hand". God's *opus alienum*. This is unreal reality, impossible possibility, powerless power: "this includes even non-being, even the merely possible and the impossible, even evil, death and hell, all things in their own way" (*CD*, II/1, p. 553). This is not produced or caused by God, but it is permitted by him. "In his turning away from it, He wills what he disavows. It cannot exist without him" (*CD*, II/1, p. 556-7). What is unreal in this world is that which is denied of God, that to which he says "no", that which he hates and disapproves. God's left hand—his negative power and will—"is equally omnipotent" (*CD*, II/1, p. 544) with his right hand—God's positive will and power. In his definitive treatment of this whole topic in *CD*, III/3, pp. 289-368, Barth's translators have used the term *nothingness*.⁶
4. "Nothing". "That which is not knowable and known by Him, does not exist, either as actuality or possibility, as being or non-being, good or bad, in bliss or perdition, life or death" (*CD*, II/1, p. 552-3). It is *nihil pure negativum*, that which does not exist in any sense.

It is important to note that this statement of being does not merely apply to the

relationship between God and the world, God *ad extra*. In some sense at least, the statement also holds of God *intra se*, God in himself, in the mystery of the divinity. Barth himself denies that the relationship between God and God's "left hand" is a self-distinction *in* God (*Selbstunterscheidung im Sein Gottes*); rather he affirms that what he really means is a "self-differentiation (by God) from evil" (*Selbstunterscheidung eben vom Bösen*) (*CD*, IV/3, p. 178). Be that as it may, folly and the devil—impossible possibilities—exist "apart from and beside His power" (*CD*, II/1, p. 538), or "under His feet" (*CD*, II/1, p. 523) "for all eternity" (*CD*, II/1, p. 544).

God's "right hand", God's "yes", corresponds, at least formally, to Zoroaster's Spenta Mainyu or Good Spirit. Again, God's "left hand", God's "no", is somewhat equivalent to Zoroaster's Angra Mainyu or Evil Spirit. Again, God's left hand—nothingness—is really a thumbnail concept designed to cover a variety of things: sin, death, folly, sloth, pride, evil, the devil, demons, the Abyss, non-being, God's *opus alienum*, powerless power, unreal reality, impossible possibility, ontological impossibility, chaos, disorder, the contra-godly.

Why, then, is there evil, if we assume that there is a God who is good? From the beliefs of Zoroaster and Barth, as outlined above, we can now turn to a comparison of those beliefs.

First of all, God himself makes a choice. In Zoroaster, the righteous Ahura chooses righteousness, despising evil: in Barth, God himself is good, God chooses good, scorning evil. To both thinkers, the choice is something of a foregone conclusion: the statements are virtual tautologies.

God is, moreover, the genuine father and creator of good. Zoroaster's Good Spirit, a "son" of Ahura, carries out Ahura's wishes, is of the same mind as Ahura. God's "right hand" is his *opus proprium*, his truly blessed creation. A significant difference between the two thinkers is indicated by the terms "son" and "right hand". Admittedly, both are somewhat symbolic terms; they do not purport to describe with absolute accuracy, but are intended to point significantly to reality. It should, however, be noted that to Zoroaster the Good Spirit, whose father is Ahura, is yet a secondary being. To Barth, the "right hand" is of a piece with, and of, God's own being. This difference becomes the more accentuated when we consider the problem of evil.

Both thinkers have some difficulty in explaining adequately the relationship between God and evil: between Ahura and the Evil Spirit for Zoroaster, between God and God's "left hand" for Barth. To Zoroaster, Ahura is the father of the Good Spirit; and the Good Spirit and the Evil Spirit are twins. Yet Zoroaster never says directly that Ahura is the father of the Evil Spirit.

The Evil Spirit, created good, makes a primeval choice for destructiveness; and henceforth he offers the path of perdition as an option for man. But the question arises: in creating the Spirit who chooses destruction, does Ahura positively *will* the actualization of the Evil Spirit? Or does Ahura merely *permit* the possibility of the Evil Spirit?⁷ Zoroaster never answers this question. If we assume that he meant that Ahura only permitted the possibility of the Evil Spirit, then Zoroaster's thought more closely approaches that of Barth.

For Barth, nothingness is the chaos dismissed by God when cosmos is created. Nothingness is the disorder concomitant with order. Chaos or nothingness stands for that possibility "which God in His creative decision has ignored and despised, like a human builder when he chooses one specific work and rejects and ignores another, or it may be many others, leaving them unexecuted" (CD, III/1, p. 108). *Nothingness* is the inevitable by-product of the creation of *something*. God does not *will* nothingness, though clearly God *permits* it: on this point Barth is crystal-clear.

God wills it [nothingness, only] in so far as he gives it . . . space, position and function. He does not do so as its author, recognizing it as His creature, approving and confirming and vindicating it. On the contrary, He wills it as He denies it His authorship, as He refuses it any standing before Him or right or blessing or promise, as He places it under His prohibition and curse and treats it as that from which He wishes to redeem and liberate His creation. In this way, then, in His turning away from it, He wills what He disavows. It cannot exist without Him. It, too, is by Him, and is under his control and government (CD, II/1, p. 556-7).

Yet there are times, when in his attempt to do justice to the reality of nothingness, Barth seems almost to equate God's "left hand" with the "right hand", God's *opus proprium*. For instance, the word "eternal" is used in connection with nothingness. "Sin is always sin, folly folly, and the devil the devil, with no prospect even *in eternity* of ever becoming the object of His omnipotence in any other sense. . . . [God's omnipotence] is negative towards sin, folly and the devil and can only continue to be so for *all eternity*" (CD, II/1, p. 544, emphasis supplied). Again, nothingness is granted a power equal to good: "that which in omnipotent positivity God wills . . . is distinguished from what in *equally omnipotent* negativity He does not will" (CD, II/1, p. 544, emphasis supplied). Finally, there is at least a suggestion that the confrontation between God and nothingness is a confrontation within the divine mystery itself. "That which God renounces and abandons . . . is nothingness . . .

[God's] rejection, opposition, negation and dismissal are powerful . . . because they are grounded in Himself" (*CD*, III/3, p. 352). God lives "in eternal self-differentiation from all that is not God and is not willed by God" (*CD*, II/2, p. 141). Combinations of statements such as these have brought the criticism of one sympathetic theologian: "In speaking of sin and nothingness exclusively as the *unavoidable* reverse side . . . [Barth] does not radically exclude the shadow of a dualism between the work of God's *right hand* and those of His *left hand*".⁸ Clearly, there are statements in Barth that could lead to the conclusion that nothingness is a power equal to that of good.

On the other hand, there are matching statements, emphasizing that although real, nothingness is no match for God. "Nothingness exists in its own way, not as something infinite, but as something finite" (*CD*, II/1, p. 553). Barth insists that nothingness has no eternity, no perpetuity (*CD*, III/3, p. 364). Paradoxically enough, the only way in which one can meaningfully apply the word "eternal" to nothingness is to characterize it as "the eternal past, the eternal yesterday" (*CD*, III/3, p. 353). Again, in the face of Jesus Christ, the vaunted power of nothingness expires: "because Jesus is Victor nothingness is routed and extirpated" (*CD*, III/3, p. 363). Finally, the confrontation between God and nothingness is not a self-distinction within God, but rather "the original self-differentiation of God from evil" (*CD*, IV/3, p. 178). Barth avows that "only the divine non-willing can be accepted as the ground of [the] existence of [nothingness]" (*CD*, III/3, p. 353). Nothingness is the inevitable result of God's cosmos. It is not necessary. It gains substance only when man seizes that which God has already denied. "It is only behind God's back that the sphere of chaos can assume the distinctive and self-contradictory character of reality. This can, of course, happen. The creature can be so foolish. It can become guilty of the inconceivable rebellion of looking past the Word of God . . . to this state of chaos" (*CD*, III/1, p. 108). "Sin is when the creature avails itself of this impossible possibility in opposition to God and the meaning of its own existence. . . . It follows inevitably only from the incomprehensible fact that the creature rejects the preserving grace of God" (*CD*, II/1, pp. 503-4).

In spite of some ambiguity in phraseology, there are two clear points in which Barth's "left hand" of God is distinguished from Zoroaster's Evil Spirit. First of all, there is no doubt in Barth, as there is in Zoroaster, as to whether God permits or wills evil: God only permits it. In Zoroaster, it could be either. Secondly, in Barth the "left hand" of God remains a part of God's

anatomy: evil does not slip away from God. In Zoroaster the Evil Spirit, created by Ahura, attains some sort of independent status by the very fact of the separation by creation. There may be one more area where Barth is more clear, if not more correct.

On the one hand, Barth makes a very careful distinction between what he calls the "light" and the "shadow" side of creation; and, on the other, he clearly differentiates between the "shadow" side of creation and nothingness. Barth points out that "light exists as well as shadow; there is a positive as well as a negative aspect of creation and creaturely occurrence" (CD, III/3, p. 295). The Genesis account itself points to the positive and negative sides of creation in its differentiation between day and night, between land and water. And it is true, says Barth, that this negative side of creation is in some respect related to nothingness. But it is equally true that the "shadow" side is not identical with nothingness. At most, the "shadow" aspect points toward nothingness. Nothingness as such does not belong to the essence of God's creation, whereas both "light" and "shadow" parts do so belong. Again, our own experience verifies the "light" and "shadow" aspects of creation. "It is true that in creaturely existence, and especially in the existence of man, there are hours, days and years both bright and dark, success and failure, laughter and tears, youth and age, gain and loss, birth and sooner or later its inevitable corollary, death. It is true that individual creatures and men experience these things in almost unequal measure, their lots being assigned by a justice which is curious or very much concealed. Yet it is irrefutable that creation and creature are good even in the fact that all that is exists in this contrast and antithesis" (CD, III/3, p. 297). We cannot be sure that Zoroaster made such a helpful distinction and differentiation. True, Ahura creates light and darkness; yet later Zoroastrianism unmistakably assigned darkness to the special creation and realm of the Evil Spirit. Barth notes that if the "shadow" side of creation is equated with nothingness; one of two things happens. *Either* nothingness becomes something finally and fundamentally harmless, even wholesome: *tout comprendre, c'est tout pardonner*. *Or*, nothingness takes on an undeserved honour and might, and thereby nothingness takes on a devilish significance, nothingness becomes a hellish power. Perhaps Zoroaster's lack of clarity on this point did help to lead to the enthronement of the Evil Spirit as co-equal and co-eternal with the Good Spirit in later Zoroastrianism.

Except by implication, no reference has been made to Barth's Christological emphasis in his ontology or his doctrine of nothingness. Barth emphatic-

ally asserts that all the Christian theologian knows about God, about evil, about himself, he knows only in and through Jesus Christ. "In Him [Jesus Christ] there is revealed not only the goodness of God's creation in its twofold form light and shadow but also the true nothingness which is utterly distinct from both Creator and creation" (CD, III/3, p. 302). Again, it is because of Jesus Christ that Barth feels that the Christian theologian is enabled to be free from the intellectual temptation of treating, in a mechanical fashion, "ideas" and "principles" of "good" and "evil" in the interest of a logical or consistent "system".

Despite the interval of twenty-five centuries between the lives of the two men, there are certain similarities in their discussion of God and evil. In each, there is a desire to proclaim God's holiness, the reality of evil, the subordination of evil to good, the responsibility of man, the ultimate triumph of God and the good. Barth's answer may be the more profound and penetrating in his clear statement that although God *permits* evil, he does not *will* it; keeping "the left hand" and "the right hand" firmly attached to the divine: they do not come to be independent entities; and, finally, in his careful distinction and qualified differentiation between the "shadow" side of creation and nothingness.

NOTES

1. R. C. Zaehner, *The Dawn and Twilight of Zoroastrianism* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1961), p. 19.
2. Quotations from the Gathas are from J. Duchesne-Guillemin, *The Hymns of Zarathustra* (London: John Murray, 1952).
3. Douglas A. Fox, "Darkness and Light: The Zoroastrian View", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, XXXV, 2 (1967), p. 131.
4. See Zaehner, *op. cit.*, p. 51.
5. CD indicates quotations from Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1936-).
6. In CD, III/3, p. 289, the editor notes: "Many terms have been considered for *das Nichtige*, including the Latin *nihil* which has sometimes been favored. Preferring a negative term, and finding constructions like 'the null' too artificial and 'the negative' or 'non-existent' not quite exact, we have finally had to make do with 'nothingness'."
7. Fox (*op. cit.*, p. 136) offers a third possibility, that Good and Evil existed before Ahura, and Ahura himself had to choose between them. Although it is formally possible, this does not appear to have been Zoroaster's intention.
8. G. C. Berkouwer, *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1956), pp. 220, 247.