

God's Problem: When religion fails to answer the question of evil and suffering.

(Outline)

By Grant LaFleche

"And don't tell me God works in mysterious ways," Yossarian continued, hurtling on over her objection. "There's nothing so mysterious about it. He's not working at all. He's playing. Or else He's forgotten all about us. That's the kind of God you people talk about – a country bumpkin, a clumsy, bungling, brainless, conceited, uncouth hayseed. Good God, how much reverence can you have for a Supreme Being who finds it necessary to include such phenomena as phlegm and tooth decay in His divine system of creation? What in the world was running through that warped, evil, scatological mind of His when He robbed old people of the power to control their bowel movements?"
- *Catch-22* by Joseph Heller.

A half century before the alleged birth of a carpenter's son in Judea, believed by many today to be a human incarnation of a god, a Greek thinker examined the notion of all powerful deity who loves and cares for mankind and found the concept to be a failure. Epicurus' formulation of what is now sometimes called "the problem of evil" remains as powerful now as it did 2,500 years ago:

Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able?

Then he is not omnipotent.

Is he able, but not willing?

Then he is malevolent.

Is he both able and willing?

Then whence cometh evil?

Is he neither able nor willing?

Then why call him God?

Epicurus' old questions, as both Hume and Shelly would remark centuries later, remain unanswered. Attempts resolve the problem of evil have failed time and again. Free will, original sin, or simply "god works in mysterious ways" fail to address what Epicurus asked, and so leaves religion unable to face suffering for what it is. Evil and suffering become deep mysteries, things that cannot ultimately be explained and might even be good and desirable.

To some this inability to resolve such a fundamental conceptual contradiction is taken as evidence that god simply does not exist. That may be so, but there is a far more direct implication about religion's inability to come to grip with the causes and results of evil and suffering. Rather than improving the human condition, these beliefs often contribute to and exacerbate human suffering. The present pope, Mother Theresa, American evangelicals or the parties of god in the middle east all made that which plagues human beings worse because their theology has distanced them from the reality of the human condition.

Mother Theresa, whose legend makes her to be a champion of the poor, destitute and dying, once said, *"I think it is very beautiful for the poor to accept their lot, to share with the passion of Christ. I think the world is being much helped by the suffering of the poor people."* Only one blinded by theology could make a wicked pronouncement such as this. Only credulity can make one believe it to be true.

Rather than lean upon a theology divorced from the reality of human existence, we ought to look to a greater tradition that we are the inheritors of – the traditions of Epicurus, Lucretius, Homer and the basic concept of human solidarity and never again say that suffering and evil are mysterious or good.