**The Drama of Redemption and Theodicy in Charles Williams’ Nativity-Moralities**

“He was not like us, and yet He became us. What happened there the Church itself has never seen, except that in the last reaches of that living death to which we are exposed He substituted himself for us. He submitted in our stead to the full results of the Law which is He. We may believe He was generous if we know that He was just. By that central substitution, which was the thing added by the Cross to the Incarnation, he became everywhere the centre of, and everywhere He energized and reaffirmed, all our substitutions and exchanges. He took what remained, after the Fall, of the torn web of humanity in all times and places, and not so much by a miracle of healing as by a growth within it made it whole. . . . In all failure of love there is left to us only a trust in His work; that is what we call ‘faith’, a kind of quality of action. It is, however, a trust in what is already done. Not only His act, but all our acts, are finished so. . . . It is finished; we too do but play out the necessary ceremony.”—*The Cross*

**Theodicy Overview**"Theodicy" is a term that Leibniz coined from the Greek words *theos* (God) and *dike* (righteous). A theodicy is an attempt to justify or defend God in the face of evil by answering the following problem, which in its most basic form involves these assumptions:

1. God is all good and all powerful (and, therefore, all knowing).
2. The universe/creation was made by God and/or exists in a contingent relationship to God.
3. Evil exists in the world. Why?

Notice what this problem suggests. It begins with the assumption that such a being as God will want to eliminate evil. If God is all good but not all powerful or knowing, then perhaps he doesn’t have the ability to intervene on every occasion. Likewise, if God is all powerful and knowing but not all good, then perhaps he has a mean streak. If God is somehow all these things, but the universe does not exist in a contingent relationship, then God has little to do with evil (even though God’s design can still be faulted). However, if God is both good and powerful, then why does evil exist?

*I.* *The Free Will Model:* God wanted us to freely love him, which meant allowing for the possibility that we might choose against him. And we have--all of us since Adam and Eve. Free will provides a great good—self-determination--and carries with it significant responsibility, which is also a great good. This is especially true of relationships involving love: such must be entered into freely. Evil is an unfortunate result of human free will. If God were to intervene at every point of our wrongdoing, our free will would be compromised. So evil in the world is not entirely God's fault; however, this position does not claim that God is not responsible in any way for evil. If you have the power to intervene and do not, that implies choices.

*II.* *The Soul Making Model:* We are incomplete souls in need of improvement and growth. Notice that this model also assumes free-will. Evil is a necessary condition for a world in which we overcome obstacles and struggles in order to develop. In fact, many *higher-order goods* (e.g. self-sacrifice, endurance, courage, compassion on the poor, etc.) are not possible unless we have to overcome evil. This model points out that God often allows the condition of suffering to improve us. We become purified through life's trials.

*III.* *The Possible Worlds/ Great Design Argument:* This suggests that God designed the world in such a way that it included the possibility of evil, but that if rightly perceived, we would understand that all of it works together for a greater good. This is a subset of the first two because both models assume a world in which moral action/ growth is both possible and meaningful. Namely, a world with free will and the possibility of soul making is a better world than one with only automatons.

*IV.* *The Eschatological Hope:* Granting all the above, God has also promised that such evil and suffering is only for a finite time in human history. God will bring an end to it all, and evil will be rightly answered by its destruction. Furthermore, the future hope that God offers will judge, compensate and/or at least put into perspective this present world’s evil. Of course, this model raises the question as to whether good can be said to actually "balance off" evil and suffering. This is alternately understood as either the afterlife and/or the final state of all things.

V. *The Suffering of God Response:* This response assures us that God has not abstracted himself from the human situation--that he, too, suffers with us. God weeps for Israel, the Holy Spirit grieves over sin, and Christ suffered for us that we might have an example of how to undergo suffering. Strictly speaking, this response isn’t about justifying why God allows evil, as much as affirming that *God is involved in the problem*. Some have suggested that God’s suffering teaches us to move from self-absorption to cooperation and compassion for others in their suffering. In this view God’s own suffering absorbs our hostile self-absorption. Others have gone farther, arguing that God actually feels and experiences our suffering and, by doing so, honors us as the infinite God and that this honoring actually addresses our experience of evil and suffering by defeating it in our own lives.

*VI.* *A Theology of the Cross:* Contained in each view of the suffering of God above is a suggestion that in some fundamental way the work of the cross is God’s answer (or one of his answers) to the problem of evil, even that the cross is the only justification God gives of his responsibility for the existence of evil. In this sense, the work of redemption transcends the role of Christ’s suffering, for the cross is atonement for, victory over, and judgment upon evil and sin.

*VII.* *Faith and Trust:* Sometimes called simple fideism—this position is one that seeks not to answer the question in any complex way but rather affirm basic Christian truths, such as God is ultimately good; God has everything under the divine control; God is to be trusted despite life’s trails and difficulties.

**Discussion Question**: Which models seem to best encapsulate Williams’ response in his plays?

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*Seed of Adam* (1936/37) was commissioned by the Chelmsford Diocesan Religious Drama Guild and was performed in both Brentwood and Oxford. His first Nativity play, it was written and performed before World War II and also proceeded his later *Judgement at Chelmsford*.

Discussion Questions

1. What does each of the three kings stand for?
2. What role does Adam-Augustus serve in the play?
3. Why does Williams’ make Joseph a young warrior?
4. How would you describe Mary? What does she understand that none of the other characters do?
5. Are the Third King and his mother racist figures? Why or why not?
6. How and why does death dominate the play?
7. How does *Seed of Adam*’s ending compare to reversal in other plays by Williams? Is the Third King comparable to the Skeleton or the Accuser? Explain.

During World War II, Williams became associated with Ruth Spalding’s Pilgrim Players in Oxford. His next three moralities, two more Nativities and a sequel occurring after the passion of Christ, were written for war performance conditions; all were one-act plays requiring no elaborate staging or props.

*The Death of Good Fortune* (1939)--Discussion Questions

1. Many critics consider *The Death of Good Fortune* the least successful of Williams’ one-act moralities. Would you agree? Why or why not?
2. Compare and contrast Mary’s role in this play with that of Mary in *Seed of Adam*.
3. What do the Magician and the Girl suggest about the relationship between technical power and atheism?
4. What is the purpose of *Fortuna* in the play?
5. Why should “all luck be good luck”?
6. Why does the play end the way that it does?

*The House by the Stable* (1939) and *Grab of Grace* (1941)--Discussion Questions

1. What is the impact of the simplicity of the plot in these two-linked moralities?
2. How does Williams keep his allegorical characters from becoming simple symbols/signs?
3. How do Mary and Joseph differ from their counterparts in the other plays?
4. Why does Williams give Pride, Hell, Faith, and Grace the particular characters they exhibit?
5. How would you trace the dramatic relationship between the two plays?