

Did God Create Evil?: Mahmoud Ayoub

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Transcript - Long

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Mahmoud, the problem of evil in this world is so substantial that it causes great grief for those who believe in God--philosophers, theologians, common people. If you look at the argument from evil, atheists use it to prove in their mind why God does not exist. In Islam, how do you deal with the problem of evil?

Mahmoud Ayoub:

Among the monotheistic religions, Islam can be said to be the least dualistic. That is to say, in the end God is responsible for both the good and the evil in the world. However, evil has to be differentiated. Natural disasters, however evil they may be, are seen as a part of the human trial, that is, God tests people with good and with evil. And there is a Koranic verse on this which says, 'We shall try you with a measure of loss of fruits, livestock and your own lives, but give glad tidings to those who are patient. Those who when visited by affliction say, To God do we belong, and to him we shall return.' This Koranic verse, and there are others also, gives not so much an answer, a philosophical answer to the problem of evil, but it makes evil a divine trial that people should endure with patience and steadfastness. And those who do so will eventually be rewarded by God.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

What's interesting is that you pose it where God is actually responsible for the evil. Other traditions of course would have great difficulty in God having created and caused evil. Certainly traditional Christian philosophers are very much desirous of explaining how God did not create evil.

Mahmoud Ayoub:

But then who? This is the question. Islam is closer to Judaism in that Satan, who is the supposed agent of evil, if you like, is not really evil. Satan's role is to try and trick people into believing him, and then on the day of resurrection, Satan will say, 'I tempted you and you listened to me. Why did you listen? Now I disassociate myself from you and I fear God, the lord of all beings.' So in Christianity, the problem of theodicy becomes in the end a problem without really a final solution, and it sort of is explained somewhat by the idea of original sin and the fall in humanity. This is not in Islam, no. I spoke so far about what I call natural disasters, or evil over which human beings have no power, like a child suffering from leukemia, for instance. Or somebody getting run over by a car and is totally paralyzed. These are evils over which we have no power, and the more patiently a person endures that evil, the better that person is in the sight of God. So there is a prophetic tradition which says the people of the greatest affliction are the prophets, and then those who are most like them and those who are most like to the others and so on. A person may suffer so much evil that he has no garment with which to cover his back. If he endures, then God may even increase his suffering. But if he has a little faith, or weak faith, God may lessen this. But this only goes to describe the evil over which human beings have little or no power. Human evil is the real evil.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Moral evil.

Mahmoud Ayoub:

Yes, moral evil. Evil where, for instance, somebody has done wrong and is being tortured somewhere. Or people who are deprived of the necessities of life and so on. This sort of human evil, people should try to oppose in any way they can. So, for instance, another saying of the prophet is that the greatest Jihad, the best Jihad, is a word of truth addressed to a tyrannical ruler. Yeah, and then, of course, the Koran insists on the human responsibility to enjoin that which is good and to dissuade from that which is indecent or evil. And so in a way one could argue that in the Koran there are verses which make God completely responsible for every good and every evil in creation. But there are verses also which make God the author of good, but human beings are the authors of evil. In the final analysis, I think one would have to say that the Koran, being a book not of theology but of guidance, human beings are co-workers with God, and together they try to make this world a better world. Now of course there is the question, also, is what would a world without evil at all look like? We would be in an imaginative kind of, or imaginary utopia, where we are at best robots. But in a world where we are responsible, morally and spiritually, for the good and the evil that happens in the world, then the world I think is more real. There is one final point. Often natural evil becomes in the end a source of good. Like, for instance, probably every lake in this country, the United States, was or could have been a source of a lot of human, maybe, but certainly animal life. Then a volcanic eruption created the conditions for the Great Lakes, for instance. But then, now the Great Lakes are very important for our comfort and a better life. In my view, anyhow, for me particularly, I am willing to endure natural evil, or evil over which I have no power. For instance, I try to do the best I can in life with my blindness. Blindness is an evil, I cannot deny it. But that does not bother me. What bothers me is when human beings oppress one another and cause evil and suffering to other human beings.