

Preface

The struggle to understand why evil and suffering happen in a world created by the good and loving God of Christianity led me to leave a successful career in health care for graduate studies in theology. I was fortunate to have been introduced to the intellectual complexity of the issue by Professor Stephen J. Duffy (1931–2007) in his challenging and enlightening graduate course at Loyola University New Orleans on the problem of evil. Duffy was a brilliant theologian, teacher, mentor, and friend. His life ended prematurely as a result of cancer, a disease I find it very hard not to call “evil.” I wish he were here to comment on this work, but since he is not, the book is dedicated to him as, in a sense, all my academic work has been. Duffy’s response to a paper I wrote for his seminar on evil planted the idea that I just might be able to make a career in the world of academic theology, and a revision of that paper became my first publication. Without Duffy’s guidance it is not likely that I would have even considered applying, much less have been accepted, for study in the Ph.D. in Religion program at Vanderbilt. Thanks to Duffy, I have had the privilege, for more than fifteen years, of living my life-long dream of teaching and doing theology.

CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDINGS OF EVIL

Although theodicies often seem like dispassionate intellectualization, biographies show that theologians who engage in extended reflection on the problem most often do so because of their personal experiences with suffering. My mother unexpectedly passed away in July 2015 as I was nearing completion of the first draft of this work. As my family and I grieve her absence, and I see my father facing the challenge of making sense of life without his companion of more than sixty-six years, I am reminded of the deeply personal nature of theological reflection on the problem of evil and suffering. In the time I've spent writing this book, I've seen friends and family face everything from life with debilitating chronic diseases to the loss of loved ones through murder. I hope this work does not strike the reader as a merely intellectual exercise as it has become a profoundly personal contemplation on the most difficult of all theological questions.

I owe a debt of gratitude to those people in my life who remind me of the inherent goodness of creation. After many long days of thinking about evil and suffering, it is such a gift to hear the voices and see the smiling faces of loved ones. Thanks most especially to my son, Tom Burns, and his partner, Amie Johnson, for all their love and support. Special thanks go to my dearest friend, Linda Corson, for being there for me through all the joys and sorrows of life. Her patience, understanding, and compassion are my anchor.

Many, many thanks to all of the students who have grappled with these issues in my seminars dedicated to the problem of evil. Their trust and willingness to learn is second only to their humor—thanks to them, my nickname is “Dr. Evil.” I wish I could list every one of them by name, but there have been too many. As promised, though, I must mention in particular the awesome group of Religious Studies majors and minors who

took the journey with me during fall semester of the 2013–14 and the spring semester of the 2015–16 academic years. Their honesty, humor, openness to challenge, and eagerness to engage in real debate helped clarify my own thinking as I researched and wrote this book. Thanks, guys!

Thanks also to Hailey Huizenga for her help in proofreading and preparing the manuscript for publication, and to UWEC's Office of Research and Special Projects for the grant funding to hire her. Her assistance sped up the process of getting these pages in shape to send off to Denis R. Janz, general editor of the Fortress Historical Trajectory series. His invitation to write this book came at just the right moment in my academic and personal life. Denis is a masterful editor whose careful reading and expert suggestions have resulted in major improvements to the text. Finally, of course, profuse thanks go to all the editorial staff at Fortress who have worked hard to make this book the best it can be.

Christian understandings of the problem of evil have been the subject of so much theological work for more than two thousand years now that to imagine I might have an original thought on the topic is fantasy. I have studied the works of so many brilliant scholars over the years of my personal and academic interest in theodicy that there is a real risk I might have unconsciously adopted ideas of others and not given credit. I have done my best to make sure this has not happened, but if it has, I apologize profusely for having unknowingly made this mistake.