

A TRADITIONALIST ATTEMPT AT (DIS)SOLUTION OF THE PROBLEM OF EVIL: FRITHJOF SCHUON'S RESTATEMENT OF THEODICY

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Abstract: Modern man's, especially modern Western man's, turning away from traditional religion and belief in God is attributable, among other things, to supposed failure of theism as framed in Semitic contexts, in the face of evil. All the traditional theistic responses including certain new ingenious ones are vulnerable to serious criticism. In the face of all this the claim of the traditionalist school that there is hardly any problem of evil and if at all there is one we have a quite satisfactory solution to it in principle is worth reckoning. The present paper attempts to present brief outline of what might be called as traditionalist theodicy touching some important issues in the traditional debate on the problem of evil. The traditionalist claim of reconciling/ integrating as diverse approaches to the problem as those of Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity and Islam is certainly very intriguing for many a modern theologian and philosopher of religion that calls for attention. Invoking such concepts as Real, Absolute, Beyond Being, Infinitude, All-Possibility, Divine Relativity, Self and the like to critique traditional formulation of the problem of evil by the critics of theodicy, the paper attempts to present traditional metaphysical response to critics of theodicy, focusing primarily on the writings of its leading exponent Frithjof Schuon, especially those writings that have been written in the backdrop of Islam. It is thus also an attempt in explicating Islamic theodicy which has largely been ignored in the standard expositions of philosophy of religion and theodicy.

The great enigma of the existence of so much suffering and moral evil and what is formulated as the problem of evil has been one of the most troublesome problems for Western man's understanding of God as presented in the mainstream of Christian theology and philosophy. Many a critic of theism see the problem of evil as Achilles' heel of all theistic worldviews. Traditional theistic answers to the problem are increasingly felt to be inadequate and unconvincing. Pessimist and nihilist tendency of much of modern thought which has a negative bearing on religion is attributable to the problem of evil. It has generated what is called unwilling disbelief amongst many. Western philosophical and Christian scholastic understanding of evil and theodicy has not been felt as satisfactory by many philosophers of religion and even religious traditionalists. One modern traditionalist has remarked that "The Western theodicy has failed to vindicate divine providence in view of the existence of evil." (Qaisar, 1990: 265). Many modern philosophers of religion and even such a mystical philosopher as Stace have, not quite unwarrantedly, asserted that all solutions to the

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nagging problem of evil are patent frauds (Stace 1952: 56). Modern man's turning away from belief in God, many a modern literary classic, secular or radical theology and postmodern a/theology and such philosophical movements as existentialism have, in a way, the failure of Western theodicy in the background. All the traditional theistic responses including certain new ingenious ones are vulnerable to serious criticism. In the face of all this the claim of the perennialist school that there is hardly any problem of evil and if at all there is one we have a quite satisfactory solution to it in principle is worth reckoning. The present chapter attempts to present brief outline of what might be called as perennialist theodicy touching some important issues in the traditional debate on the problem of evil while some aspects of the issue will only be tangentially touched. The perennialist claim of reconciling/ integrating as diverse approaches to the problem as those of Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity and Islam is certainly very intriguing for many a modern theologians and philosophers of religion but can't be dismissed without a sympathetic hearing. In order to present the perennialist approach it seems necessary to give a historical and introductory note on the perennialist school itself.

The traditionalist perennialist school¹ believes that "there is a Primordial Tradition which constituted original or archetypal man's primal spiritual and intellectual heritage received through direct revelation when Heaven and Earth were still 'united' (Nasr 1993: 54). This Primordial Tradition is reflected in all later traditions, but the later traditions are not simply its historical and horizontal continuation" (*Ibid.*). Perennialism, if at all it may be referred to as an ism (and it is more appropriately termed as traditionalism), appropriates religious and what Huston Smith calls "wisdom traditions" in their perspective. Thus, Plato and Plotinus, Origen, St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, and Leibnitz – to name only a few representative figures who have contributed to what goes by the name of theodicy are appropriated by them in their theodicy. The peculiar merit of the perennialist school lies in

¹ The traditionalist perennialist perspective began to be enunciated in the West at the beginning of the twentieth century by the French metaphysician Rene Guenon, although its precepts are considered to be timeless and to be found in all authentic traditions. The great trinity of the founding figures of the Traditionalist School included besides Guenon great Ceylonese art critic A. K. Coomaraswamy and the German metaphysician and mystic Frithjof Schuon. Since then it has influenced important figures in a number of disciplines. *Philosophia perennis* pertains to a knowledge "which has always been and will always be and which is of universal character both in the sense of existing among peoples of different climes and epochs and of dealing with universal principles." This knowledge which is available to the intellect (which in the traditionalist perspective is a supra-individual faculty distinct from reason though the latter is its reflection on the mental plane) is, "moreover, contained in the heart of all religions or traditions." "The *philosophia perennis* possesses branches and ramifications pertaining to cosmology, anthropology, art and other disciplines, but at its heart lies pure metaphysics, if this later term is understood as the science of Ultimate Reality, as a *scientia sacra* not to be confused with the subject bearing the name metaphysics in post-medieval Western philosophy." (Nasr, 1993, 54.)

reconciling and integrating as seemingly divergent perspectives on evil as those of theistic Christianity and trans-theistic Buddhism. Their basic position is that common metaphysics unites all great religious traditions and traditional civilizations. They try to apply this metaphysical perspective to the specific “problem of evil” and one could see that it appropriates rather than borrows from many traditional arguments for theodicy. One could well say that the perennialists integrate and give them solid metaphysical foundation without being eclectic in the usual sense of the term such solutions as aesthetic solution (the aesthetic whole is good though the parts are evil), teleological solution (good comes ultimately out of evil), contrast solution (evils are necessary in order to contrast with and point up the good), free will solution (man with his free will is the cause of evil), discipline solution (evil disciplines us and builds our character), recompense solution (evil, such as unjust suffering will be nullified, recompensed in heaven) illusion solution (evil is an illusion, and not ultimately real), privation solution (evil is privation of good, and not something positive in itself), justice solution (evil is God’s punishment for sins), necessary solution (evil is logically and metaphysically necessary for the manifestation or existence of good), metaphor solution (the language describing God is not to be taken literally and anthropomorphically, but symbolically and metaphorically), outweighs solution (evil is not so bad and so pervasive for the good in the world always outweighs it), mystery solution, rebirth solution, and lastly but most importantly metaphysical evil solution (evil in creation is caused by the imperfections in the creation itself) (Herman 1976: 790-80).² The strengths of all these approaches get appropriated in the perennialist perspective though they don’t invoke any of these arguments in usually presented formats and would even critique most of them from their own vantage point. Theirs is quite a different understanding of almost all terms in the theodicy debate such as God, manifestation or creation, freedom and necessity, *maya* or illusion etc. as will be reflected in our appraisal of them.

The metaphysical/traditional understanding of the issue of problem of evil has remained qualitatively different from the philosophical (and theological) one. The philosophical view (and to a certain extent the scholastic approach also) is accused of lacking the metaphysical conceptions of the Real, Absolute, Infinitude, All-Possibility, Good, Self and the like results in making the relative reality of evil a false absolute. Nietzsche’s epochal declaration of the death of God had the problem of evil also in the background. Inadequate comprehension of evil vis-à-vis divine goodness is significantly responsible for modern humanism’s rejection of religion and Fall. In Nietzsche’s revised formulation of trinity figured God the Devil as one of the three constituents, as he felt that otherwise evil is left unaccountable. Eclipse of traditional metaphysical perspective is largely responsible for modern man’s problematic approach to the existence of evil. Evil is said to be ingrained in the ultimate nature of things. Its opposition to good is also construed as absolute. The contradiction between

² This list is adapted with slight modification from Arthur L. Herman’s *The Problem of Evil and Indian Thought*, Motilal Banarsidas, Delhi, 1976, pp.79-80.

good and evil is traced back to the source giving rise to various insurmountable dilemmas and contradictions. As Shahzad Qaisar notes:

The modern man concerns himself, if at all, with the horizontal dimensions of evil alone. Resultantly, the metaphysical foundation of both good and evil is displaced by the faulty assumptions of Empiricism, Pragmatism and Positivism. The divergent trends of contemporary philosophy complicate the situation further. The modern philosophy of religion by its profane methodology baits human understanding on the subject. From pure metaphysics to present impure philosophy, the comprehension of evil has witnessed a major fall from the highest pedestal of the Real (Qaisar 1990: 263).

To present the viewpoint of pure or traditional metaphysics our primary focus here will be on Frithjof Schuon, also known as Isa Nuruddin after his initiation in Sufism, the influential exponent of the metaphysical or perennialist school, especially on those of his writings which were written on Islam such as *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy*, *Understanding Islam* and *Dimensions of Islam*. Another perennialist author whose work has been referred to in some detail is Marco Pallis who has dealt with the problem in his *A Buddhist Spectrum*. As will be seen in the following discussion, Schuon's formulation of theodicy is singularly free from traditional theological face-saving stratagems and obvious embarrassment detectable in such exercises to all of us. He displays no muddle headedness and invokes no crucifixion of intellect and logic in order to safeguard the divine mystery and its elusive unfathomable ministry. He isn't really much perturbed by the problem. He asserts that God wages war against evil with perfect success and it is good which finally carries off the victory against evil at all levels and that evil is extremely limited in space and time, in total Existence³ and that Reality or God is good, and that Epicurus and his later followers are wholly in the wrong and proceeds to demonstrate all these points with great dexterity and logical acumen. He is least impressed by the critics of theodicy. He does not minimize the reality of the existence of evil at the existential or worldly level. He even acknowledges that the world is evil, and that the Buddha is correct in his great emphasis on evil and suffering in the world. He isn't guilty of marginalization of one term (evil) and privileging of the other term of the binary

³ One point which seems to have been overlooked in the majority of theodicies is how extremely limited evil is in strict sense is in space and time considered in their full extent, and this applies even more to evil in total Existence; it is true that the authors of these doctrines don't stop to ask themselves whether evil is great or small, but state simply that it exists; but this is precisely the treason why they give too much the impression of establishing some sort of symmetry as between good and evil whereas, in reality, there is a common measure between the two, either in the cosmic cycles or in the total universe. It must be recognized that the eschatologies, Aryan as well as Semitic, bear some responsibility for this impression of symmetry, but this is because they are drawn up in view of the present state of terrestrial man, and not for the sake of doing justice to things in their total proportions (pp.170-171 of Schuon's *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy*).

(good). He doesn't hide the darker face of the reality. He is no optimist for that matter. His point of view is, self avowedly, completely objective as is Islam's perspective characteristically. He is quite consistent in his treatment of the problem. He rejects both pessimism and optimism. But that doesn't mean that he is a meliorist.⁴ He talks on equal terms with the critics of theodicy and doesn't take a defensive posture at all. He categorically asserts (an assertion which our theologians and philosophers of religion will hardly understand) that there can be no real problem from his (metaphysical) perspective. Marco Pallis similarly asserts that there is no such thing as the problem of evil either in Buddhism or in Semitic religious traditions. To quote Schuon:

From the standpoint of a piety nourished by anthropomorphism, the question of predestination and the question of evil are the two great problems. But from the standpoint of metaphysical knowledge, the only problem is that of expression through language; the difficulty therefore lies in the fact that the heaviness of language requires almost endless prolixities. Be that as it may on the principal plane, there are no unsolvable questions, for all that "is" can in principle be known, the human spirit being total – not partial as is animal intelligence. The real and the knowable coincide, not for the rational faculty to be sure, but for the Intellect, whose presence – actual or purely potential – constitutes the reason for being of the human condition (Schuon 2014: 27).

He situates the whole debate in a different perspective so that the cutting edge of the arguments against theodicy disappears. His framework is that of "Absolute-relative" rather than that of "Creator-created" and this alone removes most of the difficulties for practising theodicy. The Supreme Principle is not God or Being that creates, saves and judges but the undifferentiated Godhead, Beyond-Being, the Supraformal Essence that has nothing to do with creation as such, with its suffering and evil, with man and his fight against evil, his sin and damnation. Nothing can be predicated of it. It is attributeless and relationless. It cannot be implicated in any theological discourse as a party against which a suit could be filed by man. No anthropomorphic image could be deployed to characterize it, to talk about it. The distinction between God as Beyond-Being and God as Being or the Person Beyond-Being which manifests all possibilities, including the possibility of its negation and separation from the source which is the Origin of what appears on the human plane as evil is to be attended to. It is God the Person who wishes good and in relation to whom the problem of evil is said to arise. But read in light of (and subordinated to) the notion of Supreme as Beyond-Being the question of evil appears in a different light. The Qualities of God

⁴ If people have been inclined to see "optimism" in theodicy, this is entirely to misconceive its point of view, which is essentially objective. For optimism, as we see it, is a matter of subjectivity and not of objectivity; its error is to gainsay an evil which does in fact exist, just as pessimism errs conversely not in affirming an evil, but in denying the real good (p. 171 of *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy*).

refer to Relativity or *Maya*. They do not constitute Essence. Against the traditional position of monotheist theologies who operate with categories of the “created” and the “Uncreated” or the binary of God and the world, or the Creator and the created, Schuon says that in reality there is, first of all the Absolute and the relative, and then, within Relativity itself, the Uncreated Creator—and not the Uncreated in itself—and all creation. The crucial distinction between the impersonal Divinity and the personal God as maintained by traditional metaphysics helps to shift the debate so that the cutting edge of most critiques of theodicy is lost.⁵ All religions have the doctrine of Absolute as Supreme Principle though the personal dimension of the Divinity may be either absent as in Buddhism or emphasized so much as one may lose sight of the Beyond-Being. Theology has been more or less anthropomorphic and has humanized the Absolute and that is why it has been hard put to solve such theological puzzles as the problem of creation or manifestation (assuming Supreme Principle to be Perfect and Unchanging) and the problem of evil. Buddhism has been successful in avoiding this “idolatrous” instinct and has gone so far as to compromise the personal element in the Divinity altogether which is not unreal at its own level though of course cannot be absolutized. That is why it need not bother about the Epicurean formulation of the problem of evil as the personal God does not figure there. However, he does speak of Being (personal God) and Its intrinsic goodness. And the perennialist claim is that there is a “transcendent unity” of religions and that is demonstrable by their metaphysical esotericist approach. Buddhist doctrine of the Absolute converges with the Christian doctrine of the same as Schuon tries to demonstrate in his *Transcendent Unity of Religions*. Absolute and not the personal God of theism is the common denominator of great religions. Now if the problem of evil isn’t problem for nontheistic religions it should not be so for theistic religions either at deeper level. What the perennialists attempt is an explication of the notion of God (a metaphysical or perennialist reading of it) in the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition so that grounds of critiques of theodicy that presuppose humanized anthropomorphic notion of the Supreme Principle and very faulty understanding of Divine Nature are

⁵ We will present perennialist reading later and presently we quote Huston Smith, another writer closely allied to the perennialist school on the distinction between the personal God and Absolute. Because in the West the word God tends to be tied to his/her/its personal aspects, it is perhaps better to speak of the Absolute, to widen the screen. The personal dimensions of the divine are not unreal, but they are not inclusive. They are caught up and assume this place in the abysmal infinity of the Godhead which our rational minds can no more fathom than a two dimensional mind could fathom the nature of a sphere, The trans-rational depths of the divine are accessible, but by reason only abstractly and with anomalous residues; kataphatic theology inevitably produces paradoxes analogous to the ones that turn up on two-dimensional maps of our three-dimensional earth. Only in the inclusive light of intellective discernment can these paradoxes be resolved. Such intellective knowing requires more than thought – It requires that the subject be adequate to its object according to the dictum that “only like can know like.” (Huston Smith in “Primordialist Claim” in *God Self and Nothingness: Reflections Eastern and Western*, Ed Robert E. Carter Paragon House, New York, 1990)

problematized.¹⁰ Monotheistic scriptures' narrative of genesis provides the key to their theodicies. And it is in the perennialist reading of such narratives explaining them in the light of traditional metaphysics is that a coherent theodicy could be formulated.

Schuon admits that the problem of evil appears very difficult for average believer and he himself is no bluff master and does not dabble in rhetorical word play. He shifts to metaphysics and does not attempt theodicy in the usual sense of the term.

If the questions of evil and predestination appear as unsolvable problems to the average believer it is because theology, owing to its anthropomorphism, halts midway; it improperly personalizes the supreme Principle, and this shows that it has an insufficient idea of what we term the "Divine Order." Doubtless there is no impenetrable partition between reason and intelligence, but the latter cannot enter fully and decisively into a thinking that identifies with dogmatic crystallizations and their corresponding sentimentalities (Schuon 2014: 27).

Marco Pallis similarly points out that the idea of "a problem" of evil originated in the Christian tradition and is largely confined there. To quote him: "This idea is closely bound up with the anthropomorphic representations of the relationship between human and Divine, which if pushed too far or insufficiently corrected by commentaries of a more purely sapiential kind (as in the sermons of Meister Eckhart), can easily be invaded by sentimental and moralistic influences" (Pallis 1980:41). In Islam Sufism provides this corrective.

Schuon doesn't posit a personal Good God as Absolute. Absolute can't be predicated. It is attributeless, beyond good and evil. This is what many theologians and critics of theodicy don't adequately understand. This makes Schuon's position very formidable.

In one sense, the Absolute is beyond good and evil, but in another sense it is the very essence of goodness, which is to say that It is the Good as such. It is neither good nor evil insofar as It conditions, by the radiation of Its Infinitude, the genesis of what we term evil, but It is good in the sense that every conceivable good testifies to Its essential nature; evil as such could not have its root in the pure Absolute, nor in that "lesser Absolute" that is Being, the personal God (Schuon 2014: 28).

Proceeding from this understanding of the Supreme Principle Schuon rejects the classical Epicurean formulation of the problem, Against Epicurean reasoning on evil, he, unlike Iqbal and many Christian theologians, appeals to no vague hope, optimism or meliorism and does not feel in need of qualifying his explanation by any 'perhaps'. His is a bold counterattack without any fumbling. He does not demand any *a priori* commitment on our part or any Kierkegaardian leap of faith and crucifixion of intellect and mystery mongering. His devastating critique needs quoting in full. He writes:

Epicurean reasoning is based on certain ambiguities concerning the very notion of “evil,” “will” and “power.” In the first place, will and power are inherent in the Divine Nature, which is absoluteness and Infinitude ; this means that God is neither capable nor desirous of what is contrary to His Nature on pain of contradiction and hence of absurdity. It is impossible, because it is absurd, that God should have the power to be other than God, to be neither absolute nor infinite, to be altogether in-existent; and He cannot will that which, inasmuch as it is contrary to Being, is outside His Power. God is all powerful in relation to the world, His creation or His manifestation; but Omnipotence cannot act upon the Divine Being itself, given that this Being is the source of that Omnipotence and not the reverse (Schuon 1976: 167).

Epicurean reasoning is the almost classical example of a faultless operation of logic which lacks the data that its content requires; it discusses “evil” but fails to realize that evil is by definition evil only in one respect and not in another, as is proved in advance by the fact there is no absolute evil and that evil is never a substance; it discusses “God” but fails to realize that God, being infinite, includes in His Nature the seed of an unfolding that necessarily involves an element of contradiction by the very fact of His Infinitude ; and it discusses “power” and “will”, but fails to recognize that the Divine Nature is the Subject of these and not their object, which amounts to saying that these two faculties, although they are unlimited by virtue of Divine Limitlessness and when directed towards contingency, are nevertheless limited “at the Summit” by Divine Absoluteness, which no will or power can modify (*Ibid.*: 168).

Schuon as a metaphysician takes up the basic question whether Reality is “good” or “bad” and takes recourse to no mystery mongering or unfounded assumptions and doesn’t demand *a priori* commitment on our part to belief or faith in God’s goodness. He addresses the matter as an astute logician. He writes in this connection:

To the question of whether Reality is “good” or ‘bad’ there are logically two answers: the first is that Reality is neither good nor bad; the second is that it is good. If good exists, it is because the ground of Existence is beneficent; if good can be absent— to a minute degree when the world and the cycle are envisaged in their totality—it is because the ground of Existence, or absolute Reality, is neither “good” nor ‘bad’ because it can’t be enclosed in an alternative or an opposition. The thing is that it is important to understand that this indifference or transcendence is essentially of such a nature as to reveal itself as good; that is to say, good essentially reveals the nature of indifference that is superior to it. The part can be relatively an evil, but the whole is good, whatever may be the degree of reality; in this sense the world is a positive manifestation, despite the negations it shelters positively. Or again, if a thing is bad, it can only be so by virtue of its fragmentary nature and not of its totality. Evil makes things fragmentary, as good makes them whole; good dilates whereas evil contracts. God manifests Himself only in perfections, not in their absence; where they are lacking there can’t be either totality or centre. A bad man is no more than a fragment of himself (Schuon 1969: 41).

Although this seems quite similar to aesthetic solution which has been subject to some telling criticisms by many philosophers of religion including Stace, it is not so. Schuon's assertion that the whole is good he himself qualifies in the beginning and what he seems to say should be understood in the context of another premise of their metaphysics which takes Being as Good and non-being or *'adm*, to use Muslim scholastical equivalent term, as evil. It amounts to more than an axiomatic statement that Being equals God and God is good and desires radiation of good as manifestation. Beyond-Being desires good as radiation, manifestation or world, whereas Being desires good as the participation of things in the Divine Good. Schuon explicates the Augustinian formulation that "the good tends essentially to radiate itself" (Schuon 1976:165). Every existent is good by virtue of its very existence, and by that alone.

The perennialists attribute failure of the Western theodicy to imputing evil in the Reality itself. From the metaphysical point of view, the Supreme Principle is beyond the range of evil. "Evil is not a self-subsistent reality but arises in the process of the manifestation of the Absolute. The relativity of evil is only meaningful in reference to the absoluteness of Goodness" (Qaisar 1990: 265). Thus the orthodox theistic belief in God's goodness is not compromised though it is not given a literal meaning as anthropomorphist theological exoterism gives it. It is not vulnerable to those critiques that problematize literal sense of such statements as God is love or good.

The perennialists deny that the problem of evil is a genuine problem as usually presented. Marco Pallis makes this point forcefully in his book *A Buddhist Spectrum* in the essay provocatively titled as "Is there a Problem of Evil?" The question in the perennialist perspective is not 'Why God creates evil?' but why does God create at all. Why is there any manifestation, any world? In fact, why we need exist? It is the key notion of All-Possibility that helps to tackle the problem of evil. The metaphysical meaning of evil is understandable from the concept of All-Possibility. It is the presence of universal possibility which gives rise to the phenomenon of evil. The possibility of evil is contained within All-Possibility over which has no power over All-Possibility in which is possibility of evil contained, since All-Possibility belongs to the Divine Essence itself, and "the Essence comes before the Person; Beyond-Being or Non Being comes before Being; the Suprapersonal divinity determines the Personal God, and not the other way round" (Qaisar 1990: 266). To quote Schuon's pithy explication of the notion of All-Possibility that explains evil, both metaphysical and moral:

The Absolute by definition includes the Infinite — their common content being Perfection or the Good — and the Infinite in its turn gives rise, at the degree of that "lesser Absolute" that is Being ,to ontological All-Possibility. Being cannot not include efficient Possibility, because it cannot prevent the Absolute from including the Infinite.

Possibility has so to speak two dimensions, one "horizontal" and one "descending," or one "qualitative" and one "quantitative," analogically or metaphorically speaking. The first contains the infinitely diverse qualities and archetypes, whereas the second projects them in the direction of "nothingness" or impossibility. In drawing away from its source — namely pure Being —

the second dimension on the one hand coagulates the qualities and archetypes, and on the other manifests their contraries; whence ultimately the phenomenon of contrastive manifestation, and consequently of evil. Being, which coincides with the personal God, cannot prevent evil because, as we have said, It cannot abolish, and could not wish to abolish the Infinitude of the pure Absolute.

And this resolves the following difficulty: if God is both good and omnipotent, why does He not abolish evil? Does He not wish to, or can He not do so? For the reasons we have just indicated, He cannot abolish evil as such — and He does not wish to abolish it because He knows its metaphysical necessity — but He is able and wishes to abolish particular evils, and in fact, all particular evils are transient; the cosmogonic unfolding itself is transient since universal Manifestation is subject to phases and becomes reabsorbed "periodically" into the Apocatastasis or the "Night of Brahman" (Schuon 2014: 27-28).

If the All-Possibility did not include the possibility of its own negation, it would have been negated forthwith. Schuon argues that the real and the good coincide. And evil is the "possibility of the impossible," lacking which the Infinite would not be the Infinite. One cannot ask why All-Possibility includes the possibility of its own negation is unwarranted as it is like asking why Existence is Existence, or why Being is Being (Qaisar 1990: 261). Pallis's discussion of the idea of All-Possibility and the problem of necessity of the world or creation is more lucid. So, we take up his explication of the idea.

To explicate the idea, he first discusses the question of divine freedom and necessity. This also reflects on the nagging question of predestination and freewill that has been a source of so many theological puzzles and one could well argue that it has so far resisted satisfactory theological as well as coherent philosophical treatment: the problem of determinism vs. free will hardly stands resolved in the Western philosophy. But the metaphysical perspective quite effectively deals with it. In the perspective of Islam it is the genius of Sufism as represented in the writings of such great Sufi metaphysicians as Ibn Arabi and Jami that has solved the problem of evil as Mir Valiuddin has argued in his *Quranic Sufism*. This needs a detailed discussion of traditional conception of archetypes and quite involved discussion of traditional Sufi metaphysics which is not possible here. The reader is referred to Valiuddin's book *The Quranic Sufism* for the same. Presently we shall restrict our discussion principally to the concepts of freedom and necessity as they relate to divine action and to the notion of All- Possibility and the problem of necessity of existence as such which is the fundamental question of metaphysics.

Metaphysically speaking the Real is the Absolute and the Infinite. Both are the aspects of Reality.

The Absolute and the Infinite are characterized by essentiality and potentiality respectively. Essentiality manifests Necessity and Infinitude exhibits freedom. Both are metaphysically united in a situation. They principally belong to the realm of "non-duality" but they appear as separate at the level of manifestation. If one attempts to study both these aspects from the point of view of manifestation alone then we fear that a complete understanding of this metaphysical totality shall

remain essentially elusive. Necessity and Freedom are identical since there is nothing outside total Possibility (Qaisar 1990: 245).

Necessity constitutes the very essence of freedom and one could declare that it is the “substratum” of freedom. It gives life to possibility. As Pallis notes:

Whenever divine action is spoken of, that action must be regarded as necessary as well as *free*; *in divinis* the two attributes coincide at every point whereas, with us, existence, which relativizes everything, renders them more or less incompatible in any given set of circumstances. God’s infinity implies absolute liberty; where there is no limit; there can be no constraint either. Likewise God’s absoluteness implies limitless necessity; it is absurd to speak as if God’s ordinances bore an arbitrary character (Pallis 1980: 40).

Pallis explicates the idea of creation’s gratuitousness to which theology has been committed to but then it has been very hard for it to explain why evil in the creation should not be attributed to God. Why did God create a world at all which is cursed by evil? For Pallis the theological doctrine of gratuitous creation is intended to affirm God’s absolute freedom and not to deny His infinite necessity. The infinite nature of divine possibility includes the idea of manifestation and therefore also requires it. He clarifies that God’s perfection and unchangeableness is not thereby compromised. To quote Pallis again: “He is the creator of the relative, as required by His infinity; of that relative the thing we call evil is a necessary function, being in fact the measure of the world’s apparent separation from its principle, God – an illusory separation in as much as nothing can exist side by side with the infinite, however real it may claim to be at its own relative level” (Pallis 1980: 40).

He quotes Schuon in this connection who said “one can’t ask of God to will the world and at the same time will that it be not a world.” A world is a whirlpool of contrasts (the Indian word *samsara* expresses this). “It is not a unity in its own right. It can’t be a limitation on the Almighty that He can’t produce another Himself, a second Absolute. The world is there to prove it (Pallis 1980: 41).

The question why do things exist thus is dissolved. This question is devoid of intrinsic sense. It can’t be discussed at the discursive rational plane. Its “answer” lies at an altogether different plane that transcends conceptual intellect and logic. Here the element of mystery comes if one wishes to call it so. Religions in the ultimate analysis are just an affirmation of and thus the acceptance of or surrender, to use Islamic idiom, to the Mystery of existence. God is Mystery or He is nothing. Religion refuses to demystify existence on principle, on *a priori* terms. The relationless divisionless absolute, the undifferentiated supraformal Essence, the Non-Being or Beyond-Being, the Being of being that transcends subject-object duality, the *coincidentia oppositorum* in which all contradictions are appropriated can’t in any conceivable manner be discursively known, apprehended, categorized, objectified and thus rationally analyzed. To the conceptual intellect God and Godhead can’t but appear as Void, as Nothing, Emptiness, Abyss, the great silence, the great darkness as Stace has cogently argued in his *Time and Eternity*. The sacred by definition is the mysterious.

The tradition of the negative divine in all the religious traditions asserts that one can't solve the mystery of existence at a rational discursive plane. The rationalizing intellect is not comfortable with it and wishes to explain away the final Mystery, to comprehend it, to reduce it to the categories of natural world (and modern scientific reductionistic naturalism is wholly illegitimate from the perennialist viewpoint). Mysticism asserts that existence, the totality of existence that encompasses the unseen realms or higher degrees of existence which Sufism classifies under the notion of five divine presences, is not a rational logical thing, it is mysterious and God is thus a "Mystery or nothing at all." As long as one does not realize the unity of thought and being, or subject and object, or knower and known in that Unitarian or non-dual or *Tawhidic*, as the Sufis would say, mode of consciousness by means of mystical and metaphysical realization one can't hope to answer the fundamental question of why of existence. As Pallis says:

Our existence is not something of which the question "Why?" can validly be attached in expectation of a solution comfortable to human logic, itself an apanage of the existence in question. Existence is something one can accept only for what it is. All argument about things starts from there; it can't be pushed further back thanks to some subterfuge of the discursive mind. Only the eye of the intellect not to be confused with reason or conceptual intellect that is as an individual faculty but understood as intellectual intuition – the third eye of Indian traditional symbolism – is able to pierce beyond the existential veil because something of what lies beyond is already to be found in its own substance; it is not for nothing that Meister Eckhardt called it "uncreate and uncreatable." But here we are outside the discursive realm altogether (Pallis 1980: 41).

Thus as Pallis says as long as the existence or creation is a possibility (as it evidently is at its own level), that possibility will in due course be called to manifestation because the divine All-Possibility can't be limited in any manner whatsoever. "This is enough" declares Pallis, "to account for the existence of the relative, the cosmic unfolding in all its indefinitude of becoming, including that apparent opposing of relative to real, of world to God, that constitutes, for beings, their separative dream" (Pallis 1980: 41). It may be mentioned here that in the perennialist scheme the theological notion of creation from nothing is not opposed to the idea of creative emanation. This helps to tackle otherwise serious criticism of theistic thesis that posits a beginning to the universe and overemphasizes God's transcendence and perfection and unchangeability. The relative in itself amounts to nothing in the presence of the real, though by its own limited reality it manifests the real at a given level, failing which it could not exist. The world and thus the evil, in the ultimate analysis, is unreal or illusory in reference to the Real. It lacks being in itself. This follows from the notion of All-Possibility. Huston Smith makes a similar point about privative nature of evil in reference to God. This also is in line with the aesthetic solution referred to above. He says:

Esse qua esse bonum est; being qua being is good; evil is the relative absence of good in the way shadow is the relative absence of light. The issue is subtle, but a

sentence by St. Augustine points to the direction in which the traditional argument proceeds: “I no longer desired a better world, because I was thinking of creation as a whole: and in the light of this more balanced discernment, I had come to see that higher things are better than lower, but that the sum of all creation is better than the higher things alone”. (*Confession*, VI, xii, 19). Not to affirm that point is to complain about the admittedly inferior while essentially noble condition that is ours. How noble it can come to be seen is life’s open – ended question (Smith 1990).

Schuon thus dismisses the “impotent God” thesis:

If God cannot suppress evil as possibility, it is because in this respect evil is a result of His Nature and as such, ceases in any case to be evil; and what God cannot do, without contradiction or absurdity He cannot possibly will. But the Divine Will opposes evil in so far as it is contrary to the Divine Nature which is goodness and perfection; in this relationship of opposition – and in this alone evil is intrinsically evil. It is against this evil that God wages war with perfect success, since, at all levels, it is the good which finally carries off the victory, evil is never more than a fragment or transition, whether we are capable of seeing of this or not (Schuon 1976: 168).

It is difficult to see how Mill’s and similar critiques of theological notion of omnipotent God could be deployed to question Schuon’s argument. The scriptural statements that with God all things are possible or God has power over all things the perennialists understand not only in the usual theological sense of alluding to God’s infinite power but also as referring to the metaphysical notion of All-Possibility. As Nasr puts it “To say that God is All-Powerful, the All-Potent, is also to say that He is the All Possibility” (Nasr 1993: 9).

Schuon for his theodicy is compelled to criticize traditional Muslim (and Christian) theology on various accounts, the primary ground being metaphysical. In fact he is for transcending the theological approach or understanding which is committed to dualistic framework based on the mutually exclusive categories of Creator and created and other dichotomies which can be bridged by an act of faith only, and lacks adequate doctrine of God as Reality, Absolute and Infinite, and operates without the crucial notions of Beyond-Being and Divine Relativity (mainstream theology lacks an adequate knowledge of the Principle as absolute and adequate grasp of the meaning of relativity, of levels and hierarchy of existence, of the relatively real and of what Schuon calls the ‘relatively absolute’). He asks for leaving behind an “anthropomorphist and moralizing ontology.” His perspective is metaphysical rather than theological and then alone is able to dissolve, rather than solve, the problem of evil. However, he argues with theologians on their own terms and claims orthodox credentials for his esoteric metaphysical reading of scripture. He points out limitations of a purely theological approach to the problem of evil and shows how many difficulties and impasse in a purely theological approach could be avoided. It is, however, important to note that he is not for abandoning the theological paradigm altogether or committing any blasphemies on that account. He in no way

does leave the ground of orthodoxy, the universal orthodoxy as Schuon calls it though many an “orthodox” theologian will reject this universal orthodoxy as heterodox. Now we take up his critique of theology, especially Muslim theology as it relates to the problem of evil.

He refers to some verses of the Quran which seem to imply that God’s Will is arbitrary because He apparently acts without motive and that he is bad because He causes evil. For instance, “He punishes whomsoever He will, and He pardons whomsoever He will” and “I take refuge in the Lord of the dawn, from thee evil of that which He has created” and those verses which declare that God “causes it go astray whomsoever He will.” Theologians have been hard put to interpret these verses that seem to imply that God is utterly unconcerned with justice and logic and wisdom, that He offers no apology for apparent imperfections and injustice in His doings. Some theologians like Ibn Hazm have taken recourse to a curious interpretation of God’s attributes that makes them totally incommensurable with the human understanding of them; that seems to imply that there is no rational analogy possible in theology. The Quran does make comparisons between God and the world / man (e.g., take this verse ‘He it is who hears who sees’ (XLII, 11) and so many verses which use plain anthropomorphic imagery) and thus clearly indicates that an analogy between things and God exists. The God is called *Az-Zahir* (the Manifest) and thus implying the metaphysical transparency of phenomena. For theological language to be meaningful, the strategy of Ibn Hazm and of those who argue that God owes no explanation to man on this or that account and thus He is not scrutinizable or understandable and that He is “capricious” from human perspective will not do. It is here that metaphysician in Ibn Arabi or Schuon comes to our rescue. I quote Schuon’s interpretation of these verses in which God owns evil actions.

...to assert that God punishes and forgives according to His good pleasure means, not that He is arbitrary, but that the ‘good pleasure’ represents motives which escape our limited understanding; and to say that God causes evil means, not that He wills it *qua* evil, but that He produces it indirectly as a fragment – or an infinitesimal constitutive element – of a greater good’, whose extent compensates and absorbs that of the evil ... By definition, every evil is a ‘part’ and never a ‘whole’ and these negations or fragmentary privations which are the various forms of evil are inevitable owing to the fact that the world, not being God and being unable to be God, is of necessity situated outside God. But from the point of view of their cosmic function of being necessary elements of a total good, the various evils are in a certain way integrated into this total good, and it is this point of view that makes it possible to say that metaphysically there is no evil; the notion of evil presupposes in fact a fragmentary vision of things, characteristic of creatures, who are themselves fragments; man is a “fragmentary totality”. Evil... is in the world because the world is not God; now from a certain point of view – one of which the Vedantists are especially aware – the world is none other than God; *Maya* is *Atma*, *Samsara* is *Nirvana*; from this point of view evil does not exist, and this is precisely the point of view of the macrocosmic totality. This is suggested in the Quran by means of the following antinomy: on the one hand it declares that good “comes from God” and that evil “comes from yourselves” and on the other hand it says that everything comes from God... the first idea having to be understood on

the basis of second, which is more universal and therefore more real; it is the difference between fragmentary vision and total truth (Schuon 1969: 126 -128).

Schuon elaborates further his metaphysical critique of theologians in this connection:

Theologians have sometimes dodged this rational difficulty with a somewhat massive piety – or a sentimental blind obedience, if one prefers – by alleging, for example, that ‘God is free to do what He wants’ because He has no above him, and that good is good, not by virtue of an infinite quality which reflects directly – not indirectly – such and such an aspect of Divine Perfection, but for the sole reason that God willed it so; the error here is, on the one hand to confuse Omnipotence or All Possibility with the arbitrary, and on the other to forget that the basis of good is not a decree of God, but the intrinsic goodness of the Divine Nature. (Schuon 1976: 121).

These observations neutralize force of most humanistic critiques of theism and theodicy and at the same time critique theological omnipotentialism that reduces man to nothingness and don’t cater to the claims and demands of human intelligence. They defend God’s viewpoint without making him an arbitrary or capricious Power or dictatorial despot (as certain theologians seem to imply if not explicitly state) who could be accused of sadism – a blind will that delights at our misery and kills us for sport and does not wish to owe an explanation to humans for his doings. Schuon makes it quite clear that man is entitled, by virtue of his intelligence, to demand from God an “explanation” or better understanding and clarification of His doings. He critiques literalist theologian Ibn Hanbal and Ashari, the architect of Sunni scholasticism, for denying man the prerogative of understanding the logic of the Divine Nature as they assert that God need not and cannot owe anything to him. He points out that the fact that man is created in God’s image and has been gifted with intelligence imply that God owes His theomorphic and intelligent creature an intelligent and consequential attitude as He owes this to Himself. As the Divine Nature is essentially good and true man cannot be excluded from the logic of the Divine Nature and man with intelligence (Schuon 1976: 121). Man’s nothingness does not mean he needs to abdicate common sense. Totalitarian obedentialism of Ashari equates God’s sublimity with blind immoderation of freedom and unintelligible and incalculable wilfulness. Critiquing the Ash’arite thesis of gratuitous “Omnipotence” he says: “The entire error in this reasoning comes from the equation of “God” and “Will” and from the fact that All-Possibility is envisaged – in keeping with exoteric anthropomorphism – as a freedom to do whatsoever; the error here lies in– we repeat – lies in subordinating even the true and the good to the arbitrariness of an unrestricted Divine Will (Schuon, 1976: 122). The arbitrary and wilful God of Ashari and Ibn Hanbal is not lovable, because the only motive for Him is “what he wills.” “Ultimately, the error here is the subordination of Being to Power, of God-*Atma* to God-*Maya*, or of Essence (*Dhat*) to Qualities (*Sifat*); now Power is a reality that is already relative-although still in a divine way – since it presupposes a level which is not God and over which it can hold sway. Power has no effect on the Divine Nature which is absolute” (Schuon 1976: 120). In the context of Ghazali’s (who was

simultaneously a theologian of Asharite bent and a Sufi) treatment of the problem of evil who has discussed the specific issue of 'why did God create unbelievers and snakes or scorpions. He develops his own analysis that needs to be referred to as it provides a good example of concrete application of perennialist theodicy and it is to this discussion to which we now turn.

Taking Ghazali's example of scorpion he sees it from the point of view of pure existence as a good and not an evil, a victory over nothingness. Fragmentary anthropocentric and humanistic point of view is of course here rejected. A scorpion's existence is good also from the point of view of its function in the economy of nature and asserts that if we look at everything in this way, we could say with Ibn Arabi that in the world there is only good. He does not deny, as certain theologians are wont to do, that an evil is an evil in the particularity which characterizes it. He seems to argue against the extreme forms of *privatio boni* arguments so trenchantly critiqued by Jung in his *Answer to Job*. He says that even if we grant that evil in this particularity is only privative or "pure inexistence" as Ibn Arabi would say, the concrete reality of imperfect or maleficent things will still not be abolished, for the very reason that this privation or inexistence exists, failing which it would be impossible to speak of an evil (Schuon 1976: 120).

He clarifies the notion of Divine Will as it is this that exoterism fails to comprehend and that contributes to limitations of the problem of evil, especially the problem of moral evil and *Iblis*. Arguing that God firstly wills Himself, His Will coinciding; secondly Wills Existence in order to manifest His Nature; and thirdly He wishes to manifest within Existence the Good and hence the norm and the law. This Good within Existence is the totality of the reverberations of the Sovereign Good. But reverberations require contrasts, whence the privative and subversive concomitance that we call evil as evil is such in relation to the particularity characterizing it and not in its existence. There is no evil that is not woven existentially of good All the positive possibilities in evil, such as intelligence, beauty, strength, the faculties of sensation and action, are good. (Schuon 1976: 268) There is no pure and simple evil. It simply cannot exist. One could well argue that there is only good in the world and that evil is a matter of point of view. He elaborates his critique thus:

He critiques many arguments that have been put forward to solve the rational problem of incompatibility between the existence of evil and the goodness of God. These include such arguments as maintaining, for example that that evil arises as a simple contrast and in completely extrinsic manner, from the stipulation of some law - just as a shadow is cast by an object- or that it is such purely by contrast with our conventional attitudes and so on. He concedes that though, existentially speaking, evil is the distortion of a good but also points out that the fact that the substance is ontologically good doesn't prevent this distortion from being an evil which is completely real at its own level. (Schuon 1969: 26).

Anthropomorphist streak in Muslim scholasticism (*Kalam*) is critiqued from the view point of traditional metaphysics. He observes:

The great weakness of the protagonists of *Kalam* is to apply anthropomorphism to what is in God most completely eludes being made anthropomorphic namely Beyond-Being or the supraformal Essence and to confuse Beyond-Being with its ontological self-determination namely Being which creates, reveals and saves. This is to confuse, in the absence of the notion of *Maya*, two totally different Divine subjectivities, the first corresponding to *Paramatma* and the second to *Ishwara* or even to *Buddhī*, according to the degree envisaged; and it is this lamentable confusion that constitutes the characteristic infirmity of Ash'arism in particular and of *kalam* in general or even of all doctrinal exoterism to one degree or other" (Schuon 1976: 141)

He rejects the notion of anthropomorphic *Paramatma* is something monstrous, and all speculations based on as bad metaphysics and cautions against confusion of pure Being with the determinative and existence generating qualities, which amounts to a mixing of two universal subjectivities which are in fact different, always without prejudice to their essential unity. He argues that it is impossible to practice integral metaphysics and theodicy on the basis of axioms treated apart from the key notion of *Maya* or Divine Relativity (Schuon 1976: 142).

These observations apply to Ruqayyiah Waris Maqsood's theological (in her *Problem of Evil*) and also to Iqbal's philosophical (who is the most significant modern Muslim philosopher and religious thinker to have reckoned with the problem of evil in contemporary idiom in his *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*).

Schuon further points out, which applies to Iqbal's philosophy also,

two fundamental errors in the formulation of the voluntaristic theologians and philosophers: firstly, the attribution to a single Divine subject (in fact humanized) of cosmic effects which in reality are related to different universal sources, since the Divine Functions are not substance or Being, and since Being is not Beyond – Being secondly the use of word "will" for causes to which this anthropomorphic analogy is only very partially applicable (Schuon 1976: 143).

Schuon thus explains the import of the Quranic verses "God doeth what He will" and "God doeth what He will" by stating that man is in general unaware of the motives of the Divine Purpose, particularly when it comes to the numerous contradictions which the world displays (*Ibid.*: 65).

It isn't that Schuon claims that he has a solution in detail and that he is able to account for all the evils in their concreteness and minute details. This would be an impossible claim to make and sacred scripture also makes it quite clear that man is given but little knowledge and that the divine wisdom and divine intention or motives may not necessarily be known or comprehensible to man always. It would be very difficult if not impossible to refute Ivan Karamazov of Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* point by point, to demonstrate divine wisdom behind the apparently needless suffering of innocent children or justify the ways of God to the victims of a plague (e.g., in Camus's *Algeria*). Schuon does not attempt this either and all he claims is that we do possess a solution to the problem of evil in principle but not in detail. He

rightly warns against turning a blind eye to the existence of evil (*Ibid.*: 174). He is not primarily interested in the theological problem of evil but in vanquishing evil in us, (*Ibid.*: 175) which is what religion demands (and this is best illustrated in the Buddhist approach to the same). We are not here to dabble in metaphysics and practise theodicy as advocates of God but to win salvation, to vanquish the evil that plagues our earthly sojourn.

To Dostoevsky's Ivan and Camus's Rieux the perennialists have an answer, but only an answer in principle. This answer appropriates rebirth solution as well though the perennialists understand rebirth quite differently from that of popular Hindu conception. Semitic conception of hell is read in light of reincarnationist thought. This point however cannot be elaborated here. He asserts that, in a way, we are all "sinners"; only God is perfect. The point is that wherever one is dealing with a relative perfection, one that has existential limits, for instance the case of child or innocent person, one has implicitly accepted or owned, a degree of perfection in respect of the absence of whatever lies outside those limits. The privative character of the limit is manifested by a proneness to change and consequent suffering. This basic thesis of Buddhism is the thesis of the Semitic traditions although differently expressed. To quote Schuon:

Our existence as such is like a still innocent prefiguration of all transgression – innocent yet the generator of misery; at least it is so inasmuch as it is a demiurgic 'coming out' from the Principle, though not when regarded as a positive 'manifestation' of the Principle. One should never ask why misfortunes befall the innocent: in the sight of the Absolute all is disequilibrium, 'God alone is good', and this truth cannot fail to be manifested from time to time in a direct and violent manner. It the good suffer, that means that all men would merit as much; old age and death prove it, for they spare no man. The sharing out of earthly good and ill fortune is a question of cosmic economy, although the immanent justice must also sometimes reveal itself in the light of day by showing the link between causes and effects in human action. Man's sufferings testify to the mysteries of his distance and separation and they cannot be, the world not being God (Schuon 1969: 84).

Indeed, God alone is good and in the sight of the Absolute all is disequilibrium. Adam's descent on earth is the result of some kind of evil or Fall. Man's very existence is an indirect manifestation of evil, a punishment for the "sins" committed by him in "previous life." speaking from the perspective of the Absolute. To be is to be bedevilled by evil. To be is to suffer and die. There is a profound truth in Abul Aala Maari's (a famous Arabic ascetic and poet) famous statement that our very existence is *the sin, the evil*. This idea is frequently echoed in Sufi literature. Schopenhauer's whole philosophy (though a heterodox interpretation of Buddhist wisdom) is a powerful expression of the same truth. From another perspective this is the conclusion of Sophocles and perhaps all great tragedies. The absurdist writers and philosophers emphasize the same point in their own way. Angels, in the Quranic narrative of genesis, foresaw the danger of evil or *fasad* that will enter in the world on account of man. The point to be made is that modern humanist's sanguine estimate of man and his denial of evil and sin or fall is simply unwarranted. But religious vision

is distinguishable from all pessimistic, absurdist philosophies and its central dictum is the essential goodness of man and life and divine goodness. "Life is worth living" is the fundamental postulate of all religions as William James has argued in one of his famous essays. Holiness, benediction and sacramental character of life is the fundamental postulate of all religious traditions. Indeed, God in the ultimate analysis is identifiable with Life itself.

To the question "why is there death?" that has disturbed many a critic of theodicy he has an answer. "The cause of death is the disequilibrium brought about by our fall and the loss of Paradise" (Schoon 1969: 83). For him the levelling justice of death is infinitely more important for us than the diversity of earthly destinies. The experience of death is essentially the lifting of the veil. Its experience resembles that of a man who lived all his life in a dark room and suddenly finds himself transported to a mountain top where his gaze would embrace all the wide landscape. Projected into the absolute 'nature of things' man is inescapably aware of what he is in reality; he knows himself ontologically and without deforming perspective in the light of the normative 'proportions' of the universe (*Ibid*: 85). Death alone lets us perceive what we are, not as an insignificant dust or the "lusting and fighting animals" but theomorphic beings made in the image of God. Death allows us to see our real nature and realize our destiny as we meet the Beloved.

It is generally granted that the problem of evil is a problem in a theistic perspective and that there is hardly such a problem in trans-theistic perspective of Buddhism. Pallis argues that Buddhist solution is also principally advocated/appropriated in theistic perspectives of Semitic religions. Theodicy is ultimately man's problem; the problem of evil arises not from the perspective of the Absolute, but from that of man. It is man who needs to make sense of God's doings, who asks the question. It is His prerogative to justify his understanding of God's Nature. This he does by metaphysical reading of the story of genesis. In fact, the story of genesis has traditionally been seen as scriptural theodicy. Justifying God's ways to men, however, has proved very difficult if we restrict our view to exoteric theological reading of the story. Indeed, it has raised more questions, especially at the hands of modern rationalist critics, than it has solved in this perspective. Milton's grand aim in his *Paradise Lost* of justifying God's ways to men is not realized for many modern readers. He is unable to explain the presence of serpent in the paradise and ends up by making Satan the hero of his epic. Forcing God to speak and act like one of us as we see in Milton's epic and in many scholastic treatises simply shows the inadequacies of anthropomorphic and personalist conception of the divine. There are too many contradictions for such a God to be either coherent or worthy of veneration. From Hume to Mill and Russell and of course their intellectual predecessor Epicurus, most critics of traditional theism on account of problem of evil have narrow theological conception of the divine or personal God and they are not entirely in the wrong if we have purely theological conception of God before us. According to the perennialists, theological exegeses are unable to comprehend the real metaphysical purport of such religious narratives as the narrative of genesis. The way perennialists unearth the metaphysical core of this story and thus dissolve the problem of evil is fraught with great significance for modern man who often denies hell, his sin and fall

which Adam as a primordial archetypal man experienced. In fact Nasr's claim, made in the context of perennialist theodicy, that if people understood metaphysics there would be no agnostics around is substantiated if the perennialist account of the Divine Nature (that of course leaves ample scope for such "agnostics" as the Buddha) is conceded. The traditionalist reading embraces a sort of Buddhist reading of the story that Pallis proceeds to make. A Christian or a Muslim theist could easily appropriate it and fathom the meaning of evil and see why he rather than God is to be blamed in this primordial drama that captures the tragedy of fallen man and his proclivity to sin and suffer in consequence. Schuon, who champions the perennialist school, has defended theism though of course also at the same time transcended purely theological or absolutistic theistic position. Here Pallis' and Schuon's exegesis of the Fall is discussed to further elucidate the perennialist theodicy.

The Tree of Life in the center of the Garden of Eden corresponds to the axis of the universe. Adam, primordial man, dwells at peace with all his fellow beings, and they along with him participate in the center so long as his attention remains focused there. Now comes the snake (whose presence there will be explained later) and tempts Adam with a hitherto untasted experience, that of fragmented unity, of things unreferred to the center and valued for their own sake as if they were self-sufficient entities. From the moment on Adam and Eve feel imprisoned within their own fragmentary consciousness, their empirical egos (which are illusory and breed suffering). This fact is evidenced by their shame at their own nakedness, which they try to cover up with an artificial selfhood of their own contriving, the fig leaves that have become the prototype of all human disguise. It is not without reason that the Tree now becomes the other tree, the Tree of Good and Evil. A Tree "bowed under the weight of its fruits, light and dark, containing the seed of indefinite becoming... regarded from the viewpoint of ignorance, the Tree of Life becomes the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil" (Pallis 1980: 38). This tree is referred to as the other tree as for the first time they feel an acute sense of otherness, of I and you, and by this very fact they are cut off from those other beings with whom they formerly communed on free and fearless terms. Schuon in his exegesis of the narrative of genesis attributes the origin of evil to Adam's placing himself outside the Divine Centre by succumbing to the lure of exteriorizing separative fragmentary knowledge. The Tree of Life at the center of the Earthly Paradise is the tree of synthetic or unitive knowledge; this knowledge perceives accidents, or contingencies, in the Substance, or as coming from the Substance. The forbidden tree is the tree of separative knowledge which perceives accidents as being outside the substance (Schuon 1976: 188). "Positively speaking, the tree of the knowledge of Good and Evil is All-Possibility as Divine Freedom; negatively or in a limiting sense, it is that same possibility when, unfolding in existence and thus, one might say, in a downward direction, it necessarily moves far away from the Divine Source." (*Ibid*: 190).

The question of innocent suffering or for that matter anybody's suffering doesn't arise in the perennialist view. We cannot ask why we suffer. "Why me?" is not the proper question. The very question calls forth an erroneous answer. We are part of the relativity. Just as posing the question in terms of a "problem of evil," leads one away

from truth, so also asking of “why me” centers the problem on our individual ego and begs the issue. As another perennialist, Rama Coomaraswamy, puts it:

The real challenge is to recognize that one is part of the relativity of creation and that one is therefore forced to choose and act. Suffering seen in this light is always a gift, leading us to, as it were, abandon the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, and turn again to the Tree of Life, for it is only in this way that one can escape from the *Samsaric* sea in which we all are forced to swim. As St. John said: “Him who overcomes I will permit to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of my God.” (Apoc., 2:7)

Gide has a brilliant comment to make on the story of genesis “We have eaten of the fruits of the tree of knowledge and the taste of ashes is left in our mouths.”

The question of snake’s presence in paradise is thus made comprehensible. Those apologists who have wished to defend God against an accusation of being ‘the author of evil’ have failed to understand or even note the fact of snake’s presence there. Snake, a symbol of evil, could not but be present in the created order and heaven belongs to the created order. Creating anything other than Himself, imperfection was inevitable. “Only God is Perfect,” as the Scriptures say. If God created something other than Himself that was perfect, it would be another god which would mean that God was dual, whereas His very nature is Unity or Oneness. God cannot produce another Absolute. He cannot will a world that would not be a world. The world He created was “good,” but not perfect. “The perfection of a paradise without the presence of the serpent would be the perfection, not of paradise, but of God Himself. It would be, in Sufi terms, ‘the paradise of Essence’”(Pallis 1980: 39). The same principle is applied to the case of hell. Hell cannot be a place of absolute evil or absolute imperfection or absolute anything. A hell must contain a trace of the Tree of Life concealed somewhere in it. That is why, as Pallis notes, in the Tibetan iconography when hells are depicted, a Buddha is always shown there as witness to the omnipotent truth (*Ibid*: 39). Swedenborg’s vision of hell and Ibn Arabi’s description of it have many things in common and both become understandable in the perennialist perspective. The way perennialists understand hell is not vulnerable to Russell’s and similar critiques of this notion in Christian theology. One chooses hell, so to speak, by forfeiting one’s transcendental vocation, by refusing to see things as they are, by denying one’s theomorphic status or by betraying oneself by identifying with the empirical ego. Hell is an existential reality. Even Dr Faustus of Marlowe believed in it after he experienced a glimpse of it. Mephistopheles believes in it. One only needs to read Beckett, for instance, to see hell face to face. Modern man has had an agonizing experience of it and that contributes to irremediably pessimistic and tragic tone of modern literature. Hell is another name of self alienation, to use existentialist phrase. The significance of Perennialism lies in making comprehensible the eschatological imagery as well as to help the victim of these evils – the existential evil to be more specific – which modern man is par excellence though sometimes he may deny the possibility or even need of his salvation in his odyssey of soul-making if he is prepared to concede some semblance of reality to this idea of soul at all.

Theology tells us that God created the world out of love, and that love, being His intrinsic nature, He cannot help but love us, or to use Sufi expression, to express hidden treasures. The Good couldn't but be radiated. God desires us in turn to love Him – to love Truth, Beauty and Justice, which are but His various names. On the pain of hell one has to be true to our transcendental Ground of being, our Heavenly Father our divine or what amounts to the same, truly human image. As Rama Coomaraswamy observed: “Had He created the perfect world, a world in which we could not choose Truth, Beauty and Justice, a world in which we could not love, we would be robots and would lack even the possibility of dignity. Instead of raising the ‘problem of evil,’ we might well ask why God bothered to create the world at all. In fact, why do we exist?” And that problem we have already discussed above.

As evil arises from the separative knowledge and identification with the ego (Lacan's psychoanalysis, his analysis of illusions of desire and ego and the consequent psychological problems though conceived from a very different perspective concur with Buddhist and thus perennialist approach and could be read as concrete application of latter to the concrete problem of suffering) out of them could well be seen as an application of Buddhist it would be logical to expect that for the sage, the enlightened one, the “omniscient” one, there should be no cause of worry on account of evil, *Mara* or Satan. He conquers evil or bears witness to its vanquishing, its shadowy existence. Schuon, consistent to his metaphysics, thus is able to declare:

He who has the intuition of the Absolute- which does not solve the problem of evil dialectically but puts it in parentheses by removing all its venom- is *ipso facto* endowed with a sense of the relationship between the Substance and accidents, to the point of not being able to see accidents without also seeing the Substance... Accident or form, manifests the absence of substance, or the Essence, and proclaims its glory; evil is the price paid for accidentality, in so far as accidentality is separative and it is privative, not in so far as it is participatory and communicative. Knowledge of the immanent Substance is victory over the accidents of the soul – hence over privative accidentality itself, and since there is an analogy between the microcosm and the macrocosm- and it is, for that reason, the best of theodicies (Schuon 1976: 175).

Schuon makes it clear that the Goodness of Creator is not a proposition to be argued for and that metaphysical proofs could in any way be deconstructed or problematized and critiqued from without by any rationalistic approach. His theodicy cannot be thus subject to usual critiques that attempt to point out the weaknesses in the arguments of the opposite point of view. Theodicy, in such a perspective, can't have a primary role of causing or impressing upon one the certainty of God's goodness. It has the secondary role of “putting hearts at rest” as the Sufis would say. The metaphysical arguments are not the causes of certainty but their results (*Ibid*: 73). One can't critique the mystical vision or metaphysical realization of God's goodness from outside. How can one possibly problematize the following position by any rationalistic critique? One must be a sage to find out any fault in it. It is self-authenticating as is religious experience characteristically. One may disagree with it

but can't argue with it. One has to be an insider to evaluate the unanimous testimony of the mystics and sages which Schuon explicates here:

As far as theodicy is concerned, it is important to realize that the intellect perceives universal or divine Good *a priori*, that is, it comes to perceive it before it understands – or wishes to understand – the nature of evil; and if the contemplative metaphysician may perhaps overlook the doctrine of evil, this is precisely because he is certain in advance, and in unconditional and, as it were, primordial fashion, of the infinite precedence of Good, under three aspects of “Pure Being,” “Pure Spirit” and “Pure Beatitude.” (Schuon 1976: 174).

Of course Martin and like minded critics would claim that the sage's intuition is not verifiable for him and it begs the question but to this sage can't reply by any rational argument and he need not as he has seen it and of course the victory over evil or consciousness of divine or Self's Beatitude is an individual discovery. To all of us is yoked a cross – the cross of *avidya*, of separative knowledge, and religion's claim is that there is a light beyond darkness, a light that never was on land and sea; and for this one needs to cross the dark night of the soul and rise above passions that cloud the vision of Intellect. From the perennialist perspective there is a deliverance from *avidya* or conquering of evil and they bring as witness unanimous testimony of mystics and prophets.

It is man on whom onus for misuse of freewill and consequent evil lies. God's freedom cannot be questioned. He cannot be accused of willing or not preventing evil on account of being free no to have created at all or created only good. Against humanistic critics of theodicy Schuon defends God's Freedom while as shows man prone to misusing his freedom and thus puts blame squarely on man and exonerates God. He says that only God, who is the absolute Good, has the right to absolute freedom as He wills only good. (Schuon 1976: 189). God being Unity and Totality can't sin by going outside himself as man does, whose existence is limited to a single individuality and whose activity affects existences other than his very own (*Ibid*: 191). He argues that when God appears to do what would be evil if man did it, He compensates for it by a greater good. This follows necessarily from the premise that God is the absolute Good. God's nature thus necessarily includes a compensating attribute which precludes evil as such. But man is contingent by definition and can't possibly enjoy the compensating attribute which derives from Absoluteness and Infinity. The evil man does is not a virtuality of good but is evil pure and simple as he is a fragment and not the whole. (*Ibid*: 200).

The genius of perennialism lies in seeing how evil is ultimately naughted or reintegrated into the Good. This is argued not from a shallow melioristic perspective but clearly follows from their metaphysical premises. As God who is absolute goodness is the Origin as well as the End of all things, the First and the Last, as an oft quoted Quranic verse says. The primal innocence that knew no sorrow or evil as man was placed on the Divine Axis or was not outside the Divine Centre and no separative principle of ego was there will be/is to be regained by all and the sundry, sooner or later as salvation is not a monopoly of certain denomination or sect. God arranges our

salvation. From a salvific perspective God's function might be seen as arranging man's salvation. Willy-nilly man is dragged towards God, his Ground of being, or real self through the travails of this vale of soul-making. Hick's theodicy is provided a solid metaphysical grounding from this perennialist perspective. No souls or egos, to use Iqbalian terminology, will be ultimately lost or annihilated. God or the incorruptible Spirit at the heart of life is there to ensure it. The traditional doctrine of apocatastasis dissolves all evil or *batil*, to use the Quranic expression, which in reality had never existed and was liable to disappear. The night of Brahman will consume everything dross as the pure gold of the Spirit will have the final word as the *samsaric* realm is transcended. The hell will ultimately be emptied as the prophetic traditions testify. In fact, hell is the creation of ignorance, *avidya*, and nothing but self-will is burned in it as Eckhart has said. Nirvana, which is attainable here and now, puts an end to the dominion of sorrow or suffering (though of course not all kinds of pain as the biological one to which flesh is heir to by virtue of its very existence). Only when pure consciousness is attained is the realm of evil finally transcended. Brahman or Supreme Self is objectless pure consciousness not bound by the fetters of matter or body – this is attainable only after death—this is perhaps the meaning of Muslim theological doctrine that only after death is God's vision possible.

Malefic power, personified as Satan in Islam and Christianity, is finally reintegrated into the Divine Clemency. Evil is finally reabsorbed into its original and neutral substance. Fire and darkness will be transmuted into light. God's Mercy rather than Wrath has the final word. The doctrine of apocatastasis is in a way expression of the fundamental enunciation of original blessedness of existence or *Sat-Chit-Anand*. The unfathomable peace and bliss of heaven or religious experience comes from simply coming home, returning to our original state of Self or pure consciousness that has been obscured by the Fall or vagaries of existence. Coming home or regaining paradise or nirvana or vision of God is simply cleansing of perception, dispelling of ignorance and regaining the repose of being. The smile of the enlightened ones, the joy, and the ecstasy of the mystics expresses the Beatitude and Bliss that is ours by inheritance, by being created in the image of God. "The sage—precisely because his subjectivity is determined by Intelligence – will tend to enjoy that which enjoys." (Schuon, 1976: 200). "There is in reality but a single Beatitude, just as there is but a single subject and a single Object. The three poles are united in the Absolute and separated in so far as the Absolute engages itself in Relativity, in accordance with the mystery of Maya" (*Ibid*: 200). All relativity can, and must, ultimately be transcended. The world can't be made to disappear, but "it can be rendered transparent so that the light, ever shining, may illuminate our existential darkness. The centre is everywhere, this room included and where the centre is, there is the beatific vision." (Pallis 1980: 44) God, the Bliss Infinite and Good, is ever close at hand, "closer than your jugular vein," as the Quran states. As Pallis says "The tree of Life is standing in this room, as certainly it stood in Eden; it is a pity if we will not use our eyes" (*Ibid*: 51). The real issue that should concern us is neither the existence of the world nor the world remade in accordance with our heart's desire, but solely how to find our way home, to God who is the Origin and the End, to be realigned on the axis of Buddhahood, to "re-join our own centre which is also the centre of all things, the Tree of Life, the axis

uniting heaven and earth” (*Ibid*: 47). And religions are revelation or gifts from Heaven that shows the means to unite man to his Origin, to his home.

The perennialist approach to philosophical problems of religion (those treated in the discipline of ‘philosophy of religion’) in general, and perennialist theodicy in particular, has not been subjected to detailed critical scrutiny as it has been largely ignored by modern scholarship. Hardly any anthology of philosophy of religion and much quoted works on the problem of evil refer to it. However, there are some, usually brief, scattered critical appraisals of it. Its practitioners have been accused of vagueness and criticized for being too abstract and using obscure, almost incomprehensible style and language. It has also been charged with heterodoxy by theologically oriented critics. All these charges could be easily refuted but there is neither space here nor any scope for attempting this refutation. However, one limitation of it is evident to even some of its sympathetic interpreters such as Shahzad Qaisar. It concerns its indifference towards concrete existential situation of man caught in the whirlpool of evil. Even if the good of radiation compensates for the evil of remoteness as is guaranteed by the Apocatastasis which brings every evil back to the initial good and evil is just a fleeting accident in the procession of cosmic cycles as Schuon notes, the excruciatingly painful fact of evil at existential level which defies all comprehension, remains. Many a passage in Hardy, Maughm, Mann, Camus and Beckett, to name just a few of the modern critics of theism, retain their force and it is hard to see how metaphysicalist approach could be applied to some of these concrete situations where evil seems triumphant. One could cite de Sade’s Justine as another instance of concrete manifestation of evil in this context. “Metaphysics can’t swallow the existential reality of man. It can’t lay the blanket of abstraction on the concrete sufferings of an individual. It is here that the introduction of the religious element takes place, and the necessity of revelation restores the ‘Word that was lost’” (Qaisar 1991:268). Somehow the element of mystery crops up and at certain moments we must have recourse to faith that constitutes the *raison d’etre* of religion and just surrender with all our heart and mind to the will of God which is not the will of man and neither could that be appropriated at purely human, all-too-human plane. Here comes the crucial role of faith in the unseen (*iman bil gayyib*), to use the Quranic phrase, and importance of simple but total submission which is the *sine qua non* of Islam. “Only God knows, and man knows but little.” Iqbal rightly says that one must pass the boundaries of pure thought and affirm the religious doctrine of eventual triumph of goodness (Iqbal 1997:70). “God is equal to his purpose, but most men know it not” the Quran asserts. God has the final word. Schuon explains the basic attitude of a believer/gnostic that should help in encountering, if not explaining, concrete evil in life’s odyssey.

When all is said and done, life is simple: one is standing before God from birth until death; everything lies in being aware of this and in drawing the consequences from it. The consciousness of the Sovereign Good is the greatest of consolations; it should keep us in equilibrium always. What results from this consciousness is first of all the quality of resignation, the constant acceptance of God’s will; this virtue is difficult to the extent that we wish to force the world to be other than it is, to be

logical for example. The complement of resignation is trust; God is good, and everything is in His hands. There is also gratitude, for every man has reasons to be thankful; one must remember frequently the good things we enjoy and not forget them because we lack something else. Finally, one must do something in life, for man is an acting being; and the best of acts is the one having God as its object, and this is prayer. (Fitzgerald, 2010: 139)

Prayer is part of an answer to the thesis that our predicament is hopeless, absurd.

(But) to know we are perishing means either to despair or else to pray.... Prayer – in the widest sense – triumphs over the four accidents of our existence: the world, life, the body and the soul; It is situated in existence like a shelter, like an islet. In it alone are we perfectly ourselves, because it puts us in the presence of God. (Schuon 2007: 228) Man prays and prayer fashions the man. The saint has himself become the prayer, the meeting place of earth and Heaven; and thus, he contains the universe and the universe prays with him.....He who lives in prayer has not lived in vain. (*Ibid*: 213)

It is Schuon the poet who gives us some of the most succinct formulations of believer's response to the problem of absurdity, an aspect of the problem of evil that has been much pervasive in twentieth century literature and philosophy:

Only an empty head can be bored –
 Only he who knows not boredom is truly human.
 For to be human is to be a mirror that receives
 Light from God, man is none other than this (Schuon, 2006: 176)

Fools think that in Heaven,
 Everything we had on Earth is lost;
 They know not that the beauty of this life
 Is in the Most High – and also, through God, within thyself. (*Ibid*: 177)

Schuon's key argument against the epistemology of absurdists is the existence of intelligence and its priority in relation to judgment of absurdity. How come one can judge something as absurd if there is no prior order of intelligence transcending absurdity that makes such a verdict possible? Marcel, engaging with Camus, has explained this point from another context:

There is a fundamental question which Camus never seems to have put to himself: by what right am I qualified to pass this sort of verdict on the world [the verdict that the world is absurd]? Of two things, one: either I myself do not belong to the world under discussion, but in that case have I not every reason to suppose that it is impenetrable to me and that I am not qualified to judge its value- or, on the other hand, I really am part of the world, and if the world is absurd, so am I absurd too. Camus, perhaps, might concede this. It is, however, a destructive concession. Again, of two things, one: either I am myself absurd in my ultimate nature- in which case so are my judgements absurd, they negate themselves, it cannot be

conceded that they have any sort of validity- or, on the other hand, we have to admit that I have a double nature, that is there is a part of me which is not absurd and which can make valid judgements about absurdity: but how did this aspect of me which is not absurd get there? I cannot even admit the possibility of its existence without beginning to formulate a+ kind of dualism which, in some sense, splits my original assertion of the *total* absurdity of the universe apart (Marcel 1952: 118).

One may sum up seemingly abstruse and scattered reflections on inescapable conclusion of traditionalist position:

God “created” by reason of His infinity: The Infinite requires its own affirmation, which is Being; Being requires creation; creation requires limitation and diversity; these in turn require negation and contradiction, and therefore evil. He who wants a world perfect in virtue and happiness also wants as a consequence an imperfect world full of sin and misfortune. The only choice is between the world and God; there is no choice between an imperfect world and a perfect world. In an analogous manner, there is no choice between a fallen Adam and an incorruptible Adam; there is only the choice between man and God. Hence the attitude of the saint who believes himself to be “the greatest sinner” and, at the spiritual antipodes of this perspective, the idea of non-duality, of identity in the absolute Subject. (Schuon 2007: 167)

Schuon has no difficulty in dismissing prevalent presumption of man’s innocence:

Modern man always starts from the idea of his axiomatic innocence: he is not the cause of existence, he did not want the world, he did not create himself, and he is responsible neither for his predispositions nor for the circumstances that actualize them; he cannot be culpable, which amounts to saying that he has unlimited rights. The consequences of such an attitude are evident: it opens the door to all the vices of human nature and unleashes the downward force of its fall; this is enough to prove it false. Every man who is injured in his elementary rights admits the existence of responsibility and culpability in others; he should therefore admit the possibility of culpability in himself; he should also recognize the existence of culpability as such, and so of guilt towards God. And such culpability incontestably exists, for every man freely does those things the responsibility for which he casts upon Heaven; every man, within the limits of his freedom, does what he reproaches God for having done in the universe. The opposite attitude is to ask pardon of God; the response, if one may put it thus, is that God asks pardon of man: this is salvation... God alone possesses Being; He alone is Plenitude; if man asks pardon of God, it is, in the final analysis, in order to conform to a normative reality, or simply to truth; it is because man exists without being able to move the sun or create one grain of dust, because he usurps the existence that belongs to Him who creates and who orders the stars, because he desires and accomplishes this usurpation within the limits of his freedom and on the plane of his life. (*Ibid*: 168)

He proceeds to argue for another inescapable point regarding futility of rebellion against God and thus how wisdom requires fear of God.

The fear of God is not in any way a matter of feeling, any more than is the love of God; like love, which is the tendency of our whole being toward transcendent Reality, fear is an attitude of the intelligence and the will: it consists in taking account at every moment of a Reality which infinitely surpasses us, against which we can do nothing, in opposition to which we could not live, and from the teeth of which we cannot escape. (*Ibid*: 222)

Schuon presents final conclusions regarding meaning of and response to the question of death often seen as quintessential evil:

There is one great certainty in life, and this is death; he who really understands this certainty is already dead in this life. Man is hardly at all preoccupied with his past sufferings if his present state is happy; what is past in life, whatever its importance, no longer exists. Now everything will one day be past; that is what a man understands at the moment of death; thus, the future is already part of the past. To know that is to be dead; it is to rest in peace. But there is yet another certainty in life—whether we can have this certainty depends only on ourselves—and it is the certainty of living in the divine will; this certainty compensates for that of death and conquers it. To put it another way: when we have the certainty of being in conformity with the divine will, the certainty of death is full of sweetness. Thus, the meaning of our life on earth can be reduced to two certainties: that of the ineluctability of our destiny and that of the meaning or value of our will. We cannot avoid the meaning of life any more than we can avoid death; that great departure, which cannot have a shadow of doubt for us, proves to us that we are not free to act no matter how, that from this present moment we ought to conform to a will stronger than our own (*Ibid*: 180)

A poetic formulation of the point regarding certitude of a heaven-oriented odyssey:

*Tell me why thou hast loved the mountain top,
Its serene silence and its purity,
And I will tell thee that our spirit's rest
Is solitude with God: serenity
Above the noise of thoughts. And tell me why
Thou lov'st the secret of the whispering wood,
Its sacredness and dark security,*

*And I will tell thee that our lasting joy
Is union, love within our deepest heart,
Diving into our being's Mystery:
Union with what I am, and what thou art. (Schuon 2005: 53)*

These points about certainty of death and certainty of conquest over evil for the one who braves the odyssey of life with all the dignity and fortitude it requires are eloquently—and dramatically—brought forth in Tolstoy (in *Confessions* and *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*) and Dostoevsky (in *The Brothers Karamazov*). The following

passages from Tolstoy's *Confessions* constitute a compelling argument against the prophets of despair.

Like man and his power of reason, the knowledge of faith arises from a mysterious origin. This origin is God, the source of the human mind and body. Just as God has bestowed my body upon me a bit at a time, so has he imparted to me my reason and understanding of life; thus, the stages in the development of this understanding cannot be false. Everything that people truly believe must be true; it may be expressed in differing ways, but it cannot be a lie. Therefore, if I take it to be a lie, this merely indicates that I have failed to understand it...The essence of any faith lies in giving life a meaning that cannot be destroyed by death. Naturally, if faith is to answer the questions of a tsar dying in the midst of luxury, an old slave tormented in his labor, an ignorant child, an aged sage, a half-witted old lady, a happy young woman, and a youth consumed by passions; if it is to answer the questions asked by people living under radically different circumstances of life and education; if there is but a single response to the one eternal question in life of why I live and what will become of my life, then this answer, though essentially everywhere the same, will be manifested in an infinite variety of ways. And the more unique, true, and profound this answer is, then, of course, the stranger and more outrageous will seem the attempts to express it, depending on the upbringing and position of each individual...I understood nothing of this life, it seemed to me frightful; and then suddenly I heard the words of Christ, and understood them; life and death ceased to seem evil, and instead of despair I tasted the joy and happiness that death could not take away." Schuon's task appears to be elucidation of this insight and providing sophisticated philosophical foundation of the argument of faith.

One of the more influential responses to traditionalist position on evil may be taken note of here. Griffin, appraising Huston Smith's advocacy of traditionalist response to the problem of evil, states what is problematic with it thus:

Hume's two levels of "theory" and "practice" are paralleled by Smith's two levels of "reality" (or "absolute truth") and "appearance" (or "relative truth"). Smith says that, because evil has a relative reality, appearing to be real at the level where we now live, we are to resist it with all our energy, even though we already know that, in reality, from the perspective of absolute truth, it is not evil. My claim is that we cannot live with that type of bifurcation, any more than we can live with a Human bifurcation between theory and practice, or with a Kantian bifurcation between theoretical reason and practical reason. Those bifurcations, furthermore, reconcile the inconsistencies inherited from the old metaphysical systems too superficially, preventing us from searching for that larger truth through which divergent presuppositions of practice can truly be coordinated with each other. (Griffin and Smith 1989: 106)

Griffin further lists as problematic the denial of "the ultimate reality of evil, time, progress, and personal qualities," (Griffin and Smith 1989:145) and failure to satisfactorily resolve dualisms of various sorts and asserting utter transcendence of First Principle or Absolute (Griffin and Smith 1989: 106-7). While Smith's defense of his position vis-a-vis Griffin is worth a perusal and does not appear to be

inattentive to these concerns, a few remarks in light of the exposition of Schuon (that has already shed important light on these charges or limitations of framing such charges) are in order to present further clarification.

Schuon observes in *Roots of the Human Condition* regarding the First Principle whose transcendence is said to leave evil unaccounted for:

In Itself, the Supreme Principle is neither transcendent nor immanent, It “is That which is”; only in relation to Manifestation may one speak either of transcendence or of immanence. And transcendence and immanence are united in theophany: in the Logos, the Man-God, the *Avatara*, and in a certain manner also in the Divine Symbol and the saving Sacrament (Schuon 1991: 69).

This helps to clarify overly transcendentalist reading of traditionalist position and its understanding of the Absolute besides problematizing the charge of (absolutizing) dualisms in traditionalist work. Further remarks in the same work are in order to elucidate the point regarding inescapability of evil and attention to it in the divine bosom, in every paradise and all that is differentiated and ordinarily experienced:

Metaphysically, it is important to distinguish between a transcendence that is objective and another that is paradoxically subjective; analogously, within immanence a subjective aspect must be distinguished from an objective aspect; similarly again, there is not only a manifested theophany, but also a principal one (*Ibid*: 69).

And

Absolute Reality - Beyond Being, *Paramatma*- has no opposite; but Being, the personal God, comprises an opposite because Being is comprised in universal Relativity, *Maya*, of which it is the summit. This opposite, Satan, could not however be situated on the same level as God, so that God too can be said to "have no opposite," at least in a certain- but essential- respect; thus, God is “in Heaven” (*en tois ouranois*), whereas the devil, and with him hell, pertains to the sub-celestial world. Be that as it may, the satanic possibility is given, ontologically speaking, by relativity itself, which requires not only gradations but also oppositions; relativity is basically the movement towards nothingness, which possesses a shadow of reality only because of this movement; all this, we repeat, in virtue of the infinitude of Being. (*Ibid*: 109).

Schuon frankly acknowledges problems in the position often misattributed to religious or metaphysical perspective he advocates:

In order to resolve the thorny problem of evil, some have claimed that nothing is evil because everything that happens is “willed by God,” or that evil exists only from the “standpoint of the Law.” This is unacceptable, firstly because it is God who lays down the Law, and secondly because the Law exists on account of evil and not vice versa. What should be said is that evil is integrated within the universal Good, not as evil but as an ontological necessity; this necessity underlies

evil, it is metaphysically inherent in it, yet without thereby transforming it into a good. (*Ibid*: 107-8)

Schuon further asserts that “one must not say that God “wills” evil-let us rather say that He “allows” it- nor that evil is a good because God is not against its existence and that we, as saints and believers, do have “the certitude at once metaphysical and eschatological that we bear deep within us- the unconditional certitude of That which is, and the conditional certitude of that which we can be” (*Ibid*: 108) making it possible to fight, with resignation and the enthusiasm of a soldier in God’s way (*mujahid*), evil especially as manifest in the moral sphere – injustice and oppression of which liberation theologians especially take note.

Finally, negative or privative phenomena manifest God's "capability" to contradict Himself as it were, and this possibility is required by the very perfection of Being; but, as Meister Eckhart said, "the more he blasphemes the more he praises God." Moreover, it can happen that good and evil are mingled, whence the possibility of a "lesser evil"; this coincides with the very notion of relativity. (*Ibid*: 108)

Below are summarized (that are elaborated elsewhere by this author) the distinctive features and strengths of the perennialists theodicy.

Employing metaphysical notions which are not reducible to traditional theological counterparts but subsume the latter and appropriating and transcending theological perspective and reconciling as diverse positions on evil as those of Buddhism and Islam and not positing the notion of personal God as Absolute or Supreme Reality, standard critiques of theism from the problem of evil and standard Epicurean formulation of the problem are inapplicable in traditionalist framing.

Certain key notions such as Maya (translated by them as Divine Relativity) are read in different traditions which dissolve the problem of evil. The familiar personal God of theology is placed in this realm of Divine Relativity (Maya) and those who reduce Godhead to personal God and then fulminate against his governance are therefore easily catered.

Nonliteral symbolist reading of key theological notions disarms the critics who employ purely logical and philosophical tools in dismissing theodicy.

Traditionalists hardly feel any warrant for keeping mum in the face of inexplicable; they rely on no silencing strategy. They concede much of the modern philosophical critiques of theodicy as practiced in exoteric theological circles. Hick’s recourse to a sort of verificationist principle need not necessarily be invoked in the traditionalist perspective. Certain profound critical observation one finds here and there in modern literature are appropriated. They are not apologists for the “misdeeds” of capricious God but apply logical rational analytical tools to the data in hand. Their genius lies in synthesizing quite divergent data and including so much and conceding much to the critics of theodicy and yet formulating a quite strong and consistent “theodicy”. Certain influential critiques of theodicy made by certain philosophers of religion in modern times are easily bypassed in their perspective as the key terms in the debate such as God, creation, freedom and predestination,

afterlife, omnipotence, goodness (all transposed from dualistic, voluntaristic, sentimental, moralistic, theological to non dualistic ontological plane where arbitrary ad hoc notions are not invoked. Philosophical and theological understanding of these terms differs in important respects from the metaphysical understanding.

Responses to suffering and its conquest are essentially similar in all religions as all are directed to take us to the other shore. Different theologies have not resulted in fundamentally different responses to evil.

Metaphysical perspective, in contradistinction to a theological-religious position, is formulated keeping in view the salvation of men rather than logical coherence. Religions are interested in saving people rather than satisfying their philosophical queries. In the interests of salvation certain aspects of truth may go into the background and others overemphasized.

Given the methods of conquering suffering are strikingly similar and we can see all religious commandments and ethics as geared towards making conquest of suffering possible, one can infer that background doctrinal or theological divergence does not translate itself into significantly divergent responses and as such may well be bracketed in our understanding of theodicies or that theodicies are not irreconcilable in principle or at origin in the divine/sacred.

For Reality/Theocentric religions onus lies on man rather than God for the presence of suffering and emphasis is on his sin rather than on some supposed flaw in God

God and His scheme of things are not to be fathomed; what is important is that man knows his proper relation to Reality. This alone really matters. Things are as they are and the object of religion is to orient man to this objective order. Reality or Existence is the mystery of all mysteries; it resists logical rational approach. Religion asks us to celebrate this mystery. The Essence is not knowable and the tradition of negative divine—the way of *neti neti*—expresses this irreducible primordial mystery. Man can't scan God; it is his vain presumption that he can lift the face of the mystery. Religion proposes that man should dissolve into the Reality, the Mystery. The only question asked of man, from religious viewpoint is, whether man is capable of unconditional love or *karuna* in Buddhist formulation. If not, he is in his own created hell or purgatory and it is his own business to let himself be decreed, change his perception and get liberated. Evil is not be explained but conquered and for this man has to respond to the call of the Other. God is not mocked and can't be sued as Bollywood film *OMG* makes /the point. God is concerned about fighting it through human participation. God offers help for man's problem.

The metaphysical perspective puts onus on man instead of God. Man's culpability rather than God's goodness or wisdom is under scanner. Man's initiative to struggle against the dominion of Mara or Satan or desiring self is called for. The consciousness of suffering leads the traditional man to introspect and ultimately, he strives to purify himself to transcend it rather than to question God and doubt His power and wisdom and absurd response of despair, revolt and nihilism

The traditionalist perspective is sage/saint cognizant perspective and as such it fundamentally builds its case not on a set of logical or philosophical propositions or analyses but by inviting us in a participatory and exploratory endeavor for seeing for

oneself. It thus requires more a training of perception, a purification of faculties of higher knowledge so that one sees for oneself the goodness of God and the bliss which puts end to suffering than. One verifies the tenability of its claims not merely by rational or philosophical analysis of its premises and arguments but empirically or experientially. One doesn't merely argue one's case but lives it; knowing that is not being is incapable of giving us certitude and thus serenity in the face of all contingencies. By experiencing the overflowing love and goodness of God and thus witnessing the bliss that God is, one has, finally arrived at the other shore and henceforth becomes ever joyous in the serenity of spirit

To quote from the paper "Towards Formulating a Universal Theodicy"

Conclusion

1. In the perennialist approach we find equivalent formulations of diverse traditions for common response to the problem of cause and overcoming of suffering and rejection of all rebellious – Promethean and Faustian – perspectives. We find, on deeper analysis, there is only one evil, but it has numerous forms. "Fundamentally, it is the self-centered desire which runs counter to the spiritual laws of the universe. Physically evil is a disease and privation, psychologically it is insanity or abnormality, ethically it is badness, ill-will or wrong, religiously it is a sin and spiritually it is ignorance." Evil is opposition of the finite to the Infinite. Problems of existence in both Hinduism and Islam are mainly problems of harmony and synthesis. Disharmony occurs when a creaturely selfish will is asserted against the universal will. This is "violation of one's true nature which is of a piece with Ultimate Reality." *Wu wei* and harmony with the Tao is what is the purport of Islam's supposed fatalism. Islam agrees with the Buddhist diagnosis that it is "the egoism accompanied with craving and clinging, infatuation and attachment as 'self-ness', appetites of greed and resentment etc. which strongly binds the man." The four noble truths of Buddhism figure in other traditions as well. The first noble truth is a matter of commonly validated experience. Nothing describes better our existential predicament than the suffering being. The realm of manifestation, of existence is by definition the realm of contrasts, of imperfection, of separation from the Principle and thus suffering. Other traditions though not directly based on the perspective of suffering nonetheless appropriate this fundamental fact. The theology of original sin, fall, and redemption is obviously tailored to the question of suffering and its cessation. Man's first sin/forgetfulness/foolhardy ambitious choice is to be born. This is almost universally affirmed by folk literatures and wisdom traditions. Wherever tragedy has been written this fact figures. The birth of self-consciousness is the birth of suffering thus a form of sin that calls for expiation of a sort. The equivalent expressions that describe the cause of suffering (*tanha*/craving) in other traditions are, "object oriented consciousness, love of the world, to value things in themselves apart from God, to live outside God, to attribute reality to non-Self, to posit an abiding or permanent entity other than the Only Permanent Reality, to resist innocence of becoming, to have a sense of agency, to will one's own will in defiance of the Cosmic Will etc." (Shah 2008). The third noble truth that affirms the possibility of the cessation of

suffering is the very *raison d'être* of all religions. William James expressed this by stating that the basic claim of religions is life is good or worth living. All religions describe themselves (and succeed, in performative terms) as paths to liberation/deliverance/salvation/ the kingdom of God, the states which are defined by absence of suffering that characterizes the state of separation from God or *avidya* or fall the redressing of which is the concern of religion. The fourth noble truth that prescribes a path for cessation of suffering constitutes the ethical or practical dimension of all religions. Prayer, meditation, *zikr* or *japa* and other spiritual disciplines are all finally geared towards this end of cessation of sorrow.

2. Perennialism combines the best of Augustinian, Irenaean and even process theodicies and sees no contradiction between the Indian perspective that seeks deliverance from suffering and the other perspectives that seem to assign a positive function to it and see it as mystery and trial, as God's lasso for errant souls and as goad to perfection. This follows because in the latter perspective suffering leads to weakening of self-will and lets God come in. The trial consists in the fact that nothingness at the heart of life be acknowledged, that self's creaturely status, and thus its state of imperfection be acknowledged. The trial allows man to know himself, to judge himself, to see himself from the viewpoint of God. Schuon reiterates that from the perspective of Absolute everything in disequilibrium and suffering makes us acutely conscious of this fact. All have sinned from the perspective of Absolute. "Not me, but my Father in Heaven is perfect." The trial is to separate the gold from the dross of passions and assertions of will. The trial destroys the willing ego. It lacerates it and humiliates it so that it may repent in dust and ashes. It is God's whip against the devil, against the self that wishes to be left untried, to do its business, to proceed unaware of the king's treasures that lie at the other shore/in the depths. Eschatological suffering too is there only to burn self-will. The self-left to its own wouldn't consent to let God in. For His mercy and grace to rain God needs to prepare the ground, to de-weed the garden, to break all resistances of a weak soul. God needs to "forsake" man so that all the vestiges of a self that strengthens itself by such anchors as hope and consolation are destroyed. The trial is not completed until the servant cries "Where is God?" and feels God abandoned as the Quran says and Simone Weil dramatically explains. This is the significance of the night of Golgotha and the great agonizing cry to silent heavens, to the "absent God." The kingdom of God is only for the poor, thoroughly poor in spirit (Shah 2008).

3. The royal road and the simple straight path or highway to find peace and happiness for one is by playing one's part with a spirit of detachment as if he is an actor on the stage. One should have no sense of agency as the *Bhagwat Gita* emphasizes. Actionless action (*wu wei wei*), action done with an awareness of God, relinquishing of result and reward for our action, conceding God as the only Agent as *Tawhid-i-faeli* aims to realize gives one primal innocence needed to respond to suffering and take sting out of sorrow. The only way to live in Spirit or *sub species aeternitatis* is not to resist becoming, to step out of the net of time by transcending the resisting and desiring ego. There is, in reality, no bondage, no *karma*, no rebirth as God can't be subject to these things and there is, in reality, nothing but God. This is the final assertion of all Unitarian worldviews and from this vantage point

(equivalence of earth and heaven for the thoroughly decreed one as Simone Weil would put it, or of samsara and nirvana as Nagarjuna would put it) that perennialists approach the issue of evil and dissolve usual objections from critics of theodicy.

4. None of the traditional religions is obsessed with speculating on the metaphysical cause of suffering but in removing it. And all agree in diagnosis of the cause and broad contours of treatment. This effectively dissolves the problem of evil, not through some attempt of reason to make sense of suffering but, through dissolving the consolation/explanation seeking self, the self that is disturbed by suffering. The question, from the traditional perspective, is not theodicy in the sense modern philosophers of religion would have it as an intellectual puzzle but escape from suffering at practical or realizational plane. There is also what has been called as the distinction between suffering as problem and suffering as mystery. What is at stake is man's salvation or damnation, or, to use nontheological language, alienation and de-alienation.

5. Perennialists point out that none of the sages have been troubled by the problem of evil and all of them have a deep conviction based on personal experience that this very garden is the Garden of Eden and Divine Goodness has the final word. Concentrating on their attachment to the Real they are transported out of time, out of Maya, out of the world of shadows and distinctions. They are too busy in loving God to worry about hating the devil (unreal or *batil*). They live possessing an intuitive conviction of goodness of God, a taste of *ananda* of the Self, (*ananda* could be understood in the context of the Good of Western philosophy as a supreme value). Being blissful, utterly thankful for the gift of being and knowing one with being, radiating supernal joy and blessing everything under the sun. Death has no sting and suffering no bitterness for them. Physical evil remains and flesh is heir to scores of forms of it because it is flesh. We can overcome psycho-spiritual suffering and that alone is promised to the enlightenment seeker. With the resources accessible to all of us, believers and not to speak of saints and sages, we goodness and not evil has the last word and we live and find life worth living and smile at the time of death and the so called problem of evil that perplexes those relying on abstractionism, ad hoc/limiting beliefs and post-dated cheques dissolves. All religions are based on the certitude of prophets-sages-saints that suffering/alienation/finitude do not describe our final destiny, that we do willy-nilly recognize or know the truth or return to God/Reality. In fact, it is contemplative support of phenomena that recall God for us that sustains men in their daily lives. Enlightenment is the real nature of all existents; it is our birth right. In fact, we have never been expelled from the Garden of paradise though we may not know it and that makes the samsaric wheel run. The illusion that we are egos, separate from God, remains nevertheless an illusion only though it costs the subject of illusion quite direly, even hell. The problem of suffering remains for most men while as what is called the problem of evil loses its cutting edge when we take into account how limited evil is at cosmic level, how it survives as parasitic on good, how what is projected as the issue for God is really an issue of man and how it is Godhead/Absolute that takes full note of both good and evil in their dialectical play and the Good when applied to God is primarily an ontological and not a moral notion and how God's war against evil is a success as demonstrated in countless moral

victories testified by collective memory, folklore, literature, philosophy and convictions of mankind. Man remains happiness seeking creature meaning he does not let evil have dominion in life and most importantly how evil is an instrument for good and we can't cite a single instance of pure and autonomous evil.

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