CHAPTER THREE

KEITH WARD’S THEODICY

Keith Ward retired as Regius Professor of Divinity at the University of Oxford in 2004. He was the Gresham Professor of Divinity at Gresham College in London from 2004 to 2008, but is now retired. He is an acknowledged philosopher of religion, author of acclaimed books like *Divine Action* (1990/2007); *God, Chance and Necessity* (1996); *God: A Guide for the Perplexed* (2002), and several others. Ward has not written any books where the problem of evil is the only focus, but many of his books have one or more chapters about theodicy. Relevant books in this regard are *Rational Theology and the Creativity of God* (1982); *God, Chance and Necessity* (1996); *Religion and Creation* (1996); *God, Faith and the New Millennium* (1998); and *Pascal’s Fire* (2006). Most extensive on the problem of evil is his book *Divine Action* from 1990, which came in a new print with a new foreword in 2007. Ward says in the preface that chapters three to seven are about the problem of evil, but most of the other chapters are also highly relevant since they discuss God and creation, human freedom, and the particularity of providence. This introduction will focus on his book *Divine Action*, since it is the most thorough. In the foreword of the 2007-print, Ward says that he still defends the main content of what he has written there. I will supplement his writing here with other books, when that seems to me to strengthen Ward’s case.

Ward is similar to Swinburne on very many points. Much of what Ward says can be found in Swinburne’s writings, which Ward often quotes. Ward’s theodicy will be presented on its own, but in chapter ten the discussion of Ward leaves out the points that are similar to Swinburne and which have already been treated in the discussion of Swinburne in chapter ten, in order to avoid unnecessary repetition. Because the discussion will proceed in this way, I will also in the presentation focus on how Ward differs from Swinburne. This implies no devaluation of Ward, because Ward makes good adjustments in relation to Swinburne. Presenting his theodicy this way is only a matter of more efficient writing. My presentation is based on his own presentation in *Divine Action*, but I highlight elements that are important for
the discussion, and arrange the presentation partially in the same order as Swinburne, to ease the comparison. In practice this means that I start with a presentation of Ward's understanding of God and God's goals with creation, before I present his theodicy.¹

**Concept of God**

According to Keith Ward, Christians must believe that God acts in history. It is very clear from the Old Testament and the New Testament, it is presupposed in prayer, and it has clearly always been a part of the historic faith of Christianity. On the other hand, the success of the natural sciences and the problem of evil seem to suggest that God does not act in the world. ² This can be called the problem of divine action, and by 'divine action' Ward usually refers to particular basic acts within the created order, where God brings about a state of affairs in the world as a basic act, which means that he does not do it by means of prior causally efficacious acts. An example would be that God raised someone from death. Relating to this problem of how to understand divine action, Ward argues that it is crucial to start with creation. He does not consider the doctrine of creation out of nothing to be explicitly formulated in the Bible – it might even have developed quite late. But Ward's reflection on how God's power is understood in the Bible, and

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¹ More often than with the other theodices, I find it difficult to know what position Ward himself holds on different questions, because he often uses expressions like 'it is possible that...', 'it may be that...', 'if.....then...', 'Christians hold that...'; and then it is not always clear whether he holds the opinion himself. Sometimes Ward starts by saying that something is possible, and then he continues by saying that it is actually so, without any comment on that transition. See for example Keith Ward, *God, Faith & the New Millennium: Christian Belief in an Age of Science* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1998), 92, where he says in one paragraph 'it may be that any world of rich and complex values that God can create must contain some unintended consequences'. Then come a series of sentences all with the verb 'may' until suddenly he says about unwanted evils that 'The reason God cannot actively and unilaterally eliminate such states is that they – or states very like them – are necessarily implied in a universe like this.' The last sentence seems to be a claim made by Ward, but there was here no argument in favour of making the transition from the claim that it may be so, to the claim that it actually is so. And of course he has different focuses in the different books. My way of dealing with these problems of interpretation is the same as with the others: My goal is to present Ward's theodicy as coherently as possible, and so if something is ambiguous, I comment upon it, and interpret him as well-willingly as I think the text allows.