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THEODICY AND COSMODICY

The contribution of neoclassical theism

Summary

The aim of this article is to offer a critical interpretation of the research into theodicy and cosmodicy of the 'Religious Communication in an Empirical Theology' (RECOMET) program at the Universities of Nijmegen and Tilburg (cf. Van der Ven, 1988a, 1988b, 1989). In response to the suggestion of Johannes van der Ven, we shall draw on the resources of the neoclassical theism of Charles Hartshorne and on its appropriation for Christian theology by Schubert Ogden, in order to propose several basic revisions to the theory guiding the RECOMET project and to offer our own interpretation of some of its findings (1989, 25).

Introductory Overview

Researchers in empirical theology at the Universities of Nijmegen and Tilburg have recently conducted a study of how people search for existential meaning in the face of suffering. In our judgement, the topic of this research is central to Christian theology and to religious studies more broadly, and the basic approach of the RECOMET program is sound. However, the fundamental interpretive theory the program employs is weak, and this naturally affects its empirical findings. We propose to employ the resources of the 'neoclassical theism' developed by the American philosopher, Charles Hartshorne, and especially his notion of 'dual transcendence', in an effort to clarify the RECOMET program's basic typology of theodicy and cosmodicy and, thereby, to make its empirical findings more stringently testable.

We begin with a summary interpretation of recent developments in the RECOMET typology (Section 1). We then turn to an analysis of ambiguities in the formal distinction of 'transcendence' and 'immanence' that structures the typology as a whole (Section 2) and to a clarification of the further material distinction of 'absolute' and 'immanent transcendence' (Section 3). Hartshorne's concept of dual transcendence is particularly helpful here.
Hartshorne’s proposal to understand the suffering or receptivity of God to worldly individuals as a real, internal relation gives conceptual and structural clarity to the RECOMET models based on symbols of divine compassion and solidarity. Moreover, the critical appropriation of Hartshorne’s work by the American theologian Schubert Ogden clarifies basic issues in the relation between Christian theology and natural or philosophical theology on the one hand, and Christianity and Judaism on the other, concerns of importance to the RECOMET program (Section 4).

Finally, we show how Hartshorne’s explicitly social or nondeterministic interpretation of divine causality, power, and responsibility results in a ‘neoclassical theodicy’ that is a powerful alternative to the ‘aporetic’ explanations which the RECOMET research presupposes, but which both its typology and its empirical findings call into question (Sections 5 and 6). We suggest that Hartshorne’s and Ogden’s work not only permits a clarification of the RECOMET typology that is of value in its own right, but also enables one better to account for and to interpret the important empirical findings of this research project.

‘How can Charles Hartshorne’s neoclassical theism help us understand how both Christians and nonchristians, believers and nonbelievers in God employ theodicies and cosmodicies to find meaning in the face of unremovable suffering today?’ This is the question addressed here.

1. Theodicy and Cosmodicy in RECOMET Research

The RECOMET research program studies how people search for existential meaning in the face of ‘personal and unremovable suffering’ (1988a, 359). Some have recourse to beliefs about God (theodicy). Others seek such meaning in nontheistic ways and employ various forms of cosmodicy, so-called, whether these refer explicitly to the cosmos itself, to life (‘biodicy’), to humanity as such (‘anthropodicy’), or to society (‘sociodicy’) (Ibid., 363).

The RECOMET project has undertaken a study of such quests for meaning based on the hypothesis that ‘transcendence... is not exclusive for religious world-views only. It also belongs to non-religious world-views’. As Johannes Van der Ven explicitly recognizes, this implies that the distinction between religious and non-religious transcendence ‘is relevant and legitimate’. In epistemic terms, there is ‘a common structure between religious and non-religious world-views’ (Ibid., 362 f.).