

Theodicy as/and Modernity: Comments on Mark M.S. Scott's paper, *Theorizing Theodicy in the Study of Religion*

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Mark Scott states that the aim of this paper is, “to develop a theoretical paradigm of understanding how theodicy has functioned in religion.” (p.1) While Leibniz was the first to conceptualize theodicy in a text of 1709 bearing the title; the notion becomes central in the writings of Max Weber. To be sure, human groups throughout their existence on the face of the earth have given expression to their mortality and finitude—the fact of death, the experience of misfortune and exposure to the various ephemeral and structural faults of the species, etc. This does not mean that they were at the same time expressing what Leibniz and the epigone of the Enlightenment meant by theodicy.

While the content of theodicy is coincidental with the aforementioned human difficulties, the concept, theodicy, as a mode of posing issues is neither congruent nor compatible with these expressions in a non-Enlightenment context. Mark Scott seems aware of this fact when he quotes Weber to the effect that “*With the rise of reason...the inequities of the world came into sharper relief: Individually ‘undeserved’ woe was all too frequent; ‘not good’ but ‘bad’ men succeeded.*”¹ Scott adopts Weber’s conceptual understanding of theodicy. “...*theodicy at its core, as an attempt to create and sustain meaning in the face of evil*” This is taken from Weber’s essay, *Das Probleme der Bedeutung* where Weber sets the stage for the problem of theodicy.

Mark Scott intends to present “an approach that will have heuristic value for the study of theodicy in all its plurality within and between religious traditions.” (p.1) Following J.Z. Smith he sets forth the notion that “theodicy, at its core, is the attempt to create and sustain meaning in the face of inexplicable evil. Central to Scott’s discussion of theodicy is the notion of making meaning, “living in the world of meaning, etc.” While his concern for meaning is most immediately derivative from J.Z. Smith, its ultimate source is Max Weber. It is against the template of Weber that he interprets the theorists, Clifford Geertz, Peter Berger, and in passing, Charles H. Long, David Tracy, and Paul Tillich.

Weber is a formidable figure in the study of religion and modernization processes. I devote a major part of my comment to his notions as they are involved in Scott’s essay. Though Max Weber may seem an apt or even exemplary theorist of a modern notion of theodicy, there are drawbacks to his centrality in setting forth a general theory of theodicy. Often Weber’s position seems fettered by the very observations he has put forth in his understanding of the relationship between religion and modernity. He may not have been the theorist who would enable the author to carry out his own project of transposing the notion of theodicy from a macro to a micro level. Weber, though paying attention to other religions and cultures accepts the normativity of modernity as specified and expressed in Western history from the Reformation through the Enlightenment, to Protestantism. All other religions and traditions are seen through these lens.

¹ Mark Scott, *Theorizing Theodicy in the Study of Religion*, p.2

Weber attributes the modern problem of theodicy to the “increasing rationality” of worldviews,” or how religion evolved from “primitive to rational,” or his reference to the “traditional,” “belief in magic,” or “archaic beliefs.”² Given Weber’s specification for the locus of the theodicy problematic, one can not then identify the perennial expressions of human finitude and misfortune with Weber’s concept of theodicy. Ernst Cassirer described the Enlightenment conception of God in terms of a juxtaposition of index symbols. He tells us that what had established and justified the other concepts of human existence now finds itself in a position of a concept which requires justification. This task of logical justification was taken on by thinkers from Descartes to Malebranche. Leibniz’s theodicy continues the tradition of philosophical logic in his theodicy. In this tradition God is necessary as an integer in the human logic of explanation. Weber’s meaning of theodicy breaks with this logical tradition of theodicy and seeks a meaning of God in the historical and socio-logic of modernity. Weber does not raise the issue of the source, origin, or creation of the cosmos. His concern is with the “worldview” of modernity—the world that modern human beings have made for themselves. It is this fact that defines the Weberian theodicy as the problem of meaning.

Creation myths, narratives of how the cosmos came into being, often include a scenario describing how the fault, the finitude, the “the crucial negativity of a primordial happening” became a part of the human condition. This is a dominant meaning in cosmogonic myths. In other words, misfortune and evil are understood as dimensions and aspects of life itself and not a separate and distinct issue that called for an explanation outside of the constitution of human condition itself.³ In this regard, one notes that in Scott’s paper no distinction is made between his usage of “cosmos” and “worldview.” This is probably because Weber made no such distinction and this usage is followed in his discussion of Berger and Geertz. While “cosmos” is a term from ancient Greek thought, “worldview” is a very modern Enlightenment notion stemming from subjective epistemologies. I would make a distinction between the two, a dialectical distinction rather than an identity or binary based upon separation or static or stadiial views of culture I would state it in this manner: In the act of creating one’s world, (worldview), one discerns that it is already given, (cosmos). It is precisely this distinction that is lost in Weber’s formulations. This is what leads him to the antinomies and tautologies of modernity. Weber’s “disenchantment” of the world that leaves modern human societies in their “iron cages,” with little hope forthcoming from a sterile and abstract ideological future.

Instead of the logical legerdemain of Descartes’ *cogito*, Weber presents us with his own version by describing how capitalistic accumulation is camouflaged by the inner asceticism of Protestantism. In Weber’s case the historical and sociologic has turned upon itself. Weber is very much aware of the strange and quixotic logic of the thesis he set forth in The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism. The last chapter of this text

² Scott, Ibid. p. 2

³ See Charles H. Long, Alpha, The Myths of Creation, 2nd Printing, Scholars Press, (Atlanta, Ga,n.d.) The cosmology may also be seen from the perspective of mortality, see Hans Abrahamsson, The Origin of Death, Studies in African Mythology, Studia Ethnographica Upsaliensia, (Uppsala, 1951)

entitled, “Asceticism and the Spirit of Capitalism,” is a sober and even chilling summary of where the kind of world he described has led us. “...in the United States the pursuit of wealth stripped of its ethical meaning, tends to become associated with purely mundane passions, which often actually give it the character of sport.”⁴ One of the most astute interpreters of Weber put it this way, “Rationalization and disenchantment have created, according to Weber, a world with no ascertainable ground for one’s conviction. Under the circumstances, Weber saw the modern self torn between the irresponsible agitation of subjective value and bureaucratic petrification of objective rationality, and thus incapable of taking disciplined moral action.”⁵

It should be made clear here that this loss of meaning or what Weber understands as the failure of modernity to fulfill itself is not one shared by all those who look upon the modern period in the West as a time in which more peoples and cultures in the West gained dignity and satisfaction in their lives. In other words, many would not agree with Weber’s loss of meaning as a mark of the modern period. One must understand Weber’s critique in terms of what he thought was the purpose and goal of modernity from the Reformation to the Enlightenment through Protestantism; this was the trinity of rationality, discipline, and freedom.

It is clear that the view of theodicy put forward by Weber and followed by Scott is stated in terms of the history of ideas or ideologies. Some practices are referred to but seldom is there a full blown discussion of practices. For example, Weber’s Protestant Ethic... is peppered with references to the United States and especially to Benjamin Franklin but there is no mention of how the American democratic constitution legitimated chattels slavery. Unlike previous works such as Alexis de Tocqueville’s, Democracy in America or Hector St. John Crèvecoeur’s, Letters to an American Farmer, no specific incidents or events are narrated. It is difficult for one to see how this method will allow Scott to move from the macro to the micro levels of the problem of theodicy.⁶

It is this point of view that allows for stylization of the issue in terms of binary oppositions. This is clearly seen in Weber’s use of the binary—archaic/modern; magic/science; primitive/civilized; asceticism/hedonism, etc. While Weber may be forgiven for this way of thinking, it is difficult to understand how one could discuss any serious issue concerning the meaning of the West during the modern period without taking into account the simultaneity and interlocking ideologies and practices of colonialism, imperialism, and international slavery in the making of the modern world.

⁴ Max Weber, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, (George Allen & Unwin, Ltd., London, 1948), p.183

⁵ Sung Ho Kim, Max Weber’s Politics of Civil Society, (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK, 2004), p. 130

⁶ Benjamin Nelson’s, The Idea of Usury: From Tribal Brotherhood to Universal Otherhood, (Princeton University Press, 1949) presents us another account of the relationship between Protestantism and capitalism. It has the merit of centering his work on usury which allows for description of the nature and meaning of exchanges within the ordering meaning of community, something lacking in Weber’s thesis and what gives it the magical unconscious sense.

And these were not simply additional facts but also expressions of relationships that have and still have consequences for the way we speak of human beings and their contemporaneous possibilities.

When one is cognizant of the totality and range of the relationships, the binary stylization of the human problem whether posed as one of a religious cosmos/chaos, as in the case of Berger or unintelligibility on the one side and lucidity on the other as in the case of Geertz, is simply not adequate. The events of modernity have taken us beyond binary formulations as a statement of the issue. Thus the issue of theodicy, if there is authentically such an issue, must move beyond the Western Enlightenment's statements not only about the evil but the very formulation of the human mode of being itself. Those who suffered most during the "rise of the West" during the modern period did not succumb to the temptation of meaninglessness. W.E.B. DuBois after describing the involuntary transfer of millions of Africans into the lands across the Atlantic as the largest involuntary movement of human beings in history goes on to speak of this as "a descent into Hell."⁷ And then there is the Holocaust. What is one to make of this event? It can surely not be placed within the continuity of the Western conception of time rationalized by the Enlightenment and theologized by Hegel. It is a surd, a hole in the systematic conceptions of Western meanings.

Scott turns to the metaphor of floundering and disintegrating boats in the water to give us the sense of the urgency and radicality of our situation in relationship to theodicy. Before proceeding I can not resist the temptation to point out that this was not a metaphor for millions of persons during the modern period. One only needs to recall the thousands of boats in the Atlantic waters filled to capacity with the human cargo of African bodies, having been captured and enslaved, not knowing why of this enslavement nor the destination to which they were proceeding. Let us think of these kinds of facts alongside the metaphors of meaning presented to us by Scott. The floundering boat upon the sea metaphor was made famous in our time by W.V.O. Quine who derived it from the philosopher, Otto Neurath. Here is the way Quine stated it: "*Neurath has likened science to a boat which, if we are to rebuild it, we must rebuild plank by plank while staying afloat in it. The philosopher and the scientist are in the same boat. Our boat stays afloat because at each alteration we keep the bulk of it intact as a going concern.*"⁸

While this states a crisis situation I think that Neurath's original statement is a bit more dramatic. Here it is: "*No tabula rasa exists. We are like sailors who must rebuild their ships on the open sea, never able to dismantle it in dry-dock and to reconstruct it there out of the best materials. Only the metaphysical elements can be allowed to vanish without a trace. Vague linguist conglomerations always remain in one way or another as components of the ship.*"⁹ I find this statement a bit starker than Quine's paraphrase and thus I like it better. Like Neurath and Quine I don't think it is an issue of navigation at all but whether or not we have a viable boat or ship in these very turbulent waters. To

⁷ W.E.B. DuBois, Black Reconstruction, in America, (Russell & Russell, N.Y., 1962) p.727

⁸ W.V.O. Quine, Word and Object, (MIT Press, Cambridge, 1960) pp-3-4

⁹ Otto Neurath, "Protocol Sentences." in Logical Positivism, ed. by A.Y., Ayer, (The Free Press, Glencoe, Ill, 1959) p.199

continue the analogy—as planks and other accoutrements of the original vessel are lost we might be able to pick up flotsam and jetsam floating by—debris from the several debacles of the West during the modern period. We must make use of this material to keep our vessel afloat (our worldview). However, in the midst of this dire circumstance of making a world, a cosmos of the given will appear as both limit and resource. What is at stake is not a matter of navigation but the whether the human mode of being is capable of survival.