



## The Irenaean Theodicy

St Irenaeus was Bishop of Lyon in the 2<sup>nd</sup>C. His attempt to provide a justification of evil was highly influential and paved the way for the theodicy put forward by John Hick at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup>C.

His theodicy pre-dates Augustine but is still rooted in the Biblical text of Genesis. In his work *Against Heresies*, St Irenaeus (130-202) suggested that evil can be traced back to human free will. However, unlike Augustine, he did not claim that the world was created perfect. Instead Irenaeus suggested that evil has a valuable part to play in God's plan for humanity.

Irenaeus thought that God was partly responsible for evil, in the sense that God created human beings imperfectly. Although God created human beings in his image, this did not mean instantaneous perfection but rather that human beings would grow into the likeness of God. According to Irenaeus, being made in God's image means having intelligence and moral awareness. However, perfection can only be obtained through the willing cooperation of human beings with God. God-given free will is the only means whereby God can perfect people without coercing them. Freedom requires the possibility of choosing evil as well as good. Irenaeus claimed:

*"How, if we had no knowledge to the contrary, could we have instruction in that which is good?" (Against Heresies)*

Irenaeus went on to explain that, according to the Bible, humans chose evil and rejected God's way. God had to allow this, because he gave humans freewill. If God had intervened, humans would have lost their freedom and essential character.

God created the natural order to include the possibility of good as well as evil and suffering. He then stood back to allow humans to use their freewill for good or evil. Irenaeus concluded by saying that eventually evil and suffering will be overcome and the human race will develop into God's perfect likeness.

The purpose of human existence is therefore to develop from being in the *image* of God to becoming the *likeness* of God – when this is achieved, man will be a perfect, albeit finite, reflection of God.

This development can only effectively take place if humanity is free to make choices and thereby develop their character. Irenaeus taught that the key way to ensure proper development was through the practice of faith and moral discipline. In order for these to be effectively developed, they must encounter challenges as unless a per-



son is challenged, they will never reach their full potential. Sin and evil are necessary in order to provide the challenge that is needed to sufficiently develop our character. This is because the greatest challenge to faith is evil and the greatest challenge to moral discipline is the lure of sin. It is only by overcoming these challenges that an individual can grow closer to God and ultimately achieve our potential of his perfected likeness.

Successful growth and achieving full potential will be rewarded after death by being allowed to enter into Heaven.. Those who have failed to make any progress at all will be punished with hell; those who have tried but failed will be sent to purgatory where they will be made good enough to enter into Heaven.

The Irenaean theodicy still has some merit among Christians today. Although Irenaeus would have regarded the Genesis account as literal truth, it is nonetheless compatible with a more symbolic interpretation of biblical material: The figures of Adam and Eve illustrate the immaturity of the human spirit in their inability to overcome temptation and give in to the lure of sin. The figure of Jesus represents the process of growth to becoming in the likeness of God in one lifetime.

Think about & note down:

- What part does Freewill play in the Irenaean Theodicy?
- In what sense is God partly responsible for evil?
- What is the purpose of the natural world?
- Explain the purpose of human existence.