

OPEN ACCESS VERSION

The Challenge of Evil: Grace and the Problem of Suffering. By William Greenway. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016. x + 143pp. \$30.00 (paper).

This is an extraordinary book, a piece of passionate advocacy for a particular form of existential spirituality that is able to look suffering in the face and still find joy. I sense that it might be best read after the author's companion volumes, *A Reasonable Belief: why God and faith make sense* (WJK, 2015) and *For the Love of All creatures: The Story of Grace in Genesis* (Eerdmans, 2015). Some of the questions that seem to be begged in the present book may well be answered there.

Greenway's core text is the work of Emmanuel Levinas, who, he points out, has a particular claim to be able to address suffering because of his own and his family's experience of the Nazi tyranny. Greenway focusses on Levinas' claim that the essence of both relationship and personhood is 'being seized in and by love for Faces' (p. 13), where a Face may be any creature that can inspire such love. The author makes little reference in this book to biblical texts. Indeed he makes clear in his Afterword that he thinks a philosophical spirituality should 'guard against surreptitious dependence on special revelation' (p. 133) though he points out that an edited version of 1. John 4 comes close to his core claim, and he later associates it with gaining one's life by losing it, citing Luke 9.24.

In that Greenway refuses to do theodicy in the sense of providing abstract reasons for the compatibility of suffering with divine benevolence, but he is not doing anti-theodicy in the sense of tearing down the arguments of theodocists, he falls into the territory helpfully described by Bethany Sollereeder as 'compassionate theodicy' – argument and reflection that is aware of theory but actually seeks to apply itself to the situations of sufferers, as opposed to armchair reflection on suffering. Greenway gives a number of cogent examples of individual creaturely suffering, human and non-human. The important thing, he claims, is that, when our compassionate loving concern is evoked by Faces, we have the choice to harden our hearts. If we do not harden our hearts, we live 'by faith', and under grace. Our own personhood grows out of being seized in and by love, so we too become Faces even as we let our love respond to others.

Through the book this position is contrasted with a set of 'straw men', positions briefly outlined to show their inadequacy. These are: a rejection of God because of suffering, a Nietzschean rejection of morality as socioculturally conditioned, a systemic biocentrism that 'thinks like a mountain', in Aldo Leopold's phrase, and an autonomous individual self as explored in Iris Murdoch's work, especially *The Unicorn*. Greenway's heroes, in contrast, are Levinas, Jean-Luc Marion, and Fyodor Dostoevsky – a reading of sections of *The Brothers Karamazov* forms a key part of his evidence against Murdoch.

Greenway says a number of times that he is not providing a foundationalist argument for his position, but rather showing how reasoned reflection supports it. He also clearly aims his book at a general readership, by referring at various points to the 'technical' arguments he might have used but doesn't. Yet for a non-technical book it is a demanding read. Big concepts and literary themes are covered in quite a

compressed way. So perhaps its natural readership would be the philosophically-inclined pastor or seminarian; I do not see it being a book for more general use.

The core insight from Levinas is a profound one, and if Greenway's work gives it wider currency, that is to be welcomed. But a whole stream of questions will occur to the reader. The very important insight of Job and some of the Psalms, that protest at God is an authentic way of relating to the divine, seems rather to be written off in Greenway's dismissal of rejection-of-God strategies. His treatment of biocentrism likewise seems very partial, and neglects the work done by, for example, Jay McDaniel, who provides just the kind of focus on the individual creature Greenway finds absent in much of this writing. The very interesting use of the example of a lion killing a gazelle begs huge questions – why does this world contain such 'tragic necessity'; why does it contain 'brokenness' and how did that arise? How and when, come to that, did this 'seizing love' arise in the evolution of creatures? Is the one 'seized' ever mistaken about a Face? How might we negotiate the clash between the interests of different Faces? By merely reiterating throughout the book, and quite repetitively, his core assertion, the author ended up frustrating this reader at least.

Perhaps this book goes to show how difficult the enterprise of compassionate theodicy is. *The Challenge of Evil* seems too argumentative to be a really pastoral contribution, yet the argumentation left too many questions open. I would have preferred to see the author tease out further, using more case-studies, how his theology of Faces works transformatively in real situations.

Christopher Southgate
University of Exeter, UK