CHAPTER VI

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL IN REFORMED THOUGHT

1. AUGUSTINE AND THE REFORMERS

It has long been recognized that the Reformation of the sixteenth century represented, theologically, a revival of Augustinianism. Luther and Calvin both quoted extensively from Augustine and regarded him as presenting the best wisdom of the ancient Church, uncontaminated by the subsequent aberrations of medieval Scholasticism. But it was always the biblical and theological rather than the more speculative and philosophical sections of Augustine’s writings that appealed to the Reformers. They were Augustinian on the Pauline, not on the Neo-Platonic, side of his thought. This means, so far as the theodicy-problem is concerned, that the Reformers have no general theory of the nature of evil such as Augustine offered in his privative analysis, his use of

1 For example, Benjamin B. Warfield said that ‘the Reformation, inwardly considered, was just the ultimate triumph of Augustine’s doctrine of grace over Augustine’s doctrine of the Church’ (Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, ed. Hastings, vol. ii. p. 224). Walther von Loewenich, in Von Augustin zu Luther (Wittenberg: Luther Verlag, 1959), emphasizes — especially in the essay, ‘Was bedeutet uns Evangelischen Augustin?’ — the continuity between Augustine and the Reformers. Calvin’s numerous citations from Augustine’s writings, revealing his immense respect for their author, are exhaustively studied by Luchesius Smits of Louvain in Saint Augustin dans l’œuvre de Jean Calvin (2 vols., Assen: Van Gorcum & Co., 1957–8). Smits concludes that ‘The Reformer felt himself to be in accord with St Augustine on all the fundamental questions, and voluntarily underlined this harmony when replying to his adversaries’ (i. 259).

2 Cf. L. Smits, op. cit. i. 270. Calvin expresses his intention not to use (rather than positively to reject) Augustine’s privative analysis of evil in De Aeterna Dei Praedestinatione (1552): ‘I shall not say with Augustine, although I willingly embrace his statement as true, that in sin as in evil there is nothing positive. It is, however, an argument which does not satisfy many people.’ (Calvin, Corpus Reformatorum, vol. vii, p. 353.) On the Reformers’ view of the privative conception of evil see also Julius Müller, The Christian Doctrine of Sin, i. 294–5.

J. Hick, Evil and the God of Love
© John Hick 2010
The Augustinian Type of Theodicy

the principle of plenitude, and his conception of the aesthetic perfection of the universe. On the other hand, they share to the full, and even carry further, Augustine's strong doctrine of the fall of man and its paradoxical counterpoise in an equally strong doctrine of predestination.

The Reformers' lack of interest in a general philosophical theodicy is presumably due, negatively, to the absence of any contemporary heresy on the subject to be combated such as had confronted Augustine in Manichaeism; and, positively, to their passionate adherence to Scripture as the normative source of Christian truth. Thus the theology of the Reformers, faithfully built upon the sola Scriptura principle, reminds us by its silence that the Augustinian philosophy of evil is a work of human analysis and speculation, and that it should not be accorded the status of revealed truth. It was left to the eighteenth century to revive the more philosophical aspects of the Augustinian theodicy tradition, which had been carried over from the ancient world in Neo-Platonism and then in the Cambridge Platonism of the seventeenth century.\(^1\)

\(^1\) Ralph Cudworth, in his *True Intellectual System of the Universe* (1678), a central work of Cambridge Platonism, deals with the problem of theodicy in chap. V, sect. 5, and uses a number of the themes which later appear in Archbishop King's *Essay on the Origin of Evil*: the thought that the origin of evil lies both in the necessary inferiority of created things to their Creator and in the non-compossibility of various goods; that God makes evils contribute to the harmony of the whole; that we must judge the whole and not the parts; that evil is necessary as are the dark colours in a picture, or the more plebeian roles in a drama. These latter images go back to Plotinus and before him to the Stoics. For a direct echo compare Plotinus' 'We are like people ignorant of painting who complain that the colours are not beautiful everywhere in the picture: but the Artist has laid on the appropriate tint to every spot. . . . Again, we are censuring a drama because the persons are not all heroes but include a servant and a rustic and some scurrilous clown; yet take away the low characters and the power of the drama is gone; these are part and parcel of it' (En. iii. 2, 11 quoted more fully above, p. 89), with Cudworth's 'But we are like unskilful spectators of a picture, who condemn the limmer, because he hath not put bright colours everywhere; whereas he has suited his colours to every part respectively, giving to each such as belongeth to it. Or else we are like those, who would blame a comedy or tragedy, because they were not all kings and heroes, that acted in it, but some servants and rustic clowns introduced also, talking after their rude fashion.' (*True Intellectual System*, ed. by Thomas Birch, Andover: Gould and Newman, 1837-8, vol. ii, pp. 339-40.) For a yet earlier use of the simile, see Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations* vi. 42.