

[From the papers of Dr. Gordon H. Clark at the Sangre de Cristo Seminary library. - DJD, 27 Nov, 2014]

Evil and the Christian God, by Michael Peterson, Baker Book House, 1982, pp. 160.
Reviewed by Gordon H. Clark.

The question is easy to state: How can there be a good God when there is so much gratuitous evil in the world? Refusing to define evil (p. 19), he gives examples of earthquakes, plagues, and tragedies. He defines gratuitous evil as an evil which has no compensating good result. However, two difficulties remain through the book: he does not define the sense in which God is called good and he incessantly assumes without any intelligible attempt to justify it, that there are gratuitous evils. For one who does not accept that assumption, the book begs the question.

Toward the end of the book he emphasizes literary tragedy (pp. 12, 139-145), and thereby gives the impression that his aesthetics controls his theology.

The author's solution to the problem of evil is the well known appeal to free will, though in an extremely complex form. Given his assumptions, the arguments are generally sound, often quite clever, and sometimes pedantic.

But although the author claims to give a Christian solution, it is certainly not Biblical. I think he quotes the Bible only twice, the first time (p. 32) without any probative application, and the second doubtful (p. 120). In contrast he quotes secular literary authors copiously, and many religious philosophers whose commitment to Christianity is either tenuous or nil.

His main argument is based on two assumption. First, man has free will. Human experience is reliable (pp. 90-93). Man is autonomous (pp. 118-119). God cannot prevent or even reduce natural disasters, for if he could, it would trivialize free will (pp. 112-114). Indeed "If God violates our highest and best moral values, then surely he is no better than an omnipotent fiend" (p. 126). Thus human experience and opinion sits in judgment over God. God's creation of the world must "be squared with refined moral insight" (p. 125). "God cannot be accused of violating our moral convictions." Man is autonomous.

These statements on free will are not argued: they are assumed. If, now, the author can quote secular writers for confirmation of his ideas on tragedy and experience, could not this reviewer quote Spinoza to the effect that the human perception of free will is simply the ignorance of the cause of our actions?

The second related and unsupported assumption is that God does not control the world. The author repeatedly denies what he calls "meticulous providence." Repeatedly.

No wonder that the author quotes secular sources and pagan aesthetics instead of using the Bible. Given his assumption what else could be done?