

**Karen Kilby. *God, Evil and the Limits of Theology*.
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The theme that unites the eleven wide-ranging essays in this book is the role of mystery and paradox in theology. How far can or should the quest for clarity be taken in this field of inquiry, and what is the relationship between clarity and mystery? What are the limits of our understanding of God and God's relationship to the world? The last essay, "Beauty and Mystery in Mathematics and Theology" provides a key to the book as a whole. Here Kilby observes that the great discoveries in mathematics related to the concept of infinity have promoted a clearer understanding of infinity but simultaneously intensified the sense of incomprehensibility that surrounds this concept. The lesson that theologians can learn from this is that the relationship between mystery and understanding may be non-competitive. An increased understanding of a phenomenon is compatible with finding it more deeply mysterious.

The essays that make up the chapters are independent of each other and have for the most part been previously published. They resonate in interesting ways with each other, however, and apply the theme of mystery to different theological *loci* and problems. The book has, as the title indicates, two focal points – the doctrine of God (especially the Trinity) and the problem of evil. The first four chapters deal with the limits of theological understanding with respect to the Trinity, and chapters 6, 7 and 10 reflect on the proper theological approach to the mystery of evil and suffering. In this review, I will focus on these essays about God as Trinity and evil, since they relate most clearly to the book's overarching thesis. However, there are also interesting chapters about paradoxes of grace in Catholic and Protestant theology, the role of concepts in theology, and the relevance of Jewish Enlightenment thought for Christian theology. In what follows, I will summarize some of the central arguments and themes of the book, and then proceed with a critical discussion.

In chapters 1–4, Kilby turns a skeptical eye to something that has been taken for granted by mainstream theology since the trinitarian renaissance of the twentieth century, namely that the doctrine of the Trinity belongs at the center of Christian theological reflection. Many thinkers assume that this doctrine both provides a deeper insight into God's nature compared to what a generic theism can yield and constitutes a great template for interpreting various other phenomena, such as personhood, relationality, society and politics. An example of this tendency is social trinitarianism, represented by theologians like Jürgen Moltmann, Colin Gunton and Miroslav Volf. They all understand the Trinity as something analogous to a community of persons, who are one in virtue of their mutual indwelling or *perichoresis*. The

social trinitarian program is widely perceived as attractive because it presents a “robust” understanding of the Trinity that makes the doctrine intelligible and relevant for many areas of life.

According to Kilby, however, it is precisely the attempt to make the Trinity intelligible and relevant that leads theology astray. In practice, what social trinitarians do is to interpret the mysterious notions of divine personhood and *perichoresis* in terms of their own preferred conceptions of self and social relations. Then they announce that “the Trinity is our social program” (a phrase popularized by Miroslav Volf) and claim to extract insights about society from the doctrine. But what they extract is only what they have themselves put in. Since we cannot really grasp what *perichoresis* is and how the three divine persons can be one, there are basically no constraints on what views the Trinity can be used to justify. As Kilby puts it, “nearly any understanding of self and other ... could be spun as perichoretic” (52).

What, then, is the right attitude to the doctrine of the Trinity, according to the author? The short answer is that theologians should realize that they cannot understand the doctrine, and therefore should be satisfied with viewing it as a set of grammatical rules that govern our speech about God. In Chapter 2, Kilby suggests that Aquinas’s teaching on the Trinity can be interpreted in this modest, “postliberal” way. Aquinas does not, on her reading, try to present a coherent model of the Trinity. Instead, he is “simultaneously displaying the grammar, the pattern of speech about the Trinity, and displaying it as beyond our comprehension” (26). The latter is accomplished when Aquinas serenely presents us with a number of (what Kilby takes to be) unresolved difficulties or “intellectual dead-ends”.

An example of such a dead-end is Aquinas’s conception of the divine processions. According to Aquinas, the Word proceeds from the Father in such a perfect way that it remains wholly one with the Father. But this, according to Kilby, undermines the very idea of a procession. “Thomas is presenting us with a procession that is so perfect that we in fact have no idea why it could not also be called ‘not a procession’” (23). Likewise, in order to be able to portray the divine persons as “subsisting relations”, Aquinas has to twist and contort the idea of “relation” until it becomes unintelligible. An even more serious problem is the fact that the subsisting relations that constitute the divine persons are all supposed to be identical to the one divine essence while at the same time being really distinct from each other. How is this possible? According to Kilby, Aquinas provides no answer. His treatment of the Trinity is thus to be read as “a way of clearly articulating a lack of insight” (25).

In Chapter 3, Kilby gives a programmatic statement of the “apophatic trinitarianism” she finds in Aquinas (as well as in Gregory of Nyssa). Her basic claim is that the doctrine of the Trinity confronts us with a number of questions – about how the three are one, how the persons are related to the essence, etc. – without giving us any resources with which to answer them (33). “I am suggesting”, she writes, “that Christians are, and ought to be, at a loss in making sense of their belief at all” (42). Apophatic trinitarianism comes with a number of benefits, however. Besides the fact that it functions as a safeguard against idolatrous objectification of God and the tendency to project our own ideas onto the Trinity, apophatic trinitarianism can also have political significance, as Kilby argues in Chapter 4. It can, for example, school us “into suspicion of systems that present themselves with a kind of sacred, all-encompassing necessity” (55).

Suspicion towards systems and syntheses of various kinds is a recurrent theme throughout the book. In Chapter 5, Kilby uses the thought of John Zizioulas as an example of how an overblown confidence in the explanatory power of a certain concept – in Zizioulas’s case, that of “communion” – can lead theology astray. However, it is above all in the essays about evil,

suffering and sin (chapters 6, 7 and 10) that Kilby's warnings against theology's integrative and explanatory ambitions (or temptations) become most insistent.

In Chapter 6, she addresses the relationship between theology and what she considers to be a different intellectual tradition with roots in the Enlightenment, namely the project of theodicy. Instead of dismissing this project out of hand (as many theologians are prone to do), she acknowledges that theodicies address legitimate questions about God's relationship to evil. Although the "canonical" problem of evil – as it is typically discussed among philosophers of religion – is an Enlightenment abstraction, something very similar lurks within the Christian tradition itself. This does not mean, however, that theologians should start to produce contextualized or "thick" theodicies. Radical critics of theodicy such as Terrence Tillby and Kenneth Surin are right in two respects: theodicies and "defenses" consistently fail to produce acceptable answers to the problem of evil, and the very attempt to "solve" this problem inevitably diminishes the scandal of evil and is therefore morally problematic. Refreshingly, however, Kilby directs a similar critique against the fashionable idea that appeal to divine co-suffering is a meaningful response to the problem of evil. According to Kilby's analysis, divine co-suffering functions as a kind of *ersatz* justification of God – and as such it works very badly – and it tends to diminish the scandal of evil by reducing the dissonance between our conception of God and the existence of evil.

What is the proper theological response to evil, then? "My proposal," writes Kilby, "is that these questions, these concrete and theological versions of the so-called 'problem of evil' ought to be acknowledged as completely legitimate *and* as utterly unanswerable" (81). By not trying to explain evil, we at least avoid creating further problems. Kilby's conclusion with respect to the mystery of evil is hence similar to her conclusion with respect to the mystery of the triune God: "It is of the very nature of Christian theology to make affirmations ... that it cannot co-ordinate or make sense of". In certain respects, systematic theology must be "if not systematically incoherent, then at least systematically dissonant" (81).

In Chapter 7, Kilby argues that theological reflection on God's permission of sin makes the problem of evil more "decisively insoluble" than it appears to be for most philosophers of religion. This is because the Augustinian tradition with which the author sympathizes has a "non-contrastive" understanding of the relationship between divine grace and human freedom. Human free will is not a "no fly zone" for God, which means that God's permission of sin cannot be explained by appeal to God's respect for our freedom. There is, in fact, no possible explanation available within the parameters of the Augustinian paradigm, according to the author.

Kilby eloquently defends the non-contrastive understanding of divine and human agency. The modern idea that freedom requires God's partial absence or non-engagement does not fit well with the Christian view that God is the source of all goodness, and it also contradicts how Christians think about their own relation to God's grace. As Kilby cleverly points out, people never seem to worry that God might give them too much grace, thereby undermining their freedom. However, pre-modern theologians in the Augustinian tradition did not fully appreciate the gravity of the problem that the non-contrastive view entails, with one important exception: Julian of Norwich. She felt the full weight of the question of why God permits sin. She did not offer any answer to it, however, and Kilby argues that this stance is to be emulated by contemporary theologians. For Kilby, Julian is "the high point of the Augustinian tradition, a theologian who sees where its logic leads, and follows it through more fully than most of those who came before. Where it leads is to an intense problem, one which she is utterly unable to resolve" (93). Sin is by its very nature perplexing and obscures the gaze of those who are involved with it. The lesson that Kilby draws from this is that theologians and philosophers

of religion cannot always have intelligibility as a prioritized goal (98). Sometimes the proper clarity to be sought is clarity about why certain things cannot be understood.

Julian of Norwich also figures importantly in Chapter 10, where her understanding of suffering and its relationship to love is favorably contrasted with Hans Urs von Balthasar's. In Balthasar's theology, suffering is portrayed as intrinsic to love and finds its ultimate ontological ground in the immanent Trinity, where something analogous to suffering exists as a consequence of the "infinite distance" between the divine persons. According to Balthasar, suffering is thus intelligible in the grand scheme of things. Julian, on the other hand, clearly contrasts suffering and love. While she has a strong sense of the salvific significance of Christ's suffering and the suffering that is a part of the Christian life, she refuses to ontologize or "explain" it. She is thereby an authentic representative of the Augustinian *privatio boni* tradition, while Balthasar displays a different sensibility with roots in the late Middle Ages.

In the second part of the essay, Kilby presents a constructive defense of the tradition that Julian represents. She argues that "it is not of the essence of love itself to involve sacrifice and loss", since one can give oneself without being diminished (134). The challenge that faces this perspective is to explain why human lives that involve great sacrifices (paradigmatically Christ's life) seem capable of manifesting God's presence and love in a clearer way than more tranquil lives. Kilby's explanation is that those who accept great suffering and loss for the sake of love or justice "enact" the Augustinian understanding of evil as *privatio boni*. By showing an ultimate indifference to suffering and loss – pursuing their goals as if evils did not exist – such persons implicitly deny any ultimate reality to evil.

After this somewhat eclectic summary, I now proceed with an evaluation and critical discussion of the book's overarching thesis. First it should be said that there is much to appreciate in this volume. Kilby is an excellent guide to many of the important debates within systematic theology during the last few decades, and the reader gets a good sense of the lay of the contemporary theological landscape, as viewed from a broadly postliberal perspective. Since the author often looks at things from original angles, the book sheds fresh light on a number of important issues. I personally learned a lot from it. Kilby also writes in a clear and lucid style, a fact that – I am sorry to say – distinguishes her from many of her contemporary peers.

While many of the book's particular arguments are enlightening, I find problems with its main thesis about the limits of theology. It is easy to agree with a part of that thesis, namely that theological reflection can serve to deepen rather than reduce our sense of God's mysteriousness. However, a problem with Kilby's approach is that she seems to conflate a respect for the divine mystery with a rational insensitivity to "cognitive dissonances". These are two very different things, however, and only the first is commendable.

Throughout the book, Kilby claims that we cannot – and should not try to – "make sense of" certain things having to do with God and his relationship to the world. "It is of the very nature of Christian theology to make affirmations ... that it cannot co-ordinate or make sense of" (81). This could perhaps be understood in an innocent way, as the admission that there is much about God that we cannot understand, model, or picture. Unfortunately, it seems that Kilby has something stronger in mind. What her treatment of concrete theological issues suggests is that theologians should sometimes leave apparent contradictions unresolved.

Traditionally, it has been seen as an important task for theology to show that apparent contradictions are merely apparent. This is a minimal way of "making sense" of Christian doctrines (the opposite of "sense" being "nonsense", and the paradigm of nonsense being logical inconsistency). It is hard to shake off the impression that Kilby finds this modest ambition problematic. In order to justify my critique, I will take an example.

In the essay about Aquinas's trinitarian thought, Kilby discusses his treatment of the claim that the persons of the Father and the Son are both identical to the divine essence but nevertheless really distinct from each other. "Aquinas's technical language", Kilby writes, "does not serve to resolve this difficulty – it does not get rid of or explain or make clear to us *how it could be possible* that $a=b$ and $a=c$ but b does not equal c " (25, my emphasis). Note the phrase "how it could be possible", and recall that what is not logically contradictory is logically possible. Kilby hence implies that Aquinas has no way of resolving an apparent contradiction, and she argues that he did not regard this as a problem. Aquinas "has laid things out in such a way as to make a problem more or less leap off the page at us – how can two things be absolutely identical with a third, and yet not identical to each other! – but he seems hardly to think it worth commenting on" (25).

Really? In *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 28, a. 3, Aquinas (2012) addresses this problem. His answer shows that he is concerned to avoid a contradiction, and he attempts to do so by claiming that identity is only transitive when it is both real and logical. In the case of the divine persons, they are only really (and not logically) identical to the one essence of God. Trinitarian doctrine therefore does not violate any law of the transitivity of identity that we have reason to hold true. What Aquinas aims to do here is clearly to show "how it could be possible" that the relevant claims about the Trinity are both true.

Whether his solution is successful or not is a matter of debate. There are contemporary thinkers who argue that if Aristotelian theories of relation and identity are accepted, then Aquinas "succeeds in giving a coherent account of how the three Persons can be distinct from one another and yet be one God" (Lamont 2004, 268). Moreover, if the modern construal of identity as a *relative* notion is accepted, then the problem can be solved in other ways, for example as suggested by Peter Geach, who writes: "Now different Persons' being the same God is not manifestly impossible: for, in general, x and y may be the same F although different things are true of x and y " (Geach 1961, 118). Perhaps Kilby rejects all solutions to the relevant problem that have been proposed. However, her judgment that it is unsolvable ("an intellectual dead end") and that Aquinas did not care about this would have carried a greater weight if she had shown some awareness of actual attempts to solve it, and especially Aquinas's own.¹

To be fair, in a footnote Kilby states that "I am not advocating the assertion of *logically* incompatible propositions, but rather the holding of a set of beliefs which, somewhat more broadly, *we cannot make sense of*" (82, footnote 25). Nevertheless, what causes her to regard the issue just discussed as a "problem" – one that Aquinas, in her view, is right to leave unsolved – is the fact that trinitarian doctrine seems to contradict the principle of transitivity of identity ("how can two things be absolutely identical with a third, and yet not identical to each other"). It hence seems that Kilby in fact advocates the assertion of logically incompatible propositions (presuming that she accepts the principle of transitivity of identity). In any case, I wish Kilby had made clear that it is an important task for theology to resolve apparent contradictions, and that this is fully compatible with a profound respect for divine mystery (in fact, I would argue that it is constitutive of such respect).

Moving on to the second focal point of the book – the essays about evil. Here I find a paradoxical tension between, on the one hand, the author's emphasis on mystery and lack of

¹ There are also other problems with the essay about Aquinas (Chapter 2). The most serious one is its failure to discuss the doctrine of analogy in relation to Aquinas's understanding of processions and relations in God. Kilby also mistakenly assumes that ordinary relations are always, for Aquinas, "towards something outside the substance" in which the relation inheres (23).

knowledge and – on the other hand – her unshakable certainty that the problem of evil is “utterly unanswerable” (81), “decisively insoluble” (91), “a problem with no solution” (84). How, one may ask, does she know this? Even if we grant that she is right, it does not immediately follow that we must live with an unresolved “dissonance between our conception of God and our awareness of evil”, as she recommends us to do (77). There is also the alternative suggested by skeptical theism, which Kilby surprisingly does not discuss.²

Skeptical theists hold that we are not justified in making all-things-considered judgements about what a perfectly good and omnipotent God would do in any given situation (cf. MacBrayer 2010, 611). If we are not justified to make such judgments, then we are not justified to make the judgment that a perfectly good and omnipotent God would not permit certain horrendous evils. This means that the existence of such evils does not constitute evidence against God’s existence or goodness. If this type of reasoning holds water (and the skeptical premise can be justified in various ways³) there is no *cognitive* dissonance between our conception of God and the existence of the evils that actually exist in our world. The skeptical theist can acknowledge that she is at a total loss when it comes to suggesting a possible explanation of why God permits Auschwitz, but since she does not take herself to be in a position to know such an explanation even if one existed, this admission does not collide with her belief in God’s goodness or omnipotence.

Skeptical theism hence offers, if successful, the possibility of both rejecting theodicy (as Kilby finds imperative) and at the same time preserving coherence in the Christian system of beliefs. If Kilby had made a skeptical theistic move, she could have avoided the unfortunate conclusion that systematic theology needs to be “if not systematically incoherent, then at least systematically dissonant” (81). Perhaps Kilby finds skeptical theism unconvincing, but it should at least have been discussed as a conceivable third alternative between theodicy and accepting cognitive dissonance.

One significant drawback with the latter attitude is that it tends to undermine rational dialogue between different traditions or worldviews. This can be illustrated by an example. Suppose that Richard Dawkins and the other “new atheists” were confronted with an argument against naturalism that questions the compatibility of some of their naturalistic commitments with some generally acknowledged fact about the world. Instead of responding with a counter argument in support of the coherence of the naturalistic framework, they respond by saying that naturalistic philosophers “may have to live with points of systematic dissonance that they cannot make go away”, and that they sometimes must make affirmations that they “cannot co-ordinate or make sense of” (81). This would be to effectively end the debate by proclaiming that their framework of thought is immune to rational criticism. But this immunity would be achieved at a great price, since Dawkins and company would hereafter be unable to criticize the Christian faith for lacking in rationality in some respect.

A question that Kilby’s thought-provoking book raises, then, is this: When should a cognitive dissonance be taken as an indication that something might be wrong with one’s worldview, and when can it safely be “lived with” indefinitely? It seems to me that the author owes us an answer, or at least a discussion of the issue. The answer I would give myself is that although we sometimes will have to live with cognitive dissonances, they should always be seen as problems in need of either solution or dissolution.

² There is a massive literature on skeptical theism. For an introduction, see (Bergmann 2009).

³ See (McBrayer 2010, 613-616).

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