



Fully Explaining Evil Is Doing The Devil's Work

by Lucerne French Snipes

Richard W. Coffen. *When God Sheds Tears: A Christian Look at the Mystery of Suffering*. Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald, 1994. \$8.99 hardcover. 127 pages.

Although few if any Seventh-day Adventists would baldly assert that evil is good, there are subtle ways in which we may, nevertheless, succumb to such doublethink. Richard W. Coffen, associate book editor of the Review and Herald Publishing Association, is determined to warn us against this kind of self-contradiction. In *When God Sheds Tears*, Coffen examines several "common rationales" for evil and concludes that any reason given for the existence of evil is tantamount to a defense of evil as a useful aspect of the universe. And this, he says, is the devil's doctrine.

Adventists may be particularly attentive when Coffen challenges the "Great Controversy" rationale, warning against the acceptance of

suffering "because it seems to support a good cause—the vindication of God's character" (p. 92). Readers will recognize this as Adam's temptation in *Paradise Lost*—to think of his sin as a boon (*felix culpa*) because it made possible our glorious redemption through Christ. Surely Coffen is right to insist that a good God would not use the universe as a stage on which to display the divine glory, but would instead love and grieve for a world blighted by evil—entering into its pain to the point of death on a cross. So Coffen grounds his argument not only on the principle of non-contradiction, but also on his faith in the unequivocal goodness of God. Although he is responding to a challenge from Ellen White—"Show that it is not God who causes pain and suffering"—his case for the goodness of God depends mostly on his appraisal of the behavior and character of Jesus. For Coffen, God's self-revelation in Jesus enables us to transcend First Testament speculations that God causes evil.

The truth about evil, Coffen insists, is that evil is meaningless, absurd, life blighting, and that a universe that cannot distinguish

between good and evil is even more absurd. While cautioning us not to identify contingency and finitude automatically with evil, nor to equate safety and immutability with good, he offers some advice to those of us who wish to "avoid doing the work of Satan when we attempt to defend God in the face of disaster, disease, and death" (p. 112): For us, evil must always remain an outrage; we must empathize with those in pain; and we must be critical of our theodicies, because they so easily backfire, so easily become the devil's doctrine.

Although *When God Sheds Tears* is short and written for a Seventh-day Adventist lay audience, its many references to philosophers and theologians signal the reader that Coffen is consciously and seriously joining a long-running conversation about the problem of pain. I was disappointed that he did not acknowledge Rick Rice's *When Bad Things Happen to God's People*, but at a time when many are re-examining the Adventist message, it is good to be reminded to avoid doublethink and to proclaim the loving goodness of God. Coffen's is a message for the whole world.

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