

The Holodomor of 1933 – Evil

*All her people groan as they search for bread;
They trade their treasures for food to revive their strength.
“O Lord, behold my affliction.” Lamentations 1:11*

When confronted by an event as horrifying as the Holodomor of 1933 we come to face with the unvarnished ugliness of evil. It is the incomprehensibility of the acts of murder on such a vast scale that stops us in our tracks and put into question the very goodness of creation. This event seems to shout at us: there is no God, there is no sense in existence but only suffering and frustration.

And yet, the power of Christianity is such that it does confront evil and does not give a sugarcoated, banal answer to this question that looms over all of humanity.

*Should women eat their offspring,
the children of their tender care? Lamentations 2:20*

There are certain foundational statements that our faith and Tradition make and we need to keep these before us as we explore the difficult question regarding the existence of evil in creation as evidenced by the Holodomor.

The first is that there is no evil in God. God does not sympathize with evil and does not condone it. Evil is parasitical in the sense that it has its being in the distortion of what is good. It is important to remember that those who commit evil, were originally good. This is difficult sometimes to accept, but in order to make sense of things we have to come to terms with this assertion.

So, if God is not the originator of evil, then where does it come from? And the answer is that evil originates with the created order, with those who have come into being because of God's love. They create evil because they have choices between life and death, between following God and following their own wishes. But, one could ask: if God foreknew that the creatures that he made would bring evil, couldn't He have not created them and thereby avoided the existence of evil?

It seems that God is so full of love – to everything and everyone: Does He not make rain fall on the just and unjust? – that He would not limit Himself only to those who would not do evil. God, in His love creates all that can be created – the good and the evil. Maybe the possibilities faced by God are such that He either has creation which contains both good and evil or He does not have creation at all. At this point I would like to underscore an assumption that is often made. In a sense, when we look at the Holodomor, it seems that it is easy to draw a dividing line between those who do evil and those who do not. But, we come to acknowledge that everyone is contaminated with evil, with sin – granted to varying degrees - but none is totally and completely good. History, going back to evidence that we have of the very beginnings of the existence of man, shows that man has been evil from the very beginnings. There is no history of sinless

man and even the Theory of Evolution is in agreement here. So, when we ask whether God could have created only that which is good, when we see a creation in which none is completely good, then we are asking, in a sense, a nonsense question.

All of creation is an admixture of good and evil and this is especially true of man. We are therefore cautioned against judging others.

Therein lies the terrible dilemma of creation and what our faith refers to as salvation history is the answer given by God to this. God does a daring feat in that He overcomes evil by good and this act of overcoming evil by good, inevitably involves enduring suffering and death.

*It is a common teaching in Orthodox spiritual literature
that evils are God's sole means
for converting and saving sinners. Thomas Hopko*

It is sometimes implied that evil is beyond the power of God because of the respect that God has for the free will of man and that is why evil is rampant in our world. The problem with this view is that it says that evil has an existence outside of God. He permits evil in respect of the freedom of His creatures and He can do nothing about it. Attractive as this view may be, it does not accord with our faith and Tradition completely. Creation gives us a world in which evil comes into being through creaturely rebellion and God's response to this evil is not what we expect or want. We want him to annihilate the evil and cause it to not exist. But God responds in a manner totally unexpected by us. He incorporates evil into His providential plan for humanity and creation and thereby brings good out of evil.

Take away temptations and no one will be saved. Evagrius Ponticus

What Evagrius is saying is that our trials are absolutely necessary for our redemption. In a sense. God destroys evil from within as opposed to destroying it from without by wiping it out of existence. Remember, that if God decided to destroy all that is evil, no one would be left and all of creation would vanish.

Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil? Job 2:9-10

Job underlines the sovereignty of God – over all, including the good and the evil - and in doing so, he raises a question which is often forgotten. If there is a 'problem of evil' then there is also a 'problem of good'. We seem to glibly accept that there should be good, but we need to also explain why we think that good is normal and natural. Why we are on the receiving end of good needs as much an explanation as to why evil intrudes into our lives. And it is in fact Christianity that offers the most cogent and satisfying answer.

Christianity, far from being something that anesthetizes us from the brutal aspects of existence, faces evil and does not back down. It shows how evil can be swallowed and transformed into a fulfilment of God's benevolent purposes. For many years of

enslavement, Ukrainians turned to God and prayed for liberation, for the possibility of being free from foreign domination which culminated in the tragedy of 1933. And God responded, but not in the way we had imagined. Through the evil of the Holodomor of 1933, a new and independent state arose where Ukrainians could finally use their own language to praise God and to develop their culture. The evil of oppression was replaced with freedom, which confirmed the dignity of Ukrainians.

*In many ways, our time is the beginning – and not the end – of faith.
Patriarch Bartholomew*

Horrifying events such as the Holodomor starkly raise the question of the meaning of existence. This is a time for us to seek succor in our faith, and to be strengthened with the wisdom that is within our beliefs. Let our meditations on the spiritual significance of the Holodomor bring us into deeper faith and into a deeper realization that eventually, good will triumph over adversity and evil. We will realize that the universe is not merciless and cold but all of creation is pervaded with love, love for each and everyone of us. And if we come to know that we are truly loved, then nothing can overcome us.

*And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes:
There shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying.
There shall be no more pain. Revelation 21:4*

Vichnaya Pamyat!