

NO. 8 1
conducted 7/5/05

VIII

Metaphysical interview7 recorded 7/5/2005

ML: Today, we're going to discuss theodicy and its several attempts to reconcile the coexistence of evil and God. Any venture that looks to deal with the philosophical problem of evil, is theodicy. And there are many.

God's ultimate purpose, some philosophers say, is to glorify Himself.

He, by definition, He, alone, is infinitely entitled to do that without vanity.

But He does allow evil to exist so we will appreciate goodness all the more.

It is analogous to the way that the blind man healed by Jesus appreciated his sight more than those around him who had never experienced such a condition.

NM: Let me take up first what I have never understood. Why is there this

enormous desire in God to be glorified, ^{Why is that so acceptable to} ~~so accepted by~~ so many branches of

religion? We laugh at people who insist on being constantly glorified. We speak of neurotic movie stars or spoiled athletes. And crazy generals. Or impossible authors. One of the few things ^{we all} ~~humankind~~ seems pretty certain of is that excessive vanity, once it becomes a thing in itself, is dire. By that logic, a god-sized vanity ^{must be} ~~seems~~ worse. Where is the need for it?.

ML: Maybe we can change "glorified" to "loved." God wants to be loved.

NM: Why does God need to be loved? That's a large question. It may be true, but if God needs to be loved, then I think we are entitled to start posing a few questions. Is it that God's need to be loved is crucial because God, like us, is over-extended? When, after all, do we have our greatest need to be adored? It is precisely when we are worn thin, when our courage, our stamina, our determination, our belief that we possess worth, is attenuated. At such times, we ^{may be more} ~~are~~ in need of love.

ML: Are you saying that is where God is now?

NM: ~~Yes~~, I suppose I am. It is the only justification I can comprehend if ^{for}

God ^{needing so much} ~~truly needs our~~ Adoration.

ML: Moving to my second point, you find no interest in the argument that

He allows evil to exist in order to intensify our love for Him all the more?

NM: I find that strange. I've always been bothered by the excessive love

that God appears to demand, or, worse, that the churchmen who ^{rule} ~~found~~ His

places of worship insist upon. "Jesus needs your love, Jesus wants your

love." Well, Jesus is giving love, presumably. Does He need it in order to

receive it and return it? What they're saying—without understanding,

because they never follow anything to a logical conclusion—but one of the

elements in their thinking that repels most serious young people away from

theology, is that fundamentalists, for example, seem to make a point of not

thinking through to the consequences of their thought. For if God does need a great deal of love, then why? Why? The question has to be asked.

Doesn't it suggest that we dwell in a situation where God's fate depends upon our development as well—the good or evil world that we are developing?

Now, all we ~~as humans~~ have to work with in these theological speculations ~~and think~~ is what we know from our own experience.

Generally, people who ~~really~~ ^{desperately} need love are not in good shape. If God created us in His or Her image, which I do believe, then God ^{must} ~~also wants~~ us to understand some real portion of what is going on in His universe. It is to God's advantage, I would argue, for us to understand what God's needs might be. Unless, on the other hand, human history has been so vile and so awful, so permeated by the Devil, that God lives in terror, expecting to be

destroyed by mankind so soon as humans obtain enough power. That may be a real possibility. We glimpse the edge of such danger in medical technology for example.

ML: Here is another theodicy: Evil is one of the means by which God can test humanity and ~~can~~ see if we are worthy of His grace and His love. The evil and the suffering that comes to us prove to be educational, can make us better people. He is testing us and the tests are good for us.

NM: I find that offensive. Apply it to a parent and a child. We test the child—and in some situations we do test a child—but do we do it to see if the child is worthy of our love? Literature is rife with portraits of detestable parents, fathers and mothers of that ilk.

ML: Consider the second part: it is educational for us. It makes us better people. We do that with children—we do test them to improve them, we

and so be able to understand the world around us a little more. Do you reject that?

NM: I can agree that suffering is, yes, a mighty educator, but it is also an immensely expensive one. Some learn a great deal from it; all too many are destroyed. Suffering can be a Bed of Procrustes and ~~so maim~~ more than

spirit than it creates. Some learn best by suffering ^{through stages, shifts} in ~~small degrees~~. ^{in one's uglier habits. ~~It~~ It, for example,} If, for example, if you want to become a better man or woman, that might require not indulging greed. ~~not~~

ML: A form of suffering.

NM: A modest form. If I want something, and I can't have it, I may be suffering like a child. Whereas Dostoyevsky was referring to suffering at a high level: Can I go on? Is existence worthwhile? Suffering of that order can become too intense. Some people turn to suicide. And it can be true

that those who pass through such storms of the soul can come out on the other side not emotionally crippled, and have much to offer. But some are hobbled, and have lost ^{their} much.

ML: OK, let me offer another theodicy, the "now and then." Evil and pain exist in this world, but only as a prelude to the afterlife. There, no pain will exist. So God offers a balance: Much suffering, pain and evil in this world, but in the other, there will be none. The scales balance.

NM: That is comparable to a man thinking, "I'm poor, but there will come a day when I am wealthy." Of course, the poor man has nothing to offer concerning the way ^{and the means by which} he will become wealthy. He has nothing but his

hankering. By the same token, any notion that we will live in peace and beauty afterward may be naught but hard-sell salesmanship. "You won't

know what true happiness is until you buy this car. Don't let people tell you

it's a lemon; it's a wonderful car. You'll come back and thank me for having sold you this car."

In the theodicies you've presented so far, there is always the assumption that God is in control of our fate from beginning to end. By my lights, the prime theological misdirection rears up right ^{here,} ~~there~~. Anyone who

looks even casually at the variety of incredible animals that have come ^{to us through evolution (and/or Intelligent Design)} down the pile, has to assume that God may have said to Himself at a certain point, "This little animal, this macaw, is going to be the best of its species."

Then, it turned out that it wasn't. So God moved on and made a better bird or made a better hedgehog, or a better pig. Then, man came into it and ^(And, often, improve them.) began in his turn to alter the animals. My underlying notion is not that God

knows completely what He or She is doing, but rather that God is searching to do the best He or She can do to improve things. And, the moment you

(As we see every year on the American Natural Show.)

a full notion of
accept the existence, and therefore the hazards and perils added by the Devil,
is exerted in the ^{of} challenge
God's effort takes place against great odds. It has become a contest where

no one, human or divine, necessarily knows which side may win. In

contrast, look at how our minds, our sense of challenge, is reduced if it is all

being done for God's greater glory and all we have to do is guard our

patience and pass through our suffering. Because at the end, there will be a

happy ending—no! No! I much prefer the Greek's assumption that tragedy

lies next to happiness, and both compose the staples of our existence. We

can live with the hope that it may all turn out well, but such hope will be

empty unless we are also prepared to live with a tragic outcome. We need

to have the bravery to proceed, but in no way can we appropriate the

confidence to proclaim that a wonderful heaven is waiting for all of us, and

we need only to
all we have to do is keep our minds clean and, most preferably,

theologically
philosophically inert.

ML: The fourth theodicy is one of maya. ~~Do you know what that is?~~

~~NM: Maya...~~

~~ML:~~ Illusion. This is how some deal with the question of evil. They say:

what humans consider to be evil or suffering is either an illusion or ~~its~~ *it is*

unimportant. Events that are thought to be evil, such as death by natural

disaster, are really not so. It could all be part of God's scheme. All eastern

religions—Taoism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, take this stance—

they do not engage the problem of evil. You are mistaken if you think it is

really there.

This
NM: ~~That is one~~ argument ~~that~~ could survive until the 20th century came

along. I think the Holocaust shattered ~~that argument~~ *it*. Shattered it force.

majeure. A useful notion, force majeure. It ^{says that} means these particular facts are so

strong that they dictate the ^{first} ~~way you have to~~ ^{and maybe the only way you can} approach the problem.

Contemplate the Holocaust, the gulags, and the atom bomb, ~~and~~ the

mystery of suffering is intensified by at least one order of magnitude. ^{In} Now,

Consequently, the notion that evil is illusion becomes offensive. Of course, maya assumes

that all of the "outside world," good, evil, and neutral, is illusion—

wonderful, lovely outer events are as illusory as suffering. It's all maya.

But I must say I find that almost as offensive. It suggests that we are at best

no more than the equal of any holy cow in any Hindu pasture. Indeed, the

notion that all life ^{is} ~~was~~ ^{is} ~~was~~ illusion ^{is} ~~was~~ not a bad way for the upper classes of

India to salve their bad conscience at the sight of the hideous poverty

around them. But that's another discussion.

If you believe in karma as I do, and so believe not only in rebirth, but
in subtle divine judgment ^(it is subtle) (hopefully) concerning the manner in which you ~~will~~
~~be~~ ^{that remains} reborn, there is also a part of me which ~~is~~ sardonic and expects that God
may have His or Her bureaucratic problems with reincarnation. If
populations die at a steady rate with only a statistical spike here and there—
a local earthquake, a terrible storm or flood—God can receive and judge
incoming souls. Forgive this unforgivably crude presentation of celestial
mechanics, but it must serve ^{for the moment,} ~~to make my crude point.~~ When reincarnation is
flooded with a huge number of deaths that have no meaning—because they
are abrupt, even near-instantaneous, without warning, and provide no
opportunity to die with any grace, and so leave the victim bereft ^{of awareness} at the
moment of their death—they possess no sense of why they now must die, —
then they have less preparation within themselves as they enter

The Finest part of their spirit has
reincarnation. They have been lopped off. I would argue that a sudden,

unexpected death is much worse than death that comes to one after a

fear and resolve and
modicum of thought and expectation. I believe there is a difference *then*

~~between the two, and for all we know,~~ it may be profound.

So I think the Holocaust ravaged many ~~of the~~ divine procedures *in death*

~~concerning reincarnation.~~ I think there was confusion in the heavens, even

a celestial nightmare for God and the angels. *Reincarnation*
was floundered.

ML: Was it so different from trench warfare in the First World War where

they were killing 150,000 people in a week? Surely, that equals the rate of

people being exterminated in the Holocaust. By the time the First World

War was over, something like 30 million people were gone.

but not identical.
NM: I believe it's analogous, ~~When deaths occur too quickly, the powers~~

~~and processes of reincarnation can suffer chaos.~~

ML: So every time this has happened, like at ~~Stalingrad~~⁷, the battle of

Stalingrad, ~~or the horrors of China when the Japanese went into~~

~~Manchuria~~ all of those. . .

NM: When you go into a battle like Stalingrad, you are, at least, prepared

to die. What was most diabolical about the Nazi camps is that they were

most careful not to prepare people for death. They did not state: "We are

going to gas you today." On the contrary, they told the concentration camp

inmates that since they were lice-ridden and filthy, they would receive

showers. So, please undress. Those prisoners who were most obsessed

with cleanliness, trooped happily into the gas chambers. A minute later,

they were dying with fire in their lungs, and screaming, "You lied, you

cheated me." I am arguing that ~~it is one thing~~ for a thousand people to die

in a large room at a given moment, ^{*of betrayal is different*} ~~but the difference is whether they are~~

dying in a rage, feeling that God or someone or something on high betrayed them, ~~or whether they were prepared to die.~~

In contrast, the soldiers in Stalingrad knew there was a good ~~daily~~ chance they were going to perish. That, I would submit, offered less grievous problems to the powers of reincarnation than the ~~carriage~~ ^{obliteration} of the Holocaust. I repeat: it is so important to have a sense of why you are dying. I go so far as to believe that can prepare you for your next existence.

ML: Are you saying God was not able to accommodate many who were ready for reincarnation?

NM: What is basic in the universe? ~~One thing we do know are the laws~~ ^{Certainly} concerning the conservation of energy—we know that you cannot do everything at once for everyone. All existence seems to be built on that ~~set of proportions~~ ^{set of proportions}. So, to assume that God is in complete command of reincarnation is ~~notion~~.

equal to assuming that He or She is never overcome by even passing despair

at huge, unforeseen disasters—indeed, why must we assume that God

anticipates every disaster? Or possesses every energy for every occasion? (He or She created our world but that doesn't

mean every outcome contingency was delineated in advance.

ML: So, what happened to those victims of the gas chambers?

NM: I would offer this large assumption. I would say most of them who desire

did receive it
~~received~~ reincarnation, but in unsatisfactory fashion. This flows from the

argument I proposed earlier that the closest we come to heaven or hell is to

encounter some ~~other~~ angelic witty presence who decides how you are going to be

reincarnated. And where. When God's wit is present, that is as close as you

will get to heaven or hell, knowledge that you will have a better life or a

poorer one at the start of your next life. But when God is not functioning at

His or Her best because God is too beleaguered, too extenuated, too

despairing, too exhausted, then the choices made for reincarnation can

become gross, thick
~~become second-rate aggressively put~~ there's not enough of God to go

around. The Holocaust ~~dead~~ God's wit. Too much was happening at

once. And God, too, has limits, is not inexhaustible. This is at the core of

everything I have been saying: God is a divinity possessed of great

energies, great creativity, great possibility, but that ~~must~~ *does* not mean that God

is all-powerful.

ML: I hear what you say, but why is it more difficult for God to assign a

new birth to someone who died in the Holocaust than someone who died in

the trenches? I don't see the difference.

NM: OK, let's put it this way—you have been a teacher. You certainly

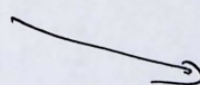
won't dispute the suggestion that you can walk into certain classrooms

where the students are energized and ready to learn, whereas others, when

you walk in, are lethargic. Some are eager to be in class and others are there because it is compulsory. So, I am saying that when you die with great bitterness in your heart, you are much harder to reach. How does this not apply to reincarnation? I am now speculating outrageously, but allow me. Let us say, the monitoring angel comes by, takes one quick look and has a sense of how the recently expired soul before him can prove strong here, weak there, and might well deserve to go ~~to~~ here or ~~to~~ there. In normal situations, they ^{can} make quick decisions. But if the soul is in disarray, if it is analogous to deciding how to give necessary counsel to a person who has come into your room in fearful ^{drugged-up} condition and is now threatening to blow his ~~brains out~~, you don't necessarily know where ^{or how} they should be assigned to class. And I think this carries over to some extent to what I'm talking about.

ML: OK.

Next one. The big



~~Next one: the big picture.~~ We've talked about this before, but this is

the fifth theodicy. God's divine plan is good. What we see as evil is not really evil. Rather it is part of a divine design that actually is good. Our limitations prevent us from seeing the larger picture. Certainly you'll grant that God envisions more than we do.

NM: Of course.

ML: So things we think are a terrible tragedy turn out —you know, you say a year later—I've heard you do this many times.

NM: Yes, the army. The worst experience of my life. And the most valuable. That's one thing. But to build a theological system on this theodicy may be excessively hopeful. It does not explain evil at all. It does not justify the Holocaust. The first person who can show me how that was good for God's purposes will alter my thinking drastically.

ML: The great example is Judas. Judas was a traitor, a betrayer, yet he was absolutely necessary to God's plan. . .

NM: How do you know what God's plan was? You're taking the received *Book*

wisdom of theologians who have been living with these enigmas for two

thousand years and coming up with the answers that serve their respective *and*

~~intended, intended~~

/needs. But what they conclude may have nothing to do with reality. I wrote

a book which concluded that two things happened because of the

crucifixion. One: that God lost to the *D*evil when He had expected to win—

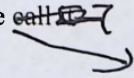
He thought Jesus was going to change humankind profoundly. He did not

know enough about His own most advanced creation to be able to foresee it

all. ~~No more than we as parents necessarily know enough about our~~

~~children—they can surprise us profoundly.~~ And God, having so much to

create and oversee all at once is not necessarily focused on what each one of

His Creations are capable of. So I'm willing to assume that Jesus was His bold stroke. In chess, for instance, when a really bold move is made and you are not sure how it is going to turn out, you record it with an exclamation point plus a question mark. I would say God's expectation for Jesus was both an exclamation point and a question mark. Then, like many another bold move, it did not turn out right. The Devil won—Jesus was tortured. At this point, God in His brilliance came up with one of the few great victories He had over the devil. He gave us to believe that His Son had died for our sins. What a deep chord was struck! But to say this was planned in advance—dubious! God may well have been responding to a crushing defeat with half a victory. That makes more sense to me: God was re-writing the depths of what had happened after the events had taken place—which is exactly what we humans do all the time. We call it ~~re-writing~~ 

~~different~~, some vast deity, very far removed, said, "All right, Young ~~One~~,^{God}"

this will be your territory. Do what You can with it."

ML: That's a gnostic idea.

NM: "And if you fail—well, other young deities have failed before you.

All the same, ~~do give it your best attempt~~ ^Y You are an artist, ~~after all, a great~~

~~artist, maybe; You are~~ the greatest artist we have available just now for

^{Given this scenario,}
Your assigned part of the cosmos." ~~All right~~ God soon discovers that He or

^{God is now}
She has a great deal to learn about evil. And ~~is~~ fascinated with evil. You

could go so far as to say God plays with evil, uses it sometimes, but is not

fundamentally evil. Is not fundamentally sympathetic to evil.

ML: Well, you have a view of evil as a powerful, dynamic force.

NM: Yes, I see evil as looking to destroy the part of the universe that we

know.

ML: Emerson said there really is no evil, just the absence of good. But that there are degrees of good, just as there are degrees of worth.

NM: Too easy. It enables us to go to sleep at night without pang or fear.

But on the nights when one can't sleep, sometimes you can feel there's evil

in the room, evil in your heart, evil in people around you—not all the time,

(rarely - thank God!)

but on those occasions when one's felt such a presence, you certainly can't

say it is not really evil, it is just a lesser degree of good. *Maybe* Emerson ~~may~~

~~perhaps~~ never sniffed the miasma. He was, after all, such a fine spirit.

ML: Here is another argument: Evil is the consequence of God permitting

humans to have free will. Human cruelty is the price of freedom. God gave

us this freedom and He cannot interfere. Without the possibility to choose

to do good or evil, humanity would be robots.

NM: That's the best single, strongest argument. But theologians abuse it.

They wiggle out of it. They put God back in control by the end of the *philosophical*
day,
~~argument.~~

ML: Well, yes, at the end of time, God does take over again. This is a
testing time.

NM: Here is exactly where existentialism needs to rear up on ~~all fours~~. *its precepts*

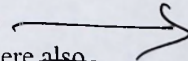
Yes, God had to give us free will in order to find out about us. He could

learn so much more about us once we were given free will. But, of

necessity, the door had to be left open to the ~~Devil~~. This was a move done,

perhaps—on a cosmic level—in fear and trembling. Yes, great fear because

the final answer had to be left open. It was not free will unless the ~~Devil~~ had

equal opportunity. *at influencing humans,*
~~God did not create alone. The devil is in there also.~~ 

I would add that it is not only an open war, but has become a tri-partite war.

If it is only a contest between God and the Devil, and we are no more than

some species of Astro-Turb

~~the turf~~, then we still do not have free will. We have to be equal as players

to God ^{and/or} of the Devil. To be free we ^{need} ~~have to have~~ the ability to ^{appear} ~~stand~~, so to

~~stand~~, as the third creative force in this combat. That ^{opens} ~~creates~~ a new kind of

fear ^{for us} ~~in humankind~~. Some used be terrified that the Devil would triumph and

we would all go down in disaster. Others supposed that God would finally

be victorious, and, yes, we, His soldiers, would all go to heaven. That was a

view held for centuries. Now, it is as if any one of the three ^{might} ~~could~~ triumph.

We can even conceive of a universe that manages to survive for a period

without either God ^{and} of the Devil—to a degree. I don't pretend to know how

to speculate on this. Let's say is it not inconceivable that man may become

more and more powerful in relation to God and the Devil. If They have

exhausted each other, we may even arrive at a point where it becomes man's world, our humans' world. But if we are in rough command of the show, that could prove disastrous, absolutely disastrous.

ML: What would make that come about?

NM: Technology. It's obvious—well, obvious to me—that every effort is being made in these years to replicate a human being and, once done, forge armies of them. It might take two centuries but it does seem to be what we humans are hell-bent on doing. At that point, free will will have grown so large and so livid that it will be looking to replace God.

ML: Here is the last theodicy. The eighth. God is a righteous judge. And so people get what they deserve. If someone suffers, it is because they have committed a sin that merits such suffering.

NM: What if a divine balance has been disrupted? We had a different

relation to existence ten thousand years ago. You had to hunt an animal

down if you wished to eat ^{meat} ~~such food~~. Now the beasts are brought to

stockyards. ^{Flesh} ~~Meat~~ for consumption is slaughtered in ~~all kinds of~~

disagreeable fashion. Sows are kept in cribs so small they do not have room

~~These animals~~ to move once they are fattened. The world of nature was once built on the

basis that nearly everything contributed to the feeding cycle. Add

reincarnation, and the cycles of life and death were taken care of. This was

the original and doubtless beautiful conception. Today, as one example, the

overlay of contemporary agribusiness has skewed it. In like fashion, the

earlier human notion that excessive evil was compensated for—that if you

were killed before your time, reincarnation could make adjustments—may

no longer be operative. Yet it is still remains the only explanation I know

for why many young soldiers are, when tested, ready to die in battle. I think they have a sense—comparable in some degree to the terrorists who are blowing themselves up—that they are going somewhere special. Right or wrong, this is their belief. It's a deep belief. So deep that one cannot necessarily ignore *the possibility that it is real.*

But repeat this theodicy, would you?

ML: God is righteous. People get what they deserve.

NM: God does the best He or She can do. That doesn't mean people get what they deserve. If they did, the universe would be equal to a clock.

ML: Would you agree that it was inevitable once God gave us free will, and intelligence, that technology would follow?

NM: No. I am working against the tide on this one, but it could be that at a certain point God hoped and expected all of us would become psychic.

Great entertainers would be so intense in their art that men and women all over the world could experience the performance. Yes. Depending on how skilled and beautiful your senses had become, you could receive these performances, you could have people influencing other people at great distances. Of course, it did not happen. We looked instead for technological means of communicating. And that blunted the possibility of such fine senses. It helps to account for the near-mute, somewhat odd and wistful sense we acquire when we watch a world event on television.

ML: I would say that if you put people in a physical world, they are going to invent the wheel. And once they do, technology follows from that.

NM: No, sir. No, sir. Electronics have nothing to do with the wheel. That was one jump by mankind which God may have had nothing to do with.

ML: So when we went from a mechanical universe to an electronic universe—

NM: A leap not anticipated. Or such is my speculation. We still don't know what electricity is, nor light, nor sound. We manipulate these forces without knowing their inner nature. I say that ~~being~~ ^{being} contributes to a great ~~sense of contemporary~~ ^{zone} uneasiness in ~~us~~ ^{each of us,}

Now most people who believe in reincarnation do expect that sooner or later they will reach enlightenment or some equitable resting place, and look back upon the problems and sufferings of earthly life as no more than way-stations on the journey. But I can't agree. I think reincarnation makes no sense if the end is foretold. I can't emphasize this enough. None of my arguments make sense if the end is known. It is precisely because the end is unknown that human terror sits at the root of every theology, as it has for

millennia. It is so difficult for humans to accept the likelihood that this world is as open and undecipherable, as chaotic, as wayward, as playful, as perverse, as unexpected as, in secret, we fear it is. I think this is what has driven any number of theologians to the notion that it has all been foretold, that the end has been granted to us. But, such conclusions are not only philosophically outrageous, but have gotten us into all sorts of trouble. Because a foreordained end narrows our lives, shrinks our thinking, and tends to bring out the worst in us. We become addicted to quick judgment concerning others.

ML: In all these conversations we've had about the nature of God, your supposition has been that God makes mistakes, He is not perfect, He is much like us. But we know we have evil in us. There is evil in us as individuals, and as a race. And if God is so much like us, then God does

indeed have evil in Him or Her. And that explains everything—you don't need a devil.

NM: No, no, no, no, I don't think that's it at all. God could have a little evil in Him and the Devil a great deal. If God has a little evil in Him, fine.

ML: Let's say it's 80/20. If God just has 20% evil, wouldn't that be enough to account for all the natural disasters and the Holocaust?

NM: Probably. But 80/20 is an assumption. What if it's 95/5 or 98/2? This sort of argument one can only grapple with in a novel. That could be interesting.

ML: There are theologians who take this position. They're called "open theists" and take the position that God is imperfect and has enough evil in Him—and the evil in God, coupled with the devil, is responsible for the miseries of the world.

NM: Well, that could certainly be an answer, and if you want to respect the Old Testament as more than a great work of literature, but ^{also} as a document with some reality, you certainly have a Jehovah out there wreaking evil on a large scale as well as goodness. And it could be that God, being existential like us, was trying to reduce the amount of evil in Himself or Herself.

ML: By doing what?

NM: For one thing, by trying to get that prodigious temper under control. By daring to have a Son, a great attempt to improve matters. It may be God was trying for more, over and over, and often deciding, "No, this move won't work." It may be that after Christ's death, He had to decide if He wished to build the Catholic Church. And maybe the Devil was joining Him. It may be easier to comprehend the history of the Catholic Church if

~~on~~ *and worked in*
we assume that they were building this Church together ~~in~~ collaboration,

~~and~~ with some considerable unhappiness, yes, God and the Devil built it together as most unhappy and embattled partners.

In other words, God may be out on an odyssey not unrelated to ours.

He or She may get better along the way, but not succeed altogether.

ML: Are you saying that many human institutions can be the creation of

both God and the Devil?

NM: Absolutely.

ML: Do you see any human organizations or institutions that are free from

the taint of evil? Or are they all mixed?

NM: I think there's evil in everything.

ML: Baseball teams. . .

NM: Of course.

ML: Football. . .

NM: How not? [pause] One last thought. Earlier, you were advancing the argument that suffering is good for you. That submitting to God's will without complaint is virtuous. And this virtue will earn you all kinds of rewards. We will endure whatever God sends since that is our passage to eternal bliss. Of course, if you dare to ask how a perfect God can make matters so imperfect, or worse, unjust, the only answer you can ^{give} receive is,

"Do not presume to understand the mind of God." Right there, is the most dangerous single argument advanced by churchmen. It is exactly what drives people out of their faith because it tends to make faith brittle. Any time there is something you cannot comprehend, you are told, "It is beyond you—your faith has to carry you through this." So greater and greater

(Sooner or later, and in so many, faith ~~says~~
demands are placed upon faith, ~~until it~~ snaps. And people leave the Church,

("Do not presume to understand the universe, 4)
leave religion, cease to believe. *while it is the most-employed of the*
in its final effect,
various explanations of evil, it is also ~~the most unbalanced,~~
the most demoralizing.

I vote then, as is obvious, for an existential God who does not demand my unwavering faith, but prefers instead that we look to find, despite God's flaws and ours, a core of mutual respect as we set out together to create a vision that can lead us into the unforeseeable future out there with its galaxies, its light-years, its enigmas, and ultimately, let us hope, its subtle availability. Perhaps the greatest gods of the cosmos are also on a search and may not be wholly undisposed to welcome Us.

Metaphysical interview 7 recorded 7/5/2005

ML: Today, we're going to discuss theodicy and its several attempts to reconcile the coexistence of evil and God. Any venture that looks to deal with the philosophical problem of evil, is theodicy. And there are many.

God's ultimate purpose, some philosophers say, is to glorify Himself.

He,, by definition, He, alone, is infinitely entitled to do that without vanity.

But He does allow evil to exist so we will appreciate goodness all the more.

It is analogous to the way that the blind man healed by Jesus appreciated his sight more than those around him who had never experienced such a condition.

NM: Let me take up first what I have never understood. Why is there this enormous desire in God to be glorified so accepted by so many branches of

religion? We laugh at people who insist on being constantly glorified. We speak of neurotic movie stars or spoiled athletes. And crazy generals. Or impossible authors. One of the few things humankind seems pretty certain of is that excessive vanity, once it becomes a thing in itself, is dire. By that logic, a god-sized vanity seems worse. Where is the need for it?

ML: Maybe we can change "glorified" to "loved." God wants to be loved.

NM: Why does God need to be loved? That's a large question. It may be true, but if God needs to be loved, then I think we are entitled to start posing a few questions. Is it that God's need to be loved is crucial because God, like us, is over-extended? When, after all, do we have our greatest need to be adored? It is precisely when we are worn thin, when our courage, our stamina, our determination, our belief that we possess worth, is attenuated. At such times, we are in need of love.

ML: Are you saying that is where God is now?

NM: Yes, I suppose I am. It is the only justification I can comprehend if God truly needs our adoration.

ML: Moving to my second point, you find no interest in the argument that He allows evil to exist in order to intensify our love for Him all the more?

NM: I find that strange. I've always been bothered by the excessive love that God appears to demand, or, worse, that the churchmen who found His places of worship insist upon. "Jesus needs your love, Jesus wants your love." Well, Jesus is giving love, presumably. Does He need it in order to receive it and return it? What they're saying—without understanding, because they never follow anything to a logical conclusion—but one of the elements in their thinking that repels most serious young people away from theology, is that fundamentalists, for example, seem to make a point of not

thinking through to the consequences of their thought. For if God does need

a great deal of love, then why? Why? The question has to be asked.

Doesn't it suggest that we dwell in a situation where God's fate depends

upon our development as well—the good or evil world that we are

developing?

Now, all we, as humans, have to work with in these theological

speculations and think is what we know from our own experience.

Generally, people who really need love are not in good shape. If God

created us in His or Her image, which I do believe, then God also wants us

to understand some real portion of what is going on in His universe. It is to

God's advantage, I would argue, for us to understand what God's needs

might be. Unless, on the other hand, human history has been so vile and so

awful, so permeated by the devil, that God lives in terror, expecting to be

destroyed by mankind so soon as humans obtain enough power. That may be a real possibility. We glimpse the edge of such danger in medical technology for example.

ML: Here is another theodicy: Evil is one of the means by which God can test humanity and can see if we are worthy of His grace and His love. The evil and the suffering that comes to us prove to be educational, can make us better people. He is testing us and the tests are good for us.

NM: I find that offensive. Apply it to a parent and a child. We test the child—and in some situations we do test a child—but do we do it to see if the child is worthy of our love? Literature is rife with portraits of detestable parents, fathers and mothers of that ilk.

ML: Consider the second part: it is educational for us. It makes us better people. We do that with children—we do test them to improve them, we

say, "Now that you've been through that, you're a better person for it." We do that all the time to our children.

NM: On the other hand, there is also large vanity in the assumption that God knows all about evil. Why not try to live with the notion that God is trying to discover what evil is about? What if evil is, at present, more bottomless than good? To say it once again, I work on the notion that God is not all-powerful, and that opens all sorts of questions. The first is God's relation to evil. Is He trying to discover more about it? May it be that God doesn't comprehend evil all that well, any more than as parents we understand it? If children are moving toward evil, are parents always the first to know? Not often.

ML: It was Dostoyevsky who said suffering is the soul-origin of consciousness. That only through suffering could we improve our minds,

and so be able to understand the world around us a little more. Do you reject that?

NM: I can agree that suffering is, yes, a mighty educator, but it is also an immensely expensive one. Some learn a great deal from it; all too many are destroyed. Suffering can be a Bed of Procrustes and so maims more than spirit than it creates. Some learn best by suffering in small degrees. If, for example, if you want to become a better man or woman, that might require not indulging greed.

ML: A form of suffering.

NM: A modest form. If I want something, and I can't have it, I may be suffering like a child. Whereas Dostoyevsky was referring to suffering at a high level: Can I go on? Is existence worthwhile? Suffering of that order can become too intense. Some people turn to suicide. And it can be true

that those who pass through such storms of the soul can come out on the other side not emotionally crippled, and have much to offer. But some are hobbled, and have lost much.

ML: OK, let me offer another theodicy, the "now and then." Evil and pain exist in this world, but only as a prelude to the afterlife. There, no pain will exist. So God offers a balance: Much suffering, pain and evil in this world, but in the other, there will be none. The scales balance.

NM: That is comparable to a man thinking, "I'm poor, but there will come a day when I am wealthy." Of course, the poor man has nothing to offer concerning the way he will become wealthy. He has nothing but his hankering. By the same token, any notion that we will live in peace and beauty afterward may be naught but hard-sell salesmanship. "You won't know what true happiness is until you buy this car. Don't let people tell you

it's a lemon; it's a wonderful car. You'll come back and thank me for having sold you this car."

In the theodicies you've presented so far, there is always the assumption that God is in control of our fate from beginning to end. By my lights, the prime theological misdirection rears up right there. Anyone who looks even casually at the variety of incredible animals that have come down the pike, has to assume that God may have said to Himself at a certain point, "This little animal, this macaw, is going to be the best of its species." Then, it turned out that it wasn't. So God moved on and made a better bird or made a better hedgehog, or a better pig. Then, man came into it and began in his turn to alter the animals. My underlying notion is not that God knows completely what He or She is doing, but rather that God is searching to do the best He or She can do to improve things. And, the moment you

accept the existence, and therefore the hazards and perils added by the devil, God's effort takes place against great odds. It has become a contest where no one, human or divine, necessarily knows which side may win. In contrast, look at how our minds, our sense of challenge, is reduced if it is all being done for God's greater glory and all we have to do is guard our patience and pass through our suffering. Because at the end, there will be a happy ending—no! No! I much prefer the Greek's assumption that tragedy lies next to happiness, and both compose the staples of our existence. We can live with the hope that it may all turn out well, but such hope will be empty unless we are also prepared to live with a tragic outcome. We need to have the bravery to proceed, but in no way can we appropriate the confidence to proclaim that a wonderful heaven is waiting for all of us, and

all we have to do is keep our minds clean and, most preferably,
philosophically inert.

ML: The fourth theodicy is one of maya. Do you know what that is?

NM: Maya. . .

ML: Illusion. This is how some deal with the question of evil. They say:
what humans consider to be evil or suffering is either an illusion or it's
unimportant. Events that are thought to be evil, such as death by natural
disaster, are really not so. It could all be part of God's scheme. All eastern
religions—Taoism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, take this stance—
they do not engage the problem of evil. You are mistaken if you think it is
really there.

NM: That is one argument that could survive until the 20th century came
along. I think the Holocaust shattered that argument. Shattered it force

majeur. A useful notion, force majeure. It means these particular facts are so strong that they dictate the way you have to approach the problem.

Contemplate the Holocaust, the gulags, and the atom bomb, and the mystery of suffering is intensified by at least one order of magnitude. Now, the notion that evil is illusion becomes offensive. Of course, maya assumes that all of the "outside world," good, evil, and neutral, is illusion—wonderful, lovely outer events are as illusory as suffering. It's all maya. But I must say I find that almost as offensive. It suggests that we are at best no more than the equal of any holy cow in any Hindu pasture. Indeed, the notion that all life was illusion was not a bad way for the upper classes of India to salve their bad conscience at the sight of the hideous poverty around them. But that's another discussion.

If you believe in karma as I do, and so believe not only in rebirth, but in subtle divine judgment (hopefully) concerning the manner in which you are reborn, there is also a part of me which is sardonic and expects that God may have His or Her bureaucratic problems with reincarnation. If populations die at a steady rate with only a statistical spike here and there—a local earthquake, a terrible storm or flood—God can receive and judge incoming souls. Forgive this unforgivably crude presentation of celestial mechanics, but it must serve to make my crude point. When reincarnation is flooded with a huge number of deaths that have no meaning—because they are abrupt, even near-instantaneous, without warning, and provide no opportunity to die with any grace, and so leave the victim bereft at the moment of their death—they possess no sense of why they now must die, then they have less preparation within themselves as they enter

reincarnation. They have been lopped off. I would argue that a sudden, unexpected death is much worse than death that comes to one after a modicum of thought and expectation. I believe there is a difference between the two, and for all we know, it may be profound.

So I think the Holocaust ravaged many of the divine procedures concerning reincarnation. I think there was confusion in the heavens, even a celestial nightmare for God and the angels.

ML: Was it so different from trench warfare in the First World War where they were killing 150,000 people in a week? Surely, that equals the rate of people being exterminated in the Holocaust. By the time the First World War was over, something like 30 million people were gone.

NM: I believe it's analogous. When deaths occur too quickly, the powers and processes of reincarnation can suffer chaos.

ML: So every time this has happened, like at Stalingrad, the battle of

Stalingrad, or the horrors of China when the Japanese went into

Manchuria—all of those. . .

NM: When you go into a battle like Stalingrad, you are, at least, prepared

to die. What was most diabolical about the Nazi camps is that they were

most careful not to prepare people for death. They did not state: "We are

going to gas you today." On the contrary, they told the concentration camp

inmates that since they were lice-ridden and filthy, they would receive

showers. So, please undress. Those prisoners who were most obsessed

with cleanliness, trooped happily into the gas chambers. A minute later,

they were dying with fire in their lungs, and screaming, "You lied, you

cheated me." I am arguing that it is one thing for a thousand people to die

in a large room at a given moment, but the difference is whether they are

dying in a rage, feeling that God or someone or something on high betrayed them, or whether they were prepared to die.

In contrast, the soldiers in Stalingrad knew there was a good daily chance they were going to perish. That, I would submit, offered less grievous problems to the powers of reincarnation than the carnage of the Holocaust. I repeat: it is so important to have a sense of why you are dying. I go so far as to believe that can prepare you for your next existence.

ML: Are you saying God was not able to accommodate many who were ready for reincarnation?

NM: What is basic in the universe? One thing we do know are the laws concerning the conservation of energy—we know that you cannot do everything at once for everyone. All existence seems to be built on that notion. So, to assume that God is in complete command of reincarnation is

equal to assuming that He or She is never overcome by even passing despair at huge, unforeseen disasters—indeed, why must we assume that God anticipates every disaster? He or She created our world but that doesn't mean every last contingency was delineated in advance.

ML: So, what happened to those victims of the gas chambers?

NM: I would offer this large assumption. I would say most of them received reincarnation, but in unsatisfactory fashion. This flows from the argument I proposed earlier that the closest we come to heaven or hell is to encounter the witty presence who decides how you are going to be reincarnated. And where. When God's wit is present, that is as close as you will get to heaven or hell, knowledge that you will have a better life or a poorer one at the start of your next life. But when God is not functioning at His or Her best because God is too beleaguered, too extenuated, too

despairing, too exhausted, then the choices made for reincarnation can become second-rate—aggressively put, there's not enough of God to go around. The Holocaust deafened God's wit. Too much was happening at once. And God, too, has limits, is not inexhaustible. This is at the core of everything I have been saying: God is a divinity possessed of great energies, great creativity, great possibility, but that must not mean that God is all-powerful.

ML: I hear what you say, but why is it more difficult for God to assign a new birth to someone who died in the Holocaust than someone who died in the trenches? I don't see the difference.

NM: OK, let's put it this way—you have been a teacher. You certainly won't dispute the suggestion that you can walk into certain classrooms where the students are energized and ready to learn, whereas others, when

you walk in, are lethargic. Some are eager to be in class and others are there because it is compulsory. So, I am saying that when you die with great bitterness in your heart, you are much harder to reach. How does this not apply to reincarnation? I am now speculating outrageously, but allow me. Let us say, the monitoring angel comes by, takes one quick look and has a sense of how the recently expired soul before him can prove strong here, weak there, and might well deserve to go to here or to there. In normal situations, they make quick decisions. But if the soul is in disarray, if it is analogous to deciding how to give necessary counsel to a person who has come into your room in fearful condition and is now threatening to blow his brains out, you don't necessarily know where they should be assigned to class. And I think this carries over to some extent to what I'm talking about.

ML: OK.

Next one: the big picture. We've talked about this before, but this is the fifth theodicy. God's divine plan is good. What we see as evil is not really evil. Rather it is part of a divine design that actually is good. Our limitations prevent us from seeing the larger picture. Certainly you'll grant that God envisions more than we do.

NM: Of course.

ML: So things we think are a terrible tragedy turn out —you know, you say a year later—I've heard you do this many times.

NM: Yes, the army. The worst experience of my life. And the most valuable. That's one thing. But to build a theological system on this theodicy may be excessively hopeful. It does not explain evil at all. It does not justify the Holocaust. The first person who can show me how that was good for God's purposes will alter my thinking drastically.

ML: The great example is Judas. Judas was a traitor, a betrayer, yet he was absolutely necessary to God's plan. . .

NM: How do you know what God's plan was? You're taking the received wisdom of theologians who have been living with these enigmas for two thousand years and coming up with the answers that serve their respective needs. But what they conclude may have nothing to do with reality. I wrote a book which concluded that two things happened because of the crucifixion. One: that God lost to the devil when He had expected to win—He thought Jesus was going to change humankind profoundly. He did not know enough about His own most advanced creation to be able to foresee it all. No more than we as parents necessarily know enough about our children—they can surprise us profoundly. And God, having so much to create and oversee all at once is not necessarily focused on what each one of

His Creations are capable of. So I'm willing to assume that Jesus was His bold stroke. In chess, for instance, when a really bold move is made and you are not sure how it is going to turn out, you record it with an exclamation point plus a question mark. I would say God's expectation for Jesus was both an exclamation point and a question mark. Then, like many another bold move, it did not turn out right. The devil won—Jesus was tortured. At this point, God in His brilliance came up with one of the few great victories He had over the devil. He gave us to believe that His Son had died for our sins. What a deep chord was struck! But to say this was planned in advance—dubious! God may well have been responding to a crushing defeat with half a victory. That makes more sense to me: God was re-writing the depths of what had happened after the events had taken place—which is exactly what we humans do all the time. We call it—

forgive me—we call it History. It is one of our fundamental activities. It enables us to keep on living. I suppose I even offer the assumption that God is not only like us in many ways but, indeed, He or She also has an ego to protect.

ML: The next theodicy argues that evil is not the cause, but the consequence of people failing to observe God's will. Universal, reciprocative love would solve most of the problems that lead to the evils in the world.

NM: Well, let me go back to something I said earlier. God is searching for a deeper set of meanings in evil. God does not pretend to understand evil completely. Evil has aspects that God's understanding cannot penetrate.

The fundamental notion is that God, like us, seeks to learn. Maybe at the commencement, whatever form it really took, close to Genesis, or vastly

different, some vast deity, very far removed, said, "All right, Young One, this will be your territory. Do what You can with it."

ML: That's a gnostic idea.

NM: "And if you fail—well, other young deities have failed before you.

All the same, do give it your best attempt. You are an artist, after all, a great artist, maybe; You are the greatest artist we have available just now for

Your assigned part of the cosmos." All right, God soon discovers that He or

She has a great deal to learn about evil. And is fascinated with evil. You

could go so far as to say God plays with evil, uses it sometimes, but is not

fundamentally evil. Is not fundamentally sympathetic to evil.

ML: Well, you have a view of evil as a powerful, dynamic force.

NM: Yes, I see evil as looking to destroy the part of the universe that we know.

ML: Emerson said there really is no evil, just the absence of good. But that there are degrees of good, just as there are degrees of worth.

NM: Too easy. It enables us to go to sleep at night without pang or fear.

But on the nights when one can't sleep, sometimes you can feel there's evil in the room, evil in your heart, evil in people around you—not all the time, but on those occasions when one's felt such a presence, you certainly can't say it is not really evil, it is just a lesser degree of good. Emerson may perhaps never sniffed the miasma. He was, after all, such a fine spirit.

ML: Here is another argument: Evil is the consequence of God permitting humans to have free will. Human cruelty is the price of freedom. God gave us this freedom and He cannot interfere. Without the possibility to choose to do good or evil, humanity would be robots.

NM: That's the best single, strongest argument. But theologians abuse it.

They wiggle out of it. They put God back in control by the end of the argument.

ML: Well, yes, at the end of time, God does take over again. This is a testing time.

NM: Here is exactly where existentialism needs to rear up on all fours.

Yes, God had to give us free will in order to find out about us. He could learn so much more about us once we were given free will. But, of necessity, the door had to be left open to the devil. This was a move done, perhaps—on a cosmic level—in fear and trembling. Yes, great fear because the final answer had to be left open. It was not free will unless the devil had equal opportunity. God did not create alone. The devil is in there also.

I would add that it is not only an open war, but has become a tri-partite war.

If it is only a contest between God and the devil, and we are no more than the turf, then we still do not have free will. We have to be equal as players to God or the devil. To be free we have to have the ability to stand, so to speak, as the third creative force in this combat. That creates a new kind of fear in humankind. Some used be terrified that the devil would triumph and we would all go down in disaster. Others supposed that God would finally be victorious, and, yes, we, His soldiers, would all go to heaven. That was a view held for centuries. Now, it is as if any one of the three could triumph. We can even conceive of a universe that manages to survive for a period without either God or the devil—to a degree. I don't pretend to know how to speculate on this. Let's say is it not inconceivable that man may become more and more powerful in relation to God and the devil. If They have

exhausted each other, we may even arrive at a point where it becomes man's world, our humans' world. But if we are in rough command of the show, that could prove disastrous, absolutely disastrous.

ML: What would make that come about?

NM: Technology. It's obvious—well, obvious to me—that every effort is being made in these years to replicate a human being and, once done, forge armies of them. It might take two centuries but it does seem to be what we humans are hell-bent on doing. At that point, free will will have grown so large and so livid that it will be looking to replace God.

ML: Here is the last theodicy. The eighth. God is a righteous judge. And so people get what they deserve. If someone suffers, it is because they have committed a sin that merits such suffering.

NM: What if a divine balance has been disrupted? We had a different relation to existence ten thousand years ago. You had to hunt an animal down if you wished to eat such food. Now the beasts are brought to stockyards. Meat for consumption is slaughtered in all kinds of disagreeable fashion. Sows are kept in cribs so small they do not have room to move once they are fattened. The world of nature was once built on the basis that nearly everything contributed to the feeding cycle. Add reincarnation, and the cycles of life and death were taken care of. This was the original and doubtless beautiful conception. Today, as one example, the overlay of contemporary agribusiness has skewed it. In like fashion, the earlier human notion that excessive evil was compensated for—that if you were killed before your time, reincarnation could make adjustments—may no longer be operative. Yet it is still remains the only explanation I know

for why many young soldiers are, when tested, ready to die in battle. I think they have a sense—comparable in some degree to the terrorists who are blowing themselves up—that they are going somewhere special. Right or wrong, this is their belief. It's a deep belief. So deep that one cannot necessarily ignore it.

But repeat this theodicy, would you?

ML: God is righteous. People get what they deserve.

NM: God does the best He or She can do. That doesn't mean people get what they deserve. If they did, the universe would be equal to a clock.

ML: Would you agree that it was inevitable once God gave us free will, and intelligence, that technology would follow?

NM: No. I am working against the tide on this one, but it could be that at a certain point God hoped and expected all of us would become psychic.

Great entertainers would be so intense in their art that men and women all over the world could experience the performance. Yes. Depending on how skilled and beautiful your senses had become, you could receive these performances, you could have people influencing other people at great distances. Of course, it did not happen. We looked instead for technological means of communicating. And that blunted the possibility of such fine senses. It helps to account for the near-mute, somewhat odd and wistful sense we acquire when we watch a world event on television.

ML: I would say that if you put people in a physical world, they are going to invent the wheel. And once they do, technology follows from that.

NM: No, sir. No, sir. Electronics have nothing to do with the wheel. That was one jump by mankind which God may have had nothing to do with.

ML: So when we went from a mechanical universe to an electronic universe—

NM: A leap not anticipated. Or such is my speculation. We still don't know what electricity is, nor light, nor sound. We manipulate these forces without knowing their inner nature. I say that brings contributes to a great sense of contemporary uneasiness in us.

Now most people who believe in reincarnation do expect that sooner or later they will reach enlightenment or some equitable resting place, and look back upon the problems and sufferings of earthly life as no more than way-stations on the journey. But I can't agree. I think reincarnation makes no sense if the end is foretold. I can't emphasize this enough. None of my arguments make sense if the end is known. It is precisely because the end is unknown that human terror sits at the root of every theology, as it has for

millennia. It is so difficult for humans to accept the likelihood that this world is as open and undecipherable, as chaotic, as wayward, as playful, as perverse, as unexpected as, in secret, we fear it is. I think this is what has driven any number of theologians to the notion that it has all been foretold, that the end has been granted to us. But, such conclusions are not only philosophically outrageous, but have gotten us into all sorts of trouble. Because a foreordained end narrows our lives, shrinks our thinking, and tends to bring out the worst in us. We become addicted to quick judgment concerning others.

ML: In all these conversations we've had about the nature of God, your supposition has been that God makes mistakes, He is not perfect, He is much like us. But we know we have evil in us. There is evil in us as individuals, and as a race. And if God is so much like us, then God does

indeed have evil in Him or Her. And that explains everything—you don't need a devil.

NM: No, no, no, no, I don't think that's it at all. God could have a little evil in Him and the devil a great deal. If God has a little evil in Him, fine.

ML: Let's say it's 80/20. If God just has 20% evil, wouldn't that be enough to account for all the natural disasters and the Holocaust?

NM: Probably. But 80/20 is an assumption. What if it's 95/5 or 98/2? This sort of argument one can only grapple with in a novel. That could be interesting.

ML: There are theologians who take this position. They're called "open theists" and take the position that God is imperfect and has enough evil in Him—and the evil in God, coupled with the devil, is responsible for the miseries of the world.

NM: Well, that could certainly be an answer, and if you want to respect the Old Testament as more than a great work of literature, but as a document with some reality, you certainly have a Jehovah out there wreaking evil on a large scale as well as goodness. And it could be that God, being existential like us, was trying to reduce the amount of evil in Himself or Herself.

ML: By doing what?

NM: For one thing, by trying to get that prodigious temper under control. By daring to have a Son, a great attempt to improve matters. It may be God was trying for more, over and over, and often deciding, "No, this move won't work." It may be that after Christ's death, He had to decide if He wished to build the Catholic Church. And maybe the devil was joining Him. It may be easier to comprehend the history of the Catholic Church if

we assume that they were building this Church together in collaboration, and with some considerable unhappiness, yes, God and the devil built it together as most unhappy and embattled partners.

In other words, God may be out on an odyssey not unrelated to ours.

He or She may get better along the way, but not succeed altogether.

ML: Are you saying that many human institutions can be the creation of both God and the devil?

NM: Absolutely.

ML: Do you see any human organizations or institutions that are free from the taint of evil? Or are they all mixed?

NM: I think there's evil in everything.

ML: Baseball teams. . .

NM: Of course.

ML: Football. . .

NM: How not? [pause] One last thought. Earlier, you were advancing the argument that suffering is good for you. That submitting to God's will without complaint is virtuous. And this virtue will earn you all kinds of rewards. We will endure whatever God sends since that is our passage to eternal bliss. Of course, if you dare to ask how a perfect God can make matters so imperfect, or worse, unjust, the only answer you can receive is, "Do not presume to understand the mind of God." Right there, is the most dangerous single argument advanced by churchmen. It is exactly what drives people out of their faith because it tends to make faith brittle. Any time there is something you cannot comprehend, you are told, "It is beyond you—your faith has to carry you through this." So greater and greater demands are placed upon faith until it snaps. And people leave the Church,

leave religion, cease to believe. While it is the most-employed of the various explanations of evil, it is also the most unbalanced.

I vote then, as is obvious, for an existential God who does not demand my unwavering faith, but prefers instead that we look to find, despite God's flaws and ours, a core of mutual respect as we set out together to create a vision that can lead us into the unforeseeable future out there with its galaxies, its light-years, its enigmas, and ultimately, let us hope, its subtle availability. Perhaps the greatest gods of the cosmos are also on a search and may not be wholly undisposed to welcome Us.