

## BOOK REVIEW

of

Charles Colson and Nancy Pearcey,  
*The Problem of Evil: Developing a Christian Worldview of the Problem of Evil*,  
Tyndale House Publishers, 2001.

February 2013

This review is by Larry D. Paarmann.

Charles Colson is well known as a popular author and speaker, and founder of Prison Fellowship. Nancy Pearcey is also well known as an author and speaker. Perhaps her best known book is *Total Truth*, which won the 2005 Evangelical Christian Publishers Association Gold Medal Award for the best book in the category of “Christianity and Society.” The main text of the book under review is chapters 15 through 29 of the 1999 book *How Now Shall We Live?*, also published by Tyndale, and by the same authors. The book under review is shorter in length, and designed for individual and group study. In this form it is still a little over 200 pages in length. The larger volume is a little over 640 pages.

The book under review contains an Introduction, and How to Use This Book. It is then divided into six sessions. Session 1 is titled The Great Modern Myth. The session has three chapters: The Trouble with Us, A Better Way of Living, and Synanon and Sin.

Session 2 is titled Denying Reality. The session has two chapters: We’re All Utopians Now, and The Face of Evil.

Session 3 is titled Sin, Suffering, and the Fact of Freedom. The session has two chapters: A Snake in the Garden, and Does Suffering Make Sense?

Session 4 is titled Redeemed: How They Love to Proclaim It. The session has three chapters: Good Intentions, In Search of Redemption, and Does It Liberate?

Session 5 is titled Sex, Science, and Despair. The session has three chapters: Salvation through Sex?, Is Science Our Savior?, and The Drama of Despair.

Session 6 is titled New Age or Real Redemption? The session has two chapters: That New Age Religion, and Real Redemption.

Each session ends with Discussion Questions. At the end of the volume is a fairly lengthy list of Recommended Reading.

The approach taken in the book is to include a fair amount of detail, supplemented with notes and recommended reading, but also a winsome writing

style that stresses the importance of the material. The topic of evil is an important and difficult one for an understanding of Christianity. Other books address this problem at a more advanced level, such as *The Many Faces of Evil: Theological Systems and the Problems of Evil*, by John S. Feinberg, revised and expanded edition, Crossway Books, 2004. However, the topic is a deep and difficult one of philosophy and theology, and advanced books on the subject may not be the best for a general audience. Nevertheless the topic is an important one, and should not be neglected. What is the solution to evil in the world? Colson and Pearcey conclude as follows on page 200: “By lining up the Christian faith against other worldviews and religions, as we have done in the previous chapters, we see with astonishing clarity that Christianity offers the only real answers to the most basic questions of life and the best understanding of how we can be saved.”

In Chapter 1, the problem of moral evil is addressed. On page 3 the authors write as follows: “Why is there war and suffering, disease and death? These questions are particularly pressing for the Christian worldview, for if we believe that the universe came from the hand of a wise and good Creator, how do we explain the presence of evil?” The authors answer their own question on page 4: “In short, the Bible places responsibility for sin, which opened the floodgates to evil, squarely on the human race – starting with Adam and Eve, but continuing on in our own moral choices. . . . This is the foundation of the doctrine that theologians call *original sin*, and it haunts humanity to this day.” The authors admit that this is not what most people want to hear: “The problem with this answer is not that people find it unclear but that they find it unpalatable. It implicates each one of us in the twisted and broken state of creation.” On page 6 they summarize their position: “Someone once quipped that the doctrine of original sin is the only philosophy empirically validated by thirty-five centuries of recorded human history.”

In Chapter 4, Colson and Pearcey describe how mankind has attempted to avoid taking responsibility for evil, and have denied original sin. On page 45 they write: “many Americans and other Western people continue to cherish the same utopian myth that produced such bitter fruit in the totalitarian nations: the same assumption that human nature is basically good, the same rejection of transcendent morality as confining and oppressive, the same grandiose dreams of social engineering.”

In much of Chapter 4 Colson and Pearcey develop the ideas that denying original sin and embracing the false concept of human nature being basically good leads to social injustice. They attribute Freudian psychology as basic to these wrong ideas. They write on page 47 as follows: “This line of logic can be seen clearly in the field of psychology, beginning in the nineteenth century with Sigmund Freud, who did more than anyone else to debunk the very notion of moral responsibility. . . . In Freud’s theory, people are not so much rational agents as pawns in the grip of unconscious forces they do not understand and cannot control. A committed Darwinist, Freud proposed an evolutionary scheme in which our primitive impulses (the id) belong to the oldest, most animal part of the human brain. While the rational mind (the ego) is a later development from the more highly evolved cerebral cortex. Thus, the things that society labels ‘bad’ are not really evil; they simply reflect the more ancient, animal part of the brain.” We are therefore victims, rather than being responsible, moral agents.

The above feeds into the belief in a liberal concept of government. On pages 52 and 53 we read: “when things go wrong, when poverty and crime prove intractable, the assumption is that the state is not doing enough. . . . welfare has spawned an underclass in which dysfunctional and illegal behavior is the norm. . . . Traditional liberalism fixes responsibility for crime on poverty and other social ills. Crime is not a matter of the soul, says the liberal; it is a technical problem that can be solved by engineering the right social conditions: devising the right public policies, distributing money to the right places, and arranging the right physical environment.”

In Chapter 5, once again the authors lead us to acknowledge the true source of evil in this world. On page 58 they write: “What does the face of evil look like? It looks like the kid next door. It looks like us. How can we view this carnage, this unspeakable evil lurking behind the wholesome grin of an eleven-year-old (who has committed murder),

and still cling to the myth that humans are basically good?” They continue on page 59: “It is sin that unleashes the capacity for raw evil. It is sin that blinds us to anything beyond our own selfish desires.” What happens to a society is summarized on page 66: “When we embrace nonmoral categories to explain away moral evil, we fail to take it seriously, and we fail to constrain it.”

In Chapter 13, *The Drama of Despair*, the authors survey where we are as a society. On pages 170 and 171: “What happened to the utopian dreams of the past two centuries, the vision of endless upward progress? For many people, those dreams crashed in the convulsions of two world wars that left a trail of horrors, from the blood-soaked trenches of Argonne to the ashes of Auschwitz. From 1918 to 1945, a little more than a quarter century, the world was shocked out of its complacent optimism by the inescapable reality of naked evil. . . . Since the universe is ‘without a master,’ Camus writes, all that’s left for the absurd hero is to exercise his free choice and rebel, thereby becoming his own master. . . . there is no ultimate meaning to life – that life is absurd – then why not seek alternative sources of meaning in sensual pleasure and mind-altering drug experience? . . . They, in turn, have brought those ideas to their logical conclusion in postmodernism, with its suspicion of the very notions of reason and objective truth.” Does not this sort of thing go a long way towards describing what is wrong with our society? Suicide is now the tenth most likely cause of death in the US for all age groups, and is the third leading cause of death for those aged 15 to 24. Not only does postmodernism and the rejection of Christianity lead to despair, it also leads to evil (murders, including mass murders, drug usage, immorality, crime, etc.).

In the last chapter, Chapter 15, *Real Redemption*, Colson and Pearcey move beyond criticism and analysis, and offer real hope, and real redemption. As noted above, on page 200 the authors write: “By lining up the Christian faith against other worldviews and religions, as we have done in the previous chapters, we see with astonishing clarity that Christianity offers the only real answers to the most basic questions of life and the best understanding of how we can be saved.”

This book makes it clear that there are things significantly wrong with this world and with ourselves. Christianity offers the only coherent answers to the basic questions of life.