

Editorial preface

R. L. Hall

Published online: 17 September 2013
© Springer Science+Business Media Dordrecht 2013

In all of its versions, religion has always been concerned with how its followers ought to live and always ready to praise and reward the faithful for righteousness. Just as clearly, religion has never been slow to condemn and even punish those who refuse its prescriptions for a righteous happy life. But on this matter religion's condemnation and punishment of the apostate, little agreement has emerged; indeed, in the articles in this issue, this discussion continues.

In our first article, Mikel Burley considers the claim that retributive karma explains human misfortune and/or suffering. Such a view is deeply connected to a belief in reincarnation since the concept of retributive karma blames misfortune and/or suffering on the sins that the victim committed in a past life. Although Burley does not discuss this, I am reminded of the biblical thought: "The fathers have eaten sour grapes and set the children's teeth on edge." But this biblical idea of reaping the consequences of past lives (not our own) of course does not imply reincarnation any more than the idea (in discussions of moral evil) that my "past life," that is, the way I used to live, does. So there might be some room for a concept of retributive karma that is decoupled from reincarnation and from blaming the victim. Burley however takes a different tack. He examines the disagreement between those who believe in retributive karma and those who find this belief morally abhorrent, observing that the two parties tend merely to talk past each other when they fail to see that their opponent's viewpoint presupposes a radically different way of thinking. The offence that some take at blaming the victim is not mitigated by the fact that defenders of retributive karma claim that it actually inspires more benevolence in this life since this will insure a better next one. Burley also points out that it is possible to avoid blaming the victim without abandoning a doctrine of reincarnation. He suggests that even though it would take a deep shift in

R. L. Hall (✉)
Department of Philosophy, Stetson University, DeLand, FL, USA
e-mail: ronhall@stetson.edu

one's form of life (à la Wittgenstein), perhaps a conversion, it is possible to develop a non-retributive sense of karma that completely changes one's picture of those who suffer from moral blame to positive moral duty.

The second article also employs a Wittgensteinian perspective, but in this case using it to critique a commonly held picture of what we are doing when we pray to God for forgiveness. On this common picture, it is assumed that God just is merciful and forgiving. But Verbin claims that the coherence of this picture depends on whether or not God is depicted as immutable and impassible. If God is depicted as immutable and impassible then it is impossible to make any sense of divine forgiveness, at least if asking for this involves asking God to overcome his emotional hostility towards the wrongdoer. If we suppose, as the biblical narratives seem to, that God is subject to rage and vengeance and hence is not immutable and impassible, then asking for forgiveness (that is, asking God to overcome his hostility toward the wrongdoer) is not ruled out as senseless. One possible way to make sense of this is to conceive of our pleas for forgiveness as speech-acts that function to move God to overcome his emotional hostility towards us. Rather than presuppose a description of God as always ready to forgive, perhaps it makes more sense to see our pleas for forgiveness as devices designed to help God manage his anger towards us. That is, perhaps we ought to think of our prayers for forgiveness as our way of helping God realize his capacity for forgiveness.

Our third essay returns us to the issue of reincarnation. Gianluca Di Muzio presents a moral argument for why Christianity ought to incorporate reincarnation into its belief system. The author's claim is that the Christian concept of hell as eternal punishment for human sin is not fair given the facts of human temporal finitude, chance circumstantial differences, historical contingency, the inequality of opportunity, and so forth. Perhaps humans need more time, or more opportunities to see the light. If Christians are right that God is concerned with our moral development, then it would seem to make sense that God would give us more time for our souls to develop, more opportunities to live will, more opportunities for salvation than can be contained in a short human lifespan. Perhaps Christians ought not to be so ready to think that God has all that he needs in the short lives of human beings to pass eternal damnation on them, especially given that some of these lives are very short and some have the cards stacked against them, not to mention the fact that countless human beings were born before Christ. If human beings were destined for reincarnation this would maximize our prospects for salvation; and surely this is what God desires. But before the moral benefit of the doctrine of reincarnation can be embraced, there are philosophical problems with it that must be addressed. A good portion of the essay attempts to address the usual philosophical objections to the doctrine of reincarnation, problems such as personal identity and the mind/body relation. Di Muzio presents the case that these obstacles can be satisfactorily overcome; and along with this, he presents the case for overcoming the objection that more time for salvation also implies more time for damnation.

Brent Kyle continues this discussion of divine punishment. His central concern is the atonement theory known as the doctrine of penal substitution. On this theory, God is justified for punishing a sinner for a moral or religious offense. However, the idea that Christ was punished by God for our sins does not make sense given that the

punisher must believe that the recipient committed an offence and given that Christ was without sin. Kyle presents a very interesting alternative to the idea that Christ was punished by God which he derives from Anselm. According to Anselm there is a way to pay for sin other than punishment: this is compensation. If I deface your home, I can be required to undo the damage and otherwise compensate you for your loss, or I can go to jail. Perhaps then God was not punishing Christ but Christ was, as sinless, compensating God on behalf of sinful human beings. As Kyle puts it: "... Christ pays the compensation that we owe to God (and cannot pay) *so that* we are permitted to go unpunished. In this sense, Christ saves us from punishment."

Our last essay is not directly related to the issue of punishment, but it is not irrelevant to this issue either. Religious traditions have tended to be exclusive and as a result to claim that something better, some reward, is in store for those who embrace the right theological beliefs and something bad, perhaps eternal damnation for those who disagree. Strikingly, however, there have been voices that reject this exclusivism; these are the voices of what we call religious pluralists. While religious pluralism may seem more like a uniquely modern push back from exclusivism and push for tolerance, the authors of our last article point out that this call for religious tolerance can be heard as far back as the fifteenth Century. However impressive and admirable this call from Nicholas de Cusa might have been, Aiken and Aleksander argue that its theological focus prevented it from keeping exclusivism at bay. And indeed when theology is the focus of tolerance, meta-exclusivism is not far behind. This happens for example in Christian imperialism where Christ is said to be present, however hidden, in every religion; and this suggests of course that after all there is only one true religion. While the authors do not defend exclusivism, they think its implied meta-exclusivism might be unavoidable unless we can find a way to pursue tolerance on grounds other than theological. Perhaps, as the authors suggest, a more productive way into religious tolerance is political.