

**Sigve K. Tonstad**

## **God of Sense and Traditions of Non-Sense**

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If, even for a moment, we give credence to Baudelaire's remark that "the Devil's cleverest wile is to convince us that he does not exist", then Tonstad's work is an equally ingenious attempt to make sure that deception does not happen. To give a voice to the victims who refuse to be silenced by the seeming interpretative plausibility of traditions of non-sense is, claims Tonstad, the theological obligation of those who deem unsatisfactory contemporary interpretations of the problem of evil. Tonstad's work takes particular issue with those traditions of non-sense which attribute evil to the dark side of God and of humanity or understand it as the primordial principle, permanently lodged in the heart of creation (Hobbes, Nietzsche). More specifically, defective traditions include those such as Freud's psychology of evil, Augustine's argument of privation, or its contemporary interpretations in the works of H. Arendt or R. Niebuhr. A proper response, argues Tonstad, requires a fresh look at the role of the long-neglected category of demonic reality in any search for the truth about evil and suffering within the interdependence of God, created beings and nature. The role of Satan and demonic beings as unholy subjects of evil is crucial for a balanced discernment between the view of God as the source of peace, goodness and love, on the one hand, and the utterly opposite perception of a morally unacceptable, cruel and genocidal God of biblical revelation on the other.

The meta-theoretical framework of Tonstad's narrative approach to interpreting evil and suffering in selected Bible texts, early Christian sources and the works of authors such as Dante, F. Dostoevsky or R. Williams presupposes an apocalyptic, cosmic conflict between good and evil. Tonstad presents the reader with deliberations about human freedom, the final self-destruction of evil and the possibility of living a permanently reconciled life of goodness and love. For the sake of comparison, the narrative reading of biblical texts in Tonstad's argument plays an almost identical role to that which Eleonore Stump, in her seminal work *Wandering in the Darkness*, assigns to the biblical narratives in interpreting God's pedagogical function of suffering. The key difference lies in that for Stump the validity of narrative interpretation is based on the distinction, within the episte-

mological category of the knowledge of persons, between first, second and third-person knowledge, while Tonstad implicitly relies on the doctrine of the intrinsic authority of the biblical canon as God's normative self-disclosure. Methodologically, Tonstad pins his faith on the integrated reading of biblical texts and the theological retrieval of long-neglected early Christian theological and literal sources. For example, he contrasts Celzus's and Origen's understanding of Satan, God's sovereignty and human freedom to lay emphasis on the rootedness of human freedom in God's character and to safeguard its integrity in the process of unmasking and overcoming evil. Tonstad is especially committed to providing the necessary theoretical space for pondering ontological questions in relation to God, created beings and nature so as to portray God as an ultimately transparent, meaningful source of freedom, love and peace. This theoretical stance is in stark contradiction to a great deal of the Christian tradition which, by dismissing Satan as the subject of human evil, has been forced to resort to an understanding of God as Someone whose intentions for humanity and the created world are arbitrary and inscrutable. However, if into the narrative portrayal of apocalyptic conflict between good and evil causal effect (operation) of demonic reality is reintroduced, then it is necessary to review in a fresh light the accusations against God of absence and of responsibility for evil and suffering.

It is also vital to point out the limits of Tonstad's portrayal of God as the God of sense, in contradiction to the traditions of non-sense. Even though they focus on demonic reality as the cause of evil, all attempts to divulge the primal sources of this phenomenon stop at the boundaries delineated by the biblical narratives. Tonstad's efforts to describe, discern and interpret the nature and role of the demonic in historical order tread on the heels of the same interpretative boundaries that Bonhoeffer argues for in his work *Creation and Fall*:

"The question why there is evil is not a theological question, for it presupposes that it is possible to go back behind the existence that is laid upon us as sinners. If we could answer the question why, then we would not be sinners (...). The theological question is not a question about the origin of evil but one about the actual overcoming of evil on the cross (...)." (P. 120.)

In the same way, Tonstad does not explain how these demonic subjects of evil are to be identified. Nor does he try to explicate at what level of human existence they operate or by what processes they succeed in causing evil in the historical lives of individuals and communities.

That said, the key purpose of Tonstad's narrative interpretation is not to just bring into the open a deficient and almost dogmatic understanding of the causes of moral evil. His purpose is also to reassess more positively the Christian theological tradition of conceiving God as peace, justice and love. Even though he does not address the question of natural evil, Tonstad's argument about God's ultimate conquest of evil at the end of history is relevant to all its historical manifestations. The ultimate overcoming of evil will take place, the author claims, at the end of history, after the protracted historical process of God's apocalypse (self-disclosure), by which he will unmask the deceptive nature of Satan and his followers and bring about the final dissolution of evil, opening the way for the permanent reign of peace and love.

In the first five chapters, Tonstad argues for the remythologization of the theological understanding of the created order, in contradiction to Augustine's, Bultmann's and Barth's insufficient interpretations of evil and suffering. More precisely, Tonstad reinscribes into the narrative retelling of the cosmic conflict between good and evil the crucial role of the demonic subjects of evil. He also questions the traditional Christian picture of a God whose intentions for human beings are inscrutable. This remythologization casts serious doubt on the picture of a God whose sovereign will is the foundation of the church's authoritative, even violent imposition of the Christian faith. On the contrary, Tonstad portrays God's relationship to humanity as one in which he gradually establishes a new order of love and peace, based on respect for human freedom of choice, while at the same time unmasking the deceitful and violent nature of evil and its impending self-destruction. By careful reading of selected biblical texts and early Christian sources, he stresses what Origen in his polemic *Against Celsus* succinctly claims, namely that no one will be able to know the origins of evil unless he or she grasps the truth about Satan and his angels.

Numerous scholars would strongly disagree with Tonstad's interpretation of evil and suffering. For instance, in his book *Evil and the Augustinian Tradition*, Charles Mathewes views Augustine's demythologization of evil as a crucial contribution to this issue, while simultaneously offering a nuanced explanation for Augustine's paradoxical acceptance of necessary violence – despite postulating love as the central value in the divine-human relationship. Even though both views offer the potential for mutual dialogue, they are, in the final analysis, irreconcilable. The reason is that, for Tonstad, the manifestations of God's sovereign will in historical time must

never limit the fullness of human freedom. It follows that Tonstad's critical reading of Augustine is in keeping with the importance he (Tonstad) assigns to the exegetical and narrative portrayal of God in the biblical texts while assuming the internal coherence and credibility of the biblical canon as an interpretative framework for explicating the problem of evil and suffering. Unlike Mathewes, Tonstad is most insistent that God respects human freedom and is not prepared to apply any form of coercion to extort obedience and make human beings consent to the good. It is also important to notice that in his call for remythologization Tonstad does not argue for a return to the medieval and post-medieval picture of the world, with its imagery of Antichrist whose historical manifestation is expected in the form of a Jew from the tribe of Dan, a diabolical Islamic ruler or the Pope himself. Tonstad's apocalyptic theology relies on a nuanced and original exegesis of Bible texts with special emphasis on relevant sections of the book of Revelation.

In the second part of the book, well aware of the limits of every interpretation which cannot explain God's mystery, as well as of the perils of conceptual idolatry, Tonstad is committed to examining the long process of God's transparent self-disclosure in historical time. Tonstad examines the creation story and the account of the first murder, as well as the narratives of Abraham and Isaac, Moses, Elijah, Job, and the rape of the concubine in the book of Judges. He aims to systematically unmask the subtle but one-sided Christian theological traditions and their interpretative strategies, which make God, rather than demonic beings, implicitly responsible for the existence of evil and suffering. By using the phrase "God of sense", Tonstad primarily refers to the sources that are made available to created beings to understand and practise the gift of freedom as the central value in divine-human relationships. The author's insistence on interpreting these sources represents an implied response to the charge that God does not act to prevent the proliferation of evil in the historical order. In fact, God's self-disclosure in Jesus Christ and the Bible is the most identifiable form of such acting, even though the protection of the role of human freedom in the process of comprehending and opposing evil leaves the impression of indolence or inexcusable inefficiency on God's part. By revealing His will to all subjects of the historical process, God has fulfilled the first condition for enabling human beings to comprehend and respond to the problem of evil and suffering. Divine self-disclosure in Jesus Christ and Scripture represents an invitation to all human beings to participate in the divine defeat of evil and

suffering. According to Tonstad, God's gift of freedom will triumph in the conflict with the demonic, deceitful strategies of power and is inseparable from the gifts of peace, goodness and love through which God finally overcomes them.

Tonstad also maintains that evil and suffering, the consequence of demonic operations whose power subjugates human beings, cannot be said to have any original purpose in God's created world. While Stump, writing in the contemporary Thomistic tradition, claims that all suffering is medicinal, for Tonstad this would be an excellent example of a deficient tradition of non-sense which implicitly assumes God's responsibility for the existence of evil and which makes efforts to overcome it seem contradictory. Even though it is possible to accept that evil and suffering can occasionally lead to healing and positive change, Tonstad insists that they are always the consequence of revolt against God (Mathewes), abandonment of God (Ellul), or of human "willed loneliness" (Stump). Evil represents the depravity of God's originally good creation and is the result of deception and violence on the part of Satan and demonic beings. There is nothing therapeutic or cathartic in terror caused by genocide, the attrition of whole nations and cultures, the killing of the innocent and weak or in natural disasters. Tonstad is especially keen on drawing attention to the dramatic reversal brought about by Jesus Christ when his death and resurrection overcame "powers and principalities" (a phrasal synonym for demonic reality) and inscribed on the horizon of human existence faith and hope in a new life, thus making way for the final triumph of good over evil. This "weak power" of the cross demonstrates its power in the act of resurrection and in the gradual transformation of the lives of those who accept the gift of the new creation. Life "in Christ", or participation in the life of Jesus Christ, thus becomes the most powerful demonstration of the beginning of an end of evil at the intersection of human history and God's promised future.

What stands out in the third part of Tonstad's book is the author's novel interpretation of the book of Revelation. It unmasks the true nature and final destiny of demonic reality in contrast to God's transparency in opposing evil and suffering. That which in the course of history appears to be hidden and abstruse becomes astonishingly clear and meaningful at the end of time. The final defeat of demonic powers is preceded by a portrayal of God as One who puts up with the work of evil out of necessity, not frivolity. This necessity results from the need to fully unmask the *modus operandi* of the demonic subjects of evil, their de-

ceitfulness, lies, violence and death. Thus, the corollary to the final resolution of the conflict of good and evil unfolding in the climax of an apocalyptically conceived theology of history is also to be found in deficient interpretations of traditions of non-sense. God does not wish the allegiance of human beings to be based on lack of understanding or on blind obedience but primarily on sufficient understanding and free acceptance of the truth about Him, themselves and demonic reality. The unmitigated portrayal of the moral deprivation of demonic beings explains not only God's seeming absence and the alleged lack of action which prompts "souls who had been slain" to cry out for justice but also the reason for the long historical period needed for their unmasking. In the final scenes of the book of Revelation, which describe the self-implosion of evil and the establishment of a new order of peace and love in God's promised future, John offers a long-awaited response to the charges of God's responsibility for the existence of evil and suffering. Evil dissolves itself under the burden of its own futility, meaninglessness and non-sense, along with the old historical order of fear, violence and death. Tonstad is most emphatic that God's judgement does not destroy evil but that evil self-destructs. After the final, great attempt at deception, demonic beings and their followers implode as the consequence of hopelessness and powerlessness in the face of the incoming new world of goodness, love and peace. In the final conflict between good and evil, when the true natures of both sides are completely revealed, God unveils Himself as the Life and Peace whose power of love creates the new world of perpetual harmony. The power of truth about this God of sense, fully transparent as permanent goodness, peace and love in the final act of cosmic conflict between good and evil, reveals the hollow deceptiveness of demonic reality. The deception of Satan and of other evil beings loses out in the confrontation with the truth about the transparent God of truth, justice, peace and love. The God of sense finally triumphs over the traditions of non-sense.

It is important to point out that the aim of Tonstad's work is not to respond directly to the specific objections to "divine violence" or "genocidal God" in the examples of the massacre of Amalek in 1. Samuel 15, about the moral justification of Old Testament animal sacrifices, or the ethics of different theories of atonement, with its human sacrifices. In an age when monotheistic meta-narratives are subjected to relentless doubt, those who seek to explicate why, according to the particular interpretation of Christian theological tradition, divinely inspired Word commands

taking life or carrying out conquest and destruction, face an immensely difficult task. Thus, the value of Tonstad's reintroduction of diabolical reality in the discourse about the origin and historical manifestations of evil and suffering lies precisely in a reconsideration of the entire spectrum of interpretation based on insufficiently critical evaluation of the concept of the ontology of violence. It also requires reconsideration of numerous theological responses to the postulate of an ontology of violence that fall under the rubric of a theologically or philosophically defined "ontology of peace" (Milbank). For instance, the questions one might pose include, "What does Tonstad's reintroduction of the category of demonic mean for Boersma's theory of non-violent atonement (*The Nonviolent Atonement*)?"; "Is it possible to justify Volf's argument for the necessity of a theologization of violence (*Exclusion and Embrace*) as the precondition for the politics of nonviolence?"; and "Is Milbank's proposal (*Theology and Social Theory*) that we should act as if sin does not exist possible, desirable or even necessary?"

Tonstad seeks to demonstrate how the reading of the Bible narratives by those who see in them a violent or even genocidal God is too simplistic and arbitrary, failing to carry out detailed, comprehensive exegesis and ignoring the nuances of literary style and form. Good examples of such inadequate studies of the Bible texts are to be found in the first three chapters of *Divine Devil? The Moral Character of the God of Abraham*, in which Fales, Anthony and Curley argue, from different viewpoints, for the moral unacceptability of the Old Testament portrayal of God. In contrast to them, Tonstad presents a non-violent and peacemaking God and questions not only their critiques but also the responses offered in the remaining chapters of this work. According to Tonstad's interpretation, insistence on the pedagogical purpose of violence (Stump, Anderson), interpretation of violence in the light of the rule of faith (Swinburne, Seitz), or descriptions of violence as necessary literary features (Wolterstorff) are the consequence of subtle, but ultimately unpersuasive interpretative strategies necessary to fill in the gap created by the exclusion of demonic reality as a possible cause of evil. Additionally, if Tonstad's argument is accepted, the doctrine of universal salvation (Talbot, Hick, Bentley Hart, Moltmann) is devoid of one of its key interpretative motifs. Specifically, Tonstad, just like M. Volf in his work *Exclusion and Embrace*, presupposes the existence of beings "who (...) have immunized themselves from all attempts at their redemption" (p. 292), so the idea of God's love as being so powerful as to transform even those who refuse it does not

seem to be tenable and represents an infringement of human freedom of choice.

The thesis that evil is self-destructive – one of a few common points with Stump's work – opens the way for Tonstad to argue convincingly for a permanently reconciled relationship between God, created beings and nature. Thus, Milbank's reliance on the power of imagination in creating the ontology of peace is here shown to be wholly inadequate. Specifically, Tonstad portrays Jesus Christ as the Creator of a new realm of peace which he, by the work of redemption, inscribes on the horizons of human lives willing to accept His gift of a new life. Comprehending and opposing the depth of evil and suffering requires far more than the power of imagination, claims one of Milbank's critics, and Tonstad's work admittedly addresses this objection. This is why it seems to me that the next logical step for Tonstad would be the interpretation of the biblical idea of the participation of humanity in divinity, succinctly described in Pauls' phrase "in Christ", to explain the processes by which divine reality overcomes evil and suffering in the historical order.

And finally, Tonstad's proposal that a remythologization of Christian theology is a necessary precondition for a more balanced grasp of the relationship between God, human beings and nature, with special emphasis on demonic reality as the source of evil and suffering, deserves several clarifications. First, the content of this proposal is carefully defined in an implicit dialogue with the stratified cultural habitus of late modernity in the form of Bultmann's demythologization of biblical theology, Augustine's demythologization of evil, or Taylor's exclusive humanism and disenchantment with the Western world. Yet, these well-known interpretations of the biblical text or late modernity are additionally complicated by Ellul's sociological analysis of western societies (*Hope in Time of Abandonment*). When referring to the monumental fallacy of modern man, he claims that there is no such thing as a critical intellect or a rational, scientific perspective on the world which prevents the modern man from accepting a biblical worldview. By abandoning God (secularization), modern man has accepted new forms of mythologies. They make him naive and credulous, subject to self-destructing doubt and propaganda. This is because, after abandoning Christian hope and consolation, he feeds on group delusions. Modern man, claims Ellul, is a projection of theologians who have difficulties with their own beliefs. Tonstad does not directly engage any of these analyses when he calls for the remythologization of theology but points to a specific phenomenon which is not altogether incompatible with some as-

pects of Ellul's sociological analysis. Tonstad claims that to deny demonic reality used to be a sign of intellectual maturity and a refined mind; but the reality of the Holocaust, the Gulags and a century of genocides casts a long shadow over this myth about the progress of modern humanity. He therefore repeatedly stresses the need to understand the Christian God who, at the end of history, overcomes the demonic reality of Satan and his followers by the non-violent power of peace, goodness and love. This idea has almost vanished from the modern Christian theological tradition, and Tonstad makes an effort to demonstrate its crucial importance for a balanced understanding of evil and suffering within the horizons of the cosmic conflict between good and evil again.

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### **The Language of Nature**

**Reassessing the Mathematization  
of Natural Philosophy in the  
Seventeenth Century**

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More often than not, the natural world can be quite perplexing. Even the things we today take for self-evident, need not have been such for our ancestors. Try to remember the disbelief you felt when you first encountered the fact that all bodies fall at the same rate, regardless of their mass. Surely, that cannot be so, a young mind thinks, an anvil is bound to strike the ground much faster than a tiny feather. Yet, experiments conducted in vacuum keep proving these intuitions wrong to this day. At least our young minds were in good company, as many ancient natural philosophers believed the same, and they could offer extensive and consistent explanations to support their claim. After all, the task of a natural philosopher was to make rational sense of the seemingly chaotic nature. And to do that, they

had to rely on the powers and discipline of their minds, because the physical world and the senses can be treacherous and deceptive. A long time ago, the best way to become a *physicist* (so to speak) was to read a book – Aristotle's *Physics*.

It took quite some time for us to become comfortable with the idea that the best source of knowledge about nature was nature itself. The uncovering of mathematical principles of nature is often cited as the turning point. We no longer needed to rely on clever teachers from the past to provide us with answers to our questions, we could simply ask nature, and it would gladly give us the answer, provided that we understood its language. Hence Galileo's famous adage about the book of nature being written in the language of mathematics.

This is the language that is spoken of in the book *The Language of Nature: Reassessing the Mathematization of Natural Philosophy in the Seventeenth Century*. The book is comprised of twelve distinct essays collected by editors Geoffrey Gorham, Benjamin Hill, Edward Slowik and C. Kenneth Waters, and published in 2016 by University of Minnesota Press as a part of Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science series. Contributors of this book are professors of various universities and colleges from the United States, Canada, France, Romania and the Netherlands, most of them specializing either in modern philosophy, philosophy and history of science and epistemology. Their essays are rallied around a common topic, namely, the so-called *mathematization thesis*, an idea that the ever-greater use of mathematics as a constitutive element of natural philosophy during the seventeenth-century played a pivotal role in the emergence of modern science. The soundness of this idea is probed from various standpoints: some essays are engaging with historical figures such as Galileo and Leibniz, while others focus on the development of important ideas like laws of motion. All of the texts are seriously researched and equipped with sizeable lists of references, yet topically distinct enough to avoid repetition and to offer a plethora of information. The historiographical approach that all these essays share makes them very enjoyable to read and every single one of them can be considered as much a compelling story as a scholarly article.

The subject matter contained in this book can best be described as an advanced commentary on a previously established understanding of a prominent historical milestone. Thus, this book is not a primer, a beginner's companion or an introduction to the early history of modern science, it is instead geared towards experts and enthusiasts who are already well-acquainted with the mathematization thesis.