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And The Atheist Shall Lie Down With The Calvinist: Atheism, Calvinism, And The Free Will Defense

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Philosophy makes strange bedfellows. Occasionally one finds that even though most of his intellectual commitments are contrary to those of another thinker, nonetheless one may agree with an opponent on some important point. It may initially be somewhat disconcerting to find oneself sharing the same philosophical bed with a thinker whose views are generally widely divergent from one's own; but it need not be traumatic as long as the reasons for sharing the same philosophical resting place are not the same, and as long as both do not draw the same conclusions from their identical commitment on the issue in question.

I suppose that most Christian thinkers would not assume that they held any major intellectual commitments in common with an atheist, and I imagine that is true in many cases. However, when one considers the issues involved in evaluating the Free Will Defense, he finds that a very interesting thing happens: he finds that a theologian committed to Calvinism must share the same philosophical bed with many atheists. As strange as this may seem, I intend to demonstrate the truth of this claim and to explain its implications by arguing the following two theses: 1) Many atheists reject the Free Will Defense as a viable solution to the problem of evil, because they reject the notion of freedom presupposed by such a defense; but it is also the case that a person who is theologically a Calvinist must reject the Free Will Defense as the solution to his theology's problem of evil for the same reason; 2) In spite of the Calvinist's agreement with the atheist in rejecting the Free Will Defense, the Calvinist argues neither that the Free Will Defense does not render internally consistent those theologies that can use it, nor that he personally cannot answer the problem of evil which arises for his own theology.

In order to demonstrate the truth of these two theses, my procedure will be as follows: a couple of preliminary points about the nature of the problem of evil will first be presented. These will prove helpful in establishing the truth of the second thesis. Then there will be a brief statement of the Free Will Defense. Following that presentation, I shall briefly sketch the interchange in regard to the Free Will Defense between the atheists Antony Flew and J. L. Mackie, and the free will defender Alvin Plantinga. Having shown that the issue between Mackie and Flew, on the one hand, and Plantinga on the other, ultimately resolves to a debate between compatibilistic and incompatibilistic freedom, I shall then relate the matter to Calvinism and explain why the Calvinist must side with Flew...

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