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978-1-107-02357-4 - The Severity of God: Religion and Philosophy Reconceived

Paul K. Moser

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THE SEVERITY OF GOD

This book explores the role of divine severity in the character and wisdom of God, and the flux and difficulties of human life in relation to divine salvation. Much has been written on problems of evil, but the matter of divine severity has received relatively little attention. Paul K. Moser discusses the function of philosophy, evidence, and miracles in approaching God. He argues that if God aims to extend without coercion His lasting life to humans, then commitment to that goal could manifest itself in making human life severe, for the sake of encouraging humans to enter into that cooperative good life. In this scenario, divine *agapē* is conferred as a free gift, but the human reception of it includes stress and struggle in the face of conflicting powers and priorities. Moser's work will be of great interest to students of the philosophy of religion and of theology.

PAUL K. MOSER is Professor of Philosophy at Loyola University Chicago. His most recent books include *The Elusive God: Reorienting Religious Epistemology* (Cambridge, 2009) and *The Evidence for God: Religious Knowledge Reexamined* (Cambridge, 2010). He is the editor of *Jesus and Philosophy: New Essays* (Cambridge, 2009) and co-editor, with Daniel Howard-Snyder, of *Divine Hiddenness* (Cambridge, 2002) and, with Michael McFall, of *The Wisdom of the Christian Faith* (Cambridge, 2012). Moser is the Editor of the *American Philosophical Quarterly*.

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For my mother, without whom not

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Behold therefore the kindness and the severity of God
(Rom. 11:22)

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Preface and acknowledgements

Human talk of God is often cheap and easy, and self-serving too. It thus leaves us with a god unworthy of the morally perfect title “God.” This book takes a different route, in order to move away from counterfeits and toward the real article. Our expectations for God, if God exists, often get in the way of our receiving salient evidence of God. We assume that God would have certain obligations to us, even by way of giving us clear evidence, and when those obligations are not met we discredit God, including God’s existence. This is a fast track to atheism or at least agnosticism. We need, however, to take stock of which expectations for God are fitting and which are not, given what would be God’s perfect moral character and will.

Perhaps God is not casual but actually severe, in a sense to be clarified, owing to God’s vigorous concern for the realization of divine righteous love (*agapē*), including its free, unearned reception and dissemination among humans. Perhaps the latter concern stems from God’s aim to extend, without coercion, lasting life with God to humans, even humans who have failed by the standard of divine *agapē*. God’s vigorous commitment to that goal could figure in God’s making human life difficult, or severe, for the sake of encouraging humans, without coercion, to enter into a cooperative good life with God. This severe God would not sacrifice a human soul to preserve human bodily comfort. In this scenario, divine *agapē* is the unsurpassed power and priority of life with God, and humans need to struggle to appropriate it as such, in companionship with God. It comes as a free gift, by grace, from God, but the human reception of it, via cooperative trust in God, includes stress,

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struggle, and severity in the face of conflicting powers and alternative priorities.

This book attends to the widely neglected topic of the severity of God, in connection with its implications for religion and philosophy. It contends that divine severity points us to the volitional crisis of Gethsemane, for the sake of cooperative and lasting human life with God. In doing so, it invites us to consider the priority of divine power over philosophical propositions, persons over explanations, and God's will over human wills. Accordingly, this book invites us to reconceive religion and philosophy in the light of the Gethsemane crisis, particularly in the significant areas of the methodology and epistemology of God, the value of human life's ongoing flux, the divine redemption of humans, and the nature of philosophy under the severe God worthy of worship. This reconceiving leaves us with religion and philosophy renewed by a needed interpersonal and existential vitality, grounded in widely neglected but nonetheless salient evidence of God's redemptive severity.

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