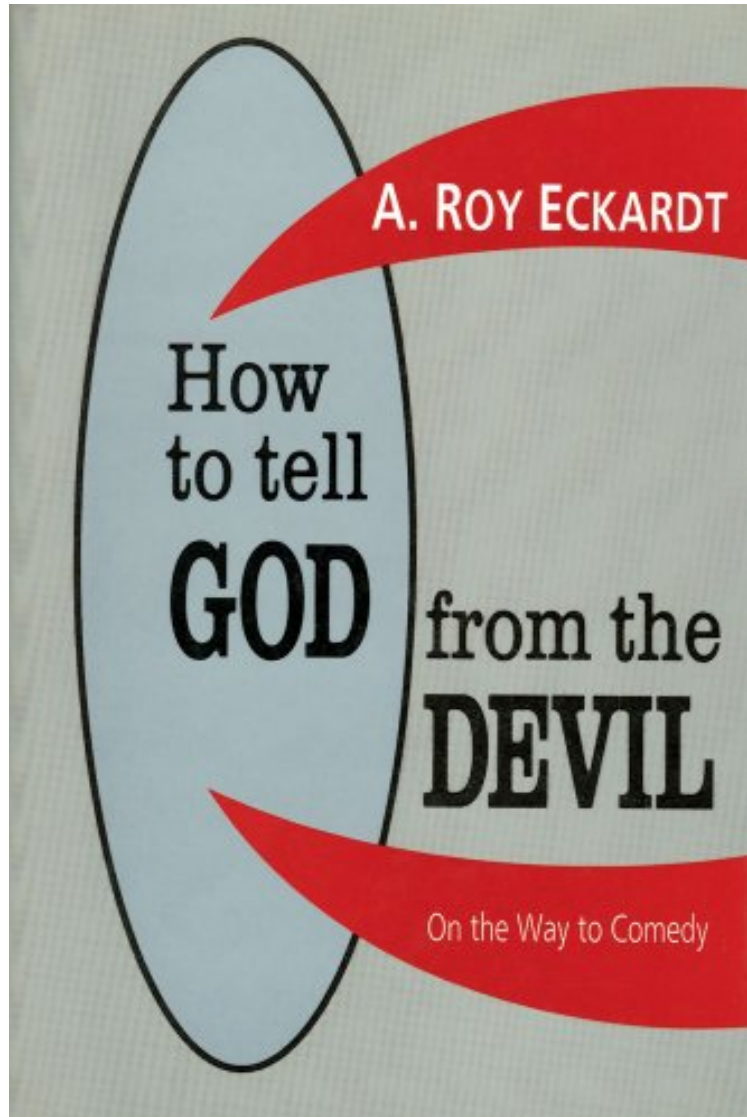


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How to Tell God from the Devil: On the Way to Comedy

A. Roy Eckardt

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A. Roy Eckardt : How to Tell God from the Devil: On the Way to Comedy before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised How to Tell God from the Devil: On the Way to Comedy:

How to Tell God From the Devil is the first book to depict the relationship among comedy, the Devil, and God. Drawing from Jewish and Christian theories, Eckardt describes comedy as a means to distinguish the divine from the diabolic. He presents a thorough critique of efforts throughout history to justify God in the presence of radical evil and

suffering. *How to Tell God From the Devil* is a sequel to Eckardt's fascinating earlier study *Sitting in the Earth and Laughing*. Eckardt offers a theological vision of the comic, and shows its practical use in differentiating God from the Devil. The viewpoint presupposed is a special application of the incongruity theory of humor, which sees humor as an attempt to deal with inexplicable occurrences. Eckardt shows how humor can make faulty explanations tolerable for examining evil and suffering, particularly the notion that God can somehow be "excused" for the terrible evils extant in the world. Eckardt critiques dualistic views that make the Devil and God independent sovereign beings, and monistic views that try to reduce evil to non-being. Eckardt holds God to be ultimately responsible for evil, in such ways that the only final resolution of evil—if there is such—is a form of divine comedy. Eckardt employs a variety of historical, psychological, sociological, philosophical, and theological sources. He discusses and assesses such diverse figures as Martin Luther, Reinhold Niebuhr, Zen Buddhists, Conrad Hyers, Nancy A. Walker, Jon D. Levenson, and Harvey Cox. *How to Tell God From The Devil* is an exceptional work, and will be significant and enjoyable for sociologists, theologians, philosophers, and specialists concerned with the study of humor.

“This intriguing study seeks to relate God, the Devil and Comedy. It is a metaphysical examination of God’s place in the moral universe that goes beyond theodicy and into a form of irony or comedy. The comic vision is able to carry ahead the discussion of God/Devil by calling attention to resources that a strictly theodicean analysis does not provide. Professor Eckardt declares that he is only in search of ways to tell God from the devil and through comedy, which provides a method of celebrating or coping with the incongruous, the contradictory and the absurd, he is exploring a way of doing so. The comic—including the humour of Zen and Jewish humour—joins myth in nurturing the human imagination and provides, according to the author, a peculiar metaphysical resource. The book’s premise, which may appear on first approach to be frivolous, is anything but: it draws the reader into the irresistible net of its logic until the triad God/Devil/Comedy becomes a firmly based metaphysical proposition. “Proving once and for all that comedy is not only a serious business but a crucial one, Professor Eckardt takes his reader on a step by step analysis of theodicy and of humour as a theological tool. His formidable knowledge does not get in the way of his style, which is lucid, open and often wickedly engaging.”—Glenda Abramson, Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies

“A. Roy Eckardt has succeeded beautifully in a most extraordinary task: producing a book on the problem of evil that is at once philosophically deep, eminently readable, and amusing. His main point, in fact, is that the cosmic and human conditions are not best understood as dualistic battlegrounds between God and Satan, or Good and Evil, but rather as being in a three-cornered struggle, between Good, Evil, and Comedy. His grasp of theology, philosophy, ethics, and literature is wide and firm, but he wields them lightly for both our reflection and our entertainment. Dante understood, as Eckardt does, that the tale of the cosmos is more a comedy than a tragedy, that God is the Divine Fool, that the matriarchs laughed in the beginning and the blessed shall laugh at the end. No one can read Eckardt’s final summation of the difference between God and the Devil without laughter, laughter that appreciates both his joke and his psychological clarity. The world, Eckardt suggests, is better for ‘the frail grace of a smile.’ His book is the best I have read in a long while to help us smile at both grace and pain.”—Jeffrey B. Russell, University of California, Santa Barbara

About the Author A. Roy Eckardt is Senior Associate Fellow at the Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies, University of Oxford, and professor emeritus of religion studies at Lehigh University. He has been president of the American Academy of Religion and editor of its journal. Among his many books are *Reclaiming the Jesus of History*, *For Righteousness' Sake*, and *Jews and Christians*.