

# Innocent suffering and the Christian God: Some Philosophical Reflections

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IN THE CONTEXT of the recent public outpouring of comment over the profound theological implications of the Indian Ocean Tsunamis, I would like to offer a comment coming more out of the complementary perspective of Christian philosophical reflection on God.

The popular conversation has generally had little difficulty in making the important distinction between horrifying suffering caused by moral evil (Beslan, Iraq, Sudan) and the equally horrendous suffering caused by purely natural events such as this one. Sometimes the latter has been described as ‘natural evil’, though there is something oddly out of place in speaking of any natural geological event in such ethical terms. How then can we think about the relationship between human beings, a fundamentally ambiguous natural world and a God of compassion? Does it all add up?

Two approaches that were aired over the weeks immediately following the tragedy seem to me to be fundamentally inadequate. The first is the view that the meaning of such natural catastrophes is to be read in the light of a theology of good and evil, and mostly this takes the form of claims about Divine justice and human sinfulness. Quite apart from the apparent category error involved here, such thinking runs clearly counter to the words of Jesus on this issue. Asked in Luke’s Gospel whether the eighteen people who died in the collapse of a tower in Siloam were ‘more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem’, his answer is an emphatic, ‘I tell you, no!’ The issue for Jesus (frustratingly, we might think) is nothing at all to do with attributing any kind of ‘cause’ for such events, but rather one of what it reveals about our own present condition. And it is in this spirit that he immediately transforms the issue to one of repentance by which alone salvation is possible (Lk 13: 1-5).

The second approach (and it is this one on which I wish to focus here) is a response that simply continues to assert the unconditional fatherly benevolence of God without offering any way in which to understand how such a God might ‘allow’ these horrendous—and worse, seemingly random and arbitrary—things to happen, an approach that simply appeals to ‘the mystery of God’ and leaves it at that. Mysterious it of course is, but the Christian tradition can do much better than that, and it needs to if it is to appeal to thoughtful people of all points of view. For in the

light of such events, the meaning of ‘unconditional fatherly benevolence’ is sorely strained.

In times like these, the famous argument attributed to the ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus by Lactantius in 318 CE, has to be once again directly addressed. His reasoning is clear and stark:

*Either God wants to remove evil from the world, but cannot; or he can but will not; or he will and can. If he wants to but cannot, he is impotent. If he can and will not, he does not love us. If he will and can - and that is the only thing that recommends him as God - then where does evil come from and why does he not take it away? (see, e.g., Larrimore, 2001, 50).*

The problem raised by the suffering and death wreaked by the Tsunamis is a powerful one that goes to the very core of monotheistic conceptions of an omnipotent and infinitely just, good and loving God. While it is true that many have had their faith deepened or restored by such an experience, it is also true that for some it represents a decisive stumbling block for faith. Epicurus’ question is a fair one. How do we—in our present time and in the shadow of current events—answer?

Perhaps the most adequate response begins by questioning our (and Epicurus’) presuppositions concerning God’s relationship with the world. Need we assume a God who (aside from the outcome of human freedom) is in one way or another directly responsible for all that happens in the universe: good, evil and indifferent?

In scripture, God is very much presented as the Lord of history, be it in the history of the people of Israel or later in the salvation of all the nations through the Jesus event and the continuing presence of the Holy Spirit. This much is central to the faith. However, within this framework there is a vivid debate going on concerning the extent to which God is actively and causally involved in the minute-to-minute affairs of human history. Some texts (e.g., early Proverbs and parts of the Pentateuch) paint an oddly confident view of the world according to which the righteous live long and well and the wicked perish prematurely. Others (e.g., Qoheleth and Job) struggle furiously with the problem and frankly admit of the mysterious nature of it all. Others again (mainly inter-testamental and Christian works) reframe the issue of God’s justice in terms of the hope for the resurrection of the dead.

If we are not to simply foreclose on Epicurus’ question by appealing to divine eschatological justice while leaving the whys and wherefores of current events in the realm of impenetrable mystery, then it is to ‘this-worldly’ considerations that

we must look. In this context, we are perhaps left with Job's initial stoical response that if we accept the good things from God's hand, we must also accept suffering (Job 1: 20-21), and his final realisation that the awesome ways of God are far beyond human understanding (Job 38ff). Now while there is profound insight here into the absolute dependence of human life on Divine providence, it might nonetheless be argued that insofar as Job's thinking is rooted within the (very Jewish scriptural) framework of the assumption of continual Divine intervention—according to which whatever happens does so because God directly wills it, as seen in the very premise of the whole story (see Job 1: 6-12 and 2: 1-7)—his resolution might still be captive to an approach that is eventually unhelpful. This issue is central: to what extent is the notion of God's continual, immediate and causal intervention in this world an inalienable part of Christian faith? If it is seen as central, then Epicurus' question stands and we might justifiably ask 'why doesn't God save us from the natural consequences of living on this planet?'

But when the question is framed in this way, are we not already on the road to another perspective? Must we not draw back the lens, so to speak, to take in the entire context in which the events of Boxing Day (and its aftermath) are viewed, and to which Epicurus' question is not entirely open? Must we not consider what it is to live on this extraordinary planet in the midst of such vast expanses of swirling dust and emptiness?

This perspective is, I think, silently behind the Archbishop of Canterbury's striking article that recently appeared in the Australian press in which he says:

*The extraordinary fact is that belief has survived such tests again and again not because it comforts or explains but because believers cannot deny what has been shown or given to them. They have learned to see the world and life in the world as a freely given gift. (The Australian, Jan. 4, 2005.)*

I would suggest that it is precisely this extraordinary gift of life of which Rowan Williams speaks that must form the starting point for such contemplation.

At this point, philosophical reflection opens into consideration of the discoveries of the physical sciences, not as an intellectual curiosity, but as a compelling task for any engaged contemporary Christian response to the tragedy in coastal Asia. What I mean is this: We live on a dynamic planet, a vast ball of cosmic dust that is seething beneath our feet with unimaginable geo-tectonic forces that occasionally make themselves felt in powerful volcanic outbursts. We live just on and above the very crust of this planet, in a sphere that for all its atmospheric and oceanographic tempests is amazingly stable and literally teeming with life and exuberance. And

we live in a universe that for all its vast emptiness is pulsating with forces capable of producing stars and planets that are in turn capable of producing us.

These are no irrelevant details divorced from the immediacy of the lives of those who have so severely suffered as a result of the upheavals on the ocean floor off Sumatra. They are rather the context in which we all live our lives, and to which we generally pay so little heed in the business of these lives. But what is important here is not so much the details themselves, as much as their significance for understanding the profound 'background' giftedness that makes possible all that we enjoy and suffer in the 'foreground'. Living as we do in the foreground, we take the extraordinary blessing of our lives on this planet for granted, worrying instead about comparatively petty matters and complaining that we are not still more showered with blessings that we somehow instinctively feel are our right. And when a truly horrific natural upheaval occurs, we lack a groundedness in the original background blessedness by which such events can be interpreted. In this way we so often miss that which is perhaps the central point in trying to come to terms with such a tragedy: its place in the vastly larger canvas.

In a strong sense, then, the huge potential for suffering caused by natural upheavals on this planet, is simply the other side of the coin of the huge potential for delight and physical and spiritual succour with which it provides us. It is the inevitable result of living on a (literally and metaphorically) dynamic planet, a world whose dynamism is deeply reflected in us, who are amongst its most complex and extraordinary creatures. A world in which geological or atmospheric upheavals do not occur is a static world, a dead world, predicable but impotent and altogether incapable of giving birth to and sustaining the likes of human beings.

This notion of the 'two-sides of the coin' is eventually just a clumsy way of speaking of the manifold possibilities that are underpinned by the original 'background' giftedness. These possibilities (the two sides of the coin, so to speak) are all 'foreground' possibilities that are parasitic on the primordial 'background' givenness by which our world (or alternatively, the coin itself) is at all (for we could just as well not have been at all), and is in the extraordinarily fecund way that it is. In this sense we are returned to Job's insight about the 'two-sidedness' of life in God's world, but this time without the implication that what comes does so directly from God's hand according to the assumption of continual Divine causal intervention. The two-sidedness is rather written into the very fabric of the background gift of life on this planet itself, as a natural consequence of its profound dynamism and potential for both enormous beauty and catastrophic upheaval.

As opposed to the vast number of tragedies across the globe that can (and need to) be clearly traced back to human greed, intolerance and arrogance—in short, moral evil—events such as the death and destruction caused by the Tsunamis have a very particular way of rightly bringing us up short and forcing us to ask difficult questions about faith in a God of providence and compassion. Such questions compellingly point, I think, toward philo-theological issues concerning the relationship between God and the world.

The heart of the issue, it seems to me, is this: if we assume a God of constant historical causal intervention—the God who heals, blesses, punishes and manipulates as he sees fit in every aspect of earthly affairs and beyond—then it is difficult to escape from the powerful dilemmas enwrapped in the Epicurean argument. Indeed, even if we propose a God who intervenes by changing the course of objective natural processes on occasion, we are still faced with the formidable ‘if then, why not now?’ can of worms, according to which we are forced into either justifying why God would choose to allow 280,000 people to drown now, but save 100 people tomorrow (which inevitably evokes issues of either God’s capriciousness, or the ‘worthiness’ of the two groups concerned or their part in a vast Divine utilitarian ethical enterprise), or alternatively to retreat once again to the explanatory haven of God’s impenetrable mystery.

These are very real dilemmas for the ‘constant historical causal intervention thesis’. But the alternative doesn’t need to be the ‘Deist’ God who creates and then abandons the world either. A compelling third way is found at the very heart of the Christian tradition in the notion of God working through the events of the world rather than by directing them; a God who is both creator and Lord of history, luring us onward toward holiness even while being present among the suffering of those caught up in the effects of both human immorality and natural calamity. Ultimately, this is a God who despite a hands-off approach in relation to natural causality is nevertheless intimately involved in the joys and pains of the creatures of the world, a compassionate involvement that is summed up in the extraordinary image of the cross. And it is in this sense that the notion of the ‘unconditional fatherly benevolence of God’ referred to at the outset takes on more nuanced meaning.

Is this view not much closer to the experience of people of faith over the centuries, even if somehow less exciting and decisive than the God we’d sometimes ‘rather’ have: the puppet-master God we create in the human image, who jealously guards his iron-gripped control over the universe? And isn’t it eventually a great deal more respectful of God’s omnipotence than is the insistence on total Divine control even in the face of the on-going evidence of natural upheavals of which the recent

disaster is only the latest attention-grabbing instance? In other words, does not the very assumption of the constant historical causal intervention thesis simply underline the final question of the Epicurean riddle—‘if God can and will remove evil from the world, then where does evil come from and why does he not take it away?’—and in this way make faith in such a God an absurdity after all?

And at this point we are indeed returned to the realm of Divine mystery, but not at all in such a way that simply forecloses on all justified rational interrogation of the claims of faith. The mystery I speak of—and indeed, the omnipotence I speak of—is more concerned with the extraordinary and subtle ways in which goodness and healing can come out of calamity, and with the synchronicities of life (often only perceivable in retrospect) that break none of the readily observable laws of natural causation, but which are somehow nevertheless the very substance of providence. This is not a model of direct Divine intervention, but an intimation of a wonderously mysterious God who works in the depths of the human heart and mind. Of course, it is not a view of God we would choose in our more impatient and self-righteous moments, but perhaps it is a little closer to the God who nonetheless is.

And finally, does not this view of God point us back ever more to the profound background giftedness within which we all live and breathe and have our being (a giftedness we might well speak of in terms of the loftiest senses of grace) no longer allowing us the comfortable self-conceit of taking the extraordinary for granted?

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## REFERENCES

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