

Tragedy And Suffering: What Can We Say?

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Natural disasters always raises profound questions. The newspapers in Great Britain have been full of them as a result of the recent tragic disaster in Asia . Many have focused on the question of the existence of God. Religious leaders have been given wide coverage, as have those whose antagonism to religion is beyond doubt. Do such disasters prove that God does not exist? If He does, does He will them? Or is God curiously detached from the world that He has created?

It would be easy to give a response to these questions which answers them on their own terms. Perhaps this is what has been wrong with much of the comment on this issue. We have seen clergy agreeing that such disasters challenge faith, feed doubt and are a problem that believers cannot get over. Unbelievers use syllogistic logic to try to solve and prove a point in a discussion whose meaning goes further than words and which therefore requires a more profound examination.

Certainly to turn round and declare that “therefore God does not exist” is not enough. Society without God has no cohesion, no true ideal to hold humans together. The atheistic state machines of Fascism and Communism soon ended up consuming the individual and destroying any real basis for love, trust and freedom between people.

Our secular culture is beset by similar problems. Religious leaders speak to quite large groupings of people regularly in their congregations. This is in notable contrast to those who have been arguing against God’s existence: they have no such congregations. They rely only on the media. They cannot draw people together in common cause or belief. They have little to say to unite humanity since, if what we have now is all that there is in life, then we are each ultimately on our own in a struggle for survival in a world without ultimate reason.

Secularism seeks to remove faith in God from the public sphere but in so doing it has little with which to replace Him. It is the tendency of secularism to isolate the individual – more often than not unintentionally, but nevertheless such isolation flows from the logic of the secular outlook – which ultimately shows the bleakness of its vision. Faith in God gives the believer more: it has within its dynamism an ability to unite and actually to draw people together even in a physical sense.

Indeed it is striking that those who have raised the question of God’s existence in the context of the Asian tsunami disaster do so from the comfort and safety of this country. The people who have actually suffered in the affected countries are gathered together in temples, mosques and churches praying. The natural response to such a catastrophe may indeed be to ask “Why?” But usually, those involved ask that question in prayer to God. It is natural for us to be religious: it an automatic reflex of the spirit.

All of this is well and good. However, the questions and arguments proposed in our country, and many others in the West, still remain. And they are very persuasive to a culture that has distanced itself more and more from religion as a public force. As a result they do need to be answered.

Any answer we give must show a clear grasp of the subtle relationship that exists between God and the world. It must show that from creation onwards (and here we are referring to creation through evolution) God has a covenant of respect for the otherness and real consistence of created existence. The universe has evolved through a complex series of interactions and the tsunami and earthquake of December was one of these: there have been many others in history and all of them have contributed to building up the beauty of the world we live in. They are part of the fabric of the universe that God has created and in that sense are not in themselves evil.

Furthermore, there is a covenant of respect for the freedom of humanity. God does not constantly intervene to stop people murdering others or to stop drunk drivers from getting into their cars because to do so would be to destroy all freedom. He would need to unravel all history since all our decisions are interlocking ones and influence each other all the time. He would then destroy our very humanity and suspend any sense of independence in our behaviour. Freedom is part of our constitution as spiritual creatures.

Into this context steps the doctrine of Original Sin. We human beings have an ability to use our freedom for good or for ill. We have in the past used it badly. Indeed, we would say that sin made its entrance early on in the history of humanity, through our first parents. That first sin fundamentally wounded our human nature, since through it we cut ourselves off from our natural and normal relation to God as our living Environment. Our ontological moorings were damaged and ever since we ourselves have had the lasting effect of that in our own personal lives: in our relationship with God, with one another and with the environment.

The reality of sin and selfishness in humanity does not need to be proved. Most people feel instinctively that certain forms of behaviour are wrong. Even secularists believe this. However they can give no real reason for it. The problem of evil in man is more of a problem for the unbeliever because it radically underlines the real difference between humanity and the rest of animal life. Our very awareness of the problem reveals this. Professor Richard Dawkins may well want to invert the problem and show how all life, even at a genetic level, is fundamentally selfish. However, the constant altruism of individuals and their ability to deny sin and selfishness, living lives of generous service to others, just pushes the question more obviously and more awkwardly into the light.

From His very covenant of respect for our freedom, God allows us to misuse that freedom. It is in a sense useless to ask if God could have made us otherwise,

since if He had made us programmed only to do good we would in no way be free and so would not be spiritual and human. God permits us to be ourselves. But there are consequences to this – for us and also, in a sense, for God. For us it means that we become enmeshed in events and structures of sin for which we may not be personally culpable. It is in this context that we can say that often it is the innocent who suffer. Hence, it could be argued that in a more perfect world – that is, a holier world – government leaders in the affected parts of Asia would have bought into an early warning system for tsunamis and not put costs and the low probability of occurrence before the value of human life. However, in a deeper sense, no human being is innocent – we all misuse our freedom and sin. To be redeemed from this, to be healed from within of the fundamental damage we have inherited and which we perpetuate through our own personal choices, will require much effort and pain, a work that will require self denial as we wrench ourselves away from our habits of selfishness. Alone we could not do this. This is where the consequences to God of our freedom are made plain. For any attempt to look at the question of evil and suffering in the world cannot remain just at the level of mere reason. For our minds alone cannot comprehend how the vast history of suffering and sin can be healed in humanity, how any sense can be made of it all. Atheism's answer leaves us only with the futility of existence, Sartre's acknowledgment of the deep absurdity that life and existence appears to be to the unbeliever. The fact that acts of nature can roll back years of prosperous advancement in just a few hours only helps to highlight this.

In the coming of Jesus, Son of God and Son of Man, God gives us an answer to the problem of sin, evil and suffering. A short editorial cannot hope to give the fullness of what this means. This is not because we are dealing with something irrational. In fact, it does make sense to reason, but the answer is not something we could have worked out rationally on our own. We cannot hope to describe it because the answer is more than an idea or a word or a cleverly assembled argument. "We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Corinthians 1:23-24).

Indeed the answer can only be fully understood by living the mystery, by living in communion with Christ. Only in this context does the seething anxiety of human reason before suffering begin to glimpse the glory of God within it all. In His life, Jesus became one who suffered: he suffered because of the sin of the world, because of the hatred of people, because of the afflictions he saw so many burdened with. But in a world that is not to be unraveled of its real history without doing damage to human freedom itself, Christ transformed the meaning of suffering. No longer is it a dead end, a cause for despair, an affliction which holds no good within it. Rather than run away from the problem of evil, rather than shut his eyes to its inexorable reality in the lives of people, Jesus united himself to it and endured it as his personal experience. In doing this he opened it up to new possibilities and redefined the horizons of human experience. Suffering has been transformed into something potentially redemptive.

Through his passion Jesus unites himself to all who suffer; he sorrows for all who sin; he consoles all who are burdened by pain. In doing this, he assures us of his lasting consoling presence. The “logic” of this is often only experienced by those who go through such sufferings themselves and experience something of the presence of Christ’s passion in their passion. And yet none of it is irrational. It is a more profound and complex and living response to the problem of evil and suffering in our world.

It is also the true response to our need for personal redemption. Just as none of us can live utterly individual and isolated lives – such a concept is irrational given the relationships that visibly and sometimes less visibly shape our lives – so none of us can make the journey out of selfishness on our own. It can only be done in communion with God anyway, for whom we have been made. Jesus gives us that love and truth which heals the damage of sin within us if we open ourselves to him. In his suffering and death he experiences the hatred of sin and sin’s ultimate logic which is to attempt to isolate and destroy. But he perseveres in his perfect love of his Father and of us and bridges the gap that sin creates: he unites himself to each of us and draws us back to the Father. Sin cuts us away from each other because of its tendency to make others subordinate to or less than one’s own self. This means that there is no uniting force between us as human beings, apart from the uncertain power of mutual feeling and sympathy. Jesus himself is now the true principle of unity for the human race since his love overcomes the barriers of sin and death. This principle of unity is more than a feeling or an experience or a belief: it is real, existential, in the order of being itself. Through his resurrection and his Church, Christ can reach every human heart and through baptism unite them to himself as he lifts the whole of creation and reintegrates it into its ultimate purpose of communion with God the Father. But in this journey the suffering of every person can play its part. By being united to Jesus’ own work of redemption now our sufferings can become redemptive and can be offered in love for ourselves and for others: our suffering, sacrificial love can have a real existential impact on others precisely because through Jesus every person is bonded together in a way that is greater and more perfect than sin. Of course continued sin damages these bonds of communion, yet they still remain since all are the object of Jesus’ universal will to save.

Such an approach is certainly of more significance than many of the debates and discussions seen in our media of late. It is a serious attempt to understand suffering and evil in the world. It is no mere acceptance of it, nor a flight from it.

However we will not get anywhere unless we can show that the existence of God is rational, that by looking at this remarkable world around us we can show he does exist and that human beings are unique because they are not just physical organisms but have a soul as well. Without these foundations theology and preaching will seem little more than a pious reflection, without any real feet in the world. These foundations are the basis for the Church to be able to talk to our world of God at all.

Many people criticize the Faith movement for attempting to present a new synthesis of religion and science (and philosophy). Some believe that such a work is of little relevance for the Church, and others believe that it is a work incapable of being accomplished. However, the very debates that have assumed such prominence in the public forum since the Asian disaster show clearly not only the necessity but also the urgency of such a synthesis. Without it the Church's Faith appears as little more than a fable cut off from the realities and the horrors of real human life in this world. We can show the unity of creation, how it makes no sense without God and Christ, the nature of humanity and its re-established unity effected by Christ: within this the problems of evil, sin and suffering find their true context. Only here is the answer more than intellectual and impacts on the real. But the intellectual groundwork must be done. There is nothing else on offer that addresses these questions so profoundly and so hopefully, but then nothing other than the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the fullness of the Truth.