

Why Do *Humans* Allow Suffering? Towards a Better Theology of 'Natural' Disasters

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A frequently heard question following a human or 'natural' disaster is 'Why does God allow suffering?' This is sometimes asked plaintively but more often snarled out by headline grabbing media editors or by armchair spectators on disasters. I offer an alternative, more obvious, question: 'Why do humans allow suffering?' The article is based on a sermon preached at the University Church of Great St. Mary, Cambridge, U.K., during the Cambridge University Science Festival, 2017.

Introduction: the big question

A frequently heard question following a human or 'natural' disaster is 'Why does a loving God allow suffering?' Sometimes, survivors of such events voice the question plaintively, yet, I must admit that, from the hundreds of survivors who I have interviewed from some catastrophic disasters, I have never heard a single participant voice that question to me. Nevertheless, theologians and moral philosophers wring their hands and spill gallons of ink hypothesising over that topic.

I have been working in the world of man-made disasters here in the U.K. since my own response to a tragic plane crash back in 1989. My Ph.D. research focused upon my response to that event from a practical theology perspective.¹ Since 2012, I have been conducting research in the field of so-called natural disasters, particularly focusing on human factors.

As someone who works in the disciplines of pastoral care of trauma, of practical theology, and of natural disasters, I would like to pose an alternative question to the one just mentioned: 'Why do humans allow suffering?' I feel this alternative question very deeply as a Christian practical theologian and trauma practitioner. It strikes me that people can spend more time raising the former question than the alternative I have raised, and achieve very little change in the tragic outcomes of disasters. I am not implying that there is no value in seeking to respond to the former question, but the challenge of responding to my question has a huge scientific, theological, and ethical basis to it, because there are empirical actions we can take to address the problem; my question calls for action, not speculation.

My grounds for maintaining this assertion lie in the four locations my research work has taken me into over the past five years: to Haiti (earthquake); to the Philippines (super-typhoon); to New Orleans (hurricane and flood); and to Somerset (flood).² The partnership of science and religion I have worked in has demonstrated very clearly that much of the suffering people involved in those disasters experienced need not have occurred if some very basic human actions had been taken long before the events happened. To confront the extensive ethical issues that disasters raise, the question that requires addressing *most* urgently has to be: 'Why do humans allow suffering?' Sadly, all too frequently this is the question environmental geographers seem to be prioritising far more than the Christian Church.³

A biblical response

When certain people drew Jesus' attention to two disasters that had taken place locally, his reply was very poignant. Reflecting on that conversation, as recorded in Luke 13:1-5, is helpful and extremely challenging because it places every one of us, as humans, in the frame of responsibility before God when it comes to such terrible events, whether we were actively involved in them at the time or not.

The first incident involved a blood-thirsty massacre, carried out on orders from Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of the region, who went out of his way to offend and then to slaughter some Jews during their acts of worship. The second was a tower in Siloam, which fell and killed eighteen bystanders.

Jesus' response to these shocking incidents was two-fold: first, he addressed a common assumption arising from the blame-culture of his day; second, he established a moral connection between these incidents and every human being in terms of responsibility. Allow me to unpack, briefly, these two aspects of Jesus' response to two appallingly tragic incidents, with a view to casting light on how each of us should reflect on disasters in our time.

The blame culture

Jesus knew there was something in the hearts of those who were drawing his attention to these events which was very human indeed; an urge born of fear that wants to pin the blame on particular people, especially the victims. If they could do that, then those not directly involved were exempt. They expressed something deeply embedded within human nature, namely a morbid fear that terrible things can happen to innocent people.⁴ In the course of my work, I have also found there really is something within human nature that almost automatically responds to terrible events by wanting to blame someone or some category of people exclusively. Then, having done that, we can feel satisfied that the disaster had nothing to do with us. We should feel sadness and compassion, but never culpability.

That is one way of responding to disasters – so-called natural ones or human ones, however you wish to categorize them. We today, might be forgiven for assuming that the cause of the massacre of Jews that Jesus referred to, had very little to do with either the victims or 'Joe Public'. Surely, the massacre had everything to do with a barbarous human being called Pontius Pilate and those who acted on his behalf, who may have protested that they were 'just carrying out orders'. This is one way that we can respond to disasters and it is the most common way: blame it on the authorities, the government, the politicians, the terrorists; blame it on the engineers and architects; blame it on the corrupt élites; or the classic modernist cause – blame it on religion! While this response can be understandable, given the heinous nature of some disasters, or given their cruel capacity to kill or maim innocent loved ones, it does require tempering with some honest self-reflection.

In fact, given a certain set of circumstances, human nature is capable of the most devilish darkness. This was a stark and shocking lesson Marian Partington learned as she reflected on the murderous anger she felt toward Fred and Rosemary West, when, after twenty-one years of waiting, it was confirmed to her they had kidnapped and brutally murdered her sister, Lucy. Carefully reflecting on her own rage toward Lucy's killers, it dawned upon her, with appalling clarity, how, given certain circumstances, she too could commit acts of evil. As David Self, who interviewed Marian, has commented: 'Acknowledging the darkness without, led Marian to face the darkness within herself, the capacity for huge rage and murder that lies in the heart.'⁵ None of us on that basis can disassociate ourselves entirely from acts of evil, whether those be in Auschwitz, in Syria, in Mosul, in Port-au-Prince, or in New Orleans, or wherever.

Of course, there are specific parties who need to be held to account for their direct role in causing disasters: e.g. Pontius Pilate, Siloam Tower builders/maintenance teams, etc. However, this fact does not permit the remainder of us to feel relieved of responsibility, innocent, and satisfied by our humanitarian responsiveness.

The shock factor

In light of Jesus' words, how obscene it is to hear, as I have heard many times in my fieldwork, survivors of disasters being told that they must have done something very wrong to have deserved what happened to them and to their loved ones. All too often, Christians have been the main sources of such obscenities, as they were over the devastating floods after Hurricane Katrina (2005) and over the Haitian earthquake (2010).⁶

What is shocking about Jesus' response is that he insists there is a substantive connection between what happened in those appalling incidents and every human being. Hence, he could confirm there was no difference, morally, between those victims of the massacre or those of the tower collapse, and the rest of humanity looking on. Here is the shock factor of his reply, 'but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish' (Luke 13: 3, 5).

My work with disasters has convinced me there is no such thing, actually, as a *natural* disaster. Every one of them is man-made. There are of course natural events, earthquakes, volcanoes, floods, hurricanes, wildfires. However, these, in and of themselves, are not bad events. They can be spectacular events. They are the events that have helped create the physical world that we love to visit and take photographs of and which sometimes actually reduce us to tears of awe and wonder (Job 42: 1-6). Such natural hazards only become disasters when something very human and wrong happens. In all four locations where I have worked closely with survivors, it is fascinating that not one person has said to me yet, 'I blame God for this'. Not one. They have all said to me of the disaster, 'This is not God's work. This is man's work!' When I draw together the science, whether the natural or human sciences, and my role as a pastor and theologian, I conclude they are right.

I feel a sense of frustration, therefore, that, academics can spend such a long time talking about the philosophical vexations of life, the problem of natural evil and suffering, or of bad things happening to good people. The very best of minds have pondered extensively over these issues, without a satisfying conclusion.⁷ However, there is so much that we *do* know *is* responsible for these disasters, and yet we can be so dilatory in doing anything about addressing it. These are *human* factors, not divine ones: greed, poverty, lying, cheating, self-satisfying worldviews, social injustice, environmental abuse, ethical indifference and inactivity, and so forth. These ethical factors play major roles in causing disasters. I came home from New Orleans almost feeling ashamed to be white. I came home from Haiti almost ashamed to be Western.

The problem with the world is...

The connection between disastrous events and why they call every one of us to repentance is not just the way they highlight the fragility and the brevity of life for every one of us—the suddenness of life-changing injury, or of death and of the judgement to come (Hebrews 9:27). The real connection lies in the fact that all of us contribute to making this world such an unstable and vulnerable place to live in. As long as humans choose to live in alienation from their Creator God and from the wisdom that he is able to give and to restore in us in helping us live in his world to his glory in a way that does not destroy our neighbours, then disasters will continue. They will also continue until we human beings realise our corporate and individual contributions to a world where fragility and vulnerability are going to inflict disaster most on the poor and needy – upon those populations from whom we, in the white, western world, 'enjoy' safe separation.

Conclusion

Each of us as human beings must be prepared to confront our own contributions of evil towards political, economic, social, environmental, and even religious, systems, which lead to so many suffering when disasters strike. Furthermore, each of us needs to repent of those contributions before God. Until then, we continue to be a part of the direct connection, which Jesus highlights, between disasters occurring thousands of miles, or thousands of years, away from us.

The poet G.K. Chesterton, it is alleged, responded to a *Times* inquiry to famous authors, asking the question, 'What's wrong with the world today?' with the simple reply, 'Dear Sir, I am. Yours, G.K. Chesterton.' Whether he actually did say such a thing, the alleged reply captures, with brilliant succinctness the point Jesus made over two thousand years ago. So much evil and suffering brought about by disasters today can be mitigated in future if we each accept our requisite responsibility in making the world such a vulnerable place by our own actions and inaction, and if we respond appropriately to a place where terrible things can happen to anyone at any time.

For Further Reading:

- Abbott, Roger Philip, *Sit On Our Hands, or Stand On Our Feet? Exploring a Practical Theology of Major Incident Response for the Evangelical Catholic Community in the U.K* (Wipf & Stock, 2013).
- Griffin, Michael and Jennie Weiss Block, *In the Company of the Poor: Conversations with Dr. Paul Farmer and Fr. Gustavo Gutiérrez* (Orbis, 2013).
- Oliver-Smith, Anthony and Susannah Hoffman, *The Angry Earth: Disaster in Anthropological Perspective* (Routledge, 1999).
- White, Robert S, *Who is to Blame? Disasters, Nature and Acts of God* (Monarch, 2014).

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- ¹ Roger Philip Abbott, *Sit On Our Hands, or Stand On Our Feet? Exploring a Practical Theology of Major Incident response for the evangelical catholic community in the U.K.* (Wipf & Stock, 2013).
 - ² The Haitian earthquake occurred in January 2010; Super-typhoon Yolanda (Haiyan) occurred on November 8th, 2013; Hurricane Katrina and the flooding of New Orleans occurred from August 29th, 2005; the Somerset floods occurred between February and March, 2014.
 - ³ For instance, see the work of anthropologist, Anthony Oliver-Smith and Susannah Hoffman in *The Angry Earth: Disaster in Anthropological Perspective* (Routledge, 1999). Elsewhere Oliver-Smith avers: 'In short, disasters are not accidents or acts of God. They are deeply rooted in the social, economic, and environmental history of the societies where they occur' (Anthony Oliver-Smith, 'Haiti and the Historical Construction of Disasters,' *NACLA Report on the Americas*, 43. 4 (2010), 32-36. ProQuest, [2015]).
 - ⁴ This point I take to be at the root of the 'friends'' protestations with Job.
 - ⁵ See Marian Partington, *If You Sit Very Still: A Sister's Fierce Engagement with Traumatic Loss* (Jessica Kingsley, 2016); see also David Self, 'Enfolding the Dark', in Alistair McFadyen, Marcel Sorot and Anthony Thiselton (eds), *Forgiveness and Truth: Explorations in Contemporary Theology* (T&T Clark, 2001), 157-163 (161).
 - ⁶ Christian pundits lined up to blame the Haitian earthquake on a 'pact with the Devil' that it is alleged the revolutionary slaves made in 1791, under which the country has lain cursed ever since. Similarly, the devastation caused to New Orleans has been blamed on the sinful city it is supposed to be, especially the French Quarter (which never got flooded!). The history of disasters has a sad legacy of such accusations from purported Christians.
 - ⁷ For example: Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Eerdmans, 1974); N.T. Wright, *Evil, and the Justice of God* (SPCK, 2006); John G. Stackhouse, *Can God be Trusted? Faith and the Challenge of Evil* 2nd ed. (InterVarsity, 2009); Michael Murray, *Nature, Red in Tooth and Claw: Theism and the Problem of Animal Suffering* (Oxford University Press, 2008).