

God, suffering, and the ‘problem of evil’: Jews and Christians as keepers of the question

by The Right Reverend Dr Mark Burton

Introduction

The putrid mud of a drain in Sumatra may not be the best place to begin, but it will have to do.

You see, we were standing in it – deep in it, up to mid-thigh, in fact, a young sailor and I – when he asked the question. *The question; the Question.* ‘Where was God?’

It was one of those stereotypical council-worker moments as we leaned upon our shovels and relaxed for a few minutes in the filth and decay that the tsunami had carried into the grounds of *Sekolah Menengah Kejuruan* (SMK3 – a co-educational high school) in Banda Aceh. A strange place, perhaps, to relax – inured to the destruction, the decay, the stench, and to the grim silence of the survivors – but maybe the only place for a publicly and professionally recognised God-botherer to be asked.

Where was God? His question was asked without rancour, and with not the slightest hint of accusation; neither did he seem to hold me personally responsible in the manner of guilt-by-association, on behalf of the Management. It was, it appeared to me, a genuinely interested question. He did not give the impression that anything very much hung from the question, that my answer may tip him this way or that and somehow determine his life’s course or eternal destiny; no, it was more the sort of reasonable question that one could reasonably ask of a religious professional (given the setting and circumstances). There wasn’t much by way of philosophical content to the question, and the possibility of God was taken for granted, rather than argued for or against.

As I remember the moment (and you’ll have to take my word for it), my answer in the face of the indiscriminate destruction – so-called ‘natural evil’ – was of few words, spoken with faltering voice, and tempered by a lesson I learned from the late Rabbi Ronald Lubofsky. (The rabbi had once famously declared at the *Trial of God* debate in Melbourne, back in 1994, that ‘I believe that the Holocaust is to be talked about in whispers...’.¹) The principle and its dictum work well in other settings of great evil, whether ‘natural’ or ‘moral’, where the distinction is applied: speak quietly and sparingly – but speak, nonetheless.

And my (disappointing) answer? ‘God was here when the waves hit, and God is here now; and we are to keep shovelling mud.’ Not much of a response, I admit, but my companion thought it fair enough, and soon moved on to other topics of conversation.

¹ The quote continues: ‘...between Jews, quietly, sadly, with tears, and not to be manifest in public, or to be demonstrated, or to be part of any drama.’ In Norman Rothfield’s, *The Trial of God: a challenge to conventional thinking* (Melbourne: Hudson Press, 1998) 114. I paraphrased Rabbi Lubofsky’s statement and used it as part of the title of my doctoral thesis, *Speaking in Whispers: a theological response to the Holocaust, with special reference to the Christian and Jewish dialogue* (unpublished; Australian College of Theology, 1999).

I was disturbed by two observations: the first, that my skills as a theologian and doctoral-level theodicy² presented me with little more than a one-liner in the presence of real, three-dimensional suffering and destruction (though I really knew that this would always be the case, given the real-world cautions of the likes of Ronald Lubofsky, Irving Greenberg, and Emil Fackenheim – *never* ignore the advice of the playing-coach); and the second observation, that my fellow worker in the foetid monsoon drain was the *only* person to overtly pose the question.

(The situation was very different a few weeks later when, on a mission to land some of our ship's doctors, nurse, and medics on the island of Nias, off the NW coast of Sumatra, one of our helicopters crashed and burned, claiming the lives of nine of the eleven onboard. In the aftermath of our losing so many of our own, the question took on a new energy, and even a personal dimension: I had flown as a passenger in the same aircraft a few days before, and subsequently had much to do with some of the families of the deceased.)

Limning the Question

I have told the story above simply to illustrate, no matter how poorly, that whatever the question is that Jews and Christians keep with respect to the so-called 'problem of evil', it is grounded in, and heard only, in the world of experience.

Interesting though philosophical approaches to evil are, they become what Immanuel Kant described as 'mock combats', in which 'no participant has ever yet succeeded in gaining so much as an inch of territory, not at least in such manner as to secure him its permanent possession.'³ What's more, every attempt to pour oil on the raging seas of the 'problem of evil' is by its very nature time-bound and conditioned, is a product of its age, and lacks in the next and subsequent ages of its application what Michel Foucault called the 'apparatus of intelligibility'.⁴

In sum, the answers that may have carried our forebears through the catastrophe of (say) the Black Death of C14 Europe, would very likely fail to satisfy us were we to endure the effects of a global pandemic of H5N1 avian influenza.

More important, though, is the terrible test of all 'answers' proffered to those who suffer as innocents under evil – whether moral or natural – the test that was articulated famously by Irving Greenberg in the long shadow cast by Auschwitz. Greenberg cited the *verbatim* account of a Polish guard – Smirnov Szmaglewska – at the Nuremberg War Crimes Tribunal. Szmaglewska's testimony of the killing at Auschwitz in the summer of 1944 is too harrowing to be repeated here, and would serve no helpful purpose; suffice to say, it accords with Elie Wiesel's assessment of the 'language' of Auschwitz, namely, that 'the language of night was not human, it was primitive, almost animal – hoarse shouting, screams, muffled moaning, savage howling, the sound of beating...*It negated all other language and took its place.*'⁵

² 'Theodicy' is the attempt by various means to various theological and philosophical means to 'justify' (from the Gk, *dikeo*) God (*theos*) in the face of the presence of evil in the world, whether 'natural' or 'moral'. Ironically, the term was coined in the C18 after a tsunami devastated Lisbon.

³ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (trans. N. Kemp Smith; London: Macmillan, 1964) 21; cited by K. Surin in *Theology and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986) 38.

⁴ M. Foucault, 'The Confession of the Flesh', in C. Gordon, ed., *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings by Michel Foucault, 1972-1977* (New York: Pantheon, 1980) 194.

⁵ E. Wiesel, 'Why I Write', in A. Rosenfeld and I. Greenberg, eds., *Confronting the Holocaust: the impact of Elie Wiesel* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1978) 201; emphasis added.

The ‘test’ of all explanations (theodicies, if you like) that Greenberg applied after the ‘orienting event’ that was Auschwitz, is the savage measure of the burning children: he wrote, ‘No statement, theological or otherwise, should be made that would not be credible in the presence of the burning children.’⁶ Rabbi Lubofsky’s admonition that we ought only speak in whispers suddenly makes sense.

I have suggested, though, that Jews and Christians are keepers of a *question*, but not necessarily of an answer, that can (perhaps, ‘ought’) be asked in the face of the ‘problem of evil’. The question has already been described in this paper, and is neither original nor clever, and can be asked by anyone. It can be asked retrospectively, or it can be applied in the present tense; at a pinch, it could be asked *prospectively*, though never with the same urgency. The question is simply, *Where was God?*

A Real Question

Simple though the question appears from the outside, it operates as either a stimulus to further reflection and exploration, or else it silences conversation and changes the topic. It may even be a goad to action. Whatever else it does, this penetrating question takes *evil* seriously, and will not allow it to be considered a mere ‘deprivation of good’ (like St Augustine’s *deprivatio boni*), or as illusory and relative, a mere expression of ignorance: compare Henry Ford’s bombastic conclusion that ‘What we call evil is simply ignorance bumping its head in the dark.’⁷ Suffering, occasioned by either moral or natural evil, is no illusion, and whether the result of a wave or a programmatic attempt at annihilation, calls forth a simple question *about* God that can be directed *to* God.

While musing rationally and at arm’s length on the origins of evil may be interesting, and even to a degree, helpful, it runs the risk of domesticating destruction and suffering by the making of an uneasy truce. Those who are tormented by suffering – whether the evil is ‘natural’ or ‘moral’ – live in a world that is ‘extra-territorial to reason’.⁸ By extension, as the C20 German theologian, Jürgen Moltmann, notes, giving *a* reason for evil ‘would be tantamount to an excuse.’⁹

Invoking the *Where was God?* question – even to accuse God of negligence or failure – is to oppose evil with the suggestion that this is *not* the way things should be.

Jews and Christians – assuming that they willingly bear their respective titles, and with them, own at least some of the respective histories – are inheritors of traditions which do not easily make peace with things as they are. The *Where was God?* question is found as a part of the story of each of these faiths, and is bound up in a common broad agreement that God is, in some sense or other, creator of the reality that we inhabit, in and through which God communicates God’s self, and in which this God agrees to be bound in unequal partnerships and covenants with human beings.

⁶ I. Greenberg, ‘Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire: Judaism, Christianity, and Modernity after the Holocaust’, in E. Fleischer, ed., *Auschwitz: Beginning of New Era?* (New York: KTAV, 1977) 9, 10.

⁷ H. Ford, interview in the *Observer* 16 March, 1930.

⁸ G. Steiner, cited by Surin, *Theology*, 116.

⁹ J. Moltmann, *The Future of Creation* (trans. M. Kohl; London: SCM, 1981) 77.

In short, then, God has certain responsibilities, as do human beings, and there are expectations on both sides. (Even those who claim to be ‘secular’ representatives of their respective communities, and who claim to be post-theistic, are shaped by the content and history of either Judaism or Christianity, and tend to still ask a modified version of the question: *where was the idea/the ideal of God?* is a form I have encountered.)

Jews, I suggest, are far better at taking the hard question *about* God, and asking it *of* God, than are their Christian cousins: Christians are disinclined (in the comfortable first-world West, at least) to raise uncomfortable laments or to impute neglect to God, especially in liturgical settings. One Christian author, Dorothee Soelle, goes so far as to describe ‘Christian masochism’ and ‘theological sadism’: each is predicated on a theological approach which searches for ‘[the] vindication of divine power through human powerlessness.’¹⁰ Jewish tradition appears far more daring, far more likely to own the responsibility of holding God to account, than does Christian tradition, which is more inclined to explanation or attenuation in the face of evil.

Of the essence is Psalm 44, which begins harmlessly enough by recounting a standard salvation-history form of exodus and conquest themes: ‘We have heard, O God, our fathers have told us the deeds You performed in their time, in days of old.’¹¹ God is hailed as king in the usual way, and the divine right hand and arm are invoked against the enemy. All is well for the first nine verses, but then the question – more or less shaped as direct speech in the present tense – breaks out of the strictures of good form: ‘Yet you have rejected and disgraced us... You make us retreat before our foe... You let them devour us like sheep... You make us a byword among the *goyim*...’ The logic of history would suggest to the first-time reader of this psalm that apostasy or betrayal were the antecedents of the present evil and its attendant suffering, but she would be surprised by the next line: ‘All this has come upon us, yet we have not forgotten You, or been false to Your covenant. Our hearts have *not* gone astray, nor have our feet swerved from Your path, *though You cast us, crushed, to where tannim is, and covered us over with deepest darkness.*’ Then comes the outrageous imperative, a command directed at God’s very self: ‘Rouse Yourself; why do You sleep, O Lord? Awaken, do not reject us forever!’ The accusation is the terrifying experience of that which the rabbis styled the *hester pannim*, the hiding of the face, the turning away of God.

This psalm, if taken seriously, like the wonderful scandal that is the book of Job that precedes it both chronologically and canonically, forces an examination of Jewish structures of belief in every age; critics of the Christian faith, however, find an unwillingness to engage with a reinterpretation forced upon it by the weight of experience and history. By contrast, the tendency of Christians is to want to *explain* events, to make sense of them, and thereby – perhaps- to control them; with this goes, I think, a tendency towards *defending* God, itself a failure to heed the warnings of some of the great minds of the early Christian experience.¹²

¹⁰ Cited by Surin, *Theology*, 112; Soelle’s quote is from her book, *Suffering* (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1975) 17.

¹¹ All quotes from Psalm 44 are from the *Tanakh* (New York: Jewish Publication Society, 5746/1985).

¹² Compare Gregory of Nyssa’s distilled wisdom on the lurking threat of intellectual control of deity, the precursor to idolatry: ‘Comprehension is circumscription.’

Losing the Question

What, then, may be lost, if Jews and Christians fail to be keepers of the question, *Where was God?*

I suspect that, if Jews and Christians let go of the question, then a few effects will inevitably follow. They include (in no particular order), these: philosophical constructs of both God and evil (and with the latter, suffering) will come to the fore, and both will be domesticated; a frustratingly transcendent deity – who nevertheless is fleetingly encountered in particular and historically scandalous ways will be traded off for one of the old gods of the forest, whose handiwork we have seen and still see in our own day. Neglect of the question *about* God, and of addressing the question *to* God, is a part of our proper dignity as human beings, I suggest; in Job-like style we are to stand up and argue the case with God. In this way, at least, I suspect we are more likely to speak the truth about God, and thus avoid the sycophancy of Job's theologically reputable friends.¹³ Curiously, I suspect that were we to give up being keepers of the question, then we may find ourselves surrendering something of our proper dignity.

Next, as keepers of the question, if Jews and Christians neglect or refuse to ask it, then they let slip their vocation to be (in the prophet Zechariah's terms, at least) 'prisoners of hope.'¹⁴ To give up on hope is to give up on the world, and to drive God and creation apart.

The late Professor Emil Fackenheim – survivor of Sachsenhausen, and perhaps most famous for his framing of the so-called '614th Commandment' spoken by the *Qol Ha-Metzaveh* ('the Voice of the Commander')¹⁵ maintained that the Jewish midrashic concept of *teshuva* ('turning') applied first and foremost to the relationship between God and the world: it is a turning-towards-the-other, the divine and the human belonging together with their proper distinctives. Of Sinai, Fackenheim wrote, 'It...is the experience of countless generations that, alienated from the God of Sinai, found themselves ever turning, and ever being turned, back to Him.'¹⁶ To fail to address the question *of* and *to* God is finally to abandon *teshuva*, this turning-towards (itself a hope-full act).

Ironically, if Jews and Christians fail to keep and to ask the question, then God is, as it were, exonerated of all responsibility, and we with God: if God bears no responsibility, then neither do we, and evil wins. Implicating God, even by means of so clumsy a question as *Where was/is God?*, is a curiously hopeful (even worshipful) question, and the questioner will be driven to ask what his or her part is in pushing back against the surd acts of evil, whether 'natural' or 'moral'.

Jews, Christians, and God: co-workers for the *tikkun ha'olam*

A midrashic insight into Isaiah 43:12 ('you are my witnesses, says the LORD, and I am God'), runs like this and raises a difficult proposition: 'You are my witnesses, says the LORD, and I am God. That is, when you are My witnesses, I am God, and when you are not My witnesses, I am, as it were (*k'bshav*), not God.'¹⁷

¹³ See Job 42:7, 8, the shocking *denouement* of this extraordinary, extended theological reflection.

¹⁴ See Zechariah 9:12.

¹⁵ In sum, the 614th Commandment states that 'Jews are forbidden to hand Hitler the posthumous victory.'

¹⁶ E. Fackenheim, *To Mend the World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982) 141.

¹⁷ *Midrash Rabbah*, Psalms, on Ps 123:1.

This midrash appears to make God willingly – but dangerously – dependent upon human response and cooperation, with each party – God and humanity – taking its respective part in the healing of the world, the *tikkun ha'olam*. Could it be that asking so simple a question as *Where was/is God?* in the presence of suffering and evil is a part of human responsibility – and particularly for Jews and Christians - thus (as it were) keeping the rumour of God alive in the world? I submit that it is, and that it continues to be.

The alternative is to give up, to lapse into a hopeless silence, and to do nothing. Speak in whispers to the sufferer, perhaps; shout the question to God, maybe; dig with the shovel in your hands – undoubtedly.