

Introduction

The problem with writing a book on ‘evil, suffering and faith’, apart from the sheer magnitude of the question, is that you appear to be saying you have the answers. Surely, if you write a book on a topic you have to be something of an expert! Otherwise, why should anyone bother to read your work? I am really dreading the interview where I’m asked, “OK, so what’s your answer to the question of suffering?”

Over the many months I’ve been piecing this book together, I’ve decided that an ‘expert’ on the problem of pain is something I am not. My strength—if it can be called that—is in my capacity to *doubt*. There is hardly a belief which others hold sacred that I have not at one time or other seriously questioned. Some I have rejected forever. I don’t know if this is due to a religion-less upbringing, a suspicious personality or just plain pride, but for some reason I find it difficult to believe in something strongly if I have not spent time doubting it just as vigorously.

So, whatever else this book represents, at its heart it is a tribute to doubt. Nothing has exercised my sceptical muscles as much as the issue of human

pain—mine, yours, that Kenyan baby with AIDS I'll never meet, and so on. I look at it all and find myself wondering: "If I were God, I'd end all the pain, so why doesn't HE? Is he powerless? Is he not interested in us? Or is he just plain not there?" The questions—some philosophical, mostly practical—begin to mount.

This is not to say I don't attempt to answer my own questions—I do. In fact, that's the beauty of doubt. It forces you to sit loosely enough to your 'beliefs' that you can begin to look at them objectively. It makes you investigate, search out, and once you're done, either to stop believing or to start believing with fresh conviction. Both of these outcomes have made their mark on the pages that follow.

Let me begin by telling you where my doubting faith began.

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The last one standing

The front page of the *Evening News of India*, Tuesday, October 12, 1976, ran the following story:

All 89 passengers and six crew members were killed when an Indian Airlines' plane, bound for Madras, crashed within minutes of take-off at Santa Cruz airport, at 1.40 am, today. The plane... was only some three minutes airborne when its pilot... noticed a fire in one of the engines. He was reported to have told air traffic control of the fire, and... said: "I am coming back".

Eyewitnesses, including friends and relatives who had come to see the passengers off... saw the plane burning in the night sky, like a red ball, before it crashed. The passengers had no chance.

I remember that night well. I was watching TV—the *Sullivans*, I believe—with my two brothers, Rob and Jaime. The phone rang. Mum answered. It was the news she'd been dreading ever since she heard the midday radio bulletin. "Mrs Dickson", said the nervous voice at the

other end, “I’m afraid I have terrible news...”

Dad was on the plane.

The days following are a bit of a blur in my memory—I was only nine years old—but my mum recently told me that I approached her a day or so after the accident to ask: “Why did God let Dad’s plane crash?” Mum can’t recall anything of what she said in reply. Ours, like so many modern Australian homes, was not ‘religious’ by any stretch of the imagination: we never went to church, never attended Sunday school and, as far as I can remember, never even discussed spiritual issues. It was a stable, loving home, but one completely without God. Nevertheless, somehow, as a nine-year-old boy, I still held the conviction that the Creator was meant to be responsible for keeping the world together, and on this occasion he had mucked things right up.

This is a feeling shared every day by thousands and thousands of people, some of whom experience a level of pain and tragedy most of us will never know. Every time a marriage is betrayed, a business collapses, or a child dies of cancer; every time a country is bombed, a flood rages, or a famine decimates, the cry goes up: WHY?

There is no point denying the force of this question. Indeed, despite the confidence I may at points exude in a faith-based perspective on evil and suffering, I want to confess that my own faith is not untroubled by this question. I feel deeply the weight of the problem which suffering presents, and at times I still find myself asking, “Why, God?” I am not sure that the Bible—the main source of my perspective—answers all of my questions,

let alone all of yours. It will soon become apparent that my own view is not that the Good Book presents a complete and final explanation for all evil and suffering—far from it. However, I think that it offers the best explanation, the *least incoherent* one. I cling to the Bible's perspective not because it has some 'knock-down' argument to offer, but simply because, to me, it appears to be the only perspective which is not itself knocked-out by the force of this age-old question. It seems to be the last one standing.

That's why a large part of this book will be devoted to outlining several other approaches to this question. My intention here is not simply to criticise other points of view. By comparing and contrasting the alternatives, I hope to show how the intriguing and beautiful nature of the biblical perspective on suffering is the best one on offer.

But before I explain how other traditions understand suffering, I want to say something about how the question before us is often put. Sometimes it's phrased as a logical proof against God. I want to show briefly that this way of arguing isn't successful, before I deal with the more important issues of suffering and faith.

Does suffering disprove God?

A friend of mine is a Qantas pilot and one evening as he looked out of the flight-deck window at the thousands of bright stars in the night sky he said to his first officer, "Look at that. It's hard to believe there's no

God.” The first officer quickly replied, “Not when you’ve been through Vietnam and seen the violence I’ve seen”. My mate changed subjects.

Essentially the argument suggests that the presence of evil in the world can’t be reconciled with the existence of an all-loving, all-powerful God. It is reasoned that if God were all-loving and all-powerful he’d be willing and able to put an end to suffering. The fact that suffering continues in the world is proof, so it is thought, that an all-loving, all-powerful God does not exist.

Some people attempt to get around this ‘riddle’ by proposing that God is all-loving but not all-powerful. They say that God—whether by inability or by choice—cannot raise the world above the mess that it is in; that he himself is somehow caught in the trap like the rest of us, and that he is on a journey through the pain. This certainly solves the intellectual problem, since in answer to the question, ‘Why doesn’t God end all the pain?’, this view states: “Because he can’t; he, too, is enveloped by the pain of the world”. There is a half-truth here. One of the extraordinary things about the biblical portrait of God is that he does experience the pain of this world, and I’ll talk more about that later. The problem with this way of thinking—called ‘process theology’—is that it sidesteps a fundamental conviction of the Bible. As the Creator of everything, God does govern all things: he is in fact the ‘Almighty’.

So, you see, for anyone who adopts a vaguely biblical approach to the question, the dilemma remains. Does the existence of suffering disprove the existence

of an all-powerful and all-loving God? Let me put the problem again as a kind of equation:

Assumption 1: An all-powerful God would be able to end suffering.

Assumption 2: An all-loving God would desire to end suffering.

Fact: Suffering exists.

Conclusion: An all-powerful, all-loving God, therefore, does not exist.

The argument has popular appeal and has come to have the 'ring' of truth about it, but in terms of sheer logic it is not all that successful. In academic circles, this argument was refuted centuries ago, and again most recently by leading philosopher, Dr. Alvin Plantinga, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Notre Dame in the U.S.¹ The conclusion *God does not exist* is by no means a logical deduction from the phenomenon of suffering. The existence of suffering could be used as evidence against God's existence only if you could first prove that an all-loving God does not have good reasons for allowing suffering to continue. In other words, the problem in the above equation is Assumption 2 and, in particular, in the words 'would desire'. Until we could show categorically that there could not be loving purposes behind the continuation

1. Plantinga, A., *God and Other Minds: a study of the rational justification of belief in God*. (London: Cornell University Press, 1990)

of suffering, the logical force of the argument dissolves, even though its emotional force remains. Thus, ironically you could restate the equation to promote an entirely different, though equally reasonable, conclusion:

Assumption 1: An all-powerful God exists.

Assumption 2: An all-loving God exists.

Fact: Suffering exists.

Conclusion: God must have loving reasons (which he is able to achieve) for permitting suffering.

Now, this is not a proof *for* God, of course. I am simply trying to show that whether or not one accepts the argument that suffering disproves God's existence depends not on logic *per se* but on the assumptions with which one comes to the problem. And assumptions are tricky things to validate.

Please don't misunderstand me. I am not for a moment suggesting this settles the problem of suffering. It doesn't even come close. I am just pointing out that the presence of suffering in the world presents not so much an intellectual dilemma for faith in God but an emotional one. The real question of suffering is not, 'Could a god co-exist with a suffering world?' but 'Why would God allow it?' and 'What has he done about it?'. These are the more important and more difficult questions I want to pursue in this short book.

Let me begin then by outlining the comprehensive explanations of suffering proposed by the great alternative world traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and Atheism. Again, I should say that I have no intention of attempting to *disprove* any of these world views. The questions I will raise about them concern not the truthfulness or otherwise of these religions, but simply the implications of them, if true, for our struggle with suffering. The central goal here is not a critique but a comparison with the perspective found in the Bible.