

## The Tsunami: An Act of God?

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**Abstract:** *Rob Cook, Academic Dean and Head of Theology at Redcliffe College says that Christians in the West must integrate what they have seen into their faith experience, in the thinking part of their faith, not just the emotional surface. As he wrestles with sovereignty and freedom he concludes not with a patronising pat or soothing platitudes but something that seems more like the faith of scripture.*

What a shame that journalists tend to raise the God issue only when they are seeking to put theists on the defensive as with the recent *tsunami* event. How refreshing it would have been to have had them suggest in the 1960s, for example, that we needed Someone to **thank** as we gazed wonderingly at the pictures from cold, bleak space of that unique emerald jewel – planet earth. But I have also been somewhat disappointed by the response of Christian leaders in the press. We Christians have long been criticising postmodernist culture for replacing intellectual argument with mere emoting but when the challenge comes for us to make rational sense of the *tsunami* our spokesmen have tended to back off and say that it would be invidious to theologize in the midst of appalling suffering; rather we must express sympathetic feelings of pain and bewilderment. For sure the last thing a victim of the flood wants at the moment is a sophisticated philosophical defence of the concept of a benign God but at the very least it might help **us** as we seek to integrate this new development of the human story into our worldview convictions.

Hindus fall back on the inexorable law of *karma* seen in the context of multiple incarnations but that leaves us with the unpalatable implication that the victims of the *tsunami* got just what they deserved. Muslims speak of the inexorable will of Allah with history quite literally as ‘His-story’ but it seems impossible to square the goodness of God with this view. What approach should we take then? I believe that we must both retain and extend the traditional free-will defence in our Christian theodicy. The traditional defence argues that freedom is a good gift provided by God for without it we could not meaningfully love, or innovate or even assess arguments and do science. Freedom is a good gift but by its nature it is open to abuse: we may choose evil. God is responsible for the good gift and we are responsible for what we do with it. Thus the evil of, say, 9/11 is clearly the responsibility of free human beings. Thus runs the traditional free-will defence.

As for matter, it used to be thought to proceed in an inexorable manner. Napoleon’s chief scientist, Laplace famously believed that if we could only know the initial conditions of the universe, we would be able to predict all future events. However, scientists are now discovering that the universe is in a state curiously analogous to ourselves – subject to law and necessity in many ways but also with an element of open-ended ‘freedom’. Through mechanisms such as quantum indeterminacy and the butterfly effect of complex dynamical systems, nature can innovate and ‘try out’ different possibilities. At the genetic level, sometimes these innovations can be beneficial as with the evolution of a new species and at other times harmful as with the development of cancer cells. In his creative wisdom God has bestowed a degree of freedom on nature too. The world is loose-jointed. The very earth itself is moving and developing as it rolls on its core of lava making mountains and sometimes volcanoes and earthquakes. Quite simply, an earth without *tsunamis* would be a world without the Alps or the Eiger. The universe is not a clockwork mechanism. Scientists see it more like an evolving organism poised between chance and necessity. The Old Testament writer sensed something of this, ‘The race is not to the swift...nor bread to the wise; but time and chance happen to them all’ (Eccles. 9.11). Therefore, in the straightforward sense, the *tsunami* is no more an Act of God than was 9/11.

God woos but does not rape. *Kenosis* began at creation as God bestowed a degree of autonomy to the Cosmos as it evolved from the Big Bang and through trial and error demonstrated that within the ball of primordial energy lay the potential for such emergent qualities as atomic structure, matter, liquid, life, consciousness, spiritual awareness. God is not so much an authoritarian conductor of a symphony orchestra as an expert jazz player who inspires the rest of the band to yet more ingenious variations.

For most of its fourteen billion year history there was no life within the universe. To be sure the production of life was its crowning glory but it must have had an intrinsic value to God who appreciated its grandeur, as we are learning to do through such revelations as the Hubble photographs. This vast project and humankind are sometimes in conflict. Job learned this as God decentred him in the final divine speech (Jb. 38-41). In the cosmic scheme of things we are really very small yet, paradoxically, even the hairs of our head are numbered. We are both very insignificant and very significant at the same time. Nature sweeps us away and swats us like flies but God cares for, and remembers, every detail of each one of us.

Is this universe the best of all possible worlds? Even if it is conceded that this phrase is meaningful, the answer must probably be 'no'. Indeed there is an argument that God, with his preference for the poor, would choose to actualize a less than perfect cosmos which would bring about the likes of us because he wants a flawed race such as ourselves to share the bounty of his Kingdom. That is, in the hierarchy of possible biological spiritual beings we are amongst the poorest and yet God, in his mercy, chooses to actualize us.

Yet this particular universe is clearly a breathtakingly awesome project of beauty and grandeur and it is our world. A world of different conditions and coordinates would have no place for us, and most members of the human race have been grateful to have experienced this biological life. In the providence of God there is a limit to suffering – unconsciousness and death intervene. And perhaps it is only the omniscient and omnipresent God himself who experiences the total pain of the thousands of drowned and grieving. Each one of us only has our own local pain to carry.

But, like James Bond, we deeply sense that This World is not Enough especially for those young children who struggled in vain against the gargantuan waves. The cosmos seems to sense it too. Like a woman groaning with the contractions of child birth (Rom.8.22), the universe convulses to engender a new environment where created souls can find true fulfilment and happiness in the transparency of God. What faith it would have taken to believe that in the raw energy of the Big Bang the potentiality for life and consciousness were to be found! Does it take any more faith to believe that the universe contains further potential to give birth one day to what Scripture calls 'the new heavens and the new earth' (Is. 66.22; 2 Pet. 3.13; Rev. 21.1)?

The picture I have outlined entails that the *tsunami* was not a direct act of God. However, some will feel the theological cost is too high. The hard view of divine sovereignty has to go. The God who can be asked to do anything at anytime has to go. God indeed interacts with his universe but he honours the integrity of his creation such that there is a limit to divine intervention opportunities, just as within an agreed piece of music the lead jazz player may introduce new variations but not a new tune. Further, with the butterfly effect in mind, who knows what havoc would be unleashed in other parts of the cosmos were God to prevent the undersea earthquake? Only he knows and we must resign ourselves to trust his fathomless wisdom. Perhaps we need to be more modest, therefore, in our prayer expectations. We need to be more hopeful too in God's generosity as to who might share his future Kingdom – most of the drowned children were Muslim and Hindu. Perhaps we also need to moderate certain Calvinistic notions of the total depravity of humans given the widespread sacrificial giving of ordinary citizens of the world to the disaster fund.

And as for ourselves, we need to remember that some of the dead were also Christians. Our 'born again' status is not a lucky talisman. Our hope can easily be misplaced as John MacMurray reminds us:

The maxim of illusory religion runs: 'Fear not, Trust in God, and he will see that none of the things you fear will happen to you'. That of real religion, on the contrary, is: 'Fear not, the things that you are afraid of are quite likely to happen to you, but they are nothing to be afraid of.'

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