

An Executioner God or a God Who Suffers With Us?

In recent weeks, we have seen the great devastation in Myanmar and China. We remember the recent tsunami in Indonesia.

In the twinkling of an eye, tens and hundreds of thousands of people are dead. Needless to say, this causes many to question God's existence, the character of God, and if we believe, to ask, "Why does God inflict or, minimally, permit such suffering?"

I share with you an editorial from the Boston Globe by James Carroll. In "Humanizing Nature's Fury," he deals with these questions.

May his words help us, and may we, in turn, help others to better comprehend the mystery of our existence here on Earth and God's role in that mystery.

"OH, UNHAPPY mortals! Oh, deplorable Earth!" So begins Voltaire's cri de coeur over the devastation of the "great" earthquake that struck Lisbon in 1755. "One hundred thousand unfortunates that the earth devours, who, bloody, torn and still throbbing, buried under their roofs, end—unaided and in horrible torment—their lamentable days!"

The Lisbon earthquake struck in multiple tremors across ten minutes on the morning of All Saints Day, when vulnerable churches were full of Mass-goers. The event killed many thousands and leveled the city. The psychological trauma was felt across Europe. The catastrophe was a turning point in the Enlightenment, both undercutting the rationalist optimism of the age and stimulating the new science of seismology. It brought to the fore the moral meaning of natural disaster.

"Lisbon, which is no more, did it contain more vices than London or Paris, plunged in delights? Lisbon is in ruins, and in Paris they dance."

The devastating cyclone in Burma, with deaths projected at more than 120,000, and the earthquake in China, where as many as 50,000 may have died, bring the ruins of Lisbon to mind. Anguish is part of life, but when it occurs on a mass scale, the crisis becomes one of conscience. How could this happen?

The images of suffering humans prompt a visceral protest. Corpses that dishonor memory, collapsed buildings, threatened dams, the vacant stares of children, countless lives upended in an instant—all of it undeserved. All of it an outrage. And now the aftershocks of disease and displacement loom. The survivors who felt lucky at first now feel cursed.

When confronted with evil consequences of human venality, the judging mind shudders at the pain people are capable of inflicting

on one another, but the calamities caused by "natural evil" pose a different challenge, what Voltaire called "the eternal debate over useless sorrows." He mocked stoic philosophers who thought everything was for the best, and he derided the religious who preached the mysterious ways of a just and good God. Indeed, modern atheism begins in this contradiction: If an omnipotent God allows the innocent to suffer, then such a God is not good. Or not omnipotent. In either case, not God.

The problem of unmerited misery is as old as the Book of Job, but now more than the idea of God is called into question. The unpredicted loss of even one life is unsettling, but when tens of thousands of lives are snuffed out in a moment, the pins of meaning itself are removed. Is that all we are—twigs that can be snapped in two by the capriciousness of wind, water, and shifting tectonic plates?

In Burma and Sichuan, each broken body in a ditch was, until recently, a whole universe of thought, desire, love, ambition, laughter, and dreaming. And now it's nothing? How can that be? The cyclone and the earthquake have attacked the moral order, too.

But here is the irony. The visceral rejection that humans feel when confronted with large-scale suffering, the innate sense that such meaninglessness is wrong, is itself an affirmation of meaning. An enraged protest at the injustice of the deaths of children is itself a proclamation of justice. Or, as a post-Voltaire believer might put it, the death of the executioner God, prompted by the slaughter of innocents, is itself the encounter with God. God does not cause suffering, but suffers, too. Now authentic faith can, perhaps, begin.

Where does the primal human insistence on right and wrong come from? When we cry out with every fiber of our beings that what earthquakes and cyclones do to the treasures of human value is wrong, we are bringing forth a treasure. Resignation and stoicism in the face of suffering are the allies of suffering. When the moral order is overturned by chaotic nature, it is restored, first, by visceral human protest against disorder, and second, by moving immediately to help.

It is said that the ruler of Portugal, after Lisbon was devastated, asked what was to be done? And the answer came, "Bury the dead, and feed the living." If nature is indifferent to human suffering, humans are not. In this way, meaning is rescued, for humans, too, are part of nature.