FIRST THINGS

Tsunami and Theodicy

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January 15, 2010

(Tens of thousands of Haitians have already died in the wake of the devastating earthquake on Tuesday, and tens of thousands more are threatened by disease and a lack of food and clean water. We thought this would be an appropriate moment to revisit David B. Hart's essay from the March 2005 issue of First Things, *written in light of the tsunami that devastated the South Asian coastline in December 2004.)*

No one, no matter how great the scope of his imagination, should be able easily to absorb the immensity of the catastrophe that struck the Asian rim of the Indian Ocean and the coast of Somalia on the second day of Christmas this past year; nor would it be quite human to fail, in its wake, to feel some measure of spontaneous resentment towards God, fate, *natura naturans*, or whatever other force one imagines governs the intricate web of cosmic causality. But, once one's indignation at the callousness of the universe begins to subside, it is worth recalling that nothing that occurred that day or in the days that followed told us anything about the nature of finite existence of which we were not already entirely aware.

Not that one should be cavalier in the face of misery on so gigantic a scale, or should dismiss the spiritual perplexity it occasions. But, at least for those of us who are Christians, it is prudent to prepare ourselves as quickly and decorously as we may for the mixed choir of secular moralists whose clamor will soon—inevitably—swell about our ears, gravely informing us that here at last our faith must surely founder upon the rocks of empirical horrors too vast to be reconciled with any system of belief in a God of justice or mercy. It is of course somewhat petty to care overly much about captious atheists at such a time, but it is difficult not to be annoyed when a zealous skeptic, eager to be the first to deliver God His long overdue *coup de grâce*,

begins confidently to speak as if believers have never until this moment considered the problem of evil or confronted despair or suffering or death. Perhaps we did not notice the Black Death, the Great War, the Holocaust, or every instance of famine, pestilence, flood, fire, or earthquake in the whole of the human past; perhaps every Christian who has ever had to bury a child has somehow remained insensible to the depth of his own bereavement.

For sheer fatuity, on this score, it would be difficult to surpass Martin Kettle's pompous and platitudinous reflections in *The Guardian*, appearing two days after the earthquake: certainly, he argues, the arbitrariness of the destruction visited upon so many and such diverse victims must pose an insoluble conundrum for "creationists" everywhere—although he wonders, in concluding, whether his contemporaries are "too cowed" even to ask "if the God can exist that can do such things" (as if a public avowal of unbelief required any great reserves of fortitude in modern Britain). It would have at least been courteous, one would think, if he had made more than a perfunctory effort to ascertain what religious persons actually do believe before presuming to instruct them on what they cannot believe.

In truth, though, confronted by such enormous suffering, Christians have less to fear from the piercing dialectic of the village atheist than they do from the earnestness of certain believers, and from the clouds of cloying incense wafting upward from the open thuribles of their hearts. As irksome as Kettle's argument is, it is merely insipid; more troubling are the attempts of some Christians to rationalize this catastrophe in ways that, however inadvertently, make that argument all at once seem profound. And these attempts can span almost the entire spectrum of religious sensibility: they can be cold with Stoical austerity, moist with lachrymose piety, wanly roseate with sickly metaphysical optimism.

Mildly instructive to me were some remarks sent to Christian websites discussing a *Wall Street Journal* column of mine from the Friday following the earthquake. A stern if somewhat excitable Calvinist, intoxicated with God's sovereignty, asserted that in the—let us grant this chimera a

moment's life—"Augustinian-Thomistic-Calvinist tradition," and particularly in Reformed thought, suffering and death possess "epistemic significance" insofar as they manifest divine attributes that "might not otherwise be displayed." A scholar whose work I admire contributed an eloquent expostulation invoking the Holy Innocents, praising our glorious privilege (not shared by the angels) of bearing scars like those of Christ, and advancing the venerable homiletic conceit that our salvation from sin will result in a greater good than could have evolved from an innocence untouched by death. A man manifestly intelligent and devout, but with a knack for making providence sound like karma, argued that all are guilty through original sin but some more than others, that our "sense of justice" requires us to believe that "punishments and rewards [are] distributed according to our just desserts," that God is the "balancer of accounts," and that we must suppose that the suffering of these innocents will bear "spiritual fruit for themselves and for all mankind."

All three wished to justify the ways of God to man, to affirm God's benevolence, to see meaning in the seemingly monstrous randomness of nature's violence, and to find solace in God's guiding hand. None seemed to worry that others might think him to be making a fine case for a rejection of God, or of faith in divine goodness. Simply said, there is no more liberating knowledge given us by the gospel—and none in which we should find more comfort—than the knowledge that suffering and death, considered in themselves, have no ultimate meaning at all.

The *locus classicus* of modern disenchantment with "nature's God" is probably Voltaire's *Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne*, written in response to the great earthquake that—on All Saints' Day, 1755—struck just offshore of what was then the resplendent capital of the Portuguese empire. Lisbon was home to a quarter million, at least 60,000 of whom perished, both from the initial tremor (reckoned now, like the Sumatran earthquake, at a Richter force of around 9.0) and from the tsunami that it cast up on shore half an hour later (especially murderous to those who had retreated to boats in the mouth of the river Tagus to escape the destruction on land). An enormous fire soon began to consume the ruined city. Tens of thousands

were drowned along the coasts of the Algarve, southern Spain, and Morocco.

For Voltaire, a catastrophe of such indiscriminate vastness was incontrovertible evidence against the bland optimism of popular theodicy. His poem—for all the mellifluousness of its alexandrines—was a lacerating attack upon the proposition that "*tout est bien.*" Would you dare argue, he asks, that you see the necessary effect of eternal laws decreed by a God both free and just as you contemplate

> Ces femmes, ces enfants l'un sur l'autre entassés, Sous ces marbres rompus ces membres dispersés

"These women, these infants heaped one upon the other, these limbs scattered beneath shattered marbles"? Or would you argue that all of this is but God's just vengeance upon human iniquity?

> Quel crime, quelle faute ont commis ces enfants Sur le sein maternel écrasés et sanglants?

"What crime and what sin have been committed by these infants crushed and bleeding on their mothers' breasts?" Or would you comfort those dying in torment on desolate shores by assuring them that others will profit from their demise and that they are discharging the parts assigned them by universal law? Do not, says Voltaire, speak of the great chain of being, for that chain is held in the hand of a God who is Himself enchained by nothing.

For all its power, however, Voltaire's poem is a very feeble thing compared to the case for "rebellion" against "the will of God" in human suffering

placed in the mouth of Ivan Karamazov by that fervently Christian novelist Dostoevsky; for, while the evils Ivan recounts to his brother Alexey are acts not of impersonal nature but of men, Dostoevsky's treatment of innocent suffering possesses a profundity of which Voltaire was never even remotely capable. Famously, Dostoevsky supplied Ivan with true accounts of children tortured and murdered: Turks tearing babies from their mothers' wombs, impaling infants on bayonets, firing pistols into their mouths; parents savagely flogging their children; a five-year- old-girl tortured by her mother and father, her mouth filled with excrement, locked at night in an outhouse, weeping her supplications to "dear kind God" in the darkness; an eight-year-old serf child torn to pieces by his master's dogs for a small accidental transgression.

But what makes Ivan's argument so disturbing is not that he accuses God of failing to save the innocent; rather, he rejects salvation itself, insofar as he understands it, and on moral grounds. He grants that one day there may be an eternal harmony established, one that we will discover somehow necessitated the suffering of children, and perhaps mothers will forgive the murderers of their babies, and all will praise God's justice; but Ivan wants neither harmony—"for love of man I reject it," "it is not worth the tears of that one tortured child"—nor forgiveness; and so, not denying there is a God, he simply chooses to return his ticket of entrance to God's Kingdom. After all, Ivan asks, if you could bring about a universal and final beatitude for all beings by torturing one small child to death, would you think the price acceptable?

Voltaire's poem is not a challenge to Christian faith; it inveighs against a variant of the "deist" God, one who has simply ordered the world exactly as it now is, and who balances out all its eventualities in a precise equilibrium between felicity and morality. Nowhere does it address the Christian belief in an ancient alienation from God that has wounded creation in its uttermost depths, and reduced cosmic time to a shadowy remnant of the world God intends, and enslaved creation to spiritual and terrestrial powers hostile to God. But Ivan's rebellion is something altogether different. Voltaire sees only the terrible truth that the actual history of suffering and

death is not morally intelligible. Dostoevsky sees—and this bespeaks both his moral genius and his Christian view of reality—that it would be far more terrible if it were.

Christians often find it hard to adopt the spiritual idiom of the New Testament—to think in terms, that is, of a cosmic struggle between good and evil, of Christ's triumph over the principalities of this world, of the overthrow of hell. All Christians know, of course, that it is through God's self-outpouring upon the cross that we are saved, and that we are made able by grace to participate in Christ's suffering; but this should not obscure that other truth revealed at Easter: that the incarnate God enters "this cosmos" not simply to disclose its immanent rationality, but to break the boundaries of fallen nature asunder, and to refashion creation after its ancient beauty—wherein neither sin nor death had any place. Christian thought has traditionally, of necessity, defined evil as a privation of the good, possessing no essence or nature of its own, a purely parasitic corruption of reality; hence it can have no *positive* role to play in God's determination of Himself or purpose for His creatures (even if by economy God can bring good from evil); it can in no way supply any imagined deficiency in God's or creation's goodness. Being infinitely sufficient in Himself, God had no need of a passage through sin and death to manifest His glory in His creatures or to join them perfectly to Himself. This is why it is misleading (however soothing it may be) to say that the drama of fall and redemption will make the final state of things more glorious than it might otherwise have been. No less metaphysically incoherent—though immeasurably more vile—is the suggestion that God requires suffering and death to reveal certain of his attributes (capricious cruelty, perhaps? morbid indifference? a twisted sense of humor?). It is precisely sin, suffering, and death that blind us to God's true nature.

There is, of course, some comfort to be derived from the thought that everything that occurs at the level of what Aquinas calls secondary causality—in nature or history—is governed not only by a transcendent providence, but by a universal teleology that makes every instance of pain and loss an indispensable moment in a grand scheme whose ultimate synthesis will

justify all things. But consider the price at which that comfort is purchased: it requires us to believe in and love a God whose good ends will be realized not only in spite of—but entirely by way of—every cruelty, every fortuitous misery, every catastrophe, every betrayal, every sin the world has ever known; it requires us to believe in the eternal spiritual necessity of a child dying an agonizing death from diphtheria, of a young mother ravaged by cancer, of tens of thousands of Asians swallowed in an instant by the sea, of millions murdered in death camps and gulags and forced famines. It seems a strange thing to find peace in a universe rendered morally intelligible at the cost of a God rendered morally loathsome. Better, it seems to me, the view of the ancient Gnostics: however ludicrous their beliefs, they at least, when they concluded that suffering and death were essential aspects of the creator's design, had the good sense to yearn to know a higher God.

I do not believe we Christians are obliged—or even allowed—to look upon the devastation visited upon the coasts of the Indian Ocean and to console ourselves with vacuous cant about the mysterious course taken by God's goodness in this world, or to assure others that some ultimate meaning or purpose resides in so much misery. Ours is, after all, a religion of salvation; our faith is in a God who has come to rescue His creation from the absurdity of sin and the emptiness of death, and so we are permitted to hate these things with a perfect hatred. For while Christ takes the suffering of his creatures up into his own, it is not because he or they had need of suffering, but because he would not abandon his creatures to the grave. And while we know that the victory over evil and death has been won, we know also that it is a victory yet to come, and that creation therefore, as Paul says, groans in expectation of the glory that will one day be revealed. Until then, the world remains a place of struggle between light and darkness, truth and falsehood, life and death; and, in such a world, our portion is charity.

As for comfort, when we seek it, I can imagine none greater than the happy knowledge that when I see the death of a child I do not see the face of God, but the face of His enemy. It is not a faith that would necessarily satisfy Ivan Karamazov, but neither is it one that his arguments can defeat: for it has set us free from optimism, and taught us hope instead. We can rejoice that we

are saved not through the immanent mechanisms of history and nature, but by grace; that God will not unite all of history's many strands in one great synthesis, but will judge much of history false and damnable; that He will not simply reveal the sublime logic of fallen nature, but will strike off the fetters in which creation languishes; and that, rather than showing us how the tears of a small girl suffering in the dark were necessary for the building of the Kingdom, He will instead raise her up and wipe away all tears from her eyes—and there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying, nor any more pain, for the former things will have passed away, and He that sits upon the throne will say, "Behold, I make all things new."

David B. Hart's most recent book is Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies.