

Why did God allow the earthquake to devastate Haiti, to kill tens of thousands and to injure and displace hundreds of thousands more? Grown up people can cope with quite a lot of pain, but surely suffering on this scale is nothing short of monstrous and as good an argument as we need for concluding either that there is no God or else he is malicious. That has been the standard sceptical argument since the days of David Hume: if God cannot prevent suffering, then he is not omnipotent; if he can prevent it but chooses not to, then he is not good.

Most of the pronouncements on the earthquake have been unsatisfactory. A contributor to *Thought for the Day* fatuously paraded the clichés – like Ronnie O'Sullivan lining up balls for a trick shot. My wife and I were listening to this talk over a cup of tea. It made me angry for its banality and its insult to our intelligence. And you could see exactly where it was going from the opening remark. In fact, I'm afraid I did see only too clearly where it was going and said so over that cup of tea.

"Theodicy," the speaker began and you knew at once his talk was going to resemble a mini-lecture in one of the dumbed-down theological colleges. I muttered to my wife, "He'll mention Leibnitz next." "Leibnitz," said our educator. "The best of all possible worlds," I said. "The best of all possible worlds," he repeated. "The Lisbon earthquake of 1755. Voltaire. Candide. Dr Pangloss..." And so wearily on as the lined-up balls were made to perform their party trick.

People ask me why I find John Milton so unsatisfactory. Well, apart from the fact that he worked as official censor for Oliver Cromwell's dictatorship and signed King Charles' death warrant, it is because he sets out his aim at the beginning of *Paradise Lost* as "...to justify the ways of God to men." Wrong from the start. The idea that we can hold God to account and pronounce judgement over him is presumptuous and preposterous. It arises out of the dissociation of sensibility which happened at the Enlightenment: the replacement of the notion of the centrality of God with the centrality of human consciousness. It derived directly from Descartes' too-influential tautology, "I think, therefore I am." The Fathers and the medieval Doctors had said, in effect, "We are, because God exists." At the Enlightenment this scheme of things was overturned in what was truly a Copernican revolution in theology. Metaphysics was replaced by epistemology. Effectually, man set himself up as the measure of all things – including God.

We need to recapture the Biblical, Patristic and Medieval belief in the centrality of God. This means that God is the origin of all things. "All things were made by him," says St John, and then drums it into our thick consciousness by sheer repetition, "...and without him was not anything made that was made." That was enough to settle the Gnostics and Noetics of his day, but it does not, unfortunately, settle the talkative arrogance of our present-day uncultured despisers of religion.

Not only is God the origin of everything that is, he is also the origin of all value. *The Book of Genesis* tells us, "And God saw that it was good." This means, among other things, that, if we are to have any understanding of good and evil, this understanding must be derived from God. The modern world will not hear of this. For arrogant, self-centred modern types there is no absolute morality. That is what is taught not only in our "diversified" university philosophy departments but in state schools' secularised

RE lessons: "Buddha thought this, Jesus thought that and Karl Marx thought the other. What do you think, Megan?"

Everyone, however stupid and unschooled, is said to, "...have a right to *their* (sic) own opinion." Worse, this has come to mean that every opinion is as valid the next. In such a world – a world in which notions of truth and value have been so deconstructed and relativised – no meaningful concepts of either truth or value can remain. Crudely, each individual man becomes the measure and centre of all things and the clay presumes to judge the potter – and even to judge whether there is a potter. And, in this intellectually and morally degenerate culture, and insofar as God is allowed any role at all, it is only that he should deal with us as we desire him to deal with us, to fulfil our desires, to give us what we want. We see ourselves as the centre of all things, the most important kids on the block, and it is God's duty to see that nothing ever happens to hurt or offend us. As Timothy Leary said, "There is nothing beyond the pleasure principle. So turn on, tune in and drop out." No wonder then that modern culture and society consists of intellectual bankruptcy, spiritual narcissism and moral anarchy.

According to the wise theologians of Christian tradition, we cannot presume to probe the secret counsels of the Almighty. The very supposition that we can so do is impertinent and absurd. So what should our response be after a catastrophe such as happened in Haiti? "The wounded surgeon plies the steel," says Eliot. It is often those who have most keenly felt life's trials, who have been most exposed to the sharpness of suffering, who are best able to help others. Keats was surely right when he said that this world is a place for soul-making. There is something in suffering which builds character, and I have seen this myself in so many people in my parishes who have borne suffering resolutely and even cheerfully, and by doing so have transcended evil. Of course, this is all nonsense to the sceptical utilitarian who regards even the smallest amount of suffering in the world as a refutation of the proposition that there exists a supremely good God. Of course, evil and suffering are mighty problems, but they loom artificially large in the minds of those people who think that we are here only to have a good time.

We can give money and our prayers. We can certainly see God in the still small voice. But, because he is the origin of all things, he is also in the wind, the fire and the earthquake. "Let the whole earth fear the Lord: stand in awe of him, all ye that dwell in the world."

All the standard philosophical answers to the problem of evil are bound to be more or less incomplete – and only one even begins to tackle the issue from the true perspective, which is that God must be allowed to be God. We do not stand in judgement over him: it is God who judges us. We cannot, with Milton, justify the ways of God. Rather it is God who justifies us through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. So for the Christian the problem of evil is not an academic exercise. For Christians believe that God did not remain aloof from this world of evil and suffering, but in Christ he came to redeem it. God is not aloof from evil but, in Christ crucified, God suffered evil.

The Gnostics and armchair Buddhists cannot tolerate the doctrine of the cursed and crucified Christ who took our flesh upon him. They are too otherworldly to accept the sublime truths of the Incarnation and the Atonement. They can't believe that God gets his hands dirty like that. But St John and St Paul tell us

for certain that he did. No theory is any good. Rather, as Alfred North Whitehead said, "Buddha gave his doctrine. Christ gave his life."