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The Christian and "Natural Disasters"

BY THE REV. NORMAN ADCOCK, A.K.C.

THIS hoary problem is raised again in *The Lisbon Earthquake*, by T. D. Kendrick (Methuen, 21/-), who is the Director of the British Museum.

One reviewer (Philip Toynbee) remarks that the question "Why?", which mainly concerned intellectual thinkers when the earthquake occurred on All Saints' Day, 1755, killing in about ten minutes some 15,000 people, would by most modern thinkers be regarded as a "non-sense question" in that it demands a motive for a natural phenomenon which is in fact unmotivated. For reasons to be given later this will be seen to be a very dubious conclusion. He later criticizes the supposed view of modern theologians that God's purposes are so high and mysterious that it is useless to ask why He ordains an earthquake here and a flood there, by pointing out how dangerous an attitude this is, for if we cannot understand why God killed and maimed those innocent people in Lisbon in 1755 how is it possible that we should understand so many of His purposes for so much of the time? He concludes by saying that while it is the function of theologians to define the purposes of God, which they often do with zest and confidence, it seems odd we can never understand that pervasive element in human life which decrees that Lisbon shall be destroyed and London saved.

While there is much that is justified in the above complaint there is also some very inadequate and false theological knowledge. To begin with, Man will never be able to find out and understand everything about himself. All science is a method invented by Man and when that science in its branch of psychology is turned upon Man himself to investigate him, it is the case of the lesser trying to probe the nature of the greater and will never succeed in finding out all about Man. A great deal about him, yes; much more, as time goes on, than we know now; but *everything* about Man, never. Since there will clearly be for ever a mysterious, unknowable "overplus" about Man's nature itself it is abundantly clear that there will be for ever also much that is unknowable about God and His ways, while at the same time there will be through His revelation to us very much that we can understand about Him: as much, in fact, as our limited human minds are capable of bearing about God.

It is these knowable facts about God that theologians define with the zest and confidence attributed to them by Mr. Toynbee: and it is not at all odd that many for ever unknowable facts are not able to be defined at all by theologians or anyone else. Whether "natural disasters" fall wholly or partly within the for ever unknowable factors about God it is the purpose of this article to investigate.

As all Christians must if they be consistent with their calling we will first see what Jesus Himself has to say on this subject.

"Or those eighteen, upon whom the tower in Siloam fell, and slew them, think ye that they were sinners above all men that dwelt in

Jerusalem? I tell you, Nay; but except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish" (St. Luke xiii. 4, 5). This disposes at once of the arguments of those who in 1755 said that Lisbon had been destroyed because it was too rich and proud: because it was a centre of the Inquisition: because the Inquisition had been too slack: because too many images were worshipped there: because there had been too little devotion to the Saints. At the same time by plainly asserting that they were *all* sinners, together with *all* in Jerusalem and, by implication, throughout the world, although without apportioning the magnitude of individuals' sins, this also disposes of the assumption voiced by Mr. Toynbee, that it was "innocent people" in Lisbon who were killed: for, on the Christian teaching, all men are sinners, and there is no such thing as an "innocent" person anywhere.

When we examine another pronouncement of our Lord in this category, I think the clues afforded us are sufficient for establishing at least a highly probable working theory as to "natural disasters".

"And ought not this woman, being a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan hath bound, lo, these eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the sabbath day?" (St. Luke xiii. 16), the answer Jesus gave to those objecting to His healing the woman bowed and doubled up with an infirmity, eighteen years, on the sabbath. It is clear that our Lord assumed there were powerful spiritual forces of evil at work hostile to the human race. In such a matter, as on that of Heaven and Hell where He gives unequivocal teaching, there can be no doubt that our Lord would never mislead us: what He says, once we accept Him as Son of God, is all true. St. Paul echoes it when he talks of the principalities, and powers, the rulers of the darkness of this world, and spiritual wickedness in high places against which the Christian is always fighting, and not just against powers of flesh and blood (Ephesians vi. 12).

More and more psychologists are coming round to admit in some otherwise totally inexplicable cases, "spirit-possession". Under the strictest laboratory conditions, the power to "will" dice to fall in certain ways has been proved, thus not only clinching the power of "mind" over "matter" but also proving the power and ability of the spiritual to influence and move matter. It was the late Professor Sir A. S. Eddington who in his *The Nature of the Physical World* admitted that in abolishing the criterion of causality (by the acceptance of Heisenberg's indeterminacy principle) science was opening the door to the savage's demons: although he did go on to express the hope that science would eventually be able to pitch them out again. That was way back in 1927: since then the overwhelming positive evidence for telepathy, both cognitive and precognitive, has shown conclusively that in Man there is an element that ignores both the Time and the Space factors and is therefore above both. This element we term the "spiritual", and it seems clear there must be a sphere for this element to act in, and that sphere is termed the "spiritual sphere": Man himself is seen to be the nexus of interaction between the material and the non-material: hence there is interaction between the material and spiritual spheres.

It is of great importance to note that science proper deals only really

with secondary and not primary causes when it is strictly limited to the material. Let me give a personal example. When, many years ago now, I contracted pneumonia the scientists very rightly would say that the cause of it was streptococcus pneumonicus. Actually I was convalescing from an attack of measles at the time and in order to play some juvenile prank I left the warm room I was in for a cold and draughty hall on a January day. So the *real* cause was the prompting, and my succumbing to the prompting urge, to play this trick which gave the streptococcus pneumonicus, one of the countless viruses always in our bodies but during normal health lying dormant, just the opportunity it needed to become active. Thus the true scientific cause of my pneumonia, streptococcus pneumonicus was in reality only the *secondary* cause of it.

When atom and hydrogen bomb tests are made, any animals in the affected areas if they were capable of sustained rational thought would consider they were "natural disasters", sudden and unpredictable, an upheaval of nature, apparently without rhyme or reason : in short, they would consider it "an unmotivated natural phenomenon" as Mr. Toynbee suggests modern thinkers would class earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, tidal waves, and so on.

We in our superior knowledge know how wrong the animals would be if they drew such (to them) natural deductions. For these sudden upheavals are most carefully motivated; behind them there is brilliant reasoning power and *will*; we must note that for the production of an atom or hydrogen bomb explosion (or, for that matter, anything that Man does) a combination of reason and will is necessary; either alone could not produce results.

Our Lord teaches that not only is Man fallen, but that there are fallen spirits : discarnate agencies who have never been and never will be incarnate human beings. These fallen spirits are reasoning creatures : and they have will. Their will, like Man's, is in rebellion against God. That is, they, like Man, have a certain amount of free will, which they misuse. No one but God is absolutely free willed; all other creatures are to a greater or lesser degree determined by events outside their control, though still retaining some element of free will.

There is no absolute evidence against the possibility (and indeed with our growing knowledge of the nature of the physical universe and its interaction with a non-material sphere there is proportional growing evidence for the possibility) that "natural disasters" in the form of earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, etc., are primarily caused by wrongful actions on the part of spiritual beings evilly disposed towards Man, because their wills are in rebellion against God; just as it is the misuse of his conditioned free will by Man that wrongly uses, in atomic and hydrogen bombs, the secret of atomic power he has so recently discovered. We, in relation to these "natural disasters", seismic and volcanic, etc., are in the same position as the animals in relation to the "natural disasters" we purposefully release upon them by our wrong use of atomic energy; just as those same animals are unmolested by and may even with human beings eventually benefit very greatly from the right use of atomic energy.

The wrong use of any power always tends towards and finally ends

in destruction, just as the right use of any power tends towards and ends in creativity. The root of wrong use lies always in hate, rooted in sin, which divides and destroys not only the person hated, but also the hater exercising it. The root of right use lies in love, which builds up, creates, not only the object of the love but all the time the subject, that is, the lover, exercising that love.

Now Jesus, the Word of God, by Whom He created all things, is obviously the Creator and Ruler of the total Universe, material and spiritual. He can take care of all those who unreservedly and with full faith in Him, commit themselves to Him. After all, the killing of human beings by means of hydrogen bombs directed by other human agency is the killing of some incarnate spirits by other incarnate spirits just as, on our hypothesis, the killing of certain human beings by "natural disasters" directed by discarnate agencies is the killing of incarnate spirits by discarnate spirits. And in each case the first question we must ask is, How far have the incarnate spirits, claiming trust in Jesus, really placed themselves under His protection: have really made it possible for Him to help them to the full?

It is the same in any kind of disastrous accident: those, say, burnt alive in some 'plane disaster, when the cry so often goes up, How could God let such a dreadful end come to "innocent" people?

First, we remember that in the Christian doctrine there are no "innocent" people anywhere: only sinners, of greater or lesser degree. And in any accident, cataclysmic or otherwise, only God knows all the circumstances of all those involved. It is primarily a question of how far people *allow* God to help them. Are they always constant and instant in prayer: thus keeping close to God, making known their wants to Him, receiving back His Will for them: thanking Him for all His mercies? Are they always constant in His public worship, as Jesus was (St. Luke iv. 16), making use regularly, and as worthily as possible, of the Sacraments He has ordained to be used by those claiming to be His followers? Are they striving to take the Risen Lord with them during their whole life, and so seeking to present Jesus to all whom they meet, to all with whom they work? If they (and we) are doing all these things then we need fear nothing.

All these things Jesus did in His human life, and we know that He did nothing but what was necessary to keep Him, in His true humanity, ever at one with God, His Father. This did not save Him from the Cross, but it gave Him the power to endure that death and to triumph over it by the Resurrection.

Now, if every Christian soul did the same, whatever happened to them we could be sure was the Will of God: and that since they had placed themselves under our Lord's Almighty protection neither life nor death could separate them from Him (and therefore could not harm them): that whether in this life or the life to come, by whatever means the transit was accomplished, by "natural" death or by "disaster", they were the Lord's.

But not one of us ever does so behave: therefore we cannot be certain that everything that happens to us is, to begin with, God's Will for us; indeed, we may be quite sure that insofar as it is God's Will for us it is only so in the condition we have now reduced ourselves to: it is

only His Will for us, modified to suit the situation we have brought ourselves into by the misuse of our free will, and the frequent misuse or non-use of the Power of His Grace He has left behind for us to utilize.

It is surely now as when Jesus was on earth. Whenever He came to any village or community and found no faith in Himself, there He marvelled at their unbelief and could do no mighty work there, because of that unbelief. He was really there, with all His Almighty Power, but because of their condition of no faith in Him they could not avail themselves of the creative, healing Power of His Presence.

Summing up, we can present the Christian teaching on "natural disasters" as follows.

All men are sinners, in varying degrees : there are no "innocent" people in the pure, full meaning of that word. Hence the Devil has a foothold amongst us all, which he can utilize in whatever way suits his purpose best, and this will vary according to the individual concerned. That power of the Devil amongst us is limited, strictly limited, by our true faith in Jesus. Were our faith in Jesus such as His was in His Father's, the Devil's power over us would be entirely eliminated, as it was in His case : but that would not guarantee freedom from suffering inflicted from without : but since sin would then have no foothold within, that outwardly inflicted suffering could be borne and overcome in triumph as it was by Him.

Even if the faithful, always sinners, but if true to Christ, in a far lesser degree than those unfaithful to Him, suffer sometimes more than obvious and great sinners it is just because they *are* faithful to Christ that they do suffer in such a degree. It is an honour so to suffer ("And they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His Name" (Acts v. 41)); it shows they are chosen to be the friends of Jesus : to be His co-workers in the redemption of the world. Redemption brought Jesus supreme suffering : it is bound to bring suffering to those associated with Him in it.

And, in a way paradoxically, it is just those nearest to Christ who do not deserve so much suffering, who alone know *how* to bear suffering : creatively, as He did, twisting the Crown of Thorns into a true Kingly Crown, and the Cross itself into a Throne of Triumph, from which He ever reigns : and so through their Christian, uncomplaining bearing of suffering, help draw those outside Christ into His Body, the Church.

Since however we are all sinners in varying degrees, all suffering is at least partly deserved by us. And this includes suffering inflicted by "natural disasters". But how much to any individual such "natural disasters' suffering" might be mitigated, or even entirely avoided, depends on how near to God the individual keeps.

And no human being can ever have sufficient knowledge to solve this problem : for no one is fully cognizant of all the circumstances in the life of another, except the person concerned, and of course God, Who knows all, and is the Supreme Ruler of all, angels, spirits, men and things, and can provide utter protection, according to His Will, to all who faithfully seek it.