

Faith&Thought



Relating advances in knowledge to faith within society

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In this issue:

- **The Goodness, Wisdom and Patience of the Living God - Rev. Dr. Nigel Wright**
- **Is God to Blame for Natural Disasters?**
- Rev. Dr. Ernest Lucas
- **Pain and Personal Transformation**
- Rev. Sally Nelson

FAITH and THOUGHT

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Contents

Editorial		1
Faith and Thought Symposium 2011		2
Company of Educators (Master's Seminar)		3
AGM 2010		4
The Goodness, Wisdom and Patience of the Living God	Rev. Dr. Nigel Wright	5
Is God to Blame for Natural Disasters?	Rev. Dr. Ernest Lucas	16
Pain and Personal Transformation	Rev. Sally Nelson	27
Book Reviews		34
Application for Enrolment		41

Editorial

The existence of suffering and evil in the world has long been a problem for Christians who believe in an omnipotent and all loving God. Throughout history great minds have sought to understand how the dilemma posed originally by ancient Greek philosophers can be solved namely, 'Either God wishes to remove suffering and evil but is unable to and therefore is not omnipotent, or he is able but unwilling to and therefore cannot be wholly good.' Christians and others have wanted to insist God is both all-powerful and all loving, but also want to recognise that suffering and evil still exist. The speakers at our 2010 symposium sought to shed light on various aspects of this important topic under the general heading of 'Is God Good – Belief in the Face of Evil'. Dr. Nigel Wright is Principal of Spurgeon's College. Dr. Ernest Lucas is Vice-Principal and Tutor in Biblical Studies at Bristol Baptist College and Honorary Research Fellow in Theology and Religious Studies at Bristol University. Before studying theology he was a research biochemist. The Rev. Sally Nelson is a Baptist minister with experience of the hospice world and of the issues around disability. She has recently submitted her PhD thesis, which examines the narrative interpretation of suffering.

FAITH AND THOUGHT

(THE VICTORIA INSTITUTE)

TRANSLATING THE OLD TESTAMENT

First Century and Now

OPEN SYMPOSIUM

Saturday 22nd October 2011

The Use of the Old Testament in 1 Peter.

Professor Howard Marshall (University of Aberdeen)

What we now know about the preservation of the OT text after looking at the

Dead Sea Scrolls for 50 years.

Dr. David Instone-Brewer (Tyndale House, Cambridge)

To Translate or not to Translate:

The Old Testament in Missionary Bible Translation Strategy.

Mr. Eddie Arthur (Wycliffe Bible Translators)

10.30 a.m. - 4.00 p.m.

Kings Cross Baptist Church, Vernon Square London WC1X 9EW

Directions to Kings Cross Baptist Church, walking from Kings Cross Station:

A 9 minute walk roughly east of Kings Cross Station via Pentonville Road (A501). After 180 yards right into Kings Cross Rd. (A201). Keep to the left hand pavement and proceed for another 520 yards. At the multiple junction cross Penton Rise which comes in from the left. Continue into Vernon Rise, which is the next turning on the left, and after 28 yards, left again into Vernon Square.

Registration fee £15.00 (Full Time Students £7.00) including coffee and tea.

**Lunch: there are restaurants in the area; sandwiches are obtainable locally;
a room will be available for packed lunches.**

The registration fee will be refunded to anyone joining the Institute (FAITH AND THOUGHT) on the day of the symposium.

**Booking: The Rev. J. Buxton, 15 The Drive, Harlow Essex CM20 3QD
Tel: 01279 422661 Email revjdbuxton@sky.com.**

Company of Educators – Master’s Seminar

As a member of my local SACRE (Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education) I was invited to a lecture on Thursday, February 3rd, given under the auspices of the Company of Educators. I had not heard of this body before. The Company members whom I met there seemed concerned with education in the broadest sense: a headteacher, a vice-chancellor and so forth.

The Speaker was Professor Sir John Enderby (Emeritus Professor of Physics, Bristol) who had been given the title *Understanding vs. Belief ‘Will there ever be enough understanding to replace faith?’*. In fact, he began by criticizing atheists for confusing science, which produced understanding, with religion, which was concerned with eternal truths. Scientific knowledge could illumine religious belief, but did not displace it. A later illustration he gave was Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. This play expressed deep truths about human behaviour that were not affected by historical understanding of the real Macbeth.

He spoke of three attributes of God that were such eternal truths illumined by modern scientific knowledge. I will give just a few of his examples.

1. **God as Creator.** In Genesis, we are taught that the universe had a beginning, that man is made from the same stuff as earth, that all human beings have a common ancestry. Modern theories of cosmology, biochemistry and genetics helped affirm these things.
2. **God as Law Giver.** The existence of a stable universe and life on our planet were now known to be dependent on the fine-tuning of a few constants. If these changed, life would be impossible. This gave a picture of how moral laws were necessary for stable human life in society.
3. **God as Unifier.** It might be objected that allegiance to different religious beliefs and moral codes gave rise to wars and atrocities. What really gave rise to these things was *fear* of those who were different, fear that still occurs and gives rise to these things when there are no religious excuses. True faith in God frees us from fear, and so is the solution to conflict, not its cause.

I only noticed afterwards that these attributes looked distinctly Trinitarian. Whether or not this is intentional, I cannot say. Prof. Enderby described himself as a ‘theist’ who appreciates Anglican worship.

4 FAITH AND THOUGHT

He criticised the popular, contemporary atheists for rejecting religious beliefs because they were not capable of experimental testing, when the same applied to any theories about what was before the Big Bang. The very fact that science is possible depends on faith that the universe has laws that can be discovered. It also needs openness to new discoveries, an openness that the atheists failed to show to religious experience.

Annual General Meeting: November 13th 2010

The meeting was held on Saturday 13th November at 2.00 p.m. at Kings Cross Baptist Church, Vernon Square, London WC1X 9EW during the annual symposium and was attended by all participants.

- (a) The chair was taken by the Rev.Dr. R.H.Allaway.
- (b) The Minutes of the previous AGM were read and agreed.
- (c) Dr. Allaway thanked Mr. Brian Weller who had retired this year after many years service as administrator to the Institute. A letter of appreciation would be sent. Thanks were also expressed to Mr. Terence Mitchell who had retired last year as Chair of the Council.
- (d) The President, Vice-President and Honorary Treasurer were elected for a further term of service.
- (e) The Rev. Michael J. Collis B.A. B.Sc. M.Th. Ph.D., A.B.Robins B.Sc. Ph.D and Terence C. Mitchell M.A who formally retire, being eligible for re-election, were re-elected for a further period of service on the Council.
- (f) The Rev.John Buxton M.A presented the annual accounts, which are available upon application. The accounts were in a satisfactory state and there was no need to increase the subscription rates at the present time. Together with Christians in Science we have notified the administrators for Paternoster Press, which has gone into liquidation, of our liability for four years payment for SCB. We have sufficient cash in our savings account to meet this. The chairman thanked the Hon. Treasurer for preparing these accounts.
- (g) The chairman spoke of the need for a part-time administrator for which expenses and a small honorarium would be available.

The Goodness, Wisdom and Patience of the Living God

Nigel Wright

Some years ago British commercial television carried an advertisement for *The Guardian* newspaper. Within a short thirty seconds we were shown the same event three times repeated. In the first scene we notice a well-dressed man with a briefcase walking purposely across a square in the City of London. Suddenly a young man with shaved head and large boots rushes towards him and 'knocks him over. We draw a conclusion. Surely the young man is a thug mugging the man to run off with his briefcase? The scene changes and this time we are standing at a different angle to the whole event. Now we can see that behind the young man a car is drawing up. Out of the front seats emerge two heavily built men in suits and as the young man notices them he sets off at a pace, knocking over the well-dressed City gentleman in his flight. We revise our judgment. This is not a mugging after all but an attempt by the young man to escape the plain-clothes police officers, or perhaps the local gangsters, who are after him. He collides with the gentleman by accident as he seeks to escape. The scene shifts for a third time. Now we are looking down from above and we notice what previously we were unable to see, that just above the City gentleman a load is suspended from a crane and is in the process of slipping. If it does so it will certainly kill the City gentleman. We now see what is really happening. The young man is not engaged in a mugging, nor is he knocking the City gentleman over in his flight. Rather he is rushing towards the gentleman to push him out of the way and doing so at great personal risk. He is endangering his own life to save that of another. Then the words appear, '*The Guardian* gives you the right perspective on things'. By the end of the advertisement we are left repenting of our prejudice towards young men with shaven heads and large boots. Perhaps we will go on to subscribe to *The Guardian*.

The point is that interpretation depends upon perspective, and we struggle to achieve perspective. Where we are standing inevitably shapes the ways in which we understand the world around us. Events, to be understood, need a degree of distance from beyond themselves to see how they relate to the whole. This is true of the wider world whose events are often perplexing and confusing. It is also true of our own lives. All of us are time bound, contextually limited. Inevitably we see things from a self-interested and parochial perspective. Our evaluation of events, their 'goodness' or otherwise, accords with whether or not they contribute immediately to our perceived benefit. Sometimes given distance and time we begin to glimpse how experiences that at one time were unwelcome and unwanted actually shaped and formed us in ways we have come to value. At other times we see the 'meaning' of things not at all. And human beings are inevitably wedded to the short-term rather than the long run. What we are able therefore to consider 'good' has a rather limited scope. The title to this lecture seeks by contrast

6 FAITH AND THOUGHT

to relate the goodness of God to God's wisdom, the divine capacity to see things within the context not just of the long-term but of the final goal of all things, and the divine patience, the capacity of God to endure until God's own purpose is fulfilled.

In the narrative of biblical revelation God is consistently understood to be good and to be the creator of a world, which is itself structurally good. In Israel's psalms this is repeated time and time again: 'O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; and his steadfast love endures forever'.¹ This point is significantly made in the first chapter of the Bible with its repeated statement, 'And God saw that it was good', culminating with the final affirmation after the creation of humanity, 'God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good'.² A good God creates a good world, a world that is fit for purpose, for the growth and flourishing of all created things. God turns towards the creation with good will and wills its well-being and its peace. Whatever else needs to be said subsequent to this, it remains true that Christians hold to a doctrine of 'original goodness'. It is no surprise therefore that a statement frequently echoed in the Hebrew scriptures is Exodus 34:6-8:

The LORD, the LORD,
a God merciful and gracious,
slow to anger,
and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,
keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation.
forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin,
yet by no means clearing the guilty,
but visiting the sins of the parents upon the children
and the children's children,
to the third and fourth generation.³

This statement, or ones closely parallel to it, is so frequent in the Hebrew scriptures as arguably to have the status of an interpretative key to the whole. The goodness, grace and compassion of God, God's forgiving nature and his steadfast love are here stated in the strongest of terms. But this does not mean that the divine purity and holiness are lessened. God's love is holy love. God does not pass over sin and wrongdoing. Goodness is not weakness nor indulgence. But even here the 'third and fourth generation' of the divine judgment is incommensurable with the thousand generations of God's faithfulness. The goodness of God is overwhelming. In similar vein Isaiah can record after the judgment of exile endured by Israel,

For a brief moment I abandoned you,
but with great compassion I will gather you.
In overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you,

but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you,
says the LORD, your Redeemer (Isaiah 54:7-8).

These verses leave us in no doubt as to the passionate nature of the God of Israel and of the supremacy of the loving goodness that is God's own being. Whatever other images of God are employed in the Hebrew scriptures, and it is to be confessed that some of them are perplexing, this supreme vision of the goodness of God is Israel's understanding at its most mature and complete.

This said, it is characteristic of the modern mind that rather than be impressed by the overwhelming testimony to the loving goodness of God we are more likely to be irked by the reference in Exodus to 'visiting the sins of the parents upon the third generation' and in Isaiah by the words 'in overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you'. The goodness of God has an apparent dark side of which we must give an account.

Given the kind of world we inhabit it is not surprising that the goodness of God should be contested, and with it the reality of God in any meaningful, certainly any Christian, sense of the word. Despite living lives more secure and more prosperous than at any point in history we in the modern world are seemingly and paradoxically more aware of the world's suffering than at any time in the past. Human intellectual life has taken a turn to the immanent and anthropological in such a way as to be more preoccupied with the justification of God to human beings than with the justification of sinners before God. We also are more aware of the vastness of the scale on which the universe operates than can ever have been possible in the past. Whereas orthodox theology was able to trace suffering in the creation back to the moral failure and culpability of Adam, this is now much more difficult, to the point of being impossible. Where Calvin could maintain that Adam by his original sin 'perverted the whole order of nature in heaven and on earth',⁴ modern minds are much more aware of the age of the earth and the long processes of evolutionary history that preceded the appearance of the human race on earth, a history shot through with dying, death, struggle, conflict and pain. How do we think of the goodness of the Creator in the light of what has actually been created?

By any accounts God has created a vulnerable, threatened world. Having ordered the primeval chaos out of which the structured world we know has emerged, it seems yet to be the case that the well-being of this creation is threatened by non-being, by a chaos that has never fully been overcome. The chaos persists.⁵ To focus for a moment solely on the human dimension, humanity is *biologically* at risk. The processes of genetic reproduction lie open to misfiring in such a way as to give rise to minds and bodies that are not only less than fully abled but sometimes tragically disabled. Humanity is *environmentally* at risk, in that we inhabit an ecology that is subject to catastrophe, to

floods and hurricanes, to volcanoes and earthquakes, to fires, epidemics, diseases, viruses and wild beasts that are significantly beyond our powers to order. Humanity is *historically* at risk in that we are held in the grip of forces over which we have as often as not no control, the aberrations of war and conflict, of power-seeking and power-keeping, of the oppression of the weak by the strong. History is a risky business and it has numerous victims, of whom the majority suffer innocently. Humanity is *morally* at risk with a seeming inability to resist the overwhelming power of temptation to do wrong and the ability not proper to any other creature of destroying ourselves and our environment. And may we add that in the normative Christian vision human beings are *eschatologically* at risk if it is indeed true that there are destinies that await us, that human potential is not exhausted by the experience of the present age but that there are ages to come in which for good or ill we reap the harvest we have sown in the few short years, for some *very* few years, in this age.

Enough has been said to make the point, and the point is well enough known anyway. How can belief in the goodness of God be maintained in the face of the tragic risks to which human beings have been exposed and on account of which they suffer? Are we not verging on the incoherent, on cognitive dissonance, when we continue to believe in such goodness? Can this really be done?

Many of Christianity's cultured despisers are clear that indeed it cannot. David Hume's classical argument to this effect is still considered to be a powerful refutation of Christian belief: 'Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?'⁶ The classical Christian response to this proposed dilemma is the free will defence according to which even the omnipotence of God is circumscribed by the responsible and misusable freedom that a good Creator has bestowed on creatures. On this account it is precisely because of the goodness of God that humans are made with the capacity to respond to God and to do so freely, a capacity that implies the capacity also to withhold free response and so to participate in creation's deviation from the divine purpose. Strong though this argument continues to be, and cogently argued though it has been,⁷ it does not embrace all aspects of the dilemma. Human beings are already late arrivals on the scene and emerge within a world which has already learnt to embed within itself patterns of conflict and predation for which human moral failure cannot be held responsible. Humans are culpable in their apparent unwillingness to rise above those patterns but it is not they who have created them.

To cater for this critique, the free will defence might further be applied at a transcendent level to creatures, like the angels, who have preceded humans in rebelling against God. Such a doctrine of an 'angelic catastrophe' has a history in Christian doctrine all the way back to Tertullian.⁸ The fall of Lucifer is therefore said to account for creation's

bondage to decay before ever human beings emerged. Their sin is that they join with the existing resistance to divine rule rather than reversing it. But such a theory, although widely believed and with a long pedigree, labours both under the difficulty of being mythical in language and minimal within the biblical testimony such that it can hardly count as a biblical doctrine.⁹ Yet it may point us in a fruitful direction in that it locates the origins of sin in aberrations within the created sphere arising from the misuse of the freedoms the creation has. This is theologically significant in that it allows for the affirmation that God has created a good world whilst recognising that in this good world things are not they way they are supposed to be.¹⁰ However rather than choose the mythic approach of a fall of angels to explain this, an alternative is to recognise that nature itself has the power to deviate from the divine intention, to explore avenues of development which are in conflict with the divine nature and which constitute a world in which even before human beings emerge from it, the natural world is already 'fallen', tending towards the chaos over against which it is called to exist.¹¹ This is the reality towards which the mythic account of a fall of angels points. Creation as a whole has its own kind of freedom and its own forms of resistance to God.

However, this line of argument takes me outside of the territory I wish to explore and into a subject to which others are able to speak with more authority. The free will defence has stood the tests of time, but is not where I wish to locate my own reflections. Instead I find these in the idea of the wisdom of God which is closely aligned to the goodness of God. There is that which defies explanation. God is not a human being who can be spoken of as though God were one of us, explicable in terms we apply to ourselves. God is infinite wisdom and we should not expect that the divine ways will be readily comprehensible to us. 'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are my ways your ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts'.¹² This does not give us leave to retreat into obfuscation but it should perhaps prepare us to live with mystery. It is possible to live with unresolved questions, and unresolved pain, by trusting to the wisdom of God which passes understanding. And belief in the goodness of God may be maintained in the face of realities that may seem ostensibly to be contrary to it.

Hume's attack on Christian belief in a God who is both good and all-powerful finds responses not only in the free will defence but also in criticism of the logical syllogism that he and others apply. According to Alister McGrath this is usually expressed on the basis of three propositions which are considered logically incompatible. These are that:

- a. God is omnipotent and omniscient.
- b. God is completely good.
- c. There is suffering and evil in the world.

But if these propositions are to be deemed logically inconsistent a further proposition would need to be added, either:

d. A good and omnipotent God could eliminate suffering entirely,

or

e. There could not be morally sufficient grounds for God permitting suffering.

McGrath comments: 'If either of these propositions could be shown to be correct, a major and potentially fatal flaw in the Christian conception of God would have been exposed. But they have not.'¹³ The free will defence addresses proposition (d) in particular. But proposition (e) pursues a different line. Even if these are not fully known to the Christian it is possible to believe that there are indeed in the wisdom of God 'morally sufficient grounds for God permitting suffering'. Yet given the limited perspective that human beings occupy and our own deficiency in wisdom, these grounds are unlikely to be made fully manifest until the creation project has reached its goal. Until that day we base our confidence on what we think we have come to know of God through the revelation to Israel and in Christ and on the glimpses we catch from time to time of God's gracious providence.

The approach adopted in this paper therefore is *eschatological* or *teleological*. It looks for the resolution of the mystery of divine goodness and creation's suffering to the promised future, the ultimate horizon of human hope when universal history reaches its goal and at last we creatures gain the perspective to see for ourselves the meaning of things. This is a fully biblical perspective. In the words of Paul the Apostle, 'I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God'.¹⁴ Or, 'Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.'¹⁵ Why it has to be this way is a mystery hidden in the wisdom of God. What we have is not an explanation but a confidence, a hope which enables us to endure and to believe. Yet this is this is not a hope without substantiation. Behind it there lies the general witness of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures which themselves grow out of experience of God which has endured through time, the experience born through difficulty and adversity that nonetheless 'the heart of the Eternal is most wonderfully kind'.¹⁶ Even more significant, from a Christian perspective, are the events which are definitional for understanding the ways of God, the cross and resurrection of Christ. If the cross is an indication of God's willingness to identify with, even to embrace, the depths of human pain in its many manifestations, the resurrection is the sign of God's power to transform even this into glory and into blessedness. The cross and resurrection are not simply events, they are *signature* events,

indications of the way God chooses to work in the world and bring to pass a gracious purpose. The providence of God does not exclude the possibilities of tragedy, loss and suffering but contains the capacity to absorb, overcome and transform them into a greater, eschatological purpose the full consequences of which we have yet to see but concerning which we may hope with confidence. The wisdom of God has not excluded the possibility of a world which can become bound to death and decay but to the contrary has determined that it is just through such a world that God's own glory and goodness might finally be displayed, to the infinite benefit of creatures.

How then are we to imagine this providential purpose? In what follows there is one approach which I am choosing to reject and another which I wish to advocate. The position I wish to reject is that which is sometimes known as the doctrine of 'meticulous providence',¹⁷ namely the belief that because God's will is supreme everything that happens in the world is ordained and willed by God. Such a doctrine is characteristic of the Augustinian-Calvinist strain in Western Christian theology and seeks to glorify God by attributing all events to the divine will. There are therefore, as Roger Olson asserts, only two choices: meticulous divine providence or atheism. On this account 'if there is any real randomness, contingency or uncertainty in nature or history God is not God'. Rather, 'God foreordains everything that happens in nature and in human history'. Yet crucially, this should not be seen as compromising divine goodness since what counts is intention. What God determines is determined with good intention, whereas human beings who sin do so with bad intention. This constitutes their actions as evil.¹⁸ Advocates of this view therefore seek to preserve the goodness of God by an assertion. It appears that evil is ordained by God, yet paradoxically God is not its author. When the coherence of this statement is questioned appeal is made both to divine mystery and sovereignty. Who are we to question God?

Along with many others I find such an account of providence problematic. If God actively wills what is evil it requires considerable mental gymnastics to preserve the divine goodness. In the face of this criticism we are left with a bare assertion that divine goodness is not compromised. Yet it is one thing to attribute evil to wrongful creaturely choices and quite another to assert that the many destructive and disastrous events that happen apparently randomly in the world and which catch up the innocent in their happening are in fact deliberately willed and planned by God for our good. At the same time, this tradition is surely right to assert that everything that happens must in some way be related to the will of God if God is to be God. If God *wills to permit*, for instance, it is still God who does the willing since God is not a victim of circumstance. Conscious that I am neither the first nor the last person to follow these trains of thought, there are alternative ways of construing the matter that better safeguard the will and the goodness of God. Here is one possible way.

God has willed to create a world which contains agents that are free. To be sure, any freedom granted to creatures can only be freedom if exercised within a world of existing constraints and necessities. This is such a world. Freedom is constrained within limits. The granting of freedom to creatures is itself part of the work of creation and results in a world of massive variety and fruitfulness, of diversity and difference. It is itself a creative mechanism. God's creation involves calling things into being, constructing entities out of what has been made and enabling creatures also to make themselves, to realise the potential with which they are imbued. God creates by 'letting be', as is implied in the blessing upon creation in the Genesis narrative and the imperative to 'be fruitful and multiply'.¹⁹ In being dependent upon God the creation has its own divinely willed responsiveness and freedom over against God. It possesses agency. In the act of willing creation God knows all things, including all that created agents will do and how God himself will respond to such actions. The divine omnipotence is therefore also well conceived as divine omnicompetence, the capacity of the unfathomable Creator to respond to creation's actions, to redeem them, fashion them and comprehend them within an over-riding purpose. God does not therefore actively will all that happens but lets creation be so that it too has agency, the capacity, even if a limited one within the constraints of necessity, to direct itself. At the level of the animal creation this may be understood as randomness and variation, but at the human level it has the character of choice, of responsiveness or its lack. The project of creation is not well thought of as an enactment of what has been already decided from eternity but as in itself an act of creation, a process of unfolding, the living of a story. And God's purpose is to work through all things 'for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose'.²⁰ Whereas I would not wish to claim that this way of understanding things constitutes 'an answer' to the question of God's goodness and our vulnerability, it does, I think, offer us a *modus vivendi*, a way of living with that which we do and cannot truly understand until the project is complete.

At this point it may be worth saying that the goodness of God and the goodness of creation need not be taken to mean that earthly existence was ever intended to be easy. John Hick, in his landmark study of evil and the love of God, builds his analysis round two forms of theodicy. The Augustinian approach imagines a world of perfection from which we have fallen by reason of human sin. Indeed, Christians commonly speak as though prior to the Fall the world was perfect as God intended it to be. By contrast the Irenaean approach views the world as a 'vale of soul-making'. The condition of human beings arises not from a fall from perfection but from a *failure to rise* to the vocation of living in the image of God. In this account the first human beings were not perfect but only at the beginning of a journey that would bring them to perfection in the fullness of time. The world they inhabited was one in which they would encounter difficulty, danger and struggle but within they were called to learn trust in God. When this world was pronounced 'very good' by its Creator,²¹ what is implied is not that creation was

already perfect but that it was 'fit for purpose', and the purpose intended was that of soul-making, the growth of humans through struggle to maturity and completeness.²² It should be clear that the approach favoured in the present paper is more akin to the Irenaean.

Much of what we have so far considered is still within the framework of the free will defence, the justification of the goodness of God by reference to the freedom of the creature, a freedom which is itself a higher good which is worth the 'risk' it inherently involves. Our attention now turns more decisively to the eschatological or teleological dimension, the assertion that the world's sufferings needs to be seen against the future purposed by God which is itself unimaginably beautiful in its goodness. Given the weight of the world's suffering, what future hope might possibly justify the cost involved?

Once more there is a position I am inclined to reject and one which I choose to affirm. There is a strong and persistent pattern of thought amongst Christians in the broadly Augustinian tradition of Christianity which reasons as follows: It is clear from the scriptures that history has a double outcome, heaven or hell, eternal life or eternal damnation, a final divorce of the redeemed and the lost. We can account for this double outcome in one of two ways: (1) It is a consequence of human free-will and choice. Salvation is offered to all and those who decline it doom themselves to eternal loss; or (2) It is a consequence of the divine choice. God wills that it be so. History reveals what has in fact been the divine intention from the beginning, to save some and to damn others. This doctrine is known as double predestination, claims to be a logical and necessary deduction and is characteristic of Augustine, Luther, Calvin and High Calvinism. The issue at stake is the priority and supremacy of the divine will. If human beings determine the double outcome then human beings and their choices are finally sovereign in creation, and not God. To safeguard the sovereignty of God, the double outcome has to be ascribed to God's own will and decision. Yet the cost of this position is high since the notion that God creates some with the intention and purpose of damning them for all eternity inevitably casts a shadow over the nature of God's goodness. Traditionally it is countered by the retreat into assertion and mystery: God is good despite the way it may seem to us. By definition what God chooses must be good. It is our human perceptions of goodness that are skewed, not God's. As Paul says in a relevant passage, 'But who are you, a human being, to argue with God?'²³

Some Christians have clearly found this to be a satisfactory way of thinking about the eternal purposes of God. I confess that I am not among them and firmly believe that such theological logics seriously undermine a doctrine of God's goodness. On the other hand, neither is the alternative, anthropological resolution of the difficulty persuasive. Christian theology is about confidence in God, and God's ability to achieve that which

God purposes. It is clear that for John Hick it is possible to justify the reality of evil in the world only if we also conceive that it is massively outweighed by a final purpose. For Hick the 'awareness of the divine presence does not negate our agonizing human experience of evil, but sets it within the context of God's purpose of good under the assurance of the ultimate triumph of that purpose'.²⁴ Yet for this assurance properly to outweigh the weight of human suffering it becomes necessary to think of the final salvation of all creatures. The impetus towards this is *moral*. 'It seems morally (although not logically) impossible that the infinite resourcefulness of infinite love working in unlimited time should be eternally frustrated, and the creature reject its own good, presented to it in an endless range of ways'. 'Our Christian hope must accordingly be for the salvation of the whole race.'²⁵

This brings us into controversial territory. Let me state my own view that it is possible to hold an understanding of universal salvation without of necessity embracing 'universalism' as some kind of forgone conclusion. In other words I do not wish to assert dogmatically that all human beings will finally be redeemed. But neither do I wish to exclude that possibility and I am persuaded that the reference to a 'great multitude that no one can count'²⁶ leads us to think adventurously. The goodness and wisdom of God can, I think, be defended more coherently within an eschatological vision congruent with the biblical hope that the end towards which all things are tending is one in which all things visible and invisible experience redemption.²⁷ Gregory MacDonald's book *The Evangelical Universalist*²⁸ mounts a powerful case both biblically and theologically for the confidence that God can and will save all. Indeed such a hope can be seen as a corollary of the Calvinist confidence that God is able to do that which God purposes to do. To affirm that God loves all begs the question of why an all-powerful God should be unable finally to save all. In relation to our particular topic, the greater the scope of salvation the more the goodness of God can be asserted in the face of the world's suffering and pain.

An expansive vision of salvation is offered in the work of Jürgen Moltmann, who is also known as a theologian who takes with extreme seriousness the need to construct theology after the Holocaust. According to Moltmann, the ultimate reality, the truly last thing is captured in the apocalyptic statement, 'See, I am making all things new'²⁹. Moltmann gives maximum emphasis here to the term 'all things', which is to be understood not as 'all things that exist at the time of the end', but rather 'all things that have ever existed throughout the universe'. The final healing of creation is not partial therefore but includes the healing of the events of history, even of the ravages of evolution in earth's long pre-history. In a poetic and imaginative statement Moltmann envisages a movement of redemption that moves counter to the movement of evolution, out of the future into our present and the past.

It is the divine tempest of the new creation, which sweeps over history's fields of the dead, waking and gathering every last created being. The raising of the dead, the gathering of the victims and the seeking of the lost bring a redemption of the world which no evolution can ever achieve. This redemption therefore comprehends the redemption of evolution itself, with all its ambiguities. In this redemption, evolution turns and becomes re-volution, in the original sense of the word. The linear time of evolution will be carried into a unique and final eschatological cycle: into the return of all the pasts in the eternal aeon of the new creation of all things. 30

Whether or not Moltmann is right about a final and complete universal restoration, the doctrine he enunciates carries our gaze in the direction of a greater hope more wonderful than any of us can currently predict or imagine. And this surely bears upon the question of God's goodness. If the final outcome is in any sense close to what Moltmann images for the creation then the sufferings of this present age can indeed be seen in a different perspective. This perspective does not make pain less painful, or cruelty less cruel, but it may help us to live with the mystery in the confidence that God is not only good, but also wise, infinitely wiser than ourselves, and that God is also patient in ways that we are not, patient with the creation and the final bringing about of the day when the earth will be filled with knowledge and the glory and the goodness of God.

What therefore matters is how we live in the present, how we respond to events good or ill which come our way, how we learn to live as people of faith, hope and love in a world replete with overwhelming experiences in the face of which we are sometimes powerless. Believing that God is indeed good, wise and patient has the potential to make us also good, wise and patient and so in this valley of soul-making to become people of depth, of resilience and of compassion.

- 1 Psalm 107.1
- 2 Genesis 1.12,18,21, 25,31.
- 3 Compare also Nehemiah 9.31, Psalm 86.15, 11.4, 145.8, Joel 2.13, Jonah 4.2.
- 4 *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. 2.1.5
- 5 See Jon Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Doctrine of Divine Omnipotence* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988)
- 6 Norman Kemp Smith ed. *Hume's Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (London and Edinburgh. Nelson 1947) pp.193-202.
- 7 Alvin Platinga, *God, Freedom and Evil* (Grand Rapids : Eerdmans 1974)
- 8 Tertullian *Apology*, 22.
- 9 See my *A Theology of the Dark Side* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003) pp.88-92
- 10 Cornelius Platinga Jr. *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Leicester: Apollos 1995)

- 11 For this tendency see Robert Cook, 'Devils and Manticores'; Paul Fiddes, *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2000) pp.144-48.
- 12 Isaiah 55.8-9
- 13 Alistair McGrath, *Bridge Building: Effective Christian Apologetics* (Leicester IVP 1992)p.141
- 14 Romans 8.18
- 15 1 Corinthians 13.12
- 16 From the hymn by F.W.Faber (1814-63) *There's a wideness in God's mercy.*
- 17 I am indebted in this analysis to Roger Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief: Twenty Centuries of Unity and Diversity* (Leicester Apollos 2002) pp. 184-85.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Genesis 1.22,28
- 20 Romans 8.28
- 21 Genesis 1.31
- 22 John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (London: Collins, 1966)
- 23 Romans 9.20
- 24 Hick *Evil and the God of Love*, p.385.
- 25 Hick *Evil and the God of Love*, p.380, p.381
- 26 Revelation 7.9
- 27 Colossian 1.19-20
- 28 Gregory MacDonald, *The Evangelical Universalist: The biblical hope that God's love will save us all* (London: SPCK 2008) Gregory MacDonald is a pseudonym. The author is Dr. Robin Parry.
- 29 Revelation 21.5: Moltmann *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology* (London SCM, 1996)p.242
- 30 Jurgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ: Christology in messianic dimensions* (London SCM)p.303

God and 'Natural Evil'

Ernest Lucas

The existence of evil, in various forms, is a problem with which all religions and philosophies have to grapple - because it is a problem for all human beings. Classically, there have been three main ways of dealing with it.

1. Some, mainly in the religious traditions of the East, have argued that evil is in some sense an illusion, a result of our distorted perception of reality. What we need is an experience of 'enlightenment' which will free us from this distorted perception.
2. Others insist that evil is a reality, part of the ultimate nature of things, and we simply have to accept this and work to overcome it as best we can, or at least alleviate its

effects. This is the only view that materialists of all shades can adopt, but it can be, and has been, held as part of a religious outlook on life.

3. The major theistic religions all agree that evil is a reality, part of the nature of things, as we know them. But they also agree that it is not an *ultimate* reality. It can and will, therefore, be overcome, and ultimately we will live in a state that is free from evil.

Because of the finiteness of the time available, and of people's attention spans, any lecture has to have a restricted focus. I have been asked to focus on the issue that is sometimes called the problem of 'natural evil'. Natural evils are such things as hurricanes, earthquakes, volcanoes, etc., which cause pain, distress and death for sentient creatures, especially humans. I am going to address this issue from a specifically Christian perspective.

The Problem

So, let me define the problem as a Christian sees it. The problem is that we believe the world to be the 'good' creation of a good God, but we see in it features and events that are 'bad'.

Now I have put the words 'good' and 'bad' here, as applied to the created order, in quotes. This indicates an important issue. 'Good' and 'bad', as far as we are concerned with them, are moral categories. How can they be applied to physical events (like earthquakes) that are the outcome of non-conscious, let alone non-moral, forces? Of course we do this as a result of evaluating the effects of these events on us. That is not a trivial point, as we shall see.

The traditional Christian answer to the problem of evil, in all its aspects, is the doctrine of the Fall - that God created beings with a measure of free-will, so that they could choose whether or not to love and obey their Creator. They chose to rebel and this is the root of evil in the created order. It is argued that it is logically incoherent to suppose that God could have created morally responsible beings without giving them a measure of free-will and the opportunity to use it. So, the possibility of a 'fall' is inherent in the creation of morally responsible beings.

But what effect did this 'fall' have? How much evil can be attributed to *human* disobedience? The question has become particularly acute with the discovery that the earth has a history, and a long one at that. For many millennia of this history humans were not on the scene. All during this time the things which we regard as natural evils were an integral part of the way things were.

Perhaps at this point I think we need to take seriously something which John Calvin wrote. He said¹, 'If we hold the Spirit of God to be the only source of truth, we will neither reject nor despise the truth, wherever it may reveal itself, lest we offend the Spirit of God'. I agree with him that we cannot ignore what, after some careful investigation, seem to be valid scientific conclusions about the age of the earth, its history and the history of life on earth.

So, what can be said about the problem of natural evil from a Christian perspective? I intend approaching it along two different routes, before putting forward a synthesis. Please bear with me if in the first part of this paper it is not immediately clear how what I am dealing with relates to what I have said is my main focus. The problem of evil, in any of its aspects, is not an easy one. Philosophers and religious thinkers have grappled with it for millennia. There are no slick answers. The proposals I am going to make grow out of, and need to be seen in the context of, a wider framework of thought that needs to be outlined first.

Re-examining the Biblical Tradition

First, I want to re-examine the biblical tradition. In doing this I ask you to do nothing more than take Genesis chs. 1-3 seriously as a story which expresses an understanding of the nature of the 'fallenness' of creation. Truth can be expressed in a number of ways other than literal prose. The moral truth, and challenge, of the story of the Good Samaritan does not depend on whether or not it is an eye-witness account of a mugging. If Gen. 1-3 provides insights into, and a diagnosis of, the human condition which makes sense in our experience, then we may want to go back and ask questions about other aspects of the story - but that is not my task in this paper.

We must start with the understanding of the intended role of humans on planet earth. This is expressed in Gen. 1:26-28 in terms of humans being created in the 'image and likeness' of God to 'subdue' and have 'dominion' over the earth and its creatures.

I know that when some environmental activists hear or read these words in Genesis they see red, and blame the Judeo-Christian tradition for all our environmental ills. I think this is a simplistic reading of history. It is certainly a mis-reading of what the passage means. One of the principles stressed in modern semantics is that words mean what they mean in context. Gen. 1:26-28 comes after God has said five times that what was created is 'good'. Would God then give humans a command to despoil it? Whatever 'subdue' and 'dominion' mean, they cannot mean *that*. Moreover, the command is closely linked with the fact that humans are made in the 'image' of God. I shall argue that this means that we are meant to rule the earth in a way that reflects God's nature - with wisdom, justice and love.

All words have a range of meaning, and what determines their meaning in a particular sentence is their context. 'Dominion/rule' (*radhah*) can be used of violent rule (Ex. 34:4), but also of rule that is said not to be harsh (Lev. 25:43ff). In most cases it has a quite neutral sense. The word 'subdue' (*kabhash*) is generally used of overcoming enemies, but this is probably an application of the more general sense of gaining control of a situation.

The main issue is to tease out a bit what it means for humans to be made in the 'image' and 'likeness' of God. First, let's scotch one red-herring which caused problems for some early Christian theologians who could not read Hebrew and did not appreciate Hebrew rhetoric. Genesis 1:26-28 uses the Hebrew rhetorical device of parallelism, in which the same thing is said twice using synonyms or near-synonyms. 'Image' (*d^emûth*) and 'likeness' (*tselem*) do not refer to two different things, but both refer to the same thing. If there is any significance in the different connotations of the words, it is that 'likeness' softens the more definite and concrete sense of 'image', which is a common word for a statue.

Much ink has been spilt on the meaning of 'the image of God' as applied to humans. I am going to opt for an interpretation which, I believe, has become increasingly accepted by both biblical scholars and theologians during this century. The burgeoning of ancient Near-eastern archaeology, over the last century or so has greatly increased our knowledge of ancient Near-eastern culture. This, plus the generally concrete sense of the word 'image', has led biblical scholars to understand the use of the term in Gen. 1:26-28 in the light of the use that ancient Near-eastern kings made of statues. When a king conquered a territory he would set up an image of himself there to express his dominion over it. Sometimes this would be inscribed with laws which he imposed (e.g. Hammurabi's stele in Elam). A particularly interesting example was found in northern Syria about 30 years ago². It is a statue of a local ruler and is of particular interest because it has a bilingual inscription, in Assyrian and Aramaic. Aramaic is a close relative of Hebrew, and the inscription refers to the statue using both of the words found in Gen. 1:26-28, clearly using them as synonyms.

If this use of statues to declare a ruler's claim to a territory is the right background against which to understand 'the image of God' as applied to humans, then it leads to an understanding which theologians have come to on other grounds. This is an understanding which moves away from traditional attempts to identify some human attribute (e.g. reason, conscience) as the essence of the 'image' and sees it in terms of the whole person being the representative of God, the true ruler of the earth, who is responsible to God. Both the representation and responsibility are possible because humans are able to live in a personal relationship with God. When humans live in a right relationship with God their personality will reflect, in a finite way, the character

of God, and they will rule the earth in the way that its Creator intended, exhibiting God's love, wisdom and justice in the way they treat not only one another but also the rest of creation. But their rule will always be a delegated one. Humans are responsible to God for how they rule the earth. This seems to be the meaning of the programmatic statement of Gen. 1:26-28. So what has gone wrong?

This is where Gen. 2&3 enter the picture. The story is well-known, and I will not repeat it. In line with the importance of the human-divine relationship implied in the 'image of God' concept, the nature and effect of the Fall is, I think, best understood in terms of broken relationships. The most fundamental of these is the relationship between God and human beings. Adam and Eve shattered what had been a relationship of love and trust by disobeying God. As a result they could no longer face God. This led to a breakdown in three other relationships.

1. The relationship of the individual with her/himself. Where there had been self-acceptance there was now shame and guilt. Here is the beginning of psychological problems.
2. The relationship between people. Adam blames Eve. God foretells strife between man and wife. Here is the beginning of social problems.
3. The relationship between humans and the rest of creation. The ground is cursed. Here is the beginning of ecological problems.

Here, I think, we do have an incisive analysis of the human condition. The writer diagnoses the root of the problem as the fracturing of the creature-Creator relationship.

At this point we come up against one of the natural evils - death. For, according to the story, God said to Adam, 'Of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day you eat of it you shall surely die' (Gen. 2:17). Linking these words with some words of the Apostle Paul, 'sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, so death spread to all because all have sinned' (Rom. 5:12), many Christians have taken the Bible as saying that all physical death is a result of the Fall. This is strange, since from early on Christian scholars have pointed out that it goes against indicators to the contrary in the biblical text. In the 5th century St. Augustine of Hippo asserted that animal death must have been intended from the moment of their creation - why otherwise did they need to procreate³ and to eat⁴? He also argued that from the beginning animals suffered from corruption⁵ and preyed on one another⁶. Some commentators⁷ have also noted that the threat of death in Gen. 2:17 would have been meaningless to Adam if he had not been able to observe animal death.

In the early 19th century, as a result of the growing recognition that fossils are the remains of real creatures, many of which lived before humans came on the scene, the

issue of death and sin was debated in depth by theologians. In Britain the issue seems to have been settled, at least within the scholarly community, by a sermon preached in Oxford Cathedral in 1839, and subsequently published. The preacher was William Buckland, a noted geologist and theologian. His title was *An Enquiry Whether the Sentence of Death Pronounced at the Fall of Man Included the Whole Animal Creation or was Restricted to the Human Race* - they went in for snappy sermon titles in those days! It must also have been a long sermon, because he carried out a detailed exegesis of all the relevant biblical texts, concluding that death 'is by no inspired writer spoken of as a penal dispensation to any other creature excepting Adam and his posterity'⁸. I will not repeat his *tour de force*, but simply, with reference to the passage from *Romans* 5, point out that the Apostle there says that death spread to all who sinned - clearly not meaning animals!

There is a second point about death and the Fall. This is that, despite what God says in Gen. 2:17, Adam and Eve did not die physically when they ate of the forbidden fruit. This has been a much debated point. Again, I can do no more than state my position on it. I agree with those scholars who find the answer in the meaning of the word 'death' here. Walter Brueggemann⁹ points out that, in Hebrew thought, although death sometimes does refer to the end of physical life, death is understood in more general terms as a force or agent which diminishes life, and in particular refers to the loss of the joyous existence God intends for humans. So, in Hebrew thought death is not so much an event at the end of physical life as a power or process which can overtake you in the midst of physical life. Henri Blocher sums up the wider biblical picture when he says, 'In the Bible, death is the reverse of life - it is not the reverse of existence ... It is a diminished existence, but nevertheless an existence'. In this light, God's threat is carried out in several ways in Gen. 3. Human existence is diminished by the effects of the curses, and above all Adam and Eve are cut off from the intimate fellowship with God, that joyous existence intended for them, which they had had in the Garden of Eden. On this basis, death, understood merely as the cessation of physical existence on earth, may not have been envisaged by the writer of Gen. 2&3 as a result of the Fall. To end your existence of earth while still in a joyous relationship with God is not to experience a natural evil at all¹⁰. It is simply to experience the transition from one form of existence to another¹. As the Apostle Paul puts it, 'the sting of death is sin' (1 Cor. 15:56).

To summarize so far: I am suggesting that the biblical traditions present us with an understanding of 'fallenness' which is understood in terms of fractured relationships. The key relationship is the divine/human one because humans are the image of God. Because this is not what it should be, all the others go awry. Neither animal death, nor even physical death for humans, is presented as a result of this 'fallenness'.

Re-examining the Christian Tradition

In this, shorter, section I want to re-examine part of the traditional Christian approach to the problem of evil. I will concentrate on one issue, which I think is a crucial one, and then develop one implication related to it.

As I see it, what you might call the majority Christian tradition has tended to make a stark contrast between the unfallen and the fallen state. The Garden of Eden has been depicted as a glorious paradise, filled with just about everything that you could wish for in your fondest of wild dreams. On examination little, if any, of this is rooted in, or supported by, the Bible. I think it is rooted in Greek ideas about the Golden Age, the origins of which I will not go into here. The result of this is that Eden has been seen as a cushy environment devoid of all that might be inconvenient or uncomfortable. It has even led to the denial that the ‘tilling’ of the ground that Adam was set to do was in any sense ‘work’. If one asks what the purpose of this environment might be, the answer seems to be that human enjoyment of it was an end in itself. As one philosopher has put it, Eden has been seen as a paradise for pampered pets¹¹.

There has, however, been a minority tradition, going back at least as far as St. Irenaeus (ca. 130 - ca. 202)¹². He argued that the picture given in Genesis 2 is of Adam and Eve as moral innocents who have been put in an environment that was the best for God’s purpose for them. That purpose was the moral and spiritual education of human beings. This is a suggestive idea that has received little attention until fairly recently. If it is valid, then certain ‘uncomfortable’ (but not for that reason morally bad) experiences could play their part in human moral and spiritual development. Rather than being a paradise for pampered pets, Eden might be seen as a training camp for moral and spiritual athletes!

At this point it is worth noting that the Hebrew word for ‘good’ used in Genesis 1 (*tōb*) has a range of meaning which includes moral goodness and aesthetic beauty. Its most common meaning, however, is ‘fit for purpose’. This latter meaning seems the most appropriate in the context of Genesis 1. It is hard to see how, say, the appearance of the dry land and the growth of plants on it could be morally good. However, it is ‘good’ in the sense of ‘fit for purpose’ as an environment suitable for God’s purpose of training humans to be morally and spiritually mature beings.

As an example of what this might imply, I am going to take the experience of growing old. Most Christians seem to regard the weakening of physical powers which accompanies growing old as an aspect of our fallenness. This is not logical. Physical decline is not in itself morally significant, any more than is physical growth from baby to adult in the prime of life. What is morally significant is how we respond to it in

ourselves and in others. Now, do not misunderstand me. Certain aspects of aging as we know it (greater susceptibility to disease, excessive pain as a result of physical degeneration, senile dementia) I do want to attribute to our fallenness. However, it is possible to imagine growing old in a way that is free from these, and indeed for some people this is the case. I can then go on to imagine that in an 'unfallen' world it could still be the intention of a good Creator that we go through the full cycle of life from birth to death because only by doing so would we go through the range of experiences needed for us to mature fully morally and spiritually. In childhood we live in trusting dependence on others, and that is the only kind of existence we know. In adolescence we learn to cope with independence and the responsibilities this brings. In mid-life we face the challenge of how we use our powers and abilities, and in particular how we treat those who are weak and dependent on others. In old age we have to learn a measure of dependence again, but it is a different experience from childhood, because now we know what it has meant to be independent. As I have said, it is not only a matter of how we cope with *our own* experience of the cycle of life. There is also the question of how we respond to *other people* in their different stages of growth. It is important for our moral and spiritual development that we live in a society in which there are old people as well as children.

To summarize this section: at the beginning of this paper I pointed out that our view of what are natural evils depends on how we evaluate certain events. What I am saying now is that our understanding of the purpose of human existence on this planet colours that evaluation very strongly. If we think we are meant to be pampered pets, which does seem to be the view promoted in our affluent western consumer societies, then our view of what are natural evils will differ considerably from what it will be if we think we are meant to be undergoing experiences which will give us opportunity to become mature moral and spiritual human beings.

Natural Evils

So, where does this lead us with regard to natural evils?

It leads me to emphasize something that most Christian thinkers have seen as a fundamental point with regard to the problem of suffering in general. This is that it seems impossible to conceive of moral behaviour without there being an external environment that is stable and law-abiding. Only in such an environment can there be a regular pattern of acts and consequences. Without such a pattern there is no basis for making moral choices. If when I threw a stone at someone I had no idea whether it would shoot off vertically into space, or go off at an angle and miss by a wide margin, or, if I am a tolerably good shot, hit the person on the head, I cannot make any moral decision whether or not to injure someone by throwing stones. It is only because nature

is law-abiding that I can predict, with some certainty, the consequences of my actions, and so am forced to take responsibility for them and make moral decisions about them. On the other hand it is important that the environment be morally neutral, and not 'second guess' my moral decisions. If every time I tried to throw a stone at someone with intent to harm them the stone behaved like a boomerang and hit *me* on the back of the head; I'd soon stop throwing stones - but purely out of self-interest, not for any morally good reason. In order to behave morally, I must have the freedom to behave immorally, and have some hope of 'getting away with it'. This means that others will sometimes suffer as a consequence of my behaviour - but that takes us beyond our topic of natural evil.

It seems, then, that even an unfallen world fit to be a training ground for moral and spiritual beings would be a law-abiding world. By their very nature these laws will 'grind on remorselessly' so to speak, taking no account of my comfort or convenience. I have to adjust to them. In my view earthquakes and volcanoes, for example, are simply the result of this being such a law-abiding world. We live on a planet that is cooling down. The fact that it does have an inner source of heat is probably important for the existence on it of life as we know it. It enables the planet to be further away from the sun and still to have a more equitable climate than would otherwise be possible. However, that cooling process is what drives the plate-tectonics that gives rise to earthquakes and volcanoes. Hurricanes are the result of the laws of thermodynamics at work in the atmosphere and the oceans, distributing the heat of the sun, which inevitably falls unevenly on the surface of a spherical body, over the planet. Without these laws at work we would not have the return to the land from the oceans of the water needed for plant and animal life. Sometimes it comes as 'gentle rain' at others, much less often, it comes in storms and hurricanes.

So where does the 'fallenness' of creation come in? Here, I warn you, we enter the realms of speculation. The key consideration I bring to the question is the effects of the fractured relationships which I have suggested is the way the Bible presents fallenness¹³. I can begin to see how this can help us understand the existence of human disease in a world created to be good but now fallen.

1. Organic diseases are due to malfunctioning of systems in the human body. One way in which these may be related to fallenness is through the effects on people of the psychological and sociological stresses produced by those fractured relationships. There is an increasing readiness today to recognize the effect these stresses have on health, and indeed the whole psycho-somatic dimension of health and healing. Then, of course, the ecological aspect is also getting more attention as the link between diet and health is becoming clearer. So, our fractured relationship with our environment plays its part too.

2. Infectious disease is caused by the invasion of the human body by viruses, bacteria, parasites of various kinds, etc. Now there are some organisms, for example bacteria that live in our gut, which invade our bodies with beneficial effects. Why are others harmful? Maybe this too is a result of fractured relationships. The effectiveness of our immune system does seem to be affected by our psychological and physical well-being. Maybe if we lived in a network of harmonious relationships our system would have a robustness which would enable it to resist these infectious agents far more effectively than it does.

These speculations do not provide the whole answer, but they seem to me to provide glimmerings of answers that are more satisfying than suggestions that the Fall resulted in a radical change in human biochemistry and the creation of pathogenic organisms *de novo*.

What about hurricanes? Here I want to suggest two lines of thought that seem to follow from the framework I have put forward. The first concerns the moral challenge of living in a region where hurricanes happen. Moral challenge? Does that sound strange? It is usually discussed as an economic challenge or a technical challenge of weather forecasting or house building. Of course, underlying these there *is* a moral issue - the well-being of the people who might be injured or killed, or have their lives devastated in other ways by a hurricane. But ought we not to make this the over-riding issue rather than leaving it as the under-lying one? It is a matter of the use of resources, and sharing them out equitably. It is quite possible to build houses to hurricane-proof standard, as is done in Florida. But it is costly, and what about those who cannot afford to pay for such protection? Should the community pick up the bill - perhaps by providing for communal hurricane-proof shelters? And what about helping those whose livelihood is adversely affected? The wealthy can afford insurance to cover for this, but who will help the poorer members of the community get back on their feet? Now this discussion has presupposed a fairly technologically developed society, in which hurricane-proof buildings can be built and hurricanes can be forecast and tracked to enable people to seek shelter in advance, and so on. What about societies without these advantages?

This leads me to my second, speculative, line of thought. Hurricanes occur, on the whole, in fairly well-defined geographical areas and at certain times of year, and so even pre-technological societies could make preparation for them, finding relatively safe places to go while the storm passed. I have heard anecdotal stories from the Caribbean that some creatures, birds in particular, seem to sense a hurricane long before humans are aware of an approaching storm, and so observation of their behaviour gave some long-range warning for those who took note of it. Maybe the birds are much more sensitive than we are to changes in air pressure or humidity, or some other factor

related to the onset of a hurricane.

Earthquakes are less predictable than hurricanes. There are geographical areas which are far more prone to major earthquakes than others. Here, as in pre-industrial Japan, people can take this into account in their buildings and life-style. But even so, the suddenness with which an earthquake strikes can result in devastation. There have been reports that in China observations of animal behaviour have suggested that some animals can sense major earthquakes a good while before they happen - maybe they can feel tiny fore-shocks as the fault line begins to give way.

This leads me to a final, very speculative thought. Maybe, if our relationship with the non-human creation was not a fractured one, we would be able to sense the onset of these natural evils and have time to take action to escape the worst effects of them. That sensing might be a matter of being so in harmony with other creatures that have a special ability to pick up the warning signals that we get our warning through them. Or maybe we could pick up those signals directly ourselves. Even if either of these were the case, we would still face the moral challenge of how to respond to these events, and that, I have suggested is the reason why a good Creator would allow such things to be part of a good creation intended to be the home of moral and spiritual beings such as ourselves.

¹ Calvin, J. (1559), *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.2.15. An English translation of the *Institutes* is available in *The Library of Christian Classics*, Vol. 20, London: SCM, 1961.

² Millard, A.R. & P. Bordreuil (1982), 'A Statue from Syria with Assyrian and Aramaic Inscriptions', *Biblical Archaeologist*, vol. 45, 135-141.

³ St Augustine (ca. 415), *De Genesi Ad Litteram*, Bk. 3, ch. 12. An English translation is available in the *Ancient Writers* series, Vol. 41, Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1982.

⁴ *Ibid.* Bk. 3, ch. 21.

⁵ *Ibid.* Bk. 3, ch. 14.

⁶ *Ibid.* Bk. 3, ch. 16.

⁷ For example: Blocher, H. (1984), *In the Beginning*, Leicester: IVP, 185.

⁸ Buckland, W. (1839), *An Enquiry Whether the Sentence of Death Pronounced at the Fall of Man Included the Whole Animal Creation or was Restricted to the Human Race*, London, 12.

⁹ Brueggemann, W. (1976), 'Death, Theology of' in K. Crim (Ed.), *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, Supplementary Volume*, Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 219-222.

¹⁰ Perhaps this is what is implied with regard to Enoch in Gen. 5:24.

¹¹ This is a summary of: Hick, J. *Evil and the God of Love*, London: Fontana, 292-294.

¹² For a summary of Irenaeus' theology see: Hick, J. *Evil and the God of Love*, London: Fontana, 217-221; Lane, A.N.S. (2009) 'Irenaeus on the Fall and Original Sin' in Berry, R.J. & T.A. Noble, *Darwin, Creation and the Fall: Theological Challenges*, Nottingham: Apollos, 130-148.

¹³ My thinking here was originally stimulated by the brief comments in Blocher, H. (1984), *In the Beginning*, Leicester: IVP, 183f, now expanded somewhat on p. 166 in Blocher, H. (2009), 'The Theology of the Fall and the Origins of Evil' in Berry, R.J. & T.A. Noble, *Darwin, Creation and the Fall: Theological Challenges*, Nottingham: Apollos, 149-172.

Pain and Personal Transformation

The Rev. Sally Nelson

The theological exploration of suffering often goes 'backwards' rather than 'forwards'. In this attempt to go 'forwards' I will focus not on the *origin* of suffering and evil - although that is clearly inescapable as a topic of reflection in the great project of faith seeking understanding - but on the *possibilities* of suffering in the context of a life. The question is then how we interpret the experience of suffering, rather than how we analyse its source.

This approach is not without danger, because suffering hurts us, and our human desire is for justice, which often seeks a cause (*i.e.* we go 'backwards'). So I will clarify at the outset that (i) I am NOT saying that suffering is 'good' in itself; and that (ii) I am NOT saying that suffering is 'good for us', *i.e.* that its educational function justifies the pain.

The Warsaw Ghetto and the hospice

I was listening to *Thought for the Day* on 27 January 2010, given by the Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks.¹ With Holocaust Memorial Day in mind, Lord Sacks spoke about the Warsaw Ghetto, in which about 100,000 Jews died of starvation and disease, while twice that number was removed to the camps. Those remaining were eventually attacked by the Nazi forces in April 1943 and it took five weeks to destroy the Ghetto completely.

One of the Ghetto's inhabitants, the historian Emanuel Ringelblum, realised that, unusually, the Nazis did not want a victory record – rather, they wanted to obliterate all traces of their extermination programmes, to wipe out the memory of what had happened. Ringelblum, in an act of 'narrative' resistance, brought members of the Ghetto community together to gather testimonies from the people so that one day the world would know. They hid some 35,000 documents (stories, poems, photographs, letters) in tin boxes and milk churns, where they remained for years until the few Ghetto survivors were able to recover them.

Sacks comments on the incredible faith of the Jews that one day these documents would be found, and read, and that the story would be told and retold.

When I worked as a hospice chaplain with people who expected to die soon, the same basic process took place. People wanted to tell their stories, and the process of telling brought a measure of healing. This story telling can take a multiplicity of forms, from

simply chatting to a sympathetic listener to something far more elaborate. One charitable project called Rosetta Life² operates in hospices by using digital media to facilitate this storytelling process. Patients make use of poetry, film, and song to make records of their lives, often assisted in these projects by professional artists.

One patient in the Trimar Hospice in Weymouth, Maxine Edgington, had a studio photo taken with her 15-year-old daughter, Jessica, when she realised that she would not survive her cancer. The photo was beautiful and showed mother and daughter laughing together. The professional musician Billy Bragg helped Maxine to write lyrics and set them to music, which became a best-selling song, appropriately entitled *We laughed*. This moving and powerful song celebrated life, love and relationship, while acknowledging that it was coming to an end.³ Its creation constituted one aspect of what we might term ‘healing unto death’; it manages to combine sadness and loss with a sense of moving forward, without bitterness or anger. However, there are many patients who are unable to achieve a similarly positive attitude to the inevitable end of life. What is going on?

Story and interpretation

The telling of the story of suffering *and its interpretation* is extremely important for human beings.⁴ The Jews of the Warsaw Ghetto, in a truly hopeless situation, knew that they needed to tell their story and that process became redemptive. The bleak destruction could simply have been the silent end of hundreds of thousands of lives. Because the story was told, the Ghetto experience became all kinds of things – a warning, a shocking exposé, a sign of hope in extreme darkness, a challenge to the world to change.

How do people generally respond to, and recount, their experiences of suffering? At the hospice I became fascinated by modern culture’s resistance to engaging with suffering. We avoid it if we can – and we do not normally question that reaction. In other words, we regard suffering primarily as an insult, something that should not be, and get stuck at that point. Secondly, we quite readily assume that our suffering – because understandably we do not like it – is a ‘meaningless’ experience.⁵

In response, I want to argue:

- that suffering is not simply an insult to our presumed way of life, but a key part of being human;
- that suffering always has a meaning – which is not at all the same as saying that it is always good. We do not have to think of suffering as insult. We can think of it as a route of personal transformation – I would argue, as a key to *metanoia*.

This transformation does not mean that we become ‘better persons’, but rather, that we are forced to re-evaluate God and the world as a result of our suffering, and that this process is about seeking the truth that, Jesus says, will set us free.

Part of this re-evaluation process involves telling the story, although sometimes even the telling is not as simple as it seems. If you have ever worked with someone who has been bereaved or traumatised, you will have seen the therapeutic value of being able to tell the story. Indeed, we often see this process played out on the television news when people recount their experiences – but this is not to imply that it is easy to do so. Sometimes people cannot tell their stories. An ex-serviceman known to me was unable to speak of the things he saw during WW2. I do not know what happened to him there, but I do know that he was never really ‘healed’. The experience remained inside him, and it remained damaging.

The stages of suffering

Victims of suffering may be unable to tell their story but unless they do, it will be internalised and privatised. Only by telling does it become the property of others. The theologian Dorothee Sölle⁶ examined the experience of suffering in the West and identified three movements, of (i) silent agony; (ii) articulation; and (iii) change.

If we get ‘stuck’ at stages (i) or (ii), then our suffering will be intensified rather than resolved. There are many reasons why a story may remain untold (*ie* never move beyond stage (i)), but one important possibility is that the suffering person is afraid that s/he will simply not be heard. Sölle calls this ‘*apatheia*’ – simply, the ‘apathy’ that renders western culture (even Christian western culture) so isolating and alienating.⁸

We can fail to hear people:

- by belittling or patronising them (*eg* by speaking loudly to a non-English speaker, or by using childish language to someone who is elderly, deaf or learning disabled);
- by invalidating or undermining them (as the Jews did to Jesus);
- by shouting louder than them (*eg* by being dominating or abusive in the relationship);
- by forcibly silencing them (as the Nazis did so effectively to the Jews, and paradigmatically as humans did to Jesus).

So telling and hearing the story may be more difficult than we first think – but it is important to remember that however we interpret *metanoia*, the process will be challenging by its very nature.

The vital human act of articulation

We tell a story because we desire change – whether this change is wanting the suffering to end, or to see justice, or simply not to be alone – and we begin with the act of telling. Sölle is not alone in grasping the importance of this first step. Paul Ricoeur, the great narrative theologian, says:

*We tell stories because in the last analysis human lives need and merit being narrated. This remark takes on its full force when we refer to the necessity to save the history of the defeated and the lost. The whole history of suffering cries out for vengeance and calls for narrative.*⁸

Gustavo Gutierrez, the liberation theologian, agrees:

*Those who suffer unjustly have a right to complain and protest.*⁹

Jean Vanier, the priest who founded the l'Arche communities for the learning disabled, writes:

*I once visited a psychiatric hospital that was a kind of warehouse of human misery. Hundreds of children with severe disabilities were lying, neglected, on their cots. There was a deadly silence. Not one of them was crying. When they realize that nobody cares, that nobody will answer them, children no longer cry. It takes too much energy. We cry out only when there is hope that someone may hear us.*¹⁰

Sölle's three stages have a dynamism and momentum that carries us onwards as a process. Her scheme illustrates that suffering is not just a personal problem – it is either compounded or resolved by sharing it with others. We recognise that things could and should be different, and by sharing the story, the issue becomes the property of the community and not just a personal problem. We are saved from the isolation and exclusion of privatised pain, but we also express our deep desire that things need to change.¹¹

So it is vitally important that the story of suffering is heard and received in the right way. But the way in which we tell the story is also important. It can be told in the way of death, or in the way of transformation and redemption.

The way of telling

In the telling of the story, Paul Ricoeur asks: will we become blamers or lamenters?¹² I have explored this choice in the context of people who are terminally ill and suggest the following division.

- **Blamers** will seek a cause for the suffering, so that responsibility can be allocated, and this process is understood in modern society as finding a meaning. Is my cancer *because* of my genes, my diet, or my past exposure to chemicals? Is it now incurable *because* my doctor did not listen to me sooner? On what or on whom can I place the blame? Many of the ‘Why me?’ questions of patients had an underlying dimension of seeking someone to blame: if no physical agent could be found then God made a good whipping boy.
- **Lamenters**, on the other hand, do not seek primarily to minimise their suffering, but come to accept (over time) that it has a deeper meaning, which they may not be able to see or understand at the time. Almost always this means an ability to refer to a transcendent dimension to life – often a belief in God, but not necessarily. This process is about connecting the person’s painful ‘small’ story into the ‘bigger’ universal story.¹³

The Bible contains many examples of lament. Job is the classic pattern – his three ‘comforters’ are blamers, failing to ‘hear’ Job; although Job, through the telling, comes to an understanding that blame is fruitless; and he simply laments. At the end of the book of Job, the Lord says to the three comforters: ‘I am angry with you because you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has’ (Job 42:7). God dismisses the very act of blaming. Jesus also demonstrates the veracity of lament, and does not blame. ‘Forgive them, for they know not what they do’ (Luke 23:34). It is hard to make this transcendent connection, hard to lament, in our high-tech, modern, medicalised, rational society. Even if we profess and practise belief, when we suffer we often capitulate to the Enlightenment desire for knowledge, power, and control, even though we have model biblical alternatives before us. Why should this be?

Possibly it is because the stories of Job and of Jesus give us the viewpoint of the victim,¹⁴ while our society prefers the narrative of the victor. Furthermore, Job and Jesus are both plainly innocent victims: they show us that suffering may not have a ‘because’. In Jesus, however, we have the incarnated revelation of God’s own response to human violence,¹⁵ which shows us that God does not work by calculated divine transaction, dealing out punishment (as suffering) in proportion to sin. Although Jesus suffered for no *cause*, it was not for no *reason*, and it was not *meaningless*. Rather, he reveals a way of responding to suffering. He identifies perfectly with those who suffer, and his perfect response to suffering is that he does not blame. He breaks the cycle of violence that is in our very nature. To be able to take this step as a disciple is a profound personal transformation.

Thus suffering has the potential to change us fundamentally from blamers (those who

seek a cause) into lamenters (those who interpret what happens in life), which returns us to the opening words of this article. The experiences of profound suffering that we find so difficult are in fact the gates to new meaning. Whenever the question, ‘Why me?’, arises, it is in fact a unique opportunity to look at all the presumptions of life that up to that point led us to say that there is no meaning in what has happened. Frankl even describes it as our ‘unique opportunity’.¹⁶

The cross of Jesus is not a ‘right’ judgement on the life and work of Jesus, and there is no ‘because’ that is adequate to explain it. The cross was undeserved, and is quite clearly demonstrated to be so by the gospel accounts, which describe collusion and plotting against Jesus to achieve his death. Indeed, the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God...where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? (1 Corinthians 1: 18ff). Our spiritual task, our *metanoia*, is to learn to move from blame to lament – noting that Jesus never says that suffering does not hurt or does not matter.

Conclusion

If we are going to deal with suffering in a healthy way, we need to tell our stories and to be heard. What prevents us?

1. **Wrong hearing.** Our western culture cannot hear the story of pain any more – we expect to be cured by medicine, housed by welfare, vindicated by law, eased by technology. Suffering is in danger of becoming extinct as a meaningful category: we do not understand it, and we are not willing to engage with it. If the story of pain is simply internalised, it rots us away and we cannot be healed. We need also to give time and our openness to others so that in turn they are free to tell us their stories. This is the most powerful pastoral tool in the box.
2. **Wrong telling.** We struggle to tell the story as lament because we have been taught to blame, but the story of Jesus challenges every aspect of the blaming mentality.
3. **A wrong worldview.** We struggle to identify God with suffering even though the gospels are dominated by the passion of Christ. We identify too easily with a remote God of power who fits more comfortably into a scientific and rational worldview (although in the end this image of God renders him logically either unbelievable or unloveable). We also like our autonomy, and forget that we are made to be in relationship and that we need one another, to tell and hear one another’s stories. Our *metanoia* depends upon being able to hear and be heard, without an abuse either of power or of person. If we can hear and tell the stories of suffering without looking for *blame* (ie looking ‘back’), but rather are able to *lament* our pain in the presence of

others, then our community is one of justice, healing, and healthy dialogue, and holds the seeds of transformation within it. Such a community would undoubtedly be a manifestation of the Kingdom.

¹ *Thought for the Day*, BBC Radio 4, 27 January 2010. See the record of the talk at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/programmes/thought/documents/t20100127.shtml>. See also the book by S. D. Kassow, *Who will write our history?*

² Further information on Rosetta Life can be found at <http://www.rosettalive.org/content/about/>.

³ Details of the music projects can be found at www.rosettarequiem.org.

⁴ There is a mass of material on this subject but see, for example, Adriana Cavarero's argument that a person's deepest desire is to tell his/her story (*Relating narratives*); or Howard Brody's *Stories of sickness*, or Paul Ricoeur's three-volume opus, *Time and narrative*.

⁵ The use of the term 'meaning' can be debated but here I use it as Ricoeur suggests, as that which we understand, think and feel, see *The rule of metaphor*, p 57). Viktor Frankl discusses the notion of 'meaningless' suffering in his accounts of the concentration camps in *Man's search for meaning*.

⁶ D. Sölle, *Suffering*, pp 68 ff.

⁷ *Ibid*, p 36.

⁸ P. Ricoeur, *Time and narrative*, vol 1, translated by K. McLaughlin & D. Pellauer. Chicago: University Press, 1984, p 75.

⁹ G. Gutierrez, *On Job: God-talk and the suffering of the innocent*, translated by M. J. O'Connell. New York: Orbis, 1987, p 101

¹⁰ J. Vanier, *Becoming human*. New York: Paulist Press, 1998, p 9.

¹¹ See the helpful tabular form of the process in D. Sölle, *Suffering*, p 73.

¹² P. Ricoeur, *Evil, a challenge to philosophy and theology* in *Figuring the sacred* (ed M. I. Wallace), p 250.

¹³ Ricoeur explores this idea in *Time and narrative*.

¹⁴ James Alison, *Knowing Jesus*, discusses the 'intelligence of the victim', ie Jesus is sharing the place of suffering and pain and interpreting the crucifixion from that place.

¹⁵ See Rene Girard's *The scapegoat* for a fuller explanation of this idea of the victim of corporate violence.

¹⁶ Frankl, in *Man's search for meaning*, says: 'When a man finds that it is his destiny to suffer, he will have to accept his suffering as his task: his single and unique task...His unique opportunity lies in the way in which he bears his burden', p 99.

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Book Reviews

Islam is increasingly in the spotlight and is a faith that Christians need to know about. The following two books are recommended. The first is an introductory text on the Qur'an and the second a more technical work which looks at the role of Christ in Islam.

Clinton Bennett *Interpreting the Qur'an* 2009 London Continuum 184 pp. pb £14.99 pp. ISBN 978 0 8264 9944 8

The author was appointed as a missionary in Bangladesh, and from that experience developed a sympathetic understanding of Islam. He has followed that up with his subsequent studies. He writes as a Christian; and his attitude to Islam is reflected in a sentence from his introduction to this book.

“Convinced that my God and Allah are identical, I use the Arabic Allah and English God interchangeably, sometimes in the same sentence.” (p.13) His respect for the Qur'an coming from hearing it read in Arabic, listening he says to the “beauty and the rhythm of the Arabic.... this coloured all my later engagement with the scripture with a love for the tone and the sound of the Arabic language.” (p.12)

In his introduction, after explaining his background, he looks at Muslim and non-Muslim approaches to the Qur'an. In his four main chapters he surveys the contents of the Qur'an in more or less historical order (very different from the order of the surah in the Qur'an), and against the main circumstances of Muhammad's life.

The first chapter deals with the prophet's call: in some ways echoing the call of Moses, Muhammad calls people to repent, and to live justly. There is judgement against the wicked. He is an Arab prophet for Arab people, with a universal message.

The second chapter on God, humanity and the Qur'an includes many surah with

Biblical connections particularly the Old Testament. There is a clear emphasis on the oneness of God, and a rejection of the Trinity – “God has no partners”- and of Jesus as Son of God, Saviour or Intercessor. Human beings are accountable – the records are kept, and decide the future for us. The Qur’an is in Arabic and is immune from error. It was delivered over 23 years by Gabriel to Muhammad - any similarities with the Old Testament or other material are coincidental.

These surah were spoken as Muhammad was gathering together followers in Mecca, and in 622 is the Hijrah to Medina, and the community takes shape. In chapter 3 the author discusses longer surah which include law e.g .dietary law. This is followed in chapter 4 with the period of the consolidation of the community – governance should be by “shura” consultation in which all members of the community can take part. In these two chapters the author notes differences of interpretation on controversial issues – the place of women, of non-Muslims , of aggression, etc.

He ends with some final thoughts on the place of the Qur’an in Muslim life and practice. His conclusions reflect his attitude to Islam as described in his introduction to this book.

Reviewed by the Rev. John Buxton

Oddbjorn Leirvik *Images of Jesus Christ in Islam* 2nd.ed. 2010 London Continuum 256pp. pb. £19.99 ISBN 978 14411 8160 2

Images of Jesus Christ in Islam is a large survey including extensive bibliographical notes of books and essays written by a wide breadth of authors addressing the debate about the importance of Jesus Christ in the Quran, Hadith and Islamic traditions. The author speaks from the standpoint of constructive dialogue, seeking bridges to connect the two religions of Christianity and Islam.

Tensions between different interpretations of Islam and Christianity historically are addressed highlighting varying degrees of importance of Jesus Christ. Specific areas of discussion centre around Sufism and Shi’ite traditions showing the relative importance of the role of Christ over other Islamic traditions. Chapters 6-8 focus on apologetics, polemics and dialogue with specific detail about 20th Century poetry and other literature, much from Egyptian contributors.

The book is best read as a reference tool, providing links to the detailed source literature and opinions. It is a relatively easy read, however, and can be read from cover to cover, although it is not a light read it is certainly most informative.

In chapter 8, the dialogical discussions are developed by the author to suggest strategies for Muslims to understand Christians, and vice versa. He suggests 'rethinking' entrenched assumptions some of which are helpful in thinking broader than the natural somewhat narrow position that a reader typically might attest to. There is however only a very small contribution from the evangelical Christian perspective, and in the balance the work lacks this perspective in my opinion.

The final chapter provides a helpful conclusion to this work in suggesting that 'conscience' from a western perspective is a helpful bridge in the dialogue to understand eastern perspectives. With no equivalent concept of 'conscience' within Classical Islam, the concept of *damir* was developed in the 1950s. Another comparison is drawn with the term 'authenticity' and *asala* with reference to heritage and shared history. These two final discussions highlight the question of individual and communal understanding of oneself, and therefore of the other. Dialogue, the author points out, is at the heart of understanding the importance of Jesus Christ in Islam and the commonality between Muslims and Christians.

Reviewed by Andy Dipper (CEO, Release)

William Lane Craig and Chad Meister (Ed.) *God is Good, God is Great* .2009 Nottingham IVP. 265 pp. pb £ 12.99 ISBN 978 1 84474 417 6

In recent years so-called 'New Atheists' have been making a determined attack on religion. Their popular spokesperson, Richard Dawkins, whose book 'The God Delusion' has elicited numerous rebuttals, some good others indifferent, is the main target. This collection of essays seeks not only to answer challenges raised by the new atheists but also to present an alternative Christian apologetic. In fact it tries to do too much and becomes somewhat like the curate's egg. The authors represent a cross section of Christian thinkers. They include well known evangelicals like William Craig, Alister McGrath and Alvin Plantinga, those of a more liberal persuasion like John Polkinghorne and even a creationist writer, Michael Behe. The book is divided into four sections – 'God is' looking at some of the philosophical questions, 'God is Great' reviewing some scientific evidence, 'God is Good', an attempt to meet the moral objections and finally 'Why it Matters' focussing on the person of Jesus.

The contributions vary considerably in quality. Craig exposes Dawkins' weaknesses in his philosophical reasoning by restating and defending the traditional arguments for God's existence. At times Craig himself, uncharacteristically, fails to deliver and, at times, descends to Dawkins' level in his personal attacks of him. Overall his is a fine essay. As one would expect Polkinghorne comes up trumps with his 'God and Physics'.

He shows how mathematics, quantum mechanics and the fine tuning argument clearly point towards a designer of the universe. The naivety with which Dawkins rejects morality is shown up by both Craig and McGrath. The latter takes Dawkins to task on his assertion that no atheist would bulldoze a religious shrine like Mecca or York Minster by referring him to what happened under the communist dictators in Russia and Romania. There are also interesting attempts to defend the Christian doctrine of hell and the apparent evil nature of the Old Testament God and the Mosaic laws by seeing them in context. Michael Behe's chapter on evolution fails to do the subject justice by inevitably concentrating on his pet theme of intelligent design. The weakest part of the book, in my opinion, is the last section, which seems largely irrelevant to the overall purpose of the book. Nevertheless there is much that is useful in this book and it is worth reading and passing on.

Reviewed by Reg Luhman

Ian Tattersall *Paleontology* 2010 West Conshohocken PA: Templeton Press pb. £12.99
228 pp. ISBN 978-1-59947-342-0

There can be few people better qualified to write a concise book on palaeontology than Ian Tattersall, who read archaeology and anthropology at Cambridge University and vertebrate palaeontology at Yale. He calls this volume a brief history of life and regards it as a progress report in a fast-moving branch of science. He points out initially the limitations of science, which does not set out to prove anything, but rather to understand proximate causes in terms of the observable processes, about which it can then make testable hypotheses. In the case of the fossil record the tests are historically based.

After a brief description of evolutionary processes the author takes us on a whistle-stop tour of the geological eras describing the different kinds of fossils found and how they have evolved. Although he describes how some of the now extinct creatures probably looked, the non-specialist will find difficulty in picturing them. There are some line drawings, but we could have done with a lot more. He devotes specific chapters to dinosaurs, mammals and the evolution of primates and mankind. Of particular interest is his explanation of how the jaws of mammal-like reptiles evolved into the mammalian inner ear. His judgments are judicious and often tentative, unlike creationist writers, who insist that these things never happened. Of particular interest to Christian readers will be his chapters on primate and hominid evolution. He is cautious in his interpretation of the Laetoli footprints as the earliest evidence of bipedal hominids because of the lack of tool making. He notes that the earliest crude tools existed for a long period which saw the transition from 'Turkana Boy' to Cro-Magnons and Neanderthals. He dates the first Homo Sapiens to about 195,000 years ago, but

notes that it is only with the Cro-Magnons, who had a cranial capacity approaching ours and evidence of an advanced cognitive ability as illustrated by their advanced tool-making and building of shelters, that we can identify true humans. He finds no evidence of language among the Neanderthals and believes that language and our peculiar perception of the world through symbols was the product of a long history but could not have been predicted by that history.

The object of the series, of which this volume is a part, is not only to summarise a particular field of study for the general reader, but also to show how it interacts with religion. Tattersall only devotes six pages to this in discussing the origin of spirituality. He does, however, point out that religion is far from being redundant because scientific knowledge is only provisional and inherently limited and that humans thirst to know the ultimate foundations of life. He concludes by writing that, "Evidently the human symbolic capacity gives us not only the ability but also the imperative to reach out to possibilities that lie beyond the scope of science." This book can be highly recommended as an introduction to palaeontology

Reviewed by Reg Luhman.

Arthur McCalla *The Creationist Debate*. 2006 London Continuum pb. 228 pp. ISBN 978-0-82648-002-0

This book was published in 2006 but has been recently reissued. The author uses a large canvas for his work, which incorporates insights from science, religion and literature. He starts his historical study in the sixteenth century long before the advent of 'creationism' as it is popularly understood today. The book might be better understood, as his subheading states, 'the encounter between the Bible and the historical mind'. The sixteenth century saw the rejection of a symbolic interpretation of the Bible and a return to the plain, literal sense. This was the age of Galileo, Kepler, Bacon and Newton for whom the world of nature showed evidence of design and demonstrated the benevolence and wisdom of the Creator. Natural Theology, or the Book of Nature, was as much a testimony to God as the Book of Scripture. However this view was challenged by the rise of textual criticism, which showed the Bible to be a book with a human history and by the voyages of discovery, which indicated the existence of other histories which challenged the Bible's uniqueness. The eighteenth century saw the expansion of geology and the acceptance of 'deep time', that is that our planet had existed for a much longer period than the thousands of years which people generally believed the Bible taught. The eighteenth century saw the beginning of 'Higher Criticism' of the Bible, which claimed that the Bible should not be taken at face value, but rather to be seen as reflecting the times and realities of the dates and places when the various books were written, which were generally believed to be later than

had been traditionally assumed. The critics rejected anything supernatural in the Bible as myth. The nineteenth century is particularly remembered for the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species* and its challenge to orthodox Christian beliefs about the origin of life and particularly the uniqueness of mankind. McCalla then reviews the responses to these challenges, in particular the reactionary biblicism that is associated with the rise of biblical fundamentalism and the creationist movement as it is usually understood. He evaluates and critiques the various forms this reaction took, namely Old and New World creationism, 'Creation Science' and finally Intelligent Design.

The book is well researched and well written and covers a lot of ground. There is no question where the author stands on the issue. He is firmly set against any conservative or creationist interpretation of the Bible. McCalla believes that all creationists are tarred with the same brush whether they are young earth creationists or believers in the intelligent design argument. For him the issue is between holding a scientific worldview or having a misplaced reliance on an inerrant Bible. His view can be summarised by two statements at the end of the book: "Intelligent Design is a strategy to bring people back to the Bible rather than a genuine attempt to advance scientific knowledge." (p.197) and, "The critical study of religion, like modern science, shares in the linked intellectual, social and political values that are the heritage of the Enlightenment...Claims for knowledge, and the authority that follows from them, must be conditional, corrigible, open to public scrutiny and testing, and are never absolute. Creationism attempt to destroy these intellectual, social and moral values by reimposing biblical authority, and the intellectual, social and moral views of those who control its interpretation, onto modern society as a whole."(199-200) Unlike Ronald Numbers in his classic study *The Creationists*, McCalla has totally ignored the work of the Victoria Institute and its American equivalent, The American Scientific Affiliation. Articles in the journals of both these organisations demonstrate that eminent scientists, many of them accepting, and even teaching, evolution can still hold to a belief in an infallible Bible.

Reviewed by Reg Luhman

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Faith & Thought is published by The Victoria Institute and mailed free to all Institute members, along with *Science & Christian Belief*.

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