

Tsunami tragedy: Where was God?

A personal theological reflection on the events of 26 December 2004 in south Asia

© Vinoth Ramachandra, Sri Lanka, 2005

On 26 December 2004, 'Tsunami' replaced 'Sushi' as the best-known Japanese word in the world. Since that tragic day, there have appeared a number of articles and letters in newspapers all over the world questioning the credibility of faith in God in the light of such a terrible event. This is not a new experience. In 1755 when an earthquake flattened the city of Lisbon, the cynic Voltaire asked whether the vices of that city were so much greater than those of London or Paris to merit such indiscriminate judgement from God. Some Christians add fuel to the cynic's fire by making naive statements about 'God's will', 'God's judgement', 'God's end-times', and so on. Even well-meaning expressions of gratitude to God for rescue and safety lead us to wonder what purpose is served by saving some but leaving so many thousands to die. As for stories about the 'miraculous' survival of religious icons and buildings, these only confirm the atheist's conviction that all religious beliefs stem from superstition and ignorance. What kind of deity cares more for things than people?

Mutual questioning

Those of us who are Christians should see the recent tragedy as an opportunity to re-think some of the shallow theology that we simply take for granted in many of our churches. What conception of God do we believe in and communicate to others? Atheists might ask, 'which God do I not believe in?' (I find myself in agreement more often with thoughtful and questioning atheists than with my fellow-Christians!) Isn't it interesting that 'God' does not enter the picture at all when the media reports, say, the growth of scientific understanding (including of earthquakes and tsunamis) and of recent medical discoveries - these are attributed solely to human genius - but 'God' so quickly becomes the scapegoat when things start going wrong, especially in the natural world? That God is always the object of our anger or scorn should not surprise Christians who follow a crucified Saviour!

One important question that is rarely asked is the following: Why is it that when hurricanes and earthquakes hit places like Florida or Japan, the loss of life is minimal; but when the same disasters occur in the Caribbean or south Asia, the devastation is mind-boggling? The answer is simple and straightforward: *poverty*. Or poverty combined with corruption and incompetence on the part of government officials. (Think of how warning after warning about floods and cyclones in our part of the world are routinely ignored, year after year, when the technology needed to save lives and property is readily

available). And poverty and economic inequalities on the scale seen in our world cannot be blamed on God. They represent a violation of God's will for humanity.

I am also perplexed by the argument that somehow tsunamis are more destructive of faith in a good God than, say, a sudden lightning strike that leaves a man dead in an open field. Is there an assumption here that sheer numbers are what count against God? But what numerical threshold should a disaster reach before we move from belief to unbelief? Tony Blair made the pertinent observation that Africa suffers the equivalent of a tsunami every week - why does this (easily preventable) man-made disaster not merit the same moral and theological indignation in the global media?

One is left with the feeling that reminders of human frailty before the awesome powers of nature are embarrassing to modern men and women caught up in the technocratic fantasy of mastery over the world. Nature, however, is not a commodity to be consumed.

The meaning of creation

The doctrine of creation is the most neglected of doctrines in most churches today, and naturally the least understood by atheists. This negligence has led to an anthropocentric, indeed individualistic, view of God's purposes for the world. Many Christians give the impression that God's business is to spare them pain and loss, let alone death and destruction. The 'health and wealth' gospels that some churches uncritically import from affluent churches in the US reinforce this absorption with our own security and comfort. God becomes the Cosmic Security Blanket. For many atheists, the God they reject is either the Cosmic Tyrant, controlling and determining every event in the universe, or the Cosmic Spectator, indifferent and passive in the face of what goes on, a figure more to be pitied than worshipped.

For God to create a world means that God 'withdraws' in order to allow a 'space' for something other than God to come into being. This is God's free choice, and God gives a certain degree of autonomy to what is created. Every act of creation, in familiar human contexts of parenthood, music or literature, involves both the exercise of power and the self-limitation of that power. The creator respects the integrity of his creation. The relationship between creator and creation cannot be described adequately in the language of 'controlling' and 'ruling'. There is also a 'letting-be', a willingness to let the creation unfold in its own way and according to its intrinsic character. There is a mystery to every creative act that great artists and musicians always confess. How much greater is the mystery when the topic is God's creation and upholding of the universe.

Modern science has given us a picture of God's world and of human life as evolving through a long process of potentialities being actualized in time. The world is not a closed, predictable system but a place where genuine *novelty* emerges, often in unpredictable ways. An earlier picture of the world (sometimes called 'a mechanistic' or 'Newtonian universe') saw the world as ordered in a clock-like regularity. Past, present and future were essentially interchangeable. Developments in physics and biology have changed that picture. The world is made up of clouds as well as clocks, and clouds are far more difficult to study than clocks. They are examples of what mathematicians call non-linear dynamic

systems, and most processes in the physical and biological world are of this type. (The misleading name for them is ‘chaos’). Such systems still obey the universal laws of physics, as does everything else in the universe, but their behaviour is intrinsically unpredictable as the possible solutions to the equations that describe them are infinite. They are enveloped in probabilities, but future options are constrained within specific limits (called ‘strange attractors’). There is a structured randomness to their behaviour. The paths followed by such systems are irreversible, so that time now becomes significant, unlike in the mechanistic picture. Moreover, small changes in the values of one variable can have enormous implications for the system’s future development (this is sometimes called, with attractive exaggeration, the ‘butterfly effect’ – the fluttering of a butterfly’s wings in one part of the world leading to storms in another). Thus physical reality is much more subtle than was thought in earlier times. It is a complex interweaving of both randomness and order.

Now if God has chosen to create us humans as part of such a world, then we are essentially physical creatures. We emerge, along with every other form of life on planet earth, out of the complex interactions of spontaneity and regularity. We are neither angels who fell to earth, nor robots manufactured to follow instructions. Our spirituality lies in the *direction* in which we point our physical embodiment: whether towards ourselves or towards the One who gives us life as a gift and calls us to live that life in dependence on others and for others. As physical beings, we share in the unpredictability and vulnerability of the rest of the created order. Human limitation is not an evil; rather the rejection of limitation is what is evil. Our solidarity as a human species is what leads to our rejoicing in the joy of others and weeping over the pain of others. To only receive through the good that others do, but not to suffer the consequences of what others do, would be a denial of our inter-dependent creatureliness.

Suffering remains an unfathomable mystery, but we do not have to choose between an inactive God and a God who is arbitrary in his actions. In relation to moral evil, Christian theology has long argued in terms of human *free-will*: that despite the many disastrous choices humans have made, a world of freely choosing beings is better than a world of perfectly programmed automata. In relation to physical evil (disease and disaster) there is a parallel *free-process* defence: that God respects the integrity of his creation – allowing the whole universe to ‘become itself’ – while sustaining the entire process. Each created entity is allowed to behave in accordance with its nature, including the complex combination of order and disorder which is usually part of that nature. God neither wills the growth of cancerous tumours nor acts of terrorism, but he allows these to happen. He is not the puppet-master of humans or of nature.

Most earthquakes, including that which occurred near Sumatra on 26 December 2004, are caused by the sudden breaking of rocks that have been subjected to enormous tectonic forces. Heat produced by the decay of radioactive elements within the earth causes slowly moving convection currents in the earth’s mantle (another non-linear dynamic process). New oceanic crust is formed at mid-ocean ridges and plunges back into the mantle. The descending slabs of oceanic crust become strained and fracture, causing earthquakes. Mountain ranges such as the Himalayas are formed when continents collide. The earth’s

crust is constantly being reshaped by these forces, creating numerous ecological niches in which distinct and diverse forms of life may emerge.

The Anglican theologian and mathematical physicist John Polkinghorne has suggested, in his many writings, that from a theological point of view, ‘the roles of chance and necessity should be seen as reflections of the twin gifts of freedom and reliability, bestowed on his creation by One who is both loving and faithful.’¹ The intelligibility of the physical world that scientists explore (and expressed in the ‘laws of nature’) are but reflections of God’s abiding faithfulness. ‘The actual balance between chance and necessity, contingency and potentiality, which we perceive seems to me to be consistent with the will of a patient and subtle Creator, content to achieve his purposes through the unfolding of process and accepting thereby a measure of the vulnerability and precariousness which always characterize the gift of freedom by love... Yet the eventual futility of the physical universe shows also that the ultimate fulfilment of the Creator’s eternal purposes will have to take place beyond this present world – which is what I take to be the meaning of the Christian doctrines of the resurrection of the body and the life of the world to come.’²

God's actions

How then may we envisage God’s continuing interaction with the present world? There seem to be two types of causality that operate in nature: an ‘energetic’ causality that works through the direct impact of one event upon another, and a more holistic (‘top-down’) causality that works through the input of information to the large-scale system and so affecting its smaller component parts. God’s influence in directing the developmental path of natural processes (such as the evolution of the human race) can perhaps best be understood in terms of this latter ‘informational’ type of causality. But even if we disagree on how to relate God’s action in the world to the human and nonhuman actions that we study, surely we all agree that a magical world, where God intervenes to prevent all innocent suffering brought about by events, would be a world that we could never study, let alone live in as responsible beings.

Polkinghorne writes:

We all tend to think that had we been in charge of creation, we would somehow have contrived it better, retaining the good and eliminating the bad. The more we understand the delicate web of cosmic process, in all its subtly interlocking character, the less likely it seems to me that that is in fact the case. The physical universe, with its physical evil, is not just the backdrop against which the human drama, with its moral evil, is being played out, so that the two can be disentangled. We are characters who have emerged from the scenery; its nature is the ground of the possibility of our nature. Perhaps only a world endowed with both its own spontaneity and its own reliability could have given rise to beings able to exercise choice. I think it is likely that

1 Polkinghorne, John (1996). *The Faith of a Physicist: Reflections of a Bottom-Up Thinker, The Gifford Lectures, 1993–4*, p.77. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

2 Polkinghorne, John. (1986). *One World: The Interaction of Science and Theology*, pp.69, 80. London: SPCK.

only a universe in which we could entertain a free-process defence, would be one in which there could be people to whom the free-will defence could be applied.³

So we need to be more careful when we speak about God's 'omnipotence' and his 'omniscience'. We should recognize that the act of creation involves a consequent limitation of God's omnipotence (often referred to in modern theology as a 'kenosis', following the Greek of Phil 2:7, referring to the incarnation). This curtailment of divine power is, of course, through a freely chosen self-limitation on God's part and not through any inherent resistance in the creature. God remains omnipotent in the sense that he can do whatever he wills, but it is not in accordance with his will and nature to insist on total control. The revelation of the divine life that is given in the human life of Jesus is also discerned in the cosmic history of creation. The incarnate life of Jesus is also the pattern of how God works at all times and in all places. If the Cross of Jesus is our guide to the way we think of God, then providence must be understood as 'God's wisdom in action' and that wisdom is seen supremely in the bearing of the brokenness and alienation of the world.⁴ It is this that distinguishes the God of the biblical narrative from other gods.

By creating with time (and so endowing his creation with the power of true becoming), God shares the temporality of his creation. Traditionally, Christian theologians have spoken of God as outside time, beholding all events in the Eternal 'Now'. However, the Bible presents a God who has a *story*, a God who is defined by a historical narrative of divine actions, responses and knowledge. God's creative endeavour takes the form of a purpose rather than a detailed blueprint or plan. In fulfilling that purpose, God in his humility makes room for the response and co-operation of the created world, both human and non-human. This is why the dominant note in Scripture is of God giving us *promises* for the future, not making exact predictions.

Along with several modern Christian philosophers, I would say, then, that there is a sense in which God is 'surprised' by some events in the world even as he remains the ontological ground and source (Creator) of all that is. If the future is not yet there to be known, then it is no imperfection in God to say that he does not know the future. Just as an artist embodies a purpose in her work and knows in outline what is going to be in it (and, in this sense, 'foreknows' the end from the beginning), yet the material she works with (the feel of the brushes, the texture of the canvas, the density of the paint) contribute to the final product in its actuality, so we may say that God has a 'future' because of his partnership with the created temporal world (though, unlike the human artist, God has freely chosen to work in this way).

The British theologian Paul Fiddes expresses this thought more succinctly than I can:

I believe we may say that God knows at any moment *all that there is to be known* about the future. That is, God knows it *as the future*, not as something that is either present or past to God, and knows it perfectly in this way that we do not... In making a free world which dwells in time, God has thus freely limited God's own self to knowing all that can be known, allowing for some things to be unknowable because they are not yet in existence. When they are, God will infallibly know them.... If God is

3 *The Faith of a Physicist*, op.cit., pp.84-5

4 Gorringe, Timothy. (1991). *God's Theatre*, p.55. London: SCM Press.

going to allow the world to be creative with some reflection of God's creativity, there must be some things which are possible but which have not yet become actual for God. Further, when they actually happen there will be something new about them, something contributed by the world.⁵

Many historians and philosophers of science have pointed out that the scientific enterprise rests on a gigantic act of faith. To be a scientist one has to make two fundamental assumptions that, taken together, only seem to make sense within a Judaeo-Christian worldview: namely, (a) that the universe is not a meaningless jumble of events but an intelligible structure; and (b) that human beings, despite being (physically speaking) mere specks of dust on an obscure planet revolving around one of the many billions of stars in that universe, are endowed with a calling and a capacity to discover that intelligibility. In other words, the *practice* of science points beyond itself to a transcendental, theistic framework (including a high view of human significance) within which science becomes a meaningful activity. Treating the picture science gives of the world as the *final story* undermines science's own credibility.

Finally, every protest against innocent suffering, as well as every free embrace of others' suffering, are both alike reflections of God's own response to suffering – as seen supremely in God's 'enfleshment' in Jesus Christ. In Christian thought, 'God' is inherently relational: a 'network' of ceaseless self-giving and responsive love. So, in answer to the question, 'Where was God on the morning of the 26th December 2004?', we can say, humbly yet boldly, that this God of sacrificial love was present in the pain and terror of the victims, in the grief of the survivors, in the heroism of people who risked their lives to save others, in the anger expressed against the vulnerability of the poor in a technologically rich world, and in the outpouring of global compassion and selfless giving in the spontaneous tidal wave of humanity that was as unstoppable as the waves that broke on south Asia's coasts.

Vinoth Ramachandra lives in Sri Lanka, and currently serves as the Secretary for Dialogue and Social Engagement (Asia) for IFES, a global partnership of over 130 autonomous and indigenous university student movements. He has both bachelor's and doctoral degrees in nuclear engineering from the University of London. He is also a member of the A Rocha International Council of Reference.

This document last updated: 30 December 2013

5 Fiddes, Paul. (2000). *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity*, pp.142, 143. London: Darton, Longman and Todd.