



## God on Trial

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Towards the end of *God on Trial*, broadcast on Wednesday 3rd September 2008 on BBC 2, a group of Auschwitz prisoners concluded that God was indeed guilty of breaking his covenant with the Jews. Their response? They prayed.

This scene highlighted what is arguably the more telling paradox at the heart of the God-and-suffering issue. For perhaps the harder question is not the philosophical or logical one of how to reconcile a God of love with a suffering world, but rather the existential or personal question of why so many people persist with faith despite their own experience of suffering.

If we consider the global scene, the response of the Auschwitz prisoners is not atypical, but rather the norm. Across Africa, for instance, God is guilty of allowing atrocious barbarism to occur, yet still the vast majority of Africans trust and pray and hope. And just a few weeks ago in an article for G2, Frank Cottrell Boyce, who wrote *God on Trial*, talks of the struggle his own faith encountered as he confronted these issues, and how at the end of it, his faith "blew stronger". Why is this? And why do we see this pattern so frequently? For, if David Hume and a succession of philosophers since him are right, rather than foster faith, the reality of suffering should lead to its demise.

As I've indicated, though, that is not what we perceive. In those parts of our world where pain, hardship and distress are far more prevalent, we find the highest rates of faith, while it is in the

relatively comfortable and affluent west where faith is least observed. This is the precise reverse of what we would expect if Hume's argument had any real weight. How do we account for this?

Of course, one of the answers given at this point is to posit a form of cultural intellectual hegemony and suggest that the reason all those Africans retain their faith in God is simply that they haven't thought through the issue sufficiently. If only they had the benefit of the enlightenment eyes with which we are blessed then they too would realise that the reality of suffering disproves the existence of God. Perhaps it is no coincidence that David Hume, who in support of his atheism expounded the problem of suffering, also said: "I am apt to suspect the negroes and in general all other species of men ... to be naturally inferior to the whites."

Such blatant racism, either from Hume or his contemporary followers, must not be tolerated. The idea that we have anything to teach Africans about suffering would be laughable, were it not so painful. So, the question remains, why does faith persist in the face of such suffering? Given that it is not due to a lack of intellect, or a failure to think through the issues – what is the answer?

Before I became a theologian, I was training as a paediatrician. In that capacity, on occasions, I had to give treatments or conduct tests that were uncomfortable and distressing for the children. Not surprisingly, some of the children did not respond to me particularly warmly as a result. Yet, perhaps remarkably, despite the fact that at times it was their parents who held them tightly during these procedures, the children never failed to continue to show love and affection towards them. Indeed, even when it was the parents who did these things they continued – as soon as the painful procedure was over – to throw themselves into their parents' arms. Why this difference of reaction?

I would suggest it is because while their main experience of me was either neutral or unpleasant, their experience of their parents was of ongoing care, love, compassion, feeding, warmth, and so on. So when, on occasions, their parents did things they neither liked, nor always understood (if they were too young), they were able to put those experiences in the context of an overall picture of unconditional love. Even

though they couldn't always understand why their parents let this particular thing happen, they knew that their parents loved them despite it.

Is it possible that this is also why suffering can produce such starkly different responses in people of faith and people of none? Atheists or agnostics do not have a context of God's love into which this particular painful tragedy can be relativised. All they have is the tragedy itself, and no wonder their response is an even more ardent form of atheism or animosity towards the god hypothesis. In contrast, the people of faith do have such a context. This means that even though they may not be able to explain why God would allow this particular event to occur, they know that the God who on countless other occasions has demonstrated his love and compassion must have a reason. Almost certainly, such a reason has something to do with human freewill, which includes the ability of some to abuse their freedom by infringing that of others. Of course, for those who consider their rationality to be on a par with God's, such an answer will fail to suffice. For they like to think they could have designed a better world in which everyone has complete freedom to act, but remarkably no-one would freely choose to harm another.

African Christians, then, who have an awareness of God's love and compassion, are entirely rational to conclude that their own particular suffering must be fitted into a wider context than just this event. There is nothing illogical in them continuing to believe, for they feel the force of the argument that all that is required to reconcile God's love, power and the presence of suffering is merely the presence of some reason that may or may not be fully accessible to them, but that nevertheless justifies God (like the parent) in allowing some tragedy to occur for the sake of a greater good. In saying this, it's important to see that the logical force of this argument does not depend on us knowing the nature of that greater good, or how precisely the calculation works. The freewill of humanity as a whole (but not as individuals) may or may not be that greater good. But what matters (logically, though not I acknowledge emotionally) is whether there is such a greater good, not whether we are aware of its precise contours.

However, the atheist does not have that wider

context. And if you also like to think that you and God are on the same intellectual plane, then all you have left is raw, illogical, indeed insane, pain. Hence, within the confines of their limited perspective, such a person is also entirely rational to conclude that God cannot exist.

The presence of suffering, then, does not disprove the existence of God, but it does confirm us in whatever belief system we already had. As was noted in the film by one of the Auschwitz prisoners, quoting the French philosopher, La Rochefoucauld, "A great storm puts out a little fire, but it feeds a strong one." And that is why the author of this horrific narrative found his faith blowing even stronger at the end.

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