

Friday Night Theology, 5th September, 2008

God on Trial

On Wednesday night, BBC 2 broadcast [God on Trial](#), a drama written by Frank Cottrell Boyce that depicts a group of Auschwitz prisoners accusing God of breaking his covenant with the Jews. At the end of the trial, the prisoners find that God is indeed guilty. Their response? They pray.

The program highlighted once again the challenge that Christians face in answering the question: why God allows suffering. Writing in the [Guardian](#) a few weeks ago, the author of *God on Trial* spoke of the struggle his own Catholic faith encountered as he confronted the issue head on. Yet, perhaps remarkably, he says that though his faith was severely tested during the course of the program, in the end it "blew stronger". If we think about it, this is in fact the paradox that we so frequently observe in those who undergo the most testing times. Far from eliminating faith, in many, suffering actually coincides with a much stronger trust in God.

Philosophers since David Hume have suggested that suffering should produce in us a disinclination to believe. Yet, as we survey our globe, the reality is the precise opposite. Many parts of Africa, for instance, face daily challenges that we cannot even imagine, and yet rates of belief in that continent continue to outstrip those in the more comfortable and affluent West. How do we explain this fact that faith seems to be strongest in those areas of greatest deprivation?

Some secularists would respond at this point by asserting a form of cultural intellectual arrogance. David Hume, the enlightenment philosopher who spelt out why the presence of evil should lead us to atheism, also said this: "I am apt to suspect the negroes and in general all other species of men...to be naturally inferior to the whites." The suggestion, then, would be that the only reason those Africans still believe in God is because they just haven't thought through the issues enough. If only they had the enlightenment wisdom that we in the West have, then they would give up their belief in God.

Of course, such blatant racism 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?

Well, perhaps it is simply this. All of us interpret our experiences in terms of some wider context. If your predisposition is towards atheism then the context in which you interpret suffering is one of a mindless, pointless universe, and it is therefore inevitable that such suffering will simply confirm you in your belief that no compassionate God can exist. If, on the other hand, you approach suffering from the point of view of someone who does believe in a purpose to creation, and who trusts in a compassionate, caring God, then even though you may not understand why God is allowing *this* particular tragedy to occur, you know that the God who allows it is one who still loves and cares. And you know this because on countless other occasions you have been aware of God's love and care directed towards you.

The African Christians, then, are not behaving irrationally or illogically in continuing to believe. Rather, they feel the force of the argument that all that is required to reconcile God's love, power and the reality of suffering, is the presence of some reason that may or may not be accessible to us, but that justifies God in allowing this particular form of suffering to occur. Human freewill is no doubt a part of that reason, though I recognise that such an answer will fail to satisfy the atheist. For they like to think they could have designed a world in which everyone had complete freedom to act, though remarkably no-one would use that freedom to harm another.

At an emotional level, such an answer can be hard to deal with and like a whole succession of Biblical saints we will still want to cry out to God 'Why?' Nevertheless, logically, the answer is persuasive, for it remains the case that the presence of suffering does not disprove the existence of God. It does, though, 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.

Dr Justin Thacker, Head of Theology

A longer version of this article should appear on the Guardian website on Sunday 7th September.