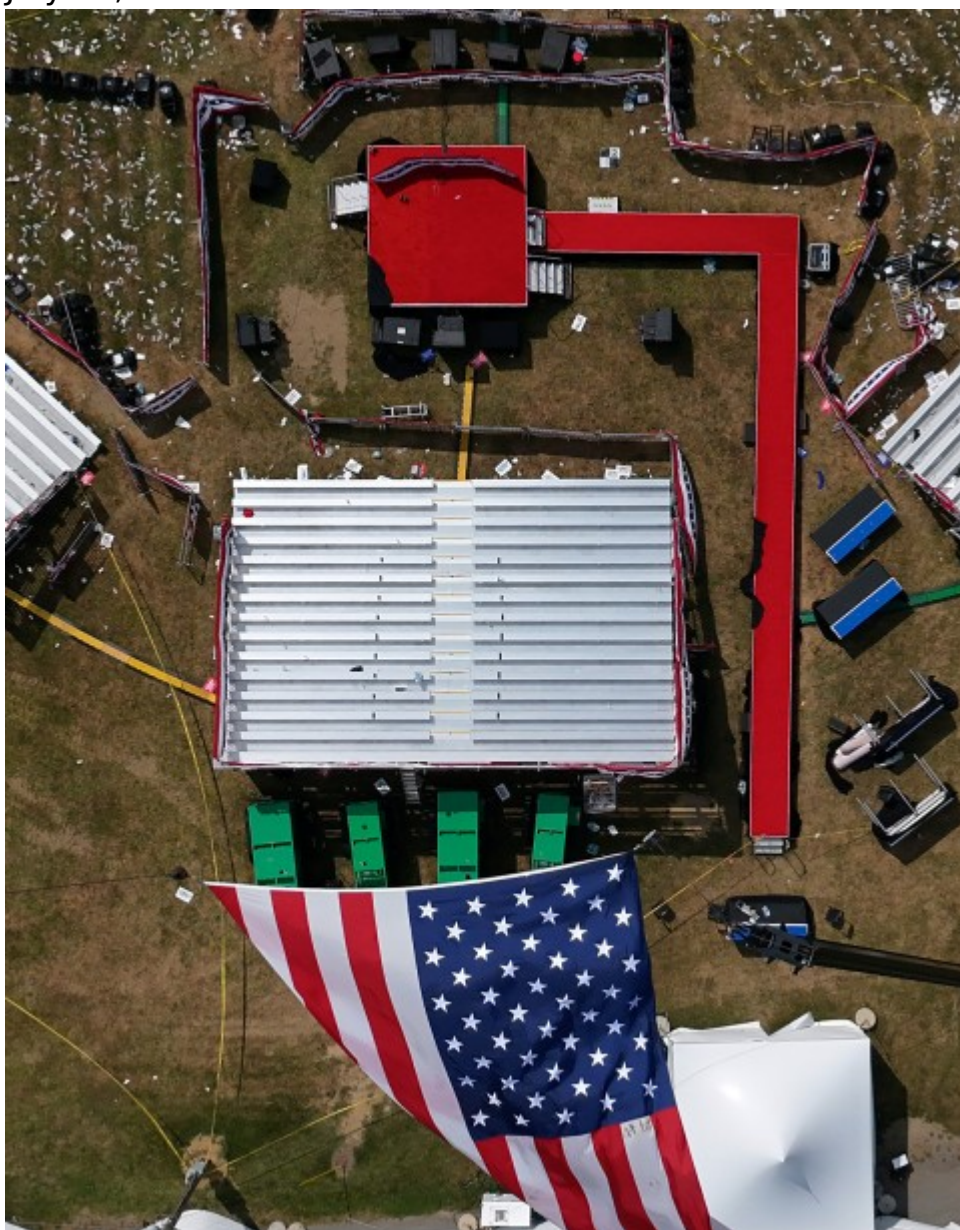


Did God intervene to save Trump's life?

Underneath this question lies layer upon layer of ever more troubling theological questions.

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The site of a campaign rally for Republican presidential candidate former President Donald Trump on July 15, 2024, in Butler, Pennsylvania. (AP Photo / Gene J. Puskar)

How to do the theology of a presidential assassination attempt:

1. Believe that God is all powerful, is in control of everything that happens, and takes a special interest in US politics.
2. Believe that God can override free will whenever God wants to or whenever it's in the divine interest to do so, like when it concerns US politics.
3. Believe that God has a special interest in the would-be target of an assassination attempt becoming the next president of the United States.
4. Believe that God is capable of intervening in human affairs in a way that can determine the next president of the United States while simultaneously respecting the free will of the voters.

We could keep climbing these steps, stopping when we no longer feel the need to keep going, when we feel that our theological questions have been sufficiently answered. But there's another possibility: we might think about climbing the steps in the other direction, down to the basement. Be warned, though. It's creepy down there, and dark, and very cold. Still, the dank, ominous basement—the structure that upholds the theological edifice we enjoy occupying—is where some of the best theology is done.

I'm using the metaphor of a basement to call attention to something that every theology teacher knows well: underneath the theological questions that we don't know how to answer are other theological questions that we don't even know how to ask.

So, for instance, some people might want to know how exactly God was able to save former President Trump's life. Did God send a wind gust to move the bullet a smidge to the left? Deploy a guardian angel to cover most of Trump's head? Cause the shooter to blink at just the right moment?

These questions seem acceptable to ask in polite Christian company. But a lot of unasked questions lurk underneath these ones. For example, when God moved Trump's head out of the way of the shooter's bullet, did God know that the bullet would end up striking a firefighter? Did God have no way to save Trump's life while also protecting everyone else's life that day? Did God engage a version of the trolley dilemma and conclude that it was more ethical to save a former president than a rally attendee?

Related to these questions are even more troubling ones. If God is capable of saving someone from gun violence, then what is God doing when a shooter breaks into an elementary school? If God can perform life-saving miracles, why is any child anywhere dying of leukemia?

Then there are the more trivial questions that are implicated in the original line of questioning: Is God's assassination prevention a stamp of approval on the Republican candidate? In the event that a similar attempt is made on a Democratic candidate, will God intervene? I thought God sent the rain down on the just and unjust alike. Does God shield only conservatives from bullets? But then why not protect the presumably Republican voter who was killed by the shooter?

Last weekend's assassination attempt has left us with questions, fears, rage, and wounds. And it is precisely at this intersection where theology is called upon to get to work. Not so much to offer answers as to help us uncover some of the deep, disturbing questions that have stymied theologians for millennia.

For me, the work of Christian theology always begins underground, in a dark, musty tomb, with the body of a man whose death God didn't prevent. Yes, sure, the resurrection and all that—there's no Christianity without it! But the resurrection doesn't undo what precedes it. What is resurrected is a murdered body, and that body was murdered because God didn't prevent it from being murdered.

New Testament passages and Church Fathers offer clever theological ways around this, most of which end up affirming some version of "God and Jesus were in cahoots the whole time, and the murder was the plan all along." But like many contemporary theologians interested in questions of justice, I find this suggestion unsettling. God's best plan to save the world involved murdering an innocent paragon of virtue, sending his only begotten son to die a cruel death? There were no better options? God is infinitely creative and had an eternity to brainstorm—and then, *this*?

To encourage my students to find the deeper questions underneath classical atonement theory, I offer them a reading by Paula Fredriksen. The scholar of early Christianity offers a hypothetical historical explanation for Good Friday that takes seriously a question that often goes unasked: Why didn't Rome kill Jesus' *disciples*, too? Fredriksen posits that Rome knew Jesus' movement wasn't a genuine threat. But then why kill Jesus at all? Because, she suggests, even though Pilate knew that Jesus was nonviolent, some of the crowds that just happened to be in the temple

during that year's Passover might have misinterpreted his message about the kingdom of God, wrongly believing Jesus was about to lead them in a bloody battle against the empire.

On Fredriksen's reading, the crucifixion happened because, well, the chips just fell that way on that particular holiday, with those particular crowds, when Pilate was in that particular mood.

Historians have debated whether Fredriksen's proposal is correct. Either way, I think it is theologically fruitful—because it takes seriously the absolute, shocking, gut-punch tragedy that is the cross of Jesus. To do theology in this way challenges us to let go of our old versions of omnipotence. No longer is God the one who pulls history's strings, who causes this nation to rise and that dictator to fall, this bullet to go just a tiny bit that way. God, in fact, is the one who, perhaps with bated breath, watches everything unfold—the good, the bad, the in-between—in the world that God is crazy about and refuses to give up on.

God's omnipotence, if we want to put it this way, consists of God's ability to accept a world going wrong and to respond to the worst of it on God's own creative terms, which are terms of love and justice and joy. God does not override the bad luck at play in the world. But God also has let the cat out of the bag by promising us that all of this bad luck won't have the final word on reality. For now, though, it has a lot of say.

Luck isn't a word that often features into theological discussions. It's one of those basement words, one that we like keeping underneath the stairs, out of sight, out of mind, in the cold darkness way down there. But it's actually a pretty useful word for theology. To say that the world often happens randomly, that people and animals are often in the right place at the right time or the wrong place at the wrong time, isn't to impugn God. It's much worse for God's character to be single-handedly responsible for calamity. I have nothing but scorn for a divine being who has the power to make things turn out well but only rarely chooses to do so. An omnipotent God who occasionally intervenes to decide elections but sits back while entire species go extinct? No thanks.

But a God who is with us come what may, who is present with us as we roll the dice, who hopes along with us for the best outcomes, and who pledges to remain steadfastly *ours* even when everything falls apart? This is the God I believe in, and

it's the God that I believe Jesus entrusted himself to at the very end, when he began to read the writing on the wall, when he wondered if bad luck was finally about to catch up with him.

In the world that God has created, in the world that God loves, things go right and things go wrong. Bullets miss their targets and accidentally strike elsewhere. Peaceful people are murdered, sometimes simply for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. In the world that God has created, folks are lucky and unlucky. Some people win the lottery; some people are struck dead by lightning. Most of us fall somewhere in the middle: neither the best thing nor the worst thing has happened to us.

Most of us, too, are lucky enough to have the opportunity to work within the confines of our (un)lucky circumstances in the hopes of achieving specific outcomes. Luckily, luck isn't the only force shaping our world. We shape it, too. We work within the constraints of randomness and luck to create the world that we want.

I suppose this leads to another underground theological line of inquiry about the assassination attempt: What sort of world have we been forming where something like this is even possible? Where a 20-year-old with an assault rifle tries to murder a politician that half of the country hates? Where people express disappointment that the bullet didn't "do the trick"? Where we all wonder if we'll be as lucky as Trump the next time a bullet flies by our head?