

Where was God? An interview with David Bentley Hart

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*David Hart's 2003 book The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth (Eerdmans) was widely touted as a theological tour de force. He offers in that book a powerful and deeply learned statement of Christian truth that draws on the Eastern Orthodox tradition while engaging modern and postmodern critics of Christianity. After the tsunami in 2004 he wrote several commentaries in response to what he regarded as unhelpful attempts to understand that catastrophe theologically. His reflections were expanded in a book, The Doors of the Sea: Where Was God in the Tsunami? (Eerdmans). Hart, who next year will be a visiting professor at Providence College, spoke with us about evil and its place in the world that God created and loves.*

**It's often said that three claims of the Christian tradition—"God is omnipotent," "God is love" and "Evil exists"—present a logical contradiction. One of the claims has to be revised. Do you agree?**

If by "evil exists" you mean that evil possesses a real substance of its own, and that it therefore exists in the way goodness exists (or, for that matter, a tree, a rabbit, an idea or a dream exists), in point of fact Christian tradition has usually denied this quite forcibly. Patristic and medieval thought (drawing, admittedly, on Platonic precedent) defined evil as a privation of the good: a purely parasitic and shadowy reality, a contamination or disease or absence, but not a real thing in itself. This, incidentally, is a logically necessary claim if one understands goodness and being as flowing alike from the very nature of God and coinciding in him as one infinite life.

That said, there surely is no contradiction between God's omnipotent goodness and the reality of evil. It may seem somewhat trite to invoke the freedom of creation as part of the works and ends of divine love, or to argue that the highest good of the creature—divinizing union with God in love—requires a realm of "secondary causality" in which the rational wills of God's creatures are at liberty; nonetheless, whether the traditional explanations of how sin and death have been set loose in the world satisfy one or not, they certainly render the claim that an omnipotent and good God would never allow unjust suffering simply vacuous. By what criterion could

one render such a judgment? For Christians, one must look to the cross of Christ to take the measure of God's love, and of its worth in comparison to the sufferings of a fallen world. And one must look to the risen Christ to grasp the glory for which we are intended, and take one's understanding of the majesty and tragedy of creation's freedom from that.

**In Dostoevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, Ivan Karamazov famously points to the brutal killing of children and proclaims that he refuses to believe in any God who has arranged the world in such a way that it entails such suffering—regardless of what “meaning” can be attached to it. What does a Christian say to Karamazov's protest?**

Actually, what Ivan ultimately refuses is not belief but consent: he will not acknowledge that there is any justice, any glory, any truth that is worth the suffering of a child. If he were merely a truculent atheist, he would be a boring figure. Instead, he is a rebel against the divine order, and intends to remain a rebel even if that order should—in some way transcending his finite understanding—prove to be perfectly just. One might very well read his protest not as a brief for atheism, but as a kind of demythologized Gnostic manifesto, an accusation flung in the face of the demiurge.

Still, the pathos of his protest is, to my mind, exquisitely Christian—though he himself seems not to be aware of this: a rage against explanation, a refusal to grant that the cruelty or brute natural misfortune or evil of any variety can ever be justified by some “happy ending” that makes sense of all our misery and mischance.

In a sense the whole of *The Doors of the Sea* was a response to Ivan's “rebellion”—and indeed a kind of endorsement of it. What I would say here is that it is important to understand the terms of the argument clearly: Ivan assumes—in good late-19th-century fashion—that the eschatological horizon of history and nature is, in a very direct way, the consummation of a process wherein all the apparent contingencies of history and nature have an indispensable part to play. For him, the Christian promise of the kingdom of God is the promise, as well, of a final justification not only of those who have suffered, but of their suffering, and of the part suffering plays in bringing the final kingdom of love and knowledge to pass. This is what he finds intolerable: the notion that the suffering of children will prove to have been meaningful, to have had a purpose, to have been in some sense a good and necessary thing; for him, the suffering of children is an infinite scandal, and his

conscience could never allow it to sink to the level of some provisional passage through darkness on the way to some radiant future.

My contention is that this places Ivan's sensibility much nearer to the authentic vision of the New Testament than are many of the more pious and conventional forms of Christian conviction today. The gospel of the ancient church was always one of rebellion against those principalities and powers—death chief among them—that enslave and torment creation; nowhere does the New Testament rationalize evil or accord it necessity or treat it as part of the necessary fabric of God's world. All that Christian scripture asserts is that evil cannot defeat God's purposes or thwart the coming of his kingdom. Divine providence, of course, will always bring about God's good ends despite—and in a sense through—the evils of this world; but that is not the same thing as saying that evil has a necessary part to play in God's plans, and that God required evil to bring about the kingdom. As the empty tomb of Christ above all reveals, the verdict of God that rescues and redeems creation also overturns the order of the fallen world, and shatters the powers of historical and natural necessity that the fallen world comprises.

**Christians often try to distinguish between what God wills and what God permits or allows. But does this distinction really help? If God allows something, or creates a world in which evil is allowed, then in some sense isn't it part of God's will?**

Unless one thinks that God's act of creation is purely arbitrary—and it would be incoherent to attribute arbitrariness of any kind to a God of infinite goodness (an argument for another time)—then one must understand creation as a direct expression of God's own Logos. God does not create like an omnipotent consumer choosing one world out of an infinity of possibilities that somehow stand outside of and apart from his own nature. Here's one without cancer, there's one without Bach, over there's one with a higher infant mortality rate, and so on; this is the worst sort of anthropomorphism.

God creates the world of Jesus, the world conformed to his infinite love for his Son in the joy and light of the Spirit; he thereby also wills his goodness in all his creatures infinitely, which is to say he wills this world for eternal union with him in love, and he wills that we should become partakers of the divine nature.

There is no other world that God might have created, not because he is bound by necessity, but because he is infinitely free, and so nothing can hinder him from expressing his essential and infinite goodness perfectly, in and through the freedom of creatures created to be the fellows of his eternal Son.

That may seem obscurely phrased—it is, I know—but if one thinks through what it means to understand God as the transcendent source of all being, one must abandon the notion that God chooses to create in the way that I choose to buy blue drapes rather than red. God creates a realm of rational freedom that allows for a union between Creator and creature that is properly analogous to the Trinity's eternal union of love; or, stated otherwise, God creates his own image in his creatures, with all that that may entail.

**Followers of Calvin have been particularly concerned to defend God's sovereignty. Do you think that tradition presents a particular problem for Christian thinking today?**

Yes—and not only today. I quite explicitly admit in my writing that I think the traditional Calvinist understanding of divine sovereignty to be deeply defective, and destructively so. One cannot, as with Luther, trace out a direct genealogy from late medieval voluntarism to the Calvinist understanding of divine freedom; nevertheless, the way in which Calvin himself describes divine sovereignty is profoundly modern: it frequently seems to require an element of pure arbitrariness, of pure spontaneity, and this alone separates it from more traditional (and I would say more coherent) understandings of freedom, whether divine or human.

This idea of a God who can be called omnipotent only if his will is the direct efficient cause of every aspect of created reality immediately makes all the inept cavils of the village atheist seem profound: one still should not ask if God could create a stone he could not lift, perhaps, but one might legitimately ask if a God of infinite voluntaristic sovereignty and power could create a creature free to resist the divine will. The question is no cruder than the conception of God it is meant to mock, and the paradox thus produced merely reflects the deficiencies of that conception.

Frankly, any understanding of divine sovereignty so unsubtle that it requires the theologian to assert (as Calvin did) that God foreordained the fall of humanity so that his glory might be revealed in the predestined damnation of the derelict is obviously problematic, and probably far more blasphemous than anything

represented by the heresies that the ancient ecumenical councils confronted.

### **Is universal salvation a corollary of your view of the absurdity of evil?**

Probably not; but Gregory of Nyssa would say otherwise. The preferred Eastern Orthodox understanding of hell, one with profound patristic pedigrees, defines hell as something self-imposed, a condition of the soul that freely refuses to open itself in love to God and neighbor, and that thereby seals itself against the deifying love of God, thereby experiencing divine glory as an external chastisement. That hell I believe in, inasmuch as all of us from time to time have tasted it in this world. The refusal of love makes love a torment to us.

### **Does your understanding of evil have implications for pastoral practice in the face of evil?**

I honestly don't know. I haven't a pastoral bone in my body. But I would implore pastors never to utter banal consolations concerning God's "greater plan" or the mystery of his will. The first proclamation of the gospel is that death is God's ancient enemy, whom God has defeated and will ultimately destroy. I would hope that no Christian pastor would fail to recognize that that completely shameless triumphalism—and with it an utterly sincere and unrestrained hatred of suffering and death—is the surest foundation of Christian hope, and the proper Christian response to grief.

### **So where was God in the tsunami?**

Where was God? In and beyond all things, nearer to the essence of every creature than that creature itself, and infinitely outside the grasp of all finite things.

Almost all the reviews of *The Doors of the Sea* that I have read have recognized that, at the heart of the book, is a resolute insistence upon and adoration of the imperishable goodness of creation, an almost willfully naive assertion that it is the beauty and peace of the created world that truly reveal its original and ultimate nature, while the suffering and alienation and horror of mortal existence are, in an ultimate sense, fictions of fallen time, chains and veils and shadows and distortions, but no part of God's will for his creatures. This is why, at one point in the book, I grant the Gnostics of old the validity of their questions, though I go on to revile the answers at which they arrived.

To see the world in the Christian way—which, as I say in the book, requires the eye of charity and a faith in Easter—is in some sense to venture everything upon an absurd impracticality (I almost sound Kierkegaardian when I say it that way). But, as I was writing the book, I found myself thinking again and again of a photograph I had seen in the Baltimore Sun. The story concerned the Akhdam, the lowest social caste in Yemen, supposedly descended from Ethiopians left behind when the ancient Ethiopian empire was driven out of Arabia in the sixth century, who live in the most unimaginable squalor. In the background of the photo was a scattering of huts constructed from crates and shreds of canvas, and on all sides barren earth; but in the foreground was a little girl, extremely pretty, dressed in tatters, but with her arms outspread, a look of delight upon her face, dancing. To me that was a heartbreaking picture, of course, but it was also an image of something amazing and glorious: the sheer ecstasy of innocence, the happiness of a child who can dance amid despair and desolation because her joy came with her into the world and prompts her to dance as if she were in the midst of paradise.

She became for me the perfect image of the deep indwelling truth of creation, the divine Wisdom or Sophia who resides in the very heart of the world, the stainless image of God, the unfallen. I'm waxing quite Eastern here, I know. But that, I would say, is the nature of God's presence in the fallen world: his image, his bride, the deep joy and longing of creation, called from nothingness to be joined to him. That child's dance is nothing less than the eternal dance of divine Wisdom before God's throne, the dance of David and the angels and saints before his glory; it is the true face of creation, which God came to restore and which he will not suffer to see corruption.