

Haiti - A Reflection

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The earthquake that devastated parts of Haiti forces us to rethink our assumptions about reality. Over the past few weeks we have heard and seen many voices offer their response of words to make sense of the event. Along side those words has been the overwhelming responses of care. This out pouring of gifts and action lift our spirits, and for many this is enough to solve the existential questions that arise in such a wide spread disaster.

A.C. Clark the science fiction writer offered a reflection on human hubris. The idea that we can control nature was shown to be false for "nature has its own ways." Natural disasters are just that - natural, and one can explain the process of why they happen - no mystery. Yet while we can describe the event and have developed tools of technology to monitor and aid us in responding to nature, we cannot control it. This causes us we to rethink our relationship with nature. This is to understand its freedom. That is, nature is not controllable so we must live in some sort of harmony with it. This is to respect its awesome, creative, and destructive power.

Still, such events do call into question the meaning of God and life. Just as all death reminds us that we too die, the staggering numbers remind us of interdependent universe, that one death touches so many. So we respond with action and prayers. We see the pain of others and respond in ways to alleviate that pain. And the generous response we see gives us hope about us as men and women. And we see that generosity even more so when we see the apathy of some and the evil others engage in, from stealing to exploitation. We see such acts for what they are, perversity. That perversity enhances the good that others show, that compassion maybe more true of us.

Both the acts of moral evil and the negative force of nature lead to other questions of why. These are the philosophic and religious questions about the nature of God. Such reflections have been going on since the time of recorded religion, for example: Job, and the flood story. However, the questions changed with the rise of the enlightenment and events like the Lisbon earthquake which lead to Voltaire's atheism which is a dominate ideology today. In response was Leibniz's -that our world "is the best of all possible worlds." This means that horror of present evils makes the positive responses even more beautiful. The world is made more beautiful by contrasts.

However there is still a problem when an event does not contribute to the greatest possible good. This implies God does not exist. All of our generous responses do not do away with the evil felt by those who perish. So atheism has been created by the way we understand God, for an all powerful God should not allow such events to happen.

On the surface, when we understand that an event is a natural event this seems to let God off the hook. However, many theologies have suggested that God has created all things, in fact, created ex nihilo (out of nothing). This doctrine opens the gates to questions of God's causal influence. The doctrine of creation out nothing is post-biblical because what we actually have in the bible is God creating out of primeval chaos. Many suggest that creation out of nothing is not biblical because the Hebrew can be translated not as "In the beginning God created" but as "When God began." Water as chaos suggests something already there to be worked with - primordial stuff. Water is not created and the line is "God moved over the waters."

When coupled with creation out of nothing, a omnipotent God is problematic. If God is a loving God and all powerful and all depends on God then there are times God ought to respond. When the tradition suggests God did respond in evil situations to save the people the question becomes why not now.

So this problem of evil makes God unworthy of worship: If God is a supernatural power who can change nature at breath yet does nothing to prevent an earthquake, then God is not worthy of our praise. It is not it good enough to say, as Calvin and others have done: It is mysterious and not real evil; it only appears to be for God has other things in mind and this is not evil to God. Again the question, is such a God worthy of worship if these things are sent to correct us or punish us for moral evil or only appear to be evil?

In response to this problem, in the eighteen hundreds Deism became the logical outcome. God started the world, gave laws, and like the watchmaker lets the world run on its own. However, this God is not a satisfying object of worship so this rationalism began to undercut experiential aspect of faith. This has lead us to our present day situation of the irrelevance of the church.

There is another way of speaking that affirms God as caring about each moment, and is the source of our compassion. In the most general sense, the God of beauty and love is in the event weeping with each individual and feeling our pain. God uses those emotions to touch our hearts. This touching has been going on for generations so we have affirmed the value of generosity as natural. It may have been first articulated in religious circles, however, it now is known as humanism. Faith's answer is that when we are the most caring we are the most God like.

We begin to refine our doctrine of God, to get rid of supernaturalism and omnipotence as grounds, for God works with the world as it is to lure it to beauty - we are the ones who can respond. Further, free will is given metaphysically not as a gift of God, for if God is good God could have given free will without the negative implications - God can only work with what is - so next comes naturalism - a theory of nature.

God worked not with creation out of nothing. It is creation out of unformed stuff. That stuff has some basic self determinative will - evolution. God could not have created a different world for God had to work with what primal stuff there was. Our natural world works as it does with floods, tsunamis, earthquakes, disease because that is how it works, through its evolution. Life is dangerous and unpredictable.

The character of God is to desire relationships and consciousness and works only with persuasion - cannot force or coerce. God lures more beauty and harmony out of the chaos so it becomes something, and that something moves from simple experience to more complex experience - a move to consciousness (a side note here, evolution cannot explain consciousness so there is room for faith) and over time we have different levels of consciousness with humans being the highest. Since God desired complexity and since there is free will or self determination built in (metaphysically given) God responded as the lure to novelty, to create more complexity. In response "things" are responsible for how they respond - again humans being the most responsible for agency, and nature without moral reflective power. So nature has real power, we have real power and God has real power to determine an event. That power is always exercised in relationships of free actors, each with its different level of power. God, then, works in the world as it is to lure it to what it could be.

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