

God and Suffering: A Covid-19 Theology

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Today is April 15th 2020, and as I write, the UK and much of the world is in a state of “lockdown”. We have been confined to our homes, as world leaders have taken the decision to enforce a quarantine to prevent the spread of a virus, labelled as Covid-19, which these world leaders are describing as a pandemic and a major global health crisis.

It’s worth noting at the outset that there is some controversy surrounding the drastic measures governments have taken as part of the lockdown, which include staying at home except for essential health-related activities, isolation for several weeks in the event of suspected illness, and “social distancing”, which means we are advised to avoid being within two metres of other people when out in public. The police have powers to intervene if these measures are not adhered to.

Many people feel that the lockdown is a gross intrusion into their liberties, and some are arguing that they have sound reasons for believing the pandemic is an elaborate cover-up designed to distract citizens into fear-based hibernation while secret political agendas are being pursued by governments.

I will leave the question of the truthfulness of matters related to the pandemic to investigative journalists, and instead focus in this essay on my own particular area of interest, which is philosophical theology.

At times of great suffering and uncertainty, people tend to reflect more on the bigger questions surrounding our existence, and these questions will be the focus of this essay. I will be asking: What is God's role in world events? Why must human beings suffer so terribly? And if I die from Covid-19, what happens then?

I will not focus here on arguments for the existence of God, which is something I have done extensively elsewhere.¹ I will focus mainly on Christian theology, for several reasons. Firstly, I anticipate many people who will read this essay are Christians, because many people who follow my blog and read my books are Christians. Secondly, Christianity is currently the biggest religion on the planet in terms of numbers, and so is very theologically important. Thirdly, Christianity has played a big role in my own spiritual journey, so it is at the forefront of my thoughts.²

I'm confident that non-Christian readers will also be interested in what I have to say in this essay, and will find my arguments relatable to their own beliefs and worldviews. It is intentionally only a short essay, and it is designed to be thought-provoking rather than offering a complete exposition of my worldview, which is the purpose for which I wrote my book, *God's Grand Game*.

The final preliminary note to mention is that I am trying to publish this essay as a matter of urgency, and therefore I haven't had time to go through my usual process of sending it to an

¹ See my book *God's Grand Game: Divine Sovereignty and the Cosmic Playground* (London, Tealight Books 2019) and the chapter entitled "How do I Know God Exists?" or my YouTube video of the same title (<https://youtu.be/eJ35Cs0cE3I> — last accessed 15th April 2020).

² For an in-depth look at my spiritual journey, check out my book *The Philosophy of a Mad Man* (London, Tealight Books 2019), and for a discussion of the Christian worldview, see my essay entitled *An Almighty Predicament: A Discourse on the Arguments For and Against Christianity* (London, Tealight Books 2019).

editor and getting feedback prior to publication. I kindly ask, therefore, that readers would focus on the content of the ideas expressed herein and graciously ignore any superficial linguistic errors they might spot.

Christianity teaches that true Christians are slaves to Christ (1 Corinthians 7:22). There is good news in this slavery, which is the promise of eternal life (John 3:16). But part and parcel of the Christian worldview is a great fear that the “wrath of god” abides on us all (John 3:36) and that if we are unable to “enter through the narrow gate” that leads to salvation (Matthew 7:13), we will be “thrown into the lake of fire” (Revelation 20:15) and experience other horrors (see, for instance, Luke 13:24-28).

An indication of the seriousness of the Christian worldview is encapsulated in Matthew 18:9, which says “and if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell fire.” Another very vivid account of the doctrine of hell can be found in the story of Lazarus and the rich man (Luke 16:19-31).

Christians argue about how the scriptures referring to ‘hell’ in the Bible should be interpreted, but many Christians (at least in my experience) do believe that a literal hell — a place of conscious unending torment for the damned — is a reality. In any case, it should be evident from the scriptures I have quoted that the teachings of Christianity are very serious, and present important considerations for any deep-thinking person.

I recently listened to an online sermon from Holy Trinity Brompton pastor Nicky Gumbel, who said God hasn't caused Covid-19, but He will use it for good.³ This statement brought to my mind the free will predicament, and the confusion Christians have concerning God's involvement in world events.

In arguing that God isn't the cause of the virus, Gumbel is trying to make sense of why suffering exists, and he daren't say God causes suffering, because he realises that this would be to depict God as cruel. Christians will twist their theology in all kinds of directions in order to avoid coming to this conclusion, despite it being fairly self-evident that it is illogical to argue in favour of God's sovereignty without implicating Him as the cause of suffering. "God is good" is the refrain of so many Christians, who must also make sense of the fact that physical and mental suffering — torture even — are an ever-present reality on Earth.

Allow me to briefly discuss my own perspective on God's involvement in world events, and how I have arrived at my current understanding of this subject.

My present moment awareness is the only tool available to me for understanding the nature of reality. Everything that I experience, and therefore everything I know, comes to me through my awareness. This, then, is the only means available to me by which I can explore the nature of things, and try to come to an understanding of the nature of God. Everything I do, whether it be read a book, meditate, go for a swim, or anything else, is experienced within this awareness.

³ The video, entitled "What Does God Cause Suffering?" can be found here: <https://youtu.be/aaNO6SW8-u0> (last accessed 15th April 2020)

When I explore my present moment awareness I am able to deduce the following things. The awareness that I experience appears to be boundless. There are no edges or constraints to it. It flows freely and unendingly. This leads me towards a kind of monism, that is to say, there is a certain 'oneness' to reality — my consciousness, or *the* consciousness, contains no divisions. It logically follows from this that there is no place where my consciousness ends and God begins, and so I can confidently say that God must be everywhere.⁴

If the being of God extends boundlessly to include every atom in existence, then it logically follows from this that there is no freedom from God, or free will. All that exists, exists within God, and God must therefore be in control of everything that happens. This includes all events which directly or indirectly involve suffering, and so I can say with confidence that God is the ultimate cause of all suffering.

The fact of God's sovereignty over all events is a very important issue, because if we don't have free will, then central Christian doctrines such as the fall of man, sin, the atonement, salvation, and divine judgment, for example, don't make sense. If we take the example of divine judgment, our lack of free will means that if God punishes us, He will be punishing us for things which He actively caused us to do. It's perfectly possible that God could do this, but it certainly raises questions in relation to the Christian argument that God is entirely benevolent and not responsible for so-called evil.

⁴ This may seem like quite a difficult idea to grasp, but please consider the statements I am making in terms of your own present-moment awareness, and as you do so, I hope God will enlighten you as to the meaning of the arguments I am making.

Despite what the Bible teaches about divine judgment and hell, we must ask these important questions: Would an infinitely powerful, infinitely wise God punish us in hell for our sins, when He is the author of those sins? Would this not make God cruel in a very arbitrary way?

God's sovereignty over all events means He has no accountability and no responsibilities; He is entirely free to do as He pleases, even if this involves causing great suffering. And in relation to human beings (not to mention other sentient beings), judging from the reality that we do suffer, we must conclude that God wants us to suffer.

Wherever suffering takes place, God wills and causes that suffering. The important question, then, is not whether or not God causes suffering — He clearly does — but why?

I have suggested several reasons why God causes us to suffer, and discussed those reasons in detail, in *God's Grand Game*. The argument that makes the most sense to me is that even though suffering can be horrendous, it is not really so bad when considered in relation to the future joy we may experience after the death of our physical bodies. God is a master craftsman, and suffering is just one of many tools He employs as He directs the unfolding story of creation.

Let me be clear. Suffering is serious. I have personally suffered terribly, as so many people do. But I believe our suffering is always under control, and limited. The evidence seems to me to be that although we sometimes suffer terribly, God inevitably takes us from the place of suffering to a place of greater peace, maturity, and liberation. For some people, this liberation might come in the form of physical or emotional healing during their life on Earth, and for others it might be experienced during the event of death, or after death. But I have a hope

(and it can only be a hope because I am not aware of how things are in the afterlife) that God is ultimately merciful to all sentient beings.

One thing that gives me hope that God is ultimately merciful to all is considering the ontology of God.⁵ When I have been immersed in the deeper stages of meditation, I have experienced the sensation of expanded awareness and transcendent bliss. Even though such an experience only lasted briefly, it made me aware that a state of expansive bliss exists, and it suggested to me that God might experience perfect bliss at all times. If it is true that God's nature is perfect bliss, this is an important reason why He might limit our Earthly suffering and not send people to hell, because His perfectly blissful nature means there is not the kind of wrath or anger that Christians talk about which would lead God to want to punish human beings.

It is possible that, in the event of death, our awareness expands exponentially and we unite with God in a feeling of joy and peace. The hope I have is that the joy we will experience after death is so immense that it *will* outweigh the suffering God puts us through during our Earthly lives.

Everything we experience as human beings is impermanent and fleeting, so there may come a day when we are liberated, and when God make us forget about our suffering entirely, or He will at least put it into a perspective where it is seen to be inconsequential and relatively unimportant compared with the way we experience things in our liberated state.

⁵ Ontology is simply the study of the nature of being.

Of course, people of different faiths, including those who identify with one of the major Abrahamic religions (Christianity, Islam, or Judaism), all look forward to a kind of paradise after death. Christians, for instance, believe there will come a time when God will “wipe away every tear” and we will suffer no more (Revelation 21:4).

Perhaps there is a heaven exclusively for Christians. But perhaps there are also other dimensions where other people go when they die. God might present a different afterlife for different people, in a similar way as when we are sleeping we all go to our own dream worlds. There is no reason to believe multiple afterlives are impossible.

A related consideration is the fact that Christianity has only been around for 2000 years, while the universe is speculated to be billions of years old. And there may well have been other creations, and other universes, which God brought forth prior to the one we currently live in. From this perspective, the idea that the Christian heaven is the only heaven seems relatively narrow and exclusive.

There is much more that could be said in relation to the problem of suffering, and I explore the subject in greater depth both on my blog and in my books. But I hope this short essay has been a worthwhile read, and has helped you consider some of the theological issues raised by Covid-19 and the current world health crisis.

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