

God of the Tsunami: A theological reflection on the experience of disaster and some implications for how we live in the world

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On the morning of September 29, 2009, an earthquake measuring 8.3 on the Richter scale occurred just off the islands of Samoa. Minutes later a huge tsunami devastated the southern part of Western Samoa. The number of people who died in the wave totalled 163 people including children. One hundred and sixty three people, including many children, died in the wave. Many others, including the author, were seriously injured.

The following day, a Catholic priest visited my family in hospital to pray with us and offer pastoral support. Speaking very directly, he asserted that God did not send this tsunami or cause it to happen. Rather, when we suffer, God is with us in our pain and will strengthen us in the journey ahead.

These pastoral assurances raise the question of how we should think of God in relation to the world and, in particular, the events that cause suffering and distress. Is God responsible for, or in control of, such events? In the discussion that follows, this paper will focus particularly upon the occurrence of natural disasters. We will consider, first, a number of ways in which theologians have seen God in relation to events in the world as such. This discussion will lead to a consideration of Bonhoeffer's statement that "only the suffering God can help." The author's personal experience of recovering from the trauma of the Samoan tsunami will form the basis for an exploration of a number of ways in which God's help may be seen in disasterous situations. From these reflections, a number of proposals are set forward as priorities for the response of churches seeking to assist people in the context of natural disasters.

God and the World: Four Ways of Relating

There are four ways in which we might think of God in relation to the world in general, but more specifically in relation to natural disasters. Before we proceed to them, it is essential to make one preliminary clarification.

It is crucial that we do not pretend that disaster is anything other than disaster. When an earthquake, typhoon, or tsunami strikes, it is devastating. There is nothing to be gained by asserting that really, in some mysterious way, it is a good thing. When people die by violent and tragic means, or are injured, or their lives become an emotional wreck, or when property is destroyed on a grand scale, or when people's livelihoods are shattered where they have no jobs and no means of supporting themselves and their families, that is a disaster.

It is a critical task of theology to deal in the truth. That is why it is crucial to ask how God is related to the reality of natural disasters. By engaging with this question, in all of its seriousness, theology may be able to offer some valuable support and guidance to pastors and relief workers, who seek to help people to find meaning in the midst of such suffering and loss.

There are four ways in which we might conceive of God in relation to natural disasters: God as the cause, God as in control, God as companion, and God as consummator. With regard to each of these theological constructs, we need to ask a series of critical questions. Where is God, according to this view, and how is God related to the world and us to God? We need also to ask whether this conception of God is consistent with the biblical, Christian understanding of God, especially as made known in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

As we consider these four conceptions of God, it will become clear that we need them all, if we are to arrive at an appropriate Christian understanding of God in relation to natural disasters. Only with this fully nuanced conception of God can we formulate some proposals for a constructive pastoral response to communities and individuals caught up in such traumas.

God as Cause

The basic idea here is that God is the cause of all that is. What happens in the world is the result of cause and effect, but if we go back far enough, we come to an uncaused cause, which is God. This conception of

God is especially to be associated with the thought of Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas posited God as the first cause or the uncaused cause.¹

God, in this conception, is the ultimate perfect being, in that God did not need any other being, impetus, or pre-condition in order to exist. God simply is from all eternity. Furthermore, God exists independent of all physical and changing phenomena. Here we see the very powerful influence of Hellenistic thought, which conceived of perfection as unchanging and complete self-sufficiency. God, the first cause, is then a pure “substance” or essence.

Much has been written in criticism of this way of thinking of God. Clark Pinnock wrote of “the influence of the pagan dogma of the absolute unchangeableness of God which comes from ‘the syncretism of biblical and Greek thought’.”² Broadly speaking, this conception of God emphasizes the difference and distance between God and the world.

It is vital, though, to note Aquinas’ theological intention in his proofs of the existence of God. His purpose as a theologian was to assert the dependence of all things upon God, in the sense that existence is not without ground, meaning, and purpose. There is something, indeed Someone, from whom all life derives, and this is God. Furthermore, Thomas’ intention was to argue that this foundation is reliable, indeed unchanging. This theological assertion, immensely important as it is, runs into difficulties when we turn it into a quasi-scientific statement about why specific things happen in the world, as if God is the cause of such events.

Here there is a complex of different issues. On the one hand, if God is the ultimate cause of all subsequent causes, then God is responsible for everything that happens, having initiated all. God is not only the cause of the flowers but also the thorns, the rivers but also the floods, the cool breezes and the cyclones. Yet according to this idea, God is infinitely distant and uninvolved in the universe. God as first cause, or creator, is on this view unrelated to us, even though God is responsible for what happens to us. This conception of God, taken in this way, is alienating and inconsistent with the biblical ideas of a God of compassion, whose loving-kindness endures forever.

The alienation inherent in this idea is complete. Either God as first cause is indeed responsible for all that happens—in which case our own lives, choices, capacities, and relationships are not really our own but

1. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (London: Blackfriars, 1963), Ia, 2, 3. On page 15, we read: “One is bound to arrive at some first cause of change not itself being caused by anything, and this is what everybody understands by God.”

2. Clark H. Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God’s Openness* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 71.

are somehow cosmically predetermined—or in reality, this first cause is uninvolved and distant from us so that we are essentially left to it, to live as best we can, but without the assistance and support of the one who set it all up this way.

In either case, God as first cause is back there, back then. This leaves God absent from the world. It may be of some significance to name God as the originating cause, but such a God has no effective presence or power. It is not sufficient to think of God as cause only. This leaves us in an impossible and deeply alienated situation, which may indeed be the ground of a modern form of atheism.

God as in Control

This way of speaking of God has much in common with the previous idea, except that it asserts positively that God is in fact responsible for what is happening in the present. This conception of God asserts God's active agency in the present and God's sovereignty over all that happens.

The strongest advocate for this idea is John Calvin, in his teaching on providence. He offers to the faithful in adversity the solace "that everything which they endure is by the ordination and command of God, that they are under his hand."³ In the following sections, he goes on to argue that all events happen by "the ordination" of God and contribute to the advantage of the godly, because "the world is governed by the secret counsel of God," who is faithful to the promises throughout Scripture that God's providence reigns over the entire creation.⁴

This conception of God, again, needs to be carefully understood. It can very easily be taken to mean that God is the cosmic puppeteer, or the one who pulls all the levers, positively controlling everything that happens. This would make God the cause of disasters and responsible for crimes such as murder and rape. This is an absurdity and clearly not Calvin's intention.

It is also based on an impossible view of the world. The universe is not a mechanical world where everything happens by predictable order, from the smallest movement of an atomic particle to the shifting of tectonic plates. While Calvin did not have the benefit of modern physics and chaos theory, for example, he was aware that calamities happen to people, even if he seems always to have attributed them to evil deeds by sinful men. Nonetheless, his emphasis on providence as the "secret" counsel of God should warn us against any simplistic notion that God

3. See 1.16.17 in John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 174.

4. See 1.17 in Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 182ff, 189.

is literally causing every event to happen. Rather, Calvin's purpose is to point us beyond such ideas towards another view of God, whose purpose is infinitely good, but as yet not clear to us. His intention is to call us to trust in God and to journey towards our heavenly home with God in spite of the sufferings and privations of this world.

This defense of Calvin's view, however, seems to reduce the meaning and effect of the concept of God being in "control." The major difficulty with this way of thinking of God is its tendency to distance God from believers and from the world. God's sovereignty is a secret, which we nonetheless have to believe. This seems to give little substance to the promise of Jesus, "I will be with you always" (Matt 28:20). Either this presence is an entirely interior experience, with no real impact upon the world itself, or we need to find some other way of thinking of God in relation to the world. God may have ordained some ultimate benefit for believers, but in the meantime, we are all subject to the unpredictable events of nature and the nasty deeds of fallen humans all around us.

God as Companion

Here we turn to the thought of Jürgen Moltmann, whose work on God as creator has addressed the alienation that contemporary humans experience in many forms. Are we in fact abandoned in the universe, alienated from both God and nature? The following paragraph presents both an important critique of much theological discussion about creation and indicates a vital way forward:

[T]he Christian doctrine of creation came to be narrowed down to creation in the beginning (*creatio originalis*); and this was further contracted still to the aspect of God's creative activity. The doctrine of the divine 'making', the doctrine of continuous creation (*creatio continua*) and the doctrine of the new creation still to be consummated (*creation nova*) all receded into the background and were forgotten.⁵

It is vital that our understanding of God and the world is not focused upon the origins alone but sees God as continuously engaged with the entire life of the world. One way in which Moltmann develops this is through the idea of God as companion.

Moltmann writes of "the accompanying activity of God," who suffers the contradictions of history, as so many events and movements work against God's creative and loving purposes. Nonetheless, God does not give up on the creation but is continuously creative, even in and through the free activities of humans and other creatures. Moltmann

5. Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation*, The Gifford Lectures, 1984-1985 (London: SCM Press, 1985), 193.

notes here the necessity for a Trinitarian doctrine of creation, in which it is the creative Spirit in particular who is “present in the world and in every part of it,” wooing the world towards its eventual consummation in God.⁶

God as companion is with people. This companionship is not conditional upon our invitation, or the result of our merit, or our choice to “have faith.” Rather, it is God who chooses to be with us, rather than leave us or forsake us (Heb 13:5).

The testimony of countless Christians supports this idea. People find that through the most difficult times in their lives, God is very close to them. They are sustained, encouraged, and given a fresh sense of the value and meaning of their lives because God is with them.

Nonetheless, the idea of God as companion has also to be developed, lest it be taken to mean that God is reduced to the proportions of our own experience. When we say that God accompanies us in our suffering, we do not mean that God is equally powerless as we may be, in the face of disease, disaster, and destruction. Rather, when God accompanies us in our suffering, God continues to be God. This is the astonishing truth of the Gospel: God is able to appear amongst us, incarnate as one of us, and yet remains God. To say that God accompanies us without ceasing to be God can only lead, then, to the fourth way of thinking about God in relation to the world.

God as Consummator

Here, we draw upon the preceding concepts, to assert that God is at work in the world, even through the medium of accompanying us. God’s purpose in the world is to bring the entire world to the eschatological banquet of peace and joy, to know the grace and love of God revealed in Jesus. The resurrection of Jesus foreshadows the resurrection of all creation in that ultimate hope. In the meantime, even in our present sufferings, we are not without hope (1 Pet 1:6-9). Rather, God is lifting us up so that we are able to rejoice in hope.

Thus Paul is able to write in Romans 8:37 that we are “more than conquerors.” He does not deny that dangers, persecution, impoverishment, and suffering are part of our situation; rather, in mentioning these things, he is recognizing that these things may threaten to separate us from the love of God. But he confidently asserts that they do not, for even as Christ intercedes for us, we are able to live into the victory God gives.

6. Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 211-213.

It can be asserted that these four ways of thinking about God need to be held together, in an appropriate balance, for a constructive and meaningful way of speaking of God in relation to natural disasters.

To pursue this further, it is helpful to consider a short and often-quoted statement found in one of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's letters from prison: "Only the suffering God can help."⁷ There are three crucial elements in this short statement. First is the assertion that "only" the suffering God can help us. This means that we should not look to any other way of thinking of God for these are delusions. In this section of his writing, Bonhoeffer was urging that people should abandon the ideas of a God who manipulates the world as the *deus ex machina*, the God who is in control but who remains outside the world, unsurpassed and unable to engage with the suffering of the world. Bonhoeffer was proposing a different way of seeing God, a suffering God. For him, God is a full participant in the life of the world. To suffer, here, means to be subject to the choices of others. To suffer means to be able to receive and to accept what others decide, as well as to have one's own capacity and wishes and purposes. The Australian theologian, Denis Edwards, has recently expressed this concept very beautifully, proposing

a theology in which God is understood as lovingly accepting the limits of creatures and actively waiting upon finite creaturely processes, living with the constraints of these processes, accompanying each creature in love, rejoicing in every emergence, suffering with every suffering creature, and promising to bring all to healing and fullness of life.⁸

The suffering God is not just an active agent but is also a companion agent, one who responds to what others are doing. It is the third element in this sentence that is critical here. Bonhoeffer says that the suffering God "can help." The word, can, means to be able, to have the capacity to help. What is crucial here is that in undergoing suffering, God is not disabled. God does not lose the capacity to respond constructively and creatively. As companion to us, in the midst of our suffering, God is still able. God is still God.

It is the resurrection of Jesus that is crucial to this theological idea. Even death cannot defeat God's redemptive purpose. Jesus is raised from death and lives as the first-born of the new creation.

7. See Letter to Bethge, July 16, 1944 in Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers From Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge, enlarged ed. (London: SCM Press, 1971), 361.

8. Denis Edwards, *How God Acts: Creation, Redemption and Special Divine Action* (Hindmarsh: ATF Press, 2010), xviii.

Implications for People in Disaster Situations

It is vital to give some specific content to the idea that the suffering God can help. What, in the lived experience of women and men undergoing suffering and distress, does all this actually mean?

In this section, we will identify a series of elements from the author and others who have experienced natural disasters. There is some indication of the ways in which the Spirit of God, as active companion in our journey, helps us. These elements will, in turn, provide some indicators for pastoral and communal response so that we may work with God in bringing comfort and hope to suffering people.

Belonging

First is the element of belonging. Many people who have undergone adversity experience a deep and new sense of belonging to each other. There is a remarkable sense of bonding that arises when people have almost lost their lives (especially when others have in that situation). For Christian believers, the prayer support of the Christian community may be almost palpable. God gives to us a new sense of belonging, and if we are able to recognize it as such, we realize we belong also, and eternally, to God.

Hope

This element expresses itself as hope. So often, people express this hope with words such as, "We will get through this." Such statements are often made through gritted teeth, in the anguish of physical and emotional pain. Hope is an inexplicable gift. It has nothing to do with wishful thinking. Hope is the gift of openness to a future as yet undisclosed. It draws us forward, even when we have no capacity to walk or act in the ways we might normally hope to do.

Patience

A third and crucial element in God's enabling is patience. It is hope that enables endurance, patient waiting for what is yet to be. Those of us, who live active lives and who are accustomed to being generally competent in all our activities, find this patient waiting very difficult. Pain is a great teacher. Patience is the slow but definite practice of hope. It is an active and loving holding on, perhaps without any other purpose than simply remaining; it is "being" in the now.

Healing

With time, however, God also gives healing. It is remarkable how there is such a close relationship between time and healing. With time, we discover that in fact all along healing has been taking place. There is healing in the very nature of things, and there is also the active work of healers. They are agents of God.

Learning

In addition, experiences of suffering and distress are often times of learning. Many people report that it was at such times they learned the most valuable lessons of life. In particular, we learn the value of things. We learn that the things for which we spend so much time, money, and effort are worth almost nothing. Here, it is essential to speak personally: when one has experienced the loss of everything, all of one's clothes and possessions washed away by a tsunami, what remains is life itself, family, and one's relationship with God. In times of pain and patient waiting, people are able to reflect on the meaning of their lives, work, and priorities.

Caring

Flowing from these elements, it is both interesting and deeply moving to see another element emerge. In many contexts of disaster and distress, we see the depth of human caring. Pastors often find that people in deep grief or pain reach out in concern for others. They want to be assured that some other person is being cared for. We may marvel at that, but it can be seen as a gift of God, emerging from within the very nature of human life. Our pain does not destroy our better selves but rather brings it to the surface. Even as he suffered, Jesus prayed for those who were crucifying him. From the cross, he urges John to care for his mother. These are examples of the loving care of God the companion in the midst of suffering.

Faith

Finally, then, the suffering God enables faith. This element is named last, in order to emphasize that it is not a precondition of the gifts that we have named already. Rather, faith may be implied in those other elements, but it may not be recognized or acknowledged. Many people in their anguish call out to God, sometimes in accusing ways. Sometimes, people, who say they do not believe in God, call out to God; and many, who have said they believe, are unable to call out to God.

They imagined that their faith in God would mean that nothing like this could ever happen to them.

Faith emerges as the quiet, sometimes unrecognized element that simply keeps us going. Faith is not the absence of struggle and doubt. Faith insists on dealing with the truth, with reality, with life and relationship; and through that keeping-on, faith emerges in new forms. It may be a new quality of prayer, or a new dimension of care, or a new commitment to reaching out to those less fortunate. Such faith will eventually find its voice, to speak the truth in the face of convenient or cheap piety. It will speak of God, the suffering God, who can and does help.

The Church in Response to Disasters

Arising from the preceding reflections, it is now possible to identify a few basic pointers for the response of local churches and other groups in situations of natural disaster. We begin with something we should try to avoid. There is nothing at all to be gained when the church takes a high moral stand at the time of peoples' suffering, even if we may believe that people have contributed to their own plight. In Australia, people do build their homes in areas that are seriously fire-prone. In Samoa, people build their villages close to the sea. Around the world, millions of people live on the sides of volcanoes and along fault-lines in earthquake zones. Even if we imagine that they could avoid doing so, it is not constructive or helpful to say this at the time of a disaster.

The first positive thing that the church can do, in response to natural disasters, is to believe that God is with us. This is why it is important to have an adequate theology of how God relates to the world. God is not only the originating cause of the world and its machinations, he is also somehow outside the world, causing things to happen. God is with us, as companion, actively with us and working towards a healing and constructive outcome. When we know this, we can hold on with patient hope.

It is essential that pastors and teachers work on developing this fundamental conviction amongst their people. The most helpful way to do this is through telling stories. This form of teaching, Jesus' own preferred form of instruction, can address the false impressions people gain about God. We have to confront directly the idea that having faith in God means nothing bad can happen to Christians. We must also challenge the idea that God causes disasters to happen. Most people do not believe such things anyway, but they need positive teaching to replace such unchristian ideas and that positive teaching can come from the stories of God's sustaining and healing presence through the valley

of the shadow, God's presence as companion and healing Spirit. The stories of Jesus and the stories of ordinary people, who have known God's presence with them, will actually unlock other stories. People will begin to recognize the truth and reality of their faith. God is with *them*. This will make their faith more real and their witness more authentic. And when the tough times come, they will be able to endure and to support others in need more effectively.

From this positive assurance, the church must also develop ways to be actively caring for people. For example, some women from a local church came to the hospital in Samoa to do what they could to help. They brought clothing and simple things, such as a toothbrush, to help the victims of the tsunami. These were invaluable gifts in the situation.

Simple and practical help must be offered but not imposed—Christians can learn to be helpful in these ways. When we say that help must be offered but not imposed, we mean to suggest that there is a crucial strength necessary to be present, simply present with someone in need, in pain or grief, when there is nothing we can give them, perhaps nothing much we can say. The ministry of presence is the most important gift in many such situations. We do not always have to have the solution. Sometimes there is no solution. We need to be able simply to trust God and to be present, perhaps even in silence.

But for all that, we must also maintain an openness to God who is present and able to do surprising things in people and situations we may not have expected. A tsunami of water may be followed by a tsunami of care. An earthquake may tear down our home, and God may give us a new home and a new community. We may discover, amongst the rubble of our lives, that faith is blossoming all over the place. God can do this.

Finally, then, there is a critical theological task for the church in the world today. As Charles Taylor has urged, we must learn to understand what it means to have faith in a world that has long since lost the pre-modern and even the modern conception of things.⁹ The world is not a machine, controlled by a master manipulator of the levers. The earth is not like a watch, created by a master watchmaker long ago, who has set it up and just let it run. No, our task is to understand what it means to be with God and God with us, in a far less controlled, less predictable, but nonetheless, created world.

9. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007). In this large and incisive work, Taylor addresses the loss of the world-views inherent in the modern era, and argues for the need and possibility of "conversions" to a religious response, the possibilities of belief within a secular world.

In such a world, we must learn again the meaning of belonging. We must learn to respect the earth, as many indigenous cultures have done since time immemorial. We must learn also that the world is not “our environment” but is rather the context in which we live with God. In so doing, we must learn see what God is doing in the world, and learn to live with and work with that, towards the consummation God seeks: the fulfillment of creation, in which all things come to their rest, in peace and harmony with God. Our task, then, is to learn to see what God is doing towards that redemption and to join God. That is our theological and practical task—and what a privilege it is to be involved with God and God’s people in this way.