

# I protest, therefore I believe

At a dinner in honor of a prominent guest, I was seated next to a woman who works for CBS. The tsunami had just struck off the coast of Sumatra with all its destructive force, and we were talking about the magnitude of desolation, the plight of the victims and the insanity of the event. She knew I was a theologian, so she broached the question of God. “Where was God?” she asked bluntly. “How can one believe in a good God in the face of such suffering?” And that’s when I made my mistake.

The good thing is, I suppose, that the mistake was not as bad as it could have been. I could have attempted to justify God. After all, God was under attack, and I was a theologian—and a theologian who finds God immensely attractive even if sometimes totally baffling and very disturbing. But I remembered the earthquake that destroyed Lisbon in 1755 and Voltaire’s *Candide*, a devastatingly witty attack on philosophical and theological optimism written partly in response. Two-thirds of Lisbon was destroyed and close to 30,000 people died, mostly from a tidal wave and a fire that followed the earthquake. It was All Saints Day, and “churches, with tapers burning, crumbled upon the crowds of worshipers.” Brothels were mostly spared, as Voltaire was quick to note.

Ever since I read *Candide* I have not been able to bring myself to try to defend God against the charge of impotence or lack of care with regard to horrendous evils. I certainly couldn’t make it plausible to myself that “whatever is, is right” or that “partial ill is universal good.” It’s not so much that I’ve come to believe that such arguments must be wrong. Maybe I’ll be persuaded by them once history has run its course and God has brought about redemption and consummation, and I am able to think with a clear head from within a world made whole. That’s what Martin Luther suggested would happen in his treatise *On the Bondage of the Will*. But here and now, enmeshed as I am in a world in which suffering piles upon suffering in the course of unfolding history, I find such arguments implausible, lame, even a bit irritating. The good of the whole seems terribly abstract and without meaning or consolation to a human being plagued by suffering. “When death crowns the ills of suffering man, what a fine consolation to be eaten by worms!” wrote Voltaire with characteristic sarcasm.

I did not make the mistake of trying to justify God—in two minutes or less. But I did try something almost equally complex, though more plausible. I suggested to my dinner partner that the very protest against God in the face of evil in fact presupposes the existence of God. Why are we disturbed about the brute and blind force of tsunamis that snuff out lives of people—including children who were lured, as if by

some sinister design, onto the beaches by fish left exposed in the shallows because waters had retreated just before the tidal wave came? If the world is all there is, and the world with moving tectonic plates is a world in which we happen to live, what’s there to complain about? We can mourn; we’ve lost something terribly dear. But we can’t really complain, and we certainly can’t legitimately protest.

The expectation that the world should be a hospitable place, with no devastating mishaps, is tied to the belief that the world *ought* to be constituted in a certain way. And that belief—as distinct from the belief that the world just is what it is—is itself tied to the notion of a creator. And that brings us to God. It is God who makes possible our protest that there is evil in the world. And it is God against whom we protest. God is both the ground of the protest and its target. Almost paradoxically, we protest with God against God. How can I believe in God when tsunamis strike? I protest, and therefore I believe.

It was a mistake, however, to try to make this argument at that dinner. It’s not that I’ve come to believe that the argument isn’t valid. It’s a fine argument, even though it leaves one with a faith that seems at odds with itself, with a God whom it is hard to abandon yet difficult to embrace. It’s also not that my interlocutor was unable to follow the argument, even in such condensed form and delivered between the salad and the main course. She was smart enough for that. Yet I shouldn’t have offered it, not then and there, and not as the first thing to be said about God and tsunamis.

“How can one believe in a good God in the face of such suffering?” The answer to this question depends in part on the other question my interlocutor asked me that evening, “Where was God?” My mistake was that I tried to answer the first question without answering the second. Just as God was in some mysterious way in the Crucified One, God was in the midst of the tsunami carnage, listening to every sigh, collecting every tear, resonating with the trembling of each fear-stricken heart. And just as God was in the Resurrected One, so God was in each helping hand, in each decision to sacrifice one’s own life so that another could live. God suffered and God helped.

I know that, at the same time, God was also seated on God’s heavenly throne. Why did the omnipotent and loving One not do something about the tsunami before it struck? I don’t know. If I knew, I could justify God. But I can’t. That’s why I am still disturbed by the God to whom I am so immensely attracted and who won’t let go of me.