

HOW CAN GOD EXIST WHEN THERE'S SO MUCH EVIL AND SUFFERING IN THE WORLD? And not only this, but how can God exist, when so much evil is done by some of God's declared devoted followers? Isn't God merely an idea conjured up by human imagination, to justify their deeds for good or ill? The so called 'problem of evil' is shared in different ways by all the world's religions, no matter that they believe about God, and there are no easy or totally satisfactory answers. Questions like : 'Why do evil and ungodly people prosper? Why do innocent children and adults become victim of the wickedness of others, doing nothing that could in any way suggest they'd brought it on themselves? Why does 'bad luck', tragic chance events strike people at all?

If God is source of all that exists, chance included some argue, then God is responsible for the existence of evil and suffering just as much as for all the good things of life. So how is it possible to believe that God is ultimate good, if God is also origin of all that is evil?

In certain ancient religious views of the world, responsibility for both good and evil was attributed to a divine creator of good and another divine creator of evil, locked in eternal conflict. Both are ultimately subsistent to One beyond all good and evil, who plays no part in resolving this. Humans beings have a choice about how they align themselves in the conflict. There are echoes of this in popular beliefs about 'god' and the 'devil', but none of this really helps find a truthful engagement with questions of unjustifiable suffering.

Other religious traditions propose that evil and suffering exist in human experience due to ignorance of the truth about reality both divine

and human. Knowledge of the truth is able to free human beings to embrace the ultimate reality of existence beyond suffering and evil. By cultivating higher awareness of how things really are (through meditation, acts of compassion, detachment) humankind can rise above all that threatens peace and well being and find fulfilment. Certainly, becoming aware of what has gone wrong in ourselves and in the world and learning what will put things right is essential to growth in becoming more human and coping with suffering.

The biblical idea is that God created all things 'very good', making human beings for relationships with their Creator. Things ceased to be 'very good' when human beings began resisting conformity and obedience to God's will and purpose. The result was the entry of evil, suffering and death into human experience. God allowed these things to happen, either a) to punish misdemeanour and assert divine authority or, b) to teach humankind a lesson about the most beneficial way to live.

Both raise questions : Is it necessary to inflict pain and suffering to either end? After all, human questioning of God's purpose, also resistance to God's will are the result of humans being created with the gift of freedom and the ability to use freedom to learn and think for themselves. How can God be good and unfair - giving with one hand and taking away with the other? Is there another way to look at this?

What some people regard as suffering evil, others regard as a blessing. Yet, whilst there is a strongly subjective element in perceiving what does each of us good, there is a

widespread and healthy consensus that famine, uncontrollable disease, destruction of civilisation, natural or humanly made disaster and ecocide - anything threatening to degrade or curtail the existence of the human race is unacceptably evil. People will sink their differences in order to ward off such threats.

Sometimes what we experience as suffering and evil turns out to do us good in the long term. The 'no pain no gain' principle. Some argue that God knows this, and can be trusted to allow what is in our ultimate best interests.

Faith hinges on the idea of trusting totally in God's will and purpose, no matter what may happen, because enduring in trust itself does us good, and leads to ultimate happiness and fulfilment. Put as simply as this, it suggests a kind of passive surrender to circumstances is all God requires. This detracts greatly from the gift of freedom that makes human beings what they are, and what drives them to work at becoming what they can be.

Rebellion against God's perfect will and purpose is known as sin. In view of its consequences, it's also possible to think of sin as 'whatever causes evil and suffering'. At the heart of both is the idea that sin is refusal to learn, grow, change in the light of experience. This denies the truth of our humanity and the purpose of our existence, as those made for relationship with our Creator.

Sin can be regarded as a punishable offence. It can also be regarded as a sickness or even an injury in need of healing treatment. The biblical idea of God is of one who loves all that is created, and hates sin and what sin does. In creating all things, the possibility of sin

comes into being. Making humans free - free to become themselves - unleashes this possibility, and God has to tolerate the far-reaching consequences, or else take away freedom from humanity, and turn human beings into mere puppets.

Or, God can refuse to abandon his creation, and seek to make a relationship with human beings that does away with sin without destroying freedom, using punishment (a way of showing that every action has its consequences), and also healing (to show the damage can be repaired) as remedies from which human beings can learn and grow to discover how freedom can best be used to fulfil our humanity.

Is there such a thing as freedom? Learned debate continues about whether human beings are a product merely of their genetic coding, and evolutionary adaptation to their environment, or whether what is learned from others, or through one's own inquiry, makes a significant difference to what we become. Did the universe we know come into existence purely by chance, as some assert, or is chance, like time, space and matter, a necessary manifestation of creative mind - the creative *logos* of Judaeo-Christian thought?

The past century has seen a remarkable expansion of information about dimensions of the universe both vast and tiny. Theories about its nature and origins continue to develop in the light of new findings, but humanity although richer in knowledge seems no nearer to unravelling the mystery of its existence than it is to unravelling the mystery of unjustifiable evil and suffering, or the mystery of death and life itself.

The marvel is that we are aware, able to question, examine our own position, and can say what we think is good and true for us. We are free to conceive of ourselves as coming into being, in order to know our creator, free to explore all life's meanings.

However hard we try, we cannot avoid all evil and suffering, nor death itself. How we deal with these things is vital to the fulfilment and the peace we seek in become fully human. God does not exist as we exist in this universe. The existence of the universe and likewise human existence, has its source in what is infinite, beyond existence.

We have a choice to confine our awareness and our search for meaning to what's within our grasp, or to pass through knowledge and search again at the point where knowledge fails, seeking to penetrate the unknown, with only loving desire and longing as our guide.

This is a choice to search for God in and through all the good and evil we encounter, to endure suffering as a way to learn and grow in trust, and heal in the face of brokenness, as people both alone and together in suffering. All this is found in the witness of the crucified Jesus - 'pioneer and perfecter of our faith'.

There are no answers to the problem of evil, only a possible way of living in faith, boldly, compassionately, creatively with unanswered questions.

Any questions or comments arising from this leaflet? Please contact the Revd. Keith Kimber, 029 2022 0375 or <keith.kimber@tesco.net>

Christianity for 21st century people

6. How can God exist when there's so much evil in the world?

Hardly a month passes by without some tragic accident, natural disaster or criminal act of cruelty or violence robbing innocent people of their lives, or their well-being. For many people this is a definite obstacle to their belief in God, and the starting point for their search to live without religion. What can the church say in response to this?

Is God cruel or indifferent to human suffering?

Is it all to do with the devil?

Is there anything to be said and done when tragic events leave us feeling speechless?

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