

Curious George Hits A Wall

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Rev. Craig M. Nowak

About a month or so ago I arrived at church to find a folded piece of paper addressed to “Rev. Craig” in the mail bin on my office door. Taking it out of the bin and into my office, I opened it and discovered it was a copy of a *New Yorker* cartoon by Roz Chast entitled “Curious George Hits A Wall.” The cartoon features a visibly distressed Curious George seated on a sofa with a thought bubble over his head that reads, “If God is omnipotent and wholly good, whence evil?!?”

Curious George is in good company.

Not long after receiving a copy of the cartoon in my mail bin (which, incidentally was also hand inscribed, “Sermon topic?”) a friend of mine who I would describe as vehemently anti-religion and with whom a group of us were discussing the musical *Jesus Christ Superstar*, angrily blurted out, “I hate Jesus.” Adding that if he did meet Jesus after death he’d spit in his face for all the horrible things that happen in the world including the suffering of his mother in the last years of her life.

Now, while the question of the origin or reason for the existence of evil and suffering in a world created and controlled by an alleged omnipotent, wholly good deity don’t always ignite such anger or even a loss of faith in people, it has long proven a point of contention among humankind whether religious or secular, clergy or lay person, learned theologian or amateur philosopher.

Indeed, attempts to explain the problem of evil in the world when the creator of that world is also said to be all powerful and wholly good come under a specialized field of study and religious philosophy called theodicy. “Theodicies”, as noted in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, “suggest reasons for which God would cause or allow the suffering, premature death, loss, and harm we experience and observe, including genocides, illnesses, persistent pain, grief, natural disasters, and assaults.” As the definition alludes, theodicies address both “natural evils”, like storms or bodily ailments which result in suffering and “moral evils” which result from the intention or negligence of moral agents.

As you might imagine there are innumerable theodicies that have been developed, refuted, defended, and amended over the centuries. Still, broadly

speaking, they generally fall into one of a handful of categories or lines of reasoning.

These include:

Relationship Building. The reasoning here is predicated on the idea that suffering is allowed by God to provide an opportunity for people to bond with one another. Evil and suffering, then, it is said elicits empathy and compassion, and underscores our interconnectedness.

Critics of this theodicy note one need only look at the state of the world and the limited scope of this theodicy to recognize its inadequacy as a stand alone justification for God's allowance for evil and suffering. After all evil and suffering seem to divide as much as unite people.

Related to relationship building is the theodicy of divine intimacy. Such theodicies posit evil and suffering are permitted to help foster closeness to God, and/or the experience of God's love, presence, and comfort in the midst of pain and loss. Some of the theodicies within this line of reasoning contend God suffers with creation.

One common criticism of this theodicy is that a perfect being ought to be capable of coming up with better means of fostering intimacy. Another relational theodicy is contrast and appreciation. The idea here is the experience of suffering/evil makes us aware of and appreciative of the good.

But again, critics of this theodicy note, couldn't an all-knowing, all-powerful God just create people who appreciate good from the start or devise another means of demonstrating the contrast that doesn't require actual suffering?

Another common theodicy is soul-making also known as character building theodicy. If you've ever believed or heard another say God is testing them by the experience of misfortune, this may be the theodicy they're relying upon. As the name suggests, the idea is the presence of evil and the experience of suffering is intended to help us grow to become more god-like in character over time. After all, what doesn't kill you makes you stronger, right?

Well, not to critics of this theodicy who ask, what about those who die in infancy or accidents or people who suffer conditions or traumas where there is no opportunity to grow in character?

Now, for those who've been wondering all this time, what about evil and suffering as punishment for sin? I haven't forgotten you.

Punishment for sin is indeed a theodicy that was dear to good old St. Augustine and later Thomas Aquinas too, as well as reformers Martin Luther and John Calvin. All of whom held a theodicy of Original Sin rooted in acceptance of the theological implications of the Genesis creation narrative. Which includes the belief that God created human beings without sin or suffering and that evil and suffering is just punishment for the fall of humankind. Never mind, as critics of this theodicy note, some people seem unduly punished in life while others appear to live lives largely untouched by evil or suffering.

Often intertwined with theodicies of punishment for sin are theodicies of free will. Basically, it's on us. Free will theodicies insist God granted human beings the gift of free will, that is, the capacity to choose between good and evil. As free will is a fundamental aspect of human nature and a necessary condition for moral responsibility, without it, so the idea goes, humans would be mere automatons, lacking genuine moral agency.

Critics however point to natural evils, like weather, famine, and related disasters as evils that, for the most part, having nothing to do with human choice. Indeed, in 1969 one Betty Penrose actually won a \$100,000. judgment against God for a lightning strike that burned her house to the ground. The basis of the lawsuit held that God is responsible for, "the maintenance and operation of the universe, including the weather in and upon the state of Arizona." Critics further challenge whether free will is actually possible if God is omniscient. For if so, wouldn't God already know all the choices we will make?

Another interesting theodicy related to Original Sin is offered by the contemporary philosopher and theologian Alvin Plantinga. His is based on what's termed the "felix culpa" or happy fault aka "blessed fall" of humanity into sin as recounted in the Genesis creation narrative. The felix culpa theodicy holds that evil and suffering are justified by way of their being necessary for the immense good of salvation by way of the divine incarnation and atonement of Christ.

The flaw of this theodicy, it goes without saying, is unless you're an orthodox Christian this is a non-starter.

Still another common related theodicy is the afterlife theodicy, perhaps the ultimate test of delayed gratification. According to this theodicy, all the wars, genocides, plagues, collective and individual hardship and suffering you've witnessed or had to endure, is all worth it once you get to heaven. Just you wait and see.

Here again, critics note, we have a theodicy with many holes, not the least of which is empirical proof of an afterlife. Even still, is the promise of eternal life really justification, let alone ample reward, for the temporal horrors the transatlantic slave trade, the Holocaust, or the AIDS epidemic?

By now, you may have noticed a number of these theodicies have similarities and/or cover instances the others exclude. The solution to this, for some, is a hybrid theodicy, in which the reasoning and justification for evil and suffering varies by individual. Some, this theodicy posits, need to build better human relationships. Some need to be closer to God. Still others may need to be punished, or experience something awful to appreciate the good and so on. No matter the circumstance, this theodicy's got you...well actually... God covered.

That fact that there's so many theodicies out there suggests nothing that's been proposed thus far fully satisfies the curious George among or within us. Now, some would argue this predicament is confined to those wedded to a theistic, anthropomorphic conception of God. Indeed, in our reading this morning we're presented with two familiar images of God, one an authoritarian who demands submission and obedience, the other tender, who offers empathy and compassion. And while the poem may be understood as commentary on the locus of spiritual authority rather than a literal comparison of two concepts of God, it nonetheless reminds us it is that latter image that proves problematic where evil and suffering is concerned.

It is a problem that so plagued the late Rabbi Harold Kushner after the death of his young son that he wrote a book, *When Bad Things Happen To Good People*. In it, Kushner offers his own theodicy rooted in what is sometimes referred to as, limited or finite theism, noting, "If I have to face the fact that either God is all-powerful but not kind, or thoroughly kind and loving but not totally powerful, I would rather compromise God's power and affirm his love." For Kushner, then, God is benevolent but not omnipotent, and thus unable to prevent all evil and suffering. Such a god, Kushner claims, doesn't cause our suffering but helps us endure it.

Of course, even religions like Buddhism, Taoism, Jainism, and certain forms of Hinduism, various Indigenous, Animistic, and other traditions that are not centered around a Creator God or single, all-powerful Deity, have their own understanding and ideas about why evil and suffering exist ranging from concepts like karma to disharmony with nature.

And so, we have lots of ideas, but not a lot of agreement on the cause and/or reason evil and suffering exist in the world.

And this leads some theologians and philosophers to conclude that asking why when it comes to evil and suffering, regardless of whether we're theists or not, is actually the wrong question. To these proponents of 'anti-theodicy', according to the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, "the project of theodicy itself is defective in important respects, morally suspect or even wrong"... Anti-theodicy... "opposes the idea that suffering can or should be made meaningful within a divine or historical narrative... and that...justifications for suffering often ignore the experiences of the victims. Unlike theodicy, which seeks solutions, anti-theodicy emphasizes the ethical weight of suffering and the impossibility of fully justifying it." Anti-theodicy then, concerns itself not with the why of evil and suffering, but, recognizing its reality, asks, what now? And, as already noted, anti-theodicy is not tied to either theism or atheism. Its critique is of the attempt to rationalize suffering, regardless of where one is on the theological spectrum.

Now, I imagine the person who put the *New Yorker* cartoon in my mail bin that inspired this sermon is wondering where I personally stand on the issue at hand.

Well, there was a time when I, like Curious George, wondered, "If God is omnipotent and wholly good, whence evil?!?" And while I can't say I've studied the question to the extent of those whose names are associated with the various theodicies we've touch on today, I can affirm that what I once thought when I was a fairly conventional theist no longer makes sense. Yet, even as my conception of God has changed, the presence and indeed the problem of evil and suffering remains.

Which highlights what I think is a larger point at the end of our story for all ages today. A point that goes beyond the cautionary thrust of the story warning against making partial truths absolute, to the realization that we're all in this together or, as a certain sacred text notes, the sun rises and rain falls on us all (Matthew 5:45)

Today, I look out at the world and consider the history of our species, our achievements and failures, our relationship and interdependence with other life with which we share this planet, not to mention the planet itself, and contemplate the heavens. And more I take it all in the more mysterious it seems to me. I don't think it an exaggeration to say that with all my schooling, study, reflection, and contemplation, I understand almost nothing about this life, and most certainly, "not more than a honey bee takes on his foot from an overspilling jar."

Which, if nothing else, suggests we are called to live this life with curious appreciation. And it seems to me that that curiosity is better spent inquiring how to alleviate, rather than explain or justify the presence of, evil and suffering in the world. Whatever its origin, be it impersonal, mortal, or Divine. For as Annette Marquis, the author of our prayer this morning observes, "it is in the presence of love that evil dissipates."

May it be so

Amen and Blessed Be