

## OPEN ACCESS VERSION

'In spite of all this, we will yearn for You': reflections on God's involvement in events causing great suffering

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What was God's involvement in the horrific event?

This question naturally arises in the minds of victims and their supporters alike – be the event terrorism as at the London Bridge attack of 2017, or disastrous negligence as at the fire at Grenfell Tower in the same year, or a great natural disaster such as the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004. Two famous responses to that question, both as it happens in response to human cruelty that caused great suffering, are first, that of Elie Wiesel in his concentration camp recollections in *Night*.

"Then the march past [the victims hanged by the SS] began. The two men were no longer alive. Their tongues hung swollen, blue-tinged. But the third rope was still moving; being so light, the child was still alive... For more than half an hour he stayed there, struggling between life and death, dying in slow agony under our eyes. And we had to look him full in the face. He was still alive when I passed in front of him. His tongue was still red, his eyes were not yet glazed. Behind me, I heard the same man asking: "Where is God now?" And I heard a voice within me answer him: "Where is He? He is here – He is hanging here on this gallows..."<sup>1</sup>

Second, Rowan Williams' response to being challenged in a New York street at the time of the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center:

What do you say? The usual fumbling about how God doesn't intervene, which sounds like a lame apology for some kind of 'policy' on God's part, a policy exposed as heartless in the face of such suffering. Something about how God is there in the sacrificial work of the rescuers, in the risks they take?... Any really outrageous human action tests to the limit our careful theological principles about God's refusal to interfere with created freedom. That God has made a world into which he doesn't casually step in [sic] to solve problems is fairly central to a lot of Christian faith. He has made the world so that evil choices can't just be frustrated or aborted... They have to be confronted, suffered, taken forward, healed in the complex process of human history, always in collaboration with what we do and say and pray. <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Elie Wiesel, *Night* transl. Stella Rodway (New York: Bantam, 1982), 61-2.

<sup>2</sup> Rowan Williams, *Writing in the Dust: Reflection on 11<sup>th</sup> September and Its Aftermath* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2002), 7-8.

Williams' interlocutor 'was a lifelong Christian believer, but for the first time it came home to him that he might be committed to a God who could seem useless in a crisis.'<sup>3</sup>

In both cases the response stems from a profound spiritual reflex in a deep thinker. But it necessarily begs the question – why is the God who is confessed as present seemingly so powerless to prevent cruelty inflicting great suffering?

A very tempting explanation, arrived at independently by two important Jewish thinkers, is that God *cannot* effect any change in such situations. God, for whatever reason, has entrusted Godself to humanity. Hans Jonas, whose mother died in Auschwitz, took the view that God empties Godself of mind and power in giving the creation its existence, and then allows the interplay of chance and natural law to take its course. God's only further involvement is that God holds a memory of the experience of the creation – God receives God's being back 'transfigured or possibly disfigured by the chance harvest of unforeseeable temporal experience'.<sup>4</sup>

For a more first-hand, up-close theological response to Nazi tyranny, we may turn to Etty Hillesum, the young Dutch intellectual, whose diaries and letters in the last two years of her life (1941-3) have had such an impact on so many readers (helped for English speakers by Patrick Woodhouse's sympathetic study *Etty Hillesum: A Life Transformed*).<sup>5</sup> Etty comes to conclude that God will not, cannot, help those in the camp. All they can do is 'safeguard that little piece of You, God, in ourselves'.<sup>6</sup> Her God has handed Godself over to the world, entering the human heart, and being 'guarded' by those with the least worldly power. She writes: 'there must be someone to live through it all and bear witness to the fact that God lived, even in these times'.<sup>7</sup> Her concern is 'if we just care enough, God is in safe hands with us despite everything'.<sup>8</sup>

Such strategies for characterising God as vulnerable co-victim emerged with great integrity out of reflection on intolerable suffering. But they seem a far cry from the more usual confession of God as transcendent creator. This chapter considers communities' possible answers to questions of God's involvement in shock events, if those strategies, based on God's voluntary self-disempowerment, are not adopted.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 8.

<sup>4</sup> Hans Jonas, *Morality and Morality: A Search for the Good after Auschwitz – A (Posthumous) Collection of Essays edited by Lawrence Vogel* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1996), 125.

<sup>5</sup> Patrick Woodhouse, *Etty Hillesum: A Life Transformed* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Etty Hillesum, *Etty: The Letters and Diaries of Etty Hillesum 1941–1943*, ed. Klaas A.D. Smelik, transl. A.J. Pomerans (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 488.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 506.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 657.

Different arguments are needed in the case of moral and natural evil, as defined below.

### **Moral evil**

At this point I differentiate between harms and suffering caused by acts by freely-choosing self-conscious agents (usually called 'moral evil') and other harms and sufferings ('natural evil'). I am not suggesting that any given human action is completely free. I acknowledge how much of our activity results from our neurological wiring and our familial and cultural conditioning. I also acknowledge that our self-consciousness is likewise limited and conditioned. I nevertheless hold that human experience suggests compellingly that within those constraints is a real if partial freedom, and that the scientific evidence does not rule that out.<sup>9</sup>

I write this as the first anniversary of the terrorist attack on a concert in Manchester is rapidly followed by that of the further terrorist attack on London Bridge and Borough Market, and then by that of the terrible fire in Grenfell Tower. Two of these events clearly demonstrated malice, indeed the intention to harm those completely unknown to the perpetrators. There is substantial evidence that the extent and horror of Grenfell reflected not only an accidental start to the fire, but a negligent approach to the building, especially the external cladding of the tower.

When we contemplate such harm-infliction and negligence caused by humans, I hold that we cannot expect to see signs of God *in those causes*. God gave the humans concerned freedom, and the causes of the harms and suffering were to be found in the misuse of that freedom. I return later to the question of signs of God in natural disasters.

Ruard Ganzevoort is surely right to draw an important distinction between responses to malicious action on the one hand, and to events that seem rather to connote tragedy on the other, including harmful actions committed without intent to harm.<sup>10</sup> This distinction is necessary for healthy response to a traumatising event, as is eventual separation from the event, so that the victims no longer derive their identity solely from it. It does not however seem to me that Ganzevoort has quite addressed that other category of moral evil – negligent action or inaction, which while having no direct intent to harm is nevertheless culpable, and can and should provoke powerful protest from victims and supporters.

<sup>9</sup> For a painstaking analysis giving the scientific account the utmost purchase, see Philip Clayton, *In Quest of Freedom: The Emergence of Spirit in the Natural World: Frankfurt Templeton Lectures 2006*, ed. M. G. Parker and T. M. Schmidt (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2009).

<sup>10</sup> R. Ganzevoort, 'Coping with Tragedy and Malice' in *Coping with evil in religion and culture* ed. N. van Doorn-Harder and L. Minnema (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008), 247-60; 'Scars and Stigmata: trauma, identity and theology', *Practical Theology* 1,1 (2008):19-31.

Response to traumatising events within a Christian community caused by malice or negligence may reasonably include worship of God, protest, lament, and practical assistance. This is indeed the same combination of responses as would be elicited by a natural disaster. But the balance of the response must be different in the case of moral evil. The *dominant* dimension of response to moral evil must be making the community safe against further perpetrators, protest against all injustice and culpable negligence, rejection of all gratuitous harming, followed ultimately, when possible, by the exploration of the possibility of reconciliation. But always the victims and their narratives must be attended to, always, as is proverbial in trauma theory, 'the survivor is the expert'. Arguably, theodicy has been much too preoccupied with the stories of the causes of great harm and suffering. The stories of victims and their supporters are coming to be recognised as of prime importance. So, remarkably, the public enquiry into the Grenfell fire began with days of testimony from survivors and relatives of victims (two importantly different groups in the immediate aftermath of a tragedy, but brought together at the enquiry in a common act of re-telling).

Caution needs to be exercised, however, in fastening too firmly onto these stories, both because of the very fluid character of narratives of recollection in trauma,<sup>11</sup> and also because of the risk of scapegoating. Here the analysis of Hauerwas and Burrell as to what constitute 'good' stories is helpful.<sup>12</sup> They claim that any story that is adopted by a community will have to display: 1) power to release from destructive alternatives 2) ways of seeing through current distortions 3) room to keep the community from having to resort to violence and 4) a sense of the tragic – how meaning transcends power. I return to these criteria later.

Where perpetrators (and the negligent) are culpable, the protest and desire for justice may eventually lead to an effort to reach for the sort of love and empathy that Jesus is recorded as evinced when he said of his executioners, perpetrators of wicked acts that 'they know not what they do' (Lk 23.34). Even the enemy is to be loved as fellow-creature, in imitation of God's love that never lets the creature go. But reaching anything like that position is a long labour of love, which perhaps few may attain. Sometimes a 'staged' version of reconciliation may be necessary, as in the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa after the apartheid era.

## **Natural evil**

What will concern us in the rest of this essay are those shocking events where the main cause is not human malice, or human negligence, or even a very rare combination of chances, but the fabric of the physical universe as God has created and sustained it. A familiar defence of God in respect of moral evil is that the gift of

<sup>11</sup> Especially in the 'disillusionment' phase, see Laurie Kraus, David Holyan, and Bruce Wisner, *Re-covering from Un-natural Disasters: a Guide for Pastors and Congregations after Violence and Trauma* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), Ch 4.

<sup>12</sup> Stanley Hauerwas and David Burrell, 'From System to Story: An Alternative Pattern for Rationality in Ethics' in *Why Narrative?* ed. Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 158-90.

freedom to freely-choosing creatures conscious of themselves and others necessarily implies the possibility of the misuse of that freedom (and that, as was noted in the quotation from Rowan Williams above, God would render that gift incoherent by continually intervening to mitigate bad human choices). In the case of shock events occasioned by the way the world is, rather than the particular choices of conscious choosers, that defence can no longer operate in quite the same way.<sup>13</sup> God seems rather to be directly responsible for the creation containing the violence of earthquakes, hurricanes, forest fires caused by lightning strikes, flash-floods, and volcanic eruptions.<sup>14</sup>

Some scholars want to insist on denying this responsibility of God's. For discussion of theological moves behind such denial, either in the form of a fall-event or some variety of what I have termed 'mysterious fallenness', and my reservations about such moves, see the exchanges in the journal *Zygon* for September 2018.<sup>15</sup> But there are also more practical denials such as that of Robert White.<sup>16</sup> It is indeed possible, as White holds, to identify areas of human hubris and negligence contributing to the extent of suffering from natural disasters. For example, the loss of life from the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004 was exacerbated by a civil war, the cutting down of mangrove swamps on coastland, and the lack of the early-warning system that was already present in the Pacific. The suffering caused by the Haiti earthquake of 2010 was greatly enhanced by the poverty of a country that is a close neighbour of the world's wealthiest nation. Yet to exclude God from all responsibility for natural evil is a hard task. (What for example about that famous case in the history of theodicy – the Lisbon earthquake and tsunami of 1755, of which there

<sup>13</sup> Though see Christopher Southgate, "'Free-Process' and 'Only-Way' Arguments." in *Finding Ourselves after Darwin: Conversations on the Image of God, Original Sin, and the Problem of Evil* edited by Stanley P. Rosenberg, Michael Burdett, Michael Lloyd, and Benno van den Tooren (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2018), 293-305, for an evaluation of those theodicies that appeal to the good of freedom of natural processes.

<sup>14</sup> B. Jill Carroll, writing of the work of the nature-contemplative Annie Dillard, goes as far as to say this: 'It is because of the conditions of human existence in the world – conditions which have God's full blessing – that people suffer what they like to call "freak accidents." In truth, there is no freak accident, because such accidents are inevitable given the conditions of time, space, matter and freedom.' B. Jill Carroll, *The Savage Side: Reclaiming Violent Models of God* (Lanham, Md. and Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001), 45.

<sup>15</sup> Neil Messer, "Evolution and Theodicy: How (Not) to Do Science and Theology." *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 53 (2018): ; Nicola Hoggard Creegan, "Theodicy: A Response to Christopher Southgate." *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 53 (2018): ; Celia Deane-Drummond, "Perceiving Natural Evil through the Lens of Divine Glory? A Conversation with Christopher Southgate." *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 53 (2018): ; Christopher Southgate, 'Response with a Select Bibliography', *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 53 (2018):

<sup>16</sup> Robert S. White, *Who is to Blame: Disasters, Nature and Acts of God* (Oxford: Monarch, 2014).

could have been no possible warning? Are we to return to Charles Wesley's view, five years earlier, when he began a sermon with the statement that 'Of all the Judgments which the righteous God inflicts on Sinners here, the most dreadful and destructive is an Earthquake'.<sup>17</sup> In the end, diversion of all culpability for catastrophic natural events from God to humans can only rest on a prior theological commitment to radical human corruption resulting from primal sin. On such a view, even a young baby falls rightly under divine judgment. It seems much more natural to concede that God has underlying responsibility for the way the violent processes of the world occasion human suffering.<sup>18</sup>

So we now find ourselves beginning to answer our starting question - about God's involvement in the shocking event - with the disturbing thought that God is the major responsible agent, the creator of the forces behind the most harm-producing manifestations of nature, be they floods, eruptions, typhoons, genetic diseases, or epidemics of natural pathogens. Christian theology has been very shy of this conclusion, though it is in a way a logical route to follow once Marcion's distinction between the Gods of the two Testaments is abandoned, and *creatio ex nihilo* becomes the orthodoxy of the Church.

Wesley Wildman has tackled this subject with characteristic clarity. He gives a skilful critique of 'determinate-entity theism' (belief in a personal God, such as the Christian conviction that God is creator and redeemer and can be known through God's Son and the work of the Holy Spirit), and goes on to show the weaknesses of process theism. Wildman's solution is to regard God as the ground of being, whose nature is glimpsable in the beauty but also in the violence of the cosmos. His God is not a determinate entity in all or indeed in most respects. Wildman writes,

'Suffering in nature is neither evil nor a by-product of the good. It is part of the wellspring of divine creativity in nature, flowing up out of the abysmal divine depths like molten rock from the yawning mouth of a volcano... Luminescent creativity and abysmal suffering are co-primal in the divine nature as they are in our experience.'<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Charles Wesley, quoted in Ryan Nichols, 'Re-evaluating the Effects of the 1755 Lisbon Earthquake on Eighteenth-Century Minds: How Cognitive Science of Religion Improves Intellectual History with Hypothesis Testing Methods', *J. Am. Acad. Rel.* 82, 4 (2014):970-1009.

<sup>18</sup> And also non-human suffering in wild nature, see e.g. Christopher Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation: God, Evolution and the Problem of Evil* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008).

<sup>19</sup> Wesley J. Wildman, 'Incongruous Goodness, Perilous Beauty, Disconcerting Truth: Ultimate Reality and Suffering in Nature' in *Physics and Cosmology: Scientific Perspectives on the Problem of Natural Evil*, ed. N. Murphy, R. J. Russell, and W. R. Stoeger, SJ (Berkeley, CA: CTNS and Vatican City: Vatican Observatory, 2007), 267-94, at 294. See also Wesley J. Wildman, *In our Own Image:*

But this will be too big a step for most Christians, who will want to insist, even in this difficult territory, on the personal nature of God, revealed especially in the person of Jesus. How to combine this with God's accountability for the disvalues of creation? Veli-Matti Karkkainen, reporting on the Finnish school of Lutheran studies, writes this of the thought of Luther:

God's alien work [*opus alienum Dei*] means putting down, killing, taking away hope, leading to desperation, etc. God's proper work means the opposite: forgiving, giving mercy, taking up, saving, encouraging, etc... Luther in fact says that God's proper work is veiled in his alien work and takes place simultaneously with it... God's works are not just veiled in their opposite but they also sometimes create bad results... God makes a human being a *nihil* ... to make him/her a new being.<sup>20</sup>

Karkkainen concludes finally that, 'God is not to be excused, but is to be trusted.'<sup>21</sup>

So there is thinking from a major element of the Christian tradition that accepts God's responsibility for the violence in creation as part of the paradox of God's ways with the world. The key element in that last quotation is that second half 'but is to be trusted'.

This is surprisingly close to a famous passage in contemporary Jewish theology, from David Blumenthal's book on Holocaust theology, *Facing the Abusing God*. In the extraordinary coda to that book he writes to God as follows:

I do not deny You or Your Torah. You denied us, for we were innocent. You crushed us, yet we were guiltless. You were the Abuser; our sins were not commensurate with Your actions. The responsibility is Yours, not ours . . . In spite of all this, we will gather our strength and support one another. We will build our world. We will love one another. We will defend our people and our land. We will believe in You, we will place our hope in You. We will yearn for You, we will wait for You, and we will anticipate the time when we will see Your Face again.<sup>22</sup>

*Anthropomorphism, Apophaticism and Ultimacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>20</sup> Veli-Matti Karkkainen, 'Evil, Love and the Left Hand of God': The Contribution of Luther's Theology of the Cross to an Evangelical Theology of Evil', *Evangelical Quarterly* 74:3 (2002): 215-34, at 222-3. On the 'violent side of God' in Christian reflection see also Carroll, *Savage Side*; Charlene P.E. Burns, 'Honesty about God: Theological Reflections on Violence in an Evolutionary Universe', *Theology and Science*, 4, 3, (2006):279-90.

<sup>21</sup> Karkkainen, 'Evil', 232.

<sup>22</sup> David R. Blumenthal, *Facing the Abusing God: A Theology of Protest* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 299.

As with Karkkainen's conclusion about the theology of Luther, God is not excused (rather the reverse!) *but* in spite of all, God is the one in whom ultimate trust will be placed.

Blumenthal is addressing the extreme moral evil of the Holocaust. It draws from him, very understandably, a conviction that God's apparent abandonment of the chosen people of God amounts to abuse. This conviction, and Blumenthal's analogy with child abuse, have been much criticised, not least by Wendy Farley in her dialogue with the author within *Facing the Abusing God*.<sup>23</sup> And it may also be criticised for blurring the distinction noted above between malice and negligence. God did not, on most accounts, actually *commit* the moral evils of the Holocaust, though God did not, apparently, intervene to prevent or even mitigate them. Hence the responses of Wiesel and Williams with which we began this chapter.

Our subject here is possible Christian responses to events of massive natural evil, causing great harm and suffering through the operation of causes that God created, and which did not operate through the choices of other moral agents. The response of holding God accountable, I suggest, is truer to the origins of Judaism and Christianity than either the hyperkenotic position of Jonas or the powerless power of Etty Hillesum's God, whom she could still call her 'high tower',<sup>24</sup> even though that God not only would not, but could not, rescue her from oppression or execution. I also hold that a God accountable for natural evil is truer to a biblical faith than philosophical theodicies that 'square the circle' of God's moral perfection and God's involvement in harms and suffering.<sup>25</sup> The shortcomings of such theodicies have been corrosively analysed by Terrence Tilley and D.Z. Phillips,<sup>26</sup> and also by Kenneth Surin, with his emphasis that we must allow the narratives of victims to interrupt the narratives we tell, and John Swinton, with his sense that the proper

<sup>23</sup> Blumenthal, *Facing*. 211-25. See also for example J. Brumberg-Kraus, 'Contemporary Jewish Theologies: An Essay Review', *The Reconstructionist* (Spring) 1994:86-94; I. Wollaston, 'The Possibility and Plausibility of Divine Abusiveness or Sadism as the Premise for a Religious Response to the Holocaust', *J. Religion and Society* 2 (2000): 1-15.

<sup>24</sup> Quoting Psalm 94.22, or possibly 18.2, or 61.3, or Proverbs 18.10? Denise de Costa notes that Etty on this postcard used the Dutch word *vertrek*, which can connote 'departure', or yet 'retreat', an interesting ambiguity indeed. Denise de Costa, *Anne Frank and Etty Hillesum: Inscribing Spirituality and Sexuality*, transl. M. F. C. Hoyinck and R. E. Chesal (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 237.

<sup>25</sup> Such as Richard Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom and Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977).

<sup>26</sup> Terrence Tilley, *The Evils of Theodicy* (Georgetown, VA., Georgetown University Press, 1991); D.Z. Phillips, *The Problem of Evil and the Problem of God* (London, SCM Press, 2004).



response to suffering is found not in theory but in lament, forgiveness, thoughtfulness, hospitality, and friendship.<sup>27</sup>

Is there then an approach that retains the personal character of God, *contra* Wildman, without seeking either to exonerate God as per White, or yet to characterise God as 'abuser' as per Blumenthal?

That God might be the author of suffering is familiar ground in the Hebrew Bible, and Christians need I believe to take with more seriousness texts such as Deuteronomy's 'See now that I, even I, am he; there is no god besides me. I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and no one can deliver from my hand.' (Deut 32.39), 'The Lord kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up.' (1. Sam. 2.6) and Deutero-Isaiah's description of God as the author of 'weal and woe alike' (Is. 45.7).<sup>28</sup>

The extraordinary power of Blumenthal's paragraph quoted above lies in that 'In spite of all this....' It is reminiscent of Samuel Terrien's formulation of Israel's relationship with her Lord, written in the context of the story of the near-sacrifice of Isaac: 'The sign of purity of faith was love at any cost for a God who conceals his Godhead in appearance of hostility.' Israel's religion, then, is 'based on the courage to face the abyss of being, even the abyss of the being of God, and to affirm . . . the will to gamble away not only one's own ego but even one's hope in the future of mankind'.<sup>29</sup>

This conclusion about the God of the Hebrew Bible theophanies is too much tidied up in too many Christian preachers' accounts of God's ways with the world. Karkkainen again: 'Much of Evangelical spirituality and theology, especially in its popular, devotional form, is a misguided effort in whitewashing the walls of our world with sentimental talk about God's love.'<sup>30</sup>

I suggest that recognising God's responsibility for natural evil counts as a helpful story in Hauerwas and Burrell's terms because: 1) it releases us from destructive alternatives, whether they be that humans are so utterly corrupt that even a newborn baby deserves destruction, or that blame must be assigned to human groups judged especially immoral<sup>31</sup> (and so also keeps us from having to resort to violence) 2) it

<sup>27</sup> Kenneth Surin, *Theology and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1986), 161-2; John Swinton, *Raging with Compassion: pastoral responses to the problem of evil* (Grand Rapids, MI. and Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2007), xxx.

<sup>28</sup> See M. Daniel Carroll R. and J. Blair Wilgus (eds), *Wrestling with the Violence of God: Soundings in the Old Testament* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2015) for recent engagement with these and other problematic texts.

<sup>29</sup> Samuel Terrien, *The Elusive Presence: Toward a New Biblical Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2005 [1978]), 83-4.

<sup>30</sup> Karkkainen, 'Evil', 231.

<sup>31</sup> As in the extraordinary assertion in a flyer from an American Baptist Church that the 2004 tsunami had done a good, in resulting in the deaths of many Swedish people in Thailand, because of the extent of homosexuality in Sweden. 'Tsunami:

provides us with ways of seeing through current distortions, such as the sentimental whitewashing just referred to, and finally 3) it enhances our sense of the tragic – neither humanity, nor even God, seems to have the power to realise certain sorts of goods except through suffering.

So we must be honest, banishing sentimentality and the temptation to whitewash, in acknowledging God's responsibility for the violent and harmful character of the natural world. For both Frances Young and myself, the Incarnation of Jesus, God's astonishingly intensified commitment to the world, culminating in the Cross, is God's taking responsibility for the suffering-filled world.<sup>32</sup> Perhaps this is for Christians the beginning of the framing of an 'In spite of all this' that is the sequel to the chronicle of God's complex relationship with the people of God in the Hebrew Bible.

I want to consider how a Christian community that had undergone terrible suffering might rewrite the second half of Blumenthal's remarkable paragraph. This is not in any way to seek to detract from the horror of the Holocaust (and the particular horror for Christians that it was perpetrated by a nation with a strong Christian tradition), or yet to seek to detract from the force, authenticity or importance of Jewish formulations of relationship with God.

But it is possible to imagine Christian communities too feeling let down, abandoned, neglected, if not positively abused by, sufferings from natural disaster, sufferings for which God seems principally responsible, and by God's seeming failure to respond to the extremity of their situation, by, in short, a God who seems at once so powerful and powerless.

It is of course possible to frame theodicies of natural evil, and I have been part of extensive conversations about these.<sup>33</sup> Sitting in a university study it is easy to pronounce, for example, that a world of tectonic activity, a world therefore of earthquakes, volcanoes, and tsunamis is a world in which many processes that enhance living organisms are made possible. But in the face of the *experience* of disaster such long-distance, on-balance reflections look out of place, if not positively offensive.<sup>34</sup>

In more recent work I have considered God's involvement in natural evil from the standpoint of the contemplation of divine glory.<sup>35</sup> There I propose that God's glory is typically best understood as a visible sign of the deep reality of God. In the natural

where was God?' (director Mark Dowd, broadcast by Channel 4 and available on YouTube).

<sup>32</sup> Frances Young, *God's Presence: A Contemporary Recapitulation of Early Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 247; Southgate, *Groaning*, 83.

<sup>33</sup> See e.g. Southgate, *Groaning*; 'Free-Process'; Christopher Southgate, 'Cosmic Evolution and Evil' in *The Cambridge Companion to the Problem of Evil*, ed. C. Meister and P. K. Moser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 147–64.

<sup>34</sup> On the offence of theodicy see e.g. Tilley, *Evils*.

<sup>35</sup> Christopher Southgate, *Theology in a Suffering World: Glory and Longing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

world the massive power of physical forces,<sup>36</sup> the skill of predators, and even the ingenuity of parasites can all be considered signs of the creative work of God.<sup>37</sup> As we have just been discussing, the signs of God's creative activity in the natural world include forces of great violence and capacity to cause harm, and also ingenious pathogenic strategies that can likewise occasion great suffering. Hints here of what for Luther is the *opus alienum Dei*?

But that is not the whole story of God with the world. I argue that a full contemplation of events in the natural world, with all their violence and ambiguity, involves what I term 'three-lensed seeing'.<sup>38</sup> By this I mean the need to consider every event in relation to *Gloria mundi*, signs in the creation of the creative activity of God, *Gloria crucis*, signs associated with God's self-giving in the Passion and death of Christ, and *Gloria in excelsis*, God's bringing of all of creation to consummation.

Such seeing will involve attending carefully to the experience of the sufferers of natural evil, as Surin urges,<sup>39</sup> and allowing that experience to interact with convictions about God's taking responsibility for all suffering at the Cross of Christ. It will involve protest and lament, as Swinton suggests.<sup>40</sup> It will involve seeing the extraordinary gift in creation that is human life, and holding on also to the belief that God holds out a future for God's creatures, including those that have died in terrible suffering.<sup>41</sup>

Blumenthal himself advocates a strategy of 'tacking'.<sup>42</sup> By this he means advancing not wholly directly into the challenges of life, now prioritising reason, now spiritual practice, now the insights of the arts. 'One tack in our lives is to confront what we would rather avoid, with as much courage as we can muster.'<sup>43</sup> Given the content of the rest of his book, this must include facing up to the blameworthiness of God, and finding the language for that, as well as for praise and hope. Three-lensed seeing endeavours to be more 'synoptic' than a strategy involving tacking between blame, lament and praise. That perhaps makes it more theologically acceptable than Blumenthal's characterisation of the 'abusing' God, though at the risk of taking the edge off the radical character of the protest at God that is so important in the Jewish tradition, especially deriving from the Psalms and the Book of Job.

This three-lensed seeing, this bringing of the whole story of God's ways with the world into every event, however shocking and full of harm, finds for Christians (or should find) its outward expression in the actions of the eucharist. There everything that has happened to the participants and the context of which they are a part is

<sup>36</sup> The tectonic slippage that caused the Indian Ocean tsunami is estimated to have had 23,000 times the energy of the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima.

<sup>37</sup> Southgate, *Theology*, Ch 3.

<sup>38</sup> Southgate, *Theology*, 14-15.

<sup>39</sup> Surin, *Theology*, Ch 5.

<sup>40</sup> Swinton, *Raging*

<sup>41</sup> Southgate, *Groaning*, Ch 5.

<sup>42</sup> Blumenthal, *Facing*, Chapter 5.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, 54.

brought to God, and interacts with the threefold narrative structure of creation, Cross and eschaton. Stephen Garrett writes:

*our performance of the eucharist serves to triangulate our actions in the present as we live in the presence of the risen Christ in the Spirit with reference to redemptive history yet in light of his eschatological glory. A robust imagination is necessary to integrate our remembering and envisaging – what was with what is and is to come, bringing a sense of meaning and understanding to the present so we can participate fittingly and creatively in the dramatic movements of God’s triune life*<sup>44</sup>

That the eucharist can be intensely meaningful in traumatising contexts is confirmed by the recent experience of Alan Everett, parish priest at St Clements near Grenfell Tower.<sup>45</sup> But is there a danger that some eucharistic practice may seem to some people all much too neat? Is there a risk that the tripartite story there enacted, of creation, reconciliation through the Passion, and eschatological hope may too readily tidy up the rawness and agony of human suffering in time of disaster? Does the eucharist as usually practised, with its emphasis on the redemption of human sin, provide sufficient opportunity to ‘pray angry’ at God’s involvement in suffering?<sup>46</sup>

Robert Orsi writes this of ‘Frank’, a Catholic priest who had suffered sexual abuse at the hands of priests:

Frank’s theodicy of praying angry directly addresses this reality. “What more can God do to you?” he says. To have seen God at God’s worst is to be liberated from the old relationship with an omnipotent God, and this opens a way for a new relationship. Survivors are free not only to express their doubts, their sense of betrayal, and their anger with God, but also to consider the articulation of these feelings as prayer. There is a hard edge to Frank’s theodicy of prayer. Survivors have got God’s number; they meet God without illusions about God. But this does not drive them away from God, or it need not do so in Frank’s theology. Rather, it permits them to pray fearlessly and freely, to pray as they really are as persons, to open their inner lives in all their turmoil and anger to God who must take them as they are...

So Frank invites survivors not to resolve their problems with “prayer,” but instead to see what is unresolvable as prayer itself. This refusal of closure restores the tension... between persons praying and the divine other. Praying angry is the medium of this new relationship with God, its ground, and its safeguard.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Stephen L. Garrett, *God’s Beauty-in-Act: Participation in God’s Suffering Glory* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Books, 2013), 192, emphasis in the original.

<sup>45</sup> Alan Everett, *After the Fire: finding words for Grenfell* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2018)

<sup>46</sup> Robert Orsi, ‘Praying Angry’ at <http://forums.ssrc.org/ndsp/2013/08/27/praying-angry> accessed July 20 2018.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

While sexual abuse poses very particular challenges in terms of prayer and liturgy, explored by Carla Grosch-Miller in this volume, some of these reactions could well apply to communities devastated by natural disaster. They too may have the feeling that they 'have seen God at God's worst'. They too need to be able to 'pray angry' and not to accept premature closure.

One might imagine a eucharist in such a community lasting many hours, and containing a long vigil and time of lament. Such eucharistic practice would find room not only for Jesus' words over bread and wine at the Last Supper - words not necessarily uttered in calm certainty, but rather torn from him as the beginning of his agony – but also for his prayer in Gethsemane, his own 'In spite of all this' acceptance of the future mapped out for him by God. Such eucharists might also provide a way in which the dynamic of Good Friday leading not directly to Easter Sunday but first to Holy Saturday, identified both by Shelly Rambo and by Jennifer Baldwin as the moment in the Christian year most in tune with the experience of survivors of trauma, might find expression.<sup>48</sup>

The vigil and lament, times of silence and praying angry, might be followed by music inspired by Christ's Passion, and in turn by a eucharistic prayer that included a sense of God's taking responsibility for the suffering-filled world God has made. The invitation to communion would recognise that it might take a long time for someone to be ready to accept God's gift of Christ's body and blood, and that for others it might on that occasion be impossible to accept the 'staged reconciliation' with God that taking communion would symbolise. To return to Garrett's helpful formulation quoted above, the integration of 'remembering and envisaging' may come at different rates for different people, not because some possess more 'robust imagination' than others, but because the histories of trauma that we each bear as humans interact differently with present sufferings and future hopes. It would be important that those who could not receive were still held by the community as full members.

The theme of eucharist in relation to trauma is further explored in the work of Karen O'Donnell (see her chapter in this volume). What I advocate here is that the use of the eucharist in traumatised congregations, especially those where the 'perpetrator' is God in Godself, is not rendered too tidy, but that its full possibilities for holding a space of pain and anger are explored.

I began the second half of this chapter from that remarkable (and to some extent notorious) paragraph of Blumenthal's at the end of *Facing the Abusing God*. I posed the question as to how a Christian community, devastated by a natural disaster, might frame the second part of that paragraph, the 'In spite of all this'.

Perhaps such a community's prayer might run something like this, rewriting Blumenthal:

<sup>48</sup> Shelly Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010); Jennifer Baldwin, 'Injured but not broken: Constructing a Trauma Sensitive Theology', (Ph.D. dissertation, Lutheran School of Theology, Chicago, 2013).

You God, made the great forces that have destroyed our homes, our livelihoods, and taken from us those we held dear. You did not warn us of disaster; you did not have regard to all our prayers and worship. We know of your loving-kindness from both Testaments of our Scriptures, but we have not felt it. Though we sought to bless you, our lives are broken.

In spite of all this, we will pray for Your comfort and mercy. We will use the life, passion and resurrection of Jesus as our clue to what life with You might ultimately be. We will believe in You because of Him, we will place our hope in You because of Him. Though His care could show partiality,<sup>49</sup> and His teaching an almost unbearable sternness,<sup>50</sup> yet because of His life and His Passion we will yearn for Him, groaning prayerfully within the greater groans of the Holy Spirit.<sup>51</sup> We will wait for the Christ's return, and we will anticipate the time when we will see You in His risen glory. We will love one another and seek even to love the enemy. We will seek to build Your Kingdom as He described it.

This is a radical formulation, and most Christian experience will, I suggest, lie between this and the all-too-common whitewashing of experience found in so much worship and preaching. But I suggest that this paradoxical prayer has wider application than only to communities shocked by sudden natural disaster. Every Christian community contains those subject to sudden tragedy, unexpected or long dreaded, explicable through understood causes, or simply mysterious. Perhaps it is time that some Christian liturgies were constructed more along these lines, and Christian hymnody diversified to inhabit more of the territory so importantly marked out by the Psalms.

In this chapter I have considered God's involvement in horrific events, both those caused by moral evils – either malicious or arising out of negligence – and those natural evils in which God is the principal cause of the harms and suffering. I drew on resources from both the Christian tradition and contemporary Jewish theology to imagine what responses might be made by Christian communities faced with such natural disasters, both in terms of prayer and liturgy. My conclusion is that reflection on the impact of traumatising events, and honest, unsentimental reflection on God's ways with the world, should lead not only to a richer vein of Christian contemplation, but also to radical and paradoxical answers to the question as what should be prayed in time of disaster.

<sup>49</sup> As at the story of the Syrophenician woman at Mark 7.24-30.

<sup>50</sup> As for example in the teaching on faith dividing families at Matthew 10.35-36.

<sup>51</sup> Rom. 8.23-27.