

110 Marford Road,
Wheatthampstead,
Near St Albans,
Hertfordshire,
England.

Wednesday, 29th January 1986.

Dear Mr. Foley,

At this time of great sadness for yourself, your staff and your pupils, I feel that I must write to offer you all my heart-felt condolences. I also want you to know how much I admire the successes of your country in the fields of Space exploration and discovery. Tremendous achievements, made possible by the most brilliant technology and not least by the endeavours and courage of the astronauts such as Mrs. McAuliffe. She was, indeed, a heroine.

In the reports of the tragic events at Cape Canaveral in my newspaper, one of your students is quoted as saying; " One moment we were clapping, the next there was that terrible explosion. All of us wonder where God was at a time like that." Feelings, I am sure, that were shared by so many yesterday.

At the time of the Ethiopian famine last year, I cut out the enclosed article from "The Times". I am sending it to you in the hope that it may be of some help to your kids in coming to terms with this perplexing question.

With every good wish.

Yours very sincerely,

Mervyn Cox.

Mervyn Cox.

Charles Foley Esq.,
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Clifford Longley

No humankind without disasters

Cardinal Basil Hume, standing in the midst of the squalor and starvation of an Ethiopian refugee camp, told a journalist that he had "no idea" why God allowed such things to happen. A more sophisticated man might have blamed the incompetence of governments, the flaws in Marxist theory, or the self-centredness of Western aid policies; but he recognized that what surrounded him was a problem for his own belief system, not just for someone else's.

It is not difficult to list other answers he might have given, such as those offered by the tempters of Job: suffering was a punishment; suffering was good for him. Both seemed to vindicate God's justice, measured in human terms. There are other answers possible too: that God does not exist; that if he does he cannot be both all powerful and all merciful but finite in one or other; that God created man with free will which man is free to misuse; or that God has withdrawn from the universe, leaving it to run its course for better or for worse without his intervention.

Job's answer, before he repents, is that God is not just. He deserves not human love but human anger. And last there is fatalism, the belief that there is neither a caring God nor human free will, and everything that happens was predestined from the start. There is no point in being angry with fate.

Of all these godly or godless responses, perhaps "no idea" is best but perhaps also the least consoling. It leaves the philosophical "problem of evil" worse than it found it by declaring it insoluble, a cruelty to be lived with and with no nice theory to bring it within human comprehension. Grieving relatives of suffering children can draw no comfort from it.

Something further can be said, however. If the search is transferred from the realm of moral philosophy and spiritual counselling - from "What does one say to the victims?" - to the fuzzy but fascinating boundary territory between religion and science, the natural or artificial catastrophes that prompt the question cease to be quite so painfully meaningless.

Job's protest, and the cardinal's on behalf of starving infants, and everyone's on behalf of the latest disaster victims and their relatives and friends, is in effect a cry for a better world. Why cannot we all die peacefully in our sleep at 85 after a full and happy life? If there was a God, and he cared, surely he would arrange it so?

It seems like a plea for a world very like our own, except that yesterday's and today's reasonable tranquillity will be guaranteed for tomorrow too, and not end for an unlucky few in the horror of a motorway pile-up or air disaster.

It is only such rare and tragic happenings that have to be eliminated; for most, life can continue as it was. Thus the alteration required to the universe's laws, to remove the random injustice of the sudden agony and death of innocent people, is marginal: why then has God not obliged? It seems almost to prove that he does not exist.

This similar world to our own, the same but for the elimination of occasional catastrophes, is easy to imagine, but quite impossible. The strength of steel alloy, or its tendency to fatigue fracture, is determined not arbitrarily as scientists might have thought only a hundred years ago, but according to sub-atomic forces which are in turn not arbitrary. Natural laws are now known to be part of a coherent interdependent pattern of order. The imaginable world in which steel had twice its strength would, be completely different in every other respect, and man would not be around to enjoy its benefits.

What is being asked for, at first sight such a modest request, is in fact regulated not by natural laws at all but by permanent and continuous miraculous intervention. If aircraft disasters were impossible aircraft maintenance would not be necessary and aircraft could indeed fly without wings, held aloft by what medieval man called angels.

If cars were guaranteed never to crash on motorways there would be no need for brakes. A divine guarantee against starvation would eliminate the need for food. There is no possible half way, keeping the laws of physics when they

serve man's purposes, with God over-ruling them whenever they do not.

There would be no laws of physics at all in such a world: man could not even begin to design aircraft or cars. God would be deciding the strength of steel from minute to minute and scientists would find nothing predictable. There would be no science.

There would be no man, either. The perfecting of creation through evolution and natural selection presupposes that there must be the possibility of catastrophes and disasters. Man's primitive ancestors developed sight and hearing, fleetness of foot and intelligence, because those variations in the species which did not do so, did not survive.

Without adrenalin to spark instant instinctive actions man's ancestors would all have been eaten by predators. And the entire pattern of creation is like this. It also demands the constancy of physical laws. There would have been no way of evolving defence mechanisms against disease, for example, if God was for ever stepping into cure diseases miraculously, so that no disease ever followed a fixed pattern.

That God could have created an entirely miraculous universe, rather than one bound by natural laws, is at least plausible if God's existence is plausible. But he chose not to because, as all religions affirm, he wanted man to be part of it and man is a creation of natural laws. Man's special characteristic, being a creature to whom the universe is intelligible, also demands that there should be natural laws for intelligibility to work on.

The strange answer which seems to emerge, therefore, is that a world in which disasters and famines do occur, unchecked by divine intervention, is the only possible one God could have created with man in it.

Approximations to it, with improvements to exclude disasters, would be logical absurdities. The complaint against God is not that he should have arrested the course of the famine in Ethiopia, but that he should never have created the world in the first place. That is rather the drift of what he tells Job, according to the text.