

Is God a disaster area?

By Simon Barrow

The tsunami disaster in the Indian Ocean, not least through its appalling human consequences, has served to remind us just how superficial, confused, facile and rootless much of our talk about God is these days.

Of course speaking about the One who, by definition, defies all our concepts, categories and rhetorical tricks (and yet is experienced by many as the loving and redeeming core of their lives) is never going to be easy. But in the emotional shock wave of a tragedy like the tsunami it seems near impossible.

The immediate difficulty is compounded by the apparent inability of theologians to communicate to an untutored public, widespread ignorance about even basic theological categories, and the prominence of forms of religion that promote narrow zeal at the expense of mature reflection.

It was in this context that the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, ventured into the God-quagmire, a few days after the Boxing Day tidal wave that killed some 165,000 and left millions destitute.

In a much-publicised (and misrepresented) article for the Sunday Telegraph, Dr Williams sought to offer consolation and encourage compassion.

He did not do this by resorting to intellectual arguments about what kind of God we might really be believing in if we expected the natural order to be suspended in such circumstances. He did it by seeking to understand the confusion people were feeling, and by pointing towards some resources of practical hope.

Yet even this proved surprisingly controversial. The Archbishop's observation that prayer was not a magic wand and that God was not (in Giles Fraser's paraphrase) 'a cosmic puppet-master' was greeted with indignity, incomprehension and horror in some quarters.

Christianity Today, an influential US evangelical magazine, accused Dr Williams of selling short the faith because he declined to repeat the ready slogans employed by routine apologists – which the writer assumed (wrongly) were the best the Christian tradition has to offer.

Meanwhile the London Evening Standard's Tim Lott spoke on behalf of many 'cultured despisers', who assume that faith and logic are antonyms, when he

asked what other kind of God there could possibly be apart from the one religious people improbably believe to be at their beck and call?

The answer, he declared, not quite grasping the Archbishop's reasoning, was a God of transcendence and mystery who is also callously indifferent to humanity and creation. At least this 'god' is a bit more believable, given the evidence of the world, Lott reckoned.

So there you have it. According to the standoff between thoughtless piety and honest scepticism, the God-question is a choice between child-like illusion and rational despair, with the churches in the first court and humanists in the second. This, of course, is exactly how some fervent believers and anti-believers want it.

But for many of us, the adult possibilities involved in the Christian narrative, and the extraordinary challenges it entails, seem so much greater than either of these superficial philosophies allows – the reduction of God to a projection of our own yearnings, or the abandonment of God to a listless transcendentalism.

For if the Gospel is to be believed, God is neither a metaphysical proposition competing for space within human reason, nor a tribal deity who sponsors our religious fantasies and bolsters our egos.

Rather, God, improbably enough, is best understood as the kind of vulnerable, inviting, non-coercive and costly love that we meet in Jesus; one who shows us in word and deed what it is like to experience life as a gift rather than a possession.

His 'answer' to the immense destruction brought on by malignity within the human polis (and the frightening contingency entailed by a universe where we can develop as people rather than automatons) is to embrace it.

This is what the cross is about. Not the sanctioning of violence, suffering, sacrifice and scapegoating – as Mel Gibson's film might lead us to believe – but its absorption and transformation.

What makes this possible is a God beyond our manipulation who nevertheless comes closer to us than breath, and gifts us unpredictable life out of death in the raising of Jesus.

The resurrection, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer pointed out from the confines of his Nazi prison cell, is not the 'answer' to death. It is not the resuscitation of a corpse or the reclamation of a disincarnate soul, but a foretaste of unrestricted bodily life in union with God.

In the poignant imagery of the New Testament, the Risen One continues to bear the wounds inflicted on him. He embodies in our midst, and in the communities that gather to share his broken life, the unfathomable depth of divine life in the face of death's dominion.

Of course in trying to express this, we are stretching language and imagination to its furthest boundary. And inevitably, if what the Gospel is saying is true, our language will fail us.

This, indeed, is what has happened. From Martin Heidegger to Jacques Derrida, post-modern philosophy declares the death of the 'god of metaphysics', the one who can 'answer' our questions about the world and its lesions through some calculable meta-theory.

The god of the philosophers, however, the god of 'perfect' attributes (omniscience, omnipresence, impassibility, and so on) is not, and never has been, an adequate exposition of the God of biblical hope.

As classical Christian theology at its best has long tried to say, the God of Jesus is not a super-being who fulfils our wishes and spares us reality.

Instead of thinking of God as some additional entity or fact in (or about) the world, we need to understand God as the mysterious source of all being.

Part of our difficulty when we ask 'how can God allow this?' in the face of tragedy and contingency, therefore, is that we are speculating about God in precisely this mistaken way - as a projection of our own human will and action writ large.

Such a god is bound to fail us and is rightly to be abandoned.

In an essay about Bonhoeffer's theology understood through the poetry of W H Auden, Jack Clemons and Geoffrey Hill [Travelling With Resilience, ed. Elizabeth Templeton, Scottish Episcopal Church, 2002], Rowan Williams puts it like this:

"The childish religious mind... tends to conceive the freedom bestowed on us by God as something provisional and temporary, undergirded by a safety net in the assurance that 'Paternal Love' still reserves the power to bring about its will by force."

"But what if the divine renunciation of violence is completely serious? In that case, there is no point in wondering whether it is in anger or pity that God stands back from the world or reacts to what the world does; [God] has elected powerlessness in terms of the world."

God resists our worldly fantasies of control and escape. But, at the same time, in Christ the wounded healer, God promises to meet us in the presence of pain and abandonment, and to be with those excluded and tortured in a way that the comfortable religious mind can barely imagine.

This, again, is Bonhoeffer's testimony. It is a different logic and an alternative witness pointing to a God who is so much greater, more puzzling and more loving than we can comprehend.

Yet, as Rowan Williams adds, the power of the modern mind – with its projected autonomy, instrumental reason, lack of specific loyalties and disdain of traditional commitments – makes the God of Jesus a stranger. Not just unseen but displaced.

In the midst of tragedy, loss, rage and injustice, the calling to be part of Christ's Body is not an invitation to cajole, worry, rationalise, excuse, blame or babble in the name of God. Rather, it is to be the kind of people, and to issue the type of response, that requires just this sort of displaced hope.

That is why 'tsunami theology' is not about engineering clever apologetics or polishing our metaphysical speculations. It is about responding to the impossible possibility of God's vulnerable love through concrete deeds, personally and politically.

The point is not that followers of Jesus are thereby seen to be right (a spiritually dangerous place to be), but that we are attempting to be faithful. In this way that immense, lengthy and patient effort of understanding which is real theology can be rooted in hopeful living.

Simon Barrow is secretary for global mission at Churches Together in Britain and Ireland. He is also a research associate for Ekklesia (www.ekkleisia.co.uk)