

How can we say God exists in a world like this?

Palm Sunday, April 8-9th 2017

Isaiah 50:4-7

Psalm 22:8-9, 17-20, 23-24

Philippians 2:6-11

Matthew 26:14-27:66

One of the most common arguments people use to either question or disprove the existence of God goes something like this.

How can we say God exists in a world like this? St Thomas Aquinas stated the argument with precision:

It seems that God does not exist, because if one of two contraries be infinite, the other would be altogether destroyed. But the word "God" means that He is infinite goodness. If, therefore, God existed, there would be no evil discoverable; but there is evil in the world. therefore, God does not exist.

This is a very strong argument questioning the existence of God. It reasons, how can God be infinitely good and loving given the empirical data? How can there be an infinitely good and loving God given the infinite badness?

On Friday evening I was listening to a moving documentary on Vimy Ridge broadcast on CBC radio. Some 11 thousand plus Canadian soldiers lost their lives in a battle lasting four days. The decisive offensive occurred 100 years ago tomorrow, on April 9th 1917. When coupled with other allied and German troop losses at Vimy, over 400,000 men were killed in the months leading up to April 1917.

How do we make sense of this kind of suffering?

Or the suffering and death inflicted by Bashar al-Assad in using sarin gas against civilians in the town of Khan Sheikhoun (Shakehoun) on Tuesday?

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Aquinas' answer to the objection is essentially that the existence of evil is logically compatible with a God of infinite goodness, wisdom, and power:

Since God is the highest good, He would not allow any evil to exist in His works unless His omnipotence and goodness were such as to bring good even out of evil. That is part of the infinite goodness of God, that He should allow evil to exist and out of it produce good.

Notice that Aquinas' answer is not a timeless logical formula but a story, an interpretation of the evil data in the universe that explains the data by the God hypothesis: What is this hypothesis:

God is wise and sees that allowing physical evils in nature will result in a better world and allowing moral evils in human life by creating humans with freewill, will result in a better history.

Evil means two very different things, of course. Physical evils are things like death, disease, pain, weakness. Moral evils are things like hate, injustice, and lies. The argument refers to both kinds of evil. And so does Aquinas' answer.

Notice also Aquinas' word "allow." God does not do evil, He allows it. He creates life and He creates living beings. He does not kill, but He creates beings that are mortal, whose life is finite. And He does not sin, but He creates beings with free will who can sin if they choose. So He's off the hook for doing evil, but He's still on the hook for allowing it. He could disallow evil.

And so it is asked: "How can we say God exists in a world like this?"

Aquinas would say God makes evil work for a greater good.

To explain physical evil, Aquinas sees the universe as a great work of art, like a picture or a story, and says God permits evil in the part for the greater good of the whole. A work of art subordinates the part to the whole, and that requires imperfection in the part.

When we come to moral evil, or sin, Aquinas' explanation for God allowing it is to preserve freewill and to bail us out of our sin by the supreme act of love; giving His life to save us. It's a surprise, a drama, a fairytale. Instead of a formula, God wrote a play and gave it to characters who goofed their lines. But a messy play is better than a perfect formula, especially if it ends happily.

This is how we can begin to answer the question:

"How can we say God exists in a world like this?"

It's better to have free human beings, even if some of them do terrible things by misusing their power of freewill to choose to do great evils to other human beings.

Nowhere is moral evil on greater display than it the Story of the Passion. In the story we just read from Matthew, consider the following:

1. While Jesus sweats blood, Peter, James and are overcome by sloth and sleep.
2. Jesus is betrayed as Judas colludes with the Temple guard
3. The apostles are cowards and flee with Peter than denying even knowing Jesus
4. The religious elite are willing to slander Jesus to get their way.
5. Pilate knows Jesus is innocent, a theme reiterated by his wife when she warns: "Have nothing to do with that innocent man" and yet is responsible for an injustice that has been recalled for 2000 years.

It is so important that we listen to the Passion Story, from Matthew Palm Sunday and from John on Good Friday. Nowhere else in Holy Writings do we have a story that better helps us to make sense of evil. Jesus though in the form of God so emptied himself that he experienced in his humanity the full weight of moral evil. The Cross shows how humans can inflict such evil but as we will remember as this week progresses, evil will not have the last word.

As I quoted in this week's Perspective from Pope Emeritus Benedict:

In Jesus' Passion, all the filth of the world touches the infinitely pure one, the soul of Jesus Christ and, hence, the Son of God himself. Through this contact, the filth of the world is truly absorbed, wiped out, and transformed in the pain of infinite love. Because infinite good is now at hand in the man Jesus, the counterweight to all wickedness is present and active within world history, and the good is always infinitely greater than the vast mass of evil, however terrible it may be.¹

Jesus is the greater good that comes from such atrocity. It is this story of the Passion whereby we can begin to make sense of every evil narrative. Christianity is clear on the horror of evil, especially moral evil. Christianity is also clear that Jesus came to confront moral evil head on.

May we hear with deepening attention this Passion story and so better articulate how we can say God exists in a world like this. Enter fully into the story of Jesus' confrontation with evil and his ultimate victory. For when we do, then we can see why Jesus had to come to a world like this and so show us that it especially in dealing with moral evil that he is Emmanuel, God with us.

How can we say God exists in a world like this? Look to Jesus and His Passion for the answer.

¹ Ratzinger, J. (2011). Jesus of Nazareth: Part Two: Holy Week: From the Entrance into Jerusalem to the Resurrection (p. 231). San Francisco: Ignatius Press.