

Readings

Genesis 22:1–14; Psalm 13 (or Jeremiah 28:5–9; Psalm 89:1–4, 15–18)
Romans 6:12–23; Matthew 10:40–42

I was online a few weeks ago when I happened across a weblog set up by BeliefNet.net, to facilitate a dialogue between Bishop N. T. “Tom” Wright of the Church of England and Professor Bart Ehrmann of Duke University’s Divinity School. Weblogs (or, simply, “blogs”), you probably know, are designed not only to feature the thoughts of people online, such as these two great contemporary theologians, but also to elicit responses from readers of the blog.

Both Ehrmann and Wright have fairly recently published books on the problem of the suffering of innocents, or theodicy, and the blog was a pretty obvious way for them to promote their books. That fact notwithstanding, their exchange makes for some interesting reading.

Wright toes the contemporary, popular Christian line – very like the contemporary, popular Jewish line toed by Rabbi Harold Kushner in *Why Bad Things Happen to Good People*. They say that God’s ways are mysterious and purposes unclear to human beings, but that God identifies with our undeserved suffering and seeks to embrace us in love and to strengthen us in spirit, so that we may feel spiritually whole even though our bodies may be broken.

Ehrmann cites a number of problems with Wright’s attitude, pointing out that, in the Bible, there are numerous times when God assumes the role of the inflictor of suffering – even on the righteous, or at least the unsuspecting. He mentions the Flood and the ten plagues of Egypt, and in between he identifies the moment we have heard read from Genesis. Though an angel swings in at the last minute to spare Isaac, Ehrmann points out that it is appropriate to question how

worthy is God of our faith and praise, if God is capable of testing the faithful in this way.

That God should exact the life of a son, as a burnt offering by the hand of his own father, begs the question of God’s righteousness.

In my experience, this story – which in the letter to the Hebrews identifies Abraham as a paragon of faith because he goes along unquestioningly – has caused more clergy conversations to deteriorate into shouting matches than any other. What kind of God does this?! What manner of God tests the

faithful in this way, willingly and willfully causes this level of emotional distress for one who is so devoted!?

If you take the Bible literally, people will consider your faith in this God with justifiable incredulity.

If you take the Bible even seriously, this account of the actions of God with a dutiful and faithful human being – a man who has dedicated himself to this God, sometimes resulting in personal humiliation – a man who has had prayers fulfilled, and all of them symbolized by this boy’s very existence... this account of the divine and the human together should cause you to feel at least a hint of a shudder.

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The only way I have ever seen out of this morass of conflicted emotions and sensitivities has been to bear in mind the pivotal Christian narrative – the one in which the Son of God is turned over to the powers of the earth. By contrast with the narrative of Abraham turning his earthly son over to the power of heaven, there to receive back Isaac’s life, the world kills the Son of God mercilessly.

But I am a Christian, and I can believe such things. Jews and Muslims do not have it so easy. They tell the story of the son’s binding to the altar – admittedly, with different sons of Abraham (Isaac for the Jews and Ishmael for the Muslims) – and simply have to deal with a God who tests the faithful, a God who may occasionally initiate innocent suffering, or at least who is ultimately blameworthy for it.

The problem of theodicy endures.

So, here’s the question. Can a Christian read this story without the Christ filter and still come forth faithful, the way that the Jew and Muslim can? Granted, we don’t have to – we’ve got the filter and, better yet, we have the ultimate

victory of God over the powers of earth by virtue of Christ’s resurrection. That is our victory, that is our proof that the Realm of heaven is not only imminent, but among us!

But can we abide theodicy the way others do? Bart Ehrmann, a former biblical literalist who now is an agnostic because of this question of God’s righteousness, says no. Without the victory over the grave, he cannot justify God. And an unjustified, indeed an unjust, God is – as far as Ehrmann is concerned – unworthy of his praise.

It is interesting to note how many more responses Ehrmann has received to his blog postings than Tom Wright. Most responses are from people who seem to want to change Professor Ehrmann’s mind, to turn him from his rejection of God.

A lot of the respondents to Professor

Ehrmann remind him that the fate of his immortal soul is on the line. They warn him that, if you turn away from God, God will turn away from you! Of course, they walk right into Ehrmann’s challenge that, if an almighty God is unable to bear the questioning of the faithful, then that almighty-ness is pretty questionable.

The fact is, there are plenty of people in our world – even Christians! – who have to endure unwarranted suffering, and who emerge faithful. Are they stupid? Are they ill-informed? Why in the face of their undeserved suffering, and in the recognition that God is not going to come to their rescue, would they persevere in faith?

Witness Morgan Tsvangarai in Zimbabwe, just a few days ago, appealing to his opposition colleagues not to lose faith, in the face of brutal persecutions from Robert

Mugabe’s ZANU-PF: “Be not afraid,” he said, “the Lord is with you.”

And one has to wonder,
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[of Psalm 13] survive at
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person?*

What would you say about the author of Psalm 13, or what would you say to that person, about emerging from that crisis of faith

with praise, as the psalmist seems to do? The Psalm opens with “How long, O Lord, how long..?” and ends with “my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.” And one has to wonder, *How does that dissonance survive at one and the same time in the heart of the faithful person?*

There is a gospel song by the Rev. James Cleveland that seems to resonate with the conflicting sentiments of Psalm 13. In the song, Cleveland – who died of AIDS in 1991 at the age of 59 – offered his own explanation, quoting a woman of faith from his youth:

*I don’t feel no ways tired!
I’ve come too far from where I started
from.
Nobody told me that the road would be
easy.
I don’t believe He brought me this far*

just to leave me.

Now, one might argue that this is the attitude of someone who just refuses to see the obvious, that destruction is imminent and continued faith in either a faithless God or a non-existent one is preposterous, that such faith just does not stand up to reason.

But, honestly, reason was the farthest thing from Rev. Cleveland's mind, as it was from Abraham's and Isaac's. Reason was likely the farthest thing from the mind of the author of Psalm 13. Reason has its place, and I doubt very much whether that place is in the moment of innocent suffering, or even in the visible incidence of undeserved suffering. Level-headed-ness, yes; calm, yes; prayer, yes; even confidence, yes: those have their place, but trying to find a suitable, reasonable explanation in that moment? Probably not.

Because there have been other times when the righteous *have* triumphed, when the world *has* changed for the better. It has sometimes taken riots and wars to make minds change, it has sometimes taken violent persecutions for the righteous to endure, which of course have begged the age-old questions again about divine righteousness, but this usually has indicated the actual need to recast the questions. In such cases, we have eventually come to recognize that those who thought they were powerful were the ones who were truly weak. What we were seeing was human frailty and fear responding as if they were actually power and trying to put a stop to the inevitable, for the truth will out!

Just on a daily life level, there are no few

people of faith who will tell you that endeavoring to walk constantly and consistently in the light of God, with the knowledge that God is in your midst and that you are in the midst of God, will change things for you. You will live your life differently, you will conduct your business differently, you will treat other people differently, you will treat yourself differently. Better. And there will be a peace and a courage about you that will enable you to overcome any apparent trial.

And somewhere in between the societal change and the personal faith, there can be the collective progress of a faith community.

I mentioned a couple of weeks ago that the First Congregational Church of Evanston has the lowest number of people in our membership and very nearly the fewest in worship that we have seen since our founding, almost one hundred forty years ago. Some who heard that, thought I was offering bad news, they said my words were depressing.

But that wasn't the impression I meant to leave you with, and I'm sorry if I did. The statistics I offered don't have to be bad news. In fact, I really do believe that they are heading us toward good news. Namely, the comparable numbers may be indicating a comparable time in our life together with that of our spiritual forebears who brought this community into being. It is time to begin again. From the evidence before us and in us, I know that *you know*, we all know, what's left: it's time for God to take over here.

We have valiantly tried to reason our way

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away from crisis, or to work our way away from the brink by our own wits. Well, my friend, the phrase “wit’s end” has rarely been so palpably defined as now. Reasonability has little to do with this moment in which we find ourselves.

We all give good lip-service to faith here. If we don’t actually have the capacity ourselves to verbalize a coherent testimony on behalf of God’s action in our lives, on our behalf, then we enjoy singing songs and service music that do, or we find our hearts warmed and moved by others when they do. That’s great, but that activity or passive reception is something like just enjoying hearing or making the sound of a finely tuned engine when the car is up on the rack with the transmission in gear. It sure does hum nicely. All the parts are moving the way they ought to, but you don’t get anywhere.

It’s time to let the rubber hit the road, and see where we can go with this faith that we’ve been giving such good lip-service. What is actually possible among us, through us?

I know we have been praying with the psalmist, “How long, O Lord... how long..?” I know we have, because I’ve heard many of us voice that exact sentiment. I’ve probably said it myself in a few prayers. And, trust me when I say this, God is replying, “No longer. Let’s go.”

You have to admit: based on past history with lack of growth and even decline around here, if the First Congregational Church of Evanston succeeds (or, rather *when we do*), it will not be because we figured out some new method or program that cinched our future. All our intellects and intellectuality have gotten us exactly here. Our success, therefore, will not be our own doing. God will have brought us out. God will have made us.

That’s what I mean when I say, it’s time to let God take over here. It is.

Bart Ehrmann and all the brainy agnostics and atheists who are writing nowadays about the unreasonability of faith in this modern age can try and subdue our hearts with their arguments about the unrighteousness of God or the delusion

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we all share by continuing to believe in God. It’s OK. Let them. We do have some mighty questionable stories about the implications and practicalities of faithfulness, from the Bible and from each other.

But “I don’t feel no ways tired...” Do you? We are walking in the light of God, by the grace of God, to the glory of God. The Spirit is among us, Christ walks with us. There is good news to share, and there are ministries to initiate. Now is the time.

And “I don’t believe [God] brought me this far just to leave me!”

Amen.