

where is god in suffering?
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ONE: INTRODUCTION

Listening to the voices of suffering

Recently, I've been considering those times during my seventy-four years on this planet when I experienced real suffering. One of the incidents that stands out involved having to part from someone I'd become very close to (I'll tell that story later on in the book), so that, on and off for years afterwards, I felt as though I'd been torn in two like a sheet of paper.

On another occasion, when I'd taken a sabbatical from teaching in order to do research at the wonderful University of Chicago, I experienced a moment of crippling existential doubt. I was slowly recovering from a broken leg during a typically snowbound Chicago winter; one night I was hobbling up and down the little day chapel on the ground floor of St Thomas Apostle rectory, where I was living, when I was seized by panic and, for just a few moments, I wondered: is there a God out there? Is there any meaning to what I'm doing? It took me a while to remember how another One had asked questions like these with his abject cry: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' A God-Man experienced himself a lot further from God

and many of his closest companions on earth than I ever could, a double laceration of separation, from God and from human community. Just knowing I wasn't on my own in that crisis of meaninglessness, that he'd chosen to be there for me too, helped me join him in his huge act of trust – 'into Your hands' – and move beyond doubt in the company of the great Doubter.

And every one of us has had to go through the loss of friends and family members, or contend with feelings of helplessness at being unable to relieve another's suffering or support someone dear to us in their addiction. For others, there may have been the searing pain caused by the betrayal of someone they thought they could trust with their life.

Many of you will have had your lives turned upside down, your self-confidence and self-worth shaken, and your faith sorely challenged. If it was a really great suffering it may have prompted not just an anguished or angry shout of 'why, Lord?' but a why of prayer, a prayer of why.

When Stephen Fry, the English broadcaster and actor, was asked by Gay Byrne on *The Meaning of Life*, an RTÉ series exploring the spirituality of celebrity guests, what he'd say to God if he were passing through the pearly gates, as an entrenched atheist he gave a spirited denunciation of a God who allows the innocent to suffer. I'm grateful to him for his frank and eloquent statement, since surely he speaks for many, and the questions he raised are the ones I'll be discussing in this book. I'd like the book to be a continuation of that debate, though admittedly with fewer fireworks.

Archibald MacLeish was a well-known American writer, poet and dramatist during the middle years of the twentieth century. In *J. B.* (1958), his modern version of the Book of Job, one of his

characters says: ‘If God is good He is not God. If God is God He is not good.’¹ (He meant that a good God wouldn’t allow suffering, but if there is a God, given there is suffering in the world he’s created, he couldn’t be good.) We’ll see that Stephen Fry and Professor Peter Singer make a similar point, albeit rather less pithily.

This issue has been playing on my mind since receiving an invitation from one of Ireland’s most experienced radio interviewers, Marian Finucane, to speak on her show and discuss Fry’s comments.² Shortly after that, Donna Doherty at Veritas asked me if I’d expand what I’d said into a little book on suffering. You’ll find the results in the following pages.

Suffering isn’t something we can cure with theoretical discussion alone. Mircea Eliade, a world-famous philosopher of religion, tells the following story. At a *soirée* in Paris in the 1940s, a Romanian woman asked a well-known French philosopher about the meaning of evil. He gave the standard answer, insisting that it was the deprivation of a good. Unsatisfied by this rather intellectual reply, she later told Eliade, a fellow Romanian, about her husband, a priest who’d been brutally beaten to death by a prison guard for hearing another inmate’s confession through the bars of his cell window. This guard, out of sheer malevolence, later turned up at the priest’s funeral and – knowing full well she was aware who he was and what he’d done – gave her the traditional Romanian funeral offering of boiled wheat grains mingled with honey and nuts. That savage murder and the additional calculated insult had prompted her to ask about the meaning of evil.

Like the Romanian woman, if we’re experiencing great suffering, a theoretical explanation is of little value. When

speaking to young people in Nairobi on 27 November 2015, Pope Francis spoke words to the same effect:

there are some questions that you can turn around in your minds over and over again and never find the answer to. 'How can I see the hand of God in one of life's tragedies?' I was going to say there's just one response but no, there's no response. There is a path.

I'm inviting you, the reader, to come along that path with me, conscious that I have no glib solution to offer, but also conscious that others who have travelled that path before us can help us along the way; perhaps they can lead us towards a few hilltops where we can see a little further ahead, if not beyond our suffering, at least towards a horizon from where it may become a little more bearable.³

Chapters One and Two will each take up three questions arising out of the Stephen Fry interview and my own public conversation with Professor Peter Singer in Melbourne in 2012, since these both help us to explore that statement: 'If God is good He is not God. If God is God He is not good.'

As Pope Francis said above, suffering is a path, something to be lived, not to be explained away. But even a wise pope like Francis has struggled to make sense of suffering, as evident in his response to seven-year-old William from the United States who asked him: 'If you could do one miracle, what would it be?' He answered, 'Dear William, I would heal children. I've never been able to understand why children suffer. It's a mystery to me. I don't have an explanation.'⁴ Neither will anything here 'explain' suffering, but I hope that listening to the voices of others who

have suffered may help us on our own way. Chapters Three to Six will explore other people's stories about how they managed to cope with suffering.

When I heard Stephen Fry saying bone cancer in children convinced him God could not exist, I immediately thought of the way Chiara Luce Badano, in her late teens, had turned to God in response to her own agonising struggle with that very disease. So in Chapter Three I'll explore her response to her illness. In Chapter Four, I'll consider the struggle of a young Dutch Jewish woman, Etty Hillesum, through her diaries and letters, as she tries to come to terms with life before and during her time in a Nazi concentration camp.

Newly appointed Auxiliary Bishop of Los Angeles, Robert Barron answered Fry's impassioned challenge to the existence of God, commenting wryly that 'the most devastating rant ever uttered against God' was not to be found in remarks like those of Stephen Fry, 'but rather in the pages of the Bible ... the Book of Job'. He finds the best rejoinder to be 'a distinctively Christian one, for Christians refer to the day on which Jesus was unjustly condemned, abandoned by his friends, brutally scourged ... nailed to an instrument of torture and left to die as "Good Friday". To understand that is to have the ultimate answer to Job ...'⁵ Following Bishop Barron's line of thought, in Chapter Five I'll consider how Job can become a voice that can enter into our own dialogue about suffering with ourselves and with God.

And, taking up Bishop Barron's second point, in Chapter Six, I'll come to what I think is the most profound experience of innocent suffering: Jesus' experience of crucifixion and 'forsakenness'. This, I believe, is a voice of suffering that everyone

– Christian and non-Christian, believer and non-believer alike – can respond to.

The attacks on the US on 9/11 were quickly seized upon by ‘the four horsemen’ of modern atheism: Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris and Daniel Dennett. They didn’t blame Islamist terrorists, but all religions – Jewish, Christian, Islamic and Hindu alike – for that horrific mass murder (Buddhism generally got a pass). The afterword in this book explores my own reaction at the time to 9/11, along with how others, such as Pope Benedict XVI, Syrian Fr Jacques Mourad, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks and moderate Muslims, have responded to the question terrorism poses to believers.

If there’s a common thread running through this little book, it’s that suffering is addressed to us as persons, and that we – and those affected by it – may be somehow able to grow as persons by the courage and love it demands of us. Perhaps you don’t immediately see your suffering in relation to God, but isn’t it often the way that when we have the privilege of sharing time and conversation with those who are going through real suffering, their courage and their words stay with us and change the way we see things? So perhaps some of the experiences in Chapters Three to Six may find an echo in your own.

TWO: VERN MULQUEENEY

‘I think you got this one wrong,
or did you?’

Vern Mulqueeney’s question

Suffering is a mystery, isn’t it, a bridge across our common humanity? Your suffering moves me, communicates itself to me wordlessly so I feel with you and for you. I feel something of what it’d be like to have to go through what you’re going through. Call it what you like – solidarity, fellow-feeling, empathy, compassion – we undergo hard and terrible things and they pass from you to me, uniting us on the most primordial level of our shared humanness.

It’s the mystery of our universal humanity. We’re moved most by the suffering of those closest to us, but aren’t we also affected by suffering in someone we don’t know at all, someone we pass by in the street, sleeping in a doorway, on a night when it’s wet, cold and windy? And aren’t we moved, too, by images of those suffering brought to us by the media? As well as hurting us physically or emotionally, mentally, spiritually or religiously, real suffering often shocks and distresses us, affronts us, challenging

everything we've built our lives on, evoking from us the anguished question: what does this suffering mean?

One of the greatest privileges I've had in my life is to have listened to the stories of those who have experienced great suffering.⁶ I think of Vern Mulqueeny, a truckdriver who died in his forties having battled with multiple sclerosis for many years. A few years before, I'd met his amazing mother, Claire, while taking part in a TV discussion about euthanasia, where she maintained that she'd help her son to die if he were no longer able to breathe. Before the show I'd thought she wouldn't want to speak to me, but she came right over to me, we had a friendly chat, and after the programme she said she wouldn't ever help Vern to die, but had said otherwise to reassure him that she wouldn't watch him suffer.

I started visiting Vern every few months – Claire of course was with him every day. It got harder for Vern to speak, but he could tell me how he'd been trying to help others who suffered from severe disabilities in the care home where he lived. He greeted the news his young daughter was expecting a child with a poem, beginning, 'My baby's having a baby. Wow!' And that little infant brought huge joy into his life. When he still could, he'd sit out with the others in their wheelchairs and sometimes get them to laugh. He made up poems for them, my favourite being, 'Are you listening God?' which ends:

I know you are powerful, mighty and strong
but personally I think
you got this one wrong
or did you?

I never felt we needed to talk about God. Vern's 'Or did you?' said all that needed to be said.

Why this book was written

In addition to the aforementioned Stephen Fry⁷ interview, which was viewed more than five million times just one week after being posted on YouTube, another source of inspiration for this book was a debate I was invited to in St Paul's Anglican Cathedral in Melbourne with the controversial philosopher Professor Peter Singer. The debate was on the subject: 'The Role of Reason in Faith and Unbelief.'⁸ Singer's reason, in brief, for rejecting the existence of a 'good' God is the suffering of animals and innocent human beings. How could an all-powerful God, supposedly gifted with foreknowledge, allow such terrible events to happen?

Like Professor Singer, Stephen Fry roundly rejected any kind of God that would permit such suffering. From his own harshly interrupted life, Vern had addressed a similar question more gently to God, 'It seems like you made a mistake'. Keeping Singer's and Fry's responses in mind – shared surely by very many for the same reasons – I'll try to take up Vern's next line, 'Or did you?'

In this first chapter, I'll have a look at the different kinds of suffering there are – from natural disasters (which affect human beings and animals in all sorts of terrible ways) to animal suffering and then to the suffering children have to go through – whether through natural disasters, illness or the evil actions of adults. The following chapter will consider the suffering adults go through, beginning with their inevitable death. But aren't the worst sufferings – like the Holocaust – caused by our misuse of our own freedom? This will bring us to the mystery of evil,

whether in others, in ourselves, or both. Since Peter Singer and Stephen Fry, like some other atheists of our time, regard all religions as a major factor in the world's evils, or at best, useless for dealing with suffering, that'll be our final topic in the second chapter.

Underlying the rejection of God is a rejection of nature

While many use the existence of human suffering as a reason for denying the existence of God, I think that denial masks another denial – a denial that we'll soon see embodied in Ivan, one of the Karamazov brothers, in Dostoevsky's last and greatest book *The Brothers Karamazov*. The novel is ostensibly a murder story: one of the Karamazov brothers, the illegitimate Smerdyakov, kills the father, Fyodor – but it's Dmitry, the most passionate of the Karamazov brothers, who's wrongly accused of the murder. The Russian Tsar was seen as the father of his people and a Dmitry Karakozov had attempted to assassinate Tsar Alexander II in 1866. So peering between the lines, a Russian reader would have understood a wider, political theme beyond the obvious one of the disintegration of the family – the assassination of the Tsar. And beyond that lay Dostoevsky's principal theme – contemporary nineteenth-century society's attempt to murder God.

In the novel, Ivan doesn't so much deny God as reject God's world. And underlying the denial of God by the two contemporary atheists, Stephen Fry and Peter Singer, is their refusal to accept nature as it is – whether it's the nature of the physical world, animal nature, or human nature.

Albert Camus, an open-minded atheist, for years struggled against the imaginary worlds dreamt up by utopian thinkers of