

MORE QUESTIONS THAN ANSWERS

Explanations for tragedy, and beauty, still beyond reach

By Christopher Webber, August 12, 2008

[Episcopal News Service] **For years I told people that I liked the *New Yorker* because of the theology in the cartoons. I once put together a proposal for a book to be called *The New Yorker's Idea of Heaven*. Dozens of cartoons are available to illustrate my proposed book, many showing a black-garbed figure with a sickle and many with clouds and a gate of heaven and St. Peter checking in new arrivals.**

Now *The New Yorker* has gotten more serious about its theology. The double issue for mid-June published a series of short essays on faith and doubt and a longish review of Bart D. Ehrman's new book, *God's Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question — Why We Suffer*. It's part of a sudden wave of books attacking the God idea, intended, perhaps for an audience too young to remember the "God is Dead" wave some 40 years ago.

The *New Yorker's* reviewer starts us off with the headlines of May 15, 2008: Fifty thousand or more dead in China, some hundred thousand in Burma; 10 killed by a suicide bomber in Baghdad, a dozen by a missile strike in Pakistan, a policeman by ETA terrorists in northern Spain. Some days are worse than others, but sheer numbers are irrelevant.

The question arises more sharply when the victim of tragedy is someone you know well. I was talking some years ago to a woman dying of cancer who told me she wanted to be able to see what would become of her children. "You will know," I assured her. "But I want to hug them," she answered. And what do you say to that?

No one can spend a lifetime in parish ministry and not face unanswerable questions or wonder what logic there is to the events of daily life. I never have been one to tell people that "God has his/her reasons" or "It's all for the best." I'd rather follow Dylan Thomas' advice: "Do not go gentle into that good night ... Rage, rage against the dying of the light." No one can convince me that the bereaved couple in China whose only child was killed in the collapse of her school is part of a larger plan. Where, indeed, is a merciful God in this?

Why? Job's question is not new, nor is the answer changed. "Consider the ostrich," God says to Job. "What do you know about creation?"

Exactly. What do we know? The circle of what we know expands out at an increasing rate of speed and expands at the same rate our awareness of the vast unknown beyond. Astronomers grapple with the questions of dark matter and the expanding universe and begin to wonder whether they ever will have final answers. But they can be sure they will have more questions.

I am keeping a list of questions to get answered hereafter. I am not looking for answers now because there are none that can satisfy me or any other reasonable person. I can offer some partial answers: Free will accounts for a lot. Where there is love there must be freedom, and where there is freedom it will be misused. If we were puppets dangling from God's fingers, there would be no evil because there would be no freedom. Those who believe we are all part of a plan God is working out in infinite detail have a much greater problem than I do. Their God has much more to answer for.

Those in the new wave of deniers have much in common with the fundamentalist. Both imagine a God who is constructed to their specifications and to meet their own needs.

"This God," says the denier, "cannot be because I cannot understand the logic of such a God."

"This God," says the fundamentalist, "can be because I can understand the logic of such a God."

I remember the title of a book by J.B. Phillips, *Your God Is Too Small*. If you, denier or believer, have all the answers, you do not know God. God, by my definition — and my definition is as likely to be wrong as anyone else's — is not limited to my logic. The God I can understand is not God.

But I have other questions that need to be answered. They are like Job's, but focused differently: "Have you considered the rhododendron? That mass of flame bursts out again predictably every year and reminds us of the omnipresence of beauty. The daffodils give way to the lilacs and the lilacs to the peonies. Is there a need for all of them? Would the balance of nature be any less balanced if there were no lilacs? Why is the world so filled with beauty, and why are we so moved by its existence? If the presence of evil leads you to question the existence of God, do you not also have to consider the presence of beauty?"

I'm with the questioners in wanting answers but not so confident of human mental capacities that I expect all the answers soon. We are, after all, asking about a Creator, and no answer will be satisfying that looks only at part of the picture. There's more than disasters to account for: Explain to me also, please, the existence of beauty.

*-- Christopher Webber, a retired Episcopal priest, has served inner-city, suburban and small-town parishes and published several books, including *A Year with American Saints* and *Beyond Beowulf*. Coming soon are *The Revised Metrical Psalter* (for the Revised Common Lectionary) and *An American Prayer Book*.*