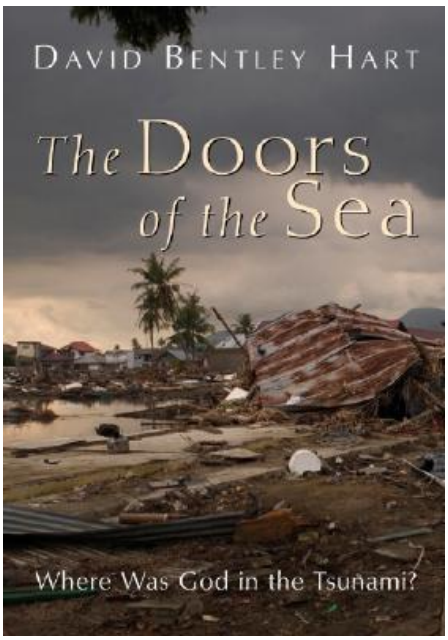

The Doors of the Sea: Where Was God in the Tsunami?

David Bentley Hart

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As news reports of the horrific tsunami in Asia reached the rest of the world, commentators were quick to seize upon the disaster as proof of either God's power or God's nonexistence. Expanding on his Wall Street Journal piece, Tremors of Doubt, published the last day of 2004, David Bentley Hart here returns to this pressing question: How can the existence of a good and loving God be reconciled with such suffering? Hart clarifies the biblical account of God's goodness, the nature of evil, and the shape of redemption, incisively revealing where both Christianity's champions and its critics misrepresent what is most essential to Christian belief. Though he responds to those skeptical of Christian faith, Hart is at his most perceptive and provocative as he examines Christian attempts to rationalize the tsunami disaster. Many people want a divine plan that will make sense of evil. Hart contends, however, that the history of suffering and death is not willed by God. Rather than appealing to a divine calculus that can account for every instance of suffering, Christians must recognize the ongoing struggle between the rebellious powers that enslave the world and the God who loves it. This meditation by a brilliant young theologian will deeply challenge serious readers grappling with God's ways in a suffering world."

The Doors of the Sea: Where Was God in the Tsunami? Details

Date	:	Published July 1st 2005 by William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company
ISBN	:	9780802829764
Author	:	David Bentley Hart
Format	:	Hardcover 109 pages
Genre	:	Religion, Theology, Philosophy, Christianity, Nonfiction, Christian

From Reader Review The Doors of the Sea: Where Was God in the Tsunami? for online ebook

Tom LA says

Brief essay about the problem of evil by David Bentley Hart, Orthodox Christian theologian. Some parts I really liked, some others went too much in the detailed, technical philosophical reference for my taste and level of knowledge.

Douglas Wilson says

This brilliant man wrote a painfully inadequate book.

William Bradford says

Hart is an Eastern Orthodox Christian and writes from a perspective that is a little different than what we usually hear. The book is rich is philosophy, theology, and literary references, and will sometimes take a second or third reading of a passage to understand. Hart interacts extensively with the writings of Voltaire and Dostoyevsky in building his theodicy.

Although Hart states that he is not trying to make Reformed theology "the bad guy", he freely admits that certain elements of Reformed theology are simply not compatible with Eastern Orthodox theology. As an Arminian, I found it refreshing to find a work that is so rich and deep.

Since it seems that tragedies come at a fairly regular pace, this is a highly recommended work in understanding God and suffering. As noted, some passages take effort - but you will be rewarded richly for the effort.

Mike says

It has some good thinking on theodicy in it, and I need to read it again to get to grips with that. Otherwise, for the length of the book, it's solidly packed while still remaining readable.

Andrew Van Os says

The doors of the sea bulldozed what was left of my crumbling reformed/neo-calvin theology. DBH presents an effective response to the questions of brothers K, and also offers a pointed (and humorously disdainful) treatment of typical protestant views of the atonement and sovereignty.

I fear I must prepare my official letter of resignation from the college church/reformation celebration etc... club.

I'm sorry Brad Dog. Please forgive me.

Perhaps one day I will return to the fold

(PS Mom, if you are reading this review its intended to be semi-ironic but mostly not)

Alex Stroshine says

Although I found David Bentley Hart's first book to be inscrutable, "The Doors of the Sea" was straightforward enough. This book isn't so much a work of apologetics as a response to secular critics who contest belief in a good and all-powerful God is inconsistent with the presence of evil (particularly the devastation wrought by the 2004 tsunami) and Christians (mostly Calvinist and Catholic) who try to neatly explain that mystery away. Really good stuff, especially in the second part, although due to the book's brevity, I don't think Hart comprehensively addresses either all the Calvinist arguments for divine determinism nor does he rigorously back up all of his assertions (he himself admits this) and his reputation for smugness does make some appearances as he casually brushes aside some of his opponents' points.

David says

After working my way through The Beauty of the Infinite by David Bentley Hart and being incredibly impressed, I sought out more of his books. He wrote a short book , The Doors of the Sea: Where Was God in the Tsunami, on the problem of evil and suffering in light of the 2004 tsunami in Asia that killed thousands. Hart seeks to defend Christianity from its secular critics, but along the way he also argues against a divine determinism that makes God the author of suffering. He brings in a lot of Dostoyevsky, which I love! He argues that God is all good and thus never wills evil. Evil is abhorent and horrific. God allows it to happen, though one day God will no longer allow it.

Here is where my one question lies, and where I think the secular critic could make a good point. Against Christians who imply (or outright say) that God does more than permit it, Hart successfully shows that God never causes evil, God merely allows it. In the face of all the evil and suffering though, why is God so slow in bringing it to an end. Is the argument, “one day, some day, God will no longer permit suffering” not somewhat questionable in the face of suffering now? God could end it now, why wait? I am sure Hart has an answer, and I would be curious to hear it.

Soren Johnson says

Wow. This little book gave me new categories by which to think about the world. Hart elucidates his understanding of the Christian view of the cosmic situation and shows how evil fits into that understanding. A Christian specific theodicy. Very good, if only to exposure yourself to Hart has to say.

Tim says

Hart is not completing a theodicy here, but instead reacting to the idiocy of the theodicy of others. I

appreciate it is a severe rebuke to some Reformed talkers who uphold a certain divine sovereignty and thus make God the author of evil for some alleged higher good. It is a sophisticated conversation, I do wish he could have said more about Dostoyevsky (I will have to reread the Brothers Karamazov now) and many other things that he just hints at, but his description of the unreality of evil, the impassibility of God, and the distinction between divine will and divine permission are clear. A pleasure to read and think along side, with, and against. Now I need to pull out Wright's Evil and the Justice of God again.

Roy Howard says

David Bentley Hart is an Orthodox Christian and theologian, who also writes extraordinarily well. It's a pleasure to read him in part because of his vocabulary - I'm always learning new words - and in part because of his capacity to dissect an opponents argument with uncanny precision. He has done those most famously with the more militant new atheists, Dawkins, Harrris and Hitchens. He deploys the same skills in this book responding to those who claim a secret providence explaining God's active involvement in the deaths of thousands and on the other hand those who claim those death prove the non-existence of God. Hart is pointedly clear that his essay is a theological response to suffering and not an explanation. In fact, he is inpatient with all attempts at explanation particularly those of ultra-Calvinists who insist that nothing happens outside the active will of God including horrific suffering such as the tsunami. He brings an Orthodox love of the created world into his larger argument about the mystery of God that cannot be reduced to categories that ultimately reduced God to monstrous distortion of all that is beautiful. Hart draws upon Doestoevsky in stunning way that gives credence to the protest against the death of the innocent as a form of faith. There is a great deal of insight packed into the brief book. Of the many books on theodicy, I rank this as one of the best. (My pastor-theologian group will engage this one during our summer retreat.)

Daniel Bastian says

This earlier book by D.B. Hart, of Eastern Orthodox notoriety, is an undeniably well-written but, at the same time, woefully underwhelming book. *The Doors of the Sea: Where Was God in the Tsunami?* is a rejoinder to a problem perhaps as ancient as humanity itself, the philosophical problem of evil. This brief Christian apologia is a specific reaction to the tsunami disaster which thumped the island of Sumatra of western Indonesia in December 2004, laying waste to a quarter million people, 40% of which were children.

It's a short read, at just 104 pages in length, though the sum of Hart's theodicic denouements could be distilled to a trio of paragraphs, if not fewer. He fills the balance of the book with flowery prose and magniloquent diction which, while concordant with his other works, fails to elevate his reasoning to any higher significance. His cavernous vocabulary and polished writing are impressive in their own right, but but ultimately serve no apparent purpose other than to cloak the tenuousness of his underlying arguments.

In responding to this greatest of theism's challenges, Hart eschews any qualms in addressing the broad marketplace of worldviews—from the atheist to the materialist, the deist to the Christian theist. He pays little attention to nontheistic appeals, reserving his greatest admonishment for aberrant Christian theology, which he believes to be the larger problem. Hart takes specific contention with Calvinism, assailing its declaratively 'unbiblical' soteriology of limited atonement and double predestination in not particularly amicable language, and assumes an avuncular posture toward the John Pipers of evangelicalism who attempt to derive divine meaning and signs from natural catastrophe. He also gives preferential treatment, and rightly so, to the pangs of Dostoyevsky's Ivan Karamazov as well as the deistic convictions of Voltaire.

The Privation Doctrine

Peeling past the layers of lofty speech reveals a frustratingly unsatisfactory and, indeed, historically banal strand of theology. While many of the classic approaches to the problem of evil are given their due, what is propounded here, at bottom, is an ectype of Augustinian theodicy circa 4th century, the idea that only good can come from God and evil is merely a privation of that goodness. Within this grid, evil is not viewed as a separate or distinct entity but relegated to various rungs in a hierarchy of goodness.

> "This is not to say that evil is then somehow illusory; it is only to say that evil, rather than being a discrete substance, is instead a kind of ontological wasting disease." (p. 73)

Leaving aside that this stands in direct contradiction with Isaiah 45:7, this of course begs the question. If God is the provenance only of good, from what or from whom does its inverse emanate? According to Hart, evil and suffering are the sole properties of the forces of evil, the "demonic powers" of one kingdom which are perpetually at war with the "angelic powers" of another. He cites a litany of biblical passages to support this claim (Col. 1:16, 1 Cor. 2:8, Eph. 1:21; 2:2; 3:10; 6:12, Gal. 4:3, John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11, 2 Cor. 4:4, and 1 John 5:19).

> "The cosmos, then, is divided between two kingdoms, that of God and that of death." (p. 66)

Concerns over biblical authority notwithstanding, what he has posited is that there exists a realm of disharmony completely sealed off from all human apprehension and sense experience, and the entirety of reality is characterized by this eternal conflict between mystical forces, evil and good. The problem I see with this argument is not only are the entities upon which it is based immune to verifiability or falsifiability (as all religious asseverations tend to be), but that it actually doesn't explain anything; it only regresses the problem (and evil itself) to another ill-defined, nebulous entity or entities. It is but a sleight-handed, duplicitous attempt to disencumber God of his accountability for evil, conceding only that God permits suffering but does not will it.

There seems to be a more fundamental and manifestly conspicuous problem here, however, with attributing the source of evil to entities which are not God. If God is the creator of all, then these entities must have been part of that creation (unless of course one wishes to subscribe to paganistic and animistic religious traditions where the powers of good and evil have always coexisted in a state of existential turmoil). The implication by those championing this brand of theodicy is that the world could not have been created any other way. It is supposed that the entities responsible for evil and the physical forces precipitating natural disasters were somehow necessary elements of a free creation. The only remaining options are that God otherwise made a mistake and should not have created these entities in the first place, or that this all amounts to bloated theologizing in order to cover for an imaginary entity.

The Dilemma of Non-Intervention

If you swallow this theology in gross and thus ground human suffering in St. Paul's mystical "forces", one burdensome question looms just around the corner. This still does not explain why if God is in fact all-powerful does he not intervene in the most opportune of moments to relieve his creation of the undue misery and calamity knocking daily at our doors. Why–why indeed–did he not stay the cataclysmic waves of the Sumatran tsunami and "*keep the sea within its appointed bounds?*" (p. 2) The age-old dilemma continues to

hold sway: either God is not omnipotent and is powerless at halting these atrocities or, if he is all-powerful, he is an inexplicably capricious being whose intervention in humanity is random, arbitrary or altogether absent. Epicurus espied this contradiction from the 3rd century BCE.

Instead of engaging this issue, Hart lambastes the impotent or evil dichotomy, saying it is a fallacious question to even ask, as it is “premised upon an inane anthropomorphism.” Hart writes:

> “Unless one can see the beginning and end of all things, unless one possesses a divine, eternal vantage upon all of time, unless one knows the precise nature of the relation between divine and created freedom, unless indeed one can fathom infinite wisdom, one can draw no conclusions from finite experience regarding the coincidence in God of omnipotence and perfect goodness.” (pp. 13-14)

His acrimonious stance toward this issue is beleaguered by a dual irony. First, he grounds his entire solution to the problem of evil in the Bible, which regularly speaks of God in human-centric language ("God is a jealous and vengeful God" - Nahum 1:2-8; "I regret that I have made [human beings]" - Gen. 6:6-7). The second shot of irony is that his attempt to promote a frictionless theodicy in this book is in fact an attempt at grappling with this intractable impasse. In a certain sense all of what we discuss about God and the supernatural are misguided anthropomorphisms, so why even endeavor to write a book if the very concept eludes conceptualization?

Hence we still do not have a reason for the abundant absence of intervention across history. Hart certainly doesn’t have an answer, urging us to "shed the burden of the desire for total explanation…” (p. 68) Rather, he assures us that it will all be worth it in the end. According to Hart, it is the God of Christianity that will intervene in the end of days to execute a final and universal harmony among his creation and the powers beyond our purview.

> “...all wounds will at the last be healed, all scars will disappear, all discord will vanish like a mirage, and that such will be the splendor of the finale of all things, when that universal harmony is established.” (p. 38)

It is certainly a chipper thought. But is this notion—the long con of redemption—sufficient to expiate the suffering endured by the victims described in Dostoyevsky’s writings, or for the unfeeling reprobates who inflicted such undue harm, or for the untold desolation and agony to which life has been subjected across the vast expanse of geologic time? This final question is one which resonates fully with Hart, and he proceeds to engage it accordingly. He tells us either we accept that we're accompanied by evil and all will be brought to light and restored in the end, or we must conclude that evil is too execrable a byproduct of freedom of the will to warrant the creation of life in the first place.

> “One is confronted with only this bare choice: either one embraces the mystery of created freedom and accepts that the union of free spiritual creatures with the God of love is a thing so wonderful that the power of creation to enslave itself to death must be permitted by God; or one judges that not even such rational freedom is worth the risk of a cosmic fall and the terrible injustice of the consequences that follow from it.” (p. 69) He concludes that “the rejection of God on these grounds cannot really be a rational decision, but only a moral pathos.”

Hart then offers a silver lining stemming from the ubiquity of evil, but one that won't be fully realized until the end of the natural order. It's the idea that the depths of good cannot be apprehended without first realizing the depths of evil, a sort of metaphysical catch-22. He tells us our eternal happiness will be amplified tenfold once final victory in Jesus is accomplished as, without our exposures to evil, we would be unable to fully appreciate the extent of the infinite goodness awaiting us.

> "…thereby in the profoundest mystery of redemption, and advancing the venerable homiletic conceit that our salvation from sin will result in a higher beatitude than could ever have evolved from an innocence untouched by death." (p. 28)

One point which refuses to fade from rational consideration, and which can scarcely be overstated, is the utter lack of evidence for the ethereal entities upon which all such belief systems are predicated. This static reality is one with which all patrons of faith must continually come to terms, from the layperson all the way up to the ivory-towered theologian. A well-reasoned, copacetic theology is, at its core, still merely an attempt to reconcile and reinforce its underlying assumptions, which have nary a shred of evidence. Each successive paroxysm like the one endured by the Indonesian peoples demands those of faith reevaluate their worldview and ask how a supposedly omniamorous God fits into the equation of life's drama.

Moreover, the loftiness of a theological argument has no bearing whatsoever on its truth value. One cannot make a myth true by developing more sophisticated polemic. Hart seems to acknowledge this, midway through the book: "To put the matter starkly, nature is a cycle of sacrifice, and religion has often been no more than an attempt to reconcile us to this reality." (p. 52) Indeed, though man's religious beliefs and theological acrobatics have grown more nuanced, more refined and ever more balkanized all at the same time, the amount of evidence for the underlying beliefs has remained unchanged.

Closing Thoughts

In closing, *The Doors of the Sea* is a provocatively written treatise on the problem of evil but one which ultimately fails to capture anything new that hasn't been propounded several times before. Were it not a targeted response to the devastating Indonesian tsunami event of 2004, this might be mistaken for a facsimile, more or less, of far earlier theodicic works littering the libraries of those of us well-seasoned in dialogues of this variety. That said, for those never before exposed to these types of arguments, or to Eastern Orthodox theology writ large, this may very well represent a beacon of perspicacity among the glut of pro-materialist writings being pushed today.

D.B. Hart is one of the more eloquent religious philosophers of our time, but a book of theology should do more than double as a pocket thesaurus. A well-written book fails to be something more when it is bereft of substance, new knowledge, or fresh approaches to old knowledge. Newness and freshness are not what you'll find here. The Christian still subscribes to the idea of an omnipotent master, a personal deity intimately concerned with human affairs, yet the earth is still riven with evil and suffering of the highest order, with no apparent intervention of any kind.

To be sure, this is a book not on the existence of God but on the nature of God. But before it is deemed purposeful to theorize one's nature or eternal plan, shouldn't we first confirm that such an entity is even there?

As Richard Feynman, the late Nobel Prize-winning physicist declared when asked what he would say to God if given the chance: "You should have given us better evidence."

Note: This review is republished from my official website. Click through for additional footnotes and imagery.

Reed Fagan says

The Doors of the Sea was written by David Bentley Hart in the two months following the December 26, 2004 Southeast Asian tsunami. Perhaps more than two-hundred-thousand people died in that tragedy. He writes that the book's aim was to elucidate "what [he] understand[s] to be the true scriptural account of God's goodness, the shape of redemption, the nature of evil, and the conditions of a fallen world" in order to show where many arguments, anti-Christian and Christian, dealing with the problem of evil go wrong (93). Hart's thesis is that "God's gracious will for his creatures… is the creative power that makes all things to be and the consummate happiness to which all things are called; but this [must] not mean that everything that happens is merely a direct expression of God's desire for his creatures or an essential stage within the divine plan for history"

Hart introduces in 1.III a motif that appears through the book, that "the atheist who cannot believe for moral reasons does honor, in an elliptical way, to the Christian God" (25). He means by this that such an atheist would have ideals of goodness, justice and truth borrowed from Christianity and she would expect these ideals to have some visibility or substance, not murkiness or mixture with their opposites. Hart finds in the words of Ivan Karamazov (of Dostoyevsky's creation) a setting of the problem of evil that demands a response (if not a solution) if one would believe in the Christian God. The strengths of Ivan's argument are 1) its assumption of God's perfect goodness, 2) its requirement that God's transcendent love and mercy be intelligible to a genuinely questioning mind, and 3) its truthful proclamation that child suffering is so unjust that a "banal confidence in "God's great plan"" is ridiculous (69-70). Revisiting the motif, Hart calls unbeliever Ivan's "a profoundly and almost prophetically Christian argument" (42).

Hart's claim is that we cannot see God as a maker, proponent or user of evil but must rather

see that evil, suffering and death “have no true meaning or purpose at all” (35; cf. 61). Evil is a privation of God’s good creations and comes from humans’ autonomous volition. It has marred and continues to mar the cosmos but will eventually be judged. In his conclusion, Hart remarks that Calvinism in particular receives his scorn because it makes God work both good and evil (confusing the concepts), it disallows “the real being of finite creatures” and disallows “the real freedom of finite wills” (93, 97).

Alex, a counselor at a Christian camp I worked at, drowned in the camp lake, probably by suicide, on August 8, 2009. Following, as I mocked the Johannine witness that “God is light and in him there is no darkness at all”, my systematic theology professor copied the last section of Hart’s text and gave it to me. As someone who already did not accept a god that predestined our fates, I found comforting Hart’s message that God did not author evil and in fact hated and would at the end of time condemn it.

Reid Belew says

Hart’s theodicy is indispensable. I finished this book filled with gratitude and more tears than I expected a book was capable of.

Hart’s answer for suffering in light of a good God is personally revolutionary, and I would recommend it to anyone searching for God in tragedy.

Kyle McManamy says

Here is a book that deserves three readings: once to get the overall picture and experience, twice to get into his argumentation, and thrice to engage his arguments thoughtfully. As a friend was recently told about another of Hart's books, you might want to grab a dictionary. The book is beautiful, hard, engaging, and important.

Zachary says

This is a great book - but, let me warn you, his vocabulary is quite extensive. I think he either really likes the thesaurus function on his word processor, or he's just a nerd. But a smart one - which is cool in my book. I would recommend having a pretty deep dictionary at hand when reading this, and I would definitely suggest

making sure you've read some other less deep theology and philosphy before undertaking this deep (albeit very well written) work.

That said, this is a great book. If you've ever wondered about how to deal with the conflicting realities of an omnipotent and benevolent God and the problem of evil, I highly recommend this book. What I loved the most was the fact that Hart actually gave credit where credit is due to those atheists, agnostics, and others who have used the reality of evil as an argument against God. He really does pick apart the truth and misconceptions of their arguments beautifully.

For the quality of the book, I would have given it five out of five stars, but it is a definitely more difficult read, so that's why I opted for four. This is not for the average casual reader (unless you're just that type of nerd - which I am!), but if you feel like diving deep into the philosophy and theology around the problem of evil, I enthusiastically recommend this book!
