

Apologetics: If God is all powerful and in control, why does evil exist, why do natural disasters happen or why disabilities occur?

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In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

One of the most enduring and significant objections to the existence of God has been the experience of what we might describe as evil and suffering in the world. The traditional Christian understanding and description of God is that he is a personal being of good who transcends time and space, and is beyond the created realm, and who is omniscient, omnipresent and all powerful. But when we look around us we see a world that for some people does not appear to represent such a creative being at all. Those who wish to dispute the existence of God have used the presence of evil of various kinds as a means of creating logical arguments to support their disbelief.

The basic form of the argument against the existence of God from the presence of evil proceeds as follows:

(1) If God exists then he is omniscient, omnipotent and perfectly good.

(2) If God were omniscient, omnipotent and perfectly good then the world would not contain evil.

(3) The world contains evil.

Therefore:

(4) It is not the case that God exists.

This is certainly a logical argument. I mean that it hangs together coherently and each of the premises, if true, would lead to the conclusion that there is no God. But as a Christian I want to object to and indeed reject the second premise, that if *God were omniscient, omnipotent and perfectly good then the world would not contain evil* and I want to unpack the third premise and consider what we actually mean by evil.

We can begin with thinking about what we mean by evil. We surely mean several different things, and it will be necessary to ask what each of these different meanings imply for the existence of God. It will also be necessary to ask what Orthodox Christianity says about these different uses of the word evil, since we are not engaging in Apologetics on behalf of a vague deism, but on behalf of the Christian, and especially the Orthodox Christian, understanding of God.

In the English language the word evil originally meant defective from either a moral or a material sense. A pair of shoes might have been made evilly, if they fell apart when they were worn. But someone who stole the shoes was also doing evil. A little later the word bad tended to be used for some material defect, while the word evil tended to be restricted to the sense of a moral defect. It is interesting that in the English language the word *good* is still the opposite of both of these meanings. The fact that the word evil has been used for both moral

and material defect certainly introduces an element of confusion when we want to reflect on the possibility of the existence of God and of evil.

I will briefly consider these different uses, and then examine the arguments made using them in a little more detail.

In the first case, we mean by evil that moral rejection of good which is made possible by the presence and experience of free will in each of us. This false use of our free will is called sin within the Christian tradition. Whether a particular society recognises any particular false uses of the free will as sin is secondary to the fact that to choose other than God, to choose other than good, is to choose evil. If someone sets out to steal a car in a local supermarket carpark then they perpetrate a moral evil. Indeed from a Christian point of view, having determined that they will steal a car, and set out to do so, they have already committed evil.

Our Lord Jesus Christ says in Matthew 5:27-28..

You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

Evil is especially therefore a matter of the heart. It is to do with the use of the will to choose that which is not God and which is not good. To choose death rather than life. As an exercise of the free will moral evil is therefore not a thing that exists at all.

St Gregory of Nyssa says...

Sin does not exist in nature apart from free will. It is not a substance in its own right.

Maximos the Confessor says...

Not even the demons are evil by nature. They become such through the misuse of their natural powers.

Evagrius says...

That which is evil in the strict sense is not a substance but the absence of good, just as darkness is nothing other than the absence of light.

Metropolitan Kallistos Ware sums up these and other references by saying...

Evil is always parasitic. It is the twisting and misappropriation of what is in itself good. Evil resides not in the thing itself, but in our attitude towards the thing, that is to say in our will.

As Orthodox Christians we would want to insist with these Fathers that moral evil is not a thing, and therefore is not created by God, who is good and made all things good. It is a misuse of that which God has made to be good and does not exist as a thing at all.

The thief who goes out to commit a crime has made use of his free will in an evil manner, but God is not the author of his morally defective choice. The man who beats a child to death has also used his free will in an evil manner. Likewise the dictator, a Stalin or a Hitler, has exercised the free will that God grants him as a human being in a manner which is evil, and which has perhaps directly caused the deaths of millions. It is the misuse of a faculty which is in itself good which is the means and cause of moral evil. Metropolitan Kallistos writes...

There is no greater force within creation than the free will of beings endowed with self-consciousness and spiritual intellect; and so the misuse of this free will can have altogether terrifying consequences.

This is what we mean, as Orthodox Christians, by moral evil. We will examine, in a moment, the arguments used to deny the possibility of the existence of God in a world with such evil.

In the second case, we mean by evil those circumstances which come about through the exercise of free will, and which might cause us, or some others, to experience harm of various kinds. If I come out of my house and discover that my car has been stolen then I suffer the consequences of the moral evil of the thief who has just stolen it. If I am walking home one evening and I am assaulted by a gang of youths then I have also suffered the consequences of the moral evil of those who have beaten me up.

Much of the evil and the suffering in the world is of this nature. It is caused by the evil choices of others. The news is filled with the recent and tragic crash of an airline into the French Alps. But it seems that the co-pilot had deliberately chosen to lock the pilot out of the cabin and plunge the plane into the ground killing all those on-board. It appears not to have been an accident without any cause, but to have taken place due to the actions of people with free-will.

We might consider a great many such situations. In 1995, the deliberate actions of an employee of the Barings Bank, a three hundred year old financial institution in London, led to the collapse of the bank, and hardship for many. He had lost £827 million in various gambles with the bank's funds and this proved more than the bank could sustain. The exercise of his free will led to harm and suffering for many others who had not been complicit in his evil.

The country of Zimbabwe used to be one of the richest in Africa, and now it is one of the poorest. What is the reason for the suffering of so many people who are without basic services such as medical care, education and who even face malnutrition? In 1960 the GDP per person was about 60% of the world average. Now it is about 8% of the world average, and Zimbabwe is the 27th poorest country in the world. What has happened? Who is to blame? It is complicated, but it certainly relates to the choices made by some of those who have been in positions of power over the last 50 years. The use of their free will has created circumstances in which a relatively wealthy nation has become relatively poor. The poverty experienced by so many people in Zimbabwe is not created by God, nor is it accidental or due to chance. It is caused by the choices made by others.

It seems to me that this second form of evil is also rooted in the exercise of the free will which is present in all human beings.

A third form of what is often called evil is found in the very nature of the material world around us. When the natural world operates in a manner which causes harm then it is often considered evil, and God is often blamed for constructing it in such a way. When there is a storm and houses are blown over, and people are injured or even killed, then this is considered evil. When there are heavy rains and homes are flooded this is often considered evil. When a volcano erupts this is considered an evil circumstance.

It seems that we can lay the blame for these natural disasters firmly in the hands of God. We even call the worst sorts of calamities *Acts of God* and insurance companies are careful to exclude them from their liability.

We will consider these events in more detail in a moment. But even in these cases it seems to me that there is often, but not always, an element of human choice which could mitigate or even entirely remove the consequences of some of these events. A couple of years ago there were heavy rains in the British Isles and for some weeks there were serious occasions of flooding in parts of the country. On the Somerset Levels for instance, water overwhelmed many farms and even inundated areas of housing. It might have seemed that this was an evil which was in God's hands alone and for which he was solely responsible.

But in fact after the floods had receded it became clear that most of the damage had been caused by human choices and by a deliberate series of decisions made by various organisations and politicians. It had been decided, for instance, to reduce the budget spent on keeping the drainage channels flowing freely. Those channels and ditches which had operated for hundreds of years to keep the area dry. It had been decided to establish a nature reserve at the mouth of the major river in the area, and to allow it to become a marshy area in which water did not flow quickly. It had also been decided to allow houses to be built on areas of ground that were low lying and which were liable to flooding. When the news programmes covered these floods it was immediately apparent from video taken from the air that the old medieval villages were all placed on higher ground, where the houses would not be flooded, while it was modern housing estates which had been placed in danger.

When the heavy rain came it was not surprising that the water could not easily drain from the Levels, because of human choices, and the houses which had been placed on low lying ground naturally suffered damage. These same rains had made the area a rich and fertile farming area for centuries, but now, because of choices made by various people and organisations, the same rain caused harm. But who is to blame? And to what extent has a natural phenomenon been made evil because of the bad choices people have made?

This rather leads into a fourth form of what is considered evil, and that is the consequences caused to us by the natural laws which we find in this world in which we live. If I drive my car very fast, then as I approach a sharp bend various natural forces will apply themselves to my vehicle and I may find that I am flying through the air and involved in a serious accident, which might well leave me injured or even dead. Though we may not be able to describe all of these forces in a formal and scientific manner, nevertheless, anyone who has managed to pass their driving test in the UK will be aware that it takes a certain amount of time to break safely, that if we travel around a bend too fast we will not be able to stay on the road, or that if the road is wet or icy then our tyres will grip the road surface less tightly. If we choose to ignore these natural laws then are the consequences due to our wilfulness or to the presence of the laws themselves? Is the fault our own or can we blame God?

If I have a space ship and launch myself towards the Sun then it is the case, according to the natural processes operating in this world, that the temperature of my space craft will increase, and eventually it will be destroyed, burnt up into a cinder, and me with it. Likewise if I dive down to the watery depths, various natural processes will cause gases absorbed in my body to be released as dangerous bubbles if I ascend too quickly. This process is well known by those who dive to any great depths, and it requires them to come to the surface very slowly to avoid getting the potentially fatal condition of the bends.

What shall we say? Are these natural processes evil in themselves? To a great extent most of them are neutral, and a force for good in many circumstances. The fire that is warming my home in the Winter, by converting fuel to energy and heat, will cause me harm if I place my hand into the flames.

Much of the harm and suffering experienced in the world is of this character. We cannot easily, it seems to me, consider it absolutely evil. Rather it is the human interaction with various processes in nature which can lead to both benefit and harm. It is good that gravity causes us to be attached to this earth on which we live, otherwise no-one would enter the Olympic High Jump event! Every competitor would find themselves launched into space. But it is that same useful force of gravity which causes a person walking too close to a cliff edge to fall to their death. In itself, it is surely not reasonable to consider that all of the forces of nature, when they act in a way that harms us, are a deliberate evil that could prevent us believing in a good and powerful God. But we will return to this type of evil also.

Finally, there is the suffering, the evil, which is experienced as illness and sickness, and as bodily pain, perhaps over many years. It is especially this form of evil which leads people to emotionally insist that they hate the God who allows such suffering, even while they deny that he exists. Much of this personally experienced suffering is indeed distressing. But as we look around the world we also see that much of the ill health, and the physical and mental suffering which is being endured, is also not without some human causation. Not all such suffering by any means. But a significant proportion. If I took up smoking cigarettes I would expose myself to about three times an increased the risk of death compared to someone who never smoked. Likewise I would be likely to reduce my life expectancy by 10 years. These are according to US Government figures. Likewise, if I became even more overweight than I am, then I would expose myself to increased risks of heart disease, to diabetes and to having a stroke.

All of these eventualities would be distressing for my family if they occurred. But to what extent should I consider myself partially responsible if I adopted an unhealthy lifestyle? We may reasonably blame various aspects of modern society with increasing the risk to our health, but this merely shifts the blame elsewhere, it does not excuse human agency. If the food we eat is part of the cause of obesity then there are humans who are deciding what ingredients to serve us, and to some extent we are also choosing what we eat. We have become sedentary, we have adopted a highly processed diet, all of these have increased the risks to our health.

Outside of the developed world there are other issues. There are hundreds of millions of people facing malnutrition and the presence of endemic diseases such as malaria. Yet it costs only £3 to purchase a malaria net, and it would be relatively simple to establish a malaria net production facility in every country where malaria was a problem and to establish it on a sustainable basis so that it did not need constant Western support. Why are people dying of malaria in the world? There were an estimated 584,000 deaths from malaria worldwide in 2013. It is not impossible to identify the breeding places of malaria bearing mosquitos either. In the West a marshy mosquito ridden area would be drained so that the mosquitos and the risk of malaria were removed. So we know it is possible for malaria to be eliminated.

Fortunately work is being funded, by Bill Gates among others, to share expertise so that those countries facing the greatest threat from malaria can adopt strategies that will lead to a reduction in risk and to the future elimination of the disease. But this illustrates that in fact

the suffering caused by malaria, and other such diseases, is not an act of God, but is also subject to human choice.

Even in a wealthy economy such as India, it is a fact that 600 million people have no sanitation, and 300 million people have no access to clean water. Yet India has a space industry. It has one of the largest armed forces and military expenditures in the world, and it has nuclear energy and nuclear weapons. Whose fault is it that so many are at risk from deadly diseases through the lack of sanitation and clean water in such an advanced society and economy? Is it a given, just something that God has created, or are there human decisions and agencies behind such a contrast of the complete poverty experienced by some and the wealth enjoyed by others in just this one country?

Now it might be said that much suffering is not of this character. What of the genetic disabilities and conditions which are transferred at conception. How do we explain these? They are surely without any human causation. Of course this is true to a great extent. We are not yet able to understand the complexity of our genetic makeup so that we can foresee all of the physical and mental consequences that might face our descendants. But in fact the illness and weaknesses and tragedies that many of us face are in fact hidden in the genetic structure of our being, a structure that we have received from others who hide those same weaknesses.

We know that our genetic structure is damaged by our environment. A recent study found that the genetic material passed on from older males tended to be more damaged than that from younger males. This means that the later in life that we have children the more likely it is that the genetic material making up our children will have some environmental damage. But there is also a link between the integrity of this genetic material and the diet and lifestyle of fathers. Smoking, for instance, harms both the genetic material used in the creation of a new life, and makes it harder for that new life to be sustained.

In the UK we also know that there has been a very greatly increased incidence of congenital illness among some migrant communities in which marriage of cousins has taken place over many generations. In the wider population the NHS estimates a risk of about 2.5% of such illness, but each incidence of a cousin marriage increases this risk to more than 10%. Such risks are well known, but certain cultures choose to ignore the risks. One such community represents only 3% of the population in the UK, but experiences over 33% of these genetically compromised births.

Whose fault is this? Shall we blame God, or shall we place some of the responsibility on the shoulders of those who perpetuate such cultural practices that cause these disabilities.

This is, then, a fifth form of what might be called evil, and which might be used as a justification for rejecting the possibility of the existence of God.

I would like us to consider these five different types of evil, or forms of suffering, and use them in the argument against the existence of God which I presented at the beginning. Let me remind ourselves of its general form...

(1) If God exists then he is omniscient, omnipotent and perfectly good.

(2) If God were omniscient, omnipotent and perfectly good then the world would not contain evil.

(3) *The world contains evil.*

Therefore:

(4) *It is not the case that God exists.*

What does this argument mean if we consider the first form of evil, that of the moral evil of rejecting God and the good in the heart of man and acting upon that rejection? We have to ask what sort of world could be possible in which such evil was impossible. That God is all powerful does not mean that he can do those things which are logically impossible. He cannot make a square circle for instance, or make $2 + 2 = 5$. He cannot make himself cease to exist. And in the case of creating human beings endowed with free will, and able to choose God or to reject him, it does not seem possible to me that such free will is compatible with any world in which that free will is constrained so that only God and the good can be chosen. It then becomes the logical absurdity of a free will that is neither free nor a faculty of will at all.

Here is what C.S.Lewis says...

“His Omnipotence means power to do all that is intrinsically possible, not to do the intrinsically impossible. You may attribute miracles to Him, but not nonsense. There is no limit to His power.

If you choose to say, 'God can give a creature free will and at the same time withhold free will from it,' you have not succeeded in saying anything about God: meaningless combinations of words do not suddenly acquire meaning simply because we prefix to them the two other words, 'God can.'

It remains true that all things are possible with God: the intrinsic impossibilities are not things but nonentities. It is no more possible for God than for the weakest of His creatures to carry out both of two mutually exclusive alternatives; not because His power meets an obstacle, but because nonsense remains nonsense even when we talk it about God.”

If God wished to create a world in which human beings could freely enter into a relationship of love with him, for our eternal benefit and blessing, then there must always be the possibility of not choosing God and the good, otherwise there is no choice at all.

When I commit evil, whose fault is it? It is surely my own. This is why we have a legal system that attributes criminal fault to those who have been engaged in criminal activity. We are expected to take responsibility for our actions. Even in school or at university we must sit examinations ourselves. We cannot send someone who has done the necessary revision to sit the test for us. And in our employment, when it comes to an annual appraisal we will not get far if we insist that our failure to do any of the things we had been required to do was the fault of God who had given us a free will to choose to ignore our duties and responsibilities.

What is better? A world in which human beings have free will and so may choose God and the good, even while they may also choose to reject God and the good? Or a world in which there was no possibility of choice at all? The second one might well be free of the sort of moral evil we are considering, but it would also be free of any humanity. All that would remain would be a world of organic robots or puppets.

It seems to me that to be human is to be agents with a freedom of will, and to have a freedom of will requires the possibility in this world of the presence of moral evil. To object to this freedom of will is to propose the elimination of humanity itself.

Now some have suggested that a world could be imagined in which only those human beings who always chose God and the good were created. But in all of human existence there has never been such a one who autonomously and universally chose God and the good, unless we consider the blessed Virgin Mary and Theotokos, but I would suggest that she was granted a singular grace. I know that no-one I have ever known, and certainly not myself, has ever lived even a day without committing some moral fault, whether knowingly or unknowingly. And it seems to me that God does not create from nothing each individual human person who is born into the world, but he already uses the natural processes he has established for the fruitfulness of mankind. Therefore it would seem to me that to suggest he should have individually created only those few humans who would always choose God and the good is neither consistent with our experience, nor consistent with that sense that God generously offers to all, to the great mass of mankind whom he loves, that possibility of choosing life, even after having made many mistakes and perpetrating all manner of moral evil ourselves.

But there is also an objection raised that when we see a crime being committed, especially a violent one, we will expect someone to boldly step in and prevent evil taking place. It is said that if this is what is expected of human beings, then why should we not expect God to also step in and intervene.

The problem with this view is that we tend to think that only serious evil should be interrupted by God, and that nothing we do ourselves is that morally reprehensible. Let us imagine that all thieves could be prevented by God from stealing. How would this happen? If they were unable to think about stealing then they would essentially become unthinking robots. If they were unable to act then it would moderate the moral evil but would not remove it, since evil exists especially in the will. Let us assume that in fact they were allowed to think about and plan their evil but as soon as they did so they found themselves on an island with all other thieves and those considering moral evil in their hearts. This might certainly seem satisfactory. But it is almost certainly the case that most of us thinking that murderers and thieves should be placed on an island would want to exclude ourselves from their company.

Yet there is no moral distinction between stealing a car, and stealing the extra 10p that we were mistakenly given in our change in a shop, if we notice it and decide to keep it. It is theft in both cases. Keeping a book that we borrowed a year ago from a friend and don't want to return is theft. Claiming that we are 15 and need a child's bus ticket when we are 17 is theft. Moral evil is not limited to what we might want to consider serious crimes that we are unlikely to commit. Even using bad language in anger when another driver on the road annoys us is an expression of moral evil. If we wish God to intervene to make all the bad people go away then we will all be caught up in God's justice and will all find ourselves on the island. Looking at a person with lust is the same as adultery. Shall we ask God to intervene in all of these cases? Being angry without cause is the same as murder.

When we want God to act to prevent others committing moral evil we exclude ourselves, but we are caught up in the same abuse of free-will. If we wish God to prevent moral evil then we must wish him to prevent all moral evil, not just other people's evil, and not just the worst of

evils. And in such a world we discover that we are without free-will, and being without free-will we are no longer human at all.

There is another objection to this argument against the existence of God because of moral evil. It is that if there is no God then there is no such thing as moral evil. How can there be an absolute morality if there is no transcendent creator of morality. All that there could be is a variety of personal opinions about what might be permitted and what might be forbidden. It becomes a matter of the imposition of patterns of behaviour by force. If we are indeed only animals, and worse than that, if we are only animals living on an insignificant speck of dust in an inconsequential galaxy whose life span is only 70 or 80 years before utter and complete oblivion, then how can it matter how anyone lives.

We do not insist that a lion adopt a vegetarian diet because of the rights of the gazelle. We understand that they are animals and must live according to animal instinct. If there is no God then we are no more than this ourselves. And there can be no good or bad. Why is it good to feed a hungry person in another continent? Who says it is good? What if I think it is bad, who can tell me that I am wrong. Indeed who has the right to tell me what I can do or think, apart from by the exercise of power.

So if there is no God then we cannot even speak about moral evil in the world, the only possible justification for saying that the murder of children is evil – not just socially unacceptable – is because of the existence of a transcendent God.

As an Orthodox Christian I think that the necessary presence of free will as a characteristic of humanity requires that the possibility of moral evil exist in the world even as created by an all-powerful and good God. Of course this does not mean that many who have no faith in God will not insist that a world in which men are able to be bad is not one that a good God could have created, but it seems to me that such people always wish to exclude themselves and their own behaviour from the category of that which is evil.

The Christian Gospel is that God has acted in this world in which all of us perpetrate moral evil, and he has done so without compromising that freedom of will which is the essence of our humanity. Had God done nothing then there might be an argument that he was not good, or was not all-powerful, but in fact he has done everything possible and necessary to bring about the fulfilment of his purposes for good, even though this has required of necessity the permissive presence of evil in the world. He has become himself part of his own creation and shares with us the experience of suffering and pain, of the consequences of moral evil committed by others. But he has not shared these experiences simply to be able to sympathise with us, but that the very meaning and purpose of this transient mortal life might be transformed and become the means of entry into a more perfect world.

If we consider the second category of evil, which is consequential to the moral evil of other human beings. I have suggested that preventing someone from stealing my car would require God to prevent all forms of moral evil, however minor they might seem to us, and so would entirely undermine the possibility of free will and therefore our own humanity.

I would not be pleased if my car was stolen, and I might wish the criminal to be caught by the police and face justice. But I do not believe I can demand that the entire world be remodelled so that my car could never be stolen. This could of course be ensured by removing free will, which I have already suggested would also remove our humanity and make us robots or

puppets. But it could also be ensured by providing one world for every person that God has made. This would be possible for an all-powerful God. But I think that this would also remove something essential to our humanity, and to our reflecting that divine community which is found in the Holy Trinity itself.

God is, from all eternity and outside of time and space, a community of Father, Son and Holy Spirit in one essence, and our humanity reflects this in that we are also made for community. It is certainly true that living with others exposes us to their moral evil, and our own moral evil affects others also. But there is also good in the world, and the choices for God and for good which we make in community are also part of the evidence we must submit to this argument.

It is true that the actions of people cause harm to others, but it is also true that the actions of people cause great benefit. America is often criticised for some of its involvement in various parts of the world that seem to represent evil, yet at the same time, ordinary American people in 2013 gave \$335 billion to charity. That is a very large amount of money being contributed by ordinary people to support those in need in various ways.

I think that such statistics must always be used together with those which point to the consequences of moral evil in the world. If it is necessary, as it seems to me, that the possibility of moral evil be allowed so that humanity can exercise free will and truly choose God and the good, then we must recognise that very often men and women do exactly that. The world is not unremittingly filled with moral evil, and the presence of moral goodness, together with the necessity of permitting moral evil, seems to me to be evidence for the existence of God, a God who is all powerful and good, but wishes to allow human beings the free exercise of their free will.

Now some people will accept that to be human means that we need to have a freedom of will, but they will insist that the natural disasters which plague the world are such that if there is a God then he cannot be all-powerful, since he allows them, or is not good, for the same reason.

But what would it mean for the natural processes of the universe to be such that they could never cause any harm. What would this mean for human responsibility? And without any responsibility what would happen to that moral development which God desires in each one of us. Is it possible for us to become properly human if there are no consequences to our actions, if we are not required to be responsible for our choices, and if there is no possibility of being required to endure a variety of difficult circumstances?

Once again it is easy to imagine that we are only speaking about earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. But these are natural disasters on a large scale. What about a flood that overwhelmed only one isolated farmhouse? If we are demanding that God not allow any natural disasters then we must also be concerned about this one family tragedy where the waters rose during the night, surrounded the house, and took away the lives of those caught within. What changes to the natural laws would require to be made to prevent such a disaster on both the smallest and the greatest scale? It seems to me that it would require the world to be turned into a magical place where there were no laws of nature and where nothing could be relied upon.

If we are concerned about the effects of the greatest storms and hurricanes then we must also be concerned about the local effects of a strong wind that brings down an old tree so that it falls on a child who is killed. Yet the tree falls as a result of universal laws of nature and not as a result of a malicious and deliberate action of God.

All of the disasters we can imagine are tragedies on a large and small scale. But it does not seem to me that changing the laws of nature in a constantly flexible manner is a coherent demand to make of God. Should we suggest that a tree will fall down, unless there is a child under it, in which case it will not fall down? Shall we suggest that a flooded river will always leave areas of dry land if there is a person occupying it? How would it be possible to understand how the universe acts and under which constant laws and forces if in fact these are constantly in flux to prevent any harm coming to any person.

And we surely cannot limit the harm caused to the physical. The farmer whose land is flooded will suffer financial harm, but to demand that a good and all powerful God would never allow this means that in fact we are insisting that a river into which more and more water falls as rain will never overflow its banks, something which is incomprehensible in our understanding of the world. Or we would insist on other absurdities such as that the rain never fall in such quantities at the head of the river to prevent a house being flooded there, but still be available in great quantities to water the fertile farm land at the mouth of the valley.

It seems to me that the natural state of the world is not a challenge to God's goodness, but an opportunity for our own experience of God's faithfulness. And he is faithful not by taking away any possibility of suffering, but by sustaining us himself and with others through various forms of suffering.

I wrote a paper some time ago based on research into an account of a major plague in an area of Syria more than 1400 years ago. The civil community there was nominally Christian, and there was a great inequality between rich and poor. But when the plague came, although at first it intensified some of these divisions, yet very quickly it became an opportunity for the expression of a greater commitment to Christ, and to those who were suffering. The rich began to open their homes as hospitals for the poor and the sick, and many of them repented of their past behaviour, understanding that in some sense the plague was a judgement upon them.

I wrote in this paper that I did not think it was ever appropriate for it to be said of a group of people – you are being judged by God – but it did seem to me that those who were and are in the midst of such situations may reflect on their attitudes and way of life and come to a personal sense that this moment of suffering is allowed by God for their salvation.

This is how I understand natural disasters in the world. They are not evidence that God does not care, but they are a necessary and painful means of moral growth. There are no major earthquakes in the UK. There are no volcanos. But when these take place in other countries then they are an opportunity for even British people to express the quality and character of their hearts in offering sympathetic support. There are many other disasters of various kinds which afflict people even here in Britain. They can include floods and fires, but also personal disasters such as unemployment or bereavement. When we blame God for disasters what is usually meant, if unspoken, is that we want this world to be a heaven already where nothing disturbing can ever take place, but where we are still able to do whatever we want without

any limitations being set by God. Such a world is not possible. Because the exercise of free will introduces all manner of consequences for good and evil, and according to the Orthodox Christian understanding, it is through the difficult and complex experience of this mortal world that we are prepared by the choices we make now for the world to come.

If we live in a world in which these are a given, then what matters most is how we respond to these circumstances in our own lives and in the lives of others. What matters in such a case is the perspective we have on the world. If we believe that this short life of 70 or 80 years is all that we experience, and if we expect it to be filled with happiness, then we will be disappointed. But if we understand it as a temporary and provisional opportunity to enter into union with a loving God then all of the circumstances of our life become invitations to a greater experience of this God.

But we also need to consider our own complicity in the effects of many natural disasters. The city of Los Angeles is built on a major earthquake fault line, and there will be another earthquake. Knowing this, who is responsible when the earthquake does occur, and lives are lost? Likewise, when an earthquake and tsunami destroyed a nuclear power station in Japan whose fault was it? It was hardly God's. There have been many earthquakes there. There will be many more. It was not unexpected. And being expected, those who designed and built it with insufficient safeguards are surely to blame for the harm it has caused, and not God.

What would it mean to live in a world where the natural world could cause us no harm? And this introduces the fourth form of evil which was more than natural disasters but the very forces of nature itself.

What would it mean to insist that God create a world where I would come to no harm if I put my hand into a fire while the fire also remained burning hot and consumed the fuel I had placed in the fireplace? What would it mean to insist that if I jumped off the roof of a tower block I would fall gently and come to no harm, while a brick, falling at the same time, would plummet to the ground under the normal force of gravity.

It might be amusing to imagine that we lived in the world of the Matrix films, where everything is essentially an illusion and therefore subject to all manner of distortion, but God has chosen to place us in a world that requires some discipline, and responsibility. A world where we, and others, will come to harm, if we do not treat the laws of nature with respect.

The question seems to me not to be so much why does a good God allow the forces of nature to cause harm, since I imagine that even those disputing the existence of God will appreciate the force of gravity working universally, but really is asking why we are mortal? And more than that, is expressing that angry sense that there must be more to life than an indeterminate number of years of existence closed by death in a variety of manners.

If we insist that God does not allow someone to burn their hand in a fire, what else should we demand of God? That we never break a bone? My wife has just broken one of her toes by walking into a suitcase in the night. She is uncomfortable and in pain, but this is what happens in our world. If we demand that God change the world so that we can never burn our hand, or stub our toe, since these all entail suffering, then surely all pain must be subject to the same criticism, and all causes of pain prevented from operating on humans while continuing to operate as expected in every other case.

This would be to treat us as perpetual children, and we would never take responsibility for ourselves. It seems to me that the world God has created, for the possibility of our salvation, of necessity requires that human persons have free will, and that the forces of nature operate in a universal man that requires us to act in accordance with them, and not have them change to suit our own irresponsibility or circumstances.

This does also mean that there will be those who suffer harm and hurt. But though this is painful and distressing, especially when those we love are facing such suffering, nevertheless as Christians we insist that the Christian God, since this is the God we are arguing about, has not provided only this temporal and mortal experience for mankind, but offers the possibility of an eternal union with Him in another world where our choices now will provide for a blessedness without evil in the future.

C.S. Lewis speaks about this when he says...

Try to exclude the possibility of suffering which the order of nature and the existence of free-wills involve, and you find that you have excluded life itself.

When I consider the responses of the families of those recently martyred in Libya. Of course they mourn and will miss the presence of their much loved family members, and they remain the subjects of our prayers. But they have themselves publically expressed that Christian hope in the life to come, which is only the fullness of the life in Christ we have begun to experience now. No one would wish for anyone to lose a loved one in such a way. But for the Christian, defending the existence of the Christian God, this is a necessary aspect of a consideration of evil in the world. We insist that this is not all there is to life. And since this is not all there is to life, then we do not despair when it comes to an end, for ourselves or for our loved ones.

I want to speak about the argument that sickness and disease are a final argument against the existence of a good and all-powerful God. It is often these very personal experiences of suffering, in our own bodies and in those of members of our families, or among our friends, which cause some people to doubt the existence of God. And even those who insist that God does not exist still seem to want to blame him when illness and disease strike them down.

Such emotions are understandable, and we will consider what we might say to those expressing them, in a moment. Many of us have stood at the bedside of a loved one who is in pain, or is seriously ill. We have a tremendous sense of mortality in such moments. That we are such fragile creatures, and that so easily our life is brought to an end. It is easy for people to become very angry against even the God they do not believe in. But what they are angry about is the fact that we are mortal and that all of us, at one time or another, and in one way or another, will meet our own death and our mortal life will come to an end.

What shall we say about sickness and suffering? It seems to me that from a philosophical point of view we understand that this created universe is subject to the laws of nature which mean that it is slowly running out of life and energy. Errors in the DNA we pass on to our children are accumulating. The environment in which we live is toxic to us. Though we live longer in the West because of improvements to medicine and nutrition, these benefits are still not experienced by most people in the world. We have adopted ways of living that are harmful to us, yet we wish to blame God for them all.

I have already mentioned the harm caused to health by smoking, but I could include excessive alcohol consumption, promiscuous sexual activity, highly processed food, lack of exercise, lack of sleep, lack of stimulating hobbies and interests, loneliness and isolation, pollution, the universal use of pesticides. There are so many health consequences caused by the environment that humans have created. And in the world of the poor there are just as many negative causes of poor health, most of which could be resolved by deliberate human intervention.

From an emotional point of view, we understand entirely when someone despairingly asks why God did not save their grandfather from death by lung cancer. But if we learn that he had smoked and drunk too much alcohol for most of his life then from the point of view of reason and logic, we will understand that to a great extent he brought his illness on himself. We do not say this to one who is sorrowing. But if we are considering the logical argument against God's existence then we must raise the issue. How much of the suffering due to ill health in the world could be avoided by various human choices and actions?

This does not mean that all such suffering could be explained or need be explained. Some cancer is caused by a genetic predisposition passed on from our ancestors and caused at some point by the fact that our genetic structure can be compromised. We are mortal. We will all of us die. This is the world that we have been born into.

For the Orthodox Christian we do not despair because we know that in the midst of our suffering, even if it seems without obvious cause, we find that God is present and is not absent. We worship a God who wept at the tomb of his friend Lazarus. God does not condone the scandal of death. Far from it. He has become man, and has himself endured death, that he might rise again, and raise us with him.

More than that, those of us who are Christian, know that sometimes God uses the pain and suffering we endure as a means, often the last means, of calling out to us. As C.S. Lewis says...

We can ignore even pleasure. But pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world....No doubt pain as God's megaphone is a terrible instrument; it may lead to final and unrepented rebellion. But it gives the only opportunity the bad man can have for amendment. it removes the veil; it plants the flag of truth within the fortress of the rebel soul.

Even in the world we know that pain is not always without some greater value than itself. Someone starting to get fit will endure all manner of pain at the beginning. Every muscle will ache and it will seem that far from becoming fit we are becoming more and more debilitated. The lazy friend will ask whether it is worth getting fit if it costs all the pain that must be borne, but the one becoming fit knows that it is indeed a necessary burden for a while.

Even in the world we know that there is much scope for compassion and generosity in sharing and supporting others in suffering, especially due to illness. Is it an accident that most of the first medical nurses were religious sisters, I mean nuns. Their selfless care of others was an expression of their own Christian faith. Even when my wife first trained as a nurse over 30 years ago, the uniform which nurses wore still had some echoes of the dress of

a religious sister, and the title of matron for a senior nurse, an old use going back to the 16th century, was not un-associated with the idea of a mother of a religious house.

This is surely what is missing whenever the subject of pain and suffering is introduced as an argument against the existence for God. Let us consider all of the pain and suffering in the world by all means, and let us be honest in considering the cause of much of it. But we must not allow those who argue in such a way to dismiss all the evidence for good and for love which we find in the same mortal circumstances in which we find ourselves.

I see this even on Facebook. As I am writing I see someone asking for prayers because a member of their family has been hurt by a falling fridge. Do we immediately demand how God could allow this if he really exists? We might. But I notice very quickly, underneath such a distressing prayer request that within minutes there are tens and even a hundred messages of love and goodwill, with prayers being promised, and this hundred represents hundreds more.

We might remember a little while ago that a disabled man had been mugged in the street and caused some bodily harm as well as losing his wallet. This is again a distressing example of moral evil in the world. But a young woman suggested that people might want to donate a little money to help the man, and restore what he had lost. Within a very short time several hundred thousands of pounds had been donated by ordinary people to help him, and to make his life a little more comfortable.

We have to understand that a world in which there was no possibility of harm would also be a world in which there was no possibility of exercising such love and kindness. Is such a world one in which we could be recognisably human? I do not think so.

Therefore it seems to me, even though we cannot answer or justify every experience of evil, pain and suffering in the world, we can insist that a world in which there was no freedom of will, and therefore the possibility of evil, would not be one in which humanity could exist. And we can also insist that though the experience of pain and suffering is not good in itself at all, it can be the means of good. Without the presence of pain and suffering there would be no need or opportunity for goodness, for love, for that sympathy which is also part of what it means to become human in the fullest sense.

God has not excluded himself from our pain, still less does he enjoy it. In Christ he has become himself truly man and has suffered with us and for us. Therefore as Christians we have confidence to address him in the midst of our suffering as one who has already manifested his love and care towards us and all men.

Let me conclude this brief study with a few more words from C.S. Lewis, whose excellent book, *The Problem of Pain*, is worth consideration. He says...

The problem of reconciling human suffering with the existence of a God who loves, is only insoluble so long as we attach a trivial meaning to the word "love", and look on things as if man were the centre of them. Man is not the centre. God does not exist for the sake of man. Man does not exist for his own sake. "Thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created." We were made not primarily that we may love God (though we were made for that too) but that God may love us, that we may become objects in which the divine love may rest "well pleased".

Knowing that we are loved by God, and created to be loved by God, changes our perspective on all things. Even the experience of evil, pain and suffering.

Apologetics: If God is Love, why Hell, "Purgatory", Judgement, Eternal Punishment, Darkness and the Lake of Fire?

I want to speak very much more briefly on a second topic, which is how we reconcile the idea of a God of love with the punishment of those judged unworthy, however this is understood, which is described in the Scriptures and in the teachings of the Fathers. I think it is necessary to speak more briefly, not only because I have already spoken at some length, but because we must be careful not to exceed the bounds of revealed knowledge. The Church seems to me to preserve a proper caution in speaking about all aspects of the life after death because we have not been given all of the information that curiosity might prefer.

We don't like speaking about Hell any more. It seems to suggest that not only are we so intolerant that we believe Christianity is true, but we even believe that those who do not agree with us might be punished for their opinions. In such circumstances it is no wonder that many Christians have preferred to avoid the issue of judgement and Hell. But it seems to me that it is entirely necessary and reasonable to discuss it openly and as a central aspect of our faith.

In the first place, each one of us will stand judgment before God for our life in this world. Each person will be judged according to his words and his works. Christians will not be excluded, as if we had already passed the test. On the contrary many of those who cried out, Lord, Lord, will find that God refuses to recognise them. And others who took first place in the Church will find that they are placed last when the secrets of the heart are made known. And some of those who seemed most at home in the Church will find that they are not wearing the proper wedding garments and will be cast into darkness.

It is surely reasonable and proper, just and fair, that everyone should face the great judgement seat where it is no longer possible to deceive ourselves and others. But we should also note that the judgement which will take place is not based on how long we have been members of the Church, nor how many services we have attended each week, nor even how many hymns we have memorised. On the contrary, our Lord Jesus Christ says...

I tell you, on the day of judgment men will render account for every idle word they utter; for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned (Matthew 12:36)

For the Son of Man is to come with His angels in the glory of His Father, and then He will repay every man according to his works. (Matthew 16: 27, cf. Revelation 2:23)

The judge will be our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, since He is the one who, by His suffering and death, has received the power to judge. It is the Crucified One who will call men to account at the end of the ages. He has earned this right as man through the perfection of His human life.

For the Father... has given Him the authority to execute judgment because He is the Son of Man. (John 5:27)

The Lord Jesus Christ will judge all men exclusively on the basis of how they have served Him by serving all men - the least of the brethren. Here is what he says...

When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. Before Him will be gathered all the nations, and He will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and He will place the sheep at His right hand, but the goats at the left.

Then the King will say to those at His right hand, 'Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.'

Then the righteous will answer Him, 'Lord, when did we see Thee hungry and feed Thee, or thirsty and give Thee drink? And when did we see Thee a stranger and welcome Thee, or naked and clothe Thee? And when did we see Thee sick or in prison and visit Thee?'

And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.'

Then He will say to those at His left hand, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food. I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.'

Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see Thee hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to Thee?'

Then He will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me.'

And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life. (Matthew 25: 31-46)

What a challenging teaching. I do not think it means that becoming and being a Christian is of no consequence in the Last Judgement, but rather that we who claim to be Christians are challenged to consider the way in which we actually live the Christian life. I think that this also suggests that God will have mercy as he wills on those others who have not been able to become Christians for all manner of reasons known to God, but who have responded to him with repentance and desire and have expressed that choice for God in service to others.

Who are the righteous? They are not those who merely speak about love and care for others, they are those who put the love of God into practice. If there is a judgement then it is just because we also will be judged, and having received so much from God in Christ how much more strictly will we be judged.

And if we accept that it is just that there be a judgement, then we must also accept that it is just that there be a Hell. Certainly not the cartoon Hell we see on the TV. But an experience of God which is sorrow to those who have rejected him and blessedness to those who have sought him.

Those who love God and prepare themselves to be united to his light will begin to be transformed even in this life; we may become "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4). But those who resist and ignore God "harden their hearts" (Hebrews 3:15). If they "love darkness rather than light" (John 3:19), they will find the inescapable brilliance to be a burning misery and paradoxical blindness.

How is it possible that the same presence of God can affect people in different ways? The Scripture teaches us that, "Our God is a consuming fire" (Deut. 4:24, Hebrews 12:29). And even while fire can provide heat and warmth and protection, it can also be dangerous.

Origen says, "The same sun that melts wax hardens mud". While St. Basil the Great speaking of the story of the three young men in the fiery furnace (Daniel 3:1-30) describes how the fire spared the three holy children, while the guards who threw them in were destroyed.

God's presence is not just Light, and Life, but Love. And Love invites, but does not compel. The Prodigal Son's older brother lived in his father's loving abundance, but was bitter and resentful. To the pure, God's purity shines clearly; but to the twisted, even His love appears untrustworthy and twisted (2 Samuel 22:27). St. Issac of Syria (7th century) wrote that those who suffer in the next life "are scourged by the scourge of love."

He says...

I also maintain that those who are punished in Gehenna are scourged by the scourge of love. For what is so bitter and vehement as the punishment of love? I mean that those who have become conscious that they have sinned against love suffer greater torment from this than from any fear of punishment. For the sorrow caused in the heart by sin against love is sharper than any torment that can be. It would be improper for a man to think that sinners in Gehenna are deprived of the love of God. Love is the offspring of knowledge of the truth which, as is commonly confessed, is given to all. The power of love works in two ways: it torments those who have played the fool, even as happens here when a friend suffers from a friend; but it becomes a source of joy for those who have observed its duties. Thus I say that this is the torment of Gehenna: bitter regret. But love inebriates the souls of the sons of Heaven by its delectability. (I.28, p. 266)

And the philosopher, Peter Kreeftm says...

In reality, the damned are in the same place as the saved—in reality! But they hate it; it is their Hell. The saved love it, and it is their Heaven. It is like two people sitting side by side at an opera or a rock concert: the very thing that is Heaven to one is Hell to the other. Dostoyevski says, "We are all in paradise, but we won't see it." ... Hell is not literally the "wrath of God." The love of God is an objective fact; the "wrath of God" is a human projection of our own wrath upon God, as the Lady Julian saw—a disastrous misinterpretation of God's love as wrath. God really says to all His creatures, "I know you and I love you," but they hear Him saying, "I never knew you; depart from me." It is like angry children misinterpreting their loving parents' affectionate advances as threats. They project their own hate onto their parents' love and experience love as an enemy—which it is: an enemy to their egotistic defenses against joy. ...

Since God is love, since love is the essence of the divine life, the consequence of loss of this life is loss of love. ... Though the damned do not love God, God loves them, and this is their torture. The very fires of Hell are made of the love of God! Love received by one who only wants to hate and fight thwarts his deepest want and is therefore torture. If God could stop loving the damned, Hell would cease to be pure torture. If the sun could stop shining, lovers of the dark would no longer be tortured by it. But the sun could sooner cease to shine than God cease to be God. ... The lovelessness of the damned blinds them to the light of glory in which they stand, the glory of God's fire. God is in the fire that to them is Hell. God is in Hell ("If I make my bed in Hell, Thou art there" [Ps 139:8]) but the damned do not know Him. (Every Thing You Ever Wanted to Know About Heaven, pp. 230, 233-235)

This is not a description of Hell according to the stereotypes around us. God is not punishing those he has created and loves for eternity, but his love, his unfailing love, becomes a scourge in those who have rejected love and life and have chosen death and darkness.

Who will be in Hell? We do not know. This is the answer the Church provides us. Indeed it goes further and insists that we should be more concerned that we are not found there. And one of the chief means of avoiding Hell in the judgement is to find ourselves living in the blessed presence of God now, in this life, while we have time to order our lives and bear the fruits of repentance.

Do we think we can judge who will be in Hell? Then we should remember the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican. The Pharisee was the well-respected man of the Temple, but his prayers were not heard. It was the sinful Publican, the outcast, whose repentance moved God's mercy.

The problem is within us, and not with God. "It is not that God grows angry with us," said the 3rd century Desert Father, St. Antony the Great, "but it is our own sins that prevent God from shining within us."

What should we do? We are taught to assume that each of us, personally, are the worst sinner in the world. St. Paul set an example, referring to himself as "the foremost" of sinners (1 Timothy 1:15). And, while God has not told us who he will or will not save, he has given us an Ark of salvation. Christians have relied on certain spiritual practices from the first centuries: the Eucharist, personal spiritual direction and confession, public worship, private prayer, and the intercessions of the "great cloud" of saints. In this way we can become light-bearers, even in this life. St. Cyril of Jerusalem (4th century) said that the Spirit penetrates our whole being like fire transforms a piece of iron, "so that what was cold becomes burning and what was black is made bright."

We should not avoid the confession of a judgement and a Hell. We need to hear the message ourselves. But the Gospel is a message of how to experience a blessed future even in the present, it is not a message of condemnation. We know that God does not will that any should perish, and it was because of his love for the world, not just a few people, that he became incarnate for our salvation.

The scope of the mercy of God is beyond our comprehension. I know that I do not deserve his mercy, how can I object to God offering it to anyone else. But God will do what is both merciful and just. It is not what we tell others about ourselves that will count for us in the

judgement, but how we actually have lived our lives. And in such a judgement there will be many surprises.

But Hell is not an eternal punishment perpetrated by God, least of all with pleasure. It is an eternal and sorrowful regret, the continuing and burning objection to God's love and to life which is its own punishment. We send ourselves to Hell. But the good news of the Christian Gospel is that it is possible to discover Heaven already, and this possibility is open to all.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, so that whosoever believes on him might not perish, but have everlasting life.