



Auckland Unitarian Church

Love beyond belief

Let's stop apologising for God

David Hines © 16 January 2022

Introduction

My sermon today says Let's stop making apologies for God. She's a total nuisance.

In the Christian circles I grew up in, people were constantly saying how good God was. They blindly ignored all the grief and harm in the world, and if anybody drew attention to it, they'd come up with excuses. Like: God sent this to test you.

If you pointed out that God did nothing whatever to help you through these troubles – after you prayed for help and nothing happened, they'd say: God always answers your prayers: Sometimes the answer is Yes. Sometimes it's no, and sometimes it's wait.

I was not very old before I realised this too was crap, because that means absolutely any thing can be called God, and in practice that's the same as there being no God at all.

So I'd like to talk about the claims religious people make for God, and the major excuses they make when she doesn't deliver.

Source of love

1. God is the source of love and compassion - yeah, but ...

“Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes

John Wesley said something similar



Teresa of Avila

One of claims is that God is the source of all love and kindness in the world
That claim is denied regularly even by religious people.

In the 16th century, Saint Teresa of Avila, was a leading member of the Carmelite order; also a social reformer, feminist and theologian and she said to the women in her order:

“Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours.”

Teresa had very responsible attitude, but one that came with exaggeration. It is not only nuns who do good in the world. Kindness and help, and comfort are given by people in all religions and cultures worldwide. (Thank God they do)

And that very point was made by the Methodist founder John Wesley. He wrote a sermon called “A caution against bigotry” and he made the point that people from **all** religions did good things, including **deists** people with no belief in a personal god at all.

And Wesley went on with a ruthless argument, that If they didn’t do these things, God’s work would not get done.

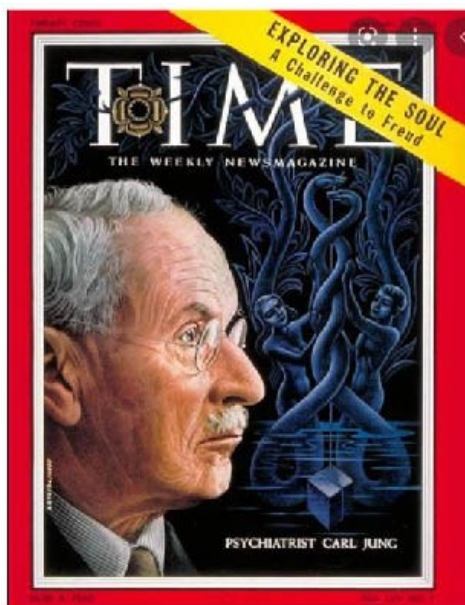
And twisting the rope tighter still, he said, it's not enough to acknowledge these good people. You need to encourage them. Because if they get discouraged they will stop doing these things. God's work will not get done, and you will be to blame.

Wow. But Wesley seems to have missed a logical objection. If God acts so widely, he is redundant. It would make no difference whether you believed in her or not.

To be fair, I add that god does make **some** difference. Stories about her are used in churches to encourage just this kind of action... so St Teresa's advice is not pointless. It is just overdone. It is just a story, and that should be acknowledged. Otherwise, all John Wesley's examples of bigotry would continue.

Anger management

2. Does God have an anger management problem?



Just a Jewish joke

An R18 joke

Carl Jung says the author of these stories is the ones with the anger problem

My second point. God has an anger management problem ... That's a quote from a Jewish comedian a few years ago. And it has its funny side, but also a horrific side, far worse than Christians taking credit for all the kindness in the world.

When I was a kid, I was brought up in a liberal Christian home. I don't recall my parents ever teaching me about hell. But they left a Christian picture book on their bookshelf one day that I couldn't resist having a peek at.

The scariest picture showed a man being tortured by devils. And they were throwing a dice, to find out who they would torture next. And another person was looking on with horror, wondering which way he should go.

Another picture was not so scary till you read the caption. It showed two bears coming out of the forest, and the caption was a verse in the Bible saying that when some children teased a prophet Elisha because he was bald, God sent two bears out of the forest and they came out and tore the children to pieces.

I was in shock, but also fascinated ... and I sneaked back to that book number of times to get that mixture of horror and excitement.

My church made excuses for the idea of hell, and said God would not cause pain to anybody, but hell was the loneliness of being without God. I would have thought eternal loneliness was also a sign of something wrong with God ... and I deleted that from my theology.

I recall at the terrorist trial of Brendan Tarrant many of the Muslim witnesses said how they would not be intimidated. Very brave of them; a few said they forgave him, and I recall two who took comfort in the thought that he would be judged by God after he died.

The subject of a vengeful Muslim god was also raised in the media recently. I didn't record the quote, but a Muslim person responded that this kind of vindication was not for Muslims to do themselves ... It was something only Allah should do.

But that doesn't wash with me, either. Like the children's picture book that scared the daylights out of me, a vengeful God would scare the daylights out of any Muslim child who read it. I read the bulk of the Koran a couple of years ago, and this picture of divine retribution came up – Not just a few times, but on almost every page, some of them gloating about the pain that would be coming.

Before I judge the Muslim view too much, I point out that the Christian book of revelation is far more graphic than the Koran. It has a large proportion of the human race being tortured by plagues, monsters and armies. The armies were, led by Jesus, who is ludicrously portrayed as a lamb ... a symbol of him being an innocent victim when he was crucified. And the Book of Revelation turns him into a mass killer.

There is really no excuse for a God who does that. And there is a huge discrepancy between this and the statement that he is a God of love, in the same book.

A Swiss psychiatrist in the early 20th century, Carl Jung, put the knife in on this discrepancy. He said the John who wrote in the New Testament had a mental disorder because in his letters he gushingly says that God is love, and in the book of the **Revelation of John** he makes him a monster, and must have had a mental disorder. His intense statement about love must have been the dark side of his hatred in Revelation. I should point out that these were two different New Testament different writers with the same name. And the gospel of John was another person again.

But the people who say the Bible was inspired by God; they are the ones with the mental problem. The only way to defend these statements is to say they were not written by God at all, they were written by people with bad, or inconsistent attitudes. Or maybe they are just lacking in curiosity and haven't spent much time thinking about it.

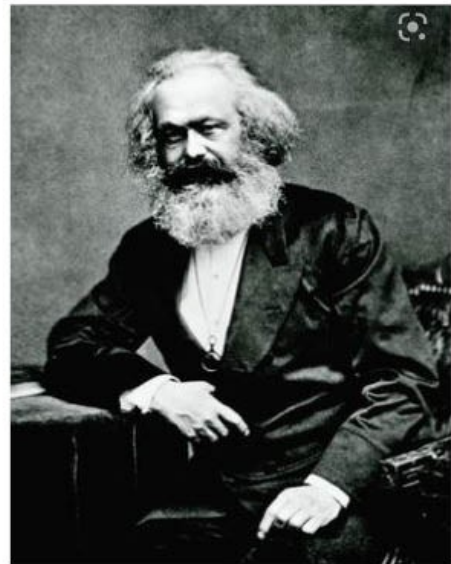
At the same time, we sceptics should not make the same mistake, of accusing all Christians of being the same. They are not all the same. **Many** Christians reject this idea of God altogether.

Marx and opium

3. Karl Marx raises a newish question: Is God an anaesthetic?

An anaesthetic to stop victims
complaining

But other religious patients
get more political, not less



My third example is an atheist attack... this idea didn't originate with religious people.

But Karl Marx said religion was like opium for poor people, and it was part of their oppression. The connection is not obvious, in my view but this criticism relates to the idea of heaven, not hell. If poor people believed in heaven it would ease their pain, so they wouldn't rise up and take political action against their rich oppressors.

I have a criticism or two of Marx, because I don't think the idea of heaven was **invented** by rich people particularly. But I think he was accurate in saying that religion can offer false comfort, and make people reluctant to complain about evil ... and so it serves that purpose, whether it was designed to do that or not.

But a psychologist study I read this week said there was another side to it. He studied the political views of religious and non-religious people in the United States and found that religion led to political action, it didn't put them to sleep. It motivated them. These were evangelical churches, but the report said their churches provided a meeting place, where they could discuss the concerns ... and take action.

This psychologist contrasted this with Karl Marx but he said Marx was right in principle, but he was talking against a different religious background. Marx was commenting on the German philosopher Hegel in the 19th century... and the study didn't give examples of what Hegel taught. But I thought the point was made all the same. Religion may make people avoid political protest in one situation, and become more political in another.

I note that in the 20th century liberal Christians have become more political ... by reworking the idea of the kingdom of God, Throughout much of Christian history the kingdom of God has been seen as something

that happens in the distant future, with the poor people becoming rich, and the rich becoming poor at the end of the world. This is called eschatology, the theory of the end of the world.

But in 1935 British scholar CH Dodd, published a book the parables of the Kingdom, saying the kingdom of god is here and now. He used the term **realised eschatology** and based it on the statement of Jesus "the kingdom of heaven is amongst you". Strictly, Dodd said, that meant the kingdom was there in the life of Jesus. But Dodd went on to apply it to our modern situation. He said we are the ones who have to bring in the kingdom of God.

In New Zealand, the welfare state was also described as the kingdom of God in action.

But this belief is also open to question.

My first complaint is I want to live in a democracy, not a kingdom. This theology creates the idea that liberal Christians have a royal right to be called spokespeople for God, even when they hardly believe in him any more.

One recent example came from my wife Marion who is a leader of the Methodist Mission. I just got my third covid jab last week, and I was surprised she didn't do the same. I asked why. She said it was because of social justice.

I couldn't follow that at all. What has social justice got to do with getting vaccinated?

She said the World Health Organisation has stressed the importance of spending money for covid Action in Africa rather than New Zealand, because the need is greater there. And it's also good sense to stop in in Africa, otherwise it will spread out from there to the rest of the world.

I thought... I have just got the vac because I am in a vulnerable age and health group, and my wife doesn't care.

So I said, why not find out how much you vaccination would cost, and donate the same amount to the U N charity which is concerned about this.

A couple of days later she did get vaccinated. She didn't tell me she was going to do it, she just told me afterwards.

So social justice can also be an excuse for God.... It says God is too busy to care about people in New Zealand and Africa at the same time.

Science denial

4. It leads to science denial



Galileo, arrested
for what he saw
through his
telescope

The issue of science denial is so old I won't labour it.

The Church's opposition to astronomer Galileo was a giant blunder, which they made because it conflicted with the Bible story of creation, which suggested that the Earth was the centre of the universe. Some of us saw the play Galileo a few months ago and it still shocked me. Because I had read the scientific issues, but hadn't appreciated the emotional torture that the inquisitors did to Galileo mainly just isolation under house arrest, and a ban on his writings. But the show vividly illustrated how this broke him down, made him do a public denial, threatened him with physical torture over a period of years.

That was 400 years ago, and it was an awful excuse for God.

To bring us up to date, skip back to our own time, and we can note that Brian Tamaki is a science denier, encouraging people not to get vaccinated, and that this arises from his conservative religious beliefs about God.

But I immediately noticed all the exceptions, of religious people responding to the science. Including our own Church, but more surprisingly the Mangere Assembly of God, who are just as theologically conservative as Tamaki, but encouraged their people to get the jab, and helped set up a centre where it could happen; and one of the two Mangere Assemblies of God came in for very unfair criticism for being on the wrong side of science. They were not on the wrong side; they were on the same side as Galileo. 95% of us have got vaccinated.

Which refutes the atheist assumption that Christians are science deniers. Some are, some aren't, and some deny science on some issues but not others.

I would accuse these bigoted atheists of being history deniers. They are living back in the time of Galileo when Christians really were anti-science, and have ignored the huge changing of thinking in church circles ever since. Some more than others.

Questioning God

5. *“We find you guilty of asking too many questions about God”*

Job gets comforted by his three friends

also R18

Also Jewish



Looking for a pattern in all this we could be swamped by all the detail.

But I would stress one overall aspect that if God is just a character in a story ... we should encourage people question their gods ... with scepticism, but also empathy.

And the Jewish people are experts in this they have been doing it for over 2,000 years.

The extreme example, in my view, is the Jewish book of Job I read you the terrible story of the suffering that happened to Job. But that was just the start of a huge discussion about **why** he suffered. In the story, three of his friends come along to comfort him, and they all bring different explanations for why God let this happen. The book has dozens of excuses. And Job rejects them one by one.

But to my mind the worst excuse these friends made ... **was that God would punish Job for asking so many questions. This excuse goes full circle. It blames the victim for his own suffering.**

And Job hits back ... miserable comforters are you all.. I could have said those things if I were in your place, but it would have comforted you.

So this book is not about God as such. **It is about the right to ask questions about God.....** especially when you are in trouble.

It's still a Jewish pastime to ask questions about God.

The musical Fiddler on the Roof, was on TV two weeks ago, it has a very devout Jewish father who keeps making argumentative prayers to God. It's set in Russia during the revolution, and how badly Jews were treated, all focussed on one family. One daughter marries a communist, for instance, driving the father to despair.

So summing up... we have looked at five ways people make excuses for God

1. The overall problem is it makes people afraid to ask questions.
2. And the answer is to keep on listening to people who are in trouble, and not discourage them with demoralising stories about God.

And the question I suggest you ask in our groups are:

- 1. What kind of comfort would you give to people in deep trouble?**
- 2. What kind of comfort would you hope for yourselves?**