

SUSAN HICKS

TALKING ABOUT
IMAGE & FRAME

S*** HAPPENS

Taoism: S*** happens.

Creationism: God made all S***.

Stoicism: This S*** is good for me

Zen Buddhism: S*** is, and is not.

Utopianism: This S*** does not stink.

Quakers: Let us not fight over this S***.

Hinduism: This S*** has happened before.

Islam: If S*** happens, it is the will of Allah.

Catholicism: If S*** happens, you deserve it.

Buddhism: If S*** happens, it isn't really S***.

Protestantism: Let S*** happen to someone else.

Calvinism: S*** happens because you don't work.

Judaism: Why does this S*** always happen to us?

Commercialism: Buy more things to stop S*** happening.

Does the existence of so much S*** in the world mean that there is no God? How can a compassionate God be in charge of a world where babies starve? It seems that either he doesn't care, or he's not there.

The **IMAGES** in this exhibition arise from experience of the S*** hitting the fan in my life: but the **FRAME** of my life is my faith in God, the loving and personally involved God of orthodox Christian belief. This essay covers the reasoning behind why I have not found it necessary to deny either the intensity of my experience, or the love of my God.

**THE SUNRISE BRINGS A PINK AND GOLD BLUSH TO THE MOUNTAIN
THAT FLOATS ABOVE THE SMOKY BLUE OF THE DESERT SHADOWS,
WHERE A STARVING WOMAN ABANDONS THE CORPSE OF HER CHILD.**

How can anyone come to terms with that?

Recorded history and every contemporary culture are permeated by stories about the origin and meaning of suffering. Stories that attempt to provide a way of understanding, and therefore a way of life, in a world of awe inspiring beauty and terrifying destruction. Stories that blame individuals, citing their sins in this or a previous life; stories that attribute power to supernatural entities and prescribe means of propitiation; and stories that there is no meaning or safety available.

This is my understanding of the Christian version.

The Bible records that God made the world, and saw that it was good. But the fact that the world is not uniformly good was as clear in ancient Mesopotamia as it is now; the explanation given for this fact is that the world has been broken.

We are probably all familiar with the Bible story of how it got broken: How God delegated the authority to look after the earth to Adam, and how Adam, though fully provided for in Eden and having the whole pristine world to study and enjoy, decided to go for the one beautiful, tasty, interesting thing that God had forbidden. As a result not only the human race but the whole of the animate and inanimate world went wrong, not because God decided to punish us but because the authority and freedom given to Adam inevitably carried with it the potential for disaster. It became hard to scratch a living; pain and sickness appeared, and a flaw occurred in human nature: an inbuilt tendency to grab at what we want regardless of the consequences. Evil became a part of life in a way that was not part of the original plan.

Some Christians understand this to be a literal history, others as divinely inspired poetry that is given to help us grasp the spiritual and moral dimensions of our place in the world. I incline more to the second view, but you can be a perfectly good Christian from either perspective.

So if God's so powerful, why doesn't he fix the world? I think that the idea of God intervening and fixing everything rests on a misconception about the nature of human freedom. The power he gave is for real, individually and collectively.

It's quite easy to see the problem with expecting God to intervene to fix the results of our behaviour at an individual level: what's he to do about my habit of over eating, send an angel with a flaming sword to stand in front of the fridge?

It's harder to grasp immediately, but I think the same principle applies to what we do to each other: Will God stop me buying a T shirt made of cotton which was grown using toxic pesticides that are destroying the health of third world cotton farmers? If he respects my freedom to choose how much to pay for

my shirt, then he can't protect any victims of my choice. I really am my brother's keeper.

But these are the easy questions; the hard question is, why does he let the broken world hurt people? Why did he let me get sick?

At this point I part company with some great Christian thinkers, notably St Augustine. Augustine's view was that God brings, or at least allows, suffering into our lives for our eventual blessing, for instance to improve our character. As far as I understand, he believed that nothing could happen to us unless God willed it, so all pain should be welcomed with joy and thankfulness.

I don't think so: The God I see in the Bible, the God I believe in and follow HATES suffering, and tries to end it where ever possible. Jesus is recorded as healing the sick, comforting the mentally distressed, partying with the socially excluded and crying at funerals. He is never recorded as telling a suffering individual to thank (or blame) God for their pain. Besides, I find it pretty hard to see what character development is being achieved in the life of a baby dying of malnutrition.

I prefer the alternative and equally orthodox Christian view of suffering, rooted in the concept of struggle between the goodness of the world-as-created, of humanity-as-created and of God, and the presence of evil in the natural, human and supernatural worlds.

In my view, we get hurt because we live in a war zone. Suffering happens not because God wills it, either for our punishment or for some future good, but because he is not yet in a position to fully prevent it.

This is not to suggest that Christianity implies an equal balance between good and evil, or that suffering will always be with us. Just as the Christian story ascribes a beginning to the existence of pain in the world, so it predicts an end. The end began in the death and resurrection of Jesus which enables us to experience the guidance and power of God in our attempts to live well, and his forgiveness when we fail to do so; the final end will be the re-making of the world, so that "there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain".

The Christian story of suffering includes elements of supernatural influence, recognises individual and collective responsibility, and allows for the randomness of life.

I became a Christian through a naïve teenage conversion. But I remain a Christian because this combination of poetry, narrative and intellectual rigor allows me to develop meaning and purpose in my life however much S*** happens.

In a world that is rightly suspicious of big truth claims, I am grateful to still be able to say with integrity "I believe".