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The theodicy of Sandy Hook and other tragedies

by Chase Nordengren

Young Voices

Preparing to brave the cold and ice on Christmas Eve, I was sitting in front of our local newscast as a local Lutheran pastor was interviewed for the show's signature conversation segment. The pastor was asked to discuss the nature of God's love in the light of apparent evil and tragedies like the school shooting in Connecticut. Per the segment's gimmick, the pastor had three minutes. A countdown clock rattled those precious seconds off on the lower right-hand corner of the screen.

Sandy Hook has prompted a renewed search for the cause of violence and destruction: Once again, we've begun to examine guns, mental health, video games and every other social cause we can imagine. Public policy should take on these issues with care; in particular, it is now clear the easy availability of powerful firearms greatly magnifies the severity of incidences like these.

Explaining the evil that visited that community, however, will likely require much more than three minutes.

2012 was a rather poor year for theodicy in our public life. Theodicy is the attempt to reconcile the omnibenevolent God with evil and suffering in the world and is a rather crucial part of how we engage with our spiritual life. We ask our pastors and preachers to support us as we suffer, to show us God's love in the midst of that suffering.

Public figures have been no help. In August, Missouri Senate candidate Todd Akin, a former Presbyterian seminarian, attempted to reconcile the realities of rape and unintended pregnancy by arguing victims of "legitimate rape" have biological mechanisms that prevent pregnancy. By December, an ordained minister, former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee, said we should not be "so surprised" at events such as the Sandy Hook massacre when "we have systematically removed God from our schools." Gay marriage in particular has been a source of blame. In 2012, pastors cited God's anger over marriage equality as the

source of hurricanes; the September attack on the United States embassy in Libya; and a variety of mass-shooting incidents, including the tragedy at Sandy Hook.

Statements like these are appalling on their face, as well they should be. Beyond that, however, their utter simplicity belies a conceptual problem that might be driving the public away from Christian life. The assumption that God uses tragedy to send a message is such poor theodicy that to routinely cite it is to invite parishioners and the public to believe religious folk just don't understand the world in which we live.

Perhaps we assert free will, the ability to choose to love, is a supreme value God chooses to protect even at the expense of destruction. Perhaps we accept the Augustinian view that evil is a corruption of God-created good, visited not on the world by God but directly by us. Perhaps even, like many Jewish scholars after the Holocaust, we adopt an "anti-theodicy," a protest theodicy, and refuse to allow anyone or anything except God to stand blame for the suffering of the earth.

Whatever course, we begin to appreciate the complexity of the problem when we refuse to accept a simple cause-and-effect relationship between a single event, even a series of events, and God's favor or disfavor with us. Doing so is the province of myth, not spiritual growth.

Graham Greene's debut novel, *Brighton Rock*, is a thriller. A gang leader, Pinkie, kills a journalist and leaves a trail of crime and destruction in his path as he attempts to cover up the initial crime and protect his wife, Rose. As the novel concludes, Rose goes to confession, in part for absolution but primarily to seek an answer for this dramatic and dark turn in her life. As consolation, the priest offers her these words: "You can't conceive, my child, nor can I or anyone the ... appalling ... strangeness of the mercy of God." Like her other confessors, however, this priest leaves Rose's life as quickly as he entered, just another name on a confessional door.

Appalling strangeness is a much better place to begin a modern theodicy. But it's not the end. While we don't understand -- as we don't understand -- suffering, we must be sources of comfort and nonjudgment for one another. We must be humble enough to admit what we don't know.

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