

God and Haiti

by David Boulton

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David Boulton offers a Quakers' view on the oldest and thorniest theological problem: How can God be both all-powerful and all-loving, since if he cannot prevent a natural disaster like Haiti he can't be all-powerful, and if he can but chooses not to he can't be all-loving. Theologians call this "theodicy."

Friends, traditionally impatient of theological conundrums, have not paid much attention to theodicy. There is good reason for this. Friends do not have a single, simple, dogmatic understanding of God. If belief in God requires belief in an "Old Man in the Sky" who spends much of his time pondering who to smite and who to spare, then Friends are atheists. We just don't believe in such a God. Our Quaker understandings of what we may call "the divine" are varied, complex, open, contingent, personal, indeterminate. We seem to prefer to speak and think of God as Spirit rather than Person, within rather than without, here rather than there, a human concept rather than a superhuman entity. Where we choose to speak of the Spirit we associate it with compassion and loving-kindness, with forgiveness, with the good and the beautiful, with ways of gentleness and paths of peace: So God becomes for us the imagined embodiment or incarnation of these precious human values, and it is these values of ultimate worth that we affirm when we worship and know experimentally in action.

Thinking of God in this way does away with theodicy. An earthquake is not an "Act of God": it is the natural consequence of a collision of tectonic plates. It is blind, natural processes that indiscriminately spare some and kill others. We respond to such calamities as human beings, according to human values. Our mercy, pity, peace and love in action is the God we bring to these situations, and this God is such that ours are the hands that do the work, ours the feet that do the running, ours the lips that speak, ours the hearts that love and ours the minds that co-ordinate it all. With such an understanding, theodicy is irrelevant.