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Where is God in Suffering? | John Lennox

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The Veritas Forum

For the religious believer and atheist alike, the problem of evil is troubling. If there is a God, why does he allow evil? And if there isn't a God, how we can say that anything is evil? At a Veritas Forum from Harvard Medical School, Oxford Mathematician John Lennox addresses one of the most challenging human questions: Why do we suffer?

Transcript

As we approach the problem of suffering and evil, we have to ask ourselves, what do we believe ultimate reality to be? And how is the problem to be seen against the background of ultimate reality? For the religious believer and atheist alike, the problem of evil in Suffering is troubling. If there is a God, why does he allow so much evil? And if there isn't a God, how can we say that anything is evil? At a Veritas Forum from Harvard Medical School, Oxford mathematician John Lennox addresses one of the most challenging human questions. Why do we suffer? Well, ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much for the invitation to Harvard Medical School.

You may think it rather strange that a mathematician would come to medical school, the fact that a mathematician would dare to come to medical school. But I need to explain to you that I come from Oxford where I'm professor of mathematics, but perhaps more importantly than that. I have a fellow at Green Templeton College.

It was originally two colleges, one Green, one Templeton. So we merged them and we didn't call it Templeton Green because that sounded too much like a London subway station. So we called it Green Templeton.

And Green College was founded by Cecil Green, the founder of Texas Instruments, to be a home for medicine. So in fact, I've been very privileged to work with countless medics surrounding me. And they even got me persuaded so far that I did a degree in bioethics.

And I think I'm the only professor of mathematics in England who has a degree in bioethics. But it's a wonderful privilege to be invited here, and particularly to be honored

by being interviewed by someone who is in the very sensitive area of medicine. And that is in palliative care.

Because the topic we have before us tonight is one of the most difficult questions that any of us face, whether we're Christians, whether we're atheists, agnostics, or whatever particular worldview we have. We're all faced with the questions of pain and of suffering. Now, I want to just set it up so that we can get to the real mate of the evening because I look forward to the questions much more than I do to my own talks.

I can find myself considerably boring. So we'll set up a few ideas that you might want to think about that will form a framework for our discussion. And the first thing is, of course, there are two problems here.

There's the problem of moral evil, 9/11, for instance. And there's the problem of natural evil, ebola, for instance. Those are logically distinct problems.

Although, of course, they can intermingle. For example, problems of malnutrition can be created by deforestation caused by very greedy exploiters. So you can't always separate the problem of moral evil and the problem of natural evil, but they have to be thought about together.

The second thing is, there are two different perspectives. I suspect many of you will be studying oncology. And you will become, in time, professors of oncology.

It's one thing to study cancer as a professor of oncology. It's another thing to have cancer and be told that you've only two or three months to live. Now, I'm very sensitive to this because one, these are very difficult questions.

They've got two sides. The professor of oncology must have a certain detachment, must be intellectually rigorous if he's going to help the patient who's suffering. But the patient who's suffering may need a great deal of empathy, of emotional counseling, of care and help.

And therefore, when we approach this question, we're approaching something that's not just like the mathematics that I do in my work. It's not like algebra. It involves the deepest resonances of humankind.

And I'm very sensitive to that. And I hope you will appreciate that as we go on. I'm starting by telling you, I find this a very difficult question, but I know everybody else does because we're faced with a world that sends mixed signals to us.

And we have to try to interpret them. We see in our world beauty and love and have marvelous experiences like I've had in the last couple of days, seeing for the first time in my life, the leaves in New England turning gold and brown. I could not have imagined it could be so beautiful.

But at the same time, I watch people being shot to pieces in Ukraine, people being beheaded in the Middle East, Ebola, reaching North America. It's a mixed picture that we're being sent. And so each of us in this room has a worldview.

We have our way of handling it. Now that worldview may be, it will be, if you're a student, it will be just developing. And the various ideas of how we cope with these things.

Well, in one sense, there's many ways of coping with it as there are individuals in another sense. There's only three or so major families of worldviews because as we approach the problem of suffering and evil, we have to ask ourselves, what do we believe ultimate reality to be? And how is the problem to be seen against the background of ultimate reality? And in the ancient world, you have people that believe that mass energy was ultimate reality. You have many people in the academy today that believe that.

They are materialist naturalists. There are others in the ancient world like my hero Socrates and Plato and Aristotle who believed that there was transcendence. There were the gods, there was a creator who created the universe and who upholds it in being.

And then there were the skeptics, the ancient postmoderns and so on. And a third family of worldviews is the family of pantheism, where God with the universe coalesce into something fundamentally impersonal. And in a sense, those are the three or four major options or many sub-options within them.

But they can help us navigate our way at least into the beginnings of this very difficult problem. So suffering coming from two logically distinct sources and the intellectual response, first of all, has been well expressed by David Hume. I quote, "Epicurus' old questions are yet unanswered.

Is he, that is God, willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then is he impotent? Is he able but not willing? Then is he malevolent? Is he both able and willing, whence then this evil?" Now I find among my friends, and I mean my friends, not just my acquaintances. I have many people who look at the mixed signals that the universe sends to us and the experience does, and they become atheists. They don't become agnostics, so much as atheists.

And I never forget meeting two people from Israel in Austria at one stage, and we were talking about these things, and they said, "We are atheists." And I said, "I'd be very interested to know why, because part of the reason I believe in God is your history as a nation." And they said, "Well, we don't want to tell you." And I said, "Well, that's okay." I said, "Why don't you want to tell me?" Well, they said, "You seem to be a very nice young man. It was a long time ago, ladies go." You seem to be a very nice young man, and we wouldn't like to disturb your faith. And I said, "That's very kind, but you know, I

believe in evidence-based faith as much as you guys believe in evidence-based medicine.

And if my faith cannot meet objections, it's not worth believing in anyway." So in the end, they made up their minds to tell me. And they said, "This husband and wife, they read books to each other." And they'd been reading a book by the Israeli Nobel Laureate for Literature, Bashovitz Singer, called *The Slave*. And in the book, he describes how at one stage in Russia, Jewish women and children were buried alive.

And I don't know whether it was a singer or not. I've read the book, but my memory fades slightly here. But what they said to me was, "In that instant, the light went out, and we haven't believed in God since." I sympathize with that, ladies and gentlemen.

I've stood in Auschwitz many times. They've wept every time, many times. And you will know people who have been injured.

My own brother was nearly killed by a terrorist bomb in Northern Ireland. I come from a country where there's been violence in the name of religion, in the name of Christianity, actually. We may want to get to that at some stage.

So I can understand and deeply sympathize with a person that says to me, "As a scientist, okay, you talk to me about evidence for God and the rational intelligibility of the universe and the fine-tuning of the universe in its mathematical described ability, etc, etc, okay, the God of the philosophers may exist in some distant realm. But please don't talk to me about a personal God who cares for us. Don't insult me.

Because my experience of life has been so negative and so horrible that I cannot possibly bring myself to believe in such a God." Now, I would like to bring up the fact that looking at it just a moment from the intellectual side, if I may, many of my atheist friends feel that they've solved the problem of suffering and evil. Now, what do they mean by a solution? Well, what they mean is the universe is bleak. You just have to accept it as it is.

The extreme version of that is given by Richard Dawkins, whom I've debated, as some of you may know. And Richard Dawkins' view is that in a universe of blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt. Other people are going to get lucky and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it nor any justice.

The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect. If there is at the bottom no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference, DNA neither knows nor cares, DNA just is, and we dance to its music. Now, it's important to take atheism seriously.

I do very seriously. And I want you to notice about this analysis, which is a reductionist taking Dawkins' naturalism to its logical conclusion. Did you notice exactly what he said? That there is no good and no evil.

DNA just is and we dance to its music. Now, of course, that means that the people that flew the planes into the twin towers in 9/11 were dancing to the music of their DNA as was Paul Pot and Stalin and Hitler. And of course, you know, if people are simply dancing to their DNA, how can you blame them? Well, Dawkins can't because there is no good, no evil.

Now, what I find very odd about that, ladies and gentlemen, is that it is obvious logically that this is a consequence of their worldview. But secondly, what's not obvious to me is how they can then start making moral criticism of God or moral criticism of anything else because they're saying there is no morality, there is no good, there is no evil. Well, if there is no good, there is no evil, that's it.

And the problem of evil vanishes intellectually. And you say, I'm not satisfied with that. Well, good.

I'm not either. And the reason I'm not is this, that when we logically analyze it from a philosophical perspective, taking this hard atheist view that there's no good, there's no evil, the trouble is we are moral beings and we see good and evil. Now, from where I sit as a Christian, that makes perfect sense because I believe that every person in this room, whether they believe in God or not, is made in the image of God and is therefore a moral being capable of seeing good and evil.

And that's why, even when Dawkins' logical philosophical arguments leads him to deny the existence of both, he still makes a moral diatribe against God because he's a moral being. It at least explains that curious inconsistency. Now, the second thing is this.

Atheism is not a solution in that it doesn't remove the suffering. The suffering's still there. If you feel that atheism is the right intellectual solution to the problem of evil, please notice what your solution doesn't do.

It doesn't alleviate the suffering. And indeed, I will want to argue a little later on that it can make it 10,000 times worse because, of course, atheism by definition, death is the end. And so there's no hope of any putting things right.

There's no hope of any compensation. There's no hope of any moral compensation if you have been a victim of moral evil. So there is, to my mind, a very major problem.

And it's very interesting you know. I deliberately went two years ago to crime zero. I happened to be staying very near, but I thought I'd listened to the reading of the names.

You all know what the reading of the names is. Very moving. But you know, as I listened for hour after hour to the reading of the names, something struck me.

There wasn't an atheist mention. There were many mentions of faith and God against the background of 9/11. And indeed, most moving of all was listening to parents, or

young people, saying happy birthday dad when they lost their dad and talking as if their dad was still alive.

I found that almost heartbreaking. But it was so interesting in the face of consummate evil, moral evil, nobody was talking about the non-existence of God. The people actually in the suffering appear to be drawn nearer to God.

They weren't denying the existence of God. Of course, that didn't prove anything. It's simply an observable of the fact that struck me very, very clearly.

If we go down the atheist route, of course, we find this curious contradiction that I've mentioned. Because any mentioning of the problem of evil, we all react similarly to these atrocities. And the interest in that is we behave as if our judgment was objectively true.

That is we expect everybody else to condemn. We're at 9/11. Why? Because we believe it is absolutely wrong.

We believe in absolute moral values in some areas. I know nobody who doesn't accept people who are very seriously mentally disturbed. And J.L. Mackey was a famous Oxford philosopher who was an atheist.

But he said, "If there are objective moral values in the universe and there appear to be," there's a direct line from there to the existence of God. Because it's very difficult. And even Dawkins confessed that up until relatively recently, when Sam Harris changed his mind, that you cannot get objective morality without belief in God.

Charles Taylor is one of the interesting commentators in our age of public intellectuals. And he says, "You know, the modern age, more or less repudiating the idea of a divine law giver, has nevertheless tried to retain the ideas of moral right and wrong, not noticing that. In casting God aside, they've also abolished the conditions of meaningfulness for moral right and wrong as well.

Thus, even educated persons sometimes declare that such things as war or abortion or the violation of certain human rights are morally wrong. And they imagine that they've said something true and significant. Educated people do not need to be told, however, that questions such as these." Now, this is Charles Taylor.

Questions such as these have never been answered outside of religion. And I spent a lot of time in Russia. And in the behind the Aaron Curtain, I'm old as the hills, you see.

So I used to go behind the Aaron Curtain in those days. Because I was very interested in what atheism does to society. And one of the things that I was told again and again is nature was right.

When nature said, "If you get rid of God, you'll ultimately get rid of value for human

beings." And many a Russian intellectual has said to me, "You know, we thought we could get rid of God and retain a value for human beings, and we discovered we couldn't." So there's that connection. If we're asking about a source of moral evil, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, when he gave us address, when he turned up in North America some years ago, said, "If I were to sum up what it is that's caused the moral evil of the 20th century, and a hundred million of my fellow citizens in Russia died, I would say we have forgotten God." So there are people joining dots in that particular way, which you may wish to question, as we go through. So I'm just going to mention a word because it came before, because very often when it comes to moral evil, people will say, "But just a moment isn't belief in God part of the problem." Look at you coming from Northern Ireland.

What on earth right have you to talk of all people that belief in God actually is a protector against moral evil. When in your country, there have been atrocities of Protestants fighting Catholics and so on and so forth. I know all about that.

Well, let me tell you something personal, but illustrated. My parents were Christian, but they weren't sectarian. That was very unusual in my country.

Hydrated manifest itself. It manifested itself in my parents employing equally across Protestant Catholic. They believed, and they taught me, that every person is made in the image of God and therefore of equal value, no matter what they believe.

Secondly, they allowed me to think, which is why I'm standing here now and why I haven't rebelled against what I learned from my parents. But you see, if I'm asked in the face of the moral evil, and the people left widowed by having their husbands murdered by terrorists, either Protestant or IRA, on that side, what do I say about it? Well, I say, I'm utterly ashamed of it. Utterly ashamed.

Utterly ashamed that the name of Christ has ever been associated with the AK-47. But the important thing for tonight is not that I'm ashamed of it, it's why I'm ashamed of it. And why I'm ashamed of it is that Jesus stood in our world and said, "My kingdom is not of this world, otherwise my servants would be fighting." So that people who take up guns or bombs to defend Christianity or not followers of Christ, they're denying him and disobeying him.

So they're not Christian. And that's part of the problem that as a Christian have to face, that accusation, but I believe the history shows that Christ himself, and here's the irony of the whole thing. As I pointed out to the late Christopher Hitchens, who was accusing religion in general and Christianity of all kinds of abyss, I said, "Christoph, listen, if you actually had read what Jesus taught and the way he behaved to the underdog, to people who were exploited and suffering and so on, you'd be on his side, you wouldn't be fighting him, you'd be on his side." So you obviously haven't read this stuff because Jesus was tried on the charge that Christianity, his message, was fermenting political

violence.

It was causing suffering. It was causing evil. He was exonerated from it because Pilate was sufficient of an intelligent person and a military general to see that someone who said, "To this end was I born, and to this end I came into the world that I should bear witness to the truth was no threat to him." Because the one thing, ladies and gentlemen, you cannot do it by violence is in post-truth.

You just can't do it. So it seems to me that point number one ends. If you espouse atheism as a reaction to the problem of suffering, you're not over.

The story isn't over yet because you're left with the suffering and you're left without any hope because all you have is death. And that's it. The Christian has a massive problem with it as Epicurus and Hume put it and we come to that in a little while.

But let's just see that it's not as simple as one thinks that the atheists obviously have a massive solution we can all go home because it doesn't work that way. Indeed, I don't like even talking about solution. I prefer to talk of a window into a way of dealing with it and living with it.

That's what I prefer to do. And we shall come to that way eventually. The final question that I want to deal with before I sit down is the question, look, could a good God not have made a world in which there was no suffering? I am sure all of us have asked that question.

I've asked it many times. My answer to it is, of course he could. Of course he could.

But you wouldn't have lived in it nor would I because it would empty the world of something most precious to our humanity and that is the capacity to love. Because is it not fair to say that our capacity to love depends on our capacity to choose. We've got a certain freedom of will the creator has indicted with us, endowed us with it if we believe in a creator.

But we've got it and it gives us the most precious thing we have as human beings. And the problem is if you create a world like that, then choice to be real has to go in two directions. You can choose the good or you can choose the evil and that has consequences.

We may want to tease that out a bit, but it seems to be enormously important for us to realize that if we say, could God not have made a world in which these things didn't exist, the answer is yes, but none of us would have been in it. God took a risk in making this world. That's true.

But you know I'm old enough to be a grandfather. I took a risk in having children. I'll never forget it.

Holding the first little girl, well I've only got one girl in my arms. I'm thinking, you know, this child could grow up to say no to me. It's perfectly possible.

Well why have a kid? You see it's interesting when you drop it from the divine level just to the ordinary human level. Because we cannot insist that our kids are pre-programmed to behave as we would like them to. And as they grow up, we see that we've got powerful personalities emerging in our house over which we've got no control anymore.

You'll discover it, you folks. You wait, you'll see. It's a very real thing.

But it helps me get into this a little bit. Because God isn't a theory or a person. We're not talking about robotics.

And really what it boils down to is this, would I prefer a robotic wife or a real wife? You know a wife of the kind of iPad here and you come home and there's a big K for kiss and you go, kiss and you get a robotic kiss. It'd be no fun, would it? And it'd just be a pre-programmed response. It would have no meaning.

And therefore I think C.S. Lewis was right long ago when he pointed out that we can dissolve meaning out of the world and rationality and all the things we love, of course we can say, "God, you should have made a world like that." But we're left in the world where real choices of consequences and unfortunately some of them are absolutely disastrous. So instead of saying, "Well, could word should a good God have done this?" We can argue, and many of us have done to midnight and later, day after day after day, and none of us have ever come to a satisfactory conclusion of that sequence of arguments. So perhaps we ought to ask a different question.

And the different question would be granted, it's like that. Is there evidence, any evidence, anywhere in the universe that God can be trusted with a real answer to it? And that's what we're going to explore. Thank you very much, ladies and gentlemen.

Well, good. I'd like to, I have a couple questions and then I eventually will get a iPad with some of your questions. So I'm waiting for those and if you want to send those in, keep on sending them in now.

I want to pick up Dr. Lennox with this question of if there's no good and no evil, the points you're making regarding the so-called new atheists. And my thinking is that they've been, people like Dawkins have been very popular, but I'm not so sure how many people find them really convincing. And they may not be convincing, but their position isn't the only position that might help explain morality and religion without having to turn to God.

So I want to engage that a little bit. Yes, perhaps God is the foundation for morality. But that doesn't mean that God isn't still a social construction.

So hear me out for a minute and then I'll let you respond. I think many within psychiatry as well as within palliative care recognize that religion plays a major and important role within the experience of illness. It is, I think from the perspective of some, a psychological phenomenon that can be seen both in the individual experience of illness, as well as within societies by providing both individuals and societies a general meaning for life and it explains, it gives a rationale for suffering and comfort and hope.

So for example, within patients facing life-threatening cancer, myself and colleagues interviewed cancer patients at four Boston Harvard teaching hospitals in Boston Medical Center. And we interviewed consecutively patients asking them a host of questions around religion and spirituality and 84% of those patients here in Boston, which is not known to be the the Bible belt. 84% of those patients indicated and agreed that religion was helping them specifically cope and handle their cancer.

We also found that religious coping, as other studies have shown, religious coping was strongly correlated with a higher psychological quality of life and higher quality of life in general. It was interesting as we interviewed these cancer patients, considering the old adage, there's no atheists in foxholes, it appears to be mostly true, not entirely true, as we looked at in interview these patients, 78% indicated that religion or spirituality was important to their experience of cancer in a positive and constructive way. And even among the 22% who said that religion and spirituality wasn't important, two-thirds of those indicated within various questions that were they were wrestling and struggling with spiritual questions.

All told, only 7% were really consistent atheists within their terminal illness. So that's just a snapshot of individual patients here in Boston. But I'm also interested in Pippa Norris's and Inglehart's thesis, which is looking, it's based on the World Value Survey, which is a representative national survey of beliefs and values in 76 nations, done in six waves over the last 25 years.

And they argue that societies turn two or away from religion based on security and measures of social security within their cultures. And so when they measure things like economic equality, education, literacy, income and affluence, health care, health and social welfare, all of these factors play a major role on whether that society is more religious or less religious. And those with lower human security caused by things like poverty, war, systematic corruption, poor health, inadequate education, all have statistically significant higher religious values versus those countries that have much higher measures of security and they have much lower religious values.

So human insecurity and suffering, I would suggest based on these theses, both on an individual and collective basis, have a fertile ground, provide fertile ground for believing in morality as well as in religion. Our characteristics as species work in tandem with our environment. So it's not an all social construction, there are the biological dimensions of

our species and how we relate with one another.

And these things work together and so that individually or collectively we have greater levels of security or lower levels of security. And that explains a lot of why religion and morality exist. We don't have to say that the idea of God is something that we've constructed.

And you can see that there are many players in this. For example, the producers of morality and religion have many potential self-interest, consider clerics who by producing religion and morality gain power, prestige, money, cultures, governments can construct morality and religion in order to create, and this is dark time, social cohesion, authorization of institutions, their own power in light of insecurities. On the other side, the consumers of religion and morality have their own interests in believing.

It gives meaning and explanation in the face of the unknown, sense of control and order when life is chaotic, hope and endurance despite overwhelming odds. It creates a merit system that motivates our actions based on reward and punishment. So religion can be a good and I think many of my colleagues would argue that and recognize that religion is an important factor within many patients' lives.

It should be something that's supported by the medical system. Sure, that's, I think that's most are willing to grant that because it provides a level of support and hope. But that doesn't actually make it true.

And I hear you indicating that it's true. And I wanted to hear your response to that. Well, you know, less than to you, it's fascinating.

I just put religion aside and come to medicine. I mean, disease and poverty are a very fertile ground for medicine and can generate a whole structure of medical care. People find that medical care enormously helpful.

And of course, governments get involved and create all kinds of structures about medicine and so on. So it's pretty clear that medicine is very helpful, but it's, that doesn't say it's true. I would say that argument doesn't work at all.

But what you're pointing up here is the truth question is a separate question. Now, I want to say several things about that. The first thing is because something is helpful, doesn't make it false.

Secondly, because we desire something powerfully, doesn't make it false. For instance, and again, it was Lewis pointed out years ago, we all have a desire. We get thirsty.

It would be very curious to get thirsty said Lewis in a world in which water didn't exist. It would be very strange to have sexual feelings in a work where sex didn't exist. And he points out, well, it might be very curious therefore for people to have these religious

feelings for God in a universe where God didn't exist.

So that I would agree with you entirely, but the flip side of it is you could apply exactly the same arguments, all of them to the institutions of medicine, as I've said. And none of you here at Harvard Medical School, I hope, would argue that because your medicine was helpful to people who were impoverished and poor and at the end of their wits and disease, that there was no objective truth to your medicine. You wouldn't consider that for a moment.

And I would apply that there, because why is that? Because there's a separate evidence based from medicine. And the important thing is to realize that the psychological arguments don't answer the truth question. Let me go one step further, because Freud waves behind all this, as you know, because he was the one who first probably will not be first.

They said it in the ancient Greek world, of course, but Freud rediscovered it. That religion is an illusion. And I'm very interested in that, because you see, I've invested interest in it.

Because when I got to Cambridge, somebody asked me in week one, do you believe in God? And then he said, Oh dear, sorry, I forgot your Irish. All you Irish believe in God, and you fight about it. In other words, it's Irish genetics.

Don't go any further. It's just, you know, that's it. So that's why I've spent most of my life exposing my faith in God to its opposite.

But the most important thing is, and there's a wonderful book. If you read German, I recommend it to you. It's called *In a Kleine Geschichte discresten*, a brief history of the great one, written by Germany's top psychiatrist.

And it's very interesting, because he said this, if there is no God, the Freudian argument that religion is helpful, it's a crutch, it's projecting our wishful filaments, and so on and so forth, it's brilliant, for as an explanation of religion as you've given it. Brilliant. If there is no God.

Of course, he said, if there is a God, the very same argument shows that atheism is the wishful filament. The desire never to have to beat God, never to have to be accountable as one of the most brilliant Polish Nobel prize winners for literature, it says what Maywurst pointed out. And then Lutz gives his bottom line.

He said, as to the question of whether there's a God or not, neither Freud, Frankel, or Jung can help you, you've got to go elsewhere. And I'd say exactly that of this. If Christianity is true, I would expect all those results you've got.

I would expect them. That doesn't prove it's true. You'll have to get evidence that is independent of that, but it's not evidence that it's false.

That's where I think the the flaw goes in that argument, that it all flows one way. I can give you the same argument as I've tried to do for the Institute of Medicine. I can also give it at the level of belief systems, for the belief system of atheism.

You can reverse everything. And when I see a reversible argument, I know immediately that the truth isn't there. So that would be my first reaction to that.

Okay, good. Well, let me turn to another question. And these are more theological explanations for why there's illness and hence suffering.

Bart Erman's book, *New Testament Scholar* at the University of North Carolina, his book entitled *God's Problem*, he argues in that book that the that within the Bible, it features two primary explanations of suffering within illness. So the first one is what he would call divine retribution. That severe illness can be at least a punishment for our sins.

So this is widely held in almost every major religion, Hinduism, Buddhism, animism, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. We find strains of that. Jesus himself said, after healing a paralyzed man in the gospel of John chapter five, he said to the man who we healed, see you are well, sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you.

When we've interviewed patients, we asked them here in Boston whether they felt that they were being punished. So listen to this question. Sometimes God disciplines or punishes using illness.

And I'd like to, we'll take a little straw poll here of the audience. Sometimes, do you agree, disagree, or are you not sure? Sometimes God disciplines or punishes using illness. How many would agree with that statement? Okay.

How many would disagree with the statement? It's like we have a two thirds majority there. How many are unsure? Okay, I've got some unsure too. Well, when we asked cancer patients here in Boston, 22% said that they believe that their cancer was a punishment from God.

That's one out of five Boston cancer patients. We've also in the National Clergy Project on End of Life Care, we've been asking them this very, that very same question. Sometimes God disciplines or punishes using illness.

And among all U.S. clergy, and this is just over 600 responding so far, we're still collecting the data. 35% of clergy agree with that statement. So the first being divine retribution that we can understand illness and hence suffering as just punishment.

The second is this, and this is back to Ehrman, that illness is caused by what he calls "cosm and evil forces," you know, such as we can lay blame on Satan or on demons. Again, this is a view that's found in every major religion. It's very prominent in many countries, including Judaism and Christianity.

Interestingly, when I consider the book of Job, where the cause of Job's illness is the infliction from a spiritual power by Satan as it begins in the beginning of the book of Job begins that way. And we see when Jesus heals many people in the gospels, many of their illnesses are being caused by demons. So two very prominent beliefs held by many patients across many cultures, divine retribution and cosmic evil forces.

And I'm wondering, as a Christian scholar, do you believe that these are in any way viable explanations and that we can take any of these things seriously? I think we can, but it's a bit more complicated than that I feel. So I would answer yes and no to the question, which is not very helpful, is it? So let me try and spell it out a little bit. I do take seriously what Scripture says about these things, and I notice two strands of thought.

The first is that you cannot hold God responsible for all disease. And our Lord Himself made that perfectly clear to His disciples, who had believed this view? This is the interesting thing, because they came across a man blind from birth. And the disciples asked Christ, "Who did sin this man or his parents that he should be born blind?" That's a very interesting thing.

They attributed it according to popular thinking, either to the man or to his ancestors. It was a kind of incipient doctrine of karma. And Christ said, "Neither, neither." So I believe that, that it is false to say that all illness is a result of God's discipline or anything else.

Secondly, it is massively dangerous to say that. Because if you tell someone, as people are wont to do, who think they know better, that this is the case, you can damage them very profoundly psychologically, as you may be aware in your own discipline. Now having said that, it's clear that there is an element of the other side, that God can allow people to suffer illness and disease as to teach them a lesson, to discipline them.

That's absolutely clear in Scripture. And to the church at Corinth, they, Paul the writer, said, "Look, your church is in an absolute mess, and you've behaved so badly that some of you have become ill and some have died." Now it may be more complicated than saying it's directly divine retribution. We have been built in a certain way by nature.

I have a stomach. It's a very nice instrument, and it gets very nice ice cream into it sometimes, and enjoys it. But if I constantly fill it with methyl alcohol, I ruin it.

Because it wasn't built originally, it wasn't designed to take 20 pints of beer a day. You see? And some of you may have discovered that already, but you see. So it seems to me that in the fabric of our bodies, they're not neutral.

There are certain behavior patterns that will congeal towards flourishing in health, and certain that do not. Now the trouble is that we're all too ready, or some people, are too ready to see the direct intervention of God, when of course it simply may be the indirect but very painful outworking of us being stupid. And it's a very wonderful mechanism that

if you boast too much, you get sick.

That can save you from poisoning yourself. So I see two strands in Scripture, but I also see a third one, and it's a very important one. The Apostle Paul wrote more than half the New Testament, and was the senior Christian missionary.

He had eye disease that made it very difficult for him to write. And he asked God to remove it. And God said, "Well, my grace is enough for you, Paul.

And therefore, I'm going to teach you to bear it." And I think that's enormously important, because God wasn't for curing it, didn't guarantee a cure. Indeed, told Paul there wouldn't be one. That in his attitude to that disease, he was going to learn things that would develop his character and so on.

And you and I know this. We've watched people who've borne disease in a way which would shame us, getting upset about the trivialities that bother us. And those lessons can be absolutely and vitally important.

So I see a mixed picture, and I think a perfectly fair picture. You say, "Do you believe these things? Yes, I do, but I'm very wary of the extremes, because the danger is that somebody comes in from the outside and you're ill and says, "What are you been sinning about last week?" And this kind of stuff. That is totally unwarranted.

It seems to me, and very dangerous. But also the other thing, which is perhaps relatively rare, but people get themselves possibly in a spiritual tangle, and God uses some illness to bring them to their senses. I've known that happened many times.

Now, your other question is to do with where evil comes from ultimately. And it's curious actually, because when I say, as I would say, that Satan does exist, there is a personal evil, malevolent force in the universe. People say, "How absurd." If I asked him if there's any extra intelligence outside the earth, "Oh, masses of it all over the place." Oh, really? So when the Bible claims there's some, you poo poo it, but you believe it's all over the place.

Why couldn't some of it be evil? That's an inconsistency actually, and an intellectual reaction. But look at this just for a moment. This is a huge subject.

We could talk about it all night, probably not too much profit. But it is interesting that the Bible doesn't blame everything on humanity. That's the striking thing to my mind.

You mentioned Job, whose disease was not caused explicitly in that book, which is the biggest treatise almost in all of literature, and the problem was suffering and evil. It was not caused by his disobedience or his sin. He behaved perfectly.

It was that God withdrew a certain level of protection, and the enemy was allowed to

attack him. And to talk to him incidentally, Job's a very subtle book. I wish I understood more of it, because his attacks came both from physical and natural evil.

That is the wind blue and the house fell and all this kind of thing and fire. And it was also due to moral evil. The civilians came and fought them.

The two problems are raised in the very same breath. But behind it, in his case, there was a malevolent evil power. And I find that in one sense depressing, but in another sense very encouraging.

God doesn't blame the whole thing on me or us. But of course, it has a corollary, and here's the important thing to my mind. If that's true, if that analysis is true, it would be idle for me to think that I'm going to put the problem right.

And it raises a very deep and important question in the other direction. If that is the case, what provision has God made to do anything about it? That's a question I want to know the answer to. Keep on sending in your questions.

Let me ask another question. This is based on a quote from C.S. Lewis, which I've heard often when it comes to suffering. He wrote in his book, *The Problem of Pain*, "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." Now, I can understand why Lewis made the statement, and it certainly seems to imply that somehow God's love is reaching out to us in and through illness, reaching down to us in order to somehow get their attention to, I would assume, a loving, a loving, benevolent God, in and through the illness. But there are a number of instances in which to say this to some one in their suffering, or maybe even to think that this way of approaching illness or explaining it, it strikes me as potentially being awful.

And I want to just give three examples. First, consider writer, a four-year-old boy with D.I.P.G., which is an inoperable brain cancer. He will likely die in 12 to 16 months.

He lives in Orlando, Florida. In what way can illness be a megaphone to him? Or consider H.O., a 27-year-old female with borderline personality disorder, which is a serious mental illness characterized by pervasive instability in moods, instability in relationships, self-image, poor self-image in behavior. H.O. had recurrent suicidal behavior, self-mutilating behavior like cutting and pulling out her hair.

And she wrote in her blog, these words, "I cut because pain of being borderline is so intense and so unbearable that the little kick of endorphins and reaction to acute physical pain is the only thing that brings relief from this horrific mental pain." How bad would you have to feel, she writes, to want to kill yourself? I feel like it most of the time. Sometimes I prefer I had cancer instead. At least then the whole world would not blame

me for desperate efforts to blunt the pain brought about by my biological vulnerability and abuse I suffered as a child.

And what's striking to me about certain types of mental illnesses is that it afflicts the person. It strikes them at their very emotional and rational states. How can that be a megaphone? Third example, consider Kelly a 74-year-old female with severe dementia.

She no longer regularly recognizes her daughters, and despite having grown up and for most of her life being deeply faithful from childhood, she has forgotten God. How can these types of illnesses be claimed to encourage a person to seek God? Is this God's megaphone? How can one claim that God is loving in God's providence when he allows this level of affliction to the person? How is God loving to writer or HO or to Kelly in these bitter sufferings? How can you, as a Christian scholar, intellectually claim that God's intention is love in these types of cases? With great difficulty. And I mean that sincerely, ladies and gentlemen, I think Lewis had a point but he wasn't right in the absolute sense.

Much as I used to listen to see us many years ago, and he's taught me a lot. But I think within the context in which he intended that he was right. But the examples you give, it's not a megaphone.

I agree with your verdict, it's awful. And so how do we begin to come to terms with it? Let's start at the other end. Pain is enormously important.

I'm glad that I have nerves so that when I stick my hand into the fire by accident, it tells me that something's going wrong. And I noticed that even bowl players in this country have nerves and sometimes they're not very pleased with them. But they do tell you when you need a bit of chiropractic or something done in your back to make you fit for the next season.

So pain has a very practical, and you all know that. You don't need me to tell you that as medics, that's absurd, I shouldn't even have said it. But pain is very important.

We are equipped with nerves that give us pain. That's the interesting thing, and they are vastly important to the way in which we live and so on. What troubles me about these things and troubles anybody, including you who thinks about them, is it seems so out of proportion, doesn't it? Just so out of proportion.

Now, we can go one or two ways, as I said before, but what you're raising now is the problem of natural evil. And there's a sense in which we can understand or not completely. People are walking to a classroom and shoot people to death and so on.

We can see it's moral evil and we can blame X for doing it. But when it comes to tsunami or these horrific diseases that you mentioned, you can't blame a person for it. So you say, "Okay, well, blame God for it because after all, if this is God's universe, he is ultimately responsible." And that's true, absolutely true.

I can't avoid that. I just cannot avoid that point. There's no philosophical sophistry that gets you round that.

So here's what I'm faced with. Those mechanisms that normally are very useful and healthy for us in our bodies, those mechanisms that give us pain, the response in the brain, and so on. When something goes very badly wrong and everything just goes viral to use the current word and the pain is inordinate and unacceptable and has to be dealt with by fairly serious doses of palliative care and all this kind of thing, we can alleviate pain.

And I'd like to say something because you mentioned that you were in the palliative care, inter-side of things. I have been so impressed at palliative doctors that I've got to know who are in the business of trying to alleviate some of that pain, not all of it. So we're faced with what appears to be an intractable problem and I just want to come to briefly, I don't have a solution to it.

For the simple reason that we've lived with this, after all, we lived for centuries without anaesthetics. I don't like the dentist much. I have a little theory that there are only two people in the world, people who don't like dentists and liars, but that's another matter.

I think of the centuries where people believed in God in millions and there were no anaesthetics. I mean, that is just a no palliative care. I think it's almost unbelievable to me, but it did happen.

It's not proof of anything. It's just a fact historically. So let me come to the heart of this as I see it.

And you can think about this. I've no simplistic solutions. I wouldn't insult you by having a simplistic solution.

But my approach to it in a way is this, that I'm faced with beauty, as I said, and the wonderful potentiality and capacity of medicine to affect the cure. And I sit here and I'm sitting in this room because of medical intervention at the last second of my life. So I know what that means.

A cardiac surgeon saved my life and I wasn't expected to live no hope whatsoever that I'm sitting here. And people say, well, thank God for that. I said, be careful because in the very same few weeks that that happened to me, my sister's daughter of 22 was carried away by a massive brain tumor.

And she didn't get cured. How do I cope with that? Well, I see it like this. If you reject God, I'll understand you.

Two cents. Because you just say there isn't a God, forget it. The universe is like it is.

It's bleak. For some people, it goes well. But for the vast majority, it's pretty horrible.

And certainly for the vast majority of people have ever lived. But they're the suffering remains. And now that little boy who's got this disease that's going to kill him in a few weeks, he nothing, the end, nothing.

Atheism is nothing to say to him that's positive. Now, what can I say to the young mother of cancer that's going to die in a few weeks? I can't cure cancer. It's inoperable and so on.

But you see, let me put it this way. You know probably, many of you, that at the heart of Christianity, there is a cross. And since I can't solve the philosophical problem, why a good God allows this level of suffering, I ask another question and I asked it before in my talk.

Now I'm going to come to where I reflect on it. And that is granted that it's messy. Granted, let me put it this way.

This world is full of two things, beauty and barbed wire. Is there any evidence anywhere that there is a God you could trust with it ultimately? Now, the heart, and the main reason I'm a Christian is because the heart of Christianity is across. And on it, Jesus died as you know.

But the big thing is that he claimed to be God, God encoded in humanity. Do I believe it? Yes, I do. As a scientist, yes, I do.

But that's another story. So the question in this context is what is God doing on a cross? And my answer to that is it shows me at the very least that God has not remained distant from the problem of human suffering but has himself become part of it. Now, at the pragmatic level, I've seen that bring healing to many, many people.

If they begin to see that God actually understands our suffering, you know, often when you're standing along somebody who's suffering, you'll know as doctors that if they're weeping and you weep too, you're far bigger effect than if you take out a stethoscope and give them more antibiotics because they're looking for somebody that understands. Now, you see, ladies and gentlemen, let me go one step further. If that was the end of it, it would be nothing.

But the God that suffered on the cross rose from the dead, and that opens up a whole world of possibility. It opens up at the level of moral evil, not only the possibility, but to my mind, the certainty that there's going to be a final judgment, that terrorists are not going to get away with it, that the bombers of 9/11 are going to face it. That is what backs up your conscience and tells me that it's not an illusion, that morality is not an illusion because it's got a backup.

But secondly, I do believe as I sit here that God is a God of compensation. Does I think of that as a boy and think of my own grandchildren and think of children I have known who have suffered to death with these degenerative diseases? This is a big thing to say, but I'm going to say it to you, that was Maddox. I believe firmly that if you could see what God has done with people like God ultimately, your questions would stop.

That's what I believe, but it depends crucially on the fact that there's someone in space, time, and history who's suffered and risen from the dead. Atheism doesn't have that. It is nothing.

And you see that 22-year-old niece of mine with her brain tumor and I sat with her, she knew she was going to die. As she neared death, her confidence in God increased, because she knew where she was going. She had real hope.

Now I've watched atheists die and they don't have that hope. And you see that goes back, Michael, to your earlier point of those statistics. People who are secure tend to be less religious, but you see a statistical analysis of a group of people who are secure at the moment.

If you're sitting there feeling secure financially and you lose all your money tomorrow, you're not secure anymore, or you lose your health tomorrow. That may be true at the given stage because life hasn't hit us in reality. We feel wonderful.

We're like people sitting on a beach enjoying the sun and somebody open the cliff and see that the tide's coming in. It's all around us. We feel terrific.

We feel secure. But actually we need saving desperately, although we don't see it. So that's how sorry to take so long about that, but it's such a big thing.

And it's not an answer in the sense of, oh, well, that's at x plus y equals z . Therefore, we're all solved. No. But you see, for me, ladies and gentlemen, my Christian faith is not an abstract belief in a theory.

It's a living relationship with a person. And it's that relationship that I take into all these engagements and talking to people. I arrived in Christchurch.

I'll finish with this. Two days after the earthquake hit, I had to speak at the biggest church gathering. I had many years in sitting in front of me, where people had lost their husbands because a wall fell on them in their office.

And people that felt guilty because the wall fell on their colleague and didn't fall on them. This awful terrible mess. And I spoke along the lines I've spoken to you.

And one of the most moving things to me was the letter I got from a lady who lost her husband. She said, I couldn't stay to see the people. But she said, I just want you to

know that in what you said about Christ, the cross, the resurrection, I see the first glimmer of hope.

One of the questions from the audience is raising about other major world religions. And their belief about suffering. And this isn't in the question, but you probably know that Buddhism, for example, it's for noble truths.

Truths are all about suffering. The first noble truth is life is suffering. And the second noble truth is that suffering is caused by misguided desires and so on.

And at least that question raises for me. And it is a question of certainty. You know, when I listen to you, you seem so certain.

And yet we live in a world in which there are many theories. There's nearly a billion people who follow Buddhism, for example, in a very different theory grounded on the idea of suffering. And I wonder, you know, as we look at the evidence that exists, how can we be certain? You know, when I listen to you, you sound like a mathematician talking about religion.

And if we went to places like Harvard Divinity School and the people who teach religion at Oxford, and we did a survey about how certain they are about their own religious beliefs, I think they would be very uncertain. Oh, especially in Oxford, yes. Well, here too.

And what grounds are you so certain? When things seem so fuzzy. And what grounds am I certain that my wife loves me? After 46 years married, I would say I was certain she loves me. I think this may seem very strange to some people.

I think God wants us to be certain. Indeed, that's explicit in the New Testament. These things are written that you might know that you have eternal life, writing to people that have trusted Christ.

And you see, I think part of the problem with the question is that people sometimes get the impression that I exude a certain amount of certainty because I've, like a mathematician, I've absorbed all kinds of high-powered arguments and they're totally conclusive and so on. That is not the case at all. The arguments to me are very important, but think of my wife again.

I cannot prove to you by mathematics that my wife loves me. No, I can't. And that certainty that we get in mathematics, that intellectual certainty, occurs in no other scientific discipline apart from mathematics.

Now, mathematics has its problems at the logical level, but leaving those aside, you don't get that certainty in the physical science, it'll get medicine and so on and so forth. You don't get it anywhere else. But you can talk about, and of course, this is the pet

phrase these days, "evidence-based medicine," don't you? That's very much the buzzword.

What's your evidence? I'm an evidence-based Christian. I don't see any difference here, except that the stakes are higher. But my faith is based on evidence, just as your faith in a particular cure, a course of medicine, well, I hope be based on evidence.

And that's what he's studying, doing systematic studies, to see where the evidence leads and therefore what can we do about it? So there's a great deal of commonality between my science and my response to God. But my response to God is not response to a theory merely but to a person. Now, where does this certainty come from? It comes from this that I do believe that God, as Roger Bacon, put it the founding father of modern science, that God has two books, the book of nature, of which we can read something about God, his fingerprints all over it.

But secondly, the book of his word. And you see, if the arguments at the beginning of this discussion were correct, and my response is simply a Freudian socially constructed God who's a projection of my wish fulfillment, I would join the crowd to say, "Don't you be so arrogant, don't you? You cannot be certain at all." But something else might be true, you see. The Christian claim is it's not so much us looking for God but God looking for us.

And the central claim is that God became human in Jesus Christ and has revealed God to us. Now, if I want to get to know you, I could submit you to a pet scan, couldn't I? And I could attach all kinds of horrible things to your brain and so on and so forth and never get to know you. But the way I can get to know you and be confident is if you reveal yourself to me as a person.

You talk to me and you can achieve a wonderful degree of confidence. And that's what a lifelong partnership between me and my wife is. But I have many other friends whom I have that degree of confidence in.

What gives me the confidence? They do. They do. Do you see what I mean? It's not, it lies on me.

I have to work up all this confidence. But if I get to know you as a person of character, of integrity, reliability and so on, you are actually giving me the confidence. You see? Now, that's exactly the way I respond to Christ.

That God gives me the confidence the more I get to know Him. And you're quite right. I do seem to be confident.

I am confident. But my confidence is not based in myself. Wobba tied me if it were.

Because the whole essence of the Christian message is it is not like the religions you

mentioned. Much good in them, of course, in their analysis of morality and what suffering means and so on. I'm not decrying that.

But all of them, including some versions of Christianity, are merit systems. Where I have to try and keep the rules, keep the path, keep the book, keep the way, in the hope that one day I will be accepted by God. And so therefore, your question has a deeper sting, actually, to it.

How could you possibly be so confident of God? After all, who are you? You're a wretch like all the rest of us. And I admit it, absolutely. I'm an amass like everybody else.

But the secret of my relationship with God is precisely that, that Christianity is not like a Harvard Medical School exam system. You're in this medical school. How do you know you're going to get a degree? Well, you can't.

If you said, "I'm absolutely confident," to your professors, well, they'd say, "Well, we'll see. Wouldn't they?" We'll see. And you can't be confident, not only that the professors cannot tell you you're going to get a degree.

Why? It's a merit system. And so many people, this is the mistake they make. And I'm so glad you asked the question because it reflects on it.

They think it's the same with God, that you try your best in the hope that one day God will forgive you. And therefore, it would be utterly arrogant to say that you had assurance. But now, let me illustrate this just for one second, from my marriage.

I met my wife on day one at university, and she was 16. Well, there we are. And she was a beautiful vision.

So what I decided to do was to propose marriage. So I brought her a cookbook. And I gave it to her, you see, and I said, "Look, on page 123, there's a law for making apple cake.

Now shall take 100 grams of flour, and thou shall take 200 grams of mayo, and you shall take so much sugar and water, and mix them together, and thou shall heat it up to such and such, you make an apple cake." Very good. You see that? Yeah, wonderful. Now I said, "Of course, I wouldn't dream of accepting you now." Now, if you keep the rules in this cookbook for the next 30 or 40 years, I don't think about accepting you.

Will you marry me? But ladies and gentlemen, why are you laughing? That's how millions of people think about God. You wouldn't insult your fellow human being by suggesting your relationship with them was based on their merit, would you? And yet millions upon millions of people either think of God in that way, and equally millions and millions of people have rejected God because they think it's that way. What's the secret of my marriage, such as it is? It's that, well, goodness knows why.

She accepted me at the start. I know why I accepted her, of course. And the point is, she will cook brilliantly because she knows that my acceptance offer doesn't depend on her merit.

And you see, it's the same with me and God. I don't go around giving talks like this and talking to students about faith in God in the hope that God will say, "What a good boy you are." And I will maybe accept you. No ladies and gentlemen, let me be absolutely clear.

I do it because I've got the acceptance, not in order to get it. And therefore, if God gives me the confidence, I would be arrogant to refuse it. For instance, if Christ tells me that if I trust Him, I already have eternal life, I shall not come into judgment, and my sins are forgiven.

And He's the moral governor of the universe. And I say, "No, oh no, I couldn't accept that." It's me who's being arrogant, not the other way round. And the proof of the putting is in the eating.

It actually works. It actually works. So that's how I'd respond to that.

Well, there's been a number of really good questions here. We're out of time. So I would encourage you to take up the offer of meeting for dinners and continuing the conversation.

You've been a very patient audience, and we've had an exceptional speaker. So in that vein, let's give everyone a hand. I think, ladies and gentlemen, you ought to show your appreciation to an exceptional moderator.

[applause] For more information about the Veritas Forum, including additional recordings and a calendar of upcoming events, please visit our website at veritas.org.

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