God and Man and Human Suffering

An "atheist friend" registers her disagreement with Michael Novak.

By Heather Mac Donald,

with a reply by Michael Novak

MICHAEL NOVAK has demonstrated his intellectual acuity and generosity yet again ("To an Atheist Friend: Conservatives, Heather Mac Donald, and Disagreements About God," *TAS*, November 2006). His explication of Christianity's joys and mysteries underscores a powerful truth: that millions of human beings, struck with sometimes inconceivable tragedy, have shown astounding courage and grace in the face of tribulation, thanks to their belief that God loves them. Many other Christians have eased human suffering through their seemingly boundless charity and self-sacrifice. Their good works have uplifted countless lives.

Yet Mr. Novak's exegesis of God's ways persuades me that to create anything like a just, decent society, human beings would do well to run as fast as possible from the divine model of governance and power. Only by following our innate sense of fairness and compassion can we hope to wrench the human world from the arbitrariness and injustice that is its natural state.

Mr. Novak cheerfully and tolerantly predicted that I might not follow his analysis of how free will coexists with God's omniscience and omnipotence. Alas, he was right. I feel like a primitive still trying to figure out the decimal system, when what is required is a leap into the realm of quantum physics. I do not understand how by "permitting" human choices that in his "simultaneous present" he has already willed, God passes responsibility for tragedy onto fallible humans (like the hapless L.A. driver whom Mr. Novak seems to blame for his fatal car accident). I understand even less how humans "choose" to become victims of natural disasters or accidents wholly outside of their control.

I am not up to the intellectual challenge that Mr. Novak presents. I take some solace, however, in the fact that after his sophisticated treatments of human time and divine timelessness, of human choice and divine permission of human choice, he returns to the principle that I have always assumed underlies the Christian concept of God: that He has absolute power over the world and could make it otherwise in an instant.

Mr. Novak argues, for example, that "those who love God attend to every event and every new direction, in order to discern what wisdom they can glean from it." In other words, Christians see God's hand in everything that happens in the world—human freedom notwithstanding. Every single event represents divine intentionality and should be closely read for its divine meaning. Mr. Novak also maintains that God "wills the whole all at once. He understands it all, and he wills it all." Nothing that happens, that is, occurs contrary to his will; affairs on earth are the direct consequence of God's limitless power and knowledge. Mr. Novak notes as well that Jesus admonishes believers to pray, a recommendation that would be senseless if God did not in fact have the ability to answer prayers and thus to intervene in the world in the petitioner's favor (even if in his timeless world he already knew he was going to do so).

Most people who might be considered especially knowledgeable about Christianity and God concur in this view of God's power. Last April, for example, the New York Archdiocese gave last minute reprieves from an order to close to several New York area Catholic schools; the leaders of those schools thanked God for answering their prayers. (Nine other schools were not so lucky.) Mary George, the principal of Our Lady of Sorrows in Manhattan, one of six saved schools, told the *New York Times* that she had been praying desperately over the previous weeks to St. Anne, her late mother's namesake. "My mother came through," she concluded. (George shows the usual solipsism of believers. What would she say to the supporters of the schools which *were* closed: "God did not find you worthy of relief"? "You prayed to the wrong intermediaries"?)

The pastor of the Bethany World Prayer Center in Louisiana also sees God's will in every human event. "God does things when he thinks they're appropriate," Larry Stockstill said to the *New York Times*, following the revelation in November that evangelical leader Ted Haggard had solicited services from a male prostitute. "[God] chose this incredibly important time for this sin to be revealed," Stockstill said, notwithstanding that Haggard and his accuser were, in Mr. Novak's terms, making good "on the Scriptural promise of human liberty."

Gary Bauer, a longtime leader of Christian lobbying groups, has written that "God's hand of protection prevented September 11 from being worse than it was." Former Attorney General John Ashcroft seconds this view that God chooses how much destruction is appropriate for America. Without God's solicitude for America, Ashcroft announced upon his resignation in 2004, homeland security efforts after 9/11 would have been "in vain." Bauer doesn't explain how God decided that 3,000 deaths on 9/11 was an acceptable number, and how he chose the victims.

I am going to take it as a Christian truism, then, that God's will is manifest in the most minute detail of human events. Nothing happens without—at a bare minimum—his "permission," and everything that happens, in God's view, is "good, and he loves it," to use Mr. Novak's phrases.

And thus I conclude that as a model for judge, lawgiver, or simply compassionate being, God leaves a lot to be desired. Mr. Novak fleetingly concedes as much. God acts "in a manner cruel, unfair, and terribly trying," he says. God warns us about "how unjust, in the eyes of humans, his justice will seem." (Hamlet's retort to his mother comes to mind here: "Seems, madam? Nay, it is.") Yet Mr. Novak cannot long sustain the notion of a God who tolerates slaughter. And so he first tries Elizabethan paradox to soften God's image, invoking "God's cruel kindness and... his empirically unjust justice." Even these antinomies are too critical, however. They soon give way to an outright assertion that despite appearances, God is "ultimately" kind, just, and benevolent. He makes sure, according to Mr. Novak, that "everything that happens to us is for our own good."

I will leave aside for a moment the question of *how* Mr. Novak knows that God is "ultimately" kind and simply test this assertion against reality. Those who "love God attend to every event and every new direction, in order to discern what wisdom they can glean from it," according to Mr. Novak. Thus, *every* event contains a salutary lesson for its participants. As the New York victims of 9/11 were jumping from windows on the highest reaches of the World Trade Center to avoid the inferno within, what "wisdom" should they have gleaned from their predicament (beyond a possible insight into the risks of high-floor offices)? Gary Bauer says that God prevented the 9/11 attacks from being "worse" than they were. It would be equally illuminating to hear him explain why God decided that it was tolerable for the workers on the 97th floor of the World Trade Center to be incinerated, while saving other workers in the building or in other buildings across the country. Nor does former Attorney General Ashcroft disclose why God decided to start protecting America fully only *after* 9/11, and not on the day itself.

I would guess that nearly every cured Christian cancer victim thanks God for her recovery. How many of the recovered, however, wonder why the cancer sufferer in the bed next to theirs was allowed to die, or dare come up with a justification for the disparity?

"Oh, but these are cases of human evil, for which God cannot be held responsible," will come the response—even though the most learned commentators, such as Mr. Novak, acknowledge that God "wills it *all*" (emphasis added). But let us test the idea of God's "ultimate kindness... justice, and benevolence" against natural events. How is it for a child's "good" to be born mentally retarded, or with a fatal blood defect? One can imagine the usual answers: "Such adversity teaches the child and its parents courage and gratitude for the joys of life." Or: "Premature death unites the child with God sooner rather than later." (Fortunately, Mr. Novak has the good taste not to essay such nauseating apologetics.) But if courage in the face of a fatal disease is such a "good," why don't we wish it on everyone? And how did God choose only some children for the good of early mortality and not others? We would ask of a human lawgiver that he be able to present rational reasons for his actions when he takes life or burdens it with terrible disabilities. Can anyone come up with a plausible explanation for why *this* child is born with a deformed brain and not this other one?

Some may be able to imagine such rationales and find them satisfying. I cannot. But a second question arises: How does Mr. Novak know that behind the appearance of "God's cruel kindness and... empirically unjust justice" lies a different reality: God's "ultimate kindness"? Is there a single piece of evidence available in the world to justify the conclusion that the ultimate reality of God is far different from what we see every day? Mr. Novak extrapolates from the "beauty, intelligence, justice, love, and truth that are found here in fragments in this actual created world of ours" to a perfect God who contains *only* "beauty, justice, and benevolence." One could equally extrapolate from the ugliness, injustice, falsehood, and unmerited suffering that are found in this actual created world of ours to a God who represents the pinnacle of ugliness, injustice, falsehood, and unmerited suffering. Our desire to be safeguarded by a benevolent deity leads us to see evil as a central theological problem needing explanation. Perhaps, however, it is *good* that presents the theological conundrum. Outside of an *a priori* conception of a just and loving God, I see no reason in logic or evidence to posit a perfectly good God, given what he allows to transpire on a daily basis on earth. There is also no reason in logic or evidence to posit a perfectly evil God—both conceptions leap equally far from what is empirically knowable.

If medical researchers possessed one-billionth of the power that God allegedly possesses, they would not allow a single additional elderly person to lose his being to Alzheimer's disease. They would develop a cure for Alzheimer's in a heartbeat. If medical researchers possessed one-trillionth of the power that God allegedly possesses, they would not allow cancer to claim one additional victim—they would wipe it out tomorrow. If engineers possessed a fleeting shadow of God's power, they would make sure that no family were ever washed out to sea again in a tsunami; they would erect infallible retaining walls to prevent anyone from ever being suffocated again in a landslide or flattened by an earthquake. And were medical researchers and engineers to possess such powers but choose not to use them, we would scorn any claim they might make to be "ultimately" kind and loving.

And yet we make excuses for God's inaction all the time. Firefighters who said: "I *could* save you from that

burning building or forest fire, but I choose not to," would be dismissed instantaneously and possibly prosecuted. Or if they said: "I will pull *that* victim out from the conflagration, but leave that one to die," we would judge them as capricious and sadistic. Yet God daily stands on the sidelines of suffering, or makes capricious judgments about saving this soul but not that one, without losing one whit of his reputation as fair and loving. I would guess that nearly every cured Christian cancer victim thanks God for her recovery. How many of the recovered, however, wonder why the cancer sufferer in the bed next to theirs was allowed to die, or dare come up with a justification for the disparity?

Given the choice between human and divine love, I'll take the former. Working with only limited understanding of biology and physics, thousands of scientists strive every day to better man's condition. Thanks to the Enlightenment legacy of empiricism and the experimental method, they have managed over centuries of hard work to alleviate many of the diseases and infirmities that God saw fit for millennia to leave be. In the area of governance, most judges try conscientiously to provide justice in the cases that come before them, however fallible their reasoning powers and however susceptible they may be to unwitting bias. Western societies have erected monumental systems of legal rules to make sure that people are treated fairly by civil authorities. Courts in the United States mete out the death penalty only after years of examining the fairness of the original trial procedures. If God metes out the death penalty with a similar concern for due process, it's not evident in the results.

WE CAN SPEAK OF HUMAN KINDNESS and human justice without the need for paradox. And when an individual acts abominably, we don't struggle for excuses as to why his callousness only "seems" unjust or evil. Only with God are we put to the Herculean task of justifying clearly unjust actions as the work of an ultimately kind being.

If a believer wants to tell me, "Stop trying to fit God into your little human categories. He is bigger than anything you can know, he owes you nothing, not justice, not kindness, not love. He is not 'sweet,' he is not 'sentimental,' in Mr. Novak's words. He is God," I would accept that. But I keep hearing from believers that he *is* just, and kind, and loving, precisely the human categories that we most cherish.

Our moral sense and our passion for justice are human attributes. Only wishful thinking posits them as faint echoes of a far more perfect morality and justice above. If God exists and possesses the powers we attribute to him, his refusal to exercise them for the alleviation of human suffering should disqualify him from the title of loving father. Tough love is one thing, but the centuries-long toleration of unmerited affliction goes far beyond well-meaning moral instruction. (And, to repeat: I say "toleration" because leading spokesmen of the Christian faith tell us again and again that God intervenes in the world to stop or lessen *some* suffering—saves *these* miners from suffocation in a collapsed mine, for example, or grants recovery to *this* heart attack victim—thus implying the capacity to eliminate all suffering.)

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Throughout his intellectually complex and challenging essay, Mr. Novak uses the language of empiricism and reason. The "evidence for the truth of Christianity," he says, is "public and accessible to all." Yet the "evidence" for the truth of Christianity has failed to convince not only many non-believers, but many believers as well. Jews are not known for resistance to empirical thinking, yet after 2,000 years of exposure to the sorts of evidence that Mr. Novak cites, many remain skeptical of Christianity's basic claims.

In fact, acceding to the truth of Christianity requires quite a large extrapolation from available evidence, one not dictated by conventionally accepted norms of empirical thought. The leap of faith originates from other sources. For that reason, I believe that religious rhetoric is best left out of the political arena. Invoking God as the stimulus or inspiration for this or that public decision inhibits debate, rather than encourages it. I would rather argue that an increase in the minimum wage will stunt job creation than that it is not, *pace* the new Democratic faith brigade, part of God's plan for the poor.

Conservatives, in particular, should throw away the crutch of allegedly superior religious piety. Talking about their prayer life or their relationship with God provides an unmerited short cut towards winning policy arguments that they are perfectly capable of winning on empirical grounds. Conservative principles

rest on close observation of human nature and on the lessons of history, not on divine revelation. One can be a conservative without being a believer, and one can lead a moral life without faith.

For centuries, believers have been quietly retiring Biblical commands that strike our evolving moral sense as callous or cruel. Such discreet hermeneutics is possible only if God's Word is the epiphenomenon of man's ethical sensibility, not its source. Because the passion for justice and for the Golden Rule is a *human* trait, I do not worry that our increasingly secular society risks moral chaos.

Mr. Novak has taken far more time to explain this great tradition of religious thought than I deserve. I am deeply grateful for his willingness to engage with what must seem my blind intransigence, and to do so with such gentleness and respect. His final paean to the restless curiosity of the human mind is, I'm sure, unconsciously inspired by his own intellectual striving, which I hope one day to experience face to face.

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Michael Novak Replies

ADMIRING ONCE AGAIN THE CLARITY of mind and persistent attention to evidence that characterize your writing, Heather, I note that you put three different sorts of questions to me. One set asks me about the reasonableness of the Christian faith, and its ability to persuade others of its claims.

Another set insists upon respect for the autonomy of reason, moved by its own "innate" (as you put it) search for truth, justice, and solid empirical evidence.

The third set challenges me with open hints about the differences in philosophical outlook ("metaphysics") that divide us. It is these last that most divide us, at least as I assess where we have so far arrived. By "metaphysics" here, I mean considerations of reason, without faith. I mean the "background assumptions" about nature and history that are implicit in all that we think and write. Such differences in metaphysics among the chief participants in Plato's dialogues are starkly drawn. If the participants are to make progress in their more immediate arguments, it is necessary to bring these underlying differences to light. (Bringing these to light, by the way, is a work of reason, even if it is not exactly empirical reason.)

But first let me make clear why I would prefer at this juncture not to argue in terms of Christian faith, either for it or against it. To employ Christian faith in setting forth the fullness of the way I think would be a great pleasure. But in the world in which I work, I have for years found it better to keep such matters out of sight, tacit perhaps, unnecessary for the arguments I am called upon to make. (The Chair I occupy at the American Enterprise Institute is designated the Jewett Chair "in Religion, Philosophy, and Public Policy." "Religion" is intended here in the broadest descriptive sense, so that it might cover the religious views of Socrates, Cicero, Mohammed, etc.) I agree with Heather that one can and probably should argue about the costs and benefits of the minimum wage, childbearing outside of marriage, personalized Social Security accounts, mandatory national health insurance, why capitalism is superior to socialism as an economic system, and the like, within the confines of reason alone. The world of reason has its own relative autonomy, which must be respected.

Experience shows, of course, that substantial numbers of the public have learned to think in religious categories, in the categories of "faith." Such persons are not to be despised, yet one does note that they are suspicious of "merely" rational empirical thinking, which they find cold, bloodless, and mostly a way of rationalizing what one really wants to do, but dare not quite express. For instance, in arguing in Latin America about capitalism, I have found Hayek's splendid arguments not convincing to many, because while they "sound nice," they are too secular. Some people want to weigh the religious bearing of Hayek's arguments, too. How do they fit in the larger scheme of things?

For some audiences, an ability to explain things in religious terms (due account being made for audiences of different religions) is indispensable for getting one's points a fair hearing.

In this respect, Heather seems to be making matters a little too comfortable for herself, and easier, when she insists that everyone should learn to speak her language of reason and empiricism. Hers is a very sound option. Yet experience teaches me that her way

is not sufficient for large numbers of people, in this country and abroad. And on this earth, there are a lot more religious than secular people.

For myself, however, I am happy to play by her rules, and stick to the ways of reason, evidence, and (as much as possible) the empirical. It would be wrong to use my Catholic faith where the proper autonomy of reason suffices. (This is a quite traditional way for Catholics to proceed, beautifully laid out by Thomas Aquinas, for one.) Still, I should point out the intellectual advantages of using Jewish or Christian faith along with reason. Using reason alone is a little like using the naked eye, whereas "putting on faith" is a little like putting on perfectly calibrated glasses, and using telescopes or microscopes, when needed, to capture otherwise invisible dimensions of reality. Faith does not take away reason, but assists it and enables it to see more and better and more steadily. Faith enhances reason, and takes it where it could not go alone.

Some scholars even argue—Alfred North Whitehead, for one—that for 5,300 years before the scientific era biblical faith taught entire cultures to trust reason and to pursue it, habits without which the scientific enterprise would have no mooring in human habits and expectations. This is because Jewish and Christian faith bear witness to the vision that the one Creator is *Logos*, that humans are made in the image of *Logos*, and thus have a vocation to follow reason, and that hidden in all things, even the most contingent and puzzling, are reasons why things are as they are. These reasons, although some remain ever beyond our ken, await patient discovery by legions of highly disciplined, dedicated, scientific, and wise inquirers.

Therefore, even from motives that in my case spring partly from faith, Heather's first two challenges seem to me quite reasonable, and not merely acceptable to me, but already a matter of daily practice. I freely recognize the proper autonomy of reason alone in settling disputes of public policy. Secondly, it is simply obvious that many people do not think that the claims of the Catholic faith—or of any religious faith—are reasonable, given their own standards for what is reasonable. It is simply a matter of respect for such persons to do one's best to keep the argument going in their own terms, without insisting upon one's own.

But the third set of questions that Heather puts before me is not amenable to so direct and uncomplicated an argument. Many background assumptions, a lot of metaphysical disagreements, divide us.

Heather manifests a deep respect for human conscience, for the human quest for truth and justice, and for the "innate" drives for goodness and care for others that she finds in human life. Where did these come from? What sort of reality is it, in which such rays of light sometimes appear? I suspect that Heather, as I do, frequently finds the world of human experience absurd and meaningless. The law of the jungle does not seem as benign, or as promising for progress in truth and justice, as do certain specifically human energies, drives, and aspirations. The problem with animal rights, someone once quipped, is getting the animals to respect them. All the more reason to wonder, then, about Heather's quest for the good and the true.

Why are we here? Why so many abandoned children crying in the night? Why the everlasting boredom, and the incessant rain of nothingness upon the windowpanes of our consciousness?

I LEARNED FROM ALBERT CAMUS that an unavoidable duality in our actual experience gives rise to what he calls the Absurd. On the one hand, there is the undeniable longing for truth, beauty, goodness, justice, unity, wholeness, love, that we powerfully experience within us, even under the most unpromising conditions (as in the Gulag, under torture). On the other hand, these aspirations cannot avoid crashing face to face on the cruel randomness, isolation, desolation, and emptiness that we are often forced to confront. We can evade the latter for a long time by distracting ourselves with pulsating music, card playing, restless movement, ceaseless activity.

Yet, sooner or later, we are driven to ask: Why are we here? Why so many abandoned children crying in the night? Why the everlasting boredom, and the incessant rain of nothingness upon the windowpanes of our consciousness? Why so many pointless routines, such petty strife, such kitchen dishonesties, such office pretenses?

Without both these sides of our consciousness, Camus taught us, we would not come to rest on the razor's edge of the Absurd—keeping the two sides in contact is crucial to our truthfulness: our longing for meaning and beauty, in contact with the jarring and jading of our lives.

Heather would like to shift onto my shoulders the burden of explaining the evil and absurdity in the world,

which our reason discerns steadily enough. Yet even when she has eliminated God from the scheme of life as she sees it, she has not diminished by one iota the same evils, sufferings, and injustices we both see around us. She does not explain how they fit into her fairly rosy view of progress, reason, and the secular. A faith she dares not express seems to tell her that this progress is indefinitely upwards, ennobling, worth contributing to. Yet, irony of ironies, meaninglessness squared, what if our visible "progress" is hurtling us toward the most awful end of history any apocalyptic writer has ever imagined? What if progress is not progress at all, but madness on the loose? (Heather may well hold this darker assumption, not the rosy one.)

I am not trying to diminish the glory of modern progress. On the contrary, I am trying to make myself conscious of the underlying metaphysics on which it depends—its vision of the direction in which history tends, its underlying dynamism, and its ultimate kindliness and benevolence toward humankind.

HEATHER HERSELF SUGGESTS that the true problem before us is not the problem of evil, but the problem of good. In my experience, the problem of evil really does bother the Christian believer, because it goes contrary to what faith teaches about the goodness of God. By comparison, this is not a problem for my atheist friends. For them, the evil of the world is just there. Insofar as it matters metaphysically, it torches arguments for the existence of God. To their mind, absurdity forms the backdrop for their heroic human Sisyphus who, against all odds, keeps rolling progress up the hill.

For them, it seems (but maybe I misunderstand), what comes from reality is meaninglessness. What comes from humans is the ennobling effort to make progress, despite the absurdity at the heart of things.

But this is not the way Plato or Aristotle or Cicero or Seneca—none of them Christians—saw the fundamental reality of things. They, particularly Plato, were stunned by the beauty in things, the forms visible everywhere to the inner eye, the perfections toward which things of every kind tend. Indeed, so splendid to him did this beauty seem that it felt to him as if life on this earth, lived by empirical reason alone (which he never disdained, but only honored), was like life in a cave, shaded from the brilliance outside its door.

Something like this vision is, I think, buried in Heather's own metaphysics. She really does see humans as aspiring to "forms" such as truth, justice, fairness, judiciousness, amity, the concern of one human for another. She measures progress by approximation to these forms. Out in the future, furthermore, these forms beckon us onward.

In her writings, Heather seems a lightsome being, impassioned by conscience, justice, and the careful use of reason, pleased most by progress in reducing the suffering of her fellow human beings. She seems to agree that these inner strivings are "innate," not really earned, but given. She writes as though these qualities are, more than their opposites, truly in touch with reality. This fierce belief of hers does not blind her to the ways in which, in fact, this day's reality is obscured by backwardness, recalcitrance, and resistance to the light of reason. But this noble belief sustains her even then.

In my view, Heather's own conscience and noble longings for the good—which seem foreign to most other things in the universe—are signals of the divine. Put another way, such signals led Plato and many another non-Christian philosophers to conclude that, in the end, the fundamental force at the heart of things cannot be considered purely evil. On the contrary, that force is the attraction that slowly pulls the human race onwards and upwards.

TO CONCLUDE. It is good to nourish that force in many human breasts, in a Republic that would be worthy of the noble side of our nature.

As both Heather and I see it, this task can be accomplished by reason and lofty human sentiments, apart from Christian (or any other) faith.

Except. I hesitate, and perhaps Heather does too, because of such things as Moral Inertia. Like the cooling of a cup of tea, the erosion of mountains, and the dying of distant stars, human character also declines across generations. For a purely secular morality, weak before the ravages of relativism, moral decadence is an almost irresistible downward drive.

I do not wish to end on a note suggesting that religion is an indispensable means to the survival of the Republic. I don't mean, either, to argue for religion on account of its social utility. My aim is solely to linger awhile on the source of Heather's own goodness of spirit, along with the fidelity of such moral heroes as Sharansky under torture in the Gulag. To what, exactly, was Anatole Sharansky exercising fidelity, under pain in every part of his body and soul?

Sharansky came up with his own answer.

As must we all.

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