

Theodicy and Anthropogenic: A Theology of Disasters in the wake of COVID-19 Pandemic

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Introduction

History bears testimony to the revolutionary nature of disasters both natural and anthropogenic. As the adage goes, ‘necessity is the mother of invention,’ major ideological shifts and religious innovations emerged out of a crisis of necessity. When the COVID-19 Pandemic appeared in the last month of the year 2019, the World Health Organization Director-General, Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus hinted that with the new virus, the world will never be the same again and people should brace for a new normal. This article interrogates the traditional understanding of theodicy in the light of modern anthropogenic studies. The argument in this article is in favour of a new systematic theology of disaster based on the contribution of human beings to natural evils.

Conceptual framework

Disasters are as old as human beings. Despite their occasional occurrence, there seems to be no scholarly consensus on the definition of a disaster. Disaster technocrats have often tried to distinguish a disaster from a hazard. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines a hazard as “a natural or human-made event that threatens to adversely affect human life, property or activity to the extent of causing a disaster”. A disaster is defined as, “A serious disruption of the functioning of a community or a society involving widespread human, material, or environmental losses and impacts which exceeds the ability of the affected community to cope using only its own resources”.ⁱ

A hazard becomes a disaster when it has disrupted the functioning of the community resulting in harm, death or injury to people or their livelihoods. However, a caveat needs to be put here. Hazards do not always affect people equally. The government has the sole responsibility to declare a state of disaster to a hazard like flood, accident, or disease outbreak. In 2008, Zimbabwe declared the 2007/2008 agricultural season, a national disaster. Apparently, despite the national declaration, there

were people within the country who were never affected by the disaster in terms of loss or damage to lives, property or livelihoods. This suggests that hazards become disasters when they interact with people's vulnerability. A person is vulnerable when he or she is susceptible to physical or emotional injury or attack.

Prior to scientific advancement, disasters precipitated by natural hazards like volcanoes, earthquakes, floods, were understood as 'acts of God'. With the growth of scientific studies, these hazards were renamed natural phenomena. Theology and philosophy would use the term natural evils as against moral evils.¹ Consequently, 'acts of God,' natural phenomenon, and natural evils, have been used interchangeably in literature on disaster and theology. Using the term 'natural' implies that man has no control over them and this has ignited controversy among disaster practitioners, as some feel, man may not be the cause of such phenomenon but has a role to play in exacerbating their occurrence.

The 2019 novel Coronavirus dubbed 'COVID-19' that emerged in Wuhan in 2019 was declared a global pandemic by WHO on 11 March 2020 after it was reported in 114 countries and had killed more than 4000 people.² This was the first time that WHO declared an outbreak a pandemic since the 2009 'Swine flu.' The International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, defines a pandemic as 'an epidemic of infectious disease that spreads through human populations across a large region, multiple continents or globally' and pandemics become disasters "when they cause large numbers of deaths, as well as illness, or have severe social and economic impacts."³

Theodicy and the problem of disasters

The problem of evil continues to puzzle theologians, religious leaders, philosophers, and sages irrespective of their faith affiliation. This is more expressed among the three major monotheism of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam.⁴ The question is: Why does the supreme Being who is often conceived as omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient allow natural evil like disasters to befall human beings?⁵ Innocent suffering is inconsistent

¹UNISDR.

with the concept of an all-loving God and makes it illogical. The Western world has been negatively affected by this seemingly illogical belief in a God who permits evil while perceived to be all-loving. Paradoxically, the existence of evil in juxtaposition with an all-loving God has been the source of strength for many people in the global South who claim that the answer lies in faith. Several scholars have attempted to proffer some justification and it is not within the scope of this article to present a comprehensive treatise on the matter. Nevertheless, a few individuals with promising modern approaches to the problem of evil are worth mentioning.

Alvin Plantinga uses the free will debate to justify why God allows evil to exist alongside his love for humankind. His starting point is that human beings possess free will and the use of free will to choose good is a value that outweighs the evil. In other words, for Plantinga, “a morally sufficient reason for God to permit evil is possible: the value of man’s possession and use of free will is a possible reason for God’s permitting moral evil, which is evil caused by man”.⁶ Plantinga further asserts that, likewise, since the angels possess free will, it is morally sufficient for God to permit natural evil emanating from the free will of fallen angels. Plantinga’s arguments have invited several criticisms which he defends by arguing that his arguments are not about conviction but assumption that there could be such a morally sufficient reason in God.

Richard Swinburne builds on the philosophy of Plantinga’s moral sufficiency due to the possession of free will and adds the exercise of free will with a choice of destiny as sufficient to justify evil in this world.⁷ Swinburne argues that natural evil is necessary as a stimulant for the right exercise of free will. In other words, natural evil as opposed to evil arising from our own free will, helps us to understand the consequence of our free choices. For example, floods in Chitungwiza will awaken us to the knowledge of building structures on solid elevations and not on wetlands. Hence God uses natural evil to stimulate our exercise of free will. Swinburne’s views were criticised by Stump for its simplicity in trying to justify the existence of evil.⁸

John Hick offers another promising philosophy on the problem of evil. He does not depart much from the other two. However, he introduces

the concept of soul-making. Hick's definition of soul-making is described by Stump as "the process by which human beings develop certain traits of character, such as patience, courage, and compassion, as a result of struggling with evils".⁹ The existence of natural evil is justified by the role it plays in forming character. For example, using Hick's arguments, the persistence of drought as a natural evil in Zimbabwe is necessary in the development of character traits like kindness, generosity, sincerity, hard work, among others which are essential for our salvation. Like Swinburne, Hick's argument has been criticised by Stanley Kane for being too naive as character formation does not necessarily need natural evil to develop. There are other methods of building character outside natural evil.

The explanations raised above in response to the problem of theodicy, have sociological resemblance in what Morgan and Wilkinson calls 'sociodicy'.ⁱⁱ According to Morgan and Wilkinson, sociologists justify adverse circumstances by highlighting their hidden benefits and functions.¹⁰ The sociologist Adam Smith has proffered the view that income inequality often stimulates hidden savings and investments. Karl Marx, the German sociologist has also suggested that increased exploitation of labour has a latent benefit of stimulating conflict that leads to transition to a socialist state. Put simply, a contextual sociodicy for Zimbabwe may look like: the persistent socio-economic deterioration of the Zimbabwean economy has latent benefits of stimulating innovation and creativity.

The anthropogenic nature of disasters

Scholarly debates on whether disasters should be attributed to natural causes independent of the influence of human beings have increased in the last few decades. Several documents make references to 'natural' disasters when speaking of earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, tsunamis, tropical cyclonesⁱⁱⁱ, floods, landslides, or bushfires.¹¹ For this article, we will use the United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR) framework often quoted which says a disaster is, "a serious disruption of the functioning of a community or a society involving

ⁱⁱSocial theodicy

widespread human, material, economic or environmental losses and impacts, which exceeds the ability of the affected community or society to cope using its own resources”.¹²

Disaster practitioners have made a distinction between natural^{iv} and man-made hazards^v.¹³ Kumar classifies natural disasters into three groups of; geophysical^{vi}, hydro-meteorological^{vii} and biological^{viii}. He also classifies man-made disasters under two categories of; technological disasters^{ix} and sociological disaster^x. According to Lakshmi and Kumar, “anthropogenic hazard results in the form of human intent, negligence, human error and involves a failure of a man-made system”.¹⁴ In this case, natural disasters suggest that their occurrence is outside the influence of human beings.

Modern science has proved that human activities can influence the earth’s “lithosphere, atmosphere, hydrosphere and biosphere”.¹⁵ In other words, contrary to his vocation as God’s co-creator and image-bearer, man’s actions can increase the veracity, occurrence, frequency, and intensity of natural evils. Not only do human actions exacerbate natural hazards, but they also commit sins of omission by failing to develop holistic multi-hazard frameworks to mitigate against natural evils. Gill and Malamud support this assertion by saying, “anthropogenic processes trigger the occurrence of particular natural hazards, these ‘primary’ natural hazards may in turn trigger secondary natural hazards, generating a network of natural hazard interactions^{xi} with the anthropogenic process as the source trigger.”¹⁶

Gill and Malamud have listed several studies carried out throughout the world which bear testimony to the anthropogenic nature of disasters. While it is beyond the scope of this article to analyse the characteristics and effects of these anthropogenic activities, studies have shown that the

ⁱⁱⁱ Typhoon, Hurricane.

^{iv} Often referred to as a natural disaster.

^v Often called anthropogenic disasters.

^{vi} Volcanoes, landslides, earthquakes, among others.

^{vii} Floods, temperature, wildfire, among others.

^{viii} Epidemics and pandemics like COVID -19

^{ix} Like poor engineering leading to collapse of infrastructure like bridges.

^x Riots, wars, stampede.

following activities exacerbates the change in climatic conditions and natural disasters: ground water abstraction, oil or gas extraction, subsurface infrastructure, subsurface mining, deforestation or vegetation removal, agricultural practice change, urbanization, drainages and de-watering, chemical explosions, nuclear explosions, and fire, among others.¹⁷ The curse of these activities is not so much on their profit motive, but the means with which human beings have tried to maximise profit. Based on this argument, the human intent, negligence, and human error, cannot be vindicated in the discussion on natural evils like disasters.

Pope Francis in his encyclical *Laudato si*, laments the culture of abuse inflicted upon the mother earth saying, “This sister now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her”.¹⁸ Pope Francis’ comments support the earlier exhortation by Pope Paul VI in the encyclical *Pacem in Terris*, in which the Pope referred to natural disasters as a tragic consequence of unchecked human activity. The Pope posited that, an ill-considered exploitation of nature, humanity runs the risk of destroying it and becoming in turn a victim of this degradation. According to the Popes, development has a moral character, which means it must be accompanied by changes in life’s styles.

Most disasters as natural evils are a product of man’s irresponsible and abusive exploitation of natural resources. Pope Benedict XVI observed this when he affirmed that the deterioration of nature is intricately connected to the culture which shapes human coexistence.¹⁹ Nature, viewed as a mere source of profit and gain for human beings, has serious potential ecological consequences. While human beings have acquired immense power due to advances in technology, these advances appear to positively correlate with the rise in natural disasters. The recent “immense technological development has not been accompanied by a development in human responsibility, values and conscience which Pope Francis calls the undifferentiated and one-dimensional paradigm.”²⁰ Disaster preparedness, mitigation and prevention are elements of discipleship. As disciples, human beings are called to be stewards of creation.

^{xi} Cascade

Major views about disasters

Like in the Old Testament, disasters raise questions about the nature of God. During a disaster, people question the theological truth of God's love, mercy and goodness. In secular language, we often hear phrases like 'acts of God' with reference to natural disasters. According to Weichselgartner & Bertens, the use of the phrase "acts of God paralyzed scientific arguments, prevention and technical measures".²¹ This means the notion of 'acts of god' has derailed scientific progress in trying to find a solution to natural evils most of which are anthropogenic. A systematic theology of natural evils acknowledges that there are no easy answers to the question of why God permits such evil like COVID-19.²² Three views have dominated studies on theodicy.

Disasters as punishment for sins committed

The Old Testament bears testimony to disasters as punishment from God for sins committed. In the creation narrative, God punished humanity because of the sin of Adam.²³ According to this perspective, God appears like a vindictive God who does not tolerate any deviation from his moral precepts. The Bible claims that God in a show of anger, "blotted out every living thing that was on the face of the ground, human beings and animals and creeping things and birds of the air; they were blotted out from the earth".²⁴ The Bible also testifies that the people of Sodom and Gomorrah had become so wicked, that the Lord rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulphur and fire out of heaven and destroyed them.²⁵ Pharaoh became another victim of God's anger for enslaving the people of Israel and the Lord said to Moses, "When Pharaoh does not listen to you, I will lay my hand upon Egypt and bring my people the Israelites, company by company, out of the land of Egypt by great acts of judgment".²⁶

In the book of Isaiah (45:7), the Lord declared Himself the cause of disasters when he said; "I form light and create darkness, I make well-being and create calamity, I am the Lord, who does all these things." It is said, the Lord will shut the heavens so that there will be disasters of drought and locusts until people turn away from their wicked ways.²⁷ It is God who designs natural evils, "for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope

that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.²⁸ And the prophet Amos also acclaimed, “Does disaster come to a city, unless the LORD has done it?”²⁹

The view that when the gods are angry, they use disasters as punishment for people’s wrongdoings is shared among many religions of the world including African Traditional Religions.³⁰ In African traditional religions, nothing happens out of chance.³¹ When the gods are not happy, they express it through a calamity. If an individual has not offended the gods in any way, then the problem is conceived to lie with his family or clan. In the book of Baruch, we hear how the people felt their parents’ guilty is upon them when they prayed, “O Lord Almighty, God of Israel, hear now the prayer of the people of Israel, the children of those who sinned before you, who did not heed the voice of the Lord their God, so that calamities have clung to us.”³² The challenge that arises from the perspective of natural evil as punishment from God is the question of innocent suffering like in the book of Job. Job experienced suffering even though there is no mention of himself or his parents having offended God in any way. To view COVID-19 pandemic as a punishment for sins committed by this generation or our forefathers is rendered intelligible and unjust to the modern scientific community as it compromises the belief in God’s justice.

Disasters as manifestation of God’s power

The second perspective in the understanding of disasters revolves around the belief that natural evils are God’s way of manifesting his sovereign power. In the Gospel of John, we meet Jesus encountering a man born blind and his disciples asks him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Jesus answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.”³³

According to Keller, the occurrence of evil suggests that God operates along general principles as against the belief that He has a specific reason for a single event. The logic of Keller’s arguments is, if God does not follow a general principle regarding interventions in natural evils, He

cannot be accused for not intervening in a particular event. If He has a different reason for each event, then He could be accused of not intervening in some events.³⁴ Following this argument, God follows a general principle that allows natural evils to demonstrate His might power. Hence, Keller argues, “Our knowledge of the way suffering occurs in the world makes this conclusion far more likely than the conclusion that there is some specific case reason why God permits each instance of suffering”.³⁵

Disasters as failure to obey God’s natural law

While we generally speak of disasters scientifically as natural phenomenon or philosophically and theologically as natural evil, studies have shown that human beings have a significant role to play in the prevention, mitigation and responding to such evils.³⁶ Current scholarly debate on whether there is anything called ‘natural disaster’ has generated international interest as disaster practitioners claim that hazards become disasters when they interact with human beings. This means human beings have a God-given responsibility to interact responsibly with nature to avoid disasters. Bakena further argues that inappropriate governance responses among nations can influence and exacerbate the movement from a hazard into a disaster. The International Council for Science (ICSU), argues that ample evidence suggests that “policy-makers may at times act in ignorance or disregard of the relevant scientific information and thereby significantly exacerbate damage resulting from natural hazards”.³⁷

Speaking in the context of COVID-19 pandemic, the United Nations Environmental expert, Inger Andersen retorted that the Coronavirus and on-going climate crisis is a message that nature is trying to send to human beings.³⁸ In support of the same argument, Martinus de Wit adds:

The current ecological crisis is a reflection of our broken relationship with God, each other and the creation. We have failed to be good custodians of the earth. We have failed in the proper care of the earth and in our care for our fellow human beings. We have lost sight of how creation is God’s abundant gift and how interrelated, interdependent and interconnected we are. This negation has been to our and nature’s detriment. We are now living in a time of ecological crisis.³⁹

When God created the earth, He blessed it with a natural order, which human beings have of late destabilized by their quest for economic profit. Pope Francis, in his 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si*, lamented how human beings have upset the ecological balance by uncontrolled destruction of animals and plant species including exploitation of natural resources.⁴⁰ Just as human beings contribute to the severity, frequency and intensity of natural evils, they also possess a God-given ability to prevent or mitigate them. As the ICSU noted, human beings can achieve this by “understanding how and where such hazards may occur, what causes them, what circumstances increase their severity, and what their impacts may be, will it prove possible to develop effective mitigation strategies.”⁴¹ Prevention and mitigation do not mean eliminating natural disasters but reducing the effect that natural evils have on people.

Towards a theology of disasters

While scientific knowledge has contributed immensely to our understanding of the phenomenon of disasters, it does not explain why God allows such evils on his people. The outbreak of COVID-19 disease is not the first in the history of pandemics. Between 1918-1920, the Spanish flu outbreak left more than 50 million people dead.⁴² The HIV and AIDS epidemic is so far estimated to have infected more than 100 million with more than 70 million deaths. Other epidemics like Ebola, Influenza, and cholera have forced people to question: Where is God in all this? Not only do people seek divine presence among pandemics, but whenever they encounter natural evils like earthquakes, volcanos, draughts, tornados, and hurricanes. How then can theology justify a loving God amid so many tears?

Theology is not about scientific truths, but the power of imagination. This is captured well in Mouton who defines theology as “the ability of the human imagination to *redescribe* reality, to *rename* experiences, to *retell* their stories from new angles.”⁴³ The story of God’s presence in the midst of disasters can only be told theologically using the power of myths and symbols, story and meaning, worship and human expressions in liturgy.⁴⁴ Disaster helps to grasp the truth that not everything that

human beings experience is known and knowable. It is in this ‘cloud of unknowing,’ that we find substance and meaning in our relationship with God.

Christian faith tells us that our lives are not acts of vainness, but rather filled with meaning. With St Augustine we can acclaim that; “Thou hast formed us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in thee”.⁴⁵ The purpose of our lives as image-bearers of God, is to fulfil the work of creation. We are stewards of God’s creation and as agency, our duty is to act on behalf of the creator. As agents, human beings are continuously a part of the making and unmaking of Creation.⁴⁶ A disaster like COVID-19 is a learning phase in the plan of God. True to Biblical wisdom, there is nothing new under the sun.⁴⁷ In the spirit of stewardship, humanity must learn from past experiences of pandemics and strive to live in harmony with creation.

Various faith traditions subscribe to the notion that disasters are products of angry gods who should be appeased through sacrifices. Analogically, God is brought into this equation because humanity has transgressed the ontological laws of nature and are receiving retribution in the form of disasters. Christians have often asked why the all-powerful, and all loving God should stop nature’s retribution.⁴⁸ At this point, it becomes necessary to distinguish between God’s judgement of a sinner and His justice. The Bible does not link disasters to God’s judgement for sinners but to His justice.⁴⁹ God’s justice co-exists with His love. He sacrifices His son on the cross for the atonement of the sins of humankind.

The view that God as a loving Father could have prevented a natural evil like COVID-19 on His people becomes unchristian when reflected in the context of God’s Justice. God gave human beings free will and preventing disasters which are products of human decision is synonymous with suppression of human free will.⁵⁰ With regards to the human free will, the Catholic Church teaches that;

The human person participates in the light and power of the divine Spirit. By his reason, he is capable of understanding the order of things established by the Creator. By free will, he is capable of directing himself toward his true good. He finds his perfection in seeking and loving what is true and good.⁵¹

The theology of disaster must then direct its reflection on the human contributions to natural evils which are often a product of man's disregard for the natural order of creation. John Paul II in his encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* affirms that development has a moral character and hence should, "take into account the nature of each being and of its mutual connection in an ordered system".⁵² While scientific discoveries and change theories are necessary for a progressive life, Pope Francis warns that "change is something desirable, yet it becomes a source of anxiety when it causes harm to the world and to the quality of life of much of humanity".⁵³ In *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis develops a comprehensive theology of disasters. The urgent development of a theology of disasters will of necessity focus on environmental stewardship, climate justice, and disaster preparedness.⁵⁴ Theodicy understood from the man's contributions to natural evil has the potential to raise our human consciousness as God's stewards.

Conclusion

This study has presented arguments in favour of the thesis that COVID-19 like most pandemics cannot be divorced from man's action or inaction. This conclusion does not suggest all-natural evils are man-made. It only acknowledges the God-given role of co-creation bestowed on human beings which in most cases has been abused. A theology of natural evil is theology of man's responsibility towards creation. As free agents, human beings have the capacity to build a better world where justice, reconciliation and respect for the environment can flourish. The study also argued that all disasters have an anthropogenic character and that man as God's co-creator has a responsibility to maintain creation in order. The view that disasters are punishments for sins committed, portrays God as a tyrant rather than a loving Father. Based on this observation, this study calls further theological research in the theology of disasters from an anthropocentric position.

¹ Mathuna 28.

² Goats and Soda. Stories of Life in Changing World: The Coronavirus Crisis. <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2020/03/11/814474930/>

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- ⁴ Pike 181.
- ⁵ Pryor 3.
- ⁶ Stump 393.
- ⁷ Swinburne 211.
- ⁸ Stump 396.
- ⁹ Stump 396.
- ¹⁰ Morgan and Wilkinson 199.
- ¹¹ Petrucci, 109.
- ¹² UNISDR 9.
- ¹³ Kumar 1.
- ¹⁴ 198.
- ¹⁵ Lewis and Maslin 2015.
- ¹⁶ 247.
- ¹⁷ 250-251.
- ¹⁸ #2.
- ¹⁹ Pope Benedict XVI 689.
- ²⁰ 105.
- ²¹ Weichselgartner & Bertens 7
- ²² Uili et al 2
- ²³ Genesis 3:16-19.
- ²⁴ Genesis 7:17.
- ²⁵ Genesis 19:24.
- ²⁶ Exodus 7:4.
- ²⁷ 2 Chronicles 7:13-14.
- ²⁸ Romans 8:20-21.
- ²⁹ Amos 3:6.
- ³⁰ Reale, 2010.
- ³¹ Musana, 2018.
- ³² Baruch 3:4.
- ³³ John 9:2.
- ³⁴ Keller 84.
- ³⁵ 84.
- ³⁶ Bakena et al. 3.
- ³⁷ ICSU, 25.
- ³⁸ Carrington 1.
- ³⁹ Martinus 1.
- ⁴⁰ Pope Francis #33.
- ⁴¹ ICSU 7.
- ⁴² ICM 5.
- ⁴³ Mouton 431.
- ⁴⁴ Pityana, 1.
- ⁴⁵ St Augustine, 1.12.
- ⁴⁶ Pityana, 1.
- ⁴⁷ Ecclesiastes 1:9.

⁴⁸ White 19.

⁴⁹ Mathuna 31.

⁵⁰ Lewis 21.

⁵¹ CCC # 1704.

⁵² John Paul 11, # 559.

⁵³ John Paul 11, # 559.

⁵⁴ Mitchell 52.