

FRY'S MAN IN THE SKY

What was the first picture you ever had in your head of God?



For most of us it was probably an old man with a beard....

Some ideas about God need to be revised. Not just from when we are children either. It's true for us as adults too.

Part of our spiritual journey in life is revising and reconsidering things that we have been told or believed or imagined about God that are really not helpful.

Because some of our ideas about God don't hold up and distort what is true.



Here's Stephen Fry – a man who is pretty popular with people and me - not least



for this reason (Blackadder appearances)

Now Stephen Fry recently had a bit of a rant on Irish TV show called *The Meaning of Life* hosted by Gay Byrne. Its now gone viral on the internet with thousands of reactions across the world.

Now Fry is an atheist, and he said a lot of things on that programme including some quite stupid things about Jesus, that was a surprise given his obvious general intelligence, but I'm not going to say anything about his comments on Jesus.

What most people reacted to was his real anger – his observation that if there is a God then God needs to be despised. God is mean-minded, stupid and capricious. (Capricious means impulsive and changeable -untrustworthy basically!)

Think of all that is wrong with our world....

If God really cared, if God is worth our love and respect - then horrible things would not happen.

Fry's (opening words to God), *"Bone cancer in children? What's that about then?"*

This is a very straightforward and basic question.
And a very hard question to answer.

We live in a world where there is suffering. It's a plain fact.

And whether we say we believe in God, or we don't believe in God, the fact of suffering remains.

And that fact poses questions to us.

If we have an Atheistic perspective....

If life is simply a product of (just) evolution and there is no such thing as God, then the actual complaint disappears, although along with it disappears any sense of purpose and meaning.

Why *should* it be any different?

Why shouldn't children die of bone cancer?

We don't need to worry about it.

Because there is no meaning to anything.

Listen to what celebrity atheist Richard Dawkins wrote...

"In a universe of electrons and selfish genes, blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, others are going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme or reason to it, nor any justice. The universe that we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but pitiless indifference."

It's all down to blind chance. There are no moral questions here at all.

Why should life be fair?

Why does it matter if children die? We're only animals.

We live in a world of pure chance – there is no meaning behind what happens to us. We are lucky or unlucky. And nothing in this universe cares about us.

But if we have a Faith perspective, the questions are a bit different.

Why *doesn't* God create a better world?

Why didn't God create a world where there is no chance of suffering?

Such a world might be a better world but it sadly would not be one that we could live in.

We would not be human beings then.

There would be nothing for us to learn,

no meaning for us to discover,

no right or wrong,

no chance for love or compassion to be expressed

and we would not be free to make any real choices.

If there is no such thing as evil, there is no such thing as good.

If we are not free to make mistakes, then we are not truly free at all.

And why single out the suffering of children?

Lets suppose no children ever suffered in our world.

Then you have to ask why do the elderly have suffer? And if somehow elderly people were spared all suffering, you would need to ask why do adults suffer?

In other words, the question is really "Why does anyone (anywhere) have to suffer?"

Why doesn't God stop it all?

Why doesn't God intervene?

So if I were to fall off the top of a twenty storey building, why doesn't God just miraculously intervene to make sure that when I land I can just get up and walk away unhurt?

The answer is that God **cannot** do that.

Because if God miraculously interfered in the world anytime and every time something might be about to go wrong - our world wouldn't function. Normal life would be impossible.

This planet works according to cause and effect and fixed laws. If God interfered constantly with those fixed laws to change them, not only would our capacity for freedom and choice and love be gone, our world couldn't work.

What is the picture that needs to go then?

It's the idea that God is some kind of fat controller able to do anything - a God with unlimited power.

The fact is that while Christians believe that God has ultimate power and we believe that our lives are ultimately safe with God

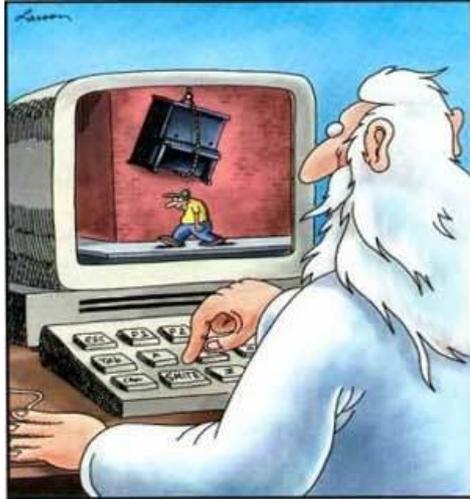
and that God's purposes will eventually win out,

and that God can bring good out of bad situations,

and even life out of death,

God is not able to act to prevent courses of events

be they natural like an earthquake,
 be they accidents like me falling out of a 20 storey building,
 be they bad human choice like a drunk driver crashing her car,
 or be they evil intentions such as gunmen firing into a crowd.



God at His computer

(God sitting at a computer, looking at the world with a smite button ready to press).

This cartoon is a version of an old picture of God that Fry and others still operate with.

If God can just snap his (or her) fingers and sort everything out and get rid of unwanted and undeserved pain and **chooses** not to bother, then God is a monster – not worthy of our love – not worthy of our worship.

If God looks down on two cancer sufferers: Mrs Brown and Mrs Black on his computer screen in the sky and says I'm going to heal Mrs Brown, but I'm just going to let Mrs Black suffer for years - then God is a monster – not worthy of our love – not worthy of our worship.

If these pictures of God were true then Stephen Fry would be quite right.

One of the most stupid things people say is that whatever happens in life is the "will" of God.

Even if some tragedy takes place they will argue that God must have some very good reason for this that we just don't understand yet.

We have got to let go of that idea because the opposite is true.

If something is your "will" – it means it is what you want.

If we say that when a child gets bone cancer it's the will of God – that means it's what God wanted to happen. And a God who is happy with a child getting bone cancer is an evil god.

No one but an evil being could look at the unjust suffering in our world and say "*This is what I wanted to happen!*"

That's not what God is like.

There are two factors that inspire me to respond to suffering and they both have to do with God..



The first is one word that we hear a lot..... **Jesus**.

Remember that whole purpose of Jesus' life was to demonstrate what God is like.

Our reading today is the final part of Mark Chapter One. And it's a fairly typical account of the work of Jesus travelling everywhere, teaching, helping and healing.

There were those who imagined God to be callous and vengeful.

There were those who imagined God to love only certain types of people or a certain race of people.

There were those who imagined that God would send illnesses and diseases or what we now call 'natural' disasters to punish people.

And of course sadly there are still people who think this kind of stuff.

Into such a world comes Jesus, to demonstrate in his teaching and life that none of these things are true.

God is on the side of healing and wholeness and hope and love.

God is on the side of people being able to live their lives to the full.

God is on the side of justice and fairness and peace and health and compassion.

All that we see in Jesus shows what God thinks about all of this.

God is love and God loves all of us.

God suffers with us when we suffer and stands alongside us in times of trouble.

And what God does, God challenges **us** to do.

It's Christians who do most to tackle world poverty.

It's Christians who mainly run the foodbanks in our own country and who provide hope to the homeless.

People of faith as a rule give much more to charities and support others in need.

I don't say that to boast - but simply to point out what is statistically true.

Of course there are Christians who are stingy and atheists and agnostics who are generous. But the response of Christians to suffering and trouble is to do something about it.

I don't know what Stephen Fry does in this regard. He's in a good position to make an impact given that he is a fabulously wealthy man. Maybe he uses his great wealth in a very altruistic way. I don't know. What I **do** know is that it's a whole lot easier to sit in a comfy armchair and blame God for the mess of the world - and a whole lot harder to actually roll your sleeves up and do something to make a difference.



The second factor for me is a sense of **Anger**.

Like Stephen Fry I'm angry at suffering and I want to respond to it.
 The early preventable death of children.
 The gross inequalities in our planet.
 Thousands who die each night from hunger - when there is enough food for all of us.
 Our inability to work for peace and the diversion of scientific minds and money and attention to armaments, and killing, and nuclear weapons like Trident.
 The politicians who are out only for their own interests.
 The banks which break the law to reward the richest in society.
 The daily news broadcasts of murders and brutality and discrimination.
 The armies of terrorists who torture and destroy anyone in their path.
 The diseases that seem to strike from nowhere.
 The mess that we are making of this planet through our wastefulness and thoughtlessness.

Boy, does that list go on and on....

But it comes down to the basic division between people.
 There are two kinds of people.
 Those who care about our world and want to find ways of making a difference - and those who don't.

And those of us from a faith perspective need to belong to the first group.
 We need to care because God cares and God calls on us to respond.

And that sense of concern – that sense of outrage and anger at the world’s ills comes to us from God. It is a reflection of God.
 When we feel horror and anger at suffering and compassion for those who are the victims of suffering, the origin of these feelings is God.
 Its because we are made in God’s image that we experience these emotions.

And that’s the good thing about Stephen Fry.

Where does Fry get *his* sense of outrage?
 Where does he get his passion?
 Where does he get this care and concern for his fellow human beings?
 Why care two hoots about other people?
 All of this stuff comes from God.

It makes him very different from a Richard Dawkins or a Christopher Hitchens.

And so despite the fact I think Fry is wrong in his analysis about God, I think he’s closer to God than he realises - and certainly closer to God than he would want to admit.

This passionate reaction he has to injustice is a kind of holy indignation.
 Despite his directing blame at God, it is God that inspires the concern.

He says he doesn’t believe in the God he describes. Well, neither do I.
 I don’t believe in that God either.

Of all the thousands of responses made to Stephen Fry over the last couple of weeks, one appeared on YouTube posted by another celebrity; Russell Brand.



Russell Brand has a background that makes it a bit harder for him than most to be taken seriously as a commentator on politics, morals and values, but he is clearly trying his best these days to make serious comments, and writing serious books, while keeping the humour going too.

His response is one of complete opposition to Fry – because Brand is clear that he believes strongly in God.

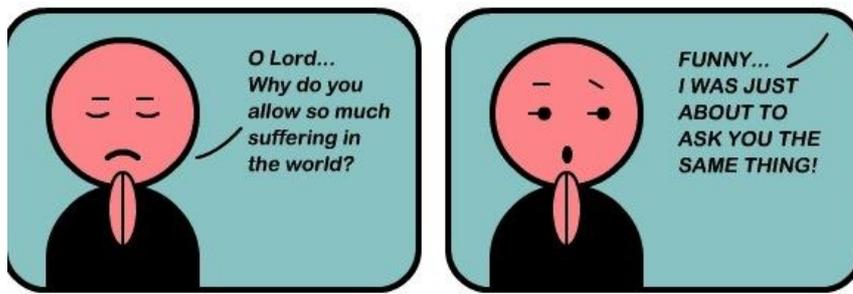
It's a rant too – because everything Russell Brand says is a kind of rant – but its friendly, and open and (as you would imagine) pretty funny.

But at one point he quotes the Indian spiritual teacher Amma. Now her real name is a bit longer than that, but I'm not going to try to pronounce it. She's known to the world as Amma - which means Mother. And her message is simple – show compassion.

Her religious tradition is Hindu, but she never asks anyone to change their religious path but rather to see that the heart of all true religion is care and compassion.

She says, *“The question is not whether there is a god. The question is whether there is suffering.”*

If the answer is yes (and of course it is), then we need to respond. We can help one another. We can love one another.



“O Lord, why do you allow so much suffering in the world?”

Voice from above: “FUNNY...I WAS JUST ABOUT TO ASK YOU THE SAME THING!”

The great majority of suffering comes down to human beings. Much of the suffering in our world can be changed.

God's response to suffering is two-fold.

First, God promises that we are all ultimately held safe in love, that whatever happens to us or comes our way we will ultimately arrive back in God's hands. Nothing we can ever face – not even death itself - can cut us off from Gods care.

And secondly, while we live in this world with all its possibility for upset and trouble, the person of Jesus shows us what God's view is on suffering. Jesus does all that he can do to help, to serve, to heal, and to bring hope. And Jesus challenges us to be part of that too.

That's good enough for me.

Mark 1:35-45

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