

# Natural Disasters, Anthropogenic Climate Change, and Divine Responsibility

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**Abstract:** In this contribution, we pose three questions. The first is whether anthropogenic climate change is producing natural disasters. The second is whether all human beings are responsible for this climate change—and, therefore, for natural disasters. The third is to what extent God bears responsibility for the natural disasters caused by climate change. To the first, we answer: yes, there is anthropogenic climate change causing the current natural disasters. To the second: no, not all human beings are responsible. To the third: God is not responsible for natural disasters. We will attempt to justify these three answers.

**Keywords:** climate change, divine responsibility, natural disasters, theology of natural disasters.

**Contribution:** This study advances a reconfiguration of classical theodicy by relocating responsibility for evil from God to the dominant socio-economic model, arguing that contemporary natural disasters are fundamentally anthropogenic in origin. It further develops a theological framework that integrates climate science and ethics, identifying both the top 1% and the neoliberal system as the primary agents of responsibility. Finally, it offers a non-Gnostic reinterpretation of creation, in which God does not causally intervene in evil but acts within history as a transformative and liberative force.

**Use of AI:** In the preparation of this article, artificial intelligence (ChatGPT, OpenAI) was used as a support tool for three specific tasks: (1) the generation of a comparative synoptic table based on data from the EM-DAT database (Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters, CRED); (2) the formal revision of citation style in accordance with the journal's requirements; and (3) the linguistic review of the English translation of the manuscript.

The use of these tools was strictly limited to technical and editorial assistance and did not affect the interpretation of the data, the theological analysis, or the conclusions of the study, which remain the sole responsibility of the author.

## Introduction

Following a series of repeated natural catastrophes of various kinds across the globe, many have begun to question the role or responsibility of God in such events. This is not a minor issue, as philosophical and theological modernity arises precisely from the central question of theodicy—that is, the possibility of the coexistence of God and evil in the world. It would seem that belief in a benevolent and omnipotent God is fundamentally incompatible with the existence of evil in its many forms. While the classical formulation of this problem originates with Epicurus and is preserved by Lactantius in *De ira Dei*, it was Voltaire who, in the aftermath of the 1755 Lisbon earthquake, gave voice to this dilemma for modern philosophy, directly challenging Leibniz's formulation of the idea of "the best of all possible worlds":

Quel crime, quelle faute ont commis ces enfants  
sur le sein maternel écrasés et sanglants?  
Lisbonne, qui n'est plus, eut-elle plus de vices  
que Londres, que Paris, plongés dans les délices?  
Lisbonne est abîmée, et l'on danse à Paris. (Voltaire 1756)

Deus, inquit (Epicurus), aut vult tollere mala et non potest; aut potest et non vult; aut neque vult, neque potest; aut et vult et potest. Si vult et non potest, imbecillis est, quod in Deum non cadit. Si potest et non vult, invidus; quod aequum alienum a Deo. Si neque vult, neque potest, et invidus et imbecillis est; ideoque neque Deus. Si vult et potest, quod solum Deo convenit, unde ergo

sunt mala? Aut cur illa non tollit?” (Lactancio, *De ira Dei*, cap. XIII, in *Opera*, ed. y trans. Jacques Paul Migne, *Patrologia Garnier*, 1844).

A benevolent God would not have indiscriminately punished both the righteous and the wicked; therefore, it is not a matter of God intervening through natural causes to produce effects in the world. Rather, the issue is that God simply wishes to have no further involvement with the world; He set it into motion and left it to its own fate. However, one might ask, what distinguishes a non-intervening God from a non-existent one?

In this brief article, we will question this very issue. However, before doing so, we must consider whether the natural disasters we have experienced in recent decades have any cause beyond nature itself, whether they have always occurred, and whether there is any way to determine natural or moral responsibility. This must be understood before attributing such catastrophes to God’s account.

We will ask whether humanity bears any responsibility for these natural disasters, which appear to be the effects of climate change that, according to most scientists, is anthropogenic in origin. Once this initial question is addressed, we must move on to the second issue: namely, whether humanity as a whole is responsible, or if there is a specific group with greater responsibility. Alternatively, we might consider whether this responsibility should be attributed to the economic, political, and social development model in which we live. Only after adequately answering these first two questions will we address the third and final question concerning divine responsibility in natural disasters.

## 1. An age of anthropogenic natural disasters?

It is a legitimate question to ask whether we are currently living in an era of natural disasters, or whether we are not experiencing an especially significant period of such events, but rather encountering random occurrences, as has always been the case throughout the history of life on Planet Earth. For many of those referred to as climate change skeptics, there is no climate change, and if it does exist, it would not be

anthropogenic in nature. The key issue for them is not so much the denial of climate change itself, but the denial that it has any connection to the way of life we have adopted for almost a century. As Naomi Klein aptly stated a decade ago: “This changes everything” (Klein 2014). This refers to anthropogenic climate change, and what is being changed is the capitalist economic model. Capitalism is fundamentally based on the constant reproduction of capital, which entails the exponential production of goods and waste, without limits.

The lack of limits would be key to understanding capitalism, but this will be addressed in the following section. For now, we wish to examine whether or not there has been an increase in natural disasters induced by the effects of climate change. To do so, we will turn to unquestionable data from international agencies that monitor climate and extreme climate events. We could approach this differently, as depicted in the film *Don’t Look Up*, where, in response to the imminent impact of a catastrophic meteorite, the denialist response is to avoid looking at the meteorite. We, however, will look at the meteorite, and what we see is that between the last quarter of the past century and the first quarter of this century, the total number of disasters has increased by 74%, according to the *Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters*. Let us now examine the information in a summary table sourced from this institution, which is affiliated with the *Université Catholique de Louvain*:

Table

<b>Comparison table: Natural disasters (1980–1999 vs. 2000–2019)</b>			
Source: EM-DAT – Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters (CRED)			
<b>Type of disaster</b>	<b>1980–1999</b>	<b>2000–2019</b>	<b>Change</b>
Total disasters	4.212	7.348	+74%
Floods	1.389	3.254	+134%
Storms	1.457	2.034	+40%
Droughts	263	356	+35%
Forest fires	102	198	+94%

Table continued

<b>Comparison table: Natural disasters (1980–1999 vs. 2000–2019)</b>			
Source: EM-DAT – Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters (CRED)			
<b>Type of disaster</b>	<b>1980–1999</b>	<b>2000–2019</b>	<b>Change</b>
Extreme temperatures	66	138	+109%
Earthquakes	385	396	≈ Stable

\* This table was generated using AI with the prompt: ‘Comparative synoptic chart between the 20th century (1980–1999) and the 21st century (2000–2019) based on data from the EM-DAT database of the Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters (CRED)’: ChatGPT. (2025). Comparative infographic: Natural disasters in the 20th vs. 21st century (based on EM-DAT data) [Infographic]. OpenAI. <https://www.emdat.be>. AI has also been used for Chicago-style citation formatting and translation review.

As can be inferred from the chart, all catastrophic events linked to climate change have increased exponentially from the 20th to the 21st century. Earthquakes serve as a control event in this regard, as their increase is barely perceptible—being the only event entirely unrelated to climate change. By way of explanation, we argue that climate change has more intense effects on temperature, and, as a consequence, on precipitation patterns.

There is a vast body of scientific literature that supports this position. And we are not referring solely to the IPCC, although its findings—confirmed since the first of its global gatherings by over 3,000 scientists from around the world and across various disciplines—are undeniably authoritative. Hence, it is not difficult to affirm our claim that we are indeed living in an era of natural disasters driven by anthropogenic climate change.

For instance, we may cite Aatishya Mohanty et al., whose article—aptly titled—argues that temperature variability is the key to understanding natural disasters. The study draws on data from 176 countries spanning the period from 1960 to 2018, and the robustness of the data is consistent with the hypothesis that the essential predictor of natural disasters is climate variability rather than temperature increase per se. In the case of the United States, for example, a 1% increase in temperature variability is associated with a 3.5% rise in natural disasters. What is most compelling

about this article is its challenge to the traditional focus on global warming as the primary cause of disasters, instead highlighting the role of climate instability. Far from denying global warming, it ultimately reaffirms it, since warming itself is the driver of both instability and variability in the climate system (Mohanty et al. 2024).

A 2020 article warned that climate change increases the risk of wildfires (Jones et al. 2020). The authors conducted a review of 57 scientific articles published after the Fifth IPCC Report of 2013. All of these studies reveal a relationship between climate change and the increasing frequency of fire-conducive weather conditions. The conclusion, according to these authors, is unequivocal: anthropogenic global warming increases the likelihood of wildfires that exceed human control. Projections for the year 2050 are far from optimistic, estimating that wildfire risk will rise between 33% and 62% by that time—even under scenarios where temperature increases are curbed. If, however, the global average temperature were to rise by 3°C, the total burned area would double. Only maintaining the planet’s average temperature at 1.5°C could offer relief from the growing threat of catastrophic fires.

In an article published in *Nature*, the authors examine the anthropogenic influence on major tropical cyclone events (Patricola et al. 2018). Using climate models and attribution techniques, the authors analyze how human activities—particularly those that produce greenhouse gas emissions—have affected the intensity, frequency, and impact of extreme tropical cyclones. Without a doubt, it is human action that has intensified hurricane rainfall and increased the frequency of category-five hurricanes. In other words, there is no margin for error in attributing these events to human influence. Therefore, the role of anthropogenic climate change in this type of natural disaster is confirmed, as we have seen in the previous cases.

The final paper we will present is titled “Climate-Related Disasters and the Death Toll” (Chavez-Demoulin et al. 2021); the title itself is telling. The article examines the relationship between climate-related disasters and mortality figures, using statistical models that allow for projections of future impacts under different socioeconomic scenarios. To this end, the authors analyze historical trends from 1960 to 2019 and

identify two key elements: first, an increase in the frequency of climate disasters—particularly floods and storms—correlated with the rise in CO<sub>2</sub> emissions; and second, a decrease in disaster severity (measured in deaths per event), attributed to improvements in risk management linked to increases in GDP per capita.

The paper also presents a particularly noteworthy projection for the year 2100. It outlines two possible scenarios. The first is the negative or “business-as-usual” scenario, which assumes high CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, low economic growth, and high population levels. Under this pathway, the frequency of disasters is projected to increase by 33–60%, and annual deaths from climate-related disasters in 2100 would be thirty times higher than under the second, sustainable scenario. The sustainable scenario envisions a drastic reduction in CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and balanced economic development, leading to a significant decrease in both the frequency and severity of disasters, and a 98% reduction in annual deaths from floods, storms, and landslides.

We are therefore living in an era of natural disasters induced by anthropogenic climate change. The data leaves no room for doubt. For the first time in the Earth’s history, human activity is the driving force behind climate change—and this change is, in turn, the primary cause of most natural disasters experienced over the past 25 years. The effects continue to worsen as the concentration of greenhouse gases increases, amplifying climate variability and instability.

However, the next question we must ask is whether all human beings are equally responsible for climate change—or whether some bear more responsibility than others. It would seem reasonable to assume that those who contribute most to the causes of climate instability and variability should bear greater responsibility. We explore this further in the next section.

## 2. “Drill, baby, drill” or the disasters doctrine

As we recalled earlier, Naomi Klein confronts us with the truth about climate change: it changes everything, because we can no longer continue

producing, consuming, and discarding as if there were no consequences. It is precisely this—living as if there were no consequences—that most characterizes the final stages of globalized postmodern neoliberal capitalism. The *homo oeconomicus* of the postmodern era has no awareness of the limits of his actions. As Max Weber (2001, 102–105) so insightfully analyzed, the human being born of the original capitalist revolution was deeply concerned with personal salvation. This concern led him to employ work, the accumulation of wealth, and restrained consumption as instruments to demonstrate his inclusion among the elect, the predestined for salvation. Enrichment thus became a sign of salvation—but it was an enrichment marked by frugality in consumption and spending, and, above all, by a deliberate avoidance of ostentation. This original capitalist subject enabled the emergence of a productive—though not productivist—capitalism, one that, for nearly a century, remained compatible with human life on Planet Earth.

However, the globalization of capital and its neoliberal implementation within a postmodern framework ultimately dismantled this original capitalism and gave rise to a new capitalism and a new human subject. As Boltanski and Chiapello argue, the new spirit of capitalism that emerged with postmodern globalization enables the postmodern individual to take pleasure in their own self-destruction: “Nous appelons esprit du capitalisme l’idéologie qui justifie l’engagement dans le capitalisme” (Boltanski et Chiapello 1999, 42). That is, the “spirit of capitalism” is the moral and cultural justification that allows individuals to accept and participate in capitalism with a sense of meaning. It is not only about how capitalism functions economically, but also about how it presents itself as desirable, legitimate, and even liberating.

We have referred to this process elsewhere as the creation of an illusion of freedom. The postmodern human being—the classical *homo oeconomicus*—has been transformed into a *homo consumptor*, trapped within a carefully crafted fiction. Let us examine this more closely:

Postmodernity is characterized, above all, by the use of mass media as social controllers of narrative and ideological discourse. Through this mechanism, individuals are redirected toward a conception of the social realm as a con-

stellation of discourses and possibilities in which they are cast as choosers. Thus, the illusion of freedom of choice is created. Freedom becomes identified with the freedom to choose, and subsequently, the illusion of truly distinct possibilities is manufactured. You can choose to watch this TV channel or that one—there are hundreds. You can choose to spend your holidays here or there. You can choose to buy this product or another. The perversion of this illusion lies in the closing off of real discourse: by generating a multitude of options, what is actually produced is disorientation and a loss of reality [...]. In truth, all products are the same product, and all possibilities are merely the single possibility of becoming both a consuming and consumable object (Pérez Andreo 2011, 115).

This process, generated by globalized postmodern neoliberal capitalism, could only lead to absolute nihilism. There are no values, nothing is worth anything, everything is a commodity. This is precisely what underlies the phrase coined by Donald Trump during his first term in the White House, and which has recently been revived: *drill, baby, drill*. Even if the world perishes, let us extract every last drop of that precious resource which nature took millions of years to create and make available to us to improve as a civilization—yet, instead, we are using it to destroy any future possibility of human life: oil. This liquid gold, along with other fossil fuels, is responsible for the increase in carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases that are generating the greenhouse effect, altering the climate to the point of triggering climate change.

The key to understanding this nihilism that has taken hold of the globalized capitalist world—including China and Russia (there is no place on the planet that is exempt)—is that we have been seized by a geopolitical doctrine that tells us: “If you don’t do it, someone else will; if you don’t consume it, someone else will”, because “international politics, like all politics, is a struggle for power. Whatever the ultimate aims of international politics, power is always the immediate aim” (Morgenthau 1985, 29). It is a race to obtain the dwindling resources left on the planet—not only fossil fuels but also rare earths and minerals. Rather than arriving at the conclusion that we must reduce consumption and live with less—that is, rather than coming to the rational conclusion that the only way to live on this planet is through the degrowth of consumption and

the squandering of valuable resources—we have accepted the madness of extracting whatever is left before someone else does. This suicidal race can only increase greenhouse gases, environmental pollution, the destruction of forests and rivers, and increase climate variability. All of this, of course, will lead to greater climate change, which is undoubtedly anthropogenic.

At this point, the essential question is: who is responsible for all of this? The tendency in the media is to blame humanity in general, through a deceptive discourse that presents us with the false choice between living with the current comforts of the developed Western world or returning to the caves. It is framed as if there is no middle ground, as if it were not possible to live with much less and perhaps even be happier. As Andrew Jebb's study showed that there is a point of wealth beyond which happiness does not increase. It varies by region, but for the United States it was at \$60,000 (Jebb et al. 2018). It is evident that the level of wealth in developed countries is excessive and that it would be possible to live better with less. Data tells us that the vast majority of wealth created in the world ends up in the hands of a tiny fraction of the population. Specifically, 1% of the population controls more wealth than the remaining 95%, and since the COVID-19 crisis, this 1% has accumulated more wealth than the other 99% combined (Oxfam 2024). What are 80 million human beings doing hoarding the wealth that could allow everyone to live better and drastically reduce fossil fuel consumption? The conclusion is simple: the 1% has more than enough of that 99% of wealth. We could, first, generate less wealth because it is unnecessary; and second, redistribute wealth in such a way that no one lacks what is necessary. The maxim should be that no one has more than what another lacks. On the other hand, as demonstrated by a recent study, more than fifty percent of pollution is produced by the wealthiest ten percent of the population (Schöngart et al. 2025).

Therefore, the answer to this section's question is straightforward: the responsibility for anthropogenic climate change falls primarily on that 1%. However, two important qualifications must be made. There is another 9% of the global population that willingly collaborates with this 1% to create and appropriate wealth. Additionally, between 15 and 20%

more serve this 10% to achieve their objectives. For this reason, the real responsibility does not rest so much on specific individuals but on the postmodern globalized neoliberal capitalist model.

If this is the case, then we must answer the third and final question. The first two have already been answered: yes, there is anthropogenic climate change causing natural disasters, and the responsibility for this lies with the economic and social model and the 1% of the population that leads it. But, does God bear any responsibility? Let us explore this.

### **3. The natural disasters and the divine responsibility**

In his seminal work *Jesus Christ Liberator*, Jon Sobrino questioned the most significant aspect of theology, and the answer lies in the existence of the poor and their relationship with Jesus Christ. It was from this pivotal point that he built his liberation christology. Today, we can ask a similar question, and we believe the answer is that the most significant aspect of theology in the 21st century is the real possibility of the disappearance of the ideal conditions for human life on Planet Earth, caused by anthropogenic climate change of catastrophic proportions for the survival of humanity. Pope Francis has not overlooked this when he states: “Climate change is a global problem with grave implications, both environmental and social, and is largely a result of human activities” (Francisco 2015, 23). According to the teachings of the Church, we are facing a serious global issue, largely due to human actions.

If we determine the most significant issue in 21st-century theology in this way, we move beyond a debate that has become outdated—the classic theodicy debate on the compatibility of evil in the world with the goodness and omnipotence of God. God does not permit evil, much less does He cause it. If we turn to the Gospel, we see how this question was posed to Jesus by His disciples in Chapter 9 of the Gospel of John: “As He went along, He saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked Him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’ ‘Neither this man nor his parents sinned,’ said Jesus, ‘but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him’. “Evil is not caused by

personal or inherited guilt; therefore, God is not the cause of evil. If we thought like the disciples, neither the father nor the blind man would be the ultimate culprits, but God, who would have punished a human sin with blindness. What the evangelist tells us is that God is not the cause of evil, but He is the solution to it because evil is an opportunity for God's greatness to be revealed through those who can act to alleviate suffering. Jesus acts to alleviate evil, and human beings can do as He did—act to alleviate evil.

The answer to the question we posed has a direct response: God is not responsible for natural disasters. In this sense, we fully concur with the proposal outlined in a recent study regarding the need for a positive understanding of Creation—and consequently of the Creator—if Christians are to move away from denialist attitudes toward the created world: Madueme et al. 2024. First, because He is never the cause of evil, but also because the origin of these disasters lies in the order created by human beings, or rather, the disorder that has been established, as Emmanuel Mounier aptly expressed (Rougemont 1985, 37). We have created a global disorder, both economic and political, which has led us to this situation. Our supposed fallen nature is not to blame, nor is God. It is the use, or rather the abuse, of our freedom that has led us to this real possibility of the destruction of human life, as natural disasters primarily arise as a consequence of climate change that we have caused ourselves. However, where sin abounded, grace abounds all the more, and this moment is a precious opportunity for human beings to intervene so that “the works of God may be displayed.” We can apply the principles of degrowth and accept that we live in a limited world where nothing can grow indefinitely, as economic doctrine posits, and as we seem to want to live. If we accept this, then we will apply the necessary criteria to drastically reduce consumption, avoid product waste, and live with less to be happier.

Theology posed a fictitious problem due to ignorance of natural processes and a Gnostic prejudice that became ingrained in theological thinking, as Paul Ricoeur noted (Ricoeur 1969, 383). The natural world, the material reality, or Creation, contrary to what we read in the book

of Genesis, is considered potentially dangerous, if not directly the agent of evil. Not long ago, it was said that the devil, the flesh, and the world were the enemies of the human soul. This led to a paradox: on one hand, people believed that nature was the cause of evil, and on the other, that God used it to punish sinners. Neither is true. Nature acts according to its own principles, which must be understood to avoid the disasters we experience. And God does not use nature to punish any personal sin. To put it philosophically: the metaphysical order does not intervene in the physical order to produce effects in the moral order. God only intervenes by taking sides with the victims of the established disorder to restore it, as He did through His Son on the cross. The only way to restore love is by giving one's own life in the face of the evil of the world. We need a theology that frees us from the Gnostic error once and for all, without falling into the agnostic error. God is committed to His Creation, but He is committed to ending the consequences of evil from within the world; not with an extrinsic intervention, but by moving consciences and generating a push for universal fraternity and solidarity among the victims.

## Conclusion

The fundamental question for theology is whether we can intervene in the events we are currently experiencing. A sclerosis-driven theology would propose a fatalistic view of the global situation regarding natural disasters: nothing can be done because God is punishing our sins; therefore, we must accept what is happening and pray fervently, hoping that God will take pity on us and intervene to alleviate the suffering. Alternatively, it may present an illusory proposal that all of this is merely a natural event beyond our control, a manifestation of a nature hostile to humanity. Both approaches are erroneous and reflect a theology petrified in the past.

One possible way out of this situation would be to “recosmify theology” (Gómez García 2025) as a means of grounding theological reflection in the world, a grounding that the original Christian thought possessed.

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