

LLUIS OVIEDO

Pontifical University Antonianum, Rome
Nicolaus Copernicus Superior School, Krakow
loviedo@antonianum.eu
ORCID: 0000-0001-8189-3311

Theology Trying to Make Sense of Natural Disasters: Some Contemporary Theological Perspectives on Natural Evil

Abstract: Natural disasters present a significant challenge to engaged theology, particularly following the decline of traditional explanations that relied on the model of divine punishment. The ongoing occurrence of such catastrophes has become a scandal and is frequently used as a critique of divine providence and goodness. In response, theology has moved beyond earlier models to develop more nuanced answers, drawing on alternative frameworks that offer greater flexibility and depth, after considering merits and flaws of available theodicies. This article reviews contemporary theological approaches to the problem of natural disasters and explores new opportunities provided by research on the function of religion, religious coping mechanisms, and the processes of belief.

Keywords: theodicy, religious coping, function of religion, believing, religious evolution, theology of cross.

Contribution: This paper updates theological responses to natural disasters, aiming for greater effectiveness. After reviewing previous arguments and considering scientific explanations, it explores recent theological proposals and new and relevant areas of study, such as belief systems, to develop more complex models of the interaction between God and creation.

Use of AI: Generative AI tools were used solely for grammar correction and language refinement. No AI system contributed to the interpretation of results or the development of arguments. The author take full responsibility for the content of this article.

1. Introduction

Natural disasters are becoming more frequent, in part because of climate change, in part because of better communication that makes us more aware, or simply because they are closer to us than they used to be. Nevertheless, this perception might be a consequence of certain reporting biases (Alimondi and Mariani 2023; Ritchie and Rosado 2024). These uncontrolled and unpredictable phenomena are a great challenge for a more engaged theology. I mean a theology that pays attention to real experiences, especially those that contradict the expectation that divine providence, in its goodness, would prevent or at least limit so much harm to so many innocent people. This negative perception is reinforced by the data which show that in many cases the victims are those whose poverty makes them more vulnerable to the vagaries of nature (Sawada and Takasaki 2017).

Many might think that theology has a very limited role to play in these cases and might come too late when what is needed is immediate relief, material aid and psychological support. Moreover, in highly secularised societies, theology can be perceived as an almost esoteric knowledge of very limited cognitive value and of little use to those who lack religious faith. However, other people, especially believers, might expect theology to provide some words or guidance to make sense of and cope with such absurd circumstances as major catastrophes affecting entire populations. Some voices may suggest that the best we can do is to pray and accept this kind of “dark night of the soul” when almost nothing makes sense. In this situation, theology could simply become superfluous or helpless, an academic activity devoted to many other issues that have nothing to do with the current urgencies; or, even worse, it could fall victim to the pitfalls and limitations attributed to theodicies.

This is a real test for theology and for its function and performance in a world with scientific mentality, quite secularised and unsure about the role of religion and even more so of theology. Theology can nevertheless become useful in this context, where other social systems become less able to provide meaning and orientation. This has been an important function for theology throughout history. Religion and theology can be viewed as social systems that are well-suited to dealing with unmanageable contingency, uncertainty, and distress, when other social systems appear to be less appropriate for this purpose. (Niklas Luhmann). The problem is that most of the resources and answers provided in the past do not work today: the functional needs remain, but the old means of addressing them become outdated and even dysfunctional in the new context.

An example will help us to understand this point: great natural disasters have occurred more often, but the theological ways of dealing with them are no longer convincing. In a classical period, they could be understood in terms of divine judgement and punishment. There are many references and historical studies that show this attitude as almost standard in earlier periods (Chester and Duncan 2010; Hardwick and Stephens 2020). In modern times, and after the terrible Lisbon earthquake of 1755, these events became a challenge to the religious conscience of enlightened thinkers who saw an inconsistency between the Christian declaration of divine goodness and the immense negativity of such adverse events. In any case, a theology on the defensive, or one that tries to respond to the criticisms of sceptical philosophers, is certainly not the best that theology can offer in its mission to accompany, through reflection, and to offer some answers and help in situations that make no sense and cause enormous suffering to many people. Theology is not only about justifying God's existence and love, despite all evidence to the contrary, but also about finding meaning and hope, especially when things go wrong.

The central issue in the current context is how we can renew the theological approach to natural disasters in a way that is appropriate to contemporary mindsets and their demanding and critical views, that takes into account the scientific knowledge of nature and its processes, and that nevertheless continues to offer meaning and hope in spite of the

odds, or at least offers an alternative view to the temptation of despair and deep confusion.

This article will first offer an overview of recent studies and major themes that have addressed this question in theology, in order to point to current research and provide a historical perspective. In a second step, it will explore some alternative sites, inspired by recent developments and theoretical frameworks, outside theology, but which could be very helpful in a theological application. And in the third step, the focus will become more specifically theological, to analyse the alternative styles we can find in dealing with such adverse events.

2. A short review of current developments on theology and natural disasters

The topic of theology and natural disasters has been covered by many focused studies in the last 25 years. The ATLA bibliographic dataset offers 114 results under that label between 2000 and 2025 (accessed 19/07/2025). It is interesting not only to find a large number of proposals and analyses, but also that collective works dedicated to the multidisciplinary study of natural disasters — including the management and assistance of such crises — resort to the theological dimension in at least one chapter (Gregersen 2015; O’Mathúna 2018; Chester 2005). That is, in these cases it is perceived that theology can offer a reflection and an approach to these critical situations that could be useful, together with the contributions of other disciplines that are also relevant in the face of these crises. Theology can be seen today as well-endowed to better address problems and challenges that are clearly beyond our normal resources or that generate a high level of uncertainty and invite multidisciplinary intervention.

A systematic review of published theological studies on natural disasters is needed to account for the variety and complexity of the strategies that have been developed. Unfortunately, this is not the aim of the present paper, which instead seeks to identify significant studies that reveal the main orientations of current research. At least five points of interest stand out. The first is that such studies often relate to and

complement general analyses of disasters. Second, in most cases there is a clear evolution from negative to more positive ideas and explanations. Third, the issue is also linked to the question of theodicy, or attempts to present the goodness of God despite the negativity discovered in such events. Fourthly, new theological interventions suggest a further complexification in our understanding of God and divine action. And fifth, the theological approach points to an invitation to help and to remedy or mitigate the most negative effects. The following paragraphs develop these points.

2.1. The theological vision in a multidisciplinary framework

In several cases, the theological contributions invite us to connect with the broader vision represented by the specialised field of disaster studies, which helps to understand the different approaches that have been applied in recent years and to better situate the theological contribution. The Danish theologian Niels Gregersen, for example, presents the contribution of theology in these cases as an opportunity to place the study of natural disasters in a broader perspective, taking into account aspects that are not often considered in sociological and psychological studies, and providing keys to analysis that enrich the usual repertoire (Gregersen 2015, p. 37). Interestingly, both he and David Chester reconstruct the changes of perspective in secular science, pointing out the shift from a model that was dominant until the 1980s, in which attention was focused on occasional and limited events that had to be dealt with by all the technical means available, to a model of vulnerability that considered, from a more global vision, the limits of a society, a precarious general condition that required a more comprehensive, realistic treatment capable of accepting this limitation and adapting to it. This development would have given rise to a third stage, that of resilience, which seeks to focus on the processes that contribute to recovery and the improvement of the situation of the victims. These developments point to the importance of social capital and all the factors that can contribute to both embracing our vulnerable condition and facilitating processes of material, emotional and social recovery after devastating circumstances (Chester 2005; Gregersen 2015).

The question in such cases is what theology brings to the table when we might have the impression that everything has already been more than analysed and resolved. Yet both Gregersen and Chester see in these developments opportunities for a theology that can engage with such conditions. Indeed, the story of human vulnerability finds clear affinities in the Christian vision of our fallen and limited condition in need of salvation; and the search for resilience has connotations in the discourse of grace and salvation, but also in the evangelical insistence on charity.

2.2. A case of theological cultural evolution

Many articles on the theology of disasters describe a history that has clearly been one of evolution (Chester and Duncan. 2009; Gregersen 2016; Hardwick and Stephens 2020). The clearest step is the one that seeks to move beyond a view of natural disasters as divine judgement, or as punishment and call to conversion, towards readings that are less negative and that emphasise the mystery and the invitation to improve our world.

The theme of cultural evolution applied to theological developments implies accepting that Christian ideas and representations are not static, but change over time to adapt to new environments or historical circumstances (Oviedo 2024). It is striking, for example, how most theological analyses, even up to the Lisbon earthquake (1755), applied a negative criterion in that God used these events to punish a people, to warn them or to correct negative tendencies; this seemed to be inferred from some biblical passages. It seems that such an approach was quite “functional” or satisfied the cognitive needs of believers, in the sense that it provided a convincing explanation that fit the model of faith they knew. It is very striking how, after a certain point in the modern period, the explanations attributing catastrophes to “divine acts” of judgement are abandoned, to move to a vision in which such events are not attributed to a divine will of punishment or retribution, and to move to a presentation of natural phenomena without intentionality and of some events with which we must be responsible, and to receive a theological treatment that respects a certain level of mystery in order to

seek a positive value, an assumption of our vulnerability, a call to help and transformation.

Two factors have contributed to these changes. First, a scientific understanding of these adverse phenomena, which ultimately provided an explanation of natural processes without recourse to divine action. Second, a shift away from the question of guilt or retribution for actions within a moralistic scheme. Such a shift helps to observe these phenomena in a more neutral way, although it also implies a greater cognitive effort, which cannot fail to look for agents – of one kind or another – in the face of phenomena that overwhelm us, also for our mind and our way of understanding the world.

2.3. The question of theodicy

Most of the published studies relate to the so-called “problem of theodicy”, i.e. the need to justify divine wisdom and goodness in the face of serious adverse natural phenomena that cause so much suffering. Moreover, we could say that the problem of evil remains one of the main arguments against faith. Even if we can separate the theological treatment of this question from the arguments that, especially in modern times, try to approach it in a rational or philosophical way, it seems that we cannot separate theology from the philosophical debate.

There have been several attempts to give a reason for this disproportion; perhaps the most accepted is the argument of freedom – also in the natural environment – or the need to accept the physical laws that govern such an environment, without expecting or pretending a constant divine intervention to correct them, which would make the physical world even feeling more unpredictable and strange (Plantinga 1977; Swinburne 1988). Others have pointed to the formative aspects that can come from such natural disasters, forcing us to develop a stronger and more resilient character, or to become more mature in the face of adversity (Hick 1985). Other proposals invite us to accept evil and suffering as inherent consequences of the evolutionary process, a price to pay for our adaptive capacity (Southgate 2008). To all this must be added the criticism of those who argue that creation, as the work of God, is far from

being as perfect and efficient as we would expect from a wise and good creator. The proportion of suffering it endures would be an indication of its imperfection and flawed design.

The general criticism of the published studies shows that philosophical explanations attempting to solve the problem of theodicy are either insufficient or unconvincing for those with a more informed and critical mentality. Furthermore, many have denounced the failure of theodicy to provide anything other than a rational answer or a way to make sense of seemingly meaningless events. For instance, these voices claim that it is necessary to distinguish between the ‘logical problem’ and the ‘practical, emotional and pastoral problem’, since a logical answer does not help much in addressing the latter (Philips, 2004).

Other authors have been more vocal in denouncing the flaws of such a philosophical attempt to offer a response to this enigma. Examples include Terrence W. Tilley (1991), Nick Trakakis (2008) and Toby Betenson (2016) (see for a review Sollereeder 2021). The latter author even points to a moral deficit in such theodicies and a lack of theological sensitivity. In most cases, theodicies are found to be contrasting approaches to a Christian theology of suffering that is intended to help those who are most affected. Theology’s role would then be to provide additional layers of understanding or to refine ideas that reason alone might struggle with or find too challenging to grasp.

2.4. More complex theological solutions

Some developments can be seen in the work of several theologians who have attempted to build a positive theology in the face of negative natural events. In most cases, a development beyond former simple models of divine action in the world can be observed, rendering that interaction far more complex by introducing new distinctions, integrating more factors, and inviting the perception of the relationship between God and the world as being less linear, more plural, and more nuanced. The aim is always to reinforce the fundamental teaching of divine love for humanity and all creation, despite apparent contrary evidence.

One example of this is David Bentley Hart's response to the devastating 2004 tsunami (2005), an event that, like the 1755 Lisbon earthquake before it, prompted a search for answers and meaning. Hart's view attempts to rethink the nature of the divine, distinguishing between what He wills and what He permits — a distinction aimed at making such a scandal seem less extreme.

A second example is Nancey Murphy's analysis of the fine-tuned created world (Murphy, 2007). This world is capable of supporting life and evolved minds, but in such a complex way that it necessarily comprises "by-products" that are unintended by such design. Nevertheless, these by-products are unavoidable in order to bring the plan to its full development.

A third example is Thomas Jay Oord's attempt at an 'open theology' and his concept of 'essential kenosis' (2009). This proposal goes beyond the solutions offered by process theologians and the concept of 'divine kenosis', which is supported by Polkinghorne and others. The nuance introduced here is that such kenosis should be understood less as voluntary and more as a necessary condition of the love that can be identified in God. This is because He is able to create beings with freedom and agency as an essential condition of that love. This nuance points to an idea of divine love that must account for the limitations and suffering in its creation, rather than dismissing that love.

Further examples of 'theological complexification' can be provided, such as when considering the distinction between natural and anthropogenic disasters (White, 2014), or disasters exacerbated by human planning errors and activities. Other examples include the work of Christopher Southgate (2018), which is discussed further in the next section. Theology also appears to be evolving in this direction, with more complex views accounting for additional factors and introducing new distinctions into our understanding of the divine.

2.5. Practical answers

Most of the theological studies published on natural disasters agree on the need to see these phenomena as a call to cooperate in alleviating their

most negative effects, to help the victims in the name of Christian ideals of fraternity and charity, and even to work for actions that will prevent these phenomena and make them less deadly in the future. We can speak of two trends: one that points to a theology of charity, especially as a victim, that can point to God's care for those who suffer most, recovering the merciful image of God (Swinton 2007); and the transformative, or the one that calls for practical interventions to prevent future greater evils, in a more prudential sense (Gregersen 2015; 2017; O'Mathúna 2018).

An article by Roger Abbott (2019) makes a radical case for what he calls a 'theology of works', i.e. one that bypasses theoretical answers and points directly to an analysis of all that contributes to the increased suffering of victims, such as poor planning or inadequate post-disaster relief, and invites theology to adopt an attitude of denunciation and transformative demand.

3. Exploring alternative frameworks

The published articles offer many more points of interest and constructive analysis. However, other models or proposals can be explored that might provide additional answers or complement those already formulated in the years of intense theological reflection, especially after the terrible tsunami in the Pacific Ocean in 2004 (a good example of such a theological engagement is the booklet of David Bentley Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 2005). It is useful in this context to explore studies on the function of religion in more developed societies; studies on religion, coping and resilience; and studies on belief and the process of believing that can be applied to this challenging area.

3.1. Does theology still have a function in advanced and self-sufficient societies?

This is the real challenge: to be able to connect theology as a more traditional activity, linked to pre-scientific mentalities and cultures with

higher levels of uncertainty and fewer means to control nature, society and human conditions.

An interesting guide to approaching this thorny issue is to be found in the social systems theory of Niklas Luhmann. This German sociologist proposed in the seventies to approach religion according to its functionality in modern differentiated societies, i.e. societies in which several systems achieve autonomy to specialise and better perform their functions through their own communication code. Luhmann assigned a specific function to religion: to cope with uncontrollable contingencies or uncertainties generated by the whole system or its environment. That is, to deal with those residual problems that are perceived to be out of control by the usual systems, such as the economy, politics or science (Luhmann 1977, 9 ff.). In this analysis, religion performs a kind of “magic” as it is able to transform negative values into positive ones, or what is perceived as harmful is transformed in religious belief into a circumstance that opens up to meaning and hope (Luhmann 1977).

This is not the place to elaborate and discuss such a theory and its implications. The model can clearly be applied to natural disasters as features that are usually – in part – beyond the control of the systems that normally manage most problems and provide appropriate responses to keep the whole social system and its fabric going. Religion is about constructing meaning where things become so strangely disappointing, or it can perform a specific meaning-making function in the midst of societal experiences of suffering and a lack of control. In this model, theology is seen as the “reflexive” side of religion, or the dimension capable of generating new meaning on the basis of its own communication code, the one that distinguishes between transcendence and immanence. The idea is that theology, being able to communicate about a dimension that transcends the material or physical world, can wrap in a meaning related to a different order of reality what becomes meaningless in the usual immanent order of things. The question is how theology can still fulfil such an assigned function in these new times and cultural conditions.

3.2. Christian faith as coping and resilience

Another relevant framework links Christian faith and practice with the capacity to cope with adversity and suffering and to contribute to the resilience of individuals and societies. This is a point on which several of the reviewed authors have insisted (Swinton 2007; Entwistle, Moroney, and Aten. 2018; Abbot 2019; Sollerender 2021). What may be a novelty is that the many studies published on religious coping contribute to a better understanding of these dynamics and offer an opportunity to build a better theological case (For an overview and systematic review: Pargament 1997; Garssen, Visser & Pool, 2020). Nevertheless, these publications, almost always of an empirical nature, are quite alien to theology because of their method and their too pragmatic orientation. The fact that there is evidence of a positive effect of religious beliefs and practices on coping and resilience processes, even after natural disasters (Koenig 2008), opens a window to a more interesting theological panorama.

More generally, the capacity of Christian faith to provide meaning in the midst of negative situations is seen in many forms of coping. Faith, supported by intentional practices of prayer and celebration, helps to recalibrate negative events and experiences by projecting positive meaning. This dynamic is reinforced in celebratory environments and through community support, which introduces a language and categories that allow us to read reality in a bright and hopeful light.

Again, the dynamic of coping is very close to the traditional idea of “carrying the cross”, avoiding running away from it or being crushed by it, and also implies an invitation to carry the crosses borne by others. This claim must be aware of the pitfalls of exploiting spiritual motives to perpetuate victimisation and subjugation; this is clearly an abusive use of Christian spirituality. What is happening now is that, thanks to studies of the positive experiences of believers, we can propose a theology of the cross or of coping with natural disasters that can actually be an effective response and a message of salvation that is really helpful for many.

3.3. Beliefs and cognitive conditions

The role of beliefs in these negative cases is also important. We all need to hold beliefs that help us to better represent reality – because we can hardly get an accurate, complete and scientifically sound picture of the world and our foreseeable future. But we can get more or less approximate views, which we can adjust and nurture after our many failures, and which can provide better guides for navigating reality and making the right choices.

Several theories attempt to make sense of religious beliefs in the context of high uncertainty, predictive limitations, and the need to fill multiple cognitive gaps (Rigoli and Lennon 2024; for critical comments: Oviedo 2025). Religious beliefs appear to function to reduce anxiety in the face of delusions and contrasts between expectations and often disappointing reality. Natural disasters represent an extreme case of such dissonance between expected views and a complete failure, but they stress the level of religious cognitive response, sometimes beyond its own possibilities, a stress that could lead to a rejection of this religious response as unconvincing or too ineffective to address such a problem. However, it can be argued too that religious expectations about the fundamental goodness of the world are precisely what prime people for this sort of disappointment. Theology can take up this framework to try to better address such a challenge and to provide better answers. In these cases, the role of theology can be conceived less as an attempt to reduce the cognitive dissonance arising between confessed beliefs and adverse circumstances and experiences, and more as a means of demonstrating how such beliefs can be reconciled with a more complex reality. Such an effort often involves assuming new levels of complexity that go beyond the simple models of past theological traditions. Science can play an important role in assisting with the design of such new models. For instance, it could help to account for the apparent sub-optimal design that we perceive in the world (Lumbreras et al. 2026).

4. More theologies dealing with natural disasters

Returning to the subject of theology, the first point to note is that there are multiple ways to approach natural disasters from a theological perspective. At least a few of the more common approaches can be recalled: the traditional apocalyptic is the first that comes to mind, as these disasters can be easily connected with ideas and expectations about the catastrophic end of times and the last judgement; second, the contemporary ecological, connecting humans and nature or cosmos in a deeper way; third, an updated theology of the cross; and fourth, a view that stress more the social aspects and the engagement to heal and assist in those critical moments. I consider here few of these proposals.

4.1. A theology of the connection between humans and nature

Karen Armstrong has denounced in her latest book (Armstrong 2022) a dynamic within the Christian churches that would have led to a separation between believers and the cosmos we inhabit, which would have become an object of control and exploitation. Her purpose is to redesign Christian theology, in conjunction with other great religions, which have tried to connect with God as the background of all reality, and which is able to perceive his mysterious presence in the entire natural environment, not as something detached but as the medium in which “we live, move and exist”. This effort is inspired, among others, by a rereading of the Book of Job, in which the American theologian discovers a religious approach very different from that which presides over the biblical revelation centred on the Law. In her own “For the first and only time in the Bible, we see that nature has its own intrinsic value, power, integrity and beauty. Where Job had seen darkness and death, God reveals a cosmos pulsing with energy and life” (Armstrong 2022, 69). Nature, with all its accidents, becomes a destiny that we are called to accept and assume as sacred. From this observation derives a more understanding attitude, which accepts the cosmos in its processes, also in that which is contrary to our own plans, and even that which is catastrophic. Such an attitude is a condition for

overcoming our self-centred behaviour, and for encouraging forms of empathy, compassion and helpfulness.

Armstrong's approach gives food for thought in the context of natural disasters. She speaks rather of a "broken world" in reference not so much to such disasters, but to our inability to reconcile ourselves with natural reality and its dynamics, which, as in the case of Job, surpass us, but are revelatory of a mysterious plan of God that we are invited to take on and be part of. Perhaps this is an extreme demand, of a radical faith, both in the case of Job and for our contemporaries who suffer from natural catastrophes or are scandalized by the obvious absence of the God of mercy and compassion.

4.2. A theology of divine glory

Christopher Southgate has suggested this point and developed a theological motive of glory that can be understood in a broader and more complex way. Indeed, he advocates reflection on overcoming a 'simplistic theology' and accepting a creation 'in which negative values were intrinsic' (Southgate, 2018, p. 2). The key concept of 'glory', with its biblical roots, encompasses dimensions that render it much more complex as a divine attribute, including the negative aspects of creation and the acceptance of suffering. This is consistent with references to the redeeming cross and eschatological universal redemption. Southgate thus invites us to reconsider the relationship between divinity and the world, moving away from a binary perspective of reward or punishment and embracing a more nuanced understanding. God is presented as accepting the reality and consequences of creation, including its "disvalues", which are not dismissed as contradictory to the divine character. Its glory means the capacity to encompass and assume all that suffering and redeem it.

4.3. A renewed theology of the cross

A less demanding reading of Armstrong's proposal can draw on the theology of the cross, for example in the version inspired by Jürgen Moltmann, to assume that adversity of any kind can be a condition for

new life and redemption (Moltmann 1974). Surely, without going to the extreme that Armstrong demands of a total connection with the natural cosmos and its absolute acceptance, seeing the saving mystery of the cross as a proclamation of salvation could open a better way to face these challenges. Theology teaches us how to read the presence of God where he seems rather absent, as happened with Jesus on the cross, suffering in an extreme way. Christians learn from this tragic event that the cross reveals a mystery of salvation because it opens up the possibility of resurrection, or of experiencing life where there is only the immediate perception of death. In any case, Moltmann's theology is more than that: it is more about divine passibility, and hence divine solidarity with the suffering, a view certainly able to illuminate this suffering.

Theology should be a school for believing in a way that helps people to overcome negativity and despair. There are beliefs that become toxic, such as those that see only divine punishment in very negative events, and others that are constructive and contribute to development and to giving the best of oneself. Helping to believe in a way that allows glimpses of light in the midst of darkness, to believe in the best content and in the most intense way possible, is what makes theology an exercise in spiritual reconstruction, which is often necessary along with the processes of material reconstruction after the great catastrophes suffered.

Conclusion

Theology is a valuable tool in responding to natural disasters, beyond the practical action and emotional support traditionally associated with it by providing a framework for interpreting human suffering and vulnerability, theology can offer meaning and hope in the midst of the adversity caused by these extreme events, including assisting affected communities in their search for meaning and resilience, thus complementing the material and technical interventions necessary for recovery. Religious coping is a complex process requiring cognitive, emotional and social support and intervention. Theology can provide insight into integrating these dimensions and encouraging engagement; this is a point that

has vindicated Bethany Sollereeder under the label of “compassionate theodicy” (Sollereeder 2021).

A renewed theology aimed at providing an updated message about Christian salvation amidst great disasters causing widespread suffering and loss of life should connect the following strands: a specific theological reflection adopting a more complex view of the divine and its relationship with the world; an analysis of the role of religion in contemporary contexts, including how to deal with natural disasters; and related research on religious coping and its effectiveness in addressing such crises and distress. By combining these strands, I believe we can offer a more fitting theology to assist in these difficult circumstances.

There has also been a significant evolution in theological perspectives on natural disasters. From ancient conceptions that saw these events as divine punishment, we have moved to interpretations that emphasise the mystery and complexity (as well as the necessary unpredictability) of creation, recognising the need for an ethical and responsible approach to environmental challenges. This shift reflects a more dynamic and contextualised theology, capable of adapting to scientific advances and contemporary socio-economic realities, and promoting a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness of humanity and nature.

In any case, theology invites us to take a religious or transcendent stance in those cases that are beyond human capacity and control, and to develop a sense of the divine and its presence in the world that is less the result of some trade or transaction, but rather of search, submission and wonder before its mystery, which projects salvation beyond our expectations.

References

- Abbott, Roger Philip. 2019. “‘I Will Show You My Faith by My Works’: Addressing the Nexus between Philosophical Theodicy and Human Suffering and Loss in Contexts of ‘Natural’ Disaster.” *Religions* 10 (3): 213. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel1003021>.

- Alimonti, Gianluca, and Luigi Mariani. 2023. "Is the number of global natural disasters increasing?" *Environmental Hazards* 23 (2): 186–202. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17477891.2023.2239807>.
- Armstrong, Karen. 2022. *Sacred Nature: How We Can Recover Our Bond with the Natural World*. London: The Bodley Head.
- Betenson, Toby. 2016. "Anti-Theodicy." *Philosophy Compass* 11 (1): 56–65.
- Chester, David K. 2005. "Theology and Disaster Studies: The Need for Dialogue." *Journal of Volcanology and Geothermal Research* 146 (4): 319–28.
- Chester, David K., and Angus M. Duncan. 2009. "Responding to Disasters within the Christian Tradition, with Reference to Volcanic Eruptions and Earthquakes." *Religion* 40 (2): 85–95.
- Entwistle, David N., Scott K. Moroney, and Julie Aten. 2018. "Integrative Reflections on Disasters, Suffering, and the Practice of Spiritual and Emotional Care." *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 46 (1): 67–81. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0091647117750658>.
- Garssen, Bert, Anja Isser, Grieteke Pool. 2020. "Does spirituality or religion positively affect mental health? Meta-analysis of longitudinal studies". *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 31 (1): 4–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10508619.2020.1729570>.
- Gregersen, Niels Henrik. 2015. "Theology and Disaster Studies: From 'Acts of God' to Divine Presence." In *Disaster Research: Multidisciplinary and International Perspectives*, edited by Rasmus Dahlberg, Olivier Rubin, and Morten Thanning Vendelø, 34–48. London: Routledge.
- Gregersen, Niels Henrik. 2017. "Positive Loss and Tragic Memory: On the Preservation of Community." *Dialog* 56: 361–72. <https://doi.org/10.1111/dial.12356>.
- Hardwick, Joseph, and Randall Stephens. 2020. "Acts of God: Continuities and Change in Christian Responses to Extreme Weather Events from Early Modernity to the Present." *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change* 11 (2): e631.
- Hart, David Bentley. 2005. *The Doors of the Sea: Where Was God in the Tsunami?* Grand Rapids, Michigan: W.B. Eerdmans.
- Hick, John. 1985. *Evil and the God of Love*. London: Macmillan.
- Koenig, Harold G. 2008. *In the Wake of Disaster: Religious Responses to Terrorism and Catastrophe*. Templeton Foundation Press.
- Luhmann, Niklas. 1977. *Funktion der Religion*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Lumbreras, Sara, Lluís Oviedo and Peter Jeavons. 2026. "The Design Argument Revisited through Evolutionary Computation: Imperfection, Robustness and Creative Emergence." *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 61 (1): 221–39. <https://doi.org/10.16995/zygon.24840>.

- Moltmann, Jürgen. 1974. *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Murphy, Nancey. 2007. "Science and the Problem of Evil: Suffering as a By-Product of a Finely Turned Cosmos." In *Physics and Cosmology: Scientific Perspectives on the Problem of Natural Evil*, edited by Robert John Russell and William R. Stoeger, 131–52. Vatican City; Berkeley, California: Vatican Observatory; Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences.
- O'Mathúna, Dónal P. 2018. "Christian Theology and Disasters: Where Is God in All This?" In *Disasters: Core Concepts and Ethical Theories*, edited by Dónal P. O'Mathúna et al., *Advancing Global Bioethics* 11.
- Oord, Thomas Jay. 2009. "An Open Theology Doctrine of Creation and Solution to the Problem of Evil." *Creation Made Free: Open Theology Engaging Science*, 28–52.
- Oviedo, Lluís. 2024. "Theology and Cultural Evolution." In *St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology*, edited by Brendan N. Wolfe et al. <https://www.saet.ac.uk/Christianity/TheologyandCulturalEvolution>.
- Oviedo, Lluís. 2025. "Comments to the Article 'The Gods as Latent Causes: A Statistical Inference Theory of Religion,' by Francesco Rigoli and Jack Lennon." *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 1–5. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10508619.2025.2491889>.
- Pargament, Kenneth I. 1997. *The psychology of religion and coping: Theory, research, and practice*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Phillips, Dewi Zephaniah. 2004. *The Problem of Evil and the Problem of God*. London: SCM Press.
- Plantinga, Alvin. 1977. *God, Freedom, and Evil*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans.
- Rigoli, Francesco, and Jack Lennon. 2024. "The Gods as Latent Causes: A Statistical Inference Theory of Religion." *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 1–26.
- Ritchie, Hannah and Pablo Rosado. 2024. "Is the number of natural disasters increasing?" Published online at OurWorldinData.org. Retrieved from: <https://ourworldindata.org/disaster-database-limitations>.
- Sawada, Yasuyuki, and Yoshito Takasaki. 2017. "Natural disaster, poverty, and development: An introduction." *World Development*, 94: 2–15.
- Sollereeder, Bethany N. 2021. "Compassionate Theodicy: A Suggested Truce Between Intellectual and Practical Theodicy." *Modern Theology* 3 (2): 382–95.
- Southgate, Christopher. 2008. *The Groaning of Creation: God, Evolution, and the Problem of Sin*. London: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Southgate, Christopher. 2018. *Theology in a Suffering World: Glory and Longing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Swinburne, Richard. 1988. "Does theism need a theodicy?" *Canadian journal of philosophy* 18 (2): 287–311.
- Swinton, John. 2007. *Raging with Compassion: Pastoral Responses to the Problem of Evil*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Tilley, Terrence W. 1991. *The Evils of Theodicy*. Washington: Georgetown University Press.
- Trakakis, Nick. 2008. "Theodicy: The Solution to the Problem of Evil, or Part of the Problem?" *Sophia* 47: 161–91.
- White, Robert S. 2014. *Who Is to Blame?: Disasters, Nature and Acts of God*. Oxford: Monarch Books.