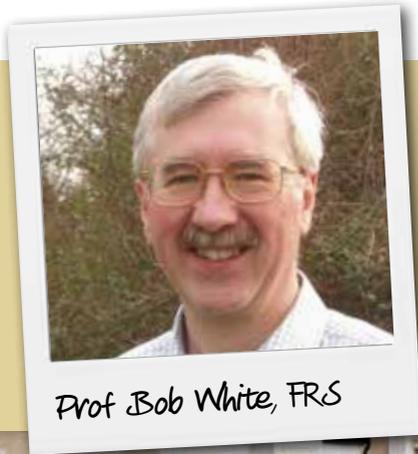


brokenness of this world, but also the reality of God's sovereignty over it and of his ultimate plans for a new creation. That does not mean that we need not strive to improve things now. Rather it points in the opposite direction, that we should work for better scientific understanding of disasters, we should enable communities to build resilience against them, we should

strive to remove the unjust disparities in wealth and resources that mean it is so often the poor who are most vulnerable and who suffer most. It is part of our worship of God to use our skills and understanding, our talents, our financial and natural resources to help reduce the effect of disasters and to help those affected when they do strike. That is what will please God.

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Prof Bob White, FRS

## There are no easy answers to the problem of human suffering

### Further information

[www.cis.org.uk](http://www.cis.org.uk) - Christians in Science

[www.faraday-institute.org](http://www.faraday-institute.org) - The Faraday Institute

### Suggested reading

D. A. Carson, *How Long, O Lord? Reflections on Suffering and Evil*, Baker Academic, 2006.

Jonathan A. Moo & Robert S. White, *Hope in an Age of Despair: The Gospel and the Future of Life on Earth*, Inter-Varsity Press, 224 pp., 2013.

Robert S White, *Who is to Blame? Nature, Disasters and Acts of God*, Lion Hudson, 207 pp., 2014.



# natural disasters

## how do we respond to natural disasters and suffering?

ADDRESSING QUESTIONS OF SCIENCE AND FAITH



THINKING ABOUT...



**Almost always it is the actions, or the neglect, of humans which turn natural processes into disasters**

Prof Bob White, FRS

# natural disasters

## **Just thirty seconds was the start of eternity for 230,000 people killed by an earthquake in Haiti in 2010.**

In a few minutes on Ascension Day 1902 the entire population of 26,000-36,000 in St. Pierre, Martinique died when a volcano poured burning ash across the town. During one night in November 1970, half a million people drowned when Typhoon Bhola hit East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). Such disasters may challenge belief in an all-powerful, loving God, though for atheists they challenge the hubris of this age that we can control our environment.

But volcanoes, floods and earthquakes make this a fertile planet. Without them Earth would be barren, without life as we know it. Volcanoes continually cycle to the

surface huge volumes of minerals essential for life. Floods distribute fertile soils. Earthquakes are caused by plate tectonics and the building of mountain ranges, which trigger rainfall and provide a steady supply of nutrient-rich sediments.

We call these catastrophes 'natural disasters'. Yet almost always it is the actions, or the neglect, of humans which turn natural processes into disasters.

## **Human Factors**

An identical earthquake to that in Haiti occurred 20 years earlier in California. Yet it killed only 57 people. California's building codes meant that houses did not collapse, whereas Haitians died when their concrete slab houses collapsed. By comparing death rates, you could say that 99.98% of the Haitian fatalities were due to human factors, largely resulting from decades of endemic corruption, misrule and poverty.

The St. Pierre volcanic disaster should have been avoided. For two weeks before the eruption, earthquakes, ash falls, fumes and mud flows killed over 600 people. Yet the Governor prevented people leaving, using soldiers to block the trails, because elections were due and the demographics of St. Pierre's voters favoured his party. It was an avoidable tragedy.

HOW DO HUMAN FACTORS CHANGE THINGS?

Floods kill more people globally than all other disasters. When Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans in 2005 over 1,800 people died. They were disproportionately the infirm, the elderly and the poor who could not evacuate as the storm approached

## **A Christian Perspective**

There are no easy answers to the problem of human suffering. However, there are some things we can usefully say. The first is that 'nature' is not a force separate from God. Natural processes occur under the overarching sovereignty of God, and so too must natural disasters.

It is helpful to see God's response to the trials suffered by Job, a righteous man. Some, at least, of the disasters that befell him were due to natural processes, such as the wind that blew down his eldest son's house and killed all ten children (Job 1:18-19). Job's friends tried to rationalise the disasters as resulting from some sin or failing on Job's part. Job rightly rejected those suggestions, but wanted God to explain himself. When God finally spoke to Job, he didn't give any tidy explanations. Instead he spoke majestically of his power over all creation, from the stars to the sea, the weather and the animals, including all the wild animals, which were far from Job's domesticated environment. Tellingly, God had complete control over the most fearsome of animals, the Leviathan, possibly representing Satan himself.

The biblical story of Joseph hinges around a 7-year famine. Yet Joseph was only in Egypt to oversee the storage of grain during the good years and its distribution during the bad, because of evil actions by others, including his brothers' sale

of himself into slavery. Joseph tells his brothers after they had been forced by the famine to come begging for food that 'you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today' (Genesis 50:20).

WHAT SHOULD OUR CHRISTIAN RESPONSE BE?

We can be reassured that God knows all there is to know about evil, that he constrains its reach and is ultimately sovereign over it.

## **Hope for the Present and the Future**

The story of Joseph is an encouragement to believers to use their gifts and abilities to ameliorate the consequences of disasters: to scientists and engineers to use their knowledge of the natural world for the good of humankind; to administrators, secretaries and government officials who enable society to function even when under stress; to aid workers and politicians who try to implement practical policies to ameliorate suffering; and indeed to everyone to be good stewards of resources. There is nothing 'unspiritual' about working hard at such mundane things.

The Christian perspective sees the