

If there is a loving God, why does God not stop evil?

INTRODUCTION

This session invites students to discuss one of the most testing philosophical questions concerning the Problem of Evil for religious believers. Students will be introduced to St Augustine's and St Irenaeus' theodicy and will be asked to evaluate these theories and give their own answers to the above question.

The session also asks students to empathise with people who have gone through horrific instances of suffering and to assess how this may have impacted their faith. This session deals with themes of death and suffering, so it will be down to the session leader's judgement as to how appropriate this session is for their students.

ACTIVITY

Ask students for their responses to the above question. Use these further questions to go deeper into the theological and philosophical issues:

- *Can God still be good if God causes suffering?*
- *Can good come from suffering?*
- *Can God stop all evil and suffering?*
- *Should God stop all evil and suffering?*
- *If God stops all suffering and evil that happens does this take away a human beings freedom?*

Explain to students that the question above is known as the philosophical problem called the Problem of Evil. This concerns the problem of how there can be an all loving, all powerful, all knowing God, if there is evil in the world?

Explain that several philosophers have come up with theodicies, i.e., explanations as to how God can be loving and good and coexist alongside evil.

Introduce students to two famous theodicies:

1. St Augustine argued that the reason we suffer and the reason why there is suffering in the world is due to the sin of human beings in the Garden of Eden. Suffering and evil is the result of punishment for sin, because Adam and Eve broke the commandment that God had given them. Evil and suffering is not God's fault.

2. St Irenaeus on the other hand argued that evil is the consequence of humans using their free will incorrectly. Irenaeus argued that God created the world imperfectly so that imperfect beings could develop through various experiences and learn from them in order to grow into a more mature individual. Therefore suffering can lead a person to grow into a more mature and experienced individual.

Ask students to respond to such questions as:

- *Do these two theodicies adequately explain how a good god and evil coexist?*
- *Is one theodicy more convincing than another?*
- *Can you come up with their own theodicy?*

ACTIVITY

This activity is designed to expand on Irenaeus' theodicy further. Ask students whether they think good can come from suffering. Give them the following list and ask them to think of what possible good could come from these examples:

- Childbirth
- Dieting
- Illness
- Being burgled
- Burning your hand
- Falling over
- Losing something very important to you
- Death.

ACTIVITY

Watch the following clip from a programme called *Where was God in the Tsunami?* Watch about 8 minutes of the film from around 16 minutes in. Preview this clip before watching as it deals with death and devastation that may be upsetting for some students. The clip details an interview with a young man who has lost all his family in the tsunami of 2004 in the Indian Ocean. The interviewer asks him about his faith and whether it has strengthened or weakened as a result of the experiences he has gone through: www.youtube.com/watch?v=jM_tCFF8gw

Ask students to respond to such questions as:

- *Has any good come from this young man's suffering?*
- *Could we say that some people experience too much suffering that is undeserved?*
- *Is it possible to grow and mature from a suffering experience like this?*

- *'God made this man suffer for a good reason'. Do you agree or disagree with this statement?*

ACTIVITY

Play the students a rap song called *A Letter from God to Man* by Dan Le Sac and Scroobius Pip: www.youtube.com/watch?v=x5e_vNNkbCI

This rap song imagines God's views on the evil that can be observed taking place in the world and where it might come from. Remind the students that this is purely the opinion of the writers of this song and is not necessarily representative of other people's views.

Ask students to respond to such questions as:

- *Who or what is the writer suggesting is responsible for evil in our world?*
- *What reasons may someone have for disagreeing with the message of this song?*
- *What image of God does this song portray?*
- *Would a religious person agree with depicting God in this way?*

When views have been exchanged ask a couple more questions:

- *Does this song give a possible answer to the main question: If there is a loving God, why does God not stop evil?*
- *Do you agree or disagree with the message of this song?*

CONCLUSION

The last activity involved a song entitled *A Letter from God to Man*. Encourage students to write a letter from human beings to God explaining their reflections on what humanity might say in reply. Have human beings made the world *better* in any way?