

Introduction

How to weather seven storms

(By Randal Rauser)

www.randalrauser.com

The flying spaghetti monster (aka FSM) first appeared on the religious scene in 2005. In contrast to the many deities of major religions whose origins have been lost in the mists of antiquity, there was no doubt where this god came from: The FSM was the creation of Bobby Henderson, a graduate student in physics at Oregon State. But don't get the wrong idea. Henderson was not seriously vying for the title of twenty-first prophet. Rather, his spaghetti god and the religion that came with it – “Pastafarianism” it was called – were intended from the outset as a parody. A parody of what, you ask? While the initial target was the theory of intelligent design, it didn't take long before the pasta deity had been recruited to illustrate the general absurdity of religious claims. To put it bluntly, if a Christian can believe in something as extraordinary as a deity who is three persons in one, why not believe in a deity that consists of noodles and meatballs? And so critics like Henderson concluded that if we count belief in the FSM crazy, then we should assume nothing less about belief in Father, Son and Holy Spirit.¹

¹Henderson later expanded his parody with *The Gospel of the Flying Spaghetti Monster* (New York: Villard, 2006), a book that went on to sell over one hundred thousand copies.

Henderson's pasta parody is actually rather ironic for even as he highlights the bizarre beliefs of others, as a physicist Henderson himself holds some surprisingly strange convictions. Indeed, the physicist's view of the universe as governed by general relativity and quantum physics is so bizarre that it would strain the credulity of even the most seasoned sci-fi readers.² To appreciate just how strange the story narrated by physicists like Henderson is, it may help to consider a specific example. Rather than get into some of the *really* bizarre stuff, we'll take a comparatively simple and straightforward example: the way that physicists describe the structure of the material world.

With that in mind, imagine that you invite a poet, priest and physicist over for dinner. You have slaved all day in the kitchen to produce a lovely meal, and now as delicious fragrances waft through the house you take a moment to admire your artistry. The main course is a succulent roast beef smothered in a rich gravy with a healthy dollop of extra spicy homemade horseradish (excellent for clearing the nasal passages). For a side you have whipped up creamy mashed potatoes with chives complemented with asparagus spears fried in olive oil and wrapped in bacon. Finally, for dessert you baked a traditional apple cobbler, still steaming from the oven with hunks of brown sugar and topped with a scoop of freshly churned vanilla ice cream. The entire meal is a feast of culinary sensations: mouth-watering aromas, delicious tastes, and truly tantalizing textures.

The poet, priest, and physicist are so impressed by this gastronomic gala that after dinner each decides to offer a spontaneous tribute of thanks. The poet kicks things off by standing and delivering a spontaneous haiku to describe the evening:

² Physicist Michio Kaku observes that "The most advanced form of the quantum theory is called the Standard Model, based on a bizarre, motley assortment of particles with strange names." *Visions: How Science Will Revolutionize the 21st Century and Beyond* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 347.

Candlelight flickers

Delicious flavors melding

Laughter and delight

As the poet completes his performance with an earnest flourish, you and the priest clap enthusiastically. But you notice the physicist rolling his eyes. Apparently he has no time for literary artistry. Indeed, by the look on his face he considers the poet's account of the meal to be little more than mere pretentious nonsense.

Next comes the priest who loosens his collar and raises his hand as he prepares to deliver a heartfelt prayer of thanksgiving. "Father," he begins, "we thank you for the goodness of this meal that you have wrought through the hands of your faithful servant. In your providential care you have brought together a symphony of flavors in a tribute to the goodness of creation and we are truly thankful..." The physicist may have found the haiku a bit ridiculous, but this prayer strikes him as positively bizarre! As the priest drones on, he stifles a chuckle at the thought that some mysterious, invisible deity out there is spinning galaxies on the end of his finger while still finding the time to help you out in the kitchen!

As soon as the priest has uttered his heartfelt "Amen" the physicist stands, anxious to counteract this buffet of well-intentioned gobbledygook with a rather more sober and commonsensical tribute:

"While I appreciate our poet's literary prowess and our priest's loveable piety, I offer a different perspective, one which is rooted not in the shadowy recesses of art or religion but in the concrete world. As we physicists know, our entire meal is nothing more than vibrating packets of energy with a whole lot of empty space. That actually makes your

accomplishment all the more impressive. You worked all day in the kitchen simply rearranging clouds of colorless, odorless, tasteless subatomic particles, and look at the mouth-watering result!”

With that the physicist sits back in his chair, pulls a toothpick out of his pocket protector, and thoughtfully begins to pick some of those subatomic particles from between his teeth as the other guests look bewildered.

In one sense the physicist is certainly correct, for his impromptu speech is simply summarizing the results of one hundred years of extraordinary advances in physics. It does appear that at the subatomic level the meal indeed consists of vibrating packets of colorless, odorless, tasteless energy. And yet, we are really to believe that the preparation of dinner was merely a rearrangement of energy? Forget the poems and prayers: that claim is *really* bizarre. Surely we cannot deny the indisputable data of experience that the table really is hard (try putting your fist through it), the roses really are fragrant (just take a whiff) and the roast beef really is tasty (go ahead and sample a forkful). If there is *anything* we know it is this, for these experiences are immediately presented to us as we sit at the table.

Look at him sitting there smugly. The physicist seems incredibly nonchalant about the astounding nature of his claim. His scientific description of the meal remains at arms length for us, mediated through theory, calculation and instrument and the interpretation and testimony of scientists. I am not suggesting that we should reject this scientific account, for indeed we do accept it. The point, instead, is to recognize that it is *prima facie* no less bizarre than anything offered by the poet or priest. The lesson, to say the least, is that the physicist who believes a meal of roast beef, mashed potatoes, and bacon-wrapped asparagus is mere energy should not be too quick to mock the very different accounts of a poet or priest.

Two types of crazy beliefs

Poets have them, priests have them, physicists have them, and so do you and I. But what is a crazy belief exactly? While we all have a good working sense of a crazy belief (namely, it is the kind of belief that makes us exclaim: “*You seriously believe that? Are you crazy?!*”), given the centrality of the concept in our discussion, it is worthwhile to propose a more formal definition.

With that in mind, I suggest the following:

a crazy belief is one which appears highly implausible or even impossible in light of other beliefs which we hold and which, by contrast, seem very sensible and plausible.

The claim that the meal is vibrating packets of energy is highly implausible because we have very sensible beliefs about its taste, color, texture, and smell, based on our immediate perception. Indeed, these beliefs are so sensible and plausible that at first blush the physicist’s claim might well appear impossible. How could the meal *possibly* be what the physicist describes when our experience is so completely different?

As I see it, crazy beliefs come in two basic grades. On the one hand, there is what I call “Grade B” crazy beliefs. These are beliefs that are just plain ridiculous, implausible or contradictory. The physicist’s claim that solid, fragrant (or pungent), foods are vibrating packets of energy is a fine example of a plain crazy belief. Obviously it is important to think through our plain crazy beliefs whether they concern art, religion, science, or a well prepared dinner. But important though these may be, “Grade A” crazy beliefs are even more worrisome. Beliefs achieve Grade A status when, in addition to appearing implausible or contradictory, they also conflict with very deeply held moral convictions. In short, they have all the implausibility of Grade B beliefs but they add to that a moral offense that shakes us to our very core.

What do these disturbing Grade A beliefs look like? Consider as an example the Hindu doctrine of karma. Some years ago I used to frequent a bohemian coffee shop that eschewed a tip jar for its hardworking employees in favor of a “karma bowl”. No doubt more than a few patrons had dropped in some change “just to cover their bases”. Now I have nothing against tipping hard-working baristas, but it is worthwhile considering whether the doctrine of karma ought to be the motivation for doing so. According to this stunning doctrine, all events in the universe are governed perfectly in a meticulous cosmic system of tit-for-tat. As a result, any negative action in this life is punished in the next life while any positive action is rewarded. Thus the karma bowl promises that if I acknowledge the barista who made my coffee by dropping a coin in the jar, this modest gesture will pay dividends in my next life. (Indeed, toss enough coins in enough karma bowls and next time around you might end up with Bill Gates’ bank account and Tom Cruise’s wide grin.)

Belief in karma may not appear to be offensive when it is invoked as a means to solicit a modest tip. But the picture is very different when it is used as a means to cement the life course of millions in the underclass. To see what I mean, think of the staggering implications of karma for Mittal, a man born into the untouchables at the bottom of Indian society. Mittal cannot forget the day when, while he was still a small child, he was taught that he had been born into squalor because of sins from his previous life. Nor can he forget the moment when his mom quashed his dream that he might one day become famous like his favorite Bollywood actor. “Forget it Mittal,” she had said. “Your future is to join your father working waist deep in Calcutta’s sewers.” Never mind the barista’s fifty cent tip. When I think about how karma consigns people like Mittal to a life of misery and exploitation, I find the belief to be Grade A crazy. In this sense it is very different from, say, belief in a flat earth. That’s just plain Grade B wacky. But a belief

that relegates people to misery and by implication freezes out all efforts at positive social change? That is one that offends my deepest sense of justice.

Two responses to crazy beliefs

As I said, we tend to be rather adept at pointing out the crazy beliefs of others even as we gloss over our own. In fact, when the craziness of our beliefs is pointed out, we are often indefensibly casual and forgiving toward them. I refer to this as the “Whitman response” in recognition of this well known excerpt from Walt Whitman’s famous poem “Song of Myself”:

“Do I contradict myself?

Very well, then I contradict myself,

(I am large, I contain multitudes.)”

Admittedly when Whitman penned these lines he did not have in mind an individual persisting in a crazy belief. Nonetheless, there can be no doubt that this excerpt aptly captures the flippant attitude that many of us adopt when confronted with the implausibilities and impossibilities of our convictions. One can anticipate the physicist’s dismissive response toward those who would venture to point out his inconsistency:

“This delicious piece of roast beef is a cloud of nonsensible particles in empty space. Do

I contradict myself? Very well, then I contradict myself, (I am large, I contain multitudes). *Now pass the horseradish.*”

But lest we linger too long sniggering at the physicist’s double standard, we should note that we too are often just like the physicist, keen to point out the craziness of others while forgiving our own. Indeed, as I already noted, I suspect that the vast majority of readers will find themselves accepting the physicist’s descriptions of the meal as a well established deliverance of sober

science. We do this because people who are a whole lot smarter than us assure us that science has vindicated these claims to the nth decimal point. So we shrug our shoulders and accept these claims on their say-so, even if we have no real idea how to reconcile them with our other beliefs. Consequently, we should be careful about judging the physicist since his crazy belief has become ours too, yet one more of the many crazy things that we accept without a blush.

The most important point is not that we're all a bit crazy, but rather that we are, like the physicist, so quick to adopt the Whitman attitude toward our own craziness even as we demand an accounting from others. Surprising? Perhaps not. Scripture is certainly familiar with this rather ignoble penchant for inconsistency. I am reminded here of Jesus' parable of the unmerciful servant (Matthew 18:21-35). This familiar story begins with a king benevolently forgiving a servant's debt after the man pleads for mercy. Immediately after receiving this extraordinary pardon the servant goes to a fellow servant and inexplicably demands immediate repayment of a relatively trivial debt. The lesson for today: this is how *we* look when we grant our own crazy beliefs a free pass even as we lampoon the crazy beliefs of others. When we apply this double standard, we end up looking like another unfortunate character in the parables of Jesus, namely the man who eagerly points out the speck in his neighbor's eye whilst remaining oblivious to the plank in his own (Matthew 7:1-6). In this light, the Whitman attitude toward our own beliefs coupled with our intolerance of others is not only inconsistent, it is downright hypocritical.

As you can probably guess, the antidote to the Whitman hypocrisy is straightforward: we need to extend more charity to the craziness of others even as we shift our critical gaze onto our own spectrum of disturbing beliefs. When a person drops a quarter in a karma bowl based on the real hope that this may pay off in a cosmic system of perfect recompense, I want them to think of what that belief means for Mittal. I want them to think of how, even in those first moments when

he emerged from the birth canal as an innocent red faced baby, his fate as a sewer worker was already sealed. Maybe after that reflection some will reject their views on karma (while hopefully finding other reasons to tip their baristas). Others may decide to revise their understanding of karma in some way that softens the offense. And still others might bite the bullet and retain the belief as is. All I ask is that they consider the doctrine's implications carefully for *everyone* from baristas to barons to beggars. Then, if they still opt to embrace the doctrine of karma, they will at least do so with their eyes open.

While the beliefs of a scientist or Hindu do not get a free pass, neither do those of the Christian. All our crazy beliefs should also be subjected to that same careful, critical reflection that we expect of others. So what happens if we decide to start tugging on those crazy knots in our tapestries of belief? By resolving to think through our beliefs more carefully and critically we repudiate the Whitman nonchalance and instead adopt what I call the Chesterton stance. The name is in honor of G.K. Chesterton in recognition of his statement “I know nothing so contemptible as a mere Paradox; a mere ingenious defense of the indefensible.”³ For Chesterton, the Whitman attitude that embraces glaring contradiction or implausibility without a blush is simply indefensible. We are too fallible and error prone to be so cavalier about our craziness. And so we have an obligation to be thinking through the meaning, implications and truth of our beliefs.

Chesterton's intolerance of so-called “mere Paradox” might raise red flags for some Christians. After all, didn't God say through the prophet Isaiah that his ways are higher than our ways (Isaiah 55:9)? And didn't Paul lampoon human wisdom by proclaiming the “foolish” cross

³G.K. Chesterton, *Essential Writings*, ed. William Griffin (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2003), 43.

that saves us? We all know how that passage ends: “For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.” (1 Corinthians 1:25)

The warning is salutary: we should be careful that we do not end up labeling God’s supreme wisdom as mere craziness due to *our* ignorance and foolishness. At the same time, we should be clear that Chesterton’s point is *not* that we ought to storm the deepest mysteries of faith like a bull in a china shop, smashing whichever doctrines resist immediate comprehension by our puny brains. Chesterton was no rationalist, believing that human beings could comprehend every mystery of faith. His contempt is reserved for those who invoke paradox or mystery merely as an excuse for not thinking hard about their beliefs. Some people avoid thinking hard about their faith based on the assumption that the problems with our beliefs are not important. But this has things backward: It is not those who accept crazy beliefs with a Whitmanite shrug who take those beliefs seriously, but rather those who wrestle with their beliefs just like Jacob wrestled with the angel.

Not only do we take our crazy beliefs seriously for their own intrinsic value, but also because we want others to understand, appreciate, and perhaps share them. Clearly if a Hindu wants me to take karma seriously, he cannot ignore my intuitive sense that the doctrine is immoral based on the implications it has for poor Mittal and countless others like him. If my Hindu friend assumes a Whitmanite attitude toward these puzzles, then I can all but guarantee that I shall never give Hinduism a second thought. But I must never forget that this is a two way street: if I don’t subject my own beliefs to close scrutiny, how can I expect the Hindu to take my faith seriously? How can I excuse with nonchalance those Christian beliefs which also appear to be Grade A crazy?

While many biblical passages implicitly condemn the Whitmanite attitude, the most familiar is probably Peter's advice: "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect...." (1 Peter 3:15) If we have reasons for our hope, then presumably we've also thought through some of the disturbing implications of that hope which might tell against it. The Chestertonian admits that we probably cannot remove the ridiculous and/or offensive dimension of every crazy Christian belief, but surely Peter's words here constitute a charge that we should try. Since such critical self-reflection is no less than what we would expect from our neighbor, it is likewise no less than what we should expect from ourselves.

A careful process of self-examination carries with it an undeniable risk since looking closely at our beliefs can really shake us up. I suppose if I were born and raised a Hindu in Calcutta, I would probably be somewhat resistant to consider closely the offensive nature of belief in karma (though perhaps I'd be more willing if I were, like Mittal, a member of the untouchable class). But even if it is disturbing to reconsider my beliefs, the Whitman alternative of not thinking at all is surely not a viable response. Indeed, it is really no better than sticking one's head in the sand.

A brief "inspirational speech" interlude

In light of what I've said thus far, it would be more than a bit ironic if I spent this book analyzing the Grade A crazy beliefs of others. We need to take a long hard look at our own beliefs knowing that doing so might have all sorts of unanticipated consequences (think of opening Pandora's Box). It might deepen our faith, but it might also shake it in a variety of ways, challenging us to revise or even reject doctrines which were once cherished (or at least heretofore blithely

accepted). Before proceeding further however, we must address a couple problems at the outset that typically prevent Christians from accepting this challenge: apathy and fear.

I suspect the more common factor is apathy. Sadly many Christians just are not sufficiently interested in their fundamental faith convictions to undertake a long, hard look at which of those beliefs are Grade A crazy. I must say that this apathy mystifies me and *not* just because I'm a theologian. I simply do not understand how people can claim that their faith in Christ is at the core of their being, and yet invest more time watching "America's Got Talent" and "Dancing with the Stars" than in exploring the mysteries of their faith. I just don't get it. Of course since you've picked up *this* book you're probably not in the apathetic group so I won't say any more about them.

You may well be in the second group however: those who are reluctant to explore the Grade A crazy beliefs of Christian faith for fear of what you might find. In contrast to the apathy group, fear is a reaction with which I am both familiar and sympathetic. There is a quick "tough love" way to deal with this fear. Just as Socrates evocatively asked whether the unexamined life is worth living, so we can ask whether the unexamined faith is worth believing. Assuming that it isn't, we can take a ready or not approach and, like a mother bird launching her chicks, we can simply force uncertain Christians out of the nest and leave them to fly or fall. While there is something to this sentiment, I suspect it would be helpful to say a bit more.

So what *do* we say? I'd like to deal with the problem via a confidence boosting pep talk borrowed from the film "Braveheart". This popular movie tells the story of William Wallace (played by Mel Gibson, as if you didn't already know), a Scotsman who rallies his oppressed countrymen to throw off the yoke of English oppression in one of history's great underdog stories. On the eve of a significant battle, Wallace appears before a large group of demoralized

men who would clearly prefer to be at home running the farm rather than entering into a fierce battle with the English infantry and cavalry. Wallace addresses the palpable indecision of the group with what may be one of the most rousing speeches in cinematic history:

“I am William Wallace, and I see a whole army of my countrymen here, in defiance of tyranny. You’ve come to fight as free men and free men you are. What will you do without freedom? *Will you fight?*”

One crestfallen farmer speaks for the disheartened many: “No, we will run ... and we will live.” But Wallace will not let them get away with such pragmatic cowardice. And in three magisterial sentences he provides them with a completely different perspective:

“Aye, fight and you may die. Run, and you’ll live, at least awhile. And dying in your beds many years from now, would you be willing to trade all the days from this day to that for one chance, *just one chance*, to come back here and tell our enemies that they may take our lives but they’ll never take our freedom!”

The oppression that those Scottish men were under may not always have been visible, but it was always there. Even if they lived their four score and ten years, they would have done so with the abiding fear that a contingent of English soldiers could ride up any day, forcing them off their property, raping their wives, and enslaving their children. They may have looked free but they didn’t have *freedom*. They may have been alive, but they weren’t really *living*.

Whether you’re a pacifist or a Navy seal, whether you’re Scottish, English or Eritrean, whether you’re a man or a woman, I think we can all find something noble in the call of William Wallace to set aside personal fears and take up the cause for something greater than oneself, the cause of freedom, liberty, and truth. And that is what I propose to you. We as Christians believe some pretty crazy things. We can avert our gaze, change the subject and choose to live day by

day as if everything is fine. But we will always know that those lingering doubts, questions and fears could come back to haunt us one day, thereby shaking our faith to the core. We may succeed in limping through life with our unquestioning and unquestioned faith intact, but will we really have lived all those years? Will we really have believed?

Facing the seven storms

While the battlefield provides a stark image for intellectual enquiry, as we go forward we will employ a different root metaphor by shifting our backdrop from the misty highlands of Scotland to the misty shores of the Netherlands. I first encountered this metaphor some years ago in a book by science writer Chet Raymo. Although Raymo is dismissive of religious belief (indefensibly dismissive in my view), he nonetheless has a profound sense of the way that mystery frames the scientist's study of the world. This is what he writes:

Let this, then, be the ground of my faith: All that we know, now and forever, all scientific knowledge that we have of this world, or will ever have, is as an island in a sea [of mystery].... We live in our partial knowledge as the Dutch live on polders claimed from the sea. We dike and fill. We dredge up soil from the bed of mystery and build ourselves room to grow. And still the mystery surrounds us. It laps at our shores. It permeates the land. Scratch the surface of knowledge and mystery bubbles up like a spring. And occasionally, at certain disquieting moments in history (Aristarchus, Galileo, Planck, Einstein), a tempest of mystery comes rolling in from the sea and overwhelms our efforts, reclaims knowledge that has been built up by years of patient work, and forces us to retreat to the surest, most secure core of what we know, where we huddle in fear and trembling until the storm subsides, and then we start building again, throwing up dikes,

pumping, filling, extending the perimeter of our knowledge and our security.⁴

This is a striking picture, especially coming from a scientist. We all know something of the popular image of the scientist as one who magisterially conquers the forces of ignorance as he marches toward ever greater understanding. Raymo certainly dispenses with *that* notion. The fact is that scientists are always in dangerous territory, their theories tenuous barriers as they labor on the very edge of the limits of knowledge.

If the scientists labor on the shoreline, facing daily the limitations of our knowledge and battered by countless storms, where do the rest of us fit in? Presumably this places us well inland, perhaps living our comfortable lives in the bucolic Dutch countryside far from the turbid shores. (To expand the metaphor further, the energy that runs our lives – technology – is drawn from the wind and hydro power gathered through scientific enquiry on the shores.) And so by the time those fierce storms that threaten to wash the scientists and their best theories out to sea (Galileo, Einstein...) get to us, they may be little more than an afternoon of heavy rain that causes our lights to flicker momentarily. Aren't we glad that we are where we are, insulated by miles of rolling hills rather than clinging to a rock as our seawall is decimated by screaming winds? Yet the scientists do not retreat to the countryside after receiving a humiliating blow. Rather, as men and women of courage and conviction who are determined to learn about the natural world, they continue to labor diligently rebuilding battered theories or erecting new ones. Though the sea remains a vast mystery lapping at their shores, they are in it for the long haul, determined to extend our meager knowledge however far they can.

When it comes to our faith, most Christians resonate not with those working on the shore but rather with those living deep in the peaceful countryside who benefit daily from their labors.

⁴ Chet Raymo, *Skeptics and True Believers: The exhilarating connection between science and spirituality* (New York: Walker and Company, 1998), 47.

That's fine of course: we can't all be academic theologians any more than we can be scientists or mountain climbers. But that hardly excuses us from *ever* taking a journey down to the shore to explore the limits of our faith, those mysteries with which theologians wrestle on a daily basis. This book is an invitation to take a field trip, to leave the bucolic landscapes with which we have become comfortable and to venture out to the dangerous coastlines where theologians labor every day by reclaiming land from the seas of theological mystery. If you thought the task of the scientist was daunting, you can imagine how many more challenges await the theologian who faces a sea of literally infinite expanse. As much as we might be tempted to retreat to our comfortable farm house, I propose that we face the challenge squarely by joining the theologians shoulder to shoulder, throwing up dikes, pumping and filling.

The theologian who dares to work at the limits of our knowledge faces many possible tempests of mystery. At any time the skies could darken, the seas begin to heave and the wind scream as yet another challenge to faith rolls off the North Atlantic. But how many are there exactly? In Lewis Carroll's classic *Through the Looking Glass* the queen famously boasted of her ability to believe six impossible things before breakfast. That's nothing. Christians believe many more things which appear impossible or nearly so. So the plan is this: Working on the coast we will be inundated with seven violent storms, each one a particularly tempestuous Grade A crazy belief which remains perplexing and disturbing in its implications. Weathering these storms, and probably facing some flooding along the way, could well be an unsettling experience, and so it should. But in the wind, rain and waves we will find our Whitmanite proclivities being washed away as we move into a deeper, more mature faith.

With that backdrop we will see our first storm forming on the horizon, and with it a cloud that looks strangely like the favorite dinosaur of every seven year old boy: the terrible

Tyrannosaurus Rex. Consider the u-shape of the upper jaw of this monster, perfectly shaped to maximize the amount of flesh the creature could rip out of its hapless victim's hide. Shudder at the incisiform edge of the front teeth, ideal for sheering through the meaty belly of a terrified triceratops. Gawk at the sheer size of deadly teeth up to 12 inches in length. Now ask yourself the simple question: *what on earth is this beast doing in a world that God created and called good?* And while we're at it, how do we make sense of saber-tooth tigers, great white sharks, wolves, and scorpions (not to mention that bane of backyard barbeques, the mosquito)? Why would God create a world teeming with suffering and death? When you begin to think of the staggering degree of animal suffering in the world, the problem is truly astounding. The traditional answer says that God did not create carnivores as such. According to this view, T-Rex was once perfectly satisfied munching on ferns. (Those teeth? Munching on ferns? Talk about overkill.) According to this account, it was only after Adam's culinary indiscretion that God's Dr. Jekyll creation morphed into Mr. Hyde and T-Rex gained an appetite for juicy triceratops. Unfortunately this tidy explanation of predation, carnivory and death in the animal kingdom no longer appears plausible to many of us. And this forces us to ask the question of chapter one: "Why did God create carnivores?"

Back to the dike wall. Even as we set up the pumps, wring out our clothes and begin to dry off, another storm begins to form. Christians believe that the world God created is the world he providentially guides. Indeed, throughout history Christians have widely embraced a robust doctrine of meticulous providence according to which every detail of creation is planned by God and reflects his perfect decree. Yes, the decree has been understood to be *perfect* and to encompass *every* detail. Certainly this can seem to be an awesome and glorious doctrine if we think of God guiding the descent of every snowflake onto the hamlet in a Thomas Kinkade

painting. While a tumbling snowflake may be beautiful, how do we vindicate providence when a couple billion of those snowflakes form an avalanche that buries a mountain village? And while we may be keen to find God's providential care in the birth of a child, where is providence when that same child is tortured and murdered? The simple problem is that the doctrine of meticulous providence affords no space between God and the evil events of creation since his intimate control extends over all events. The immediacy of the divine presence to evil forces us to ask the terrible question of chapter two: "Does God bury mountain villages and torture little girls?"

I'm patching some deep cracks while you throw up a new wall and begin to pump out the sea water. And then unexpectedly another storm slams into the coast. Providence may be a difficult doctrine to understand, but Jews and Christians alike have rejoiced in the way that God has sustained Israel throughout history. Even if we struggle over particular horrors of the past, surely here there is evidence for providence in the way that God formed and sustained a people of his own. But the story of Israel's election has a dark side as well, for even as God provided Israel with land and a future, he apparently did so by directing the bloody genocidal annihilation of entire populations. Incredibly Christians believe that God commanded the slaughter of an entire society including newborn infants and the elderly. Since we unequivocally condemn contemporary instances of genocide in the strongest terms, how can we possibly view these instances of ancient genocide as morally permissible, even praiseworthy acts? Even though the question of chapter three may strike us as dangerous, even blasphemous, skeptics ask it and so must we: "Was Joshua the Jewish Hitler?"

The next storm rolls in almost undetected and then begins to shake our best defenses to their foundations. On Tuesday, January 12, 2010 the ground shook beneath the destitute island nation of Haiti. In the weeks that followed the extent of the devastation became clearer as we

discovered that more than two hundred thousand people had died while hundreds of thousands more had been maimed or rendered homeless. Then in the midst of this horror Christian evangelist Pat Robertson shocked and offended just about everybody by asserting that Haiti's earthquake represented God's judgment on the nation's sins. The condemnation was swift as Christians expressed universal outrage and indignation toward Robertson with the retort not only that God did *not* do this, but that God would *never* do such a thing. While that retort sounds reassuring, it cannot be true if the biblical accounts of divine punishment are correct, for God is frequently described as using natural calamities to punish Israel and the surrounding nations. As a result, disconcerting though it may be, we must ask the painful question of chapter four: "Was Haiti's earthquake a punishment from God?"

That was a vicious storm with a few of us even being swept into the sea. Even as they are being pulled out of the calming surf the barometer shows another notable drop in pressure, an ominous sign of things to come. We may not understand why God created carnivores, allows natural and moral evil, or judges whole nations the way he does, but we can at least agree that any discussion of the love and providence of God needs to come eventually to the cross. We might think that finally here the pressure of the Grade A beliefs is relieved as we simply marvel in the incredible gift of the atoning work of Christ. By submitting to the Father's will to die for our sins, Christ took the punishment owing to us, and by his stripes we are healed. However, a closer look at this doctrine of atonement finds that it actually *increases* the pressure of Grade A crazy beliefs, effectively adding one more log onto the roaring fire. After all, at the heart of this story is a human sacrifice being offered to appease a wrathful deity in the face of human sin. In the death of Christ, so we are told, the wrath of God was satisfied. But does God really take satisfaction in the shedding of blood? Why think this event we call atonement is anything more

than one more moral atrocity? Or, as we shall put it in chapter five, “How does the murder of a good man heal the world?”

Yet again the winds are beginning to pick up. Perhaps we could accept all these other beliefs if we at least believed that somehow, in the end, the picture they paint would work for the ultimate good of every one of God’s poor suffering creatures. But that is emphatically not what most Christians have believed. This brings us to the doctrine of hell according to which the lost will be subjected to eternal torments unimaginably worse than any finite agonies experienced in this present age. Even if Christ’s death saves a few, the rest will be subjected to the most heinous tortures forever. More bizarrely yet, it has often been believed that this fate is somehow a reflection of the goodness and love of God and will provide further *joy* for the saints as they witness God’s just punishment on the wicked. Really? Could such a torturous fate *ever* be justified even where the wickedest people are concerned? Or, as we shall ask in chapter six, “Must Hitler burn forever?”

The skies have cleared once again, but it only takes moments for a lone cloud to appear on the horizon. A flash of lightning is all the warning we need to move to our stations. “God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.” So declares the famous first law of Bill Bright’s “Four Spiritual Laws.” But is it true? It may surprise many Christians to learn that this claim has actually long been a matter of fierce debate. The question of the extent of God’s love is linked closely to the Arminian and Calvinist debates over the nature of election. While Arminians have argued that God loves all people, many Calvinists have denied this, arguing instead that God only loves his chosen elect while he hates those he does not choose for salvation. Needless to say this hard doctrine presents an enormous challenge to any Christian who hopes to affirm the unparalleled love of God. But the Arminian does not get off so easily either, for even if she

affirms that God loves all people, she also believes that God creates many people knowing that they will freely choose their own damnation. What kind of love is *this*? Or, as we shall ask in chapter seven, “What if God hates you and has a terrible plan for your life?”

From the creation of an animal kingdom wracked by agony and death to human subjects consigned to an eternity of unspeakable torment, we face a range of very difficult questions ahead. And in the process we are going to find ourselves getting drenched, battered, and perhaps occasionally swept from the sea wall into the churning waters of the storm. But our end goal is not to see our dikes overwhelmed and land reclaimed by the sea of mystery. Still less is it to allow anybody to get swept away. Nor is it to send us in fear and dismay back to the countryside. Rather, it is to challenge us to keep laboring when and where we are able even in the midst of the difficulties. For that reason, every chapter will close with a final section titled “After the Storm” in which I lay out some avenues for us to begin once again throwing up dikes, pumping, filling, and extending our theological knowledge back into that infinite sea of mystery. And even if we choose at that point to retreat to our country house, at least we will have a newfound appreciation for the poor theologian every time it begins to rain and the lights start to flicker.