



HOW THEOLOGY DISTORTS THOUGHT AND ACTION (another example)

The largest ever outbreak of Ebola virus continues in West Africa in the nations of Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia and Nigeria. Over 3000 cases have so far been identified and the mortality rate has been running a bit over 50%. The outbreak began in December of 2013 but was not recognized until March. The World Health Organization projects that the total cases could exceed 20,000. Most Americans learned of the epidemic when a physician missionary, Kent Brantly, MD, fell ill in July. Shortly after, Brantly and another aid worker were evacuated back to the US to Emory University Hospital in Atlanta, Georgia.

When Brantly was released last month from Emory, fully recovered, he said:

"Through the care of the Samaritan's Purse [Franklin (son of Billy) Graham's Christian missionary organization] and SIM missionary team in Liberia, the use of an experimental drug, and the expertise and resources of the health care team at Emory University Hospital, God saved my life – a direct answer to thousands and thousands of prayers ... I am forever thankful to God for sparing my life."

Brantly also received a blood transfusion from a 14-year-old Ebola survivor. Here, he acknowledges the skill, competence, and caring of those who contributed to his recovery. One would hope, by extension, that this would include the devotion and efforts of those who had a hand in the development of the experimental medication that may have saved his life. People did not start working on the problem of Ebola only when Dr. Brantly became ill!

Edward Current coined the term "tragicle" to refer to "acts of God" that are the opposite of a miracle. So, for example, when a passenger plane crashes and two people crawl out of the wreckage, their survival is a miracle. The tragicle is that so many more perished and, for that matter, that the plane crashed in the first place. The word "tragedy" should be all that's needed. But the media and its needs – which reflect popular prejudices – distort rational thinking. So, for example, last year Wolf Blitzer badgered a tornado survivor with: "You have to thank the lord, right? Do you thank the lord?" The

woman responded by saying that she was an atheist, cutting short the journalist's attempt to instigate a "praise the lord"-fest.

If good fortune demands a supernatural "explanation" then so does bad fortune. Since the latter is unwelcome, it is usually ignored. Nevermind the hundreds or thousands killed, "God" saved the unlikely survivor(s). Dr. Brantly gives no hint of understanding this and offers no explanation for why "God" saved him while so many others died and are dying. Perhaps, deep down, he knows that any attempt to offer such an explanation would make his gratitude to "God" look ridiculous and not just misplaced.

Sometimes an effort is made to transform a tragedy into something not-so-bad. It begins with death being referred to as "passing on" or it is said that the dead "went to heaven." But these efforts ring false, and everyone knows it. When someone "thanks the lord" there is someone else who has no cause to do so and, one would think, cause to blame "the lord." In reality, someone else is usually blamed and, often, sued.

The 17th Century Dutch philosopher Spinoza, among others, held a more consistent position that, as God is omnipotent, nothing happens that is not a part of "God's Divine Plan." Whether a miracle or a tragicle, on this view, it is all the same and if one wants to "thank the lord" it may as well be for something "good" as for something "bad." Indeed, such categories are meaningless on the cosmic – even metaphysical – scale of the inscrutable all-powerful deity whose purposes define what is good regardless of any human suffering and death. After all, Ebola is one of "God's Creatures." And what does it really matter anyway in the context of "God's Divine Plan," whatever that may be? There is no number small enough to express even the billions of years of the existence of the universe as a fraction of the eternity that theists say their deity and its ends occupy. So much for "the meaning of life" when we follow traditional theism to its logical conclusion.

There is a more disturbing aspect to the mind-set shown by Dr. Brantly's and his organization's statements. For if one reads carefully, there

is scarcely an acknowledgement of the moral value and importance of human beings, either those without whose care Dr. Brantly may not have survived, or even of all those stricken by or attempting to help alleviate the Ebola outbreak. Dr. Brantly acknowledges such efforts, but his actual gratitude is reserved for his deity. His fellow human beings are merely actors in a divine tableau of which he approves because he is alive to do so. "God" becomes a barrier between himself and other people.

Graham's organization also promotes this rather impersonal, if not to say unfeeling view. Its website displays a trademarked slogan: "Helping In Jesus' Name." What is the important element here? Helping? Or a theological doctrine? Clearly, the first is made subordinate to the second. Yet even the Gospel parable is not so tainted. Jesus says only that the Good Samaritan "had compassion," or, in another translation, "was moved with pity," and not that any supernatural forces had anything to do with it.

Ebola is a serious and frightening disease. It is good, as Dr. Brantly himself says, that attention has been drawn to this epidemic and the people affected by it, whose plight goes far beyond just Ebola. There are diseases that annually kill hundreds of times more people than Ebola – malaria, to name just one. But the Ebola epidemic – mindlessly – and Dr. Brantly and Samaritans' Purse – unintentionally – also offer lessons about charity, international aid, world health conditions, and the poverty of theology, to name a few.

The World Health Organization estimates that \$490 billion will be necessary just to bring the current Ebola epidemic to a halt over the next six months. CDC Director Thomas Frieden has said: "This outbreak is unprecedented, and it's likely to get worse ... We must respond in an unprecedented way."

**PLANNED FOR NEXT MONTH:
"SUFFERING WITCHES"
Lessons From The Salem Witch Trials
>>> Sunday, October 5th, 2014 <<<
SHERATON GRAND DFW AIRPORT
SE CORNER OF 114 AND ESTERS
YOUR GENEROUS DONATIONS
TO THE NTCOF ARE NEEDED,
APPRECIATED,
AND TAX-DEDUCTIBLE!!**



All NTCOF events can be found through our website calendar , or our meetup page, from which you can RSVP, at:

- www.meetup.com/church-of-freethought - JOIN THE NTCOF MEETUP GROUP !!!

Social Luncheon: Today, immediately after our Service, join us for lunch and discussion. Today we meet at the Jason's Deli on MacArthur Blvd just south of 635, at 7707 N MacArthur Blvd, phone (972) 432-0555.

Freethought Salon: Get together to discuss today's service topic or other conundrums of interest for Freethinkers. It happens most non-1st Sundays, over breakfast, at the Hilton DFW Lakes Hotel restaurant in Grapevine beginning 10:30 AM; see the meetup site!

Game Night: The regular game night crew meets nearly every Friday night at the IHOP on 2310 Stemmons Trail (I-35), near Northwest Highway (Loop 12). Plan to arrive at about 7:30 PM, and stay late playing Risk, Rummikub, and other fun games!

Have Another Idea? Email or call us about it!

"As soon as we abandon our own reason, and are content to rely upon authority, there is no end to our troubles. Whose authority? The Old Testament? The New Testament? The Koran? In practice, people choose the book considered sacred by the community in which they are born, and out of that book they choose the parts they like, ignoring the others. At one time, the most influential text in the Bible was: 'Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.' Nowadays, people pass over this text, in silence if possible; if not, with an apology. ... [and] No Catholic ... takes seriously the text that says that a bishop should be the husband of one wife."

- Bertrand Russell (1872-1970)

from An Outline of Intellectual Rubbish

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The Fellowship of Unbelievers

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