

The rescue of the Chilean miners was an uplifting and joyful experience - a rare instance of a hopeful news story in the midst of all the economic doom and gloom and reports of conflict from Afghanistan and elsewhere. There was, for me, just one jarring note. The Times of London carried a double page spread highlighting the role of the group's self-appointed pastor, Jose Henriquez. He was undoubtedly a leader who played an important role in maintaining morale during the ordeal, and he was absolutely convinced that it was God who was responsible for their deliverance - 'only the Lord could guide that drill to us' he was quoted as saying, and I have no doubt he believed it. He also maintained that 'when a man screams to God, God answers the prayer'.

This is a good illustration of a couple of the issues I have with religious belief. Firstly, what a cheerless world it is where the credit for every good thing that happens has to be attributed to a celestial third party, and not to the skills, intelligence and sheer hard work of the men and women who actually achieved it. Mr Henriquez is a good man, and I'm sure he gave heartfelt personal thanks to the colleagues responsible for his rescue when he finally surfaced, but their efforts are unintentionally denigrated by insisting that they were merely acting as the tools of a higher power. Not that this is an argument that would carry any weight with believers, of course. Even those whose theism is tempered by a degree of scientific sophistication possibly not enjoyed by all their brethren would say 'OK, I know the engineers did it, but they did it using the skills and intelligence that were given to them by God, their creator'. I know they would say that, because that's what I used to say when I was still a church-going Christian, and had to reconcile my beliefs with my medical and scientific training. But I maintain that it is better, and more satisfying, to rejoice in the skills, hard work and love of my fellow men, than it is to displace gratitude on to a hypothetical and improbable deity. Equally, I would rather believe that the stunning discoveries in theoretical physics and cosmology, which are taking our understanding of the universe back to those first moments of creation, are the fruit of the highly evolved intelligence and hard work of the scientists concerned, rather than the result of a creator allowing them to lift a corner of the heavenly carpet and glimpse what lies beneath.

But as I say, that's all just a matter of opinion, and not likely to cause believers to question their faith. The big problem for theists (although they wouldn't accept it as such) is that second quote: 'when a man screams to God, God answers the prayer'. I accept that nothing I am about to say is new. In fact, if I raised the issue with a believer, he or she would roll their eyes upwards and say 'not that old chestnut again!', but I don't care - they can't be allowed to escape this intrinsic dilemma of faith. I've no doubt that the miners did, internally or out loud, 'scream to God' on numerous occasions. In fact if I'd been down there, I'm sure I'd have been gibbering in a corner and prepared to call on any god that someone could persuade me actually existed. And of course, this time, the prayers of the miners were 'answered'. But if Mr Henriquez wants to claim this rescue for his god, he has to explain to me what went wrong on all the other occasions when no answer came. What about the 23 Russian submariners who survived the initial explosion that disabled the nuclear-powered *Kursk* in 2000, and who died together on the seabed in their cold metal tomb? Are we to imagine that they were all such good communists that not one of them 'screamed to God'? I pick the Russian submarine tragedy as another example of men being trapped apparently beyond human reach, but this is a much more general problem for

believers.

The religious regularly pray for those afflicted by potentially terminal conditions. When the lymphoma patient's chemotherapy works, those prayers are deemed to be answered, but nothing is said about the other patients on the same ward who died. Were the prayers of their loved ones classified by the Almighty as inferior in some way? I no longer bother to raise this issue with believers, because if I did, I know exactly what I would hear. It would be some variant on the 'God moves in mysterious ways' theme, a response which always makes me angry - and my therapist tells me that I must stop getting angry. But if a child I loved died, and a well-meaning hospital chaplain told me that it was part of God's purpose, I would have to be physically restrained from tearing him or her limb from limb. The fact that believers resort to intellectual gymnastics of byzantine complexity to get their god off the hook is ample proof that they have no logical way out of this particular dilemma - that bad things happen to good people. Of course, it's a problem of their own making. They insist on asserting that God is both omnipotent and loving, when they are assailed from all sides with evidence that this cannot be the case. If God loves us, then he can't be omnipotent, or he wouldn't allow suffering. If he's omnipotent, he clearly has a cruel streak. Believers will shake their heads sadly, and tell me that my reasoning is simplistic - that I just don't understand - and they will refer me to the writings of philosophers who have squared this particular circle to their own satisfaction. If by 'simplistic' they mean that my reasoning is less complex than the arguments mobilized by theologians to explain the paradox of suffering, I plead guilty. There are only three possible conclusions to be drawn from the fact that bad things happen to good people:

God is omnipotent, but uncaring (in other words, the Greeks and Romans had it about right)

God is caring but unable to intervene directly to prevent suffering

There is no god, and stuff happens randomly

Experience, common sense and the lack of any evidence to the contrary (not to mention good old Occam's razor) suggest to me that the third of those options is the one that fits the bill. What I can't stand is this cop-out of a fourth option that God loves us but only intervenes to prevent suffering when we ask him to - but then only sometimes, and there's no way of predicting which prayers *will* be answered, because it's all such a 'mystery'. There's no mystery here, only mysterious thinking on the part of those determined to hold on to religious belief. It's intellectually lazy, illogical and unnecessary. And strangely irritating.

Thank God for humanists.