

How God Fits into Sickness and Miracles

I began reading this book on my trip home for my uncle's funeral. I chose to read this book because I thought it might provide some insight to share with my family. I chose to read it because of the circumstances of my life in the last two years including my own struggles with health. I chose it because I was raised Catholic with the belief that God is all powerful and good, and thus this question, "why do bad things happen to good people?" has been on my mind since I was a child. And finally, I chose this book because it is a question that I believe a lot of my clients have faced and will face during the time that I meet them. Harold Kushner's exploration of this question helped me to solidify my own beliefs regarding God's interaction with the world and gave me insight into the beliefs of others. Also, because it gave me insight into the thought process of others, I feel I can better address the concerns and fears of clients dealing with difficult situations.

Since I have been a child, I have experienced the typical "Catholic guilt." In many ways this guilt has been a good thing for my developing morals and work ethic. At a young age, I realized I couldn't lie to people without telling them the truth 5 minutes later, and I cannot accept anything but 100% effort from myself in every endeavor I pursue. However, in addition to the positive effects, there have been a lot of paralyzing effects of the guilt. During extremely difficult times of loss in my life, I have had a hard time adapting because I was attached to the ideas that I had done something wrong to cause the loss, and that I could have done things differently to make things better now. This type of thinking was extremely prevalent in my early twenties, and I found myself constantly living in the past and not enjoying the present or preparing for the future. I obsessed over my own actions and analyzed what I could have changed to make things better. This obsession limited my ability to change and adapt, and it took a huge toll on my self esteem. Kushner discusses this unending cycle of guilt and how people make a bad situation worse by blaming themselves. Most people are caught in this cycle because of two reasons: 1) we need to believe that the world makes sense, and 2) we believe that we cause what happens. I know that these have been two driving factors in my own guilt.

I want to understand others' actions. And to make sense of others' actions, I often assume that I cause their reaction by my imperfect action.

Toward the end of my college career, I began realizing that my religion was making me unhappy. I found no comfort in my belief in God, but instead only thought of the thousand ways I failed as a Christian. In my prayers I was constantly apologizing and asking for forgiveness, and I felt that I didn't deserve any help for dealing with the difficult situations in my life. Because of this experience, Kushner's statement that the goal of religion should be to help us feel good about ourselves when we have made honest and reasonable but sometimes painful decision, resonated with me. Since my struggles in college, I have worked towards finding happiness and beating up on myself less. A large part of this has been reassessing my beliefs in God and religion.

Being aware, however, that the struggles that I have had in blaming myself are struggles that many feel, has been an invaluable learning experience for me in dealing with others in difficult situations. One of the first things that Kushner questions in dealing with people that are grieving is "Why did they assume that they were somehow responsible for this tragedy?" He used an example of a woman, Helen, with a diagnosis of multiple sclerosis. Helen's husband tried to comfort her by saying,

"God must have reasons for doing this, and its not for us to question Him.

You have to believe that if He wants you to get better, you will get better, and if He doesn't, there has to be some purpose to it" (19).

But this statement did anything but comfort Helen. Instead it made her feel more alone, bewildered, and angry at God. She then proceeded to feel guilty about having the anger and fell into this cycle of guilt that I mentioned earlier. For people like Helen, religion doesn't serve Kushner's ultimate goal of religion by providing support and comfort. Instead, it does the opposite by making people feel worse about themselves and their situations.

This negative effect of religion is a tragedy to me, and I believe that it is a tragedy to God as well. In the last six years, I have done a lot of exploration regarding my beliefs in God and my thoughts of religion. One of the primary conclusions that I have come to is that God wants us to be happy. And He isn't going to punish us or ignore us if we make a mistake. Furthermore, I don't believe that he condemns people who choose

different religious and spiritual paths in life. I don't believe there is one right way. Instead I believe that religion is one path among many different paths that an individual can choose to help them to attain moral and spiritual development. I don't believe that religion is either necessary or sufficient to attain this moral and spiritual growth. Instead, religion provides structure for growth and a community of people to support you in this growth. I think religion can be a wonderful resource to help an individual to discover themselves, to understand their value and the value of other human beings, and to aspire toward a goal or passion. However, the dogma of religion that scares people into treating others with respect and humanity is the wrong way to motivate. I believe people should choose to treat people with respect and humanity because it feels good to help others, not because you will go to hell if you don't. The scare tactic is going to lead to the cycle of guilt, will probably lead to misdirected anger, and ultimately will lead to unhappiness.

As a result of my reassessment of religion, I have found myself grasping to the idea of spirituality rather than religion in recent years. I consider myself an extremely spiritual person as I contemplate and analyze the spirit that drives me and others on a regular basis. I am consistently striving to better myself and treat others with more respect because I believe in the spirit that lives in all of us. When I speak of spirit I am referring to the human side of all of us. The part of us that thinks and loves and hurts and chooses. It is the part of us that goes against our animal nature, and it is the part of us that makes us so special and unique. Recently on NPR, I heard a guest speaker talking about Humanism. This isn't a philosophy that I know much about, but it seems right to me.

As far as God goes, I believe in Him or Her or It. I don't know what this thing we call God is except that God is something that is bigger than us and is responsible for our existence. Like Kushner, I don't believe that God has an active role in our life here on earth. I don't think He "gives people what they can handle" or cures the sick because 15 people prayed for them. I do believe that he created the love and compassion inside of us that allows us to make a difference in the lives of each other. So when I say that God doesn't have an active role in our lives, I guess I don't really believe that either. Because I believe that God exists in each and every one of us, and I know that if we get in touch with that spirit and we develop that spirit, we can make a difference in the world.

So when people ask me to pray for them in clinic or in my social life, I too, like Kusher, say that I will pray even though I don't believe God will come down from the heavens and perform a miracle. I say I will pray because to me that means that I am thinking about that person, that I love that person, and that I understand their pain. It means that I want to support that person, and I want to help that person in anyway that I can. And I believe that when people come together and pray and love and support one another, that is the true miracle.