

New York Times
BEST SELLER!

“Dinesh D’Souza is an outstanding thinker and a first-rate scholar. . . .
Dinesh’s book follows in the line of other great thinkers like C. S. Lewis.”
— RICK WARREN, author of *The Purpose-Driven Life*

DINESH D’SOUZA



WHAT'S SO GREAT ABOUT CHRISTIANITY

Praise for *What's So Great about God*

Atheists beware: this book contains incontrovertible evidence of a benevolent and omniscient Creator. What is that evidence? It is the spectacular mind of Dinesh D'Souza. Believing such a mind could be the product of random forces would take infinitely more faith than believing in unicorns and leprechauns. A triumphant tour de force.

ERIC METAXAS

New York Times bestselling author of *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy*

Dinesh D'Souza examines the strengths and weaknesses of the historic approaches to the problem of suffering and offers some provocative suggestions based upon more recent ideas of fine-tuning and the Anthropic Principle. He tackles the challenges in a fair-minded way while offering direct answers to the arguments of today's anti-theists. The result is a readable and entertaining book.

IAN HUTCHINSON

physicist and professor of nuclear science and engineering at MIT

In addition to reviewing the classic explorations of this most vexing problem, Dinesh D'Souza adds two provocative contributions: first, the perspective of a man born in India, a land that views suffering very differently from the West; second, an active engagement with the New Atheists, whom he counts as friends as well as debate partners.

PHILIP YANCEY

author of *What's So Amazing about Grace?*

In this provocative and important book, Dinesh D'Souza tackles the most difficult question of faith. Every reader, believer or not, will come away enriched, inspired, and compelled to rethink old assumptions.

RABBI DAVID WOLPE

author of *Why Faith Matters*

DINESH D'SOUZA

**WHAT'S
SO GREAT
ABOUT
GOD**

*A Reasonable Defense of the Goodness
of God in a World Filled with Suffering*



*Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.
Carol Stream, Illinois*

Visit Tyndale online at www.tyndale.com.

TYNDALE and Tyndale's quill logo are registered trademarks of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

What's So Great about God: A Reasonable Defense of the Goodness of God in a World Filled with Suffering

Copyright © 2013 by Dinesh D'Souza. All rights reserved.

Previously published in 2012 as *Godforsaken: Bad things happen. Is there a God who cares? Yes. Here's proof.* under ISBN 978-1-4143-2485-2.

Author photo copyright © by Sam Sharma. All rights reserved.

Designed by Stephen Vosloo

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are taken from the *Holy Bible*, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996, 2004, 2007 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked NIV and appearing on p. ix are taken from the Holy Bible, *New International Version*,[®] NIV.[®] Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.[™] Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com.

Scripture quotations marked KJV are taken from the *Holy Bible*, King James Version.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

D'Souza, Dinesh, date.

[Godforsaken]

What's so great about God : a reasonable defense of the goodness of God in a world filled with suffering / Dinesh D'Souza.

pages cm

Rev. ed. of: *Godforsaken*. 2012.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-1-4143-7964-7 (pbk.)

1. Suffering—Religious aspects—Christianity. 2. God (Christianity)—Goodness.
3. Christian life. I. Title.

BV4909.D84 2013

231'.8—dc23

2013005364

ISBN 978-1-4143-7964-7 (sc)

Printed in the United States of America

19 18 17 16 15 14 13
7 6 5 4 3 2 1

CONTENTS

PART 1: INTRODUCTION

- 1: **An Immigrant’s Journey: The Paradox of Suffering** 3
- 2: **Wounded Theism: The Indictment of God** 17

PART 2: A UNIVERSAL CONUNDRUM

- 3: **The Limits of Theodicy: Why the Usual Answers Don’t Work** 39
- 4: **Atheist Delusions: Contradictions of Unbelief** 59

PART 3: MORAL EVIL

- 5: **Free to Choose: Omnipotence and Human Freedom** 77
- 6: **Choices and Consequences: Why a Lawful Universe** 93

PART 4: CRIMES OF NATURE

- 7: **Acts of God: The Reason for Earthquakes** 117
- 8: **Red in Tooth and Claw: Evolution and Animal Pain** 135
- 9: **A Fine-Tuned Universe: The Anthropic Principle** 157

PART 5: THE CHARACTER OF GOD

- 10: **Create or Not: Does God Hate Amputees?** 183
- 11: **Rage of Yahweh: Crimes of the Old Testament God** 201
- 12: **Abandon All Hope: Heaven, Hell, and Divine Justice** 223

PART 6: CONCLUSION

- 13: **Not Forsaken: Delivering Us from Evil** 245

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS 261

NOTES 263

ABOUT THE AUTHOR 274

PART 1

Introduction

AN IMMIGRANT'S JOURNEY

The Paradox of Suffering

That to the height of this great argument

I may assert Eternal Providence,

And justify the ways of God to men.¹

JOHN MILTON, *Paradise Lost*

EACH ONE OF US, at some point in our lives, will find ourselves staring death in the face. None of us can escape that grim reality. Recently, I was reminded of that reality while reading the following e-mail from my friend, Devdas Kamath, who went to school with me in India but with whom I had lost contact over the years.

My elder son Nikhil, a first year student at the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad, died of a rare disorder, Thrombotic Thrombocytopenic Purpura (TTP), at Ahmedabad on Tuesday, September 29. On Monday, September 21, Nikhil complained of fever. Since the fever did not subside with Crocin, he visited the doctor. He did not respond to the doctor's treatment. Hence he was referred to a senior physician

on Friday, September 25. He appeared to improve a bit by the same night. The next day, however, his condition had worsened, and he was admitted to SAL Hospital. At that time, I was in Mumbai. I managed to reach SAL Hospital around 7 p.m., while my wife Surekha reached from Chennai around 11 p.m. After a series of blood tests, the doctors concluded that Nikhil had contracted Thrombotic Thrombocytopenic Purpura, a blood disorder which causes blood in small vessels in the body to clot. The clots hamper the flow of blood to key organs. This leads to rapid deterioration and multiple organ failure. By the time the diagnosis was made, Nikhil's condition had seriously deteriorated. He died around 7:20 p.m. on Tuesday, September 29.

I read the e-mail, and I burst into tears. To be honest, I didn't even know why I was crying. Devdas was my best friend in high school, but I hadn't been in touch with him since I came to America three decades ago. Obviously, I had never met his son. As the tears ran down my face, I felt almost embarrassed. Acutely I felt the contrast between Devdas's stoic report of his son's death and my seemingly excessive reaction to it. As I thought about it, I realized I wasn't crying for the young man, but for his father. I was crying for my friend's loss. And it came to me with a shock of discovery that I realized how much I loved this guy. Life had intervened since high school in such a way that I hadn't thought about him in years, yet the hurt I now felt over his loss was a measure of what, deep down, I truly felt about him. Since then we have restored our friendship, at least to the degree possible over a long distance. Remarkably, it was the death in his family that proved to be the catalyst for that restoration—though obviously neither of us would have chosen the suffering.

Suffering is the theme of this book, and it is one that I have been thinking about my whole life, though mine has been a happy

life. I grew up in a suburb of Bombay—now called Mumbai—and when I was nine years old, my grandfather died. I remember my grandmother's expression as she returned from the hospital. It was a defeated look, confirming the magnitude of her loss, and yet it was also defiant, as if she would not allow even this to break her dignity. I think this memory stands out for me, not because it was so painful, but because my life was so problem free that death came into it almost as an impostor, a misfit. That's when I began noticing death lurking about, along with its siblings tragedy and suffering.

When I was about thirteen, a group of us went to the beach near my house, not a sand beach but the rocky entrance to the Arabian Sea. As we explored the crevices and small pools leading down to the ocean, one of my friends yelled out. He had spotted a tiny infant, probably only a few days old, floating faceup in the water. Whereas in America our first thought might have been foul play or an accident, as youths in India we had no doubt in our minds that some desperate mother had drowned her child to escape the shame of having him out of wedlock. We stared at the little corpse in horrid fascination, and then we turned and ran away. To this day I wonder occasionally about that young mother, how she must have felt to be driven to do that, and how as a consequence a little life was extinguished even before it had its chance.

I wasn't a complete stranger to suffering as a child—in India I was, after all, surrounded by people who lived on just a few rupees a day—but somehow it didn't make a strong impression. I suppose that's because I was just as likely to see the poor people around me smiling, or even hear them roar with laughter, as I was to encounter their groans and tears. The poor in India take life as it comes, and they seem content to wring whatever happiness they can even out of difficult circumstances. I've often wondered why this is so. I think it's because when you have very little, you typically don't compare

yourself to the rich, but to those around you, and you find that by this measure, there is not very much to complain about.

Back then, the person I knew who had suffered the most was undoubtedly my grandfather. That man had stories, and he told them with such gusto that you almost missed the horrific aspect of those life experiences. Never one to dwell on the negative, he only told me his life story once, at my grandmother's insistence.

My grandfather worked in Burma—now called Myanmar—in the 1940s, and when the Japanese invaded the country, he and his family were forced to evacuate. Only women and children were allowed to take the boat, however; the men all had to walk. Walking, in this case, meant going on foot from Burma to India, a distance of hundreds of miles. Some of it was over mountains and across rivers and through malaria-infested jungle. As he described it, there were corpses all along the way. Sometimes the refugees would come upon a massive current, and some were not brave enough to attempt to cross it, so they would just stop and stay put and die.

When my grandfather reached India many months later, he was emaciated and disease ridden, not far from death. Besides his health he had lost his home, his savings—everything except his wife and children. Yet he recounted his hardships with enthusiasm and even humor. He spoke of being on a “compulsory diet” and said he became so weak that “even my sons could beat me up.” If you didn't know his story, you would have guessed by his cheerful attitude that he had known little of pain or suffering.

Coming to America

I came to America in 1978 as a Rotary exchange student, and a year later I enrolled as a freshman at Dartmouth College. Dartmouth was a wonderful experience, largely free of suffering, although as a young conservative activist, I tried to impose some suffering on the liberal faculty and administrators. We used to tell the deans that taking on

our rebel student group was like wrestling with a pig: not only did it get everyone dirty, but the pig liked it! My idyllic Dartmouth experience, however, took a jolt when one of my good friends, Jeff Lamb, suddenly died. Carbon monoxide had leaked out of a pipe in his apartment overnight and asphyxiated him. Jeff was an atheist, and I remember that the pastor his family rounded up had immense difficulty knowing what to say at his memorial. I recall one of Jeff's family members saying, "God had no right to take that young man," and although I didn't say anything, I thought to myself, *Jeff didn't believe in God, so I wonder what he would have made of this claim on his behalf.* Jeff was a good guy, and he was one of the few married students, so he left behind a grieving wife who was also a Dartmouth undergraduate.

Probably the worst I have personally suffered was the death of my father in the year 2000. My dad died relatively young, in his late sixties. He was a great father, not to mention an inspiring role model. There were hundreds of people at his funeral. By any standard, he lived a successful life. The Greeks used to say, "Count no man happy until his death," and my dad, a good and happy man, died a peaceful death. So what, I asked myself, was I grieving for? Why did his death haunt me months, and even years, later? I realized that I was grieving not for him, but for me. As natural as it was, this suffering was a form of self-pity. I missed him, of course, and his memory and example remain as a guiding inspiration for my life. Still, I realized with his death what a good thing was now gone from my life.

Suffering seems to require from us a balanced perspective, and yet I find that this balance is often lacking, especially in the West. Perhaps the unique horror of the Holocaust is largely responsible for that. When I was working in Washington, DC, I once attended a talk by a Holocaust survivor. Because of her moving testimony, my thoughts were stirred and I bought a book that she recommended, Elie Wiesel's *The Trial of God*. But the book's influence on my thinking about suffering was a bit of a surprise.

Wiesel himself is a Holocaust survivor, but his play wasn't set in Auschwitz. It was set in 1649 in a village in the Ukraine. A traveling group of minstrels come through a village whose Jewish population has been almost completely decimated in an anti-Semitic pogrom. The minstrels offer to perform a play in exchange for food and drink. Appalled, the lone remaining elder of the village asks the minstrels to move along. But when the performers insist, he agrees, with one condition. The theme must be the trial of God: a play indicting God for what he has done to the man's family, to his community, to all the Jews. The performers accept, and the rest of the play is the trial. "Listen," declares the prosecutor, speaking of God. "Either He is responsible or He is not. If He is, let's judge Him; if He is not, let Him stop judging us."²

I understand the horror of the Holocaust and the uniqueness of it in history, and I accept Wiesel as a man of unimpeachable moral authority. But as I read his play, I found myself growing very uncomfortable. After all, the pogrom had not been carried out by God; it had been carried out by anti-Semites. The very idea of indicting and trying God, even in fiction, even as a thought experiment, would not have occurred to anyone that I knew growing up. Putting God's goodness and greatness on trial struck me as very foreign, which is to say, very Western.

Quite recently I was picked up by a car service at JFK Airport. As we drove through Queens, heading to my apartment in Manhattan, the driver suddenly yelled out, "Watch it!" He screeched to a halt. I was mortified to see that he had almost hit a young girl. The girl, who couldn't have been more than twenty, languidly walked up to the driver's window. "Do me a favor," she said, her voice distant and remote. I thought she was going to ask for a lift. But then she clarified what she meant. "Do me a favor," she repeated, "and run me over." I realized that this lovely young girl wanted to end her life. Or maybe this scene was more of a cry for help. Either way, the driver

hadn't been careless; the girl had actually jumped in front of the car. We convinced her to go with us to a counseling center. As we rode in the car, the girl not saying a word, staring vacantly into the distance, I thought to myself, *How sad this is. She's well dressed. She isn't hungry. She has her whole life ahead of her. And yet she wants to end it.* Such desperation can come to those who seem to have it all together—but I wondered if that might not be possible anywhere but in the wealthy, enlightened West. I can't imagine anyone leaping in front of a car on the streets of Mumbai, unless it is a scam to extort money from the driver.

There is one group in the West that has been writing eloquently on the subject of suffering, and that is the so-called New Atheists. In the last few years, I have gotten to know several prominent atheists. The late Christopher Hitchens, perhaps America's leading atheist, was a friend. Yet I was still quite surprised to learn in his recent memoir that when he was a college student, his mother eloped with a former Anglican clergyman—and that sometime later, the two of them made a suicide pact and killed themselves.³ It made me think about his longtime atheism. How could such events not have a profound impact on a young man? How could they not have influenced his thinking about God? Yet was atheism the necessary result? Hitchens's brother, Peter Hitchens, is a believer and has written a book in defense of Christianity. Obviously, emotionally distressing experiences can point people in very different directions.

One who has made clear that experience pointed him in the atheist direction, rather than the Christian one, is Bart Ehrman. A former Christian fundamentalist, graduate of evangelical institutions Moody Bible Institute and Wheaton College, Ehrman has since become an unbeliever. He was raised to believe that "God wrote the Bible" and that the God of the Bible was a fantastic miracle worker who tirelessly intervened in history to help his people, at least the ones who were faithful to him. Later, at Princeton Theological Seminary, Ehrman

learned that God didn't write the Bible; humans did. Moreover, the earliest manuscripts that we have of the New Testament are from the second and third centuries. Because the Jewish and Christian Scriptures were hand copied, the books were in some cases altered by the copiers. Ehrman found his confidence in the truth of Christianity being shaken.

Losing Faith

Still, Ehrman says, he didn't give up his faith until he discovered the magnitude of evil in the world. The fact of "unspeakable suffering," Ehrman writes, "was the reason I lost my faith." Ehrman realized that "I could no longer reconcile the claims of faith with the facts of life." I've debated Ehrman several times. He is very eloquent about all the injustice and travails of the world: famines, epidemics, wars, ethnic cleansing, genocide. Ehrman speaks with such passion that one gets the impression that he has just learned about these horrors. Could it really be the case that this fellow in his late fifties has just figured out that the world could be a bad place?

Then I realized that what Ehrman terms his "deconversion"—his rejection of Christianity—didn't come because of his recent discovery of evil. It came because evil forced him to change his attitude toward the God of the Bible. As he put it in one of our debates, "It's not that I don't believe in God. But I came to see that the God that I was raised to believe in, the God of the Bible, this God did not exist." Ehrman writes, "This is the God of the patriarchs who answered prayer and worked miracles for his people; this is the God of the exodus who saved his suffering people from the misery of slavery in Egypt; this is the God of Jesus who healed the sick, gave sight to the blind, made the lame walk, and fed those who were hungry. Where is this God now? . . . But I can't believe in that God anymore, because from what I now see around the world, he doesn't intervene. "

A good question. Watching Ehrman indict God for his failure to

prevent suffering, much in the manner of Wiesel's actors, I couldn't help wonder what Ehrman's own experience was of suffering. When I read Ehrman's book on the topic, *God's Problem*, I got my answer. By Ehrman's own account, he has scarcely suffered at all. "I have such a fantastic life," Ehrman writes, "that I feel an overwhelming sense of gratitude for it. I am fortunate beyond words." Then he adds this, "But I don't have anyone to express my gratitude to. This is a void inside me, a void of wanting someone to thank, and I don't see any plausible way of filling it."⁴

What a remarkable situation. Ehrman experiences his own life as a great gift, but refuses to thank God for it. Note that his personal experience of life actually confirms the greatness and goodness of the Creator. Yet he blames God for the suffering that he has not himself experienced, the suffering of others. Ehrman's special focus seems to be on the sufferings of people outside the West, the people of Asia, Africa, and South America. Yet it is a simple fact that people in those countries don't interpret their suffering as evidence that there is no God or that God is somehow unworthy of their devotion. There are very few Bart Ehrman types in Riyadh or Rio de Janeiro.

Historian Philip Jenkins writes that in third-world countries—in what he calls the global south—suffering turns people toward God, not away from him. "Christianity is flourishing wonderfully among the poor and persecuted," Jenkins writes, "while it atrophies among the rich and secure." Jenkins suggests that this is because the world of the Bible, with its lurid accounts of famine, disease, war, and oppression, is a world familiar to those people. We in the West don't typically encounter moneylenders or lepers or people who claim to be possessed by demons and evil spirits. But for many people in third-world cultures, the world of the ancient Israelites, even the milieu in which Christ lived and died, is realistic, and familiar, and a relevant reference point for their own experience.⁵

What's true of non-Western cultures today is also true of the past,

even in the West. In previous eras, when general suffering was far worse—horrible diseases, no pain-killing drugs, infants and mothers routinely dying during childbirth—still there was no widespread sense that these counted against God's existence or even turned people away from God. When the bubonic plague swept across Europe, it wiped out one-third of the population. Still, the other two-thirds kept going to church. Indeed, church attendance often increased in times of suffering. What Rudolf Otto describes as the essence of religious experience—a feeling of sublime awe and stupefying dread—was typically enhanced by earthquakes, plagues, and other calamities. Such events convinced people of their complete dependence on God. Instead of questioning the greatness of God and indicting him, as Bart Ehrman and Elie Wiesel do, our distant ancestors responded to these occasions by calling on their God for help and strength.

Let me emphasize, at this point, that I'm not suggesting that this ancient and now third-world attitude toward suffering is in every respect superior. I mean only that it is anchored in genuine experience. There is something a little off key about Western academics saying, "I have lost my faith because of the suffering of the Rwandans," while Rwandans are saying, "Our faith draws us closer to the only one who can console and protect us, which is God." I recently spoke at a prayer breakfast at the United Nations and had the opportunity to discuss this point with a number of African diplomats. "I am always amazed," one of them told me, "that people in the West always think they know better, even about what we are going through." He then wryly added, "I do believe that we are the world's experts in understanding our own experience."

I agree with him, but there is another side to the story. Outside the West, many people are habituated to suffering. That's because they think it is inevitable. We don't, and that's a sign of progress. We have in our cultures greatly reduced suffering, and this means that

we are very intolerant of what suffering still remains. In America and Europe, we have become almost pathologically averse to suffering. Today we can barely stand to read descriptions of torture and public hangings that were, in the past, regarded as public spectacles and even entertainment. Unlike our ancestors, and people in the developing world, we regard suffering as having no legitimate place in the universe. Utopia, for us, is worth striving for.

I mention this outlook not to diminish it; I, too, see things this way. I even have some sympathy for the point of view of the atheists who say, “We don’t wait on God to do what he has for centuries, namely nothing. Rather, we deplore God’s inactivity and become active ourselves in reducing suffering.”

A Christian Solution

This way of thinking, though it seems like atheist propaganda, actually rises out of the Bible. The problem of suffering is first raised in the book of Job, and the vigorous debate about this topic is unique to Christianity. You won’t find it in Hinduism or Buddhism or even Islam. I’ll say more about this in the next chapter. Christians are the only people who raise the anguished question, Why does God allow this? And consequently Christianity has given rise to more rebellion and unbelief than any other religion. For some reason, it sharpens and deepens our sense and depth of suffering, making the “God question” all the more acute.

This raises a critical question: If suffering is a problem that arises most keenly within Christianity, is there a Christian solution? I believe that there is, and that the depth of the problem and the solution are essentially related. Of course I want to respond to the atheist, to show that there is no contradiction between suffering and the existence of God. But I also want to understand why God permits suffering, and how, as a Christian, I can love and relate to a God who often seems indifferent to suffering. This may be a Western way of

framing the problem, but it is one that now preoccupies Christians all over the world.

Since I was raised in India but now live in New York and California, I am, in a sense, between two worlds. I'd like to draw on that experience to tackle the great issues of God, evil, and suffering. I have thought about these questions for decades, and finally I have something original to say about them. Of the Holocaust victims, Elie Wiesel writes, "Theirs was the kingdom of night. Forgotten by God, forsaken by Him, they lived alone, suffered alone, fought alone."⁶ Is it true that we are, like the Jews in the Nazi camps, abandoned and godforsaken? Ehrman and others have put God on trial and have concluded that we are. The conclusion is that either God doesn't exist or his existence doesn't matter to us because he isn't strong enough, good enough, or great enough. Yet I believe we really cannot answer this question without asking first why the world is designed the way that it is, and the answer to that question will, in part, answer the question of where God is when we need him so desperately. To address the question of suffering, then, requires an inquiry into the mind of God, a search for God's own point of view.

I've called my search "what's so great about God," because this is the fundamental question people like Elie Wiesel and Bart Ehrman are asking. When we cry, "Where was God?" in the face of a specific tragedy—whether it's a destructive earthquake or the loss of a loved one—we are asking, in effect, whether God cared enough or was powerful enough to intervene. The basic question is whether God is as great as he is purported to be.

Many before me have contributed to this corporate inquiry. Typically the atheists produce a catalog of crimes and sufferings, and then they demand an explanation for God's behavior. Meanwhile, the Christian makes elaborate and ultimately impossible attempts to show the benefit and purpose of all these calamities. This book takes a different approach. While I begin with the debate as it is, I attempt

to steer it in a novel direction. Instead of confining myself to philosophical and theological speculation, I propose to draw on remarkable advances in physics, astronomy, brain science, and biology to offer a fresh answer to the problems of evil and suffering, an answer that allows us to see God's providential actions in the natural realm in a fresh light. Incredibly, modern science gives us a new way to think about an ancient philosophical and theological conundrum. In this book, I take one of the greatest recent discoveries of modern science—the discovery of the fine-tuned universe—and apply it in a new way to answer the atheist, the Christian, and anyone else who wonders why God might act in the way that he does. Why do particular evils happen at particular times to particular people? I don't know. Why does an omnipotent, benevolent God permit so much evil and suffering in the world? To this question, I believe I now have an answer.

This answer will not make suffering go away; it will not dry all the tears. In the end, it is an intellectual solution to the problem of suffering; it doesn't solve the immediate emotional problem. People who are hurting still need pastoral counseling, and they need people to commiserate with them and help them get through the pain and the shock. Still, a time comes when sufferers start reflecting on their suffering, on why this has happened, and on what God's role is in causing or allowing it to happen. This book helps to make suffering intelligible, and this, I believe, can provide in the end a profound consolation. We will still mourn, but we won't be tempted to prosecute God; rather, we will see why he permits it, and we are more likely to draw closer to him.

With this book I am hoping to provide a rational ground for hope, and hope is a very powerful medicine. Though I couldn't do much to help the brokenhearted young lady from Queens that day, I hope this book might help you.