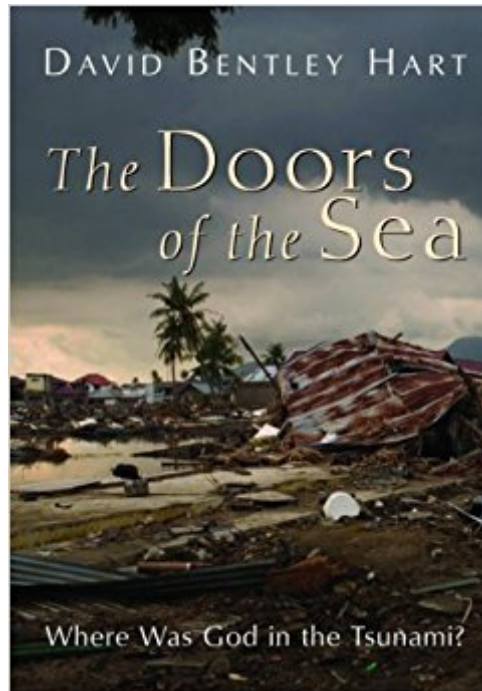




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# **The Doors Of The Sea: Where Was God In The Tsunami?**



## Synopsis

As news reports of the horrific December 2004 tsunami in Asia reached the rest of the world, commentators were quick to seize upon the disaster as proof of either God's power or God's nonexistence, asking over and over, How could a good and loving God allow such suffering? In *The Doors of the Sea* David Bentley Hart speaks at once to those skeptical of Christian faith and to those who use their Christian faith to rationalize senseless human suffering. He calls both to recognize in the worst catastrophes not the providential will of God but rather the ongoing struggle between the rebellious powers that enslave the world and the God who loves it wholly.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Soon after the Indian Ocean tsunami in December, Hart penned two essays, one for the *Wall Street Journal* and another for *First Things*, concerning the question of theodicy-how a powerful, loving God co-exists with evil and natural disaster. This book expands on the essay's theological thesis that "what God permits, rather than violate the autonomy of the created world, may be in itself contrary to what he wills." Hart, an Eastern Orthodox Christian, wants to rescue God from predestination. The book begins with an elegant description of the geological factors leading to the earthquake and ensuing tsunami. Hart then admits that, upon learning of this devastation, "we should probably all have remained silent for awhile." But since few did, he joined the chorus in an effort to counter some upsetting arguments given to help people understand God's role in the disaster. Writing in a sophisticated, academic style-highlighting the philosophical and theological

writings of Voltaire, Aquinas, Dostoyevsky and Calvin-Hart asks Christians to allow themselves to be moved and horrified by violence, natural or human-made, and, at the same time, to acknowledge that God can and someday will bring about the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. It's an eloquent and persuasive stance. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

ForeWord Magazine Book of the Year Awards, Honorable Mention,  
Philosophy (2006) Publishers Weekly "Writing in a sophisticated, academic style • highlighting the philosophical and theological writings of Voltaire, Aquinas, Dostoyevsky, and Calvin • Hart asks Christians to allow themselves to be moved and horrified by violence, natural or human-made, and, at the same time, to acknowledge that God can and someday will bring about the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. It's an eloquent and persuasive stance." The Christian Science Monitor "The Doors of the Sea is timely, eloquent, and unfashionable. Its arguments are missing from public debate • perhaps with tragic results." The Christian Century "A moving inquiry into the question of evil, one likely to be a classic. Hart defends the ancient Christian descriptions of evil as nonbeing and of God as immutable, saying that they offer the most theologically coherent and existentially satisfactory account of evil."

Interesting idea. David B. Hart attempts to answer the question of where God was during natural disasters such as the Indonesian tsunami in 2004. He is responding mostly to theodicy (the belief that evil and suffering are part of God's divine plan) and Calvinist strains of Christianity (the doctrine of predestination). Hart's response is : "The Christian should see two realities at once, one world (as it were) within another: one the world as we all know it, in all its beauty and terror, grandeur and dreariness, delight and anguish; and the other world in its first and ultimate truth, not simply "nature" but "creation, an endless sea of glory, radiant with the beauty of God in every part, innocent of all violence" (60). Evil is not a creation of God, but is the privation of goodness (like St. Augustine). Suffering and evil exist because we have free will and we have chosen to sin and thus, let sin into the world. The world was once perfect and pure (Pre Fall), and once we sinned, we have physically altered the world in a way that makes it susceptible to tragedy, misery, and evil. A question we can ask in response is how exactly was the world altered after the Fall? Did the laws of gravity or motion change? Has the genetic makeup of human beings been altered as well? Overall, I thought this approach was interesting, but I believe it be inadequate

for a number of reasons.

David Bentley Hart is unquestionably one of the most brilliant theological and philosophical minds in America today. This is a fine introduction into his thought through the medium of an important topic. The purpose for writing this book was to expand the thoughts of a NY Times article that Hart was asked by a friend to write following the tragedy of the 2004 Christmas Tsunami. The monstrous event was followed by hasty responses from people of various philosophical and religious traditions. From one perspective, some atheists wrote that this was clear evidence that God does not exist, as though the multitudes of religious believers worldwide had never considered the gravity of evil in the world, and the implications for such a reality on their belief. From another perspective, some theologians were claiming that God predestined such a catastrophe and that the piles of infant and children bodies were somehow a testimony to God's sovereignty and glory. In light of these seemingly polar opposite arguments (despite their similar theological view of god), Hart responds by expounding on the Christian intellectual tradition against these two opposing views. Hart clearly reserves his greatest criticism for those theologians who distort the Christian tradition to portray God as not subversively working against such tragedy, but willing and using such tragedies. Hart discusses Voltaire's response to the Lisbon earthquake (a similarly tragic event), positioning it within its historical context, highlighting Voltaire's disdain for the typical theological answers offered to him by those who had a heightened sense of theological optimism and claimed that every evil had a good purpose. Hart then discusses how the god who wills and has a purpose in such tragedies must also be rejected, if not through denying his existence, at least in by denying him allegiance. Hart builds this argument through the thought of Fyodor Dostoevsky (particularly through the words of Ivan Karamazov in *The Brothers Karamazov*). Few would disagree that the words of Ivan Karamazov present the problem of evil as well as anyone before or since. I will leave for you to read how Hart shows that such an argument by Ivan Karamazov is inherently Christian at its core whether Ivan would admit it or not. In the second section on Divine Victory, Hart is concerned to argue that God is free of blame for natural evil, while not diminishing the anger that every Christian should feel at such an event. Hart, focusing on the traditions of Maximus the Confessor, Isaac the Syrian and Thomas Aquinas, does an outstanding job of showing how the Christian intellectual tradition stands together with those who are angered and in deep pain concerning such events. The book is short, although some have complained that the language makes it too dense to read despite its brevity. I would disagree, and whereas I accept that reading Hart may require keeping a dictionary at hand, such a challenge should not dissuade the reader from finishing the work and

pondering his argument. Unfortunately, the brevity of this work also means that not all questions about the theological aspects of Hart's argument can be resolved. As such, I would suggest the theological reader also read Hart's *The Beauty Of The Infinite: The Aesthetics Of Christian Truth*. I would also suggest that the reader have a basic understanding of philosophy and theology before reading the book. The terminology may be unfamiliar to some who are not familiar with these fields and thus they would find the reading more difficult than it is intended to be. This would not diminish my willingness to suggest the book to those thinking through this issue. Few authors have made such a compelling case in such a succinct and beautiful manner.

Other reviews and blurbs have eloquently set out the project of this wonderful book. All I can hope to add is to ask anyone who has ever asked those big questions about suffering and meaning and God's will to read this book ... and hopefully be inspired, hopefully see a glimpse of what the answer may be. It also reminds us most timeously to refrain from the glib and banal platitude when suffering strikes. A short little book that packs the theological punch of a 500 page masterpiece. I will return to this often.

I have appreciated Hart's writings in the journal *First Things*, so my high hopes were disappointed in this book. Hart never deals directly with the questions I brought into the book, first if Jesus can calm the wind and the waves (see Mark 4:41) what are we to make of hurricanes and tsunamis? Second, what does it mean to say that nature has fallen into sin? Of course one can't fault an author for not answers questions they didn't know you were asking but rather than directly deal with natural disaster, the book trains its guns on arguing against pious Christian explanations that all things mysteriously fit into God's master plan. This is a worthwhile effort, but seems rather detached from the subtitle of the book. The second disappointment was his writing style. It seems competitively complicated to the point of being hard to follow. It is so full of parenthesized side thoughts and qualifications that I often had to re-read sentences to see how the end related to the beginning. Of course complex ideas sometimes require complex and precise language to describe, but the book would have been more enjoyable had he followed a maxim of, "as complex as necessary, as simple as possible." The book is more of a scholar's flow of conscience than a structured account of why a world made by the biblical God would include tsunamis. Of course scholarly flow's of conscience can be quite good fun and at points this book was too, just know that that is what you are buying.

I don't know if I've ever read a more compelling and beautiful explanation of theodicy ever, and it is

a book that I will need to ponder again and again to mine all the wealth of wisdom found in it!

The book was not the easiest to read, but his point well made. A compelling argument for the problem of evil. Good historical evidence given by others for and against his view. Would recommend to others, helpful to get a well rounded view in response to the problem of evil. Best point made when he wrote how we should respond to people suffering what we really believe about God.

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