

So whose fault is it anyway?



“There’s absolutely every reason to check if you’ve been sold PPI.” I don’t know about you, but I’ll be glad when the PPI claims deadline is reached and we can get rid of these annoying adverts, but don’t hold your breath – it’s still two years away. Even so, some lawyers are appealing against it so they can continue with their profitable “no win, no fee” cases. We live in an age of litigation, with legal fault claims frequently in the news and encouragement to

pursue compensation on the flimsiest of evidence. We’re told that our car insurance premiums are too high because so many drivers make spurious whiplash injury claims, and the latest wheeze is to say you suffered food poisoning in your holiday hotel a couple of years ago and get the travel insurance to pay up.

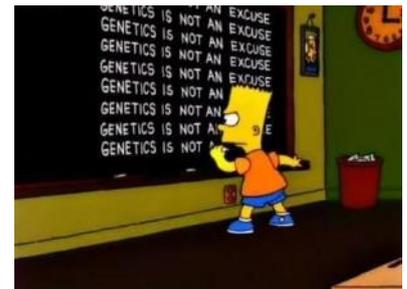
When something more serious happens and there’s a real tragedy, alongside the genuine concern and generous response we usually see for the victims, the cry goes up “Who’s to blame?” The buck has to stop somewhere, and heads must roll, whether it’s for a tower block fire, a terrorist attack, a police cover-up, or a flooded town. It’s someone’s fault – not mine, of course – and we see public enquiries, private investigations, and tabloid press witch-hunts to find out and point the finger.

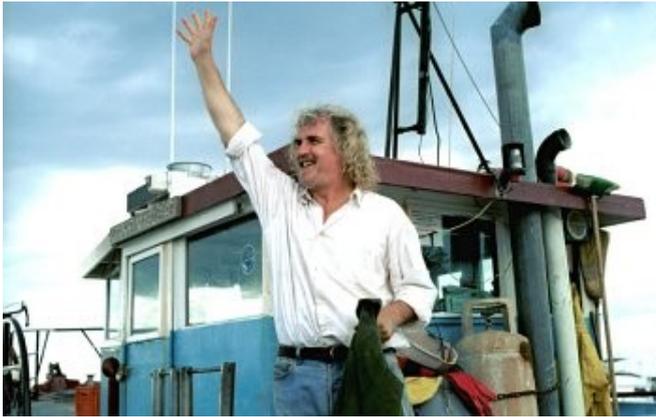


There’s a natural human tendency for me to hold others to account for their faults while excusing my own. “Don’t blame me – I can’t help it – that’s the way I was made”; but don’t try that line if you’ve done something to hurt me! What has science to say about this? With rapid advances in the modern field of genetics, we can trace our inheritance of all

kinds of characteristics across generations. It is known that particular genetic abnormalities are associated with the development of certain diseases and disabilities, and in some cases a direct cause can be demonstrated. In other cases, however, the genetic feature indicates a tendency, but not an automatic cause for something unusual, and perhaps undesirable, to happen: there’s a huge difference between genetic influence (it might happen) and genetic determinism (it will happen). Despite much research, and contrary to some media hype at times, there is no real evidence for genes that cause laziness, obesity, or a particular sexual orientation: nature and nurture – genetic and environmental influences – are both at work. The debate goes on: are great musicians or footballers or geniuses born or made?

“Science and morality: can I blame my genes?” is the subject of one of the autumn series of four talks on the science-faith interface I’ve organised for our area, which you’ll see advertised in this issue of Tyne Valley Express and on posters and flyers. It’s in Stocksfield on the evening of Thursday 28 September, and brings together, in Keith Fox from Southampton, expertise in biochemistry and genetics and a Christian perspective of moral responsibility for our behaviour.





Another dimension of blame arises when we hear of floods, droughts, eruptions and earthquakes. Have we contributed to some of these through climate change, and do our habits and lifestyles make the effects of natural disasters worse than they might be? Have you seen the 2001 film “The man who sued God”? In it, Billy Connolly (knighted in this year’s Queen’s Birthday Honours) is a fisherman whose boat is destroyed by lightning. The insurance company refuses to pay out, saying it was an “Act of God”

and therefore excluded from cover. With comical logic, he sets about suing God for compensation, which he does by taking all the church denominations to court. I won’t give away the ending, but neither Billy nor God comes out as loser.

Joking aside, this is a serious issue, especially for millions in Nepal, Haiti, Bangladesh, Pacific islands and many other parts of the world, rich and (more especially) poor. As many commentators asked in 2004, “Where was God in the Boxing Day tsunami?” So “Are natural disasters Acts of God?” – a question posed by Bob White from Cambridge, an expert on volcanoes and earthquakes, in another of our autumn series talks, in Ponteland on Wednesday 11 October. Bob’s book on this topic is called “Who is to blame?” and he approaches the subject as both an eminent geologist and a committed Christian, currently Director of the Faraday Institute for Science and Religion in Cambridge and a Fellow of the Royal Society.



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The other talks coming your way are on quite different topics of current interest; one looks at our place on a small planet in a huge universe and asks about human significance in a cosmic context (a theme of many SciFi films), and the other addresses the development and use of artificial intelligence, with some people’s fear that robots will take over our jobs and maybe the whole world (shades of “The Matrix”). If they do, then I suppose we can stop blaming other people for what goes wrong, or even “the system”, and can blame the machines – but then, since we made them, whose fault are they in the first place?

Bill Clegg

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