Like the old Chinese curse, we live in interesting times. The Japanese earthquake and tsunami has caused thousands of deaths, a humanitarian crisis and a nuclear emergency. Grass-roots protests in the Arab world have caused a change of government in two countries, shootings of protestors in several more, and a civil war in Libya that has dragged world powers into military action.

While Americans are only indirectly affected by these events, the people living in these countries are suffering. Many have had their lives and their livelihoods disrupted, lost loved ones, been injured, been fired upon and lost homes and possessions.

In Christianity and many world religions, human suffering is caused by evil. Can we identify a source of evil in these events?

In Japan, the disaster was caused by natural forces. Pressure built up at the meeting place of two tectonic plates and they shifted, which then caused an earthquake, the flooding of the tsunami and massive death and destruction. There was no mind, no consciousness, no thought to cause suffering; it just happened. Can something be evil if there is no intention? If so, does that mean that nature is inherently evil? Hmmm.

Maybe this is the way to conceive it: The events of the earthquake and tsunami are evil. Their impact on humans is evil. But their cause (i.e., nature) is not evil, at least not inherently. If so, then that also means that something that can cause evil can also bring about benefits. Tectonic plate movement and its associated volcanic activity (Japan has lots of volcanoes) created the Japanese islands in the first place. That's beneficial. So a natural force, such as nature, can cause both good and evil events, but is not inherently good or evil in itself.

The damaged nuclear reactor in Japan has caused a lot of suffering. Is technology evil? Again, I think technology, whether modern or ancient technology such as an ax, is neither good nor evil in itself. Technology can bring about benefits, such as electricity or piles of wood, or it can cause evil, such as radiation poisoning or injury.

What about human causes of evil? In the Middle East, people are rebelling against their governments, trying to bring them down. Why? Have not these governments done good things like building schools, picking up the trash, and maintaining law and order? Perhaps. But these benefits are outweighed by the bad things they have done: Restriction of individual rights and freedoms, theft and bribery, and unjust arrest and abuse. The list goes on.

But in Tunisia and Egypt, for example, the people found that their governments' bad actions dwarfed the good ones. So they decided the governments in power were evil and needed to be removed. In each country, the citizens intend to establish a new, democratic government more responsive to their needs and hopes. So governments, as forms of organization, are not inherently evil. They may carry out both beneficial and evil actions. But if they carry out too many harmful acts, then any benefits they may convey come at too high a cost.

Are individual humans necessarily evil? Are people who cause harm and suffering evil by nature? On a day-to-day basis, the actions of most people average out on the good side. They love their families and look after them; they do their jobs and try to help their employers be successful; they have friends whom they help in times of need.

But what about a soldier who shoots into a crowd and kills or injures people? Or the officer or the political leader who orders the soldier to shoot? Do they not go home at night to their loving family? Do they not have friends? Do they not do good as well? At some point, whatever their intentions and other actions, do they not harm enough people and cause enough suffering that even if they are not inherently evil, they should be treated as such?

We live a world that produces few people or things that are evil by nature. Most are neutral and capable of producing both beneficial and evil actions, events or results. The world is not black and white, where we can get rid of the black and keep only the white. It is gray, and capable of producing both. We should enjoy the white but guard against the black.