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## Religious perspectives on human suffering: Implications for medicine and bioethics

Scott J Fitzpatrick<sup>A,B</sup>, Ian H Kerridge<sup>B</sup>, Christopher F C Jordens<sup>B</sup>, Laurie Zoloth<sup>C</sup>, Christopher Tollefsen<sup>D</sup>, Karma Lekshe Tsomo<sup>E</sup>, Michael P Jensen<sup>F</sup>, Abdulaziz Sachedina<sup>G</sup>, Deepak Sarma<sup>H</sup> (2015/16)

<sup>A</sup>Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health, University of Newcastle, Orange, Australia; <sup>B</sup>Centre for Values, Ethics and the Law in Medicine (VELiM), University of Sydney, Sydney, Australia; <sup>C</sup>Centre for Bioethics, Science and Society, Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine, Chicago, Illinois, USA; <sup>D</sup>Department of Philosophy, University of South Carolina, Columbia, South Carolina, USA USA; <sup>E</sup>Department of Theology and Religious Studies, University of San Diego, San Diego, California, USA; <sup>F</sup>Moore Theological College, Sydney, Australia; <sup>G</sup>Ali Vural Ak Centre for Global Islamic Studies, George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia, USA; <sup>H</sup>Religious Studies, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, Ohio, USA.

### Abstract

The prevention and relief of suffering has long been a core medical concern. But while this is a laudable goal, some question whether medicine can, or should, aim for a world without pain, sadness, anxiety, despair or uncertainty. To explore these issues, we invited experts from six of the world's major faith traditions to address the following question. Is there value in suffering? And is something lost in the prevention and/or relief of suffering? While each of the perspectives provided maintains that suffering should be alleviated and that medicine's proper role is to prevent and relieve suffering by ethical means, it is also apparent that questions regarding the meaning and value of suffering are beyond the realm of medicine. These perspectives suggest that medicine and bioethics has much to gain from respectful consideration of religious discourse surrounding suffering.

### Keywords

Suffering; religion; medicine; bioethics

The task of modern medicine is generally agreed to be the promotion of health, the prevention and treatment of illness, and the relief of suffering. Palliative care, anaesthesia, pharmacology, psychology, and psychiatry all have as their goal the relief of suffering – be it physical, emotional, psychological or, even, existential. Historically, and in recent years, a large body of literature has concerned itself with issues relating to the management, prevention, and relief of pain and suffering (Boston, Bruce, & Schreiber, 2011; Cassell, 1991; Edwards, 2003; Egniew, 2009; Norris, 2009; van Hooft, 1998). But while the relief of suffering seems laudable, some question whether medicine can, or should, aim for a world without pain, sadness, anxiety, despair or uncertainty (Breggin, 2003; Elliott, 1998).

Different religious traditions also have a long historical interest in suffering, not only theologically but in health related practice (for example the hospice movement) and in public debates over social controversies such as physician assisted suicide and biotechnological enhancement. In certain circumstances, however, suffering may not be considered a problem that needs to be alleviated. Rather, it may be understood as something of value which makes possible spiritual connection and transformation (Norris, 2009). This may lead to speculation that secular approaches to healing, such as those offered by allopathic medicine, may invalidate suffering as an important element of human existence (Cassell, 1991).

To explore these issues, we invited experts from six of the world's major faith traditions (Jewish, Roman Catholic, Buddhist, Evangelical Anglican, Islamic, and Hindu traditions), who have a particular interest in the nexus between faith, medicine, and ethics, to respond to the following question. Is there value in suffering? And is something lost in the prevention and/or relief of suffering? On the basis of these perspectives we draw attention to the similarities and differences within these traditions, and consider the implications of these views of suffering to medicine and bioethics.

The perspectives do not attempt to exhaustively survey the relevant discourse or views within these traditions, nor do they seek to represent their respective traditions. Indeed, other members of these traditions may well draw alternative conclusions from the same or different authoritative sources. The perspectives do, however, offer the considered responses of leading experts from each religious tradition and each are grounded in the key texts and in scholarly and popular interpretations of the respective doctrines.

## **Perspectives**

### *A Jewish Perspective*

Laurie Zoloth

R. Johanan once fell ill and R. Hanina went in to visit him. He said to him: Are your sufferings welcome to you? He replied: Neither they nor their reward. He said to

him: Give me your hand. He gave him his hand and he raised him. Why could not R. Johanan raise himself? — They replied: The prisoner cannot free himself from jail. (Talmud Bavli Barochot 5b)

In a long passage in the Babylonian Talmud, the rabbinic authorities debate the matter of suffering and its meaning. Is there value in suffering? Can suffering act as atonement for sinful behaviour? Can afflictions be called “chastisements of love?” Can the sufferer, at the least, understand his agony as an expiation? The answer provided in the text is a long and complex argument, in which the protagonists, experiencing terrible loss and illness, repeat to one another: “Are your sufferings welcome to you? He replied: Neither they nor their reward.” They tell us that suffering is not welcomed as a meaningful experience, nor as a preliminary threshold to a post-mortem reward. On the personal level, pain, grief, illness, and befallenness are understood as disorder, without spiritual value, and not linked to spiritual journey or transformation. One prays, three times daily, as a Jew, to be healed, to avoid suffering, and to have the strength to endure disaster when it inevitably occurs. The world, in this religious cosmology, is created in such a way that tragic events will happen. But the world would be better if such tragedies could be averted. Suffering, in these texts, creates a crisis, a rupture, which cannot be righted, but only witnessed, by another.

Thus, suffering, within most normative Jewish texts, is not a problem of being, it is a problem of ethics and of response. First, the moral gesture of medicine as a response to suffering is enriched by a narrative approach that is rooted in the *aggadic* as well as the *halachic* tradition. Second, the primary act of healing involves not only the direct encounter with the other on both the physical, embodied level, but a direct encounter with the other at the moral and existential level, meaning that to be a healer is to be willing to participate in the act of moral reversal and reciprocity. Third, the long tradition of the lived experience of the Jewish people is replete with suffering on a collective as well as individual level, and thus the question of meaning has a social as well as psychological dimension. Finally, the entire moral argument behind this Jewish view of suffering is that the social welfare, charity, medicine, and science needed to respond to suffering are acts of justice, the response of the human, the argument of the human hand against an unjust and as yet unredeemed and darkened world.

Here the text seems to be saying: “Do you want to know the meaning and the moral value of suffering, the weight of the mark of leprosy? Ask the one at the centre of the issue, the patient himself.”<sup>1</sup> Asking the patient the moral value of suffering centers the problem of healing on the other, not the self, and it allows for more. It means that the ill one, who in the first part of the conversation in the house of study only appears as the object of the gaze – the visible sign of atonement, is transformed into the subject of the talk, and importantly, the one whose words will guide your actions. It is from this that we can draw our first conclusion of what is

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<sup>1</sup> “Him” meaning the actual men that the rabbis were nearly always thinking about.

being asked and answered by the healing gesture. The meaning of healing is first, then, 'conversive', in the sense of being a participant in a conversation about value, and in this, it is the patient's value that is determinative (something, I might add, that modern medicine finds difficult). Thus, the account of suffering that matters most in these texts is first person, embodied and personal.

The view of suffering and its role in the medical process is one way that Jewish texts take account of a core problem in religion, which is how a powerful, compassionate, and just God would allow innocents to suffer. Judaism argues for several answers. First, some philosophic texts suggest that suffering is merely a characteristic of physical existence (Maimonides, 3: 8-25), or that individual suffering can only be understood as alienation or privation of the good, a "turning away," in the Buberian sense (Buber, 1952), or a "refusal" of the ethical command, for Levinas (see Peperzak, 1993).

Both in Biblical texts, such as Abraham's bargaining for the salvation of Sodom and Job's debates with friends who want to make a facile link between sin and suffering, and in rabbinic texts like the one above, in which the idea that suffering is "a chastisement of love," is debated, the text suggests that suffering is complex and its meaning unresolved. Suffering is not to be accepted, but always calls for a response, in this world.

Such a debate is made vivid by the refusal of many Jewish texts to resolve the problem of suffering by recourse to a personal heaven. While some commentators suggest this, they are queried promptly by others. Maimonides is particularly opposed to a fully developed concept of a literal afterlife, for like most within the Jewish tradition, Maimonides understands the "world to come" as a collective, messianic redemption, not as a personal domain in which suffering is given meaning or reward.

In clinical contexts, and in the pursuit of research, the drive to alleviate, address, and eliminate suffering is understood as the best possible pursuit. There is little classical anxiety about whether a world with less suffering would be less spiritual or less moral. This understanding of the brokenness of the world, the groaning of the world, creates primary duties within Jewish ethics, and primary insights within Jewish theology, for God is said to suffer along with the people, travelling in exile.

### *A Roman Catholic Perspective*

Christopher Tollefsen

One important feature of the Roman Catholic perspective is that the Roman Catholic Church teaches that most of what is important to the moral life is available to natural reason; revelation complements what can be so known, both to ensure that fallible human beings do not err in their use of reason, and also to guide humans towards an end that is more than can be known through human reasoning: life

everlasting in the Kingdom of Heaven in communion with all persons, human and divine; and a share of the divine life itself in the 'Beatific Vision'.

Accordingly, in responding to questions about the meaning of suffering, I will attempt to say something both from the perspective of natural reason and from the larger perspective that takes the Kingdom of Heaven and a share in God's life as our final ends. I believe that, contrary to popular views, there *is* something to be said in the affirmative in answer to both questions even apart from the standpoint of faith, and specifically the Christian faith. But, I will suggest, the Catholic response goes much further than what is available to reason, and in doing so, speaks to a real and profound need on the part of humanity to make sense of suffering.

Is there value in suffering? Suffering is similar to pain, which has an important instrumental value: without pain, we would be ill equipped to know when our bodies were beset by a potential threat. Animals too can experience pain, and often undertake a search for a remedy for what ails them. But suffering goes beyond pain, and is not, I think, available to other animals. Human beings are capable of recognising, in certain experiences, including some involving pain, that we are in one or another state of disharmony: whether within ourselves, as a result of illness or wrongdoing; or with others, when our relationships are strained or severed; or with the larger universe or its Creator, when we are "not right" with either. Thus, suffering involves an awareness on our part of a harmony that should exist, whether in our physical or mental being, or our moral being, or between loved ones, or between ourselves and God, and a further awareness that that harmony is currently being damaged, rent asunder. In consequence, suffering often includes feelings of alienation, of abandonment, of loss; we feel the absence of a wholeness that we know should characterise things, but does not.

Suffering thus does point, in a way similar to pain, to something that has gone wrong; and that awareness can play a salutary role in a moral agent's life, leading her to repair that which can be repaired, and to develop virtues that are necessary for that reparative work. If this is so, then it can sometimes be problematic to relieve suffering if that relief does not also treat the disharmony at its roots. Attempts to deal with past trauma by memory-affecting pharmaceuticals, or to address ruptures with loved ones by falsely coming to believe that the loss is no big thing, might alleviate suffering, but do so at a great moral cost: an opportunity to repair what is broken is lost.

But it is clearly a significant part of the human condition that some forms of disharmony are beyond our repair. What can be the value, for example, of suffering at the end of life, when there is no hope for recovery? Further, suffering at the hands of others, or suffering at the awareness of the world's great evils, such as poverty, tyranny, and hatred, can lead to despair, when one cannot see any way that such existential forms of disharmony could be alleviated. And despair in these cases can have further consequences. For example, at the end of life, the belief that there is no value in suffering is associated with a willingness and desire to end the life of the person suffering, in hopes that they will thereby be made better off.

From the Catholic standpoint, however, there is more to say. Revelation teaches that we are called to a share of eternal life, in the Kingdom of Heaven and as adopted members of God's triune family. This end was not available to us in our fallen condition: after Adam and Eve's sin, mankind was decisively alienated from God. In the narrative of the Old Testament, God attempted repeatedly to overcome this alienation by calling his chosen people back to Him and their covenant with Him; but the reconciliation was incomplete. Thus, Christ became man to effect the deepest possible reconciliation between human beings and God: the Reincarnation made him one of us, his death atoned for all mankind's sins; and by rising from the dead he gave new life to all. On our part, we enter by adoption into the divine family, and share in Christ's death and resurrection, in the sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist.

Christ's work of reconciling God and Man was not something that occurred simply by God's willing that it should be so: Christ was sent by God with a task, a mission, to call sinners back to God, a mission that Christ worked energetically and creatively at in hopes of success. Yet the success of his mission is not immediately apparent. Christ's identification of sinful humanity was met repeatedly with anger, disregard, insults, and disbelief. Those he did attract were among the least educated and appealing of his society, and eventually, even his own people turned on him, called for his execution, and cheered his death. Thus, the harmony he sought to bring was rejected; and the fruits of that rejection were visited upon him physically, on the Cross, and spiritually, as he experienced in his final hours a sense of abandonment even by God. In other words, Christ's life was characterised by massive suffering; suffering that may be redolent of our own.

Two further points must be made in order to see how Christ's suffering is related to human suffering within the Christian tradition. The first is that Christ's suffering was itself redeemed – he was made whole, being risen from the dead in a glorified body. Thus, out of the most extreme brokenness – the Son of God, crucified on a Cross by his own people – came a more profound wholeness than could reasonably be expected or hoped for.

But second, Christians are called upon to continue Christ's redemptive work. In Catholic teaching, each person has been given a task, calling, or vocation which is to follow 'a path of good deeds'. But just as Christ's life was unavoidably accompanied by suffering, by continuing his work Christians also share his suffering. Thus St. Paul can speak meaningfully of completing "those things that are wanting of the sufferings of Christ" (Colossians 1:24). Suffering, therefore, is not meaningless, but is a particular way in which Christians may share in Christ's work, a way concomitant with taking on their vocation as a follower of Christ.

But does this view miss the point of those struck by the gratuitous suffering of this world? For not all suffering results from of a Christian's willingness to do the work she is called to do. Some suffer through illness, natural catastrophe, poverty, or oppression. And some suffer for no apparent reason at all, suffering for no purpose. What can be said of this?

Catholic tradition offers a number of responses to the challenge of suffering. The first is that the entire world can be considered to be broken as a consequence of Adam's fall in ways that we cannot even appreciate (Romans 8:21-22). Gratuitous suffering, therefore, may have a purpose, or value, or meaning, but remains mysterious to us and beyond our comprehension.

The second is Christ's life and work was aimed toward redeeming *all* suffering. Accordingly, if Christians share in Christ's redemptive work, they take on the vocation of faith. Then they too take on the sufferings of all, and not just their own. The Christian vocation therefore requires that Christians suffer with the suffering other, and strive in prayer and good works to relieve the world of suffering.

Finally, those who themselves suffer for no apparent reason may be reassured by knowing that Christ and his Church suffer in solidarity with them, and that although they must accept something that cannot be fully understood, God will bring good out of all evils. This is, therefore, the vocation of suffering – by accepting suffering *they* will complete Christ's work. And to reject this, by rejecting entirely the possibility of one's own suffering, is indeed to lose something of value.

### *A Buddhist Perspective*

Karma Lekshe Tsomo

The question of suffering is a key concern for Buddhists. Buddha Sakyamuni has been quoted as saying, "I teach one thing and one thing only: suffering and the end of suffering." The Four Noble Truths that the Buddha discovered upon his awakening under the *bodhi* tree some 2500 years ago were: suffering exists, suffering arises as a result of causes, suffering can be eliminated, and the way to eliminate suffering is through right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right effort, right livelihood, right mindfulness, and right concentration. Recognising that all sentient beings experience suffering, figuring out how to prevent and relieve it, then acting on this knowledge are the essence of the Buddhist path.

The Buddhist concept of *dukkha* is broader than ordinary concepts of suffering, however. It encompasses dissatisfaction, ennui, irritation, anxiety, frustration, craving, and all other forms of stress. Suffering can be understood by looking honestly at the nature and mechanisations of our own minds. The continual grinding of mental gears, the endless re-activity of the mind, is a form of *dukkha*. Buddhist texts describe three types of *dukkha*. The first, the *dukkha* of *dukkha*, denotes raw physical or mental pain. The second, the *dukkha* of change, is the suffering we experience when pleasant circumstances become unpleasant or when we lose what we want or hold dear. The third, all-pervasive *dukkha*, refers to the fact that sentient beings inevitably experience various types of suffering no matter where they take rebirth within cyclic existence. To achieve liberation, the goal of the Buddhist path, means to become free of *dukkha*. There is, therefore, nothing to be lost and everything to be gained by preventing and relieving suffering.

But while there is no value in suffering per se, there is great value in recognising suffering and realising that all sentient beings are beset by one suffering after another – the Buddha’s first noble truth. Contemplation on the suffering of cyclic existence is an important Buddhist practice because it engenders the wish to be free from suffering and the desire to seek liberation, *nirvana*. If we do not recognise the pervasive, inescapable nature of *dukkha*, we may become complacent and, like a bird in a golden cage, never seek to be free. Ignorant of our situation, we may fritter our time away and waste this precious opportunities for spiritual evolution. Thus, although suffering has no redeeming value in itself, insight into *dukkha* is essential for any higher attainments.

The Buddha taught that we ultimately create our own suffering, under the influence of mental defilements (*klesas*). As a result of desire, aversion, and other afflictive emotions, we engage in unwholesome actions that result in future *dukkha*. Human beings are accountable for our actions and experience the consequences. We are not rewarded or punished by some external force, but are, like all phenomena, subject to the natural law of cause and effect. Ultimately, it is said, all suffering is rooted in ignorance. Based on our misconceptions of a solid, unchanging reality, desires and aversions arise in the mind and cause *dukkha* – the second noble truth. In addition to the pain we feel, we often heap more suffering on ourselves through our reactions to the pain. Accepting the fact that pain is an intrinsic part of being alive, rather than resenting it, helps us dispel these added sufferings. Pain is inevitable; the stories we weave about pain are optional. Whereas modern medicine usually treats suffering as an external factor, something ‘it’ does to ‘us’, Buddhists perceive the ultimate source of suffering to be within our own minds, including our reaction to difficult or distressing situations.

The Buddhist concern with *dukkha* has caused it to be labeled a negative philosophy, but the point is not to cause feelings of misery or depression. The emphasis on *dukkha* is to help human beings straightforwardly acknowledge its existence, identify its causes, and free themselves from it. An awareness of *dukkha* and its causes leads to a wish to be free from the attitudes and actions that lead to *dukkha*. And if we can wake up to the causes of our suffering, ultimately we can be free from the cycle of suffering altogether.

Suffering can be a great teacher. Experiencing the pain of illness, injury, old age, or loss can be a great opportunity to gain insight into the true nature of the human condition. Not only does this realization help human beings cope with sufferings as they arise, but it also helps us avoid the causes of future suffering. Perhaps most importantly, it helps us generate compassion for the sufferings of others and the determination to prevent and relieve them.

*An Evangelical Anglican Perspective*

Michael P. Jensen



From the point of view of biblical faith, there is no inherent value in suffering. Like much that is evil in our world, human suffering is a perversion and a disruption of what should be. It has entered the world because of the dislocation of the relationship between human beings and their creator – the good God who purposed his creation for his own delight and that of his creatures. Suffering is an aberration – it has no value for its own sake and is not good in-and-of-itself. Indeed, in the Psalms of the Old Testament, we read some impassioned pleas to God about the absurdity of suffering. But that is not to say that there can be no value in suffering. As renowned British author C.S. Lewis (1996) once wrote: “it is His [God’s] megaphone to rouse a deaf world.” Human suffering is, therefore, a sign that something is not right with things as they stand. Our experience of suffering, whether bodily or mentally, ought to prompt a search for God. Without this the human condition would seem utterly tragic.

At the heart of the New Testament is the story of the terrible suffering and death of Jesus Christ on the cross, a suffering inflicted by corrupt religious leaders and an inept bureaucratic machine. And yet this story of human suffering is significant because it is also the story of God’s action to rescue humankind. The New Testament reads the story of Christ’s suffering in the light of the Hebrew prophet Isaiah’s vision of a ‘suffering servant’ who would redeem his people by bearing the iniquities of the people.

Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. (Isaiah 53:4-5)

Christ’s suffering thereby is regarded as a triumph of healing – not merely because it was a noble example of stoicism in the face of physical pain and personal shame, but because his suffering achieved the reconciliation of human beings to God.

The suffering of Jesus Christ subsequently becomes a pattern for his disciples. The New Testament does not appeal to the apostles to seek out suffering, rather, it depicts suffering as inevitable in a fallen world. The apostle Paul writes in his letter to the Romans:

[B]ut we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us. (Romans 5:3-5)

In writing in this way, Paul is not enjoining Christians to pursue suffering as a good in of itself; but rather describing how suffering, far from being an obstacle to God’s purposes, is actually used by him to achieve what he has planned. Christian

discipleship means giving one's self over to a divine designation, even if that means suffering and death. In the face of the trials and temptations that are an inevitable part of human experience, the Christian life is an offering of one's self up to the providence of God as it is evidenced in the life, death, resurrection, and promised return of Jesus Christ. And this may or may not be a suffering path.

Though some Christians have glorified suffering for its own sake, this is a false trail. Truth and love are the non-negotiables, not pain. In this regard it is noteworthy that the final scene of the Book of Revelation depicts a world from which suffering and mourning and pain have been blessedly eliminated.

Evangelical Christians are certainly of the view that human suffering ought to be prevented and relieved wherever possible assuming that the means of doing so are ethical. It is not accidental that evangelical Christians, along with Christians of other traditions, have frequently been advocates for the development of medicine, palliative, and hospice care of the sick and suffering. As Professor Rodney Stark showed in his book *The Rise of Christianity* (1996), the early Christians were notable for their determination to alleviate the suffering of the sick.

The gospels record many instances of Jesus's work as a healer of disease and disability – and his compassion for the suffering of those so afflicted. The apostles likewise are depicted as restoring physical wholeness to several individuals. And all Christians are called upon to pray for the sick (James 5:14-15). Following these examples, it would be remarkable for a Christian to see the relief and prevention of suffering as undesirable.

But the Bible also warns against all forms of utopianism. The Christian view is that while human ingenuity will lead to the amelioration of the human condition in many respects, suffering of one kind or another is inevitable. This does not, of course, mean that Christians should be so resigned to suffering that they will do nothing to alleviate it. But nor should Christians act on the assumption that suffering is unredeemable and that eliminating suffering is the highest good. For suffering may not always destroy human dignity and may, sometimes, enhance it – for example, when one is able to suffer in the place of, or for the good of, others. As Christians believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, they hold that suffering is not ultimate in human life.

### *An Islamic Perspective*

Abdulaziz Sachedina

For Muslims the Qur'an is a foundational source for their belief system. Accordingly, what the Qur'an says about any religious or ethical issue is regarded as an authentic perspective on Muslim creed. In regards to suffering, an examination of the Qur'an reveals both a 'naturalistic' account of the vulnerability of human life in threatening environments (such as the desert) and a philosophical account of the complex

interaction between the divine and human wills both in relation to the cause and meaning of suffering and its relief.

In the Islamic tradition, the Arabic term *musjiba* which signifies suffering or affliction caused by events that lead to some form of harm or loss (*djarr* or *durr*), is often discussed in the light of Muslim belief about the omnipotent and omniscient God. This same sense that suffering occurs as a consequence of God's permission is captured by the expression, (*idhn*). It is very common, therefore, to express sympathy for a loss or illness by saying: *bi idhni-lla>h* or *bi mashiyyati-lla>h*. That is, "it happened with God's permission" or God's will. However, this statement creates a theological problem because it imputes evil to God. In other words, both the Qur'an and Muslim traditions treat suffering as both an inevitable aspect of human experience, and as a problem of faith or theodicy, as it is ultimately the Almighty Creator who causes evil or suffering.

In some passages the Qur'an clearly identifies that people might sometimes be responsible for their own suffering, experiencing "an affliction for what their own hands have forwarded," (4:63). Other passages suggest that God is omniscient and has the foreknowledge of suffering because "no affliction befalls in the earth or in yourselves, but it is in a Book, before We create it" (57:22). While the majority of Sunni works on theology still make clear that God has decreed and ordained everything, and that nothing, including suffering, could happen either in this world or in the next except through His will, knowledge, decision, decree and writing on the preserved table (*al-lawh al-mafu>z*}), credal statements of God's omniscience are qualified by declarations that the writings are "of a descriptive, not of a decisive nature" (Wensinck, 1965 190).

Recognition of the omniscience of God leads, famously, to the Qur'anic statement that human beings should endure whatever visits them because "no affliction befalls, except it be by the leave of God" (64:11). While, on the one hand, "By the leave of God" - *bi idhni-lla>h* - seems to reinforce a common Muslim cultural attitude of passiveness in the face of afflictions, this attitude (or faith) also generates patience in the face of suffering in the knowledge that this suffering is ordained, is always temporary, and is, in some sense, purposeful. This is made clear in the following verse from the Qur'an:

Surely We will try you with something of fear and hunger, and loss of wealth and possessions, death, and the loss of fruits of your toil. Yet, give glad tidings to those who are patient who, when they are visited by an affliction, say, 'Surely we belong to God, and to Him we return.' Upon those rest blessings and mercy from their Lord, and those are the truly guided. (2:155-57)

But God's creation of, and foreknowledge about, imminent affliction and suffering raises a serious theological (and ethical) challenge for Islam because it appears to contradict God's justice and boundless benevolence. This theological challenge has generally been addressed by Muslim scholars in one of two ways – through reflection on the ontology of evil and the inherent goodness of the world, and/or through reflection upon human suffering as a manifestation of both divine will and human will.

But reconciling the notion that God is good, omnipresent and omnipotent with the existence of suffering, particularly of the innocent, has not been easy in Islam, in part, because the general trend in Muslim piety is to hold human beings accountable for their own suffering and to recommend undertaking righteous acts to rid the world of suffering. For, in Islam, children are not regarded as having any religious or moral responsibility (*mukallaf*) and so cannot be 'punished' for failure to fulfil their obligations. In response, some Muslim scholars have argued that because all God's acts are purposeful, and nothing is in vain, the suffering of children is best understood as a divine sign, a warning for the discerning, or a 'test' for their parents. And because God is benevolent, the 'unmerited' sufferings that children endure will be richly compensated in the hereafter. Even when the general trend in Muslim piety is to hold human beings accountable for their own suffering and to recommend undertaking to do righteous acts to rid the world of suffering, it has been especially difficult to justify the suffering of animals, lesser beings, as an admonition for humans, higher beings. This has led some to conclude that the workings of divine justice, and particularly the suffering of the innocent, are simply beyond human comprehension (Ormsby, 1984).

The theological difficulty that the existence of suffering has created for Islam is reflected in different views regarding both how suffering should be experienced and how it should be responded to. There are, for example, Muslim traditions that encourage acceptance of suffering on the grounds that suffering is divinely ordained. Other traditions advocate confronting suffering in all its forms. Those traditions that emphasise the divine 'purpose' of suffering have, in some Muslim communities, encouraged scepticism of both curative and palliative medicine on the grounds that illness might be a form of divine mercy intended to expiate a believer's sins, and that God is the only healer in whom true believers should place their trust. According to one tradition, for example, the Prophet is reported to have said: "No fatigue, nor disease, nor sorrow, nor sadness, nor hurt, nor distress befalls a Muslim, even if it were the prick he received from a thorn, but that God expiates some of his sins for that" (*Sahih al-Bukhari*, Book 70, Number 545). Similarly, this tradition reports the Prophet explaining that illness has a religious purpose and that through the experience of illness or suffering a patient might earn merit and attain the status of a true believer. "When God intends to do good to somebody, He afflicts him with trials" (*Sahih al-Bukhari*, Book 70, Number 548).

*As}abahu bi maradin* – "He (i.e. God) afflicted him with disease" (or "rendered him diseased") like its converse, *as}abahu bi s}ih}atin* – "He rendered him healthy", is a common expression of God's work in everyday life in Muslim culture. Thus, in a Muslim thanksgiving prayer, as well as praising and thanking God for all blessings a believer affirms: "To You [o God] belongs praise for all the good affliction (*bala><sup>in</sup> h}asan<sup>in</sup>*) with which You have inured me" (Qummi, 2002). The characterization of affliction as 'good' in the above prayer indicates that suffering as such does not create a theoretical problem in Islam. Rather, it is treated in direct terms as part of the divine plan for humanity. When it occurs it is identified and its impact is reversed by the education and the discipline of a person in a true affirmation and submission to the will of God (*isla>m*).

Muslim traditions also regard illness as an affliction that needs to be cured by every possible legitimate means, and accept that there is 'good' in taking steps to relieve suffering. Indeed, in these traditions, the very purpose of medicine – to seek cures, to relieve suffering, and to provide care to those afflicted by disease – has a divine foundation, reflecting a promise that "There is no disease that God has created, except that He has also created its treatment" (*Sahih al-Bukhari*, Book 71, Number 582). Importantly, while both the Qur'an and Muslim tradition provide the source for reflections upon the meaning of suffering, a vast number of Muslim traditions function not as expositions on suffering but as prophetic directives about the proper etiquette in dealing with illness and when visiting the sick and bereaved. These describe how the community should seek to emulate the Prophet in regards the respect owed to the ill, the provision of care to those made vulnerable by illness, and the way to speak to those who are sick, suffering or dying. In one tradition, for example, it is related that when a person fell ill, the Prophet used to rub him with his right hand and then pray to God saying: "O Lord of the people, grant him health, heal him, for Thou art a Great Healer" (*Sahih Muslim*, Book 26, Number 5432). Ultimately, therefore, while suffering creates a theological challenge for Islam, the Qur'an and Muslim traditions interpret suffering as a concrete human experience, as an unavoidable aspect of human existence, and as something that should, appropriately, be the focus of care and medical attention.

### *A Hindu Perspective*

Deepak Sarma

Hinduism is a relatively modern term and taxonomic category used to encompass many of the ritual, textual, and philosophical traditions and practices that trace their origins to India. While the diversity of Hinduism makes it problematic to claim that it has one unifying doctrine, it is possible to claim that all Hindu traditions and practices presuppose the mechanism of *karma*, that one's actions in earlier lives affect both one's rebirth and the events that are to occur in one's future lives. One accumulates some combination of *puṇya* (meritorious *karma*) and *pāpa* (demeritorious *karma*) – popularly rendered in the West as 'good' and 'bad' *karma* – and is born again and again in *saṃsāra* (the cycle of worldly existence).

One manifests one's *prārabdha* (latent) *karma* over time. That is, an individual's accumulated *karma*, both *puṇya* and *pāpa*, manifests itself until it is depleted or until more is accrued. This manifestation can occur in one lifetime, or over future ones, when one is reborn in *saṃsāra*. Hindus seek to end this seemingly endless cycle and to attain *mokṣa*, the state that sentient beings enter after being liberated from *saṃsāra*, the cycle, a state that is certainly without suffering. Suffering is thus inextricably linked to the consequences of actions. In this way, *saṃsāra* is unavoidably pervaded by some degree of suffering.

According to this mechanism of causality, agents human and non-human, are directly responsible for the suffering (physical, mental, spiritual, existential, and so on) that they are experiencing. While they may act in ways to mitigate this suffering,

both in the immediate and in the long term (over future lives), there is a degree to which Hindus accept, and even embrace, its inevitability.

In the medical context, such an etiology can mean that some Hindus would welcome suffering rather than try to alleviate it. Palliative care, for example, may not be desirable if the Hindu believes that her/his suffering is the expression and manifestation of *pāpa* (demeritorious) *karma*. A Hindu might believe that relieving suffering will merely delay the manifestation of *pāpa karma* and that seeking to relieve suffering could even incur more *pāpa* and prolong or intensify the inescapable.

This pattern is modified when it is tied with the requirement or desire to propitiate a god or goddess. Suffering, in this case, can be understood as a test of faith or as a means for gaining knowledge. Vaiṣṇavites (devotees of Viṣṇu), for example, may perceive suffering as a means by which one can increase *bhakti* (devotion) to the god Viṣṇu. Madhvācārya, the founder of a 13<sup>th</sup> century Vaiṣṇava tradition, held that suffering made one aware of one's utter dependence upon Viṣṇu, and that this knowledge amplified one's *bhakti* and hastened one's attainment of *mokṣa*.

In some theistic models devotees are concurrently rewarded or punished if they propitiate a god or goddess who can alleviate or penalise someone with suffering. Śītalā-devī, the smallpox goddess, is simultaneously benevolent and dangerous: she can protect and infect, bless and curse, devotees with smallpox and other diseases. Persons scarred by smallpox are believed to have been graced by her. Yet she is propitiated so that she does not inflict her *prasāda* (grace) upon her worshippers. In this case suffering is directly a result of, and explicable by, the actions of the agent.

In other traditions of Hinduism, such as the one deriving from Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtras*, suffering is an unwanted product of an attachment to the body and other material things and it is only when detached from one's body that suffering will end and *mokṣa* attained. Physical and cognitive practices (the *aṣṭāṅga* (eight limbs) of Yoga, for example) are prescribed in order to achieve this detachment, escape the cycle of *saṃsāra*, and end suffering.

In all of these cases suffering is a consequence of past actions, and the resultant *karma*, both *puṇya* and *pāpa*. But Hinduism does not advance a form of fatalism, or argue that Hindu's lives are predestined, rather, that people are always accountable and that sufferers must accept that they are responsible for their current situation, even if the actions that led up to it are beyond their range of knowledge or perception and are merely inferred.

So what is the place of modern allopathic medicine given the Hindu interpretation of suffering? Is the relief of suffering via palliative care, anaesthesia, pharmacology, psychology, and psychiatry acceptable?

While some Hindus accept suffering as essential to *saṃsāra* they are not, in principle, against attempting to alleviate it, as long as the adherent is aware of and accepts the mundane nature and the possibility that relief of suffering may have

long-term consequences (delayed or increased *pāpa*). A Hindu may also regard suffering as preventing or hindering other activities that facilitate or expedite one's attempt to attain *mokṣa*. A devotee, for example, with osteoarthritis of the knee, might justify using medication so that s/he can walk to a nearby temple to worship. But this suffering is only temporary and has no direct effect on the suffering brought about by birth in *saṃsāra*. Modern allopathic medicine, then, is permitted to relieve suffering on the assumption that it does so within a limited, mundane, and worldly, context.

## Discussion

The perspectives reveal the central and enduring role that suffering plays in the religious traditions presented here. In each, it is seen as an inevitable and inalienable part of corporeal existence. It is experienced by individuals and by collectives and the suffering of one person impacts those around them, their families, and their communities. In each faith tradition suffering tends to be regarded as a disruption or disharmony – of the body, of the self, and, in South Asian traditions, of cosmological order.

In some perspectives, pain and suffering are clearly distinguished, while others adopt a broader view that includes physical and mental pain, loss, desire, and the spiritual or existential suffering which is considered an indelible part of all sentient beings. Contextualising doctrines such as *karma* and *dukkha* provide the means for distinguishing types of suffering, as do the scriptures; but equally important is a person's own awareness of suffering and its causes.

Each tradition also distinguishes between causes of suffering. In all of the faith traditions suffering may be understood as a manifestation of decline and disease. But, unlike biomedical understandings of suffering, religious understandings of suffering are not simply a consequence of pathology. Faith traditions, however, are concerned with moral rather than with simply causal responsibility for suffering. The issue of causality, therefore, is inflected with moral significance. Thus, the perspectives can be characterised in terms of whether they hold the sufferer ultimately responsible for his or her own suffering, only sometimes responsible, or whether ultimate responsibility is attached to a deity – the latter giving rise to the problem of theodicy. For the Abrahamic faith traditions suffering may be a consequence of external 'evils' – poverty, injustice, tyranny, fear, hatred, and distrust – some of which may be impossible to comprehend but all of which must be responded to. While for South Asian traditions, suffering may, because of the central significance of *karma*, occur as a consequence of one's own actions and choices.

Each faith tradition also places value on suffering. But although both the Catholic and Hindu traditions suggest that there may be something lost in extinguishing any possibility of suffering – none of the perspectives claim that suffering has intrinsic value, and both the Buddhist and Evangelical Anglican perspectives argue that suffering has no intrinsic value. It is not a good in and of

itself; it is not something to be sought. Rather, it has instrumental value. Exactly what may be gained through the experience of suffering, however, differs between the faith traditions. Within the Catholic tradition suffering may have value because through experience of suffering Christians may share Christ's redemptive work. Within the Jewish, Catholic, and Evangelical Anglican traditions suffering is inscribed with value primarily through the way(s) that both those inflicted and those around them respond to the challenge of suffering. For the individual, suffering can provoke a search for meaning and for God, can test faith, can cultivate virtue, and can enhance human dignity, while for the community it may demand a compassionate response and provide the possibility for solidarity of faith.

Within the South Asian traditions, suffering has value because it provides an opportunity for reflection upon one's actions, one's very existence, and the possibility of liberation. It is something to be endured, understood, and interrogated as to its cause as this may provide an insight into the human condition. Suffering acts as a conduit between the 'this-worldly' and the 'other-worldly'; between self and other; between the realm of experience and the realm of possibility. Thus, its greatest value may be that it facilitates the search for relations of meaning by which persons seek to respond to the challenges of individual and collective vulnerability, injustice, and uncertainty. And like the Abrahamic faith traditions – within Hindu and Buddhist traditions suffering may also have social value as it may generate compassion for the suffering of others and a determination to relieve suffering where it exists.

The extent to which suffering can be embraced by persons as a meaningful – and more importantly, as a spiritual or transformative experience – varies according to the individual perspectives in accordance with these two positions. In the Jewish commentary, suffering is clearly not considered a meaningful experience in the sense of spiritual transformation, but presents itself as a form of spiritual void. The meaning of suffering is 'unresolved'. Suffering's unintelligibility is also a feature of the Christian perspectives, and yet they, like the Islamic, Buddhist and Hindu perspectives, place clear emphasis on a person's ability to accept and even embrace suffering as a meaningful experience – at the end of life, as a test of faith, or as a product of one's own creation. The need to render suffering a meaningful experience becomes a way of responding to the void; of overcoming the injustices and contingency of the world. The Catholic and Islamic perspectives also suggest that the meaning of suffering is sometimes incomprehensible to us (for example, the suffering of innocents). Yet, in each of the faith traditions suffering is not desirable. It is not how things are meant to be.

Importantly, while the question of suffering is often assumed to be a major theological preoccupation for Abrahamic religions this was not the case in any of our perspectives. In the Jewish, Roman Catholic, and Islamic perspectives, the conventional formulation of the existence of suffering in terms of theodicy – the existence of suffering in the face of a loving, just, and powerful God is raised, but in each case, dismissed. While the Jewish commentary concludes that suffering is more a practical and ethical challenge than a theological one, our Islamic commentary more clearly takes up the challenge of what is often referred to as the Epicurean



paradox which seeks to reconcile the problem of suffering in the face of a loving, just, and powerful God. While the Islamic commentary notes the diverse, often contradictory interpretations and responses that this question invites, ultimately it concludes that the proper response to suffering is an act of prayer and piety rather than a rational critique of the existence of God. For the South Asian traditions – unsurprisingly, as they do not presuppose the existence of God – suffering poses no theological threat. In these traditions, the causes of suffering are attributed to a person's actions, and in particular, those created by the workings of the human mind. Suffering, then, becomes a practical problem by which persons seek to recognise and eliminate it through recourse to appropriate action.

While each of our perspectives give different weight to the bearing, witnessing, preventing and healing of suffering, they are unequivocal in their view that suffering should be alleviated and that medicine's proper role is to prevent and relieve suffering by ethical means. While the Evangelical Anglican commentary warns against the assumption that suffering inevitably erodes human dignity and that the relief of suffering is the 'highest good', and the Hindu commentary suggests that the relief of suffering may not be appropriate if suffering is the result of demeritorious karma, in general terms faith traditions appear to place few restrictions upon medical treatments.

So is there anything that medicine and bioethics can learn from religious accounts of suffering? We believe that there is. Indeed, we believe it is imperative that both medicine and bioethics listen to religious accounts of suffering because suffering is at once a medical, conceptual, cultural, and social phenomenon – all of which rightfully should concern medicine and bioethics. But above all, suffering is a practical problem. The value of religious accounts for medicine, therefore, is to help patients and medical practitioners recover the context of meaning for medical interventions and to develop communal responses for dealing with the ill and suffering (Hauerwas, 1991 ). While there are few parts of life that have escaped the medical gaze – perhaps it is in relation to suffering that medicine must be most humble. For as each of our perspectives suggest – suffering may demand both medical intervention and considered reflection. And while the former lies within medical practice – the latter is in the domain of stories, relationships, and, for some, faith. As such, it is crucial that physicians invite discussion about the goals of treatment, are aware of the faith traditions of patients and know something about how those faith traditions view suffering, and can understand that suffering is not simply a problem of physiology, pharmacology and medical science.

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