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Religious Perspectives on Suffering and Evil and Peace-Experience

One of the common moral concerns of the world's religious traditions is the question of justice. Problems of justice arise in relations between individuals, groups and nations; but they are also experienced more fundamentally in the disparity between what the faithful expect to receive and what they actually undergo at the hands of fate or God or the universe. Evil and suffering pose questions for believers which at their core are issues of universal or divine justice, and the student of religion finds that this issue deserves more attention than almost any other.

It is a major task then, to examine the response to suffering of each religious tradition from within its own territory. Beyond that, comparisons and assessments among traditions are inevitable and desirable, though the resources required and the dangers involved may be considerable. This paper attempts a contribution to comparison, not by offering a detailed assessment of the variety of religious responses to suffering, but instead by proposing a *schema* in which to fit *types* of responses. The emphases are important. Much is excluded by this approach, which is so far from complete that only five major traditions are discussed. But, by mapping out a system of possible explanations of and responses to evil, the paper exposes the centrality of the problem of suffering in religion and endeavours to make the comparative enterprise more intelligible. Further, although its schema deals in abstracted types of response, it tries to connect with religious realities in such a way that believers may emphasize, combine and refine its elements to demonstrate the complexities of their own traditions.

This paper suggests five explanatory attitudes towards evil and suffering (for no good reason than that they all begin with the same letter): retribution, reincarnation, resignation, return, and resurrection. Some of these responses are closely identified with one particular

tradition, but that is not the point of the exercise. Rather, the schema demonstrates how different traditions may be associated with the same *kind* of response, though sometimes from different perspectives.

Suffering and Retribution

Suffering is a problem. Physical pain can be sometimes justified by its usefulness in warning us of disease or danger. Leprosy and diabetes have serious side effects when they interfere with nerve endings, especially in toes and fingers, so that cuts or bruises are left to fester. But prolonged pain, and the distress and anguish which wears away at our humanity, are not good. Suffering is an evil which cries out for some kind of explanation or justification.

Perhaps the most natural explanation is the one which links suffering and *retribution*. It is true that on occasion we suffer pain because we deserve it: think of the unpleasantness of overindulgence or the hurt of a truly guilty conscience. There are plausible psychological reasons for thinking it natural to associate pain and desert: when we were children we had the pain of punishment explained by our wrongdoing; and morally sensitive people of all ages, when they realize that they have hurt others, want somehow to make it up by paying in some fashion for the wrong. Furthermore, our common moral sense requires that wrongdoers be brought to justice: there is something wrong with a world in which crime pays more than honest toil, where the evil enjoy their prosperity at the expense of the poor and are not punished. So the world's religions often assert that at least some suffering is punishment for sin, as a sample of texts will show.[1]

From Judaism:

> "Take good care not to be led astray in your hearts nor to turn aside and serve other gods and prostrate yourselves to them, or the Lord will become angry with you; he will shut up the skies and there will be no rain, your ground will not yield its harvest, and you will soon vanish from the rich land which the Lord is giving you." (Deut. 11:16-17)

1. Quotations from the Bible are from the *New English Bible;* the Quranic translations are from A. J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted* (Oxford University Press, 1964); and the Indian proverb is quoted in H. H. Rowley, *Submission in Suffering* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1951), p. 3.

From Christianity:

> "For we see divine retribution revealed from heaven and falling upon the godless wickedness of men." (Romans 1:18)
>
> "Make no mistake about this: God is not to be fooled; a man reaps what he sows" (Galatians 6:7)

From Islam (of Pharaoh and the Egyptians)

> "So, when they had angered Us, We took
> vengeance on them, and We drowned them
> all together;
> and We made them a thing past, and
> We appointed them for an example
> to later folk." (*sūrat al-zukhrūf* (43:55)

An Indian proverb:

> "Who plants mangoes, mangoes shall he eat; who plants thorn-bushes, thorns shall wound his feet."

Nevertheless, there remains a huge gap between "*Sometimes* suffering is deserved" and "*All* suffering is retribution for wrongdoing." It takes little effort to think of people whose pain seems utterly unrelated to any of their misdeeds. The so-called 'natural' evils of the world (that is, evils inflicted by the workings of the natural order as distinct from any social or personal causes such as disease or famine or earthquake fall indiscriminately on whole populations without apparent regard for individual desert. What then would make it even remotely plausible for a religion to claim that what might appear as innocent suffering is really suffering which is deserved?

Let me offer two different routes towards the belief that suffering is retribution even when it does not seem that way. They may not be entirely successful, but they will aid our understanding of religious perspectives on evil. The first depends on viewing the world as the creation of a righteous God who takes an active interest in the affairs of his creatures. Since he is himself the pattern of all goodness as well as the creator who is in complete control, his wishes are to be obeyed: in fact, in following out his commands human beings will discover true fulfillment. Not to obey, therefore, is serious business. To do wrong, to commit evil deeds, is not simply to contravene accepted social norms

or to hurt other people; it is at the most fundamental level to transgress against the will of the supreme moral authority. Evil actions and intentions are thus *sins*, contraventions of the Holy Will; and sins may be committed in the heart as well as in society. With such an understanding of sin, common to the Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions, it is easy to see that the lines of guilt and innocence are often difficult to draw. Those who appear righteous may not be, in their hearts, guiltless of sin: so who is to say when they suffer that they cannot deserve it? And given a God in control of his universe, who is to say that famine or plague is not his punishment against personal or societal sin?

Nevertheless such suspicions of guilt conflict with other deeply held moral and religious beliefs—such beliefs as that no one ought to be punished if they are not guilty; that guilt involves responsibility for one's actions; that the amount of punishment should bear some relation to the gravity of the offence; that the justice of God is redemptive, not cruel. This conflict of beliefs means that there will be tensions within the equation of suffering and retribution: and in fact it would be wrong to imply that the major theistic traditions regard *all* suffering as guilty suffering. We need look no further than the story of Job to see Judaism struggling with the meaning of an innocent man's suffering—a man so little deserving of punishment that both God and Satan agree on his blameless character. Ever since that book, Job has remained the archetype of the religious sufferer; and the traditions have also acknowledged the problem of disproportionate suffering on the part of those who, if not entirely guiltless, still do not deserve what they get. John Bowker reminds us that Islam recognizes the problem of innocent suffering. "The Quran warns the faithful not to make the mistake of Job's friends and to assume that where they see suffering there also they see sin."[2] Or as the Quran itself has it,

> "There is no fault in the blind, and there is
> no fault in the lame, and there is no fault
> in the sick . . ." (*sūrat al-nūr* (24:60)

2. John Bowker, *Problems of Suffering in Religions of the World* (Cambridge University Press, 1970), p. 109.

To speak of the blind is to remember that Jesus specifically repudiated a strong retributive theory of suffering in claiming that a man born blind was not punished for sin, either his own or his parents' (John 9: 3); he also refused to attribute the fates of slaughtered Galileans or the eighteen killed by a falling tower in Siloam to their peculiar sinfulness (Luke 13: 1-5). And surely the testament of evil perpetrated on the innocent in our own day provides poignant example. As Emil Fackenheim writes of Jews in the Holocaust:[3] "Not a single one of the six million died because they had failed to keep the divine-Jewish covenant: they all died because their great-grandparents *had* kept it, if only to the minimum extent of raising Jewish children. Here is the point where we reach radical religious absurdity. Here is the rock on which the 'for our sins we are punished' suffers total shipwreck". Retribution, then, is only part of the story of suffering in spite of the caution we must exercise in proclaiming our individual and collective innocence.

This linking of retribution with suffering depends on theistic assumptions, but there is another route to the belief that suffering is retribution even when it does not seem that way. Think of the moral law, not as an expression of God's will, but rather as something akin to a natural law, where certain causes have certain invariable effects. Remember the mangoes and thorn-bushes: if you perform a particular kind of deed, a particular kind of consequence will inevitably follow. Stub your foot against a rock and you will feel pain; mistreat your children and you will pay for it. For the Hindu, this is the working out of *karma*. Radhakrishnan explains it this way:

> "The law of karma is the counter-part in the moral world of the physical law of uniformity.... According to the principle of karma, there is nothing uncertain or capricious in the moral world. We reap what we sow. The good seed brings a harvest of good, the evil of evil. Every little action has its effect on character.... We cannot arrest the process of moral evolution any more than we can stay the sweep of the tides or the course of the stars. The attempt to overleap the law of *karma* is as futile as the attempt

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3. Emil Fackenheim, *God's Presence in History* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), p. 73.

to leap over one's shadow. It is the psychological principle that our life carries within it a record that time cannot blur or death erase."[4]

This way of seeing the retribution of suffering is indeed different from the first. For here there is no active Punisher who inflicts pain when it is deserved, and this alters the notion of retribution itself. The emphasis is not so much on punishment, as on the inevitability of consequences. There cannot be a real question about justifying amounts of suffering: if you suffer this much, there has to be some cause in your past great enough to bring about its effect. Why you should enjoy good health while your brother or sister does not may be a mystery—but still there is some reason for this in your respective physical constitutions even if you cannot quite figure it out. Likewise, it is a mystery why some people experience great suffering and anguish in their lives while others live relatively free from misery; nevertheless there must be a reason for such differences in their respective *karmas*. No one can claim immunity from suffering on the ground of innocence.

Now faced with this way of relating suffering and retribution, a questioner may be tempted to raise the problem of innocent suffering. Do not the innocent reap what they never would have wanted to sow? Is not a universe which works out such *karma* on them an unjust universe?

The answer requires another Hindu doctrine: *samsara*, the wheel of rebirth. We have, it will be said, construed the problem too narrowly by focussing on only one moment in the long story of what it is to live. If we try to discover justice within the span of this individual life as we know it, our attempt will be frustrated—just as we will never successfully explain cocoons if we refuse to have anything to do with caterpillars and butterflies. Suppose that the life of a miserable infant, lived out among so much evil, is not simply the life of that child, but is instead a new form of a life that had been lived a few decades previously in sin and crime: then just as genetic defects are transmitted from parent to child, so the moral defects of a previous life have their karmic consequences in the present sufferings of an individual who

4. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philsophy* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1923), Vol. I, p. 244f.

only *seems* innocent. So the doctrine of *samsara,* the cycle of birth, death and rebirth, is not simply a statement about what is believed to happen to souls or spirits over stretches of time. It is better appreciated (at least for the purposes of this schema) as a claim about the nature of an individual, and a claim about the limits of our knowledge about the causes of suffering. Every bit of suffering, as far as we know, might be karmic retribution for the long past history of this individual whose present manifestation is only one dimly glimpsed aspect of its total existence.

This way of viewing all suffering as a kind of natural retribution avoids the problem of the first route—the question of the justice of a holy God who would punish the innocent. Those of philosophical bent in the Western tradition will ask what meaning may be given to the idea of personal continuity and identity where the same individual can assume so many different identities. Many will feel their ordinary notions of responsibility stretched by the doctrines of *karma* and *samsara,* wondering at the justice of a universe which works out its consequences on people who have no knowledge of what they were supposed to have done. In this view there is no one to call to account, no one to blame with any certainty. And that leads to a final worry: does not the very notion of karmic retribution lead to a passivity in the face of evil and suffering? Is mute acceptance the only response to evil? To answer, we need to make another move in the schema—though not a large move, for we have been gradually working over to this next topic.

Suffering and Reincarnation

To this point we have seen how a doctrine of rebirth might explain karmic retribution, but we need now to enquire further into the nature of the subject; who is caught up in the wheel of successive existences? To use the word 'reincarnation' is to evoke the image of something or other being placed in, or occupying, a series of fleshly bodies; and for Westerners it is natural to think of souls or spirits as being these incarnated things. Moreover, there is a strong current of belief in Western culture that personal souls, including the divine Spirit who creates them, are fundamental realities; they interact with material bodies and with the physical world which is real because it also is created by God. So reincarnation becomes the belief that these two kinds of realities are conjoined in temporal sequences.

But that is not the only perspective possible. To appreciate the issue of suffering and reincarnation in the Hindu tradition, we must turn to the notions of *Brahman* and *Atman*—of absolute or ultimate reality, and the self. Originally *Brahman* had to do with holy power or sound; but it came to mean the enduring and ultimate single reality which lies behind all appearances. The distinction between an apparent pool of water ahead on the shimmering road, and the reality of just more hot highway when we get there, is familiar: our eyes have been tricked by an illusion or mirage. Suppose, though, that *everything* we see or experience through the senses is only an appearance of something more ultimate. If that is so, perhaps we can learn not to be tricked into accepting the surface account as the real story. This is especially important when it comes to the suffering soul—or as it is better put, *Atman*, the self.

We may invoke some familiar Hindu pictures of the relation between the self and ultimate reality. The salt, which looks different from water, cannot be distinguished from it once it is dissolved. Then the salt is here, but also up here, and down there too. The nectar of one flower is not the nectar of another flower: but made in to honey, all nectars are each other. So it is with the self. You may think of your soul as a piece of salt, a drop of nectar—but that is to be taken in by a kind of mirage or illusion. In fact, *Atman* is *Brahman*. You, the self, the ultimate or absolute—all is the same. So you are not this experience or that piece of consciousness, not this body or even that soul among many others. These are mere illusions, *maya*. And this realization holds great significance for the problem of suffering. Suffering too, as an aspect of particular experiences, belongs to that kingdom of mirage and illusion. To say suffering is part of *maya* is not to deny that people *feel* distress or sorrow: people do feel their suffering in the same way as the hot road does look wet. Nevertheless we can learn not to be taken in. Dissolve the duality between you and the ultimate, and there is no separate subject to undergo suffering. As one of the Upanishads puts it:

> "Where everything has become just one's own self, by what and whom should one see, by what and whom should one smell, by what and whom should one taste, by what and to whom should one speak, by what and whom should one hear, by what and of whom should one think, by what and whom should one touch,

by what and whom should one know? By what should one know him by whom all this is known? That self (is to be described as) not this, not this. He is incomprehensible for he cannot be comprehended. He is indestructible for he cannot be destroyed. He is unattached for he does not attach himself. He is unfettered, he does not suffer, he is not injured. Indeed, by what would one know the knower?"[5]

This perspective on the self contains an answer, then, to the question raised at the end of the last section, over the passivity that a doctrine of karmic retribution might engender or reinforce. Suffering is not to be accepted blindly or endured mutely, for there is a form of release possible. This release (*moksha*) comes through the insight into the true relation between the self and reality. Just as there is no final judge or punisher other than *karma* itself, so there is no external saviour or redeemer other than the realization from within that *Atman* is *Brahman*. This is not the place to discuss the various paths by which this release and realization is to be attained: it may come through discipline, exercises, meditation, contemplation, or mystical experience, through devotion or worship. And of course the sketch has only been schematic and much simplified. But, as John Bowker has it, the basic pattern in Hinduism is that "suffering belongs to the world of *maya* and *samsara*, and that by seeing the relativity of suffering an individual is able to progress on the way of *moksha*—there is, therefore, a considerable emphasis on asceticism as a practical way of getting suffering in its right perspective."[6]

It will not have escaped attention that, while this place of exploration in the schema is called suffering and *reincarnation*, I have discussed the self and its release from suffering. That is not entirely accidental. We came to this topic because a purely retributive theory of suffering is somehow ultimately unsatisfactory. Even if one believes in a law of *karma* and a cycle of rebirths, it is difficult to abandon hope, to accept evil as an unchangeable constituent of the universe. So I suggest that the doctrine of reincarnation provides a framework not only to explain the present by the past (one suffers now because of one's *karma*)

5. *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* IV. 5. 15 (trans. Radhakrishnan), quoted in Bowker, p. 211f.
6. *Problems of Suffering*, p. 197.

but also to furnish hope for the future. The release of enlightenment may be remote: but perhaps the appropriate discipline or devotion will improve one's future state, and eventually release may come—if not in this life, then in the next life or perhaps the next. Paradoxically, then, reincarnaton is the series of stages of which *karma* is worked out, but also the necessary ground for any future release—a release which would overcome both *karma* and the cycle of rebirths itself. So the role of reincarnation in the Hindu explanation of suffering is a crucial one.

It also plays a part—if we can make another move within the same territory—in Buddhism, though here the role is less positive. Rebirth may be invoked to explain some retributive suffering, as in Hinduism. Nevertheless, the Buddhist goal is a different escape from rebirth, because it is built upon a different understanding of the self. To put it briefly, in Buddhist doctrine there is no 'self' to be reborn, and there is no eternal *Atman* to be identified with the self. That does not mean that you are nothing at all. But what you are is not an enduring soul or spirit which undergoes a variety of experiences; instead human beings (and indeed all things) are complexes in a flux of change. By stressing that we are bundles or heaps or aggregates, Buddhism emphasizes our lack of stability: and this applies not simply to our bodies, which are bundles of matter to be dissolved into their constituents, but also to our sensations and perceptions and impulses and bits of consciousness. The self is just these five *skandhas* or heaps. At death our bundles fall apart, but from them, as effect from cause, comes another life. The world is made up, then, of a flowing series of events. Rather than a self which persists through a rotating wheel of rebirths (a self which is the ultimately real), there is an aggregated self-bundle which disintegrates but which brings about the aggregation of another self-bundle, and so on. The Buddhist metaphor is perhaps the best explanation:

> "The King said: 'Revered Nagasena, does that which does not pass over reconnect?'
> 'Yes, sire, that which does not pass over reconnects.'
> 'How, revered Nagasena . . . ? Make a simile.'
> 'Suppose, sire, some man were to light a lamp from (another) lamp; would that lamp, sire, pass over from that (other) lamp?"[7]

7. *Milindapanha* 71 (trans. Horner), quoted in Bowker, p. 248.

The flame which is passed from one candle to the next candle is not the same flame (for what persists over time in a flame?); nevertheless this flame is the cause of the next flame.

This means that 'reincarnation' is not really the proper term for this perspective on what we misleadingly call the 'self' in the stream of events; even the word 'rebirth' is problematic, though it can be used to convey the notion of a causal relation between this dissolving life and the one that is, so to speak, born from it. Given this understanding of human life, it is possible to appreciate the Buddhist claim that our major problem is an unfounded and inappropriate cherishing of our own identities. We find ourselves positing the existence of our own stable inner core, and hoping desparately that we are enduring substances. As long as we cling to this egoistic folly we will remain caught in the stream of birth, death, rebirth. We will never overcome suffering in this way, for in cherishing the notion of our own self we make it possible for that self to suffer. Suffering is to be explained not primarily by retribution (though there may be causal connections between the past and one's present condition): nor is it to be placed in a context of reincarnation. It is better approached from the third position in the schema: resignation.

Suffering and Resignation

Among all major religions, it is Buddhism which places suffering at the core of its attention. The story of the Buddha himself stresses this: it was his recognition of the ills of old age, disease and death which caused him to renounce the world. And it is suffering—its existence, its origin, its overcoming—which provokes and shapes the Four Noble Truths:

> "The Noble Truth of suffering is this: Birth is suffering; ageing is suffering; sickness is suffering; death is suffering; sorrow and lamentation, pain, grief and despair are suffering; association with the unpleasant is suffering; dissociation from the pleasant is suffering; not to get what one wants is suffering—in brief, the five aggregates of attachment are suffering.
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> The Noble Truth of the origin of suffering is this: It is this thirst (Craving) which produces re-existence and re-becoming, bound up

with passionate greed. It finds fresh delight now here and now there, namely, thirst for sense-pleasures; thirst for existence and becoming; and thirst for non-existence (self-annihilation).

The Noble Truth of the Cessation of suffering is this: It is the complete cessation of that very thirst, giving it up, renouncing it, emancipating oneself from it, detaching oneself from it.

The Noble Truth of the Path leading to the Cessation of suffering is this: It is simply the Noble Eightfold Path, namely, right view; right thought; right speech; right action; right livelihood; right effort; right mindfulness; right concentration."[8]

Perhaps we should pause a moment over this idea of suffering: *dukkha* is the Buddhist term for it. It is a general term embracing frustration, pain, displeasure, grief—in fact, all of the facets of what we call human experience and what is referred to in the First Noble Truth as the five aggregates—the complexity-in-flux of our lives. But *dukkha* is not sin, the transgression of a holy Divine Will; nor is it exactly the outworking of a universal impersonal principle of *karma*. As Ninian Smart explains, for the Buddha *karma* is psychological: "men's bondage to rebirth is in a sense their own doing, for it arises from their attitudes and desires."[9] If birth, death, and all other experiences are suffering, that is because the unenlightened have not come to understand *why* we suffer, and they have not entered into resignation.

We suffer, as the Second Noble Truth tells us, because of our craving and thirst. So the solution is, on one level, obvious: we must cease our craving, renounce our thirst. At another level, that solution is not easy at all. We would much rather replace one craving by another, juggling our desires so that all of them do not fall into disappointment at the same time. That, however, is more and more activity, not resignation. We must begin on the path towards the cessation of all desire with right views, listening to the Buddha:

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8. *Samyutta-nikaya* LVI. 11 (trans. Rahula), quoted in Bowker, p. 239f.

9. Ninian Smart, *The Religious Experience of Mankind* (New York Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969), p. 81.

> "Let the past be what it has been, let the future be what it will be, I will teach you *dharma*: if this is, that becomes; from the arising of this, that arises; if this is not, that does not come to be; from the ceasing of this, that ceases."[10]

And as we walk the Eightfold path, we will go in the direction of Nirvana—where everything ceases, where the fluttering light goes out, the restless flux is stilled. To contemplate that absence of *dukkha* is neither to be a perceiving self nor to be unconscious nothingness; it is to overcome suffering by resigning all the interests of the self, resigning even our hold on selfhood itself. Where I am not, I cannot be harmed or hurt; where I am not, there will arise no desire which can be frustrated.

Now this is radical resignation. To minimize needs and desires through discipline is one thing; to eliminate them by voiding the very self is quite another. There is something admirable in this perspective, something fascinating in the mystical experience of the loss of self, something noble in those *Bodhisattvas* who turn back from the threshold of Nirvana to aid others on the path. Nevertheless, some will feel the resignation *too* radical, curing the disease by killing the patient,[11] and some will find themselves with the old question about the justice of a universe which lays such a burden upon each individual for his or her own suffering. Perhaps, then, this is the time to turn our attention in another direction while remaining at this place called 'resignation' in this schema.

For there is another way to think about resignation and suffering. I have in mind *submission* as distinct from the cessation of all desire. To submit is not necessarily to abandon every last one of your interests and your very self; it is to accept without struggle, without fighting back. Having made a realistic assessment of their condition, the submissive bear their lot in life in quiet acceptance without raising a fist to heaven. They have a kind of grace about them. Others, of course, are merely resigned, and let those around them know that a little too often. And sadly, some surrender too easily, paying out their very dignity as the price of their weary truce with evil.

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10. *Majjhima-nikaya* ii. 32 (trans. Chalmers), quoted in Bowker, p. 257.

11. This is Alan Berger's image: "Evil and Suffering", in T.W. Hall ed., *Introduction to the Study of Religion* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978), p. 191.

In religious perspective, submission is often seen not as an acceptance of what fate hands out, but rather as the conforming of one's will to the Divine Will. It is a surrender to God. Such submission lies at the heart of a theistic religious tradition of which only a little has thus far been said: Islam. This returns us to our earlier pitcure of the world as the creation of an almighty, holy Will; and it adds the conviction that the purposes of God are sovereign even in the affairs of human beings. His power is supreme, and his intentions beyond frustration by the petty designs of his creatures. So comes the oft-repeated line of the Quran: truly, you have power over every single thing.

> "Say: 'O God, Master of the Kingdom,
> Thou givest the Kingdom to whom Thou wilt,
> and seizest the kingdom from whom Thou wilt,
> Thou exaltest whom Thou wilt, and Thou
> abasest whom Thou wilt; in Thy hand
> is the good; Thou art powerful
> over everything.' " (*sūrāh Āl ᶜImrān* (3): 25)

Accordingly, what God asks of his creatures is trust. Since human minds are notoriously limited, it would be folly—indeed a great sin—to question God's justice. The wicked seem to prosper and the innocent to suffer. But God has his reasons, and since he is just everything will come out right at last. Not to believe this is to deny the faith itself, and indeed the very meaning of Islam. So suffering is to be met with immovable patience: it is submission to the will of Allah. This does not have to be seen as a surrender of the self to a tyrant; it is better regarded as an expression of total confidence in a supreme judge. Though strong in Islam, this attitude is also found in other religious traditions. There is Job's proverbial patience and his stubborn refusal to curse God. A like mind is to be found in a Babylonian dialogue, written about 3000 years ago, about a pious man who convinces a suffering sceptic to submit to the divine will: summarizing the argument, W.F. Albright says that "Here is stressed the inscrutability of divine justice and the need of the most complete humility and abnegation of self in relation to the gods."[12] As for the Christian where can a better example be found than in Jesus' costly submission: 'not my will, but Thine be done' (Mk. 14:36)?

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12. W.F. Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity* (Balcimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1940), p. 253.

To sum up: there are two very different views from the place called Resignation and Suffering. The Buddhist perspective calls for the cessation of suffering by a total resignation of self; the Islamic (and generally theistic) view asks for that resignation to suffering which endures it as patient submission to God's will. If the first may seem to lay too much responsibility at the door of each individual, the second could perhaps abdicate responsibility by placing it all on God. Whether suffering can call out a different sort of response is the question which pulls us to the next location.

Suffering and Return

With the theme of suffering and return we come back to the perspectives on evil afforded by the major theistic religions, which have always been concerned with the *justification* of suffering in a universe under the control of a good God. If the world's pain is the outworking of a natural principle of *karma*, a kind of inevitable retribution for the sins of an unknown past, then that is just the way the world is. Or rather, since human beings do not much like suffering, we had better say that the world *seems* to be that way, though release is possible for those who come to a genuine understanding that the self and reality are one. But there is no point in complaining about the injustices of the universe. Or, if the world's pain is the world's craving, there is again no point in my shaking my fist at anyone else. Blame belongs only to those who persist in their thirst. However, the very existence of suffering does require explanation where one believes that it is under the ultimate control of a supreme being, who might well have ordered the universe in a manner that resulted in less pain for his creatures. Either that, or else he might at least intervene to alleviate the sufferings of the faithful when things get rough for them.

We saw earlier that retribution is one way of justifying suffering. Nevertheless, retribution requires guilt, and none of the major theistic religions is prepared to assert unconditionally that *only* the guilty suffer, that all suffering is *proportional* to guilt, or even that *all* the guilty suffer as they should, at least in this life. So some further justification of suffering seems called for.

In labelling this place in the schema 'Return', I hope to draw attention to one of the purposes which a Divine Being may have in mind in causing or allowing suffering to occur. To approach this, a com-

ment about the practice of punishment in human society will be helpful. When we punish others, in families, institutions, or societies, we invoke two types of justification. Sometimes we explain that pain or deprivation (such as a fine or withdrawal of some right or privilege) is necessary because a wrong has been done. Guilt is sufficient reason: the wrong must be righted and justice done. But sometimes we provide a different reason: the pain is inflicted so that the wrongdoer will see the error, repent and reform. This reforming purpose often tempers the punishment we might otherwise feel justified in exacting, and acts as check on vindictiveness. In other words, we seek some ultimate *good* for the wrongdoer when we punish; and we do not wish merely to add the evil of his own painful punishment to the evil he has already brought about by his wrongdoing.

Now something similar happens, I suggest, in religious thinking about the suffering for which God is somehow responsible. In concentrating earlier on retribution, we left out this reforming purpose because we were thinking only of guilt and desert; but now it is time to find a place for a purpose in suffering beyond strict redress of wrong. So we ask: do the theistic religions discern any ultimate good which might come from the evil they call affliction—the suffering laid on them or not removed from them, by the hand of God?

The answer is of course yes; otherwise God would not be good. All the same, it is not easy to discern his purposes, which is why the Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions place a good deal of emphasis upon trust as a commitment which carries one across the difficult places. This means there is a complexity in the believer's closer to God—which is the reason this place in the schema is called 'Return'. Our human condition is one in which we find ourselves 'away' from him who is the source and the goal of our being. Perhaps it is our fallenness which creates the distance; perhaps the specific sins we commit; perhaps it is just part of our earthly lot that we should not yet be 'home' with God. However our situation is explained, the way back is not a smooth road. So suffering and affliction are to be seen from a wider perspective as agents which are necessary to our return. This basic conviction underlies some of the particular claims theistic religions make about suffering, two of which may be examined briefly. The first is that suffering may be like an expression of parental love; the second is that suffering is a test or trial.

I mentioned in passing that punishment takes place in families as well as in institutions. To that we can add that not all pain is the pain of punishment: sometimes it is the pain of a more general discipline which children must experience as they learn to control, channel and develop their energies. Wise parents do not spare their children all painful experiences; on the contrary, they endeavour to make punishment and discipline the expressions of a love which seeks the long term good of the child. In an analogous way, then, religious believers may view their suffering as instrumental to a greater good. Perhaps some of it is deserved. But if not strictly deserved it may nonetheless be a necessary discipline to their development as the children of God. So the Hebrew Scriptures counsel,

> "My son, do not spurn the Lord's correction
> or take offence at his reproof;
> for those whom he loves the Lord reproves,
> and he punishes a favourite son." (Prov. 3:11-12)

And the Christian New Testament, quoting these very words, continues:

> "You must endure it as discipline: God is treating you as sons. Can anyone be a son, who is not disciplined by his father? If you escape the discipline in which all sons share, you must be bastards and no true sons. Again, we pay due respect to the earthly fathers who disciplined us; should we not submit even more readily to our spiritual Father, and so attain life? They disciplined us for this short life according to their lights; but he does so for our true welfare, so that we may share his holiness." (Hebrews 12. 7-10)

The idea that our return to God is necessarily painful because we need to grow into creatures much more splendid than we are at present is a powerful theme for many believers. It is closely connected with the second particular claim made about suffering in the perspetives of Judaism, Christianity and Islam: that affliction is a test or trial. Examples are numerous. God tests Abraham in asking for the sacrifice of his only son; Job (though he does not know it) is tested as a result of Satan's claim that he fears God only for what he gets out of it. Jesus is tested in the wilderness; he teaches his followers to pray that they not be put to the test but instead be delivered from evil; and St. Paul offers encouragement in the midst of trying experiences by

claiming that God will not permit testing beyond one's capacities. (I Cor.10:13) A text from the Quran picks up both themes, of testing and of returning:

> "Surely we will try you with something of fear
> and hunger, and diminution of goods
> and lives and fruits; yet give thou good tidings
> unto the patient
> who, when they were visited by affliction,
> say, 'Surely we belong to God, and
> to Him we return'."(*sūrat al-baqarah* (2):150)

Now notice that in this perspective we move further away from desert and retribution: to be tested is not to receive something in return for wrongdoing, but to be presented with an opportunity to remain true. As a Jewish midrash on the Song of Songs has it,

> "A flax-beater does not beat his flax very vigorously when it is hard, for fear it should split, but if it is good flax, the more he beats it the better it becomes. So the Holy One, blessed be He, does not try the wicked, because they could not stand the trial, but He does try the righteous."[13]

Notice too that the trial or test of suffering is here explicitly linked to the good of the sufferer: the more he beats the flax the better it becomes. This is an important claim, for otherwise there are problems in the notion of suffering as a trial. The difficulties often crowd in around the stories of Abraham and Job: if God knows everything, why did he have to test their faith? How could a loving and good God want blind belief, even belief contrary to evidence? Would a compassionate parent want to let a child suffer in the dark just to test obedience? In spite of the problems, there is nevertheless something of importance in the experience of faith on trial. To speak too simply, the test may be passed or failed. And that places a great deal of responsibility on the candidate. This way of speaking about our suffering reminds us that, even if God may permit evil, what we make of our lives is in some real measure up to us. Suffering brings temptation—

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13. *Cant. Rabba* II, 16, 2, transl. in H. Freedman and M. Simon, *Midrash Rabbah translated* (London, 1939), quoted in Rowley p. 63.

the temptation to despair, to turn bitter, to shrink into self-pity. It also provides an opportunity for soul-making. So to speak the language of test or trial is perhaps to talk from the believer's side, not God's; perhaps his purpose is not to satisfy himself about his creatures strengths and weaknesses, so much as to meet them in the hard places on their journey back.

In exploring a little of the territory of 'Return' we are presented with two important features of the perspective on suffering of the major theistic traditions. The first is that there must be some good purpose behind whatever of ill God allows to happen; the second is that whether this good purpose is accomplished is partly dependent upon the faithful response of the believer. To return requires an invitation and much help along the way; but it also demands at least a turning in the right direction.

We are approaching the last area in the schema. We can reach it by noticing an ambiguity in the last line of the text from the Quran quoted above: "surely we belong to God, and to him we return." To return is both possible and not possible in this life—that is, we may find God in our present suffering, but we will not see him face to face. Religious faith is the assurance of God's good intentions towards us, but it does not yet enjoy everything it hopes for. That is why, to complete the schema, we need to think of suffering and resurrection.

Suffering and Resurrection

The belief in a life after death is not confined to the monotheistic religions we have been considering. It is one of mankind's most widespread beliefs, though of course it takes many different religious forms. It is also a conviction that has captured the interest of philosophers since the time of Plato—who wrote powerful myths about what we might call the last judgment, in which souls stripped naked of their reputations are punished or rewarded according to the conduct of their earthly lives. Whatever the correct interpretation of his myths, Plato felt the need for an afterlife where the injustices of this world might be corrected and the rewards of virtue enjoyed. A similar need is felt, I suggest, in the theistic religious perspectives we have been exploring.

The plain truth of the world is that, however much the Psalmist hoped that the ungodly would fail to prosper (Ps. 73), all too often it

does not work that way. The innocent still suffer—and sometimes they are so innocent or so crushed that they are capable of very little growth through their suffering. The believer hopes for ultimate good, but he knows that it must reside ultimately with God, since it is not experienced here in the present age. If faith is not to be irrational and forever blind, it must one day be vindicated. Hence the importance of the life beyond this life.

Now it is one thing to say that suffering is explicable and justifiable only *if* it somehow all works out to the good. It is quite another to claim that everything *will* work out that way. What you hope for is not always what you get, as the critics of religion are anxious to point out. Can the believer provide some reason for this hope in the final triumph of the good?

The answer given by the theistic religions usually involves the conviction that God has made a promise that he will keep. And in Christianity, that conviction is associated especially with the resurrection of Jesus. Since resurrection arises out of suffering and death in the Christian faith, and since it is impossible to tell the story of Jesus without using these terms, we should make the Christian doctrine of resurrection the main exploration point in this last place in the schema. It is not that resurrection themes are absent from the Jewish Scriptures. They are less common there than many Christians suppose: but there are reanimation stories connected with the prophets Elijah and Elisha, and there is too Ezekiel's vision of dry bones reassembled and given back their fleshly life. The possibility and meaning of resurrection was debated in Jesus' day, as the dispute between Pharisees and Sadducees shows (Mk. 12: 18ff). But what is unusual in Christianity is the conviction that resurrection to new life—that is, a life of closeness to God in which evil is overcome—has already taken place. So resurrection is not just a wish or ungrounded hope: God's promise to conquer evil and death has started to be fulfilled already, as can be seen in the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. Further, the passion of Christ says something of great significance about suffering, in the Christian perspective. Evil and sin are seen as powerful forces within human life—and much larger than that as well. Nevertheless what is dark and destructive is ultimately under God's sovereignty and can be defeated—indeed has been defeated by Christ—but at great cost. The price is suffering: evil can be conquered in no other way. But this

means that suffering may be *redemptive for others,* not simply a discipline or test for one's self. In a way not fully graspable, suffering becomes creative, bringing about good for others: and the confirmation of this is the resurrection. Christianity has not exclusive hold on this view of suffering, since the idea is to be found in Scripture in the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53:

> "Yet on himself he bore our sufferings
> our torments he endured,
> while we counted him smitten by God
> struck down by disease and misery;
> but he was pierced for our transgressions,
> tortured for our iniquities;
> the chastisement he bore is health for us
> and by his scourging we are healed." (vv 4, 5)

But the first Christians applied these words preeminently to Jesus, and saw his death in such redemptive terms.

Part of the meaning of resurrection for the Christian is that the life of Jesus may be shared in here and now. Christ is a model for the believer, an example to be followed in attitudes and actions; more than that, he is present by his Spirit in the sufferings of all his followers, enabling them to meet evil redemptively, not just with patient resignation (though that too may be called for). At its best, then, Christianity provides motivation and strength to help alleviate the sufferings of others, for it offers a model, a sense of present grace, and future hope—all in the figure of Jesus. Paul links the motifs of resurrection and service in these well-known words from I Corinthians 15:

> "When our mortality has been clothed with immortality, then the saying of Scripture will come true: 'Death is swallowed up; victory is won!' 'O Death, where is your victory? O Death, where is your sting?' The sting of death is sin, and sin gains its power from the law; but, God be praised, he gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brothers, stand firm and immovable, and work for the Lord always, work without limit, since you know that in the Lord your labour cannot be lost." (I Cor. 15:53-58)

While there is sometimes a tendency within certain forms of Christianity to interpret the resurrection solely in terms of a new life for the believer in this present world, I think we must bring to the theme of resurrection this Pauline belief in life after death. In traditional Christian doctrine, Jesus' resurrection is not simply the beginning of something new right now; it is also the specific promise of the future resurrection from physical death for all believers. The end of the pilgrimage is across that river, in the Celestial City.

You will readily see why this is important. We have insisted that, if God is to be vindicated in allowing or causing the suffering of his children, something of good that will outweigh the evil of pain and anguish must emerge. His intentions must be just and benevolent. This conviction is common to the theistic religions, and motivates stories like that of Joseph (who was rewarded for slavery and imprisonment with his elevation to power in Egypt) and Job (whose story ends with all his possessions doubled). But since we know too many other uncompleted stories, the only arena in which retribution, reformation and soul-making redemption can be fully worked out is a resurrection world. Without that possibility, too many of the tight knots of the world's suffering could never be united, at least within theistic and moral perspectives.

Naturally there remain questions. Some find the notion of life after death philosophically problematic or repugnant. And it is true that there can be no guarantee that just because suffering seems to call for resurrection, it will happen just as believers think it should. Moreover, putting off final answers to a resurrection world means that one has to live in the scant light of ambiguity and uncertainty, which sometimes looks more like twilight than dawn. All the same, it would be difficult for the human spirit to ask *no* questions about suffering, and to make *no* response to evil; and it is not surprising that the common response is to seek for a life which transcends the one we know. In their own ways, then, Hindu release, Buddhist resignation, and theistic resurrection all serve as expressions of this common desire.

Conclusion

I conclude with a reminder and an observation. The reminder is scarcely necessary: it is about the inadequacy of the schema to

present the rich complexities of attitudes to evil as they have grown and matured within the actual practices of the world's religions. Something of that complexity colours the schema itself: not only is the same response viewed very differently from different perspectives, but the very mapping process cannot be precise, for its responses often shade into each other at the boundaries.

The observation is more personal. However much this schema stands in need of refinement, it does show that to be religious is to have a perspective on good and evil, a perspective which refuses to be satisfied with suffering. Whether our lives are called ignorant, unenlightened, fallen, sinful or imprisoned, the world's religions hold out a promise of a better way—an escape, a cessation, a union, a kingdom of peace and justice. The injustice of the world may be overcome by release, or resignation, or submission, by return to God, by sharing creatively in the sufferings of others. But injustice *must* be overcome, for the last word in the world's sorry tale belongs not to evil but to good.