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SUFFERING, GUILT AND RESPONSIBILITY

(Christian Responses to Suffering)

Suffering pervades human existence, and much of it seems unavoidable. We suffer from the ill-will, weakness, thoughtlessness and selfishness of others; our own ill-will, weakness, thoughtlessness and selfishness does harm to others; and we all suffer both as victims and villains. Apart from moral suffering there are the seemingly arbitrary evils of trauma, disease, old age, dying, hunger, exposure, flood, drought, and the inhuman movements of earthly elements. Suffering from natural disaster often complicates our moral lives, bringing out the worst moral suffering as well as the greatest heroism. Furthermore, much suffering is unjustly distributed: one of the most desperate uses of power and domination is to push the burden of suffering off, onto those who lack the power to push it back; the poor and oppressed suffer more than they deserve. With regard to our own actions, we sometimes shrink from taking full responsibility because that exposes us to the suffering of our own guilt, and so we dehumanize ourselves by making excuses, often thereby increasing many people's suffering. In the face of suffering we may come to see ourselves as victims, and because of that suffer all the more. Christianity no less than any other religious tradition has had to respond to the breadth and depth of suffering.

Christianity is not one thing but many; each strand in the Christian tradition has had its own development and the strands have interwoven and exchanged characters in such diverse ways that it is difficult to say what the Christian response to suffering is. Underlying all the strands of Christianity, however, is an image of what it is to be a person. The image derives from the Hebrew roots of Christianity and is given a special character by the conceptions of the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Christ. The image is that a human being, or the human species, is created

in the image of God; and the image of God is that of creator. As God is the creator of the world, so a person (and within some strands of Christianity, the historical human species) is most authentic as a creator, an actor, an initiator of events. A person has limitations to creativity, unlike God, limitations of personal power, environment, and resources. Indeed suffering is somehow a function of these limitations, though by no means simply a matter of the frustration of creativity. The special emphasis of Christianity is that God too suffers, at least in incarnate form (and for some strands of Christianity, for instance process theology, God's proper person suffers regardless of incarnation). So for Christians, suffering is itself somehow part of human divine-like activity. It is not to be transcended but embraced.

In the Hebrew roots of Christianity suffering was apprehended mainly as resulting from flaws in the universe, either because of natural disasters, the wickedness of enemies, or the evil desires of our own hearts for which we are guilty. The proper responses of creator-like agents were conceived to be anger on the one hand and fighting back on the other, with a cry for deliverance expressing the weakness of even the best human response. These conceptions have remained at the heart of most of the strands of the Christian tradition, and have been particularly strong in Enlightenment and subsequent secular thought. Since God the creator usually is held to be responsible for the flaws in his universe, the problem of theodicy is particularly poignant for this way of looking at suffering.

As Christianity also maintains that God too suffers, or at least did in the incarnation, the ground of suffering cannot be conceived merely as a flaw, but as a challenge. On no account is suffering desirable. Yet there is an image of divine suffering. Human suffering, therefore, should imitate divine suffering, and it should do so in the ways most of the strands of Christianity conceive responsibility. Suffering in its various forms constitutes the challenge in response to which people either put on or take off their essential responsibility. Human creativity is not defined merely by the making of products but also by the responsible activity of making. To create in the image of God without responsibility in the image of God is idolatry. So Christians believe that people should take up responsibility in suffering as essential to their relation to God; this transcends anger at suffering, coping with suffering, and prayers for deliverance.

I

In contrast to the main strands of the Hindu and Buddhist traditions, Christianity has always taken suffering to be a mark of reality, not of unreality or illusion. The Hindu and Buddhist conceptions of the illusoriness of this world with its suffering are very complicated. They stem in considerable measure from metaphysical beliefs about change and permanence. And they are not intended to assert "illusoriness" to suffering in quite the way that word sounds to Western ears. Yet for both of those traditions suffering of any sort is a function of a false sense of separateness. When people come to the realization that their cancer, the earthquake, their enemy, are really themselves, or the most true reality of themselves, then the suffering that results from conflict is less real than that truth of unity. As the Buddhists put it, the attachment of people's egos to particular things makes them identify with those things over against others, and suffering results. Detachment and transcendence lead people from having to take suffering as definitive. Christianity, by contrast, though it has its own forms of detachment of ego and transcendence of finite perspective, insists that suffering is equally real, and a part of the concrete embodiment of the most transcendent divinity.

In the Christian theological tradition, this was one of the main points in the controversies during the first four centuries of the Christian churches. On the one hand was the temptation presented by Jewish-oriented Christians to construe Christ as a suffering man but not quite fully divine. On the other hand was the temptation of the gnostic-oriented Christians to construe Christ as the divine logos but not quite fully human; on this conception divinity could not suffer. The resolution that has remained at the orthodox centre of most of the dominant strains of Christianity (though by no means all) is the formulation that the divine and human natures of Christ are fully united in his one person.

Dramatically, suffering is central to the life of Jesus. His persecution and crucifixion were not mere accidents that afflicted an innocent prophet. They were definitive of the kind of redemption or salvation he presented. Ever since, Christians have enjoined each other to participate in the life of Christ by taking up his sufferings. Insofar as the Christian version of salvation is resurrection to a new life, the old life with its suffering and death must be lived through. But furthermore, Jesus said while in the life

of suffering that the kingdom of God is at hand (e.g. Mark 1:15). He also pointed out in the face of his immanent crucifixion that he had overcome the world (John 16:33). At least one way of looking at these paradoxical statements is to see that suffering is compatible with, if not intrinsic to, that quality of life which is divine-human. Jesus' way of taking responsibility for himself and his actions in the face of the ultimate suffering of crucifixion was what, among other things, gave him the divine nature.

II

The most prominent form of suffering in the Christian tradition has been moral suffering (probably the same could also be said of the Jewish tradition). Moral suffering has two classes: the kind we suffer at the hands of others and the kind we suffer by virtue of causing others to suffer.

When others act immorally so as to cause us suffering, Christians enjoin us to make a two-fold response. On the one hand, we should respond with honest feelings, which include profound expressions of pain, anger, and a clear complaint against those who wrong us (though not everyone who hurts us is morally responsible for that hurt). This requires a developed sense of morality, a capacity for outrage, and an ability to discover and hold responsible the villains. More particularly, since many who morally wound us are those closest to us, it is important not to let moral realism be obscured by the understandable desire to keep the relationships going. On the other hand, we should respond to moral injury by never closing off human love. Like Hosea with his wife who repeatedly left him to be a prostitute, we should always wait for those who injure us and receive them back. No limit can be put on the number of times we should forgive those who hurt us. As Jesus prayed for those who crucified him, we too should love our enemies. Moral realism requires that breached relationships be healed with repentance and forgiveness, not with a mere agreement to overlook past wrongs.

That we cause others to suffer by our own moral fault gives rise to the sufferings of guilt. Guilt is an equivocal concept. Its first, root meaning is that the guilty person has the status, derived from historical fact, of being the person who did the bad deed. Related to this, secondly, is the moral response to the status, namely, the recognition of one's own guilt and moral condemnation of one self for it. Self-condemnation is a desperately forceful

form of suffering if one realistically identifies with both judge and judged. This kind of guilty suffering is intrinsic to human life as Christians see it.

There is, however, a third sense of guilt that is inimical to the Christian understanding of human life, namely, the guilty *feelings* that are a form of self-punishment. Because of guilt of the second sort, we sometimes punish ourselves by feeling guilty. The logic of this is that if we punish ourselves for our guilt, we shall no longer be guilty; and the most poignant form of punishment is the feeling of guilt itself which can immobilize us or drive us crazy. The third sense of guilt is neurotic, derived, according to the psychoanalysts, from an infantile introjection of the punishment parents give us when they tell us we are bad, coupled with our self-condemnation for rage against parents we are supposed to love. This neurotic guilt has no necessary connection with any morally realistic guilt of the second sort. Furthermore, self-punishment is logically incapable of altering either our moral status as guilty or our moral self-knowledge and condemnation. What removes guilt is forgiveness, not punishment, and with regard to specific moral misdeeds only rarely are we the relevant parties to forgive ourselves. Of course, insofar as we try to punish ourselves with guilt feelings, we are morally injuring ourselves, and on that broad front we do owe ourselves forgiveness. Yet the perverted logic of guilt as punishment usually means that if we are punishing ourselves we are precisely the ones who cannot forgive ourselves. The Christian claim is that meting out punishment belongs to God, not to the guilty. When the guilty try to absolve themselves by self-punishment, particularly by the punishment of feeling guilty, they only try to escape deserved condemnation. The symbolic meaning of Jesus as redeemer of sins is that his suffering and death purchase the right to punish us from the devil, from our victims, and from ourselves. This point is particularly important for the Protestant strand of Christianity. Beyond the symbolic meaning, Jesus' life means that forgiveness, not punishment, is the remedy for being guilty and rightly condemning oneself for it.

III

Not all suffering is moral suffering, however, and forgiveness deals only with moral suffering. Buddhists put the natural pains of life first in their considerations. With respect to natural

suffering we are passive: calamity, disease, and death come to us, whereas moral suffering is a function of our activities. The chief Christian response to natural suffering is to share it, to communicate with others in empathy (this is also appropriate for moral suffering). When others suffer we should feel it with them. When we suffer the responsible thing to do is to open ourselves to others so that they may help bear the burden; not to do so is to make fake heroes of ourselves.

The reason for sharing is incarnational: the one who suffers is God. Jesus said, "Anything you did for one of my brothers here, however humble, you did for me." (Matt 25:40; New English Bible). As God can be found in each person, so in each person's suffering God is to be found; to share in any person's suffering is to share in God's. Similarly, when one suffers oneself, that should be treated as God suffering; the way to do this is to open oneself so that others may feel one's suffering.

Although there are many different metaphysical theories about this, Christians believe in a kind of mutual participation or brotherhood of mankind. This is not a unity reached when people transcend the plane of suffering; it consists rather in bearing one another's burdens. Unlike those traditions that discover the unity of mankind through an experience of God as an undifferentiated mystical unity (*Nirguna Brahman*, the *Dharmakāya* of Buddha), Christians experience the unity through the differentiated suffering of each individual. Even God's suffering in Jesus was particular. Suffering is among the most private of human realities. The unity derived from mutual bearing of suffering is therefore, a unity that reaches the inmost parts of separate individuals.

Both moral suffering and natural suffering have a brutal deadening quality. When borne alone they kill the soul; when shared they enlarge it. The most difficult kinds of suffering to share with others are our moral sufferings and guilts. The most painful revelations we have to make are the things for which we condemn ourselves. The Christian conception of the brotherhood of humankind is the community of forgiven *sinners*, each sharing in the others' guilt and forgiveness. At various times this conception has been sacramentalized to the point of magic, where the community has no real bearing in the experience of its members; but usually the norms of real community have reasserted themselves. Of course, the Christian conception is an ideal, and even when the ideal is kept constantly in view, it has not been realized very completely.

As creative agents in the image of God, it is always appropriate for people to distinguish between the sufferings they have and the responses they make. The sufferings are given, and their qualities evoke quite properly all the emotions of anger, guilt, forgiveness, moral outrage, and empathy. But the responses people make are strictly laid to the people's own account, within the limitations of what is given. If a person has a painful cancer, the pain must be suffered through; but how the person responds to the pain is not to be blamed on the pain, but is to be laid to the person. Like God's, our response to the given world should be our own, and indeed it is our own whether we own up to it or not. How tempting it is to act in ways that are easy but which we cannot in conscience approve, saying that we are forced to act that way.

"Have you eaten from the tree which I forbade you?" The man said, "The woman you gave me for a companion, she gave me fruit from the tree and I ate it." Then the Lord God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent tricked me, and I ate".

(Genesis 3:12-13)

In the face of suffering it seems easier to believe people are merely victims. But the truth is that though they are victimized by suffering, they are responsible for their responses to it.

Character is built when people learn to take responsibility for their responses to suffering. Perhaps the hardest part is the necessity of rejecting the use of guilt to punish oneself for bad responses. Surely, to be properly responsive to suffering in others opens one to extraordinary pain. And to be responsive to suffering in oneself, particularly when it stems from self-inflicted guilt punishment, is to live through the pains used to give meaning to metaphors of hellfire. But it is precisely at this point that the central Christian claim—that God forgives and loves the sinners—makes its greatest demand. Because people are not responsible for punishing themselves, and because God does in fact forgive the broken heart, there is no excuse for hiding behind guilt or victimization. For the main part of the Christian tradition, the "new life" in Christ is a freedom that consists in being the divine-like authors of responses to suffering. The new Adam has no excuses!

But what responsibility does God have for suffering? putting aside human responsibility for responding in a proper way to pains suffered, people are morally responsible for not causing suffering to others as far as possible. If God created the world with suffering in it, is he not morally guilty, at least for those forms of suffering that result from natural disasters for which no human moral agent is responsible? There have been three main lines of response to this question within the Christian tradition.

The first is that God sends the sufferings precisely to try men's souls and build character. According to this view it is a better world because of the sufferings and the ennobled, tempered characters of people. No other way of developing character would have helped human autonomy. The difficulty with this response is that it does not look as if the improved characters of a few people counterbalance the evil of so much suffering. At least, it would be so difficult to measure the balance that this explanation of God's creation of suffering cannot be an easy empirical reading of the evidence. Rather, the explanation requires the extra premise that God would not do anything less than the best, so that a world with suffering has to be the best, somehow. Non-theists rarely see this as the best world. But then what evidence is there that God would not do anything less than the best? Surely not much empirical evidence. It must be some metaphysical conception of the nature of God derived by working backwards from the analogy with an imagined perfect human moral agent. This backwards analogy (from the image of God to the reality of God) has rarely been very convincing, in the face of suffering, even for those predisposed to believe in God and think well of him.

The second response to the question of theodicy has been to say that though there are evils in the world, and suffering, God is not responsible for them. Some have argued taking the metaphysical view that suffering and evil are mere privations of existence, not positive things God creates; this is not convincing to those who wish God would have created some other positive things that would exclude suffering. Others have argued the point by saying that God is finite and cannot help the evil and suffering in the world; suffering and evil result from the limitations and inalienable responsibilities of moral agents that bind God as well as human beings. The difficulty with this view is that God is no longer conceived as creator in the same universal sense as

lay in the original problem, but rather as creator in much the same sense we are, though perhaps with inexhaustible capacities. It is difficult to see why one should or would want to worship such a God. As a solution to the problem of evil one can simply drop all reference to the finite God and the problem of evil and suffering remains what it was before: finite agents must cope with suffering.

The third response is to accept that God is the creator of suffering and other evil conditions and to deny that the analogy of the perfect moral agent applies to him. Taking its cue from Job, who learned that questions about God's moral responsibility are misplaced, this position says that God as creator transcends moral categories. God as creator has the character of creating just this world, with just the suffering and joys it has. Furthermore, among the things created are moral and other normative standards (the fact they are created explains why God as their creator cannot be judged by them). There are thus two levels of character to God. On the ontological level God is simply the creator of the world, without character apart from the world and deriving character only from the act of creating. The conception of God on this level is roughly compatible with conceptions in Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism and Neoconfucianism. The basic human image of creative agency derives from this sense of God. On the cosmological level God has all the characters derivative from the world created; this part of God's character is to be known empirically. Among the most important characters is that in incarnate form God suffers, that the divine presence in the world as the terminus of the divine creative act has the character of responsible suffering. That God is this way rather than uncaring, is the testimony of certain peoples, as marked in the traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Eastern religions have a different experience and hence a different sense of God's character within the cosmos. The sense in which Christians as "New Adams" are images of God derives mainly from historical experience. The summary character of God combining both the ontological and cosmological aspects presents God as more awesome and terrifying than kindly or good, though perfectly compassionate with the suffering of the world and responsible, as Jesus was responsible, in response to suffering. Even if Jesus were not responsible, however, the experience of the Western tradition has discerned the norms of responsibility applying to human response to suffering to be something like what the stories about him suggest. The point of this is that the reason for

being responsible in response to suffering is not that God does it but because that is what responsibility consists in.

VII

For most of the strands of the Christian tradition, suffering is neither desirable nor justified. But it is a challenge in response to which people can exhibit the traits that constitute the best in the human character. It also can call forth the worst in the human character. Whether the best or the worst results is the responsibility of the people responding, a distinctive emphasis of the Judeo-Christian tradition insofar as that responsibility is itself taken to be the heart of divinity in human life.