

The Concept of Suffering: A Christian Perspective

*Presented to an interfaith gathering of Anglican Christians and Shi'a Muslims with a series of papers on "Mourning, Martyrdom and the Concept of Suffering"
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We heard earlier in the afternoon something about the martyrdom piety and ascetical monasticism of earlier Christianity. Indeed the desire to punish the body, thereby promoting suffering, still persists in some strands of Christianity. But today, especially in western Anglicanism, by and large, we've experienced a shift of emphasis in the concept of Christian suffering. Traditionally, suffering has been regarded as character building and educative, preparing the soul for real life after death. [As such suffering was often searched out.] Alternatively, [the kind of suffering which we might term bad luck, the kind that simply comes your way through the ups and downs of life and which is meted out far more to some than others was traditionally seen] as a punishment for sin or wrong doing. [To this way of thinking, the greater a person's sin, the greater the extent of their suffering; a neat simple equation.] These explanations for suffering are, however, increasingly regarded as unacceptable, at best providing inadequate answers, and at worst being morally repugnant. There are several possible reasons for this shift in understanding.

Firstly, developments in modern medicine mean we no longer tolerate the same levels of physical suffering brought about through ill health. Expectations have changed and today we constantly search for new and better ways of alleviating pain or avoiding suffering. Secondly, through the changing role of the media, there's growing awareness of the *extent* of human suffering. Whilst sitting comfortably in our living rooms we frequently encounter the horror of violence and natural disasters. Knowledge of the magnitude of human suffering on a much larger scale than previously makes us increasingly uncomfortable, for it sits uneasily alongside our concept of a loving and caring God. And thirdly, traditional Christian responses to suffering are being challenged by minority groups such as disabled people, black people and women. Such contemporary theologies highlight a danger in the glorification of suffering or even of finding meaning in images of suffering. They argue that this kind of religious justification can reinforce the subjugation of oppressed groups and prevent the search for positive social change. So, for example, women when they're denied basic human rights, black people when they experience the humiliation of racism or disabled people when they live with the indignities of society's inability to accept them; all these groups, and others, sometimes find their suffering given subtle religious justification on the basis that to suffer is

essentially good: it builds character, purges and brings us closer God. It is possible to see how such a defence of suffering might perpetuate cycles of abuse and even violence both in the perpetrator *and* in the victim.

These misgivings about the role of suffering in Christianity are important challenges to conventional theology and should be taken seriously. Nevertheless, despite reservations, suffering persists as a significant theme within Christianity and rightly so. For ultimately at the centre of Christianity is the cross of Christ – symbol of torture, death and suffering. It's no accident that the cross is the most universally recognised image of Christianity; for the cross is the heart of the message. Remove the cross and the concept of suffering and the message will be warped beyond recognition.

On this basis suffering cannot be explained away in Christian thought. Somehow we must embrace the concept. It exists at the heart of our faith and not only is it present but it continues to transform lives. For the spectator suffering generates feelings of horror, abhorrence and compassion – naturally so. Yet for participants the process of suffering can be a much more ambiguous and mysterious experience. It is of course always painful and sometimes it proves destructive to faith, leading eventually to atheism. But for many the pain and anguish can become an occasion for revelation – a deeper insight into God. And that's why it's not that uncommon for people to find faith or experience a deepening of faith in amidst the turmoil of suffering, perhaps as they approach their own death or as they mourn the loss of a loved one.

The reasons why the experience of suffering can be destructive for some and revelatory for others is difficult to decipher. But the potential for finding redemption through suffering is one of the many paradoxes within Christianity. And it exists because of the cross of Christ. Not because the cross was a place of great suffering, which might suggest suffering is in itself good, but because amidst the suffering, which is in fact very bad, love triumphed over evil. Jesus who followed his calling to the point of death, refused to give in to hatred even as he hung on the cross and through his agonising pain overcame the power of evil, symbolised by the resurrection, by overwhelming evil with love.

So the cross is central to Christianity and provides Christians with a model for dealing with our own suffering. But the significance of Christ's suffering on the cross is twofold and, once

again, is best understood in terms of a paradox. For the suffering of Christ is at one and the same time both like our suffering and unlike it. It's richness lies both in its familiarity and its unfamiliarity. Let me explain what I mean.

Christ's cross is significant because it shows him sharing our humanity. Christ on the cross reflects to us a God who has taken his creation so seriously that he's willing to share our human nature to the full. Such a God is not distant, and unapproachable; such a God understands and empathises and can stay alongside us in our moments of dark despair. This is very significant for it means we can see something of ourselves – of our human pain and suffering - reflected in God. God doesn't remove himself from our experiences but shares in them because of his boundless love. This is something that many who suffer will describe – a sense of closeness to God; a reassurance of God's presence. For the Christian message is not that Christ will relieve or remove suffering but that he is “with us always, to the end of time”.

In Christian terms God limits himself and his power both in the act of creation and in becoming human. To create a being that is other than himself in a true sense, with freedom to make choices and shape our destiny, God had to stand back, give space and limit his power of control over us. Otherwise we'd simply be puppets or playthings of a divine stage master. Then to show the extent of his love he chose to identify with us wholly, once again constraining his powers in order to penetrate the full breadth of human experiences, including frailty and weakness. So in Christ's suffering we see our own reflected and we are comforted.

But in another way Christ's suffering is quite unlike ours. However, traditional your understanding about human suffering, Christ on the cross was in no way being disciplined, improved or educated. He didn't need a character building experience, nor was he punished for some wrong doing, for he was without sin. Rather, his suffering was for the sake of others – not in the manner of someone dying to save another in an act of bravery or heroism - but in a much more universal sense to free the world from being in bondage to sin. He did this by showing us that at the heart of God there is love which overcomes evil in the face of the greatest suffering. In his suffering love's redeeming work was completed in a unique, once and for all event, never to be repeated again. It was distinctive, with universal implications - quite unlike our suffering and it brought about salvation through sacrificial love.

And so there's never any need to glorify human suffering as something necessary or good. For suffering is essentially evil and ungodly - something we need not search out but should seek to alleviate when ever possible. Nevertheless, there is, as the example of Christ shows us, potential for great good to come out of the most dreadful tragedy. If we could explain why this is we would solve the problem of suffering. But suffice to say that love and hope have the potential to transform suffering and bring us closer to God who understands and suffers with us. That's why the great men and women of the Christian faith are often people who've suffered profoundly and in so doing experienced the profundity of God's love. They have not necessary gone in search of suffering but neither have they been destroyed in the face of it.

Guli Francis-Dehqani
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