



Suffering

Alister McGrath

Suffering poses many problems for Christian faith. At one level, it poses a knotty riddle for the theologian, who has to explain why its existence does not compromise Christian faith. It may reasonably be argued that to treat suffering as a logical, philo-sophical or theological difficulty is to miss the real point - the emotional and pastoral issues raised for those who are suffering, and for those who care for them. This is a fair point, but its importance must not be overstated. Suffering is a problem for Christian apologetics, the subject of this book, primarily because it is held to demonstrate the logical incoherence of Christianity. The shape of our discussion of the problem of suffering is thus a response to this agenda, set by critics of the Christian faith.

The problem raised for the apologist by the existence of evil or suffering is usually stated in terms of three propositions:

- a. God is omnipotent and omniscient.
- b. God is completely good.
- c. There is suffering and evil in the world.

It is often suggested that these three statements are inconsistent. In other words, the omnipotence and goodness of God is not consistent with the existence of suffering or evil in the world. All three statements cannot be true at one and the same time. The reality of suffering and evil cannot be denied. It is an observation of experience. Therefore either God is not all-powerful, or he is not good. And so the logical coherence of the Christian faith seems to unravel. A fatal logical flaw has been exposed. Or has it?

Let us begin our exploration of this theme by considering the history of this question. From the time of Plato onwards, the existence of pain, suffering and evil in the world have been recognised and acknowledged. Christian theology has long learned to live with the reality of pain and evil. It is not as if suffering was a well-kept secret, whose existence has suddenly been sprung upon a world which fervently believed that it did not exist. But Christian writers prior to the seventeenth century did not believe that suffering posed any serious threat to Christian belief. Indeed, if I might be allowed a personal reflection, I spent many years working through most of the major works on Christian theology written between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries, and cannot recall any of them treating the reality of suffering as a serious obstacle to Christian faith.

That situation has changed. Why? The answer lies in a dramatic development which took place during the seventeenth century, and which may be argued to lie at the roots of modern atheism.[15] A number of writers on Christian apologetics, such as Leonard Lessius and Marin Mersenne, argued that the best defence of Christianity was to be provided by philosophy. Instead of concentrating upon the significance of Jesus Christ for the question of whether God existed, and what he was like, an appeal should be made directly and exclusively to reason. Instead of an appeal to the Christian experience of the Holy Spirit, an appeal was to be made to nature. Reason and nature were thus the testing grounds on which the credibility of Christianity was to be tested. The end result was inevitable. 'Christianity entered into the defence of the existence of the Christian God without appeal to anything Christian.' [16]

Under the influence of Descartes, this approach to apologetics would prove to have devastating results. The enormous emphasis which came to be placed upon the perfection of God by Descartes was compromised by the undeniable fact of the existence of evil and suffering. How could a perfect being allow such imperfection to exist? Yet Descartes' 'god' is not the God of Christianity; it is simply a philosophical idea. 'The god of the philosophers' is basically little more than a perfect, ideal and abstract being, constructed out of the distilled elements of human

benevolence The characteristics of this god are primarily its omnipotence, omniscience and goodness. Its credibility - but not that of the 'God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ' (1 Peter 1:3) - is instantly compromised by suffering. As Alasdair MacIntyre remarks, 'the God in whom the nineteenth and twentieth centuries came to disbelieve had been invented only in the seventeenth century.' [17] The god of philosophical theology is a human invention, a product of our reason; the God to whom Christian faith and theology respond is a living and loving being, who makes himself known to us through Christ, Scripture and personal experience - including, as we shall see, suffering.

Why this digression into history? Because it demonstrates that suffering has only recently been seen as 'a final and sufficient ground for scepticism and for the abandonment of Christianity', whereas in the past it was viewed as no more than a difficulty, 'an incentive to inquiry but not a ground for disbelief'. [18] It is only since the Enlightenment, with its emphasis upon universal and rational concepts of divinity and justification of beliefs, that the problem of suffering has come to be seen as grounds for disbelief. But, as we shall see (pp. 191-201), Enlightenment rationalism is in retreat. Perhaps we shall see a return to the older approach to suffering in its wake.

Second, let us consider the logic of the problem posed by suffering. Let us return to the three propositions noted earlier.

a. God is omnipotent and omniscient.
• **There is suffering and evil in the world.**

At least one further premise must be added to this list if a logical inconsistency is to result. As things stand, there is no inconsistency. There would, however, be a contradiction if either of the following were to be added to the list: [19]

d. **A good and omnipotent God could eliminate suffering entirely.**
or

e. **There could not be morally sufficient reasons for God permitting suffering.**

If either of these propositions could be shown to be correct, a major and potentially fatal flaw in the Christian conception of God would have been exposed. But they have not. And the apologist, having been asked some hard questions by the critics of Christianity, has a right to ask some in reply. How do they know that there cannot be morally sufficient reasons for God permitting suffering? Are these critics not putting themselves in the position so devastatingly criticized by David Hume - that of declaring that a better world than that which we know is possible? [20]

We may explore the issue of suffering further by considering some arguments developed by C. S. Lewis in his celebrated book *The Problem of Pain*. Lewis begins by stating the problem as follows:

'If God were good, he would wish to make his creatures perfectly happy, and if God were almighty he would be able to do what he wished. But the creatures are not happy. Therefore God lacks either the goodness, or power, or both.' This is the problem of pain, in its simplest form. [21]

But Lewis is not content to leave the critic of Christianity holding the moral high ground. He demands that this critic clarify what is meant by those terms 'omnipotence' and 'goodness'. Too often, Lewis argues, such critics bandy these terms about without really engaging with them.

So what does it mean to say that God is omnipotent? Lewis argues, with considerable skill, that it does not mean that God can do anything he likes. Once God has opted to do certain things, or to behave in a certain manner, then other possibilities are excluded.

If you choose to say 'God can give a creature free-will and at the same time withhold free-will from it', you have not succeeded in saying *anything* about God: meaningless combinations of words do not suddenly acquire a meaning because we prefix to them the two other words: 'God can'. It remains true that all *things* are possible with God: the intrinsic impossibilities are not things but non-entities. It is no more possible for God than

for the weakest of his creatures to carry out both of two mutually exclusive alternatives not because his power meets an obstacle, but because nonsense remains nonsense, even when we talk it about God.[22]

Lewis then argues that suffering cannot be regarded as arising from a lack of divine omnipotence. Far from it. If God creates a material universe, and gives creatures freedom of action, suffering follows on as a matter of course. Having exercised his omnipotence in creating the universe and endowing his creature -with freedom, he cannot block the outcome of that free universe - suffering. 'Try to exclude the possibility of suffering which the order of nature and the existence of free-wills involve, and you will find that you have excluded life itself.' [23]

Lewis then moves on to consider the implications of that deceptively simple word 'goodness'. Too often, Lewis insists, the -meaning of that word is assumed to be self-evident, when in fact it requires considerable thought. For Lewis, goodness is the natural outcome and expression of the love of God. Is suffering inconsistent with a loving God? Lewis insists that we pay attention to the term 'love', and avoid reading into it trivial and sentimental human parodies of the divine reality. We must learn to discover and appreciate divine love as it really is, instead of confusing or identifying it with our own ideas on the matter. God tells us what his love is like. There is no need for us to guess about it. The love of God, Lewis thus argues,

... is not a senile benevolence that drowsily wishes you to be happy in your own way, not the cold philanthropy of a conscientious magistrate, nor the care of a host who feels himself responsible for the comfort of his guest, but the consuming fire itself, the love that made the worlds, persistent as the artist's love for his work and despotic as a man's love for a dog, provident and venerable as a father's love for a child, jealous, inexorable, exacting as love between the sexes. [24]

The love of God, then, is not some happy-go-lucky outlook on life, which makes hedonism

its goal. It is a divine love, which proceeds from God and leads back to God, which embraces suffering as a consequence of the greater gifts of life and free-dom. Real life implies suffering. Were God to take suffering away from us, he would take away that precious gift of life itself. 'The problem of reconciling human suffering with the existence of a God who loves is insoluble only so long as we attach a trivial meaning to the word "love", and look on things as if man was the centre of them.' [25]

So what purpose might suffering serve? There are several echoes of Luther's ideas of the 'strange work of God (*opus alienum Dei*)' - an idea we explored earlier (p. 72) - in Lewis' discussion of the mysterious yet creative role of suffering within the providence of God. Suffering brings home to us the distressing fact of our mortality, too easily ignored. It reminds us of our frailty and hints of the coming of death. 'It removes the veil; it plants the flag of truth within the fortress of a rebel soul.' [26] In short, it creates a climate in which our thoughts are gently directed towards God, whom we might otherwise ignore. 'God whispers to us in our pleasure, speaks to us in our conscience, but shouts to us in our pains; it is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.' [27] Painful though Lewis' point may be, there is enough truth in it to make us take it seriously. All must die, and any worldview which cannot cope with death is fatally deficient. Suffering gently prods our consciousness, and forces us to contemplate the unpalatable but real fact of our future death, and how our outlook on life relates to this sobering thought. It can sow the seeds of doubt with existing outlooks, and lay the foundation for a new way of thinking, living and hoping.

But the apologist cannot be content to remain on the defensive for ever. At some point, the full relevance of the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ must be brought home to the more philosophically-minded critics of Christianity. [28] To discuss suffering without reference to the suffering of Christ is a theological and spiritual absurdity. God suffered in Christ. He *knows* what it is like to experience pain. He has travelled down the

road of pain, abandonment, suffering and death - a road they called Calvary. God is not like some alleged hero with feet of clay, who demands that others suffer, while remaining aloof from the world of pain himself. He has passed through the shadow of suffering himself. The God in whom Christians believe and trust - is a God who himself suffered, and by doing so, transfigures the sufferings of his people.

Some say that nothing could ever be adequate recompense for suffering in this world. But how do they know? Have they spoken to anyone who has suffered and subsequently been raised to glory? Have they been through this experience themselves? One of the greatest tragedies of much writing about human suffering this century has been its crude use of rhetoric. 'Nothing can ever compensate for suffering!' rolls off the tongue with the greatest of ease. It has a certain oratorical force, especially if delivered by a skilled speaker. It discourages argument. But how do they know that? Paul believed passionately that the sufferings of the present life - and he endured many - would be outweighed by the glory that is to come (Romans 8:18). How do they know that he is wrong, and that they are right?

Now the situation would be rather different if we could listen to someone who suffers a pitiful and painful death, and then returns to us from the dead. He would speak with authority and insight on this matter. Or if God himself were to declare that the memory of suffering and pain were to be wiped out. And the wonder of the gospel is that Christ has indeed died and risen again. God has indeed spoken on such matters.

It is here that the resurrection of Christ becomes of central importance. The resurrection allows the suffering of Christ to be seen in the perspective of eternity. Suffering is not pointless, but leads to glory. Those who share in the sufferings of Christ may, through the resurrection of Christ, know what awaits them at the end of history. It is for this reason that Paul is able to declare with such confidence that 'our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that

will be revealed in us' (Romans 8:18). This is no groundless hope, no arbitrary aspiration. It is a hard-headed realism, grounded in the reality of the suffering and resurrection of Christ, and the knowledge that faith binds believers to Christ, and guarantees that we shall share in his heritage.

Christianity has been unequivocal on this point, and its voice must be heard. The sufferings of this earth are for real. They are painful. God is deeply pained by our suffering, just as we are shocked, grieved and mystified by the suffering of our family and friends. But that is only half of the story. The other half must be told. It is natural that our attention should be fixed upon what we experience and feel here and now. But faith demands that we raise our sights, and look ahead to what lies ahead. We may suffer as we journey - but where are we going? What lies ahead?

The word 'heaven' seems inadequate to describe the final goal of faith. Perhaps we should speak more expansively of the hope of eternal life, of the renewing of our frail and mortal bodies in the likeness of Christ's glorious resurrection body, and of standing, redeemed, in the presence of God. But, however we choose to describe it, the promise and hope of our transformation and renewal, and of the glorious transfiguration of suffering, are an integral part of the Christian faith. This glorious thread is woven so deeply into the fabric of our faith that it cannot possibly be removed.

The language of 'prizes' and 'rewards' is helpful in many ways. It reminds us of the need to complete the race, in order that we may receive the athlete's crown as a prize (2 Timothy 4:7-8). It reminds us of the need for training and discipline in the Christian life, in order that we may have the stamina we need to persevere. But this way of thinking about the relation between suffering and heaven can also be misleading. It implies an accidental connection between suffering and heaven. It suggests that heaven is thrown in as some kind of consolation, in order to keep us going here below. This danger is avoided if we pay more attention to the intimacy of the connection between suffering and glory.

When a seed is planted in the ground, it begins to grow, and will eventually bear fruit. Can we say that its bearing fruit is a reward for its growth? No. We would say that there is an organic and natural connection between one and the other. One flowing naturally into the other. It is not a question of declaring, in some arbitrary way, that a seed which grows will be rewarded with fruit, or that the prize for growth is fruit. Rather, germination, growth and the bearing of fruit are all part of the same overall process. They are all stages in the natural cycle of growth and development. One follows on naturally from the other.

The New Testament is unequivocal. Suffering and glorification are part of, but represent different stages within, the same process of growth in the Christian life. We are adopted into the family of God, we suffer, and we are glorified (Romans 8:14-18.) This is not an accidental relationship. They are all intimately connected within the overall pattern of Christian growth and progress towards the ultimate goal of the Christian life - being finally united with God, and remaining with him for ever.

We are thus presented with a glorious vision of a new realm of existence. It is a realm in which suffering has been defeated. It IS a realm pervaded by the refreshing presence of God, from which the presence and power of sin have finally been excluded. It lies ahead, and though we have yet to enter into it, we can catch a hint of its fragrance and hear its music in the distance. It is this hope which keeps us going in this life of sadness, which must end in death.

But is it for real? Is this hope anything more than wishful thinking, a pitiful aspiration on the part of human beings who long for a better world than that which they now know and inhabit? We are all familiar with the tedious taunt of believing in 'pie in the sky when you die'. The implication would seem to be that Christians are so unrealistic about life that they need such fictional morsels to keep them going, where others can cope with the grim realities of life unaided.

Karl Marx regarded this outlook on life as little more than nauseating sentimentality.[29] The promise of the final removal of suffering and pain in the kingdom of God distracted us from working for their elimination here and now. To use Marx' famous phrase, Christianity is 'an opiate for the masses', a kind of anaesthetic or narcotic which dulled our senses, and prevented us from changing the world for the better.

Now Marx has a fair point. So great is the attractiveness of the Christian hope that it is natural to become fascinated by it, and want to focus our thoughts upon it. It is all too easy to become so heavenly minded as to be of no earthly use. If Marx' criticism serves any useful purpose, it is to remind us that we have a Christian duty to work for the transformation of the world as we know it, removing unnecessary causes of suffering. The vision that is held before us is that of trying to bring the peace of heaven to the turmoil of the earth. The Christian hope ought to be a stimulus, rather than a sedative. It should spur us to action within the world, rather than encourage us to neglect it.

But when all is said and done, Marx' comment merely reinforces the power and importance of the Christian hope. It *does* enable us to cope with suffering in the present life. Just as a soldier fights on towards the end of a long war, sustained by the knowledge that peace will one day come, and he will be reunited with his family and friends, so the Christian continues his pilgrimage, sustained by the knowledge of the joys that await him. Marx is a reluctant, yet eloquent, witness to the power of the Christian hope to enable us to cope with the dark side of life.

Further, Marx evades the vital question concerning the Christian hope: Is it true? If it is, Christians can hardly be criticized for believing in it, whereas others can be charged with having run away from reality. Either it is true, or it is not. Which is it? Let us be absolutely clear on this. If the Christian hope of heaven is an illusion, based upon lies, then it must be abandoned as misleading and deceitful. But if it is true, it must be embraced and allowed to transfigure our entire

understanding of the place of suffering in life.

Just as suffering is real, so are the promises of God and the hope of eternal life. This is no spiritual anaesthetic, designed merely to enable us to cope with life's sorrows while they last. The death and resurrection of Christ, linked with the giving of the Holy Spirit, are pledges, sureties and guarantees that what has been promised will one day be brought to glorious realisation. For the moment we struggle and suffer in sadness mingled with bewilderment. But one day, all that will be changed for the people of God:

God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away (Revelation 21:3-4, RSV).

In that hope, we go forward into life in faith. We may not know exactly where that faith will lead us. But we *do* know that, wherever we go, the God of all compassion goes ahead of us and journeys with us, consoling and reassuring us, until that day when we shall see him face to face, and know him just as he knows us.

[NOTES]

15 See Michael J. Buckley, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1987).

16 Buckley, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism*, p. 67.

17 Alasdair MacIntyre and Paul Ricœur, *The Religious Significance of Atheism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), p. 14.

18 Alasdair MacIntyre, 'Is Understanding Religion Compatible with Believing?', in B. R. Wilson (ed.), *Rationality* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1974), p. 73.

19 For these points, see J. L. Mackie, 'Evil and Omnipotence', in B. Mitchell (ed.), *The Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp92-104; Basil

Mitchell, *The Justification of Religious Belief* (London: Macmillan, 1970), pp. 15-16.

20 Hume's original point was that, having experience only of this world, we cannot declare that it is 'the best of all possible worlds'. For precisely the same reasons, we cannot know that it is not the best of all possible worlds. That judgment requires access to information which we do not possess, and can never possess.

21 C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1940), p. 14.

22 Lewis, *Problem of Pain*, p. 16.

23 Lewis, *Problem of Pain*, p. 22.

24 Lewis, *Problem of Pain*, p. 35.

25 Lewis, *Problem of Pain*, p. 36.

26 Lewis, *Problem of Pain*, p. 83.

27 Lewis, *Problem of Pain*, p. 81.

28 For what follows, see Alister McGrath, *Suffering* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, to be published in 1993).

29 We explore and evaluate Marx' views on the nature of Christianity later: see pp. 201-206.

30 Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: