“How Long, O Lord?”

Interfaith Perspectives on Suffering, Protest, and Grace

Christopher Pramuk

The author explores how three religious traditions respond to the question of human suffering. He suggests that protest, as well as solidarity, love, and action to relieve suffering, enable persons to be vehicles of grace for one another.

How long, Lord? Will you utterly forget me? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I carry sorrow in my soul, grief in my heart day after day? (Psalm 13)

The mystery of suffering cuts to the heart of human existence. Its massive scale and random quality threaten any hold we may have on a benevolent view of reality, mocking it as tenuous and grasping. Most of us choose, in varying degrees, to block suffering from our perception. It leaves us in a quandary, paralyzed, speechless. This is especially true of suffering that we deem “innocent.” Nothing pierces the human heart so much as the innocent person, especially the child, unjustly and unmercifully crushed by suffering, whether by so-called natural evil or moral evil.

Regarding the latter, not only individuals but whole communities are guilty of collective amnesia. It is tempting to relegate the problem of moral evil to individual or corporate psychosis, a temporary blip on human history’s trajectory of progress. The optimism born in us during the Enlightenment would prefer not to compare space flight with smart bombs, or the human genome project with Nazi

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Our discomfort with self-examination and guilt may explain the corresponding urgency with which we indict God: how could God permit such desolate, crushing evil? Still, even the full recognition of human culpability only goes so far. A great deal of suffering simply cannot be blamed on moral failure. How does one “explain” to a young expectant couple the devastating loss of a stillbirth, or to loving parents the onset of leukemia in their child?

**Theodicy: the Test of All Religion**

Theologians gather such questions into the age-old realm of “theodicy,” the attempt to justify God before the realities of evil and suffering, especially the suffering of innocents. Every pastor, pastoral counselor, and religion teacher recognizes the ultimate “Why” question, “Why would God do this to me?” as the most tortuous and insoluble question because it emerges from the crucible of dashed hopes and thwarted dreams. The theodicy question resounds frequently in the cry of the Psalmist, “How long, O Lord?” Because of its universal impact, some say that theodicy is both the foundation and final test of all religion.

It is helpful, I think, to bring a mosaic of resources to bear on what is a universal human dilemma. While countless books and articles wrestle with theodicy in myriad ways, few appear to approach the problem with resources from more than one faith tradition. How have different religious traditions responded to the theodicy question? Most importantly, can any religious “solution” really console those who suffer?

This essay offers a comparative interplay of perspectives on suffering from Hinduism, Judaism, and Christianity. By taking an interfaith approach, I hope to affirm existing religious language that consoles, and to stimulate in the reader new insights and pastoral approaches around an old and difficult question. While I will highlight significant differences in how these traditions deal with the theodicy question, the discussion aims toward a synthesis built around the following thesis: religious language responds most effectively to suffering when, first, it allows for a spirituality of protest, and second, it appeals to the incarnational language of grace. I begin with a comment on the sheer existential scope of the question today.

**The Authority of Those Who Suffer**

For six weeks in the summer of 1998, I studied at Hebrew University in Jerusalem. One day I traveled by bus with my roommate, a Catholic priest in his sixties, to Yad Vashem, the Holocaust memorial on the outskirts of the city. Nothing in my experience could have prepared me for the realities I confronted during...
that visit. How does one begin to appropriate a wall-sized photograph of an SS soldier pressing his pistol into the temple of a young Jewish girl, her eyes squeezed shut, waiting?

My friend and I descended into a dark chamber in which a single candle glowing in the center became, through the use of mirrors, a heavenly dome of millions of lights. As we made our way, the voices of children, one for every light, spoke their names to us. These were the silenced voices of all the burning children of the Shoah. The father of a six-month old boy myself, I was crying when we finally walked out into the blinding sunlight. My priest friend squinted into the sky and said, “So much for the rational man.”

All theology today, says German theologian Johann Baptist Metz, is “theology after Auschwitz.” Metz puts the same idea in Christian language: we must never, he writes, “hear the message of the resurrection in such a way that in it the cry of the crucified has become inaudible” (126). The Jewish people can teach Christians a great deal about “the cry of the crucified.” For many Christians, Elie Wiesel’s book Night was a jarring entree into the darkness of Auschwitz, and, to be sure, the darkness lurking in human nature itself. Who can forget the young Eliezar watching the hanging of three prisoners, one of them a child, too light to die quickly? And the terrible question, “Where is God now?,” unanswered beneath “the silent blue sky.”

What is the significance of the Holocaust? Some Jewish thinkers have concluded only its insignificance, what they strikingly call “the significance of the insignificance” (Jospe). Surveying a long history of human cruelty and violence, many today speak of the banality of evil: “So what else is new?” This sentiment is conveyed not as apathy, but as a world-weary and sober realism. Beneath this sobriety one can safely assume a widespread fabric of despair. After every fantastic revelation of moral evil there comes the inevitable cry, “Never again!” This reaction is understandable and necessary, but who really believes it? When the carnage unfolded at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, one could not escape the dreadful feeling that this irruption would be but the first of many like it. The Beast had reared its head again, only in a new and more horrible visage than we ever thought possible, in our children, the final frontier of innocence.

**Hindu Perspectives**

The belief that history teaches us nothing resonates with the Hindu belief in reincarnation. The cosmic wheel turns, moving the Self through cycles of death and rebirth. History itself is going nowhere. Humanity is going nowhere. Advancement belongs only to individuals, who largely by their own effort, attain higher states of being. To be enlightened, or “established in Brahman,” is to
experience liberation from the endless wheel of suffering. It is to move from impermanence to permanence, from human life to absolute Being, Self, bliss.

**Divine Justice and the Law of Karma**

There are no accidents, and no innocents. All suffering, whether the result of moral or natural evil, falls on those who have earned it. The cosmic law of moral recompense, or karma, applies to all equally and consistently. Like a pebble cast into a pond, my actions generate effects that will eventually catch up with me. If I establish good karma, I will attain a higher state of being in my next life. Correct outcomes are guaranteed by God or Brahma, the cosmic regulator, and point precisely to God's perfect justice. For my suffering, I have myself to blame. For my good fortune, I have myself to thank.

From a Judaeo-Christian standpoint, it seems to me, Hinduism offers no “solution” to the theodicy question because there is no theodicy question in Hinduism. That is, the question is never put to God. There appears to be no philosophical grounding in Hinduism for protest, and certainly not for protesting to God. With the law of karma, God's justice is, *a priori*, the foundation of the cosmic order. The engine turning this karmic wheel appears to be human freedom, but within a cosmic worldview that flirts closely with fatalism. For every person's lot in life, there is an underlying causality.

I can, however, strive to improve my situation. I always get another chance, as in reincarnation. By contrast, the Christian view of time, one life, one absolute judgment, appears to the Hindu mind unrealistic and mercilessly punitive. This is especially so with regard to suffering. While no child who dies an early death is “innocent,” Hindu spirituality offers immediate consolation: in reincarnation a new and perhaps better life awaits every lost child.

**A Jewish Spirituality of Protest**

In his famous book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, Jewish rabbi Harold Kushner, whose own son died horribly from a genetic disorder, rejects the idea that people suffer because they deserve it. This idea he calls blaming the victim, the temptation to scapegoat those who suffer, including ourselves. “Aha! You are a bad person. You are finally getting what you deserve.”

Blaming the victim involves a double injustice: not only is a woman brutally attacked while jogging in the park, we wound her again by saying, “Why were you there alone, and dressed so provocatively?” On a much grander scale this kind of logic has been applied even to the Holocaust, suggesting, in one form or another, that the Jews must have done something to bring annihilation upon themselves. Everything, even the murder of six million Jews, happens for a reason. Everything must somehow be accepted, if not understood, as God’s will.

*“How Long, O Lord?”*
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Kushner rejects any implication that God uses suffering or evil as an instrument of retribution. Even the softer form of this notion yields an obscene and untenable image of God, especially when applied to irruptions of violence as horrific as the Holocaust. By contrast, Kushner places himself in the “venerable Hebrew tradition” of crying out in protest to God. With biblical figures like Abraham, the psalmist, and Job, Kushner insists that direct protest to God in the face of innocent suffering is a valid faith response.

Two points can be made in support of Kushner’s position. First, like his predecessors of ancient Israel, Kushner appears “incapable of letting himself be consoled by myths.” German theologian Johann Baptist Metz uses this phrase to describe a biblically-inspired mysticism that always turns its questions back to YHWH. This spirituality of “suffering unto God,” as Metz calls it, plants itself firmly in history, and therefore resists any myths that offer putative consolation and that finally serve not to console human beings but to defend and justify God.

Both Kushner and Metz, I think, would accuse Hindu spirituality of this offense. The law of karma would appear not to console human beings so much as sacramalize the status quo without protest. By contrast, a Judaeo-Christian spirituality of suffering unto God is infused with a sense of historical danger, crying-out, and most importantly, a strong impulse to correct injustice. What occurs in this language is not an artificial or naïve “Yes” to God which conceals a deeply repressed anger, but a “Yes” borne in one’s present and painful history. It is a “Yes” committed to do something to change and to correct sundered relationships.

This brings us to the second point. Kushner’s protest is a deeply relational protest, signifying a sense of covenant with God, and with high expectations put on this relationship. This personalism ascribed to God, itself the basis for protest, seems absent in Hinduism. But it is also effectively absent in any spirituality that allows no questioning of God in the face of innocent suffering. This has been largely true of Christian theology since Augustine, who “made humanity-become-sinful alone responsible for the history of suffering” (Metz, 62).

The character Ivan, in Dostoyevsky’s The Brothers Karamozov, may be the best-known archetype of modern protest atheism. His “rebellion” is not so much a rejection of God, as a rejection of the Christian mythos that appears to justify
God before the suffering of even a single innocent child. To this God Ivan says, “I respectfully return the ticket,” meaning his entrance ticket to salvation. “For love of humanity,” Ivan protests, he wants no part of a mythology that refuses to question God. Taken together, Dostoyevsky’s Ivan, Kushner’s protest spirituality, and Metz’s suffering unto God represent biblically grounded and psychologically healthier alternatives to theodicies that lead, if not to outright atheism, to the repression of anger and a gathering hatred of God.

The Crucified God

Kushner builds his own protest on this question: if God is “all-powerful,” must God not follow God’s own laws of justice? Kushner finally solves this dilemma by rejecting the traditional notion of God’s power, the idea that God is always in control. He opts instead for a God who neither controls evil nor wills it, but who rather suffers in and with the victims of history, such as those at Auschwitz. Here Kushner joins contemporary theologians like Dorothy Sölle and Jürgen Moltmann in locating God at the center of every cross where people are crucified.

There is no question that this idea is and has been profoundly consoling for many people. It offers God’s immediate presence and compassion in the heart of darkness. But there are myriad problems with this idea as well. That Hindus and Muslims find the idea of suffering in God scandalous ought to give Christians some pause.

Jews and Christians alike question whether the shared powerlessness and suffering of God, as distinct from Jesus’ suffering, is really biblical, or whether it is not another theological sleight of hand meant to vindicate God. Metz, for example, rejects this solution to theodicy as a kind of secret aestheticization of suffering. Suffering in God co-opts the “nontransferable dignity” and loneliness of a great part of human suffering. Does it not discount, or at least qualify as suspect, the utter abandonment contained in Jesus’ cry from the cross, or the unheard cry of countless Jews at Auschwitz? Does it not also attenuate “the counterimpulse resisting injustice” (Metz, 70)?

Grace: an Interfaith Synthesis

Following the long suffering and death of his own son, Rabbi Kushner found that “Why?,” while a necessary cry of pain, was not the most important question. The essential question became, rather, “What are you going to do about it?” Kushner’s “solution” to the theodicy question is not a final explanation or answer, since there is no such thing. It is a response, and his contribution here mirrors closely the Christian theology of grace. In fact, while Kushner rejects the traditional belief that God is all-powerful, he goes on to describe a God whose power is manifest quite efficaciously in human beings, and especially in their
response to suffering. This incarnational presence and power of God, in contrast to a deistic or mythologically conceived power, is experienced in at least two immediate and consoling ways.

**The Incarnational Power of God**

First, when all our strength is gone and our spirit stands on the brink of despair, the Spirit of God fills us up again so that we can go on living. The experience of consolation amidst desolation is captured in the beloved Psalm 23, and echoes often in the words of Jesus, “Be not afraid.” Second, Kushner says, “God comes to us in the incarnation of caring people.” As he puts it, “Human beings are God’s language.” It is noteworthy that a Jewish rabbi would use the term “incarnation” in this way, and it probably accounts in part for the popularity of his book among Christians. The point is, Kushner describes a God who is far from impotent, but whose power is hidden in the fabric of human freedom. God’s consoling power requires our openness, our willingness to act to relieve suffering and all its causes.

**“The Spontaneous Good that is Human”**

Like their Jewish and Christian counterparts, Hindu philosophers also speak of a kind of power or divine grace working in the believer, manifesting itself as an impulse to reach out to those who suffer. While the language of grace is a later development in Hinduism, it finds expression today in Hindu devotional practice and prayer (Malkovsky). Is it sufficient, however, simply to take the hand of another human being who is suffering? Is it enough to sit with a person in silence, unable to console with pious words and explanations? Kushner advises that yes, it is sufficient. We survive darkness, he muses, not because of our theology but because of our friends. Indeed, nobody escapes suffering, finitude, or death. But God would have no person suffer these realities of the human condition alone.

It is difficult to ascribe redemptive value to solitary suffering, the lonely death. But when someone’s suffering or dying draws us out of self-absorption toward care andcompanionship, that suffering becomes redemptive. It is extraordinary, truly a miracle. For grace finds its home in precisely such selflessness, in the restoration and building of communities, even in communities of two. Grace comes home in the loving-kindness offered from one person to another, even when that other may be tragically unable to receive or acknowledge it.

**Conclusions: Helping People Cope**

Even the briefest passages through “the valley of the shadow of death” can mark a person indelibly. In my own life, thankfully, I have not yet known the
“slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,” nor tasted the utter darkness of God’s perceived abandonment, as did David (Psalm 22) or Jesus on the cross. Because of a recent and still palpable experience, however, I do know something of unexpected loss and the bewildering “Why?” that comes in its wake. My own passage through grief has gifted me, I think, with a heightened compassion for those trapped beneath longstanding grievances, such as systemic poverty, violence, or hunger. Suffering has also confirmed for me the wisdom of Kushner’s experience: “You don’t explain suffering, you survive it.” Consolation and survival derive less from theology than from the loving touch of friends and family. With them I have learned how to sit in humble silence.

The Bible never solves the theodicy problem. Certainly Jesus offers no philosophical solution. In the few cases he is pressed for comment he rejects the retributive theodicy of his peers (Luke 13:1-5; John 9:1-3). When Jesus sees suffering, he acts, responding “naturally with the spontaneous good that is human.” But what is also clear is this: when Jesus acts, he clearly does so in the name and power of the Spirit of God. Through him, people encountered directly God’s very own healing love and compassion. Christianity responds to suffering with a spirituality of imitation, solidarity, and love. My first duty as a follower of Jesus, therefore, is to incarnate God’s compassion in the manner of Jesus’ own ministry. In short, I am called to be a vehicle of grace.

And so religious traditions help people cope in the first place by articulating the language of incarnation and grace, affirming that God does care for human beings, and does so through our creaturehood. Human beings are God’s language, cooperators in grace. Religions serve people by urging them toward God-like compassion in response to suffering, and toward a commitment to its alleviation.

Second, religions help people transform their suffering by acknowledging the necessity of protest, certainly against human injustice, but also at times toward the God of our faith, who clearly does not exempt believers from random and catastrophic evil. It must be remembered that, at its core, protest is born of several prior and positive conditions. Protest stems first of all from one’s commitment to reality, to living with eyes fully open to the truth. It is a reaction of righteous anger to the truth of a situation that should not be.

Protest is born, furthermore, from a heightened and holy expectation built on covenantal relationship. We cry out, as Jesus in the garden and from the cross,

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when positive expectations appear dashed: “My God, why have you abandoned me?” Why, then, has Christian language and liturgy afforded so little place for the cry of protest, for a genuinely biblical spirituality of expectation and suffering unto God? Metz offers two explanations. First, the Augustinian emphasis on human depravity and guilt has become so reflexive that questioning God has become unthinkable for most Christians. Second, it may be that Christians have long stopped expecting God to act meaningfully in history. In Metz’s view, Christians have by and large appropriated the evolutionary mythos of postmodernity. The wheel of time churns on endlessly and anonymously. God, to the degree God is invoked, is little more than an innocent bystander. What point in protesting to a God who is effectively irrelevant?

Over against the deadening resignation of the postmodern imagination, Metz argues forcefully that the biblical, historically rooted cry of suffering, the particular gift of Israelite religion, must not be attenuated in Christian language and liturgy. Why? Because a spirituality of protest, “How long O Lord?”, galvanizes communal expectation and directs it back toward the God in whom we place our trust. It girds that trust, and a conviction that God’s love remains relevant and effective, intervening in history and moving it toward final completion.

**Contemplating the Cross**

Is this, then, sufficient? What of those anonymous millions who have no hope for the present, who keep dying in obscure and miserable poverty, the result of apathy, or ecological, economic, and political injustices? What of those millions of lives extinguished by war, violence, and genocide? For these it would appear that consolation can only be proffered as a future hope. I take as my own position that of Metz, who writes: “There is a hint of something unreconciled in Christianity. To banish this would be an expression not of faith, but of smallness of faith” (Metz, 56).

At the heart of Christian revelation is the cross. We must not use the joy of Easter to muffle the cry of the cross, nor should we attempt philosophical end-runs around Jesus’ experience of utter abandonment by God. To be sure, the lonely cross of Jesus exemplifies the dangerous memory of thousands and millions of crucified peoples in history. In short, all the attempts to exonerate God or to locate suffering in God pose “too much of a response, soothing the eschatological questioning of God” (69).

A genuine Christian realism ends neither in bitter despair, nor faith-shattering nihilism, but fully expects a day when God will “wipe away every tear” and, for love of humanity, give an account for all the suffering of past, present, and future innocents. Some will surely complain that questioning the almighty, transcendent God is childish anthropocentric. But is not the heart of the good news radically anthropocentric? Every human life is endowed with the highest dignity
as a reflection of God’s image, and God is bound to the personal care of every creature.

Indeed, it is this conviction that leads the Christian to protest every earthly injustice, especially suffering caused by systemic human sin. Liberation theology stands with the biblical prophets in reminding everyone that a great deal of misery is not accidental, nor fated, nor reasonably attributable to God’s will or karma, but the result of systemic, identifiable, and preventable human evils. These man-made causes must be torn down so that God’s reign may be built up.

What, then, sustains the Christian community in hope? In the rich fields of the Christian imagination, that which remains a stumbling block to non-Christian traditions is our paradoxical symbol of sustenance, the cross of Christ. Metz’s theology of the cross, if not finally consoling, is refreshing at least in its honesty. Built on a Jewish spirituality of protest, it refuses to gloss over the loneliness of human suffering, even that of Jesus.

But that is not all. In prayerful contemplation of the cross, Metz suggests, every Christian may hear the words “God is Love” as both a present reality and a statement which bears the character of a promise: God will prove Godself to us as Love (69). The cross of Christ nurtures in the Christian community a stubborn eschatological hope, a hope that belies every evident cause for despair, and dares even to ask, “What is God waiting for?”

References


