

The Dynamics Of Human Suffering In Operative Theology

Elizabeth Onyii Ezenweke

&

Ikechukwu Anthony Kanu

Abstract

Suffering in a broad sense, is an individual's basic affective experience of unpleasantness and aversion associated with harm or threat of harm. Suffering may be qualified as physical or mental. Suffering occurs in the lives of sentient beings in numerous manners, and often dramatically. As a result, many fields of human activity are concerned, from their own points of view, with the meaning of suffering. Considerations include the nature of suffering, its processes, its origin and causes, its meaning and significance, its related personal, social, and cultural behaviours, its remedies, management, and uses. This is a contribution to the ongoing discourse on the value of human suffering in theology. It investigates the philosophical and theological responses to the problem of suffering, and examines the Christological and Trinitarian dimensions of human suffering. From these understandings, the researcher proposes the Faith-solution approach as a credible Christian response to human suffering.

INTRODUCTION

Suffering is a very complex reality and yet deep rooted in human experienceⁱ. It is a perennial and universal issue. No minority or creed can escape from it, just as none can claim sole right of it. Suffering has its hand on every pie of the world, from the smallest sociological unit to the largest. Its tentacles are well spread and its nest well laid. In Africa, its flame keeps burning wild and wild, and its alarming growth only comparable to a wild horse galloping down the slope. It is a reality experienced within concrete historical circumstances; little wonder then, it has become a recurrent issue in theological discourses. We are daily witnesses to the questions that this experience generates in the minds of people: Why must suffering exist? Does suffering have any meaning? Does it have value? Does God want suffering? Did He cause it? How much must one suffer? For how long must one suffer? What can I do to avoid suffering? Can there be God in the face of all these suffering? The recurrentness of this experience has made artists like Marnix Gijsen to put their experience and interrogations into a poem: “Is God’s heart a rock? He offers us cancer, blindness, and so on. He is terribly inventive when it comes to misery and disease. If I were to stand before His throne, I would ask Him, how could You see all this and bear it?”ⁱⁱ In Africa, where suffering is multiplying at a great speed, situations have arisen when it has become imperative to once again

examine the dynamics and functionality of suffering in operative theology.

THE MEANING OF SUFFERING

Emeka Obiezu observes that suffering and evil are so interchangeably used in discussions that one is often assumed when the other is usedⁱⁱⁱ. However, Donald Griffin asserts that suffering is only a dimension of evil connected to and experienced by human beings and other creatures^{iv}. It is indeed the relation of cause and effect. However, suffering as defined by Michael Stoeber, is “the experience of emotional pain- a mode of consciousness that can arise from sensation of intense physical pain, but which need not at all be associated with it... a painful state of consciousness that we wish we do not have to experience”^v. This definition agrees with those of John Hick and Eric Cassell who identified suffering with an emotional consciousness that one would not ordinarily want to desire^{vi}. A definition like this underscores the reality of suffering which surrounds us in various forms, such as financial worries, poverty, hunger, family concerns and personal stress, racism, misogyny, inequality, the heavy blows dealt to mother earth by war, violence and terrorism. The complexity of the nature of suffering has driven many to search for some meaning in the burdens of life.

PHILOSOPHICAL AND THEOLOGICAL RESPONSES TO THE PROBLEM OF SUFFERING

Down through the ages, there have been numerous philosophical and theological attempts to respond to the problem of suffering. Richard Sparks in his article, “Suffering” summarizes the different responses under seven approaches – all not really rationally satisfying in themselves though.^{vii}

The dualistic approach

The first and oldest approach is dualism, which holds that there are two opposing forces at work in the world – light and darkness, good and evil. The good God, in this view, is responsible for every good thing in the world, while the evil god is responsible for evil and suffering. This view is abundant in the ancient myths of the Middle East. It is also a common feature of the Johannine Writings. This view will certainly not be appreciated by Christian thinkers on the grounds that it is opposed to monotheism^{viii}.

The Classical approach

The second approach is commonly called the *Classical, Free-will* or *Augustinian* theodicy, because Augustine systematized it. According to this view, evil and suffering came as a result of the

free choice of human beings, beginning with Adam and Eve (Original Sin). A very serious question that arises from this approach is, “Is every human suffering caused by the free choice of human beings?” Certainly not! This mirrors the incompleteness of this approach^{ix}.

The retaliatory approach

The third approach sees evil and suffering as God’s punishment. In other words, in response to human sin, God punishes humans by evil and suffering. The Old Testament accounts of the flood and the plagues in Egypt reflect this view, which was later taken up by John Calvin, Karl Barth and others of the Reformed tradition. This view distorts our understanding of God as loving and merciful^x.

The redemptive approach

According to the fourth approach, suffering is redemptive. This view draws on the Suffering Servant’s Songs in Isaiah (40-45) and on the experience of Jesus in His passion and death. For those that hold this view, some human sufferings are but an expiatory payment on a debt, whether one’s own or that of others. Jesus Christ is the arch type of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah - the one who accepts abuse unto death. This notwithstanding, the redemptive approach explains only some

suffering, not all, and it is not clear what this redemptiveness means^{xi}.

The process approach

The fifth approach was first seen in Iranaeus' writings and later in the writings of Charles Hartshorne, John Hick and Teilhard de Chardin. Suffering and evil, in this view, are seen as realities that are inevitable in an unfinished world that is evolving towards its fulfilment and so is in the process of growth. In other words, they are the natural spin-off, the inevitable growing pains of matter and spirit evolving from fetal immaturity into fullness of being (cf. Rom. 8:22-23). Thus, this view is referred to as the *Process*, *Developmental* and *Evolutionary* approach. This view paints God as being harsh and as one who denies or is ignorant of the fact that suffering is largely destructive and not a necessary condition of life at all^{xii}.

The remedial approach

The sixth response to the problem of suffering sees suffering as remedial, that is, God uses them as tests. In other words, God allows suffering and evil to test our moral and spiritual strength, and to purify us as we go through life. So, suffering and evil are a kind of moral and spiritual medicines for us humans. But this view too has been criticized for referring only to some suffering,

and for portraying God as a harsh taskmaster and disciplinarian. In the final analysis, we note that no one of the approaches is sufficiently adequate. And with regard to this, one cannot but face the mystery of suffering and the incomprehensibility of God^{xiii}.

THE MYSTERIOUS GOD AND THE MYSTERY OF SUFFERING

As we have already seen from the different responses to the problem of suffering, it is a reality that continues to elude humanity's complete understanding. In fact, it has come to be seen as a mystery. What is a mystery? A mystery is a hidden reality or secret. The Chambers's Twentieth Century Dictionary defines it as "that which is beyond human knowledge to explain." Etymologically, the word mystery comes from the Greek word *mysterion* which has its root in the Aramaic *raz* that means a 'secret thing', and corresponds to the classical Hebrew word *sod*.^{xiv} Thus, suffering is a mystery – a hidden reality that goes beyond human comprehension. The mystery of suffering has been identified by many scholars to be intimately connected to the mystery of God.

Karl Rahner, in connecting the mystery of suffering with the mystery of God, wrote: "The incomprehensibility of suffering is

part of the incomprehensibility of God. Not in the sense that we could deduce it as necessary and thus inevitably as clarified from something else that we already know of God. If this were so it would not be at all incomprehensible. But the very fact that it is really and eternally incomprehensible means that suffering is truly a manifestation of God's incomprehensibility in his nature and in his freedom. In his nature because, despite what might be described as the terrible amorality of suffering (at least on the part of children and innocent people), we have to acknowledge the pure goodness of God, which needs no acquittal before our tribunal. In his freedom, because this, too, if it wills the suffering of the creature, is incomprehensible, since it could achieve without suffering the sacred aims of the freedom that wills suffering. Suffering then is the form ... in which the incomprehensibility of God himself appears".^{xv} Thus for Karl Rahner, to accept that God is the intractable mystery is to accept too the inexplicability and unanswerability of suffering, since they are one and the same event.^{xvi}

Still more, he says that when in our present state we accept suffering in view of the incomprehensibility of God and His freedom, we in a concrete form accept God in Himself and allow Him to be God. Anything short of this acceptance would amount to the affirmation of our own idea of God rather than the affirmation of God in Himself. Hence, he concludes: "There is no

blessed light to illumine the dark abyss of suffering other than God himself. And we find him only when we lovingly assent to the incomprehensibility of God himself, without which he would not be God.”^{xvii}

THE CHRISTOLOGICAL DIMENSION OF SUFFERING
Jesus Christ is the revelation of God (cf. Heb 1:1-2), and the Cross has a prominent position in his entire life.

From Birth

Many, indeed, have written about the life of Jesus Christ, but none seems to capture so well the interplay of the cross and glory in His life like Fulton Sheen:

Every other person who came into this world came unto it to live. He (Jesus) came into it to die... The story of every human person begins with birth and ends with death. In the person of Christ, however, it was His death that was first and His life that was last... It was not so much that His birth cast a shadow on His life and thus led to His death; it was rather that the Cross was first, and cast its shadow back to His birth. His has been the only life in the world that was ever lived backward.^{xviii}

He, who is the Son of God, of whose kingdom there was to be no end, was born in the filthiest place in the world, a stable, Purity was born.^{xix} Following was His circumcision, the first bloodshedding of the Child, the price of the name He was to bear, the foreshadowing of the future price that He must one day pay that

the promise contained in that name Jesus (the divine presence which delivers and saves) might be fulfilled^{xx}. After His circumcision, St. Luke gives the account of the Presentation. The prophet Simeon prophesied that Jesus would be ‘a sign of contradiction’ (Lk. 2:34-35), setting the stage for His future suffering and rejection.

At the Temptation

In the accounts of the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke), the evangelist writes that after Jesus’ baptism, he was led into the wilderness, where He fasted for forty days and nights, and was tempted by the devil (Mt. 4:1-11; Mk. 1:12-13; Lk. 4:1-13). The wilderness, with all its unfriendliness, became Jesus’ “school” (to learn divine truths), just as it had been for Moses and Elijah, and later for St. Paul.

In His Teaching

The cross as the way to glory formed the crux of Jesus’ teaching. While with the apostles, scripture says: “Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again” (Mk.8:31; cf. also Mt.16:21, & Lk.9:21-22); “And you will be hated by all because

of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved” (Mt.10:22); “If anyone want to be a follower of mine, let him deny himself, take up his cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it” (Lk.9:23-24); “Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (Jn.12:24).

At the Transfiguration

When Jesus taught that suffering was going to be His instrument of bringing about the salvation of human kind, the people of His time (particularly the Jews) could not understand. Jesus had to take Peter, James and John up to the mountain to reveal to them His glory hidden in the Cross. “They had been shattered by Jesus’ statement that he was going to Jerusalem to die. That seemed to them the complete negation of all that they understood of the Messiah... Things were happening which not only baffled their minds but were also breaking their hearts. What they saw on the mountain of the transfiguration would give them something to hold on to, even when they could not understand. Cross or no Cross, they had heard God’s voice acknowledge Jesus as his Son.”^{xxi} To believe in His Calvary, they must see the glory that shone beyond the scandal of the Cross.^{xxii}

In His Passion and Death

The Synoptic Gospels, all record the agonising experience of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane (Mt.26:36-46; Mk.14:32-42; Lk.22:40-46). St. John, however, mentions it in passing (18:1). From the accounts of the evangelists, it is evident that Jesus suffered acute mental and spiritual agony and serious loneliness too. He said, “I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here and stay awake with me.” (Mt.26:38)

After the experience at Gethsemane He was betrayed by His closest friends. This led to His arrest and trial (cf. Mt.26:47ff; Mk.14:43ff; Lk.22:47ff; Jn.18:1ff). Following His sentence, Jesus was scourged (Mt.27:26; Mk.15:15; Lk.23:16; Jn.19:1). The Roman manner of scourging criminals, especially those condemned to death by crucifixion was terrible. The victim was stripped and tied to either a pillar in a bent position with his back exposed in a way that he could not move, or he was stretched rigid upon a frame. The scourges used were made of leather thongs studded with sharpened pellets of lead or iron and pieces of bone. When used, it literally ripped the victim’s back to pieces, such that many usually lost consciousness under the lash, others emerged raving mad from the experience, while only a few still remained unbroken. The soldiers derided Him, dressed Him in a purple robe and crowned Him with thorns. He was

given the heavy wood of the cross to begin the long trek on a hot afternoon to Calvary. Many jeered at Him as He passed through the streets; He fell several times but He rose up again to continue the journey to Calvary.

When He reached Calvary, He was nailed to the cross, in the middle of two criminals (Mt. 27:38; Mk. 15:27; Lk. 23:32; Jn. 19:18). On the cross, His enemies taunted him (cf. Mt. 27:39-43; Mk. 15:29-32; Lk. 23:35-37). Even one of the criminals crucified with Him taunted him (23:39-43). When the Saviour on the cross demanded for one last act of kindness from humanity, it was turned down. “I am thirsty”, Jesus said. And they put a sponge soaked in vinegar on a hyssop and held it up to His mouth”. Seeing that the Father’s will has been accomplished, He uttered a loud cry (of triumph) and breathed His last with the words of the Psalmist on His lips: “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” Only at this point was he accepted as the Son of God (Mk 15:39).

THE TRINITARIAN DIMENSION OF SUFFERING

In the event of the Cross, God seems to be absent or rather silent. Jesus is presented as the “abandoned”, the “forsaken”. Mathew and Mark especially records that Jesus died with the words of abandonment on his lips: “My God, my God, why have you

forsaken me?” But, Jon Sobrino sees a dialectic of presence and absence on the Cross, that is, God was at once present (2Cor. 5.19ff) and absent (Mk. 15:34). In other words, God participated in Christ’s suffering on the Cross through His apparent absence. The apparent absence of God on the Cross of Jesus is a revelation of God – as mystery. What is unexpected and novel for us is that God too participates in suffering – though impassable and immutable, He chose to be passable and mutable in Christ for us.^{xxiii}

In the same light Jurgen Moltmann notes: “Jesus ‘forsakenness’ on the cross, the surrender of the Son by the Father and the love which does everything – gives everything – suffers everything – for lost men and women. God is love. That means God is self-giving. It means he exists for us: on the cross. To put it in Trinitarian terms – the Father lets his Son sacrifice himself through the spirit ‘The Father is crucifying love, the Son is crucified love, and the Holy Spirit is the unvanquishable power of the cross’.”^{xxiv} The cross is therefore a place of revelation because it opens the way to the Trinity. On the cross, just as in all the events of Christ, Jesus is with the Father through the Holy Spirit. This presence of the Godhead on the cross reveals something new about God: the fact that God too, can suffer^{xxv}.

This implies that suffering was included in God's plan of salvation, and the Godhead was involved in it.

TOWARDS A CREDIBLE CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO SUFFERING

The most credible Christian approach to suffering is the *Faith Solution approach* – the one adopted by Job in the Scripture. According to this view, since suffering and evil are mysteries just as God is, all that one can do is to follow the examples of Job and Jesus. And this entails facing and accepting suffering in faith, while seeing it as part of God's plan and will for one's life. The likes of Karl Rahner, John Cobb and Simone Weil upheld this view. This approach to suffering has been challenged by Dorothy Soelle in her book, "Suffering", for its tendency to promote 'Christian masochism' and passivity^{xxvi}. Notwithstanding this criticism, the Faith Solution approach seems most realistic and offers the best meaning to suffering.

Christ has made it clear that those who would follow Him would experience suffering. "If any wants to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me" (Lk. 9:23); "In the world you shall have tribulations, but be of good cheer I have overcome the world" (Jn. 16:33). Saint Paul was clear about this too: "Indeed, all who want to live a godly

life in Christ Jesus would be persecuted” (2 Tim. 3:12). The Apostles praised God in the face of suffering (Acts 5:41). St Peter teaches that suffering is not something to be ashamed of (1 Pet. 4:16), but that we should rather rejoice to be counted as ‘partakers in the sufferings of Christ’ (1 Pet. 4:12-14). The author of the letter to the Hebrews sees suffering as God’s way of shaping us in love, ‘My child, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord or lose heart when you are punished by him; for the Lord disciplines those whom he loves, and chastises every child whom he accepts. Endure trial for the sake of discipline. God is treating you as children.’ (Heb. 12:5-7). The cross from these perspectives is a concrete element in the Christian life.

However, this is not to say that Christians should relax in the face of human suffering, no! Christians have a responsibility to alleviate suffering where and when possible. The likes of Jon Sobrino and Dorothy Soelle called this, “solidarity in suffering”. According to Jean Galot, “...the Christian’s participation in Christ’s painful destiny must be accompanied by an eagerness to alleviate the sufferings of others and to reduce the anguish in the world.”^{xxvii} John Paul II in this regard says, “... One (the Christian) must cultivate this sensitivity of heart, which bears witness to compassion towards the suffering person. Sometimes

this compassion remains the only or principal expression of our love for and in solidarity with the sufferer.”^{xxviii}

Apart from showing solidarity to those who suffer, the Christian is also expected to suffer *with* and *for* Christ. Jesus Christ has already given us the example of His life (1 Pet 2:21-24). John Paul II said: “In this body (the Church), Christ wishes to be united with every individual, and in a special way he is united with those who suffer... For, *whoever suffers in union with Christ* – just as the apostle Paul bears his “tribulations” in union with Christ – not only receives from Christ that strength... but also “completes” by his suffering “what is lacking Christ’s afflictions”.^{xxix} It was through His suffering and death that Jesus Christ entered into His life of glory. The cross instead of being a thing of shame and a mark of failure, has become a path to glory in Christ Jesus. Jesus’ death transcended the whole of suffering to transform it into resurrection. His life made sense out of suffering. It is in this regard that John Kilroy wrote, “Christ didn’t come to alter human history but to be present in human history. Christ, in a sense, rescues us from our suffering by standing with us in our suffering. His witness gives suffering its meaning and purpose. But death to resurrection took time. One was not immediate to the other. Jesus had prepared his followers for this, but not many had been able to hear. It was a challenge

then to accept the interim period of inactivity; it is a challenge to accept it today”^{xxx}.

3.4 Conclusion

Suffering is an age-long problem. It is a reality that is universal, real and painful. More so, it cannot be easily explained away. In truth, it is a mystery, just as God Himself is a mystery, thus creating a link between suffering and God. As such, it is only in Jesus Christ, God-made-man, and in uniting our sufferings with His that we can find the full value and meaning of suffering. This is the faith solution approach to human suffering.

ENDNOTES

ⁱ Milburn J. Thompson, *Justice and Peace: A Christian Primer*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2003, p. 198.

ⁱⁱ Kristiaan Depootere, “A Different God: A Christian View of Suffering” in the *Louvain Theological & Pastoral Monographs*, 17, Louvain, Peeter Press, 1995, pp. 23 & 24.

ⁱⁱⁱ Emeka Obiezu, *Towards a Politics of Compassion: Socio-political dimensions to Christian responses to suffering*. New York: AuthorHouse, 2008, p. 1.

^{iv} Donald Griffin, Cf Ian Barbour, *Nature, Human Nature and Gods*, London: SPCK, 2002, p.105.

^v Michael Stoeber, *Reclaiming Theodicy: Reflections on Suffering, Compassion and Spiritual Transformation*. New York: Macmillan, 2005, p.20.

^{vi} Eric Cassell, *Nature of Suffering*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991, 31; John Hick, *Evil and the God of love*. San Francisco: Harper and Row Publishers, 1966, p.318.

-
- vii Richard Sparks, "Suffering" in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, Michael Downey (ed.), Collegeville, Minnesota, The Liturgical Press, 1993, pp. 950-952; cf. Bill Cosgrave, op. cit., pp.468-469.
- viii Richard Sparks, "Suffering" in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, pp.468-469.
- ix Richard Sparks, "Suffering" in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, pp.468-469.
- x Richard Sparks, "Suffering" in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, pp.468-469.
- xi Richard Sparks, "Suffering" in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, pp.468-469.
- xii Richard Sparks, "Suffering" in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, pp.468-469.
- xiii Richard Sparks, "Suffering" in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, pp.468-469.
- xiv Xavier Leon-Dafour, *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, London, Geoffrey Chapman, 1970, p. 331.
- xv Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations, Vol. 19: Faith and Ministry*, London, Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd., 1983, p.206.
- xvi Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations, Vol. 19: Faith and Ministry*, p.207.
- xvii Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations, Vol. 19: Faith and Ministry*, p.208.
- xviii Fulton J. Sheen, *Life of Christ*, Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 1958, p. 20.
- xix Fulton J. Sheen, *Life of Christ*, p. 28
- xx Fulton J. Sheen, *Life of Christ*, p. 38
- xxi William Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark*, Edinburgh, The Saint Andrew Press, 1975, p. 211
- xxii Fulton J. Sheen, *Life of Christ*, p. 158
- xxiii Jude A. Ossai, *Suffering People and the Suffering God in the Christology of Jon Sobrino*, Rome, 1998, pp. 43-44
- xxiv Jurgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God: The Doctrine of God*, London, SCM Press, 1981, p. 83
-

^{xxv} Jude A. Ossai, *Suffering People and the Suffering God in the Christology of Jon Sobrino*, p. 47

^{xxvi} Jude A. Ossai, *Suffering People and the Suffering God in the Christology of Jon Sobrino*, p. 47

^{xxvii} Jean Galot, *Christ, Our Liberator*, Rome, Gregorian University Press, 1982, p. 308

^{xxviii} John Paul II, Apostolic Letter, *Salvifici Doloris*, Home bush, St. Paul Publications, 1984, p. 72

^{xxix} John Paul II, Apostolic Letter, *Salvifici Doloris*, p. 55

^{xxx} Joan Kilroy, "A Question of Suffering" in *Review for Religious*, Vol. 41, No. 1, January/February, 1982, p. 70