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Religious Responses to Suffering

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A Sunni Islamic Approach to Suffering

In the streets of Ratchaburi, Thailand, the harsh realities of a developing nation are clear and shocking. Houses are nothing more than odd corrugated rooftop scraps, pasted together with the inescapable and unforgiving poverty that saturates the town. Most devastating is to observe the obvious unequal distribution of educational resources among children of different economic classes. During my year there I was barraged with an intense and visceral desire to take action against the injustice that I saw. It was not a cognitive reaction, or a result of extensive contemplation on the specific circumstances that give rise to such unfortunate lifestyles. Rather, I was compelled to help because of the standard of living that I believe in and because I felt indebted to the rich experiences in life that I was fortunate enough to know. Similarly, my motivation was not a religious one because my childhood exposure to Christianity focused more on personal salvation rather than community outreach. Found throughout the religious understanding of suffering is an innate human tendency to search for explanations behind the present situation. The three monotheistic religions, Christianity, Judaism and Islam, attempt to understand the reasons for suffering and invite extensive etiological debate. However, as a social activist I am not primarily concerned with the theoretical analysis regarding the causes of suffering. Instead, I am more concerned, while in the presence of actual misery and hardship, with the ways that religious beliefs function within a community. More so

than Judaic or Christian reactions to suffering, a Sunni Islamic approach advocates a constructive and active protest against unjust situations. Islamic theology and practice focus less on cognitive understanding of these circumstances and why they came to be, and instead maintain the necessity of challenging suffering in accordance with Quranic precepts. In the context of social activism geared towards alleviating suffering, Islam is the most effective Abrahamic religion in motivating its religious followers to take action against present day suffering. Specifically, Sunni Islam is most effective in ameliorating suffering because it stresses concrete action over cognitive explanation, approaches suffering as a challenge to be overcome while still maintaining faith in the omnipotent God, and in demanding a political Islamic entity, unifies a community.

While Sunni Muslims undoubtedly acknowledge possible reasons for suffering, such as a punishment for sinful actions or a test of faith, they approach the dilemma as an actual problem rather than a theoretical one (Bowker 115). In Judaism and Christianity there is extensive contemplation surrounding etiology within the religions. Unanswered questions regarding the purpose and distribution of suffering strangle the attention of followers. For example, Christian ascetic practices often consist of monks venturing out into the desert for long periods of time to contemplate the multiple dimensions of misery (Lane 161). In a Sunni Islamic interpretation of suffering, these questions are tempered by other, more practical questions. What can we do to improve our situation? I view this area of concern as the fundamental starting point for any conscientious human being contesting adversity. While in Thailand I could have contemplated the reason why some children are granted access to satisfactory educational facilities when others have limited contact with insufficient, basic schooling. Yet, during this contemplative exploration a

glaring reality remained; the children continued to fall through the cracks of an underfunded educational system. How we choose to respond to the educational crisis in Thailand serves as a model for a broader dilemma facing humankind. Do we direct our attention towards understanding God's motivations and actions within our lifetimes, or accept our inability to understand the reason for suffering and concentrate on alleviating suffering within our communities? Sunni Islam clearly affirms that if we wish to initiate change we must approach these miserable circumstances as actual problems rather than theoretical ones.

The emphasis on God's omnipotence within the Islamic doctrine helps to dissolve the etiological debate that is so prevalent within both Judaism and Christianity. Due to the Quran's devotion to asserting that God is in complete control, Sunni Muslims contend that man cannot, and therefore should not, begin to comprehend God's will (Bowker 112). Islamic theology demands submission to God, in accepting the totality of his control. Furthermore, the Quran also stresses that "society should be organized to extend and to implement the justice and compassion of God" (Bowker 117). Acting on this assumption provides the impetus for selfless good deeds. By eliminating the notion that man can understand God's will and thus act accordingly in hopes of guaranteed salvation, strong adherents of the Sunni Islamic understanding are relieved of eschatological self-interest. When I decided to volunteer to teach English in low-income Thai schools, it was not because I hoped to be rewarded in the afterlife, nor should it be. On the contrary, we must perceive suffering as a challenge to contest while continuing to have faith in God. Bowker acknowledges this essential difference of ethos between Islam and Christianity by comparing the attitudes of Jesus and Muhammad when confronted with the possibility

of defeat. He states that “Jesus in Gethsemane opted for the way to the cross, Muhammad at the hijra opted for the way of success, for the way of co-operating with the power of God, and of becoming God’s agent in the elimination of evil and injustice” (122). Contrary to the Sunni Islamic support of contesting suffering, many Christians tend to advocate indulgence in suffering as an emulation of Jesus Christ’s life. They ascertain that through this imitation you become closer to Christ and thus closer to God (Bowker 93). Similarly, during the rabbinic period Jews asserted that suffering is a test from God. This declaration was derived from Scripture, reading “[God tests] the poor man to see if he will accept suffering without complaint” (qtd. in Bowker 34). Jewish interpretation of this passage assumes that suffering should therefore be accepted and endured. Doesn’t this assumption, however, militate against any form of social activism? The function of religion within a community should not contribute to the submissive acceptance of injustice. Muslims must submit to the omnipotence of God, not injustice, and instead understand suffering as a challenge to be defeated as God’s faithful agent.

With the intention to spread Quranic justice to all, not just a chosen people, Islam demands an ever-expanding Ummah. This community, acting in accordance with the Quran, strives to implement Quranic justice without specific application to a select few. Because of the Sunni Islamic approach to suffering, which motivates followers to contest hardship as a challenge from God, Sunni Muslims are united in their campaign to spread their doctrine. We see this united campaign to contest suffering throughout past and present day Muslim communities. For example, one collaborative effort among many is the One Ummah Foundation, “a private non-profit foundation dedicated to eliminating child labor by breaking the cycle of illiteracy and poverty in underdeveloped countries”

("Mission"). On the other hand, the Judaic response contrasts this proactive communal struggle, which is intended for the general public. In conjunction with the history of the Jewish people, Judaic responses to suffering generally adhere to the notion that God shows his will through the chosen people, and thus Jews are encouraged to endure hardship while remaining faithful. This outlook, to accept and endure hardship, appeals to a powerless people, and as Jews historically have been an oppressed community, this outlook supports their situation (Bowker 37). The notion of God's chosen community is far too exclusive and therefore counterproductive in any hopes of alleviating suffering on a global scheme. Additionally, by supporting faithful endurance of suffering the community becomes deprived of a unified effort to fight together as dedicated agents of God. Faith and endurance are both forms of alleviating suffering, but as an Ummah, Muslims demand a forceful response ("Mission"). In my own experience, volunteering to teach English to low income students is an example of this forceful response. I took action as a concerned member of the community. In a Sunni Islamic manner, I employed my skills within a community in hopes of reducing harsh and unsatisfactory conditions. By contesting suffering, one need not denounce its value. But to most effectively strengthen a community and expand the community's values beyond its original population, it is vital that some driving force to alleviate misery exists. Furthermore, in both Judaism and Christianity selfless good deeds for the betterment of a community are impossible when there is so much emphasis on personal salvation. As I mentioned earlier, in Sunni Islam good deeds cannot be considered a vehicle for salvation because no human can determine how God will judge us (Bowker 115). Therefore, good deeds are a vehicle for a more just and moral community.

A Sunni Islamic approach to the challenge of suffering most effectively helps ameliorate hardship. Through a concerned community, bound together in a unified effort to implement Quranic justice, Sunni Muslims actively protest harsh and unforgiving conditions. Whereas other monotheistic traditions focus on personal expiation, Sunni Islam motivates followers to contest the challenge of suffering as faithful agents of God. During my year in Thailand I was fortunate enough to employ my language skills within the community in an active way that yielded results. Students who otherwise would not have learned English, a language with increasing importance in a tourist economy, were given the opportunity to succeed in a competitive work force. As an impoverished community we were faced with a seemingly insurmountable obstacle. We were faced with two choices; should we enslave ourselves in the unending search for reason behind our situation, or should we take on the challenge to overcome our hardship as a unified community? In a Sunni Islamic fashion the unified community agreed to contest the present condition, and the results were miraculous.

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