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THE PROBLEM OF SUFFERING IN THE QUR'AN

In his recent book, *Evil and the God of Love*,¹ Dr John Hick examined various Christian responses to the problem of evil. He traced two related, but in important respects different, paths of thought, which correspond to the two main ways in which the genesis or origin of evil have been understood: either as a capacity for goodness which has not yet been realised (with life, therefore, as a 'vale of soul-making'), or as an original defect which has vitiated all subsequent life. The former is a 'minority' report, which Dr Hick called 'Irenaean', since the first person of renown to put it forward in reasonably articulate form was Irenaeus. The latter is the dominant, or majority, report, which Dr Hick called 'Augustinian', since Augustine's formulation of it became deeply and profoundly influential in subsequent Christian thought. The differences are not absolute, but the contrasts are clear: 'Instead of the Augustinian view of life's trials as a divine punishment for Adam's sin, Irenaeus sees our world of mingled good and evil as a divinely appointed environment for man's development towards the perfection that represents the fulfillment of God's good purpose for him.'²

That passage at once isolates the extreme importance of the instrumental understanding of suffering in the Irenaean view, since suffering may well contribute to 'the making of a soul'. Dr Hick was careful not to offer this as a total 'solution',³ but he also recognised it as an important element of an evaluation of suffering.⁴ It is, therefore, all the more remarkable that there is a striking and curious gap in his book. There is no really adequate account of Christian spirituality in practice. In fact, the instrumental understanding of suffering is a frequently expressed part of Christian spirituality, and it is indeed hard to see how the distinctive patterns of Christian spiritual life could possibly exist without it. The Irenaean view, therefore, appears as an essential element in many Christian spiritual writers, though by no means necessarily in isolation from the Augustinian.

This very interesting omission is perhaps to be explained by the fact that

¹ (London, Macmillan, 1966).

² *Evil and the God of Love*, p. 221.

³ See especially *op. cit.*, p. 239.

⁴ Thus R. Pucetti felt able to begin his summary of Hick's position with the words: 'Hick's particular instrumentalist approach . . .' (*Religious Studies*, II, 1967), p. 258.

accounts of spiritual exercise or experience are not a philosopher's concern—though one would certainly expect them to be the concern of an historian of ideas. The omission is all the more serious, because it produces a distorted impression of the importance of instrumentality in Christian thought and practice. By divorcing thought from life it underestimates the actual adoption of the Irenaean view by Christians. It therefore produces an artificial contrast between Christianity and certain other religions in the Western tradition. Dr Hick was not, of course, concerned with other religions, but it is of interest that elsewhere in the Western religious tradition the instrumental understanding of suffering appears, in no uncertain terms, as the majority report. This is even true of Marxism: without prejudging the question whether Marxism is or is not a religion, it is evident that Marxism has held a strongly instrumental view of suffering¹—sometimes with tragic or even horrifying results. It is equally true that in Islam the instrumental view is the dominant, or majority, view. The purpose of this article is to illustrate this from the Qur'an, by examining the Quranic understanding of suffering and of human responses to it. To proceed further than the Qur'an is obviously not possible in the space available.

Islam as a whole stands within the Western tradition, having particularly close links with the Judaeo-Christian tradition. There is nothing 'academic' about that observation—that is to say, it is not a conclusion reached by observing literary and theoretical connections between the Qur'an and the Judaeo-Christian tradition, although those connections exist. It is, quite simply, what the Qur'an claims of itself. The Qur'an claims repeatedly to be the same revelation which God has already entrusted to such faithful servants as Abraham, Moses and Jesus, to mention only the most prominent. Those earlier figures are not confined to Biblical ones—Ad and Thamud and the Sabaeans have also received their prophets. It is fundamental to the Qur'an that God is One and that in consequence his revelation is One also; God cannot speak now with one voice, now with another; the message is the same, even though the accidents of its expression in particular ages or places may differ. The fact that the holy books of Jews and Christians *do* differ, not simply in the forms of expression but also in the substance of their message, is a proof, so far as the Qur'an is concerned, that Jews and Christians have corrupted the revelation entrusted through their prophets to them. The Qur'an, therefore, in its own estimate, represents the intended revelation of God in its pure form, but that is not to deny its necessary connections with the preceding religious situation:

¹ See my forthcoming book *Problems of Suffering in Religions of the World* (Cambridge, 1969) for a more detailed examination of this. Obviously, instrumentalism in Marxism is very different from what Christians have understood by the instrumental importance of suffering, but the connections are there. The mention of Marxism is a reminder of another, equally surprising, omission in Dr Hick's book, namely, the discussion of (or at least cross reference to) Eastern orthodoxy, particularly Russian Orthodoxy, with its quite distinctive developments of creative suffering.

'He has laid out for you as a path the same religion¹ which he enjoined on Noah, and which he revealed to you, and which he enjoined on Abraham and Moses and Jesus, that they should observe the religion and not make divisions within it.'²

This does not mean that the Qur'an is a sort of anthology, repeating, parrot-fashion, elements of pre-existing traditions. On the contrary, the Qur'an *belongs* to a tradition of thought, but it makes a unique interpretation of it, and it expresses it in a very distinctive way. As each nation has had its own prophet, and his message has been related to the circumstances of his own time, so the Qur'an is, as it says, the Arabic revelation. It is not a different revelation, but the timeless revelation of God related to the Arab situation as opposed to, for example, the Chinese or British. This has to be remembered in connection with the Islamic response to suffering, since the language and imagery of the Qur'an are directly related to the circumstances in which Muhammad lived, and yet the Qur'an is regarded definitively as revelation: the mother of the Book is laid up in heaven. Thus the words of the Qur'an are regarded by Muslims as having absolute and timeless importance, and yet it is recognised that they were related to the circumstances of Muhammad's own time.

Applied to suffering, this means, in effect, that suffering is treated in the Qur'an as it occurs, in direct and simple terms, not as a theoretical problem. Anyone who lives in or near the desert is bound to be aware how vulnerable life is. It is constantly threatened by drought or famine; its closely-knit kinship groups are frequently threatened by death or by external attack. The treatment of suffering in the Qur'an is to a great extent conditioned by the actual ways in which suffering most commonly occurred. The Qur'an is related to concrete particulars of life, not to theoretical abstractions, and in this it is certainly in line with the Judaeo-Christian tradition. This is really to point out the obvious, but it needs to be remembered, not least because it helps to explain the very direct and simple language in which the rewards of paradise and the pains of hell are described. The imagery is derived directly from the actual 'fall-out' of suffering in a desert, or desert-related, community.

The Qur'an, therefore, starts where Judaism and Christianity start, with the actual facts of suffering, not with suffering conceived as a theoretical problem. Suffering is a part of what it means to be alive. Yet there is a clear realisation in the Qur'an that the facts of suffering do create certain problems. In Judaism of the Biblical period the problem was located primarily in distribution, in Christianity it was located primarily in vindication. Where is suffering located as a problem in the Qur'an? Or, to put it another way, how does suffering occur as a problem in the Qur'an?

¹ *Din*.

² xlii. 11 (13). References to the Qur'an are to Fluegel's edition; the numbers in brackets are the corresponding verses in the Egyptian edition.

The answer is that it very nearly does not occur at all. Suffering is given repeated consideration in the Qur'an, but there is a sense in which it is almost dissolved as a problem. That is so, because the Qur'an emphasises, as a characteristic of God, omnipotence as much as love. It must be said at once that it is not the one to the exclusion of the other. The Qur'an reiterates constantly the evidences of God's compassion and love, particularly in creation; and right at the beginning of the Qur'an there stands the underlying and essential foundation of all belief,—'praise be to God, . . . the merciful, the compassionate'.¹ Yet even there the assertion of mercy and compassion is in association with omnipotence; if the whole of that opening sentence had been quoted it would have read:

'Praise be to God, *the Lord of the universe,*
the merciful, the compassionate.'

Thus whereas in Christianity suffering occurs as a problem *principally* because it conflicts with the assertion that God is love, in Islam it occurs *principally* because it conflicts with the belief that God is omnipotent. It would be ludicrous and absurd to try to make the distinction absolute, but there is a certain difference in emphasis, which amounts to a difference in the exact location of the problem. The form of the problem in the Qur'an is stated very clearly in S.ii.210(214):

'Do you reckon that you will enter the garden
without there coming upon you the like of those
who have passed away before you?
Evils and griefs afflicted them and they trembled so much
that the apostle and those who were with him said,
"When will the help of God come?"
Oh, truly, the help of God is near!'

The problem is thus the apparent absence of God's control and power—the same sort of problem that faced Dt. Isaiah in the Exile: did the Exile mean, *ipso facto*, the impotence of God? Did it mean that God is unable to look after his own? What is at issue is the omnipotence of God, and it is made repeatedly clear in the Qur'an that suffering can only be understood by being contained within that omnipotence. S.iii.159(165), therefore, asks, in the context of the defeat of the Muslims in battle at Uhud:²

'What! when a blow strikes you, and you have already struck with its like, will you say, "Why has this happened?"
Say: "It is from your own selves."
Truly, God has power over every single thing.'³

¹ i. 2 (3).

² See further p. 191.

³ '*ala kulli shayin qadir*. This is a frequent refrain in the Qur'an, as will be seen in several of the quotations in this article.

It is in this sense that the 'problem of suffering' is, in the Qur'an, almost dissolved. In effect, the Qur'an says, 'Take the concept of omnipotence seriously: if your imagination of God is not too small, then suffering cannot be a problem, because the fact of suffering must necessarily be contained within the omnipotence of God'. Suffering occurs only within creation, which is God's creation—and assuming that the universe has not got out of his control, then suffering is not out of his control either. Suffering may thus raise questions about the nature of God, but it cannot occur as a problem, since the omnipotence of God is already established, or at least accepted, on other grounds.

Yet even put like that, suffering reasserts itself as a problem, because it calls in question whether the underlying assumption is in fact correct, that the universe is not out of God's control. In other words, suffering could occur here as a problem in traditional terms, because it calls in question a basic assertion about the nature of God, i.e. the assertion that 'God has power over every single thing'. Not surprisingly, therefore, much material in the Qur'an is devoted to substantiating and exemplifying exactly that assertion, that God *is* in control, and that suffering must in some sense be purposeful—that is to say, it must be a part of the purpose of God.

This theme of the power and the control of God, particularly in creation and in history, is so vital that it might almost be described as the essence of the Qur'an. Thus to give a typical example, which actually connects up this theme with the occurrence of suffering, S.xxxv begins:

'Praise be to God, the originator of the heavens and the earth,
who appointed the angels to be messengers,
with wings, two or three or four;
he extends creation as he wills.
Truly, God has power over every single thing.
Whatever God opens to men in the way of mercy
none can hold back,
and whatever he holds back
none can afterwards set loose;
and he is the powerful, the wise.'¹

There is nothing, not even in the furthest imaginable extent of the universe, which can possibly lie beyond him:

'To God belong the East and the West.
No matter where you turn
there is the face of God.
Truly God is all-embracing, all-knowing.'²

Supremely he has control over creation, and thus over life and death itself, and this, again, is one of the commonest themes in the Qur'an:

¹ xxxv. 1 f.

² ii. 109 (115).

'Truly, it is God who splits open the grain and the date-stone;
 he brings forth the living from the dead,
 and he brings forth the dead from the living.
 That, precisely, is God.'¹

At the beginning of S.xxii this assertion of the power of God over life and death is directly related to the vicissitudes of human life and in particular to the pitiable state of senility:²

'O men, if you are in doubt about the resurrection,
 surely we created you from dust,
 then from a drop of sperm,
 then from a clot of blood,
 then from flesh formed and unformed,
 that we might give you understanding.
 And we set what we will in the wombs for an appointed time,
 then we bring you forth as infants,
 then that you may come of age—
 and some of you die,
 while others are kept back to an abject state of life
 so that (a man) knows nothing having once known much.
 And you see the earth parched;
 then when we send down rain on it
 it stirs and swells and puts forth growth
 of every lively species.
 That is so, because it is God who is the truth,
 it is he who gives life to the dead
 and it is he who has power over every single thing.'³

This, then, becomes a fundamental part of the attitude of Islam, of right relationship with God, submission. It is the acceptance that God's authority and control extend over everything.

'Say: O God, king of kings,
 you give authority to whom you will
 and you remove authority from whom you will;
 you exalt whom you will
 and you diminish whom you will.
 In your hand is all good,
 truly, you have power over every single thing.'⁴

Again it is important to remember the circumstances in which Muhammad lived. The necessity was to argue not so much for the existence of God as for an adequate conception of God. The plea of the Qur'an is that all men should

¹ vi. 95.

² Cf. also xxx. 53 (54); in xlii, 48 (49)f. the same theme is related to the problem of barrenness.

³ xxii. 5, 6. For another typical example see xl. 69 (67)f., which ends with the classic phrases: *fa'idha qada 'amran fa'innama yaqulu lahu kun fayakunu*, 'When he decrees something, he simply says to it "Be", and it is.'

⁴ iii. 25 (26).

take their profession of God seriously, and that they should not diminish the overriding sovereignty of God by associating anything with him, or by expressing scepticism or doubt. Thus:

'And if you ask them who created the heavens and the earth
and subjected the sun and the moon,
they will certainly say, "God".
How, then, have they gone astray?
God multiplies sustenance for whomsoever of his servants he wills,
and he restricts it also.
Truly God knows every single thing.
And if you ask them who sends down rain from the sky,
thereby giving life to the earth after it was dead,
they will certainly say, "God".
Say: Praise be to God.
But most of them have no perception.'¹

The obvious and immediate implication of this is that if God is all-powerful, and if the universe is not out of control, then suffering must in some sense come from God. There can be no dualism. The Qur'an certainly exploits the Judaeo-Christian myth that at the creation of Adam one of the angels, Iblis, resented Adam's pre-eminent position and distinctive relationship with God, and that he refused to acknowledge Adam or bow down before him. God's immediate response was that Iblis must be destroyed, but he was prevailed upon to give him respite. Iblis, therefore, remains, along with his companion Satans and demons, to tempt men and to provoke them to evil. In this way the Qur'an gives a pictorial, mythological content to the experience of temptation. But the important point is that the activity of Iblis is still within the control of God—it is God, after all, who gave respite to Iblis in the first place, and thus allowed his activity.²

This is a simple but clear example of the way in which the Qur'an cuts through the problem of suffering by saying that it is within the control of God, and that in a sense, therefore, it comes from him. S.lxiv.11 puts it briefly:

'There is no kind of blow³
except by the leave of God, . . .'

But this raises serious questions about the character of God: to think of God as having created suffering to be an inherent fact of creation might be impressive in terms of omnipotence but not in terms of compassion. In conjunction, therefore, with the fundamental assertion of the control of God, there is, almost inevitably, a constant exploration of ways in which suffering can be understood as purposeful. It is this which leads directly into the quest for ways in which suffering can be understood as instrumental, and two

¹ xxix. 61–63.

² See, e.g., vii 10–18 (11–19).

³ Or, 'affliction'.

main answers emerge—or, perhaps more accurately, two answers are suggested with particular frequency.

The first is that suffering is a punishment for sin. This is clearly stated in S.iv. 80(78) f, which is dealing with those who proclaim their faith in God, but only so long as all goes well; as soon as they suffer a reverse, they turn on the Prophet of God, and blame him:

‘If some good befalls them, they say, “This is from God”,
but if evil strikes them, they say, “This is from you.”
Say: Everything is from God.
What has come over this people?
They scarcely understand a single thing that is told them.
Whatever in the way of good befalls you, it is from God;
and whatever in the way of evil befalls you, it is from yourselves.
We have sent you as an apostle to men,
and God is sufficient as a witness.’

In order to support this argument, that suffering is a punishment for sin, the Qur’an makes a particular appeal to experience, and to what is known to have happened in the past. For this, the Biblical narratives proved an especially rich field, since many of them tell of proud and evil men, who felt themselves to be secure but who were overwhelmed by God, often through the instrumentality of natural disasters. The stories of Noah, of Lot, and of Moses with Pharaoh lent themselves to such an argument. Thus in connection with Pharaoh, S.xliii. 55f says specifically:

‘So when they provoked us
we exacted retribution from them
and drowned them all.
And we made them extinct
and an example to later ages.’

In S.vii. 92–94 (94–96) a general conclusion is drawn from a preceding list of particular examples:

‘We never sent any prophet into a town
without catching hold of its people with misery and affliction
that they might perhaps be humble.
Then we made good take the place of evil until they increased
and said, “Affliction and prosperity visited our fathers.”
So we took them suddenly while they were not giving it a thought.
Yet if the people of those towns had believed and been godfearing
we would have opened upon them blessings from the heavens and the earth,
but they practised deceit,
so we took them according to what they had earned.”¹

¹ The point is made with even greater clarity in xi. 102 (100) ff.; cf. also the ‘parable of the city’ in xvi. 113 (112) f.

The Quranic examples are not confined to Biblical material, fruitful though it was. Narratives of other peoples in the past, particularly Ad and Thamud, appear on the same footing. Appeal is also made to local knowledge and experience, particularly to the evidence of the decline and fall of once great cities or empires. In addition the Qur'an explores success and failure in the history of Muhammad's own time, and here the two battles of Badr and Uhud provided a crucial case. Badr was a conflict in the second year of the *hijra* between a small Muslim force and a much larger Meccan army which was sent to defend the caravan of abu Sufyan. In ordinary terms the Muslims should have been routed, but in fact they won a notable victory. Inevitably, this was taken to be a sign of God's approval and of his support for the faithful.

'Already there has been for you a sign
in the two armies that met.
One was fighting in the cause of God,
the other was resisting in unbelief.
These saw with their own eyes twice their own number,
but God strengthens with his help whom he wills.
Surely in that is a warning for those who open their eyes.'¹

Badr for the Muslims, like the Exodus for the Jews, vindicated their trust and faith in God. But Uhud seemed to call that faith in question. In the following year, A.H. 3, the Meccans returned to the attack with an even larger army, and they defeated the Muslims at the hill Uhud. The question immediately arose: why had God allowed the faithful to be defeated? The question is raised in S.iii. 117-124 (121-30), and the answer given is—Islam:

'No part of the matter is yours,
whether he turns towards them, or whether he punishes them;
for truly they do dark deeds.
To God belongs everything in the heavens and in the earth:
he forgives whom he wills,
he punishes whom he wills,
and God is forgiving, compassionate.'²

This may be a commendable attitude, but it is scarcely an answer to the problem. That suffering is a consequence of evil is undoubtedly true in some instances, but not in all. The defeat at Uhud called that answer in question, because it raised the further problem of innocent or undeserved suffering—or perhaps more particularly it raised the problem of indiscriminate suffering. It is, once more, the problem of distribution. It would be hard to suppose that each individual in the Muslim community was so equally culpable that the defeat at Uhud was a just punishment.³ Furthermore, the Qur'an

¹ iii. 11 (13).

² iii. 123 (128) f.

³ The defeat at Uhud was, in fact, analysed as a deserved punishment for over-confidence and for regretting that booty had not fallen easily into their hands, but even so not all the Muslims

warns the faithful not to make the mistake of Job's friends and to assume that where they see suffering there also they see sin.¹ There should, for example, be no attempt to dissociate from the afflicted as though they were the objects of divine displeasure, nor should those who are unable to go to battle in God's cause be blamed. Still less should those who have died in battle be derided as though the survivors were enjoying the special favour of God. Thus the Qur'an is well aware that suffering may be a punishment for sin in some cases—and it produces an impressive list of examples—but it cannot be so in all cases. The Qur'an, therefore, produces a second major explanation, namely, that suffering is a trial or test. This again is a constant and repeated theme of the Qur'an, and it is frequently stated in explicit terms:

'Surely we will test you with something of fear, and of hunger,
and of loss of wealth and lives and produce;
yet give good tidings to the patient,
who, when calamity afflicts them, say,
"We belong to God, and to him are we returning."'²

Or again:

'Every soul tastes of death,
and we test you with evil and with good³ as a trial,
and to us you will return.'⁴

This means that human beings are, so to speak, 'out on licence', and that to live is to walk on a precarious razor's edge.

'There are some among men who serve God on an edge:⁵
if good befalls them they are well content,
if a trial befalls them they turn completely round.
They have lost this world and the next;
that is an unmistakable loss.'⁶

were guilty of that offence: see especially iii. 147 (153) f. The problem of indiscriminate suffering is raised elsewhere in the Qur'an, as, for example, in connection with the treaty of Hudaibiya: was it right to have made a treaty with the pagan enemies of God, or would it not have been better for the Muslims to have attacked Mecca and thus to have become the instruments of God's justice and punishment? On this, see especially xlviii. 25b.

¹ xxiv. 60 (61): 'There is no blemish in the blind, and there is no blemish in the lame, and there is no blemish in the sick . . .' Cf. also xlviii. 17.

² ii. 150 (155) f.

³ This at first sight rather casual phrase is in fact extremely important. It means that prosperity is as much a test as suffering: what is at stake is the way in which men behave in God's creation:

'When trouble touches a man he cries out to us,
then when we bestow a favour on him from ourselves he says:
"This has been given me because of knowledge."
Far from it, it is a trial,
but most of them do not realise.' (xxxix. 50 (49)).

⁴ xxi. 36 (35).

⁵ 'ala harfin: for several different applications of this phrase see Lane *ad loc.*

⁶ xxii. 11.

This is not left as a casual or coincidental explanation of suffering. The Qur'an asserts that sooner or later all will be tested in this way:

'If a wound bruises you,
a similar wound has bruised people previously.
Such days we deal out among men in turn
that God may know those who believe,
and that he may take from among you witnesses,
(and God has no love for those who do dark deeds)
and that God may prove those who believe
and bruise those who disbelieve.
Did you reckon that you would enter the garden
without God knowing those of you who make an effort
and without knowing those who are patient?'¹

That last question means that so far as the Qur'an is concerned it belongs to the nature of faith that it must and will be tried. The question appears again, in slightly different form, in S.ii 210 (214), and xxix.1(2) f makes it clear that a simple profession of faith is not enough:

'Do men reckon that they will be left alone if they say, "We believe",
and that they will not be tested?
We certainly tested those who lived before them,
and God will unquestionably know those who are consistently sincere,
and he will unquestionably know those who are false.'

This means that Muslims must expect to be tested, and that as Muslims there will be some particular trials which can only assail *them*. So, for example, they will be exposed to the hostility of those who believe that they themselves possess the revelation of God and that the claims of the Qur'an are false:

'You will certainly be put to the test in your wealth and in your lives,
and from those who were given the book before you,
and from those who associate other gods with God,
you will certainly hear much hurt.
But if you are patient and god-fearing,
then that, truly, is real endurance.'²

Or, to give a more precise example, some of the obligatory requirements and prohibitions of Islam were given to be a test: thus it is forbidden to kill game while in a state of ritual purity:

'You who believe: God tests you in the matter of game
which is within range of your hands and spears,
that God may know who fears him in secret.
After that, whoever transgresses, there will be a
heavy punishment for him.'³

¹ iii. 134 (140) f.

² iii. 183 (186).

³ v. 95 (94).

Thus suffering in the Qur'an is a necessary part of the purposes of God: it helps to create a faithful disposition and it also helps to distinguish the sincere from the insincere. What this means, in effect, is that suffering not only forms character, it also exposes it: it reveals a man's true nature.

Under pressure a man will reveal what he is really worth:

'If we give a man a taste of mercy from us,
and then remove it from him,
at once he is despairing and rebellious;
and if we give him a taste of favours after misfortune has touched him,
he is sure to say, "Evil has left me."
Truly he is exultant, boastful—
not so those who are patient and who do good deeds:
those are the ones for whom there is forgiveness
and a great reward.'¹

In these two main ways, suffering as a punishment and suffering as a trial, the Qur'an attempts to reconcile the fact of suffering with a belief in God's omnipotence and compassion. The Qur'an opts firmly for the theory of instrumentality—for the belief that suffering is an instrument of the purposes of God. In this way the Qur'an is able to maintain that, despite some appearances to the contrary, God is in control. A number of subsidiary implications flow out from those two basic ways of understanding suffering. If, for example, suffering is a punishment it follows that suffering endured without loss of faith and in the cause of faith helps towards acquittal,² and that it leads to life.³ Or again, exposing oneself voluntarily to suffering in the cause of God can be commended or even enjoined.⁴ Then again, the effects of suffering are important: faithfully accepted, suffering helps to produce an equal and balanced character—and conversely fear of suffering is a mark of inadequate trust.⁵ Despair is blasphemy.⁶ No doubt when the faithful are distressed, the godless will mock them and regard their suffering as an evidence of the absence of God, but that is precisely the moment at which to remember that God *is* in control:⁷ they may plot and devise against the faithful, but the devices of God far exceed theirs.⁸

¹ xi. 12–14 (9–11). This ironic observation of human fickleness is repeated frequently in the Qur'an—see especially xli. 49–51. For further examples see x. 13 (12), xvi. 55–57 (53–55), xxx. 32 (33) f., xxxix. 11 (8), lxx. 19–21.

² 'Those who left their homes and were driven out of them, and were harmed in my cause, and fought and were killed, I will certainly cover over their evil deeds, and I will bring them into gardens with rivers flowing beneath as a reward from God; and with God is the best of rewards.' iii. 194 f. (195); cf. also xxii. 57–61 (58–62).

³ 'Let those who fight in the cause of God sell the life of the present world for that of the next world. And whoever fights in the cause of God, whether he is killed or victorious, soon we will give him a great reward.' iv. 76 (74); cf. also ix. 20, xxii. 57 (58).

⁴ See the references above.

⁵ See, e.g., v. 57 (52).

⁶ This is said of the Jews in v. 69 (64). Cf. also xlii. 34–37.

⁷ ix. 50 f.

⁸ iii. 47 (54); see also viii. 30.

The instrumental understanding of suffering is sometimes stated in more specific terms, particularly in the belief that God uses suffering in order to bring men to their senses—though often this does not have the desired effect:

'If we had mercy on them
and removed whatever is upon them in the way of distress,
they would surely persist in their error, wandering blindly.
We have taken them in punishment in the past,
but they have not humbled themselves to their Lord,
nor have they abased themselves in supplication
until the time when we open against them
a door leading to hard punishment,
then they are overwhelmed at it.'¹

Furthermore, God deliberately appoints some men (by their preaching and teaching) to be a test—almost, as it were, a wedge driven into the world to separate the good from the evil:

'We did not send before you any of our messengers
without their eating food and going about in the market-places,
and we appointed some of you to be a test:
will you be patient?
For your Lord is well aware.'²

The instrumental theory of suffering is developed in another direction by the suggestion that men can use suffering as an instrument with which to combat or resist evil:

'Fight them (those who planned to expel Muhammad): God will punish them by your hands and humiliate them and help you against them, and he will heal the breasts of a believing people.'³

The Qur'an, therefore, expresses in different ways an instrumental view of suffering. In the light of this understanding of suffering, what, according to the Qur'an, should the response of men be?

To some extent the answer to this has already begun to appear, and it has revealed the outlines of what may be called 'the hard response': if the emphasis with reference to God is on power and control, the emphasis with reference to men's response must be on acceptance. The characteristic word used to describe that response is *subr*, 'patience', 'endurance', as in the passage quoted above:

'Give good tidings to the patient,
who, when calamity afflicts them, say:
"We belong to God, and to God we are returning."'⁴

¹ xxiii. 77–79 (75–77). For an historically-based example, see xliii. 47 (48).

² xxv. 22 (20).

³ ix. 14.

⁴ ii. 150 (155) f.

The Qur'an repeatedly advocates the attitude of patient endurance:¹ on man's part it is epitomised in the famous phrase, 'I take refuge in God', and that too is advocated by the Qur'an:

'If a temptation from Satan tempts you,
seek refuge in God.
Truly he hears and knows.'²

The attitude is perfectly expressed in S.vi. 163 (162):

'Say: truly my prayer, my sacrifice, my living, my dying
belong to God, the Lord of the universe.
There are none in association with him,
and thus I am commanded.
And I am the first of those who submit.'³

In itself this response scarcely deserves the adjective 'hard'. It only becomes so when it leads to fatalism or indifference: if the control of God is believed to be absolute or even predestinarian, then concern or anxiety about your own sufferings or about the sufferings of others become totally inappropriate. It does not take much for patience and endurance to become hardened and thick-skinned, and there are certainly passages in the Qur'an which, in isolation, might be open to that interpretation.⁴ Furthermore, if suffering is understood as a part of the strict justice of God it may easily be used to support a 'hard response'—'God does not seek injustice for any living being.'⁵ A reward based exactly on the balance between good and evil awaits all:

'God does not burden a soul except according to its capacity:
to it belongs what it has earned,
and against it stands what it has earned, . . .'⁶

Hence your concern should be for yourself, not for the fate of others:

'He who receives guidance receives it for his own self,
and he who goes astray in error strays to his own loss.
No bearer of burdens bears the burden of another.'⁷

To the sceptics who say, 'But it doesn't look like that'—i.e. 'why do the wicked prosper?' the Qur'an replies emphatically, 'Ultimately they do *not* prosper'. They may, like Iblis, have been given a respite, but it is only a postponement, not a cancellation:

¹ For typical examples see xi. 117 (115), xvi. 127 (126)b, xlvi. 34 (35), l. 38 (39), lii. 48.

² vii. 199 (200).

³ al-Muslimun.

⁴ See, e.g., lvii. 22 f., xvi. 73 (71), iii. 150 (156).

⁵ iii. 104 (108).

⁶ ii. 286.

⁷ xvii. 16 (15)a. This, too, can be expressed in terms of the hard response of dissociation:

'That was a nation which has passed away:

to it what it has earned, to you what you have earned,

and you will not be questioned concerning the things they did.' ii. 135 (141).

'They demand you to bring on the punishment:
if it had not been for a stated term
the punishment would have come upon them.
It will certainly come upon them all of a sudden
while they are not looking out for it.
They demand you to bring on the punishment;
truly Gehenna will encompass those who reject God.'¹

Thus the supernatural solution is invoked: present sufferings, in the sense that they are a warning and a more immediate punishment, are a foretaste of those to come—'disgrace in this world, a heavy punishment in the next'.² The final reckoning will take place after death—and the word 'final' is exactly right. There will be no alleviation, nor can the pains of hell be regarded as a limited purgation:³

The immediate, practical implication of this is that the acceptance of suffering in an attitude of Islam (patient trust in the overriding control and mercy of God)⁴ is worth while because of the greater rewards to come. The anomalies and vicissitudes of this life can be accepted because the balance will be restored in the life to come. And this, too, could be interpreted as a contribution to the 'hard response': suffering is put firmly in its place. It is insignificant compared with the great rewards of paradise to come, and since it is, in any case, entirely in the control of God there is no point in being over-concerned about it. 'It is the will of Allah' is a phrase that can easily become fatalistic.

But to interpret the Qur'an in that way would be to misrepresent it. However much the 'hard response' is supported by certain passages in the Qur'an it is tempered by other passages and themes of equal significance. It is tempered, for example, by the fact that repentance is a door to forgiveness; by the fact that God has always and with great clarity made the issues entirely clear, by repeated assurances of the compassion of God and of the fact that 'he will not tempt you more than you are able'.⁵ But above

¹ xxix. 53 f.

² ii. 108 (114)b, *et al.* For an exact statement of this see xli. 15 (16).

³ Sec, e.g., ii. 74 (80) f.

⁴ In naturalistic terms, 'He is the one who sends down rain after men have despaired of it, and spreads his mercy widely. He is the protector, worthy of praise.' (xliii. 27). In more specific terms: 'Do you not know that to God belongs authority over the heavens and the earth? He punishes whom he wills and forgives whom he wills, and God has power over every single thing.' (v. 44) (40). That God has warned all men in language they can understand is one of the main themes of the Qur'an. He has always done this in the past through prophets sent to every people, though this has often had little effect except in hardening the hearts of the wicked (see especially ii. 1-6 (2-7), which describes an experience comparable to that described in *Is.* vi. 9-13—verses which were used to describe the effects of Jesus' teaching. See also xxvi. 208 f., xviii. 52-8). This can be seen exactly in the continuation of a verse quoted above (p. 197). Having said that each soul bears its own burden and cannot relieve another it concludes: 'But we never punish until we have sent an apostle' (xvii. 16b). The responsibility of a prophet is simply to warn: 'Your duty is proclaiming, ours is reckoning.' (xiii. 40; see also iv. 65 f., vi. 51, 69 (70), xxv. 21 (22), xl. 14-19 (18).

⁵ So, for example, in the prayer which concludes S. ii: 'O our Lord, do not burden us beyond what we have strength to bear. Forgive us and pardon us—you are our protector, so help us against those who disbelieve.'

all a fatalistic and indifferent attitude to the occurrence of suffering is ruled out by the Qur'an itself. Although the Islamic attitude to suffering has at certain times and in certain individuals become fatalistic, that is a perversion of Islam, not its true expression, and the Qur'an militates against such an attitude.

This can be seen most directly in the fact that the Qur'an, far from suggesting that the only attitudes to suffering should be passive acceptance, repeatedly demands that suffering should be contested and as far as possible alleviated. This is the foundation of the very detailed and specific requirements in the Qur'an for a truly Muslim society, that particular instances of suffering and injustice should be removed. To examine the whole of the social teaching of the Qur'an would be a vast undertaking: here it is sufficient to underline the extreme importance of its existence. According to the Qur'an, society should be organised to extend and to implement the justice and compassion of God. Hence specific instances of hardship and suffering which existed in Muhammad's time are contested in the Qur'an: so, for example, war against evil is necessary but war in general should be defensive only; blood-vengeance is alleviated by compensation; customs governing marriage and divorce are changed for the greater protection of women; the position of slaves is safeguarded; the settlement of debts and of estates after death is made more equitable. In more general terms, the Qur'an encourages an attack on poverty—and *zakat*, alms-giving, is one of the 'five pillars of Islam'. It also warns against the evil consequences of anger, and it therefore urges time for reflection and for ascertaining the facts before action.

This concentration on positive action in society to alleviate suffering and injustice probably arose directly out of Muhammad's early experiences. Certainly S.xciii, which epitomises this attitude, is usually understood as referring to Muhammad:

'By the light of day
and by the night when it is at rest,
your Lord has not forsaken you
nor is he displeased.
Truly what is to come is better for you than what is now,
and soon your Lord will bestow gifts on you,
and you will be pleased.
Did he not find you an orphan and give you shelter?
Did he not find you wandering and give you guidance?
Did he not find you in need and give you riches?
As for the orphan, then, do him no harm;
as for the beggar, turn him not away;
and as for the favour of your lord, proclaim it.'

The compassion of Muhammad is directly referred to in S.ix. 129 (128):

'Now there has come to you from among yourselves a messenger from God: grievous to him is your suffering; he is anxious for you; among the believers he is gentle, compassionate.'¹

This active response to suffering is not a loose or coincidental attachment to the other more passive acceptance of suffering as being within the control of God: they are both intertwined² as a part of the definition of true religion:

'It is not piety that you turn your faces to the East and West, but piety is belief in God, and in the last day, and in the angels, and in the book, and in the prophets, and to give of your substance, however dear to you, to your family, to orphans, to those in need, to travellers, to beggars, for the ransom of slaves, for establishing prayer, and for the giving of regular charity; and those who fulfill whatever agreements they have undertaken, and are patient in evil and misfortune and peril, those are the ones who are sound, and those are they who are god-fearing.'³

In addition to advocating positive action against particular instances of suffering, the Qur'an also regards intercession for its removal as legitimate—though in the case of punishment, particularly of final punishment, this is less so. In S.xxvii there occurs a sequence of examples designed to prove the unity and uniqueness of God, in which the question 'Is there any god with God?' occurs as a refrain. One of these examples is the ability of God to answer prayer and remove distress:

'He who answers the distressed when he prays to him and removes the evil and appoints you to be inheritors of the earth. Is there any god with God? Little indeed do you remember.'⁴

This is all the more impressive when it is remembered how much the Qur'an restricts the scope and efficacy of intercession in general.⁵

In the Qur'an, therefore, these two attitudes of acceptance and of action are woven together: acceptance that God is in control, and action within the context of his creation. The Qur'an is able to hold these two together without tension because it has an adequate doctrine of creation. It is God who creates 'weal and woe, light and darkness',⁶ and in both it is possible to find him—indeed, both are necessary if men are to have an adequate conception of their relationship with him and of their relative status in the universe:

¹ There are, of course, many examples of Muhammad's compassion in *hadith*.

² Although sometimes the active response appears in isolation: see, e.g., ii. 211 (215), iv. 40–44 (36–40).

³ ii. 172 (177).

⁴ xxvii. 62 (61).

⁵ For details, see my article, 'Intercession in the Qur'an and the Jewish Tradition', *J.S.S.*, XI, 1966, pp. 69–82. In xlvi. 11 there is a warning to the desert Arabs not to rely on intercession, but ii. 286 provides an example of prayer that God will hold back too severe a burden. The difference is prayer within the faith and prayer without.

⁶ Is. xlv. 7. The theme of God as the creator of 'weal and woe' is frequently repeated. Among many examples see especially liii. 44 (43) f (tears and laughter, life and death), lvii. 1–6.

'Blessed be he in whose hand is dominion:
 he has power over every single thing—
 he who created death and life
 that he might try which of you is best in deed.
 He is the mighty, the forgiving.'

There is duality, but no dualism:

'The two seas are not equal:
 the one is pleasant, refreshing, sweet to drink,
 the other salt and bitter,
 yet from each you get food, fresh to eat, and ornaments to wear . . .¹
 The blind and the seeing are not equal,
 nor are the darkness and the light,
 nor shade and blazing heat.
 The living and the dead are not equal:
 truly God can cause whom he wills to hear,
 but you cannot cause those who are in the grave to hear.'²

But these inequalities are all a part of God's creation and cannot escape it. There is no 'opposing principle' which can resist God or frustrate him. Satan and sundry other demons have much scope, but not unlimited scope,³ and in any case the final victory belongs to God:

'He is the all-prevailing over his servants,
 and he sends guardians over you
 until at the time when death takes him
 our messengers take him and they do not fail.
 Then they are restored to God their protector, the true reality.
 Is not the decree his?
 And he is the swiftest of those who reckon.'

Because it is eschatological, the victory of God is the only one that matters: it is the only one that puts an end to all further suffering and conflict:

'You who believe seek help with patience and prayer.
 Truly God is with the patient.
 And do not say of those who are killed in the cause of God,
 "They are dead".
 In fact they are living, but you do not perceive.'⁴

With such a virile and wide-ranging sense of the victory and omnipotence of God, it is not surprising that there is nothing like the profound analysis of tragedy and defeat in the Qur'an as there is in Judaism or, even more, in Christianity. Jewish Biblical stories, which are sensitive to the tragic complexities of human nature and of its potentialities for evil, appear quite differently in the Qur'an. They are used to argue or to illustrate quite

¹ *I.e.*, river water and sea water are not the same, but they both serve essential purposes within the whole design of God.

² xxxv. 13 (12), 20–21 (21–22). See also xxv. 55 (53).

³ See p. 189 above of Iblis, and see also xix. 86–89 (83–86).

⁴ ii. 148 (153) f.

different points. Thus the story of Cain and Abel as it appears in the Qur'an argues important Islamic points, but the emphasis is unmistakably different from that of the version in Genesis:

'Recite to them in truth the story of the two sons of Adam:
 they each offered a sacrifice,
 and it was accepted from the one,
 but not from the other.
 He said, "I will surely kill you."
 He replied, "Truly God accepts an offering only from the god-fearing.
 If you stretch out your hand towards me to kill me,
 it is not for me to stretch out my hand towards you to kill you.
 Truly, I fear God, the Lord of the universe.
 Truly, I desire that you should be laden with my sin and with your sin;
 so you will be among the companions of the fire,
 and that is the reward of those who do dark deeds."
 Then his soul prompted him to kill his brother,
 so he killed him,
 and he became one of those that are lost.
 Then God sent a raven scratching into the earth
 to show him how he should conceal the shameful body of his brother.
 He said, "Woe is me! Am I not even able to be like this raven
 and conceal the shameful body of my brother?"
 And he became one of the remorseful.'¹

This passage has powerful and compelling matter for reflection, not least in the *ahimsa* response of Abel, but there is nothing here of the stark question which haunts all men in their behaviour, 'Am I my brother's keeper?'² Indeed, in a sense the Qur'an almost answers, 'I am not': 'Truly I desire that you should be laden with my sin and with your sin; so you will be among the companions of the fire. . . .' Abel retains his innocence and fulfills his obligation in warning his brother of the consequences of his deed. But then he is quit of him.

Even more disastrously, from the point of view of the Islamic understanding of Christianity, the Crucifixion is almost completely emptied of significance. Since Jesus was one of God's faithful servants, and since God always protects his servants and is never defeated, it follows that those who thought they had put an end to Jesus on the cross must have been mistaken. Hence arises the famous passage in S.iv. 156 (158), which, in a list of ways in which the Jews have broken faith with God, includes,

' . . . their saying, "Truly, we killed the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, the apostle of God."
 But they did not kill him and they did not crucify him,
 but its (or 'his') likeness was made to appear to them.
 And truly those who differ (or, "fall into dispute") about him,

¹ v. 30-34 (27-31). Vs. 35 (31) goes on to make a direct application to the laws given to the children of Israel governing murder and legal killing.

² Gen. iv. 9.

are in doubt concerning him.
 They have no knowledge of him,
 except the following of conjecture.
 Of a certainty they did not kill him,
 but rather, God raised him to himself,
 and God is mighty, wise.'

The passage has been much discussed. It is certainly open to the interpretation that the intention of the Jews to crucify Jesus seemed to have been carried out, but in fact the appearance of death and total defeat was an illusion since God raised Jesus to himself. In that case it would be a graphic way of describing the power of God in the resurrection. But the more usual Muslim interpretation has been to take the phrase *shubbiha lahum* ('his likeness was made to appear to them') literally, and to understand that his likeness was given to another who was crucified in his place. In any case, what undoubtedly remains true is that there is nowhere in the Qur'an anything like the profound analysis of the Crucifixion that there is, for example, in St John's Gospel. There cannot be, since although the Qur'an is equally well aware that light is made manifest in darkness and that victory is often contained in what appears to be defeat, nevertheless the emphasis is always on the victory. The crucifixion cannot be true because it would mean the defeat of God: it would mean that he had failed to rescue one of his faithful servants *in extremis*. Still less can the Christian understanding of the crucifixion be allowed. As Kenneth Cragg has put it:

'A recent Muslim writer on Jesus in the Gospels remarks when he comes to the Garden of Gethsemane "Here the role of history ends and the role of credal faith begins." He means that what happens after the arrest, history does not tell: faith, perhaps credulity, take over the story. But history is plain enough. If the Muslim does not follow it, it is because his judgement has intervened arbitrarily to break its course and to disallow there what it wills to reject'.¹

This means that although Christianity and Islam belong to the same tradition, they represent a completely different ethos within it. They both give an important place to the instrumental understanding of suffering, but it is not the *same* place. In Christianity it has been controlled and greatly limited by an awareness of the genuine nature of tragedy and defeat. When Muhammad was once in extreme danger of being murdered by his opponents, he was, according to ibn Ishaq,² warned by Gabriel not to sleep in his usual bed; as a result he lived to triumph over his enemies. When Jesus was crucified, there was, according to the Gospels,³ no miraculous rescue; there was darkness over all the land.

¹ *The Call of the Minaret*, p. 295.

² *Sirat Rasul Allah*, ed. F. Wustenfeld, p. 325.

³ Mk. xv. 33; Mt. xxviii. 45; Lk. xxiii. 44. For the darkness in John, see the discussion in my forthcoming book on the problem of suffering in religions of the world.