

The Christian Understanding of Suffering

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I will begin with two extended comments that articulate at the outset some of the assumptions and the perspectives under which this subject is here addressed. First of all, it seems evident to me that each religion represents a unique overview or vision of all of reality, an overview that concentrates itself—though it does not confine itself to this—on the deepest problem of human existence as it sees it, and on the answer to that problem as it had received or uncovered that answer. Each religious tradition also represents a unique access to that answer, to “power,” if you will, the power to receive, to share or to embody that answer. In this sense, to use Christian language, each religion represents both truth and grace. Clearly such a vision—and this is here our concern—is expressible in a number of diverse ways: there are *different* interpretations of Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity. Nevertheless, each represents a version of or perspective on that unique vision or overview of the whole. In turn this vision is expressed in and through the symbols (exodus, election, people, messiah; creation, incarnation, church eschatology, etc.) that make up the ideational content of that religion; when formulated, this cluster of symbols becomes its “truths,” its teachings, its doctrine. This content can be delineated by those within and without the community; reflection on it, and construction or reconstruction of it is the task, I would take it, of theology.

In such a cluster or gestalt of symbols, each symbol (e.g., creation or revelation) is affected and shaped by its relation with other symbols within that gestalt. They form a relatively coherent unity, and thus do they serve, in part, to define one another. None can be understood in isolation, for part of the meaning of each comes to it as much from its role in the cluster that makes up the whole as it does from the character of relevant experience itself. Sin in Christian understanding cannot be understood except in relation to the Christian concepts of creation and redemption, just as it cannot be understood in exclusion from the experience of Christians. In this sense, all of systematic theology is implicit in any responsible delineation of a part of it—as is even the case with Søren Kierkegaard!

If this disturbingly Hegelian introduction is correct, then “the Christian understanding of suffering” cannot be articulated unless the other theological symbols significant to that understanding are also brought into view. Granting, then, that suffering represents a universally shared experience, but still one always received, experienced, and understood in a particular way, our question is: How does suffering appear, and what does it therefore *mean*, within the system of symbols which constitutes Christianity, within the Christian vision of existence—as the Buddhist understanding of suffering finds its place and its meaning in the total vision which constitutes Buddhism, with its cluster of dominant symbols? Thus to provide an intelligible explication of this understanding requires showing how the common and shared experience of suffering is shaped by and interpreted through the particular Gestalt of Christian symbols, how this symbol is given its character by its lodgement within that system. Since this is a large task, we can only here begin with a rough map.

One may note that each cluster or gestalt of symbols (each religious vision) both pays a price and receives reward for its particular emphases, for the unique shape of its dominant symbols. Obviously to those within a religious community, the benefits outweigh the price, and the resultant balance comes across as “true” to experience and to the canons of intelligibility alike. Nevertheless, since both debits and credits are there, they can be seen by others and should be admitted. No cluster, I hazard, wins them all—except to its most fanatical participants. This is why it is important, when looking into another religion (or critically assessing one’s own), to look at the religion as a whole, rather than only at its debit points, as we are all apt to do when we point triumphantly either to the philosophical contradictions of theism or to the “world denying” character of Buddhism. (One may note the interesting point that a common or shared sense of *where* these debits or weak points are indicates *some* sort of rough common ground!) In any case, it will be our effort here to understand the Christian view of suffering as that view appears within the gestalt of Christian symbols as a whole.

The second comment concerns the richness, as well as the poignancy, of the question that here concerns us. To ask about the Christian (or the Buddhist) understanding of suffering is to ask several distinct and yet related questions, not just one. Each is as important, equally as important, as the others—for, in terms of our earlier remark, each of these distinct questions concerning suffering relates the issue of suffering to some particular symbol or symbols within the cluster as a whole. I will here list four questions (the clear debt to Aristotle’s causes only occurred to me after listing them) involved in the understanding of suffering; there are no doubt many more than this list.

- (1) The question of the *source* or *cause* of suffering: How does it arise and from what factors, in reality so viewed, in what Whitehead would call “the metaphysical situation”?
- (2) The question of what we may call the *anatomy* of suffering. What is its structure, or, if it has none, of what sort of healthy

structure is it the disease, of what sort of order is it the experienced disorder, of what *telos* does it represent the deep frustration? (3) How is suffering overcome or conquered or redeemed in this gestalt? What are the conditions for this conquest; what are its limits; what are we called to be or do, if we are? (4) How does suffering relate—positively or negatively—to other symbols in the gestalt. For example, (a) what is its role or purpose if any, (cf. question three); or, (b) does it clash with, contradict, or threaten any other symbol, for example that of God?

As is evident from listing these various aspects of the Christian understanding of suffering, all of them are significant and all have functioned importantly in the tradition of Christian reflection, as I suspect they all do in other traditions as well. It seems clear that in certain religions (that is, in certain clusters of symbols) some of these questions are more pertinent, central, and thus worked out than are others—and possibly other questions than these four appear on the scene. Also, at certain times in a particular tradition one or more will be emphasized. One may note that questions two (2) and three (3) are central to religious existence, to the *piety* of a faith—in fact very near its core. Correspondingly, questions one (1) and four (4) are more “speculative,” more inferential from the existential center represented by two (2) and three (3), and thus more the result of theological or philosophical reflection on existential experience, on religion, on piety. For example, clearly Augustine’s *experience* of sin as bondage and of grace as an answer to it (questions 2 and 3) led to his articulation of the *doctrine* of original sin (question 1) as its explanation, that is as the “cause” of suffering. Correspondingly, having experienced grace as rescue from sin and suffering by omnipotent divine power and unconditional love (2 and 3), he (and we) are then faced with the apparent contradiction of suffering in the same universe with an almighty and loving God.

My point has been to emphasize that our subject, if we are to understand it aright, embraces more than one question, in this case more than the theodicy question, just as the Buddhist understanding of suffering embraces more than the blanket assertion: “All existence is suffering.” In fact most creative Christian reflection on suffering has concentrated far more on the first three questions than on the fourth; and it seems evident that it is in its answer to these three questions that the strengths or pluses of a Christian interpretation tend to lie rather than in the fourth. One might even claim—though it is certainly controversial—that such concentration on question 4, especially 4b, and too coherent an answer to it, may well subvert important answers to the other more religious and theological questions concerning the understanding of the anatomy of suffering and its possible redemption.

The cluster of symbols within a religious vision forms, we have said, a rough unity. To understand, therefore, how Christianity understands suffering we must sketch out the most fundamental shape of that vision, the contour of that

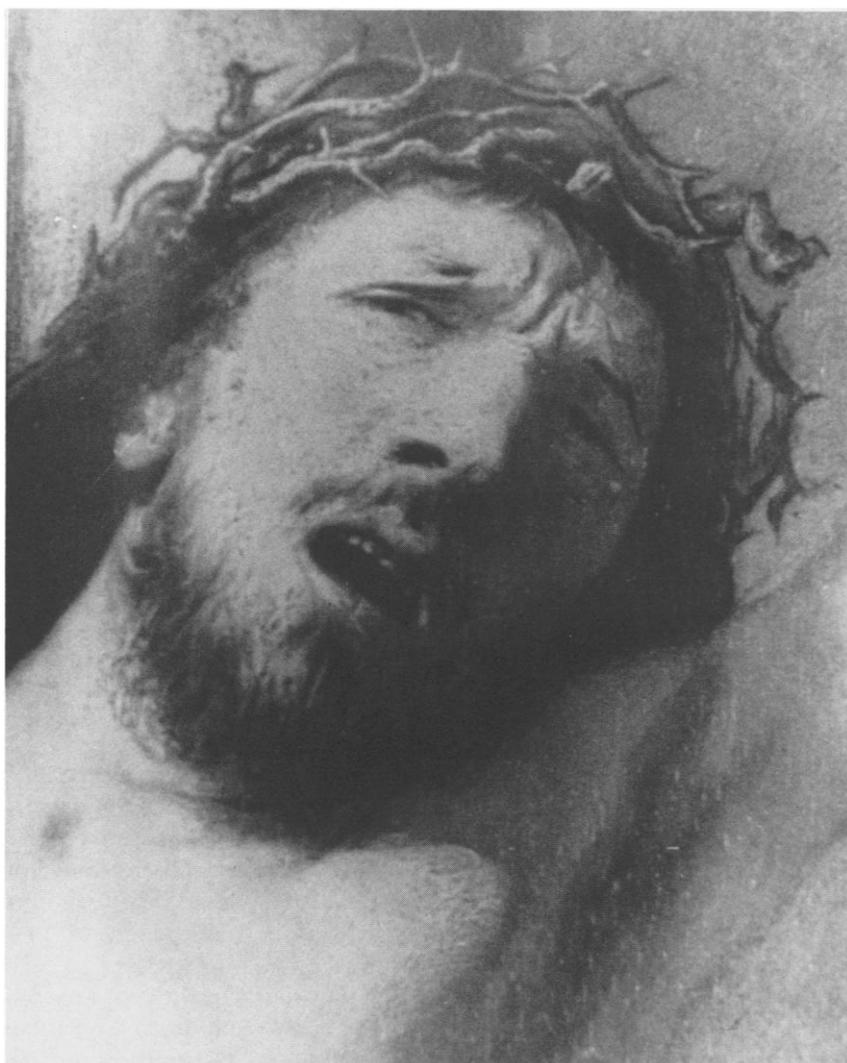


PLATE 2. Rembrandt. Detail of *The Crucifixion*. 1631. Oil on linen on wood, 100 × 73 cm. Le Mas d'Agenais Parish Church, Belgium. Photograph by Friedrich Seifert.

cluster—and locate there the place, possibly the role, of suffering within it. This contour is, so I believe, dominated by a *dialectic*, a sequence of affirmation, negation, and subsequent affirmation or reaffirmation, without which suffering cannot be understood in its Christian form. I shall, therefore, discuss suffering as it takes its shape within each “moment” of this fundamental dialectic.

Christianity, like Judaism, begins not with speculation about origins but with the historical experience of rescue or redemption. Nevertheless, logically and ontologically each begins with a fundamental affirmation of the divine *creation* and so with an affirmation of the essential *goodness* of the world: of the realm of nature and its order, of the body and its necessities, of the human spirit and its capacities (both made in the image of God); and, as a consequence, the goodness of family, community, society, and ultimately of history itself. Classically this goodness was expressed through conceiving the *initial* creation (at the temporal beginning) as perfect in all relevant respects. As a result, however, of the developments of science (natural science, social science, and history), new knowledge about the processes of development through which the present world, human being, and society as in history came to be, made incredible this “story” of a perfect beginning. As a consequence this affirmation of the goodness of creaturely being has lost its *temporal* implications. The goodness of creation has, therefore, come to mean the *potential* perfection of the world and of human being (Hegel, Schleiermacher, and most of liberalism); or, as another example, the *essential* goodness of creaturely being (e.g., Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr). In each of these varieties of interpretation, however, the symbol of creation represents an affirmation of the structural goodness or potentiality of meaning and fulfillment of finite natural and human life.

Christianity, therefore, starts out with the assertion that it is good to be and to be alive: good to God who created and sustains life, and good (at least potentially or normatively) to the creature who enjoys, or might enjoy, it. In epochs when the experience of suffering is, so to speak, recessive rather than predominant (at least among the classes that reflect and write), this side of the dialectic has tended to be emphasized: Christianity understands itself as affirming the divine creativity in existence, the goodness of finite being, and especially its potentialities of development and fulfillment—as has most of liberal theology. When the experience of suffering advances and dominates experience, this side (the emphasis on creation, development, and progressive fulfillment) tends itself to recede, and the other “moments” of the dialectic, the negative and the redemptive aspects, come to the fore—and a quite new perspective on suffering appears.

In addition to this initial assertion of *creation*, and so of a *good* finitude, we should note that Christianity adds that redemption also represents an affirmation or reaffirmation of this same point. For redemption either constitutes (in some versions) the reestablishment of created goodness (with some important

additions), or (in other versions) the fulfillment of the potentialities of created goodness. The symbols of “the new creature” as one now initiated into redemption, of the people of God as a socio-historical community now living or beginning to live a redeemed life, and of the resurrection of the body—all *have* (as does the identity of God the creator and God the redeemer) the unity of creation and redemption, that is, on our theme, the reaffirmation of the essential goodness of creaturely life under God, of human and natural being within the conditions of finitude: space, time, the system of causes, and our physical-psychological substance. As the act of creation points, to be sure, backwards and upwards beyond the finite to the activity of the God transcendent to finitude, so redemption points beyond these conditions of finitude to what has been called, paradoxically, “eternal life.” Nevertheless, despite this wider trans-natural context, it is well, in understanding suffering therein, to emphasize the forcefulness and the significance of this assertion of the potential, the essential, and the renewed goodness of finitude.

It is, I suggest, this strong and unequivocal assertion of the positive, if potential, goodness of finite and so of creaturely and historical existence that sets the stage—and so accounts for both its assets and its liabilities—for the peculiar character of the Christian understanding of suffering. For clearly suffering, along with its elder sibling “evil,” enter this stage as aliens, as anomalies, as interlopers and “spoilers,” as in fact enemies to what is—either to what is “already there” or to what “essentially is.” Were finite existence itself a “fall,” an alienation from true being in the One (mystical monism), were it a union of good spiritual elements and evil material elements (dualism), or were it merely the unintended and so unvalued result of blind natural forces (naturalism), then in none of these do suffering and evil pose a contradiction as they do here. Also, if suffering finds its cause beyond this space and time in previous lives, according to the law of karma, so that this life expresses that inherited destiny, then again suffering is intelligibly explained and understood and hardly represents a contradiction. In each case the explanation for suffering within finitude is obvious: in the first suffering is the result of the separation or alienation out of which finitude itself arises; in the second it is the result of the mixture of good and evil elements that constitute finitude; in the third suffering is the consequence of the same natural and neutral forces of things that brought finite life into being in the first place, and in the fourth it arises from decisions taken in earlier lives. In none of these cases is there a theoretical problem in understanding suffering (a “theodicy” problem) since suffering and finitude arise (and recede) together; this is surely a plus. In none of these cases, however, are there credible and valid grounds for hope for any redemption from suffering within our present finitudes—since in each case to be finite as we are is to suffer. The very intelligibility of the explanation of evil and suffering reflects and depends upon a *necessity* for evil and suffering in this life that can be (if evil and suffering are taken seriously¹) spiritually stifling and lead only to an attitude of resignation.

I have pitched the dilemma of Christian understanding—how can existence be affirmed as it here is in the face of the obvious evil and suffering with which that existence is penetrated?—at a different point than it is usually (and wrongly) pitched. That point is generally taken to be the doctrine of God; thus it is assumed that a rearrangement of that concept represents an “answer” to this peculiarly Christian dilemma. To be sure, the dilemma or contradiction I have outlined becomes more clearly apparent when the two grounds for this affirmation of a good creation are clearly articulated: (1) that God’s infinite power establishes finitude (thus are there no metaphysical or ultimate factors alien to God causing evil and suffering), and (2) that God’s infinite love motivates the creation of finite being. These two, unconditional divine power and love, constitute the two elements of the classical doctrine of *creation out of nothing* since they provide coherent grounds (and the only sufficient grounds) for the goodness of created finite beings.

My point is that it is not this doctrinal foundation (with which I agree) that creates the deeper “problem of evil”; rather the fault lies with the initial affirmation of the goodness of finite being. If any form of Christianity asserts this goodness, even the potential goodness, of finite actuality, then evil and suffering pose a dilemma for that assertion, even if its god be finite or indifferent. Moreover, if the sense of evil and of suffering rises to predominance, then the finitude of God becomes an impotence unable to generate hope for salvation, and the indifference of God becomes unbearable. I suggest that such theoretical or philosophical solutions to the problem of evil reflect, therefore, a basic optimism about evil’s ultimate conquest; and further that this solution to the problem of evil (namely that God is finite) can neither explain nor ground that unexplicated optimism. Finally, such views (that God is either finite or indifferent) will generate pessimism and resignation as we move into a more difficult epoch and in which the consciousness of suffering rises.

In any case, it is, I think, fair to say that peculiar to the Christian understanding of suffering (as of evil) is Christianity’s initial sense of the antithesis that suffering poses to the essential nature both of God and of finite existence, expressed *vis à vis* God in its symbol of God as “creator” and *vis à vis* existence in its symbol of the “good creation.” Over against many forms of spirituality, therefore, mysticism, dualism and naturalism, Christianity appears as fundamentally optimistic and affirmative about finite existence, about its ontological and metaphysical conditions and about its prospects, both individually and historically.

Although the assertions concluding the last section are valid, nevertheless it is also true that the Christian tradition has represented as well a strongly *negative* assessment of natural and historical life, especially of human existence—and so has as frequently been called “world denying” as “world affirming.” Put in another way, despite its initial affirmation about creaturely life, Christianity has also seen that life as suffused with evil and with suffering. In fact, in

classical Christian eyes so permeated is human existence with both that it cannot extricate itself by its own natural powers from either one, that is, either from the bondage of its own evil, or from the various forms of suffering that ravage its finitude and will conquer it in the end. Innumerable central symbols in the cluster that constitutes Christian understanding express this negative assessment of life as it is experienced, and so the emphasis on suffering and evil: the Fall, being now captive to the Devil, estrangement or alienation from our natural order or potentialities, enmity towards God and neighbor, the bondage of the will, having to die, being captive of death; and, on the divine side, the judgement and the wrath of God, the punishing righteousness of God, and condemnation. In optimistic epochs this emphasis recedes to that of a minor voice in the wider chorus of affirmation. At other times it has come to the fore, as the pervasiveness of suffering has become optimism. Correspondingly, an emphasis on faith, sin and death as rulers of this age is then only balanced by a greater emphasis on the power and love of divine grace.

As noted, the sharpness of the contrast between creation and suffering stems essentially from the (apparent) antagonism between the initial affirmation of finite existence and its goodness on the one hand, and the opposing affirmation of its evil propensities and the actuality of its suffering on the other. This "contradiction" is accentuated but by no means created by the two classical doctrines of (1) God's perfection of being and of love and (2) of the original perfection of the creature. That these two must be reinterpreted and so to speak "softened" is evident. On the other hand, however these two doctrines are "softened," the contradiction remains in Christian understanding so long as finite existence continues to be affirmed theologically or metaphysically and yet the undeniable reality and the vast scope of suffering are admitted.

Granted, then, the reality of evil and of suffering in a world affirmed by God and to be affirmed by ourselves, how are we to understand this suffering that suffuses our existence? What can be its explanation if God created and ruled our finite existence; that is to say, in such a universe, what are the ontological conditions under which suffering arises? This is the way the question of suffering—of comprehending why it is in the sense of its *cause*—arises in Christian understanding. And for most of the tradition there was available, in fact provided authoritatively for them by both scripture and tradition, a perfectly credible (to them) explanation, namely the Fall. Note, it is not because they believed in the Fall that Christians spoke about evil and suffering; on the contrary, it is because they knew and experienced the pervasive, universal, and conquering reality of evil and suffering that they found perfectly credible, and proceeded to emphasize, the authoritative explanation for it, the story of the Fall.

Thus for generations, in fact from Irenaeus up to Schleiermacher, the explanation for suffering—and so the understanding in that sense of it—was the following: (1) Neither evil nor suffering were necessary aspects of life since the latter had been created good. (2) However, because of the temptations of freedom (and the lure of Satan), the first and representative man and woman misused

this freedom and disobeyed God. Thus they came under the dominant rule of Satan, lost their power of goodness (or potential goodness), inherited a propensity for evil (Augustine), and were confined to the limits of mortality. (3) As a further consequence, the vulnerabilities and so the many sufferings of physical, psychological, and mental existence: natural evils, scarcity, drought, etc., diseases, conflicts, injustice, and ultimately death, followed. To Irenaeus these, especially death, were “allowed to us” to prevent the everlasting continuation of sin and so represent gifts of grace;² to Augustine they represented punishment for sin. In either case, suffering in all its forms was understood as a consequence of human religious and moral disobedience to God. It was understood as stemming from the broken relationship (“sin”) between humans and God—however that brokenness in turn may ultimately have arisen in the Fall. Confidence and hope, therefore, despite this heavy estimation of the scope of suffering, rested on the fact that this brokenness could be mended by redemption.

For most of the tradition, therefore, the “problem of evil” and the “problem of suffering” did not represent problems of theodicy, of the theological justification of God, problems to be resolved by a new philosophical theology; such was to the tradition not to understand suffering aright. On the contrary, the problems of evil and of suffering represented problems of the justification and redemption of men and women, that is, issues of how, in the face of the experience of massive suffering, interlaced with the experience of inward evil, *God* might reunite human beings to himself, heal the estrangement that has caused our suffering, and thus give us hope for its conquest both here and in eternity. In most of the Christian tradition, the understanding of suffering has meant understanding its ultimate cause in the Fall, its reappearance through our own freedom, and its cure in redemption. It has not, until after the Enlightenment, meant centrally understanding how to explain suffering so as to justify God’s goodness. To those who find suffering mainly a philosophical or intellectual puzzle within a Christian universe, a puzzle to be resolved by a more coherent theological or metaphysical doctrine of God, such an existential or religious “understanding” of it seems strangely convoluted, perhaps even irrational. To those who have deeply experienced suffering, and especially its power to blot out coherence, such an understanding can make sense in its emphasis on the existential problem of suffering and its concentration on the divine cure for it.

We said above, “in most of the Christian tradition” because a very significant change in the form of this understanding took place with the Enlightenment. At this point for a number of reasons—most but not all being new scientific and historical knowledge—this explanation of the human predicament became itself incredible. To explain the intractability and arbitrary character of nature, the conflicts within nature, the disease and death that permeate nature—as well as all the problems of universal history—in terms of that far off event in Eden became impossible. New ways of understanding human evil and suffering were thus necessary, and Hegel and Schleiermacher were foremost in pro-

viding them. For the first time in dogmatic theology, Schleiermacher distinguished natural from moral evil and sought to “explain” the first under the rubric of creation and only the second under that of the fall. Thus the sufferings, he says, that arise from the condition of our finitude are aspects of our created goodness, not consequences of sin; they are, therefore, borne by faith not eliminated by it. We can “understand” them (explain them) in a good world as setting the conditions necessary for our own moral development, for without them personality, decision, and virtue would be meaningless.³

Most theologians, insofar as they use the symbol of the Fall at all, have followed Schleiermacher at this point and distinguished natural from moral, religious, or spiritual evil. Insofar as they explain the former, they do so in terms of the necessary conditions of a finite and good creation; insofar as they explain the latter, they do so in terms of the symbol of the Fall. Hegel and Schleiermacher interpreted the Fall as the symbol of the beginning stages of spiritual and moral growth, and so as in effect necessary to the development of a spiritual humanity. Such has been recently the sense of the enormity of suffering as a result of sin, that twentieth-century theologians have avoided this explanation or justification of sin. Rather they have been content with interpreting the symbol of the Fall as a *description* of our spiritual predicament rather than an explanation of it;⁴ and they have emphasized how spiritual renewal will transmute, even if it does not conquer, the sufferings caused by natural evils.

In its understanding of natural evil and the sufferings consequent on that, therefore, Christianity has almost certainly moved closer to Buddhism: suffering (of this sort) arises from the conditions of temporal existence themselves and not from any historical act of human moral or religious freedom. On the other hand, Christianity has retained its traditional view that spiritual estrangement (sin) does not flow either from being finite or even from being appropriately attached to finitude; but it flows from an inward separation or estrangement of the self from God, from itself and its neighbor which it labels sin. As a consequence when this estrangement is healed (or begun to be healed) by faith and love, a proper attachment to and affirmation of the self, of others, and of the world are appropriate, and the ranges of suffering caused by want, disease, and death can be creatively born. Whether or not, or how much, that view is different from contemporary Buddhism, especially those forms expressed in existentialist categories, remains an interesting question. In any case, certainly the strength of Christian interpretation rests on its *dialectical* understanding of suffering and evil, that is to say, as intelligible and bearable only when seen in relation to an affirmation of the goodness of creaturely and finite freedom, not on its grasp of the explanation or cause of evil and suffering.

One may put this point that (1) present Christian theological reflection concentrates on understanding the *anatomy* of suffering and of evil rather than either its *cause* or its *justification*; and (2) that it seeks to describe this anatomy dialectically, in relation to the order and goodness of existence on the one hand and to the promise of redemption from suffering and evil on the other. More

concretely, this involves the understanding of suffering (a) in relation to the conditions of finite creatureliness as dependent and yet active within the wider system of finite creatures, and (b) as in relation to the social and historical communities in which humans live, act, and suffer. Correspondingly, it understands human evil in relation to (a) finitude and freedom on the one hand (possibility, anxiety, temptation—death), and (b) to redemption (the ideal of Christ, the judgement of God, and the mercy of God) on the other. How much of suffering in this view is necessary, an inescapable aspect of finitude, and how much is ontologically “contingent” and so humanly generated, the result of ignorance, of lack of instruments or know-how, or sin, for example, exploitation or injustice, are important theoretical and practical questions for this view.

For on such questions, further practical matters of great importance to a Christian interpretation depend. For example, how is suffering to be understood in relation to the possibility of redemption, to the possibility of individual health, of renewed individual faith and courage, of renewed community between persons; and how is suffering to be understood in relation to the possibilities of social redemption, the possibility of political or social renewal—that is, in relation to individual and social redemption as promised in the Christian gospel? How is suffering understood as the suffering of the *victims* of sin, those sinned against; how is suffering understood as that of the *perpetuators*, the suffering of the disintegrating and despairing sinner—and how are these two related—as they are—in each one of us? Thus is suffering understood here “dialectically”: backwards, so to speak, in relation to the affirmation of finitude and of history and to the inexplicable appearance of estrangement, and forward in relation to the promises and the experienced realities of redemption.⁵

As noted, the strength of a religious vision lies in large part in its understanding of what suffering is, how it arises, and what characteristics it manifests on the one hand, and how it is to be overcome on the other. Here Buddhism and Christian understandings are similar. A Christian understanding conducts this inquiry into the meaning and intelligibility of suffering in relation to (1) the affirmative symbols of creation and providence, (2) the negative ones of fall and sin, fatedness and death, judgement and condemnation, and (3) the reaffirmative ones of individual and social redemption, the new creature and the kingdom of God. As noted, there are both pluses and minuses within such an understanding—as, I suspect, there are in others as well.

We have seen suffering first in its juxtaposition with creation, representing the affirmation of finite being as real and as good; in this context suffering appears as a surd, an unwanted interloper, an irrational appearance in what is essentially a seamless, or at least a potentially meaningful, world. Next we considered suffering in relation to the actuality of that world, the way this essentially good structure appears in our actual experience, namely as also estranged or fallen. Here suffering has in the traditional understanding taken a slightly

different role, one as caused and so explained by the fallen character of the world. Later reflection has shifted this: suffering is seen as (1) partly a function of the conditions of finitude, vulnerability, and mortality (i.e., of creation), and (2) partly an effect of the estranged character of human being and so of its history, that is of sin. So interpreted, suffering is by no means irrational or inexplicable, especially with regard to the suffering consequent upon estrangement. While itself without metaphysical cause, estrangement and the suffering it entails reveal an anatomy that can be understood, an anatomy articulated in terms of theological anthropology: that is, in terms of the structure of human being as creaturely, as image of God, as "finite freedom," plus the temptations of anxiety and the role of self-constituting freedom, all this compounded in turn by the interdependence—in space and in time—of each human on the human communities in which we come to be and act.

As we noted, these two "moments": creation and fall, were initially separated in time, the one temporally as well as logically and ontologically "preceding" the other. With the loss of this temporal precedence, their relation shifts: now *both* are seen as characteristic of creaturely actuality, the one representing essential structure (or "real" or "original" nature), the other estranged actuality—as (to use Augustine's image) with an eye and its enfeebled or diseased state. Both are there: the first, its created goodness, essential, structural, and so necessary, the other its estranged actuality, contingent, historical, inescapable and yet removable because it represents the work of freedom. In somewhat similar fashion, in Mahayana Buddhism *samsara* is not only both fated and free, but even more not separable from *nirvana* into two distinct realms; these two, *samsara* and *nirvana*, while distinguishable in analysis, nevertheless interpenetrate each other so that both can be seen to characterize present actuality by the enlightened eye.

Now we move to the third "moment" of the dialectic, that of renewal, redemption, reunion. Here suffering is seen from still another perspective since, in relation to the redemptive work of the divine, it takes on a quite new role; for here it is, so to speak, transfigured or transvalued into an aspect of redemption. This redemptive moment is different from the other two in that unlike the others it "comes"; we are not "thrown into" (to use Heidegger's expression) redemption as we are into creaturely being and estranged existence, which are both already there. Rather Christians experience it as "coming to" them, and so they are, as they say, "reborn" (an interesting phrase in relation to Buddhism, underlining as it does the reemphasis on creation). For Christian understanding, redemption appears *historically* in a new *dispensation* of divine truth and grace in historical revelation; and it appears historically for each individual person in their own rebirth in faith. Thus while creation and fall are manifested in and through every historical moment, they do not begin "at a time"; yet redemption does so happen, and as a consequence history, both that of individuals and that of the race, is filled with unique, irreplaceable, and significant events. Once redemption appears, is accepted, and is experienced,

however, redemption (grace and truth) joins, so to speak, the other two aspects of present actuality: created structure and alienated actuality, as a healing or renewing principle. Neither of these latter disappear (recall the contemporary presence of *samsara* and *nirvana*), although (hopefully) the new principles of renewal gain in strength and so predominance. Both the conditions of finitude and the temptations and ravages of alienation remain; but the sufferings consequent on both finitude and sin take on a different shape and a different role in this new redemptive context. It is, therefore, to understand suffering “Christianly” within this new context of redemption, that our present remarks are devoted.

Because we are now of necessity dealing with each major doctrine in systematic theology, our remarks must be both brief and incomplete, intimating rather than spelling out varying aspects of the Christian meaning of suffering in light of the fact and the appearance of redemptive grace. In general we can sum up this new perspective on suffering by giving it two names: the *transvaluation of suffering* on the one hand and the *transcendence over suffering* on the other.

We begin with the new role of suffering as an aspect of the sacred of redemptive activity of the divine itself—a theme found in almost all religions but in our tradition starting explicitly with the Suffering Servant motif in Isaiah and reaching a crescendo in the earliest Christian interpretation of the Cross and so of the Atonement. Here suffering is seen to represent an essential, even necessary (cf. Anselm) condition—if not the *sufficient* condition (e.g., God’s love is also necessary)—for redemption itself. In most (though not all) understanding of this unexpected union of suffering with redemption, the symbol of sin or estrangement plays a crucial role: because of the separation and guilt of sin, the divine love, as well as the repentant sinner, must suffer if a reunion of human being with deity is to take place. While few contemporary theologians wish to deny this relation of redemptive suffering to sin and its forgiveness, still a new emphasis has entered: the divine participation in our suffering as an *aspect* (rather than a cause) of our redemption. This has long been an implication of most doctrines of incarnation and of atonement (“the immortal must take on mortality and suffer therein”: Irenaeus.⁶ However it has, it seems to me, been given new prominence in contemporary theology (is this because both the role of the Devil and the problem of objective guilt have receded?). There is an echo of this in Whitehead’s view that the Consequent Nature of God redeems the world through experiencing (prehending) and uniting in its own harmony the world in all its joy and its suffering—and so suffers along with the world through experiencing the suffering of the world.⁷ It also represents the center of Tillich’s understanding of the Atonement as the symbol of the divine participation and sharing in the suffering conditions of existence and so the divine redemption of them in the New Being—hence is the suffering of evil transmuted, made bearable and so conquered by the divine presence within it (*Systematic Theology II* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957], 132ff., esp. 174–176). And it is even more prominent in Moltmann’s view that the redemptive

power of the Cross lies in its witness to God's identification with those who suffer, the divine presence with them in their suffering, and so the promise of the ultimate victory of God over their suffering (The Crucified God). In all of these motifs suffering is transmuted and transcended through the divine participation in it, expressed more literally in classical doctrine by the effectiveness of the atoning suffering of the Christ, and more symbolically in present theology by the divine healing and redemptive presence within the suffering conditions of human existence, a healing presence manifested in, not effected by the atoning suffering of Christ.

With regard to suffering as experienced by human beings, one may distinguish between *inner* forms of suffering and outer, historical causes of suffering. One may say that the existential tradition in modern theology has concentrated on the first, and current political theologies on the second—both (to me) being essential to the understanding of this new role of, and thus perspective on, suffering. The beginning of the inner cure of suffering (an aspect of justification and sanctification) is the work of redemptive grace. Through grace and the new life (the new being) the inner ravages of doubt, despair, deep anxiety, meaninglessness, guilt, self-hatred and subjection to inordinate desires, to unreal pride and to a sense of fatedness, are lessened; with the growth of a humble or repentant self-awareness, and of faith and grace and so of confidence in one's new self, slowly courage, serenity, love, and hope appear as an inner balance, so to speak, over against the suffering which one's contingency and one's own sin created.

Correspondingly, the "outer" causes of suffering that are rooted in sin—oppression, injustice, exploitation, hostility, and overt conflict—can be mitigated, if not removed, by creative political action. Though political action cannot remove estrangement and sin—rather historical change reenacts estrangement in new forms—still political reforms can increasingly control and mitigate the consequences of continuing sin. Unjust institutions (e.g., slavery, colonialism, etc.) result from sin, encourage it, and give it ample "room"; in parallel fashion juster institutions, for example, political, economic, and social equality, make the envy, hostility, and greed of persons of less effect, distribute power and goods more fairly, and thus reduce the vast amount of suffering that has been the consequence of sin—if not suffering as the consequence of finiteness. As J. B. Metz has pointed out, the memory of suffering, and identification with the history of sufferers, functions as a radical force in history, calling for the removal of unjust institutions and the beginning of more adequate ones. This mitigation of the consequences of sin, along with its inward healing, represents, in Christian understanding, the purpose in historical life of God's redemptive providence—and so it is a deep faith in that providential power and meaning which gives to the Christian the ability to transmute and so to overcome the sufferings encountered in one's daily life. Thus, as Kierkegaard has said, it is in entering suffering *voluntarily* rather than, as is normal, seeking to avoid it, that God's active presence with us and calling to us is experienced.

Through sharing in suffering, then, the divine purposes are uncovered (one's vocation) and the transcendence over suffering is achieved, both in one's individual existence and in the social history of communities generally.⁸

Throughout the tradition of Christianity—as with Buddhism—there has been a confidence in a final or eschatological⁹ transcendence over suffering as well as the promise of its present transvaluation, that is the ability to deal creatively with its present and continuing actuality. This final or eschatological transcendence over suffering has been expressed in the symbols of resurrection and of eternal life with regard to individual existence and that of the Kingdom of God with regard to communal and historical existence. Needless to say, each of these symbols has received a wide variety of interpretations: Hellenistic, medieval, Reformation, modern, and contemporary; and each tradition within Christianity has seen these in significantly different ways. While some forms of Christianity—especially in the modern and contemporary periods—have tended to deemphasize, if not ignore and deny, the “transcendent” meanings of these concepts: e.g., to reject personal eternal life in an eschatological fellowship or communion with God (cf. Hartshorne and Ogden) or to reject a trans-historical meaning of the Kingdom, still almost every other part of the Christian tradition—classical, Catholic, Reformation, liberal and neo-orthodox—has viewed meaning as extending beyond spatial and temporal life and so earthly suffering, and redemption as therefore transcendent to the experience of suffering as we know it here.

Certainly it seems to be the case—at least to this interpreter—that the Christian promise of the conquest of suffering, as well as its earthly mitigation, depends on this eschatological dimension of redemption, and that the transcendence over suffering in the terms of God's experience alone does not exhaust the meaning of that traditional promise. It is commonly agreed among modern theologians that the efforts of Augustine and Thomas to justify the presence of evil as forming creative “shadows” in the total picture viewable from the divine, if not from the finite, perspective, are incredibly weak. In fact such arguments seem to make the suffering of finite creatures mere means to a richer infinite harmony (shadows that add to the total picture), and “end” experienced only by God. Ironically the same point can, it seems to me, be made about the denial of eternal life on the part of Hartshorne. There the enrichment of the divine experience by the prehension of evil and suffering in the world that God prehends may effect a redemption of the suffering but it hardly helps redeem the sufferer, who as a now-perished sentient being remains an instrumental means to that divine end, represented by the infinity and everlastingness of the divine enjoyment. As we have indicated, however, in the normative Christian understanding both the suffering experienced by creatures and creatures themselves are redeemed by the divine love—or as Calvin felicitously put it: we are saved alone for the glory of God, but the glory of God is conjoined with God's love for us, with His concern that we be saved.¹⁰ If this be egoism, then it is of a dialectical or transmuted sort, namely one that first loses

itself as the condition of gaining itself, and surrenders its own glory as the sole ground of sharing in glory—a theme explicitly manifested for Christians in the voluntary suffering of Christ through which he was accepted into glory. This paradox of gaining the self through losing it expresses the dialectic we have here outlined: of the affirmation of our finitude, the surrender of it in repentance and faith, and the gifts through grace of a new self united now with the divine.

EPILOGUE

The above represents, I think, one defensible version or survey (map, as I called it) of the modern Christian understanding of suffering. It would, however, be irresponsible, even a bit shady, to stop with the possibility of our eschatological transcendence to suffering and so to omit entirely reference to the possibility of the opposite—namely an eschatological continuation and even increment of suffering, as represented in the symbols of punishment in Purgatory and condemnation in Hell. Here some of the themes already rehearsed—suffering as punishment and suffering as purgation—reappear on a trans-mundane scale. Unpalatable as it may be to most of us today, it is simply a fact that in our tradition the final freedom from suffering promised in redemption has by no means represented the sole final Christian word about suffering. For those who remained *unredeemed*, untouched by the grace and by the truth represented in Christ, suffering has not only continued but increased—and unlike systems of karma, classically no hope of redemption from it remain for those untouched. So much for the traditional Christian understanding.

Perhaps the most dramatic change in Christian doctrine in the modern period—more fundamental, I think, than issues of literalism, miracles, or even authority—has been what one author called “the decline of Hell,” namely the dissipation of this concept of a trans-temporal and/or an eternal suffering as the punishment for unredeemed earthly sins. This development cannot be expounded here; but it must be mentioned. Few major theologians in the nineteenth and, to my knowledge, even fewer major theologians in the twentieth, have wished to reaffirm, even to reconstruct in their own way, the concept of Hell as a place of eternal suffering, a realm eternally beyond the reach of grace. Some hesitate to draw the universalist implication—as many who asserted divine election hesitated to draw the implication of double predestination!—but none speak of eternal damnation, and all tend to regard eternal suffering as more a repudiation than a vindication of the divine justice. On this one point, interestingly, Schleiermacher, Ritschel, Barth, Tillich, the Niebuhrs, Brunner, and their many diverse followers since seem to agree: the traditional and eschatological “dualism” in the destiny of our race into damned and saved was a mistake. Insofar, therefore, as it represents a picture of contemporary Christian understanding of suffering, our account has legitimately stopped before this epilogue and so before it reached the portals of that over-heated netherworld.

In sum, suffering takes on quite different hues or colors as one moves

through the Christian dialectic. It appears at first as the contradiction of creation, as its negative side or shadow, and as the consequence of creaturely estrangement. Then, as the drama moves toward redemption, suffering shifts to become itself an aspect of the divine redemption; our sufferings are shared in by God's presence among us, and they are mitigated, transfigured, and finally transcended by the power of grace, that is by the divine being and the divine love. While, therefore, the Christian understanding of suffering includes as one of its aspects the question of theodicy—how suffering and God can be understood coherently together—it far transcends that question and involves, if all that Christianity has to say about suffering is to be articulated, many other important “understandings” in terms of which it takes on its unique meaning, its power, and its peculiar difficulties: (1) the affirmation of finite being and meaning, (2) the interpretation of the vulnerability, despite its goodness, of creaturely being, (3) the anatomy of the estrangement of finite freedom, and (4) the character and promise to redeem and transmute suffering. As we have tried to show, on each of these levels—or facets—of the Christian understanding of suffering there are gains and there are losses, pluses as well as minuses. To some, therefore, this understanding, complex as it is, may at best be convoluted, bizarre, and contradictory. To others it may well appear as the profoundest and most experientially accurate understanding of evil and of suffering available; for it sets suffering and evil against the background of affirmation and the promises of ultimate confidence and ultimate hope. Probably what is important in a discussion like this one is to gain a sure grasp on both these pluses and these minuses, and so to understand a bit more clearly why each of us, in our different perspectives, see things in ordinary experience as we do.