

## A SURVEY OF PAGAN VIEWS ON HUMAN SUFFERING

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When one leaves the doors of the church he is confronted with a non-Christian world of ideas. The meaning of suffering certainly has many pagan answers. I recently held an electronic symposium with several non-Christian individuals to find how their religion answers the question of “Why good people suffer.”

### **Hinduism**

Hinduism is the basis of much popular belief on suffering. Hitesh Dani expressed his faith this way:

It is very hard to express Hinduism within confining words. I think its philosophy is like this:

- I AM god. This is called Adwait.
- I am part of God and worship God in various ways (called Dwait).
- I am an Atheist who does not believe in God.
- Regardless of how you approach the first three points, there is a law of Karma. Simply put, Karma means you reap what you sow. The fruits (good or bad) or results of one's actions reach him/her. If that is not in this lifetime, then in the next, and the next, and the next. . . until the balance sheet is balanced in full.
- To specifically answer why good people suffer, Hindus believe that it may be due to their previous life.

Raja Bhat expanded on Dani's last point in this way:

In a word, suffering is caused by Karma. The Hindu concept of Karma is fatalistic, in that once you accumulate a karmic load, its on your back and you can't just shake it off. You work it off—paying back—and the load gets relieved. . . . Yet devotional Hinduism speaks of the divine being able to get the monkey off your back if you're devout enough. And Yoga meditation methods are meant to cleanse the samskaras off the inner mind (samskaras being subconscious impressions of prior experiences). If you killed a rat, that is a samskara, and so on. I myself try to avoid himsa which is harm to others in thought word and deed.

For Hindus a missionary would emphasize two points

1. “It is appointed for man once to die, and then the judgment.” Heb. 9:27; and

2. Suffering for all eternity is not sufficient to take away sin's guilt or penalty. That is why Christ came to earth: "Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree. . . ." 1 Pet 2:24.

## **Buddhism**

An early split from Hinduism, Buddhism has many sects and is similar to Hinduism on the topic of suffering, but adds some further elements, according to Ivan Figueroa:

As tradition says, the Buddha formulated four Noble Truths after his enlightenment. The first is Dukkha, meaning that life in samsara is always associated with some degree of suffering. Second is Samudaya, meaning that suffering originates from our craving or desire for pleasures and the attachment to the feelings created by that experience. Third is Nirodha, which teaches that there is a way of liberation from suffering which is based on controlling or eliminating our attachment to "happiness." Fourth is Kukkha, the method to obtain detachment through the eight-fold Noble Path (The "paths" are: 1. right belief; 2. right aspiration; 3. right speech; 4. right action; 5. right livelihood; 6. right effort; 7. right thought; and 8. right meditation—including various forms of Yogic meditation). The first Noble Truth says that, according to the causes and conditions (karma) generated by former lifetimes, different individuals will obtain relative advantageous or harmful conditions in our earthly experience which will be judged by others and ourselves as good or bad. But in reality there is no single living being, no matter what his privileged situation who is exempt from the "relative" perception of suffering. Examples would include the inevitability of incurable diseases no matter the wealth or quality of care available; or the suffering the death of loved ones and our own fear of it; or perhaps the certainty of aging (in spite of plastic surgery); and finally the unpredictability of any result no matter our utmost meticulous planning. Practitioners of Buddhism are not pessimistic about life. They enjoy the good days but they attempt to transcend the bad ones by the balanced view of detachment.

Simon Smith was clearer on the subject, saying:

Suffering can arise from attachment. We form attachments to "things" such as loved ones, material objects—i.e. a new car—but do not accept that all things change. . . . It is this non-acceptance of change that causes suffering. To end suffering we must accept change as the true nature of all things and face this with equanimity.

Simon does add in brackets, "Easily said, very difficult to practice."

Ken Russell adds a philosophical element to the subject: "The essence of Buddhist teaching on suffering is that everyone—good, bad, indefinable—suffers until they wake up to Reality." I asked what that means. Ken responded: "To wake up means to be in touch with what really is." I admit to suffering at this definition.

One last respondent, Frank McGlohn, came closer to the classic Buddhist statement: “To suffer or encounter problems should be welcomed. With problems we as Buddhists can challenge and strengthen our practice. We grow with each event through the struggle to break that negative Karma.”

One must remember that there are over 200 different sects of Buddhism in the world. No form of Buddhism has a place for biblical doctrines of God, man, sin, salvation or resurrection. Most are either polytheistic, pantheistic or atheistic, and hold to reincarnation. Amida Buddhists do speak about salvation by faith, not works. They use such terms as “the new birth” and “changed lives.” However, for them the terms have far different meaning than the Biblical truth. No real dealing with the problem of sin can be found.

## **Islam**

No Muslim responded to my forum questions. Their attitude, however, can be gained from The Shorter Encyclopedia of Islam, under an article entitled “Shahid” (or, “Martyr”). In Moslem tradition,

. . . anyone who dies a violent death, e.g., from starvation, thirst, drowning, being buried alive, burning, poison, a lightning stroke, being killed by robbers or wild beasts, or a mother who dies in childbirth; also anyone who dies during the performance of a meritorious action, e.g., in the pilgrimage or in a foreign land, where no friend or relative is with him, or on a journey which is sunna or while visiting a saint’s tomb or while in the act of prayer, or as a result of continuous absolutions, or on a Friday night, or in the search for the knowledge of the faith, or in defending the right against injustice; whoever loves and remains chaste and does not betray his secret and dies, dies a Shahid (Martyr), and anyone who meets his death fighting against his own impulses in the ‘great warfare’ is Shahid.

Great privileges await the Shahid—unfortunately, all after death.

By his sacrifice the martyr escapes the examination in the grave by the “interrogating angels” Munkar and Nakir. He also escapes passing through the “Islamic purgatory” (Barzakh). Martyrs receive the highest of the various ranks of Paradise, nearest the throne of Allah; the Prophet spoke in a vision of the most beautiful abode in Paradise for them. The wounds of the Shahid which he received in his warfare become red like blood in the day of judgment, and shine and smell of musk. None of the dwellers of Paradise would ever come back to earth, except the Shahid: for on account of the very special privileges which are granted him in Paradise he wished to suffer martyrdom another ten times. Martyrs are freed by their death from the guilt of all sins so that they do not require the intercession of the Prophet, and indeed in later traditions we even find them interceding for other men.

There is little guilt for sin in Islam, since it is God who is all powerful and ultimately causes sin. Suffering is not a result of sin, but rather of Allah’s exercise of His capricious will. If

one endures to the end, the rewards will follow in another life. Islam's similarities to the Bible's teachings are only very superficial ones.

### ***Paganism and the Occult***

In much of the world we find what in the United States is called "New Age." Their general response to suffering is stated by Michele Cox:

I feel that the "problem of pain" really depends very strongly on what you might call a "three-legged stool" of an idea of the Divine as 1) omnipotent, 2) omnibenevolent, and 3) omniscient. If the Divine is all of these things, then the existence of suffering—innocent suffering, that is—becomes a problem. My own "escape" from this issue is to toss one of the three "legs." I don't believe that the Divine is all-powerful. Each of us has our own power, which we can use to increase joy, or to increase pain, and our choices matter and are real. From my perspective, our "job" as the sapient part of the universe is to do what we can to make God's gamble worth it—to make the joy greater than the pain. After all, they (gods) are present in all things, feeling the joy and the sorrow.

I think that human free will demands a limit to the power of the Divine. I go a bit further. I say that the gods' all good [sic] applies to all things equally, and that they hold all creatures' interests in equal regard. So a god who loves us so much will allow disease to make us ill because the bacteria have to survive as well as man.

### ***Conclusion***

There are many varieties of teachings on pain, but perhaps these reflect an increasing American, nominal Christian view as the church becomes increasingly paganised. Bible-believers must search the Scriptures and insure our families stay free from anti-Christian darkness.