

Conclusion

A number of years ago, I read an article about forty maps one could study to understand our world. One of them was about Nutella, a brand of chocolate spread. The map described the process and the involvement of countries to make a single jar of Nutella. It requires natural resources and ingredients from four continents. Hazelnuts come from Turkey, cocoa is produced in Nigeria, palm oil arrives from Malaysia, Brazil provides sugar, and France contributes with its vanilla flavoring. The company that makes Nutella is based in Italy and has factories in Europe, Russia, North America, South America, and Australia. The company also has a supply and distribution chain all over the world. Millions of people with diverse ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds are involved in the process to bring a jar of Nutella to the breakfast table.¹ Probably no one articulated this aspect of interconnectedness and dependence better than Martin Luther King Jr.:

You get up in the morning and go to the bathroom and reach over for the sponge, and that's handed to you by a Pacific islander. You reach for a bar of soap, and that's given to you at the hands of a Frenchman. And then you go into the kitchen to drink your coffee for the morning, and that's poured into your cup by a South American. And maybe you want tea: that's poured into your cup by a Chinese. Or maybe you're desirous of having cocoa for breakfast,

¹ Max Fisher, "40 More Maps That Explain the World," *Washington Post*, January 13, 2014, www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2014/01/13/40-more-maps-that-explain-the-world/.

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and that's poured into your cup by a West African. And then you reach over for your toast, and that's given to you at the hands of an English-speaking farmer, not to mention the baker. And before you finish eating breakfast in the morning, you've depended on more than half the world. This is the way our universe is structured; this is its interrelated quality. We aren't going to have peace on Earth until we recognize this basic fact of the interrelated structure of all reality.²

This reality of interconnection and mutual dependence can make us more thoughtful toward one another. One can think of evil and suffering in the same context. It is a universal experience. It is a problem that makes us all equal because it is part of human nature. Evil and suffering transcend artificial borders. If an individual has not lost their consciousness, they have the ability to have empathy not only for the suffering of their fellow humans but also for other living beings in the natural world. It does not matter whether one is part of a religious or an atheist community. Understanding the problem of evil and suffering is a struggle for both sides. While in the literature the problem is seen as a dividing question, it can also connect people regardless of their view on religion. I have observed this aspect of evil and suffering among my students. While they come to class with stark views about the issue, in the end, they come to the conclusion that the reality is more complex than they thought. There is no absolute answer to the question. For example, in facing the death of a loved one, both religious and nonreligious people struggle and grieve.

However, the role of religions in offering consolation and meaning in times of grief and suffering cannot be overstated. In this context, the strength of religion has been recognized even by thoughtful atheists and agnostics. Stephen T. Asma, an American scholar of philosophy, for example, points to this characteristic of faiths as follows:

² James M. Washington, ed., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: HarperCollins, 1986), 254.

I'm an agnostic and a citizen of a wealthy nation, but when my own son was in the emergency room with an illness, I prayed spontaneously. I'm not naive – I don't think it did a damn thing to heal him. But when people have their backs against the wall, when they are truly helpless and hopeless, then groveling and negotiating with anything more powerful than themselves is a very human response. It is a response that will not go away, and that should not go away if it provides genuine relief for anxiety and anguish.³

Alain de Botton, an atheist, maintains that some practices of religions are beneficial for society and can be used by unbelievers as well. While religious traditions have the ability to provide meaning when people suffer and teach them how to be grateful even for small successes, the secular world lacks similar skills.⁴ It is in this vein that one can view the Islamic theological approach to the problem of evil and suffering in relation to God with empathy, if not admiration. In a world that looks cruel, unjust, frightening, and meaningless, the tradition offers hope, clarity, and meaning to its adherents. In what follows, I highlight some of the findings of this research.

First, God as the sole sovereign over all things is one of the most important characteristics of Islamic theology. The entire creation, including what is considered evil, is the manifestation of his names (*asma al-husna*). Without this approach, it is almost impossible to understand the problem of evil and suffering. The revelation of God's names requires diversity in the universe, which includes not only natural evil but also moral evil. There is nothing outside of God's power. This view of evil is manifested in one of the phrases that are invoked daily by Muslims: "Alhamdulillah ala kulli haal" (Thanks to God under any circumstances). They praise God in both good and bad times. The Qur'an mentions that when believers are afflicted by a calamity or go through suffering, including the death

³ Stephen T. Asma, *Why We Need Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 209.

⁴ Alain de Botton, *Religion for Atheists: A Non-believer's Guide to the Uses of Religion* (New York: Vintage, 2013), 188.

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of a loved one, they remember God: “We belong to God and to Him we shall return.”⁵ While suffering might be a threat to their material progress, it can bring about spiritual advancement.

Second, the Islamic theological framework emphasizes humanity’s limitation and imperfection in relation to God. Humans are weak and vulnerable. Suffering is part of their nature. Aging, sickness, and death are signs (*ayat*) of God’s creation. Because of their freedom, while humans can potentially be very good, they also have the ability to be extremely destructive. Their selfish desires and urges are usually the root causes of moral evil. They are also limited in their knowledge of God’s creation, including what they regard as evil or good. The Qur’an alludes to the inadequacy of humans as follows: “It may be that you hate something while it is good for you, and it may be that you love something while it is evil for you.”⁶

Third, faith in the hereafter and accountability are significant elements of the Islamic understanding of evil and suffering. Without life after death, it is problematic to argue that God is just and benevolent. There is so much injustice in the world. Bad people who commit major atrocities often leave this world without facing the consequences of their actions. There are so many good and innocent people who suffer without any apparent justification. God’s justice and compassion will be fully revealed in the hereafter. Those who cause suffering and grief will be held accountable. Good people will be rewarded for their virtuous actions, and innocents will be compensated for their suffering. Also, people long for eternity and wish to be reunited with their loved ones who have died. God will respond to their request, as he is known to be the most powerful, generous, and compassionate.

Fourth, the Islamic approach to evil and suffering falls in between orthodoxy and orthopraxy. While theology is key to understanding the problem of evil, practical responses are equally emphasized, if

⁵ Qur’an 2:156.

⁶ Qur’an 2:216.

not more important. The matter should not be exhausted with theology but rather be balanced with practice. In the case of moral evil, while the tradition attempts to provide theological answers, it also encourages believers to be just in their affairs and stand for justice, to repel evil with good, and to be forgiving and compassionate toward their fellow human beings. In facing sickness, in addition to theological responses, the tradition teaches believers to be patient and rely on God. It admonishes those who are around sick people to be caring. For those who are vulnerable in old age, it teaches filial piety. Islam's emphasis on practice has parallels with John Swinton's "practical theodicy." Grounded in the Christian tradition, Swinton believes that the classical philosophical and theological approaches to the problem of evil alone are not able to address the suffering of people. Instead, there should be responses that can benefit people in the midst of suffering to maintain their relationship with the creator.⁷

Fifth, this book does not aim to solve the problem of evil and suffering. Despite the creative efforts of Muslim scholars, there is much mystery around this matter. The Islamic approach's strength is not in offering a conclusive answer to the question but in providing meaning. This is probably the most important role of religion. As Huston Smith rightly put it: "Religion is not primarily a matter of facts; it is a matter of meanings."⁸

Finally, religion still infuses almost every aspect of life in Muslim societies. One can hardly make progress without religion in areas such as the rights of people with disabilities, the environmental crisis, and the coronavirus disease. Islam's theological framework can help tackle the problems related to these cases. Followers of religious traditions, including Muslims, and those without religion can collaborate to overcome global challenges.

⁷ John Swinton, *Raging with Compassion: Pastoral Responses to the Problem of Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 3–4.

⁸ Huston Smith, *The World's Religions* (New York: HarperOne, 1991), 10.