

Introduction

On the first day of 2022, a tragic story made its way to the major news headlines and went viral on social media. The report was about an Afghan woman who froze to death near the village of Belasur in Iran across from Turkey's Van province. Escaping the Taliban regime, she was attempting to enter Turkey to seek asylum along with her two children, whose ages were eight and nine. Because of the mother's sacrifice, the children survived the freezing cold. When they were found, their hands were covered with their mother's socks, and the mother's feet were covered with plastic bags.¹

There are many questions that one can raise in the context of God, evil, and suffering in light of this story. The compassion of a mother toward her children is known to be the manifestation of God's mercy in Islamic theology. If the mother was able to sacrifice herself, why did God not do anything to reveal his benevolence and stop this tragedy? If God is omnipotent, why did he not use his power to save the mother of these two innocent children? If God is omniscient, why did he not use his knowledge to make space for a safe journey for them? These are questions that can be raised by religious and nonreligious people.

According to a survey that included the question "if you could ask God only one question and you knew he would give you an answer, what would you ask?" the most common response was

¹ "Afghan Woman Freezes to Death near Turkey-Iran Border," *Hurriyet Daily News*, January 2, 2022, www.hurriyetdailynews.com/afghan-woman-freezes-to-death-near-turkey-iran-border-170522.

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“why is there pain and suffering in the world?”² Probably there is no one issue that is more challenging to religion in general and to the idea of a theistic God in particular than the problem of evil and suffering. The challenge is often known as the “rock of atheism.” There are a number of reasons for this objection. Here I mention some of them. First, many atheists believe that suffering that exists in the world is one of the strongest arguments against the existence of God as described in the Abrahamic religions. Even if the reality of evil does not disprove God, it questions the depiction of God as powerful and compassionate. Bart D. Ehrman, who was raised as a believer in God and became a prominent scholar of religion in the United States, lost his faith because of this problem:

If there is an all-powerful and loving God in this world, why is there so much excruciating pain and unspeakable suffering? The problem of suffering has haunted me for a very long time. It was what made me begin to think about religion when I was young, and it was what led me to question my faith when I was older. Ultimately, it was the reason I lost my faith.³

A similar approach comes from Jeffrey R. Halverson, a professor of Islamic studies and history of religions at Coastal Carolina University. Halverson became Muslim during his college years. After ten years of his conversion, he left Islam because of the problem of evil and suffering and provides the following reasoning:

It was the problem of evil and innocent suffering that truly led me out of Islam, and most important, out of religion as a whole. In all of my studies of religious texts and the wonderfully intricate and sophisticated theologies articulated by great Muslim scholars, such as al-Juwayni, al-Ghazali or al-Qushayri, I could not find a satisfying

² James R. Beebe, “Logical Problem of Evil,” *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed January 4, 2022, www.iep.utm.edu/evil-log/#H1.

³ Bart D. Ehrman, *God’s Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question – Why We Suffer* (New York: HarperOne, 2009), 1.

explanation for the horrific innocent suffering we see again and again in our world.⁴

Second, many atheists and agnostics have indicated that religion is the source of many atrocities in the world. Absolute truth claims, exclusive views about other religions, unconditional obedience to religious doctrines and their interpretations, and the use of religion for politics, including waging wars, have made religion a source of evil in many parts of the world. Critics also say that religion is an obstacle to critical thinking and moral progress. Not to mention that there is so much violence in the name of religion. It often promotes intolerance and divisions. In 2006, *The Root of All Evil*, a television documentary, was broadcasted on Channel 4 in the United Kingdom. It was written and presented by Richard Dawkins. Dawkins believes that religion is bad for human society and is the root cause of much evil. He supports his points with more details in his book *The God Delusion*. Inspired by John Lennon's (d. 1980) song "Imagine," Dawkins invites his readers to imagine a world with no religion:

Imagine no suicide bombers, no 9/11, no 7/7, no crusades, no witch-hunts, no Gunpowder plot, no Indian partition, no Israeli/Palestinian wars, no Serb/Croat/Muslim massacres, no persecution of Jews as "Christ-killers," no Northern Ireland "troubles," no "honor killings," no shiny-suited bouffant-haired televangelists fleecing gullible people of their money ("God wants you to give till it hurts"). Imagine no Taliban to blow up ancient statues, no public beheadings of blasphemers, no flogging of female skin for the crime of showing an inch of it.⁵

Again, Dawkins's main thesis is that our world would be better without religion.

⁴ Jeffrey R. Halverson, "I Left Both Christianity and Islam Behind," *Salon*, January 5, 2022, www.salon.com/2015/08/29/i_left_both_christianity_and_islam_behind_it_was_the_problem_of_evil_and_innocent_suffering_that_truly_led_me_out_of_religion/.

⁵ Richard Dawkins, preface to *The God Delusion* (New York: Mariner Books, 2008), 23–24.

Third, atheists often argue that people believe in religion because of the problem of evil. Generally speaking, our world is a cruel place that makes people vulnerable and frightened. In a world where there is so much evil and suffering, people turn to religion for comfort. Fear is the foundation of religion. Bertrand Russell (d. 1970) pointed to this aspect of faith:

Religion is based, I think, primarily and mainly upon fear. It is partly the terror of the unknown, and partly, as I have said, the wish to feel that you have a kind of elder brother who will stand by you in all your troubles and disputes. Fear is the basis of the whole thing – fear of the mysterious, fear of defeat, fear of death. Fear is the parent of cruelty, and therefore it is no wonder if cruelty and religion has gone hand-in-hand.⁶

For example, a person who has lost a loved one to death or has a fear of death may find consolation in the idea of the afterlife and heaven. A person who has a chronic illness may find hope in the religious teachings of reward in the hereafter because of their illness. Instead of fearlessly facing and accepting the reality of pain and adversity in the world, people seek support from a supernatural being.

The problem of evil and suffering is not only a question for atheists but also an issue for people who are religious. Faith traditions including Islam cannot be indifferent to this subject. In this regard, Muslim scholars are faced with many questions: Why is there evil and suffering? What is God's role in both natural and moral evil? What is the fate of Muslims who commit moral evil and cause suffering not only to their fellow human beings but also to the natural world? What is the status of a mortal sinner? If God is just, why is there innocent suffering? Do humans have free will or are they predestined to act in a certain way? If God is all-knowing and all-powerful, why is there still accountability in the hereafter, given that he already knows what humans will do?

⁶ Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian: And Other Essays on Religion and Related Subjects* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1953), 22.

The existence of evil and suffering is used as evidence for the existence of God and the hereafter as well as the significance of religion in Islamic theology. First, unlike atheists' arguments, mercy, compassion, and solidarity infuse the world. This is explained as the manifestation of God's names: the most merciful, the most compassionate, the most generous, and so on. The Qur'an points to this aspect as follows: "You will not see any imperfection in the creation of the Most Merciful. So turn your vision again! Do you see any flaw?"⁷ For example, the care and compassion of mothers toward their children is the manifestation of this name of God. Second, in the face of the evil and suffering that exist in the world, Islam teaches its followers to be charitable, forgiving, and compassionate and to stand for justice. Third, for unresolved injustices, unfilled desires, and attachments, it teaches that there is the hereafter and accountability. God's justice will be fully revealed, and those who cause suffering will be held accountable while the innocents will be compensated with eternal bliss for their grief. They find hope through belief in the hereafter.

From an Islamic theological perspective, people's attraction to religion is not about their fear of evil in the world. In the face of pain, cruelty, and suffering, relying on a higher being and longing for eternity is part of human nature. Here I provide two cases. One of them is the story of Hamza Yusuf Hanson, who became one of the most public faces of Islam in America. Hanson turned to Islam after a near-death experience in a car accident. This unexpected confrontation with his mortality led him to do research on religions

⁷ Qur'an 67:3. For the references from the Qur'an, I offer my own translation. I also consulted the following: Yusuf Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an* (Beltsville, MD: Amana, 2003); M. A. S. Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an: English Translation and Parallel Arabic Text* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Majid Fakhry, *An Interpretation of the Qur'an: English Translation of the Meanings* (New York: New York University Press, 2004); Seyyed Hossein Nasr et al., *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary* (New York: HarperOne, 2015); and Marmaduke Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Qur'an* (New York: Everyman's Library, 1992).

and the hereafter. He found comfort in the vivid details of Islamic eschatology.⁸ Another example is Yusuf Islam (better known as Cat Stevens). At the peak of his career, he also had a near-death experience. While swimming in the Pacific Ocean off the coast of Malibu, Islam found himself on the verge of drowning. He describes this incident as follows: “I decided to turn back and head for shore and, of course, at that point I realized, ‘I’m fighting the Pacific.’ There was no way I was going to win. There was only one thing to do and that was to pray to the almighty to save me. And I did.”⁹ Islam points out that his prayer to God saved him, and he was able to return to land.

As part of my teaching work at my current institution, I offer a course on the problem of evil and suffering. The student body is very diverse. In a way, it reflects the religious diversity in America. A quarter of my students are usually atheist or agnostic. I then have students from many religious backgrounds, including Hindus, Buddhists, Christians, Muslims, Jews, Mormons, and so on. My experience of engaging with this diverse group of students has been remarkable. In exploring the problem of evil and suffering, I try to make sure that my syllabus reflects the diversity of the class. We not only study the problem in world religions but also cover the topic from nonreligious perspectives. Despite the diverse views, engaging with the topic in a constructive way has been transforming for my students. Given the complex nature of the matter, many of my students often state that studying the subject from many different angles has made them more thoughtful toward other views, whether religious or atheist.

⁸ For Hamza Yusuf Hanson’s conversion story, see Zareena Grewal, *Islam Is a Foreign Country: American Muslims and the Global Crisis of Authority* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 159–69.

⁹ Annabel Nugent, “Yusuf/Cat Stevens Reveals the Near-Death Experience That Led Him to Convert to Islam,” *Independent*, September 28, 2020, www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/music/news/yusuf-cat-stevens-reveals-the-neardeath-experience-that-led-him-to-convert-to-islam-b672142.html.

In my teachings and research, one thing that became apparent is that the Islamic view of evil and suffering is often missing from the academic literature on the topic. One can hardly find the writings of Muslim theologians as part of the anthologies on the subject. This monograph examines both theoretical and practical theodicy in Islamic theology along with case studies from the lives of Muslims. Particular attention is given to the American context. It aims to be a humble contribution to the field.

This book by no means represents the entire theology of Islam on the problem of evil and suffering. In order to provide a holistic picture, I employ a wide range of sources in the Islamic tradition including the Qur'an, hadith literature, jurisprudence (*fiqh*), poetry, the works of Sufi scholars, theologians, and philosophers. While I have tried to capture diverse approaches to the matter, my engagement is primarily limited to the Sunni scholars. Examining the works of major Shiite theologians as well as the perspectives of the key black Muslim American scholars in the context of evil and suffering is beyond the scope of this study. However, research on their readings of the sacred texts of Islam will advance this study and provide further nuances.

The readers will recognize that in addition to the sources in Arabic, I utilize the literature available in the Turkish language. The Turkish-speaking world has been and remains a major cultural zone of Islam. Employing the resources in Turkish can be considered as a strength of this work, because they are often dismissed or simply less known to the English-speaking academic world. I particularly engage with the works of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi (1876–1960), a Kurdish Muslim theologian, who wrote most of his works in the Arabic and Ottoman-Turkish languages. Nursi himself went through immense pain in his life. He witnessed and endured the suffering caused by World War I and II. Nursi was captured and held by Soviet Russia as a prisoner of war during World War I for two years. He lived in a time when the major tenets of faith were challenged because of the rise of communism as well as secularism.

Nursi was exiled and imprisoned for more than thirty years because of his writings in modern Turkey. It was during those trying times that he composed his Qur'an commentary, *The Risale-i Nur* (The Book of Light). Because of his own context and experience, Nursi wrote extensively on the problem of evil and suffering in relation to God and human nature. When it is applicable, I refer to his works, which is another contribution of this study to the field. Also, for the discussions related to the articles of faith in Islam, I rely heavily on the relevant sections of my previous book, *Exploring Islam: Theology and Spiritual Practice in America*.¹⁰

I explore the matter in three parts. Part I introduces theoretical theodicy in four chapters. Chapter 1 outlines the problem of evil and suffering. What are evil and suffering? How do religious traditions such as Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, and Christianity address the problem? What are the questions posed to traditional theism regarding evil and suffering? Chapter 2 discusses the notion of God in Islamic theology. It also looks at other supernatural beings such as angels, jinn, and Satan in the tradition. Some of the questions that I address in the chapter are the following: Who is God? What are the attributes of God? Who are angels and jinn? Who are humans in relation to God and angels?

Chapter 3 analyzes major theodicies for natural evil in Islamic theology. I review the positions of various theological schools such as the Mutazilites, Asharites, and Maturidis. The chapter also includes the views of Muslim scholars such as Ibn Sina, al-Arabi, al-Ghazali, Rumi, and Nursi. Chapter 4 concentrates on moral evil. I specifically evaluate the views of theological schools on the role of human agency in moral evil. Particular attention is given to the concepts of free will, acquisition (*kasb*), and predestination (*qadar* and *qada*).

In Part II, we try to understand the Muslim perspectives of practical theodicy. Chapter 5 explores aging in Islamic theology. What are

¹⁰ Salih Sayilgan, *Exploring Islam: Theology and Spiritual Practice in America* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2021), 73–115.

the major questions about aging? How do sacred sources of Islam address these questions? What are the theological and spiritual responses to aging, loneliness, and filial piety? Chapter 6 focuses on the reception of sickness in Islam. Is sickness part of the creation of God? How are sickness and healing treated in the tradition? Chapter 7 reviews death, resurrection, and the hereafter in Islamic theology. How is death regarded in the sacred sources of Islam? Is there life after death? What are the major rituals of funerals and burial and how are they related to the problem of evil and suffering?

Part III addresses some of the contemporary cases. Chapter 8 explores how Islamic theology deals with disability. I look at the Qur'an and hadith literature on people with disabilities. How do Muslim scholars explain disability in relation to God's justice? I specifically shed light on blindness. Chapter 9 examines the environmental crisis and attempts to develop an Islamic ecological theology. I also highlight some environmental virtue ethics in Islam. Chapter 10 tries to understand the coronavirus (COVID-19) according to plagues and pandemics in Islamic literature.

