
SUFFERING AS THEANDRIC ASSUMPTION FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY

Emil Jurcan*

'1 Decembrie 1918' University of Alba Iulia, 5 Gabriel Bethlen Str., 510009, Alba Iulia, Romania

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Abstract

One of the major issues in all religions is suffering. For some religious thinking, all of our existence is suffering. Any attachment to life, to the existential world is suffering. The chance to be happy is an attachment to life and to the entire created world. For other religions, breaking the relationship between man and God is the greatest suffering. In Christ, suffering acquires a positive meaning. The sacrifice of Christ makes all human suffering have a soteriological depth. In Christianity, human suffering also has an agapic meaning, because people are more united. In recent years, Romania has provided us with many such examples. According to the Trinitarian paradigm, Christian suffering is also pneumatophore. It infuses grace and power in man, who assumes his suffering in the Christian way.

Keywords: suffering, comparative theology, theandric, Theophany.

1. Suffering: general aspects

The dilemma of the entire religious world has always been the idea of suffering. This issue has, in fact, undermined the shade of divinity itself, which has faded in its presence; it is no longer seen as close to human life or within the society's existential framework.

Religious people of all times and of all religions have considered suffering a thorny issue. It has created dissension regarding God's positive presence. In Christian theology this dispute is known as *the challenge of theodicy* [1]. It was one of the allegations of the atheists: as long as there is suffering, they accuse religion of God's absence. They claim that a Divine presence, a supernatural reality that is primarily defined by love cannot accept suffering, so widespread and visible in the history of mankind. And yet...

Facing this challenge, religions have each tried to provide an answer to the problem of suffering. Human nature has often been discredited from this perspective: suffering as a response to the relationship between man and God. Each religious pursuit has tried to offer answers to the topic of suffering and to the manner of recovering the relationship with the transcendent by assuming or

* E-mail: emiljurcan@yahoo.com

eliminating suffering. Pathos or suffering involves an exception to the normality of creation. Man was not created to suffer. This condition is abnormal and inadequate for human existence. God did not create man to know suffering. If it had been so, it would mean that love, God's greatest attribute from the Christian perspective, does not exist. Instead, God would be an entity filled with hatred, a misanthrope, willing to create a world of suffering.

Every religion considers pain and pathos as an abnormal condition for creation. However, responses are different. We shall try to present pathos from the perspective of Comparative theology.

2. Hindu perspective on suffering

In every religion man's pursuit is focused on two major points: on the one hand, there is the belief in God and, on the other hand, the anthropological perspective, i.e., the human condition presented as a value of existence. The first point refers to God, also called Divine or Sacred, according to the various ways of expressing and representing Him. The second, just as important, focuses on man or, more precisely, on how he expresses himself in the presence of the Sacred or the Divine. In other words, man's perspective is very important in rendering religion. Man is present in all human creeds, both as a sender of his message to the Divinity and as a receiver of God's revelation to him. But there are major differences between the great religions regarding anthropology and, in our case, the idea of human suffering. The author of Shvetashvatara Upanishad asked a natural question, a question we find in any man of faith: "Why are we born, why do we live and where do we go?" [2] There are multiple answers, even if we took into account only the Eastern world.

Pantheist thinking, as expressed by the Hindu world, considers man to be a combination of two elements: the material (Prakriti) and the spiritual (Purusha). We shall see, however, that in this religion there are other anthropological options. Ancient Sanskrit literature mentions three anthropogenic myths. In the Rig Veda [3] both men and gods are said to have their origin in the primordial impersonal entity, which will then be called Brahman or the universal Atman. It is a kinship between gods and men who belong to the same chain of entities that tend towards the final unfettering and the union with the pantheist Divine. Hindu theogony is both pantheistic and polytheistic.

Their pantheistic theogony starts from that final, ultimate divine reality, which will absorb the world at its end. Polytheism shows that in their religious structure there are also divine elements, deities, to whom people appeal in order to break the cycle of karma. But these deities will, too, be absorbed into that one pantheistic entity in the end. They are not absorbed yet because, according to the Hindu faith, they are necessary for the liberation of the spiritual entities who exist in the karmic firmament. In other words, people invoke deities, who do not become one with Brahman, precisely compassionately to help those with existential issues.

Brahmanas texts have a different vision of the creation of man. It regards the creative act of Prajapati [4], who brought the world and mankind into existence by heating (tapas) his own body, which expanded into the elements of the visible world. Here we see a relationship between man and the divine, which are present to one another through meditation and tapas. Tapas is the method that most of the yoga schools adopt for use; they believe that by the energetic positioning of the body and by its inner *heating* through such energetic interiorisation, one can reach the state of illumination or integration in Brahman's absolute.

In the Purushasukta hymn from the Rig Veda book (10, 90) the primordial giant Purusha creates the world through his own sacrifice. It should be emphasised that in all this creation process there is a fairly close bond between man and the divine reality. Hindus, even if they do not preserve the elements of the primordial authentic revelation, still are not estranged from the idea of a kinship between the human and the divine world. Obviously, this involves a special relationship between man and the transcendent, because the purpose of the two entities is their union and dispersion in the pantheist cosmos. In this equation, gods are mediators and intercessors, which mean they are not a final reference point. The god should also be a part of the union with the pantheistic Divine. But he remains in the firmament of the Cosmos of the current world in order to help humanity in search of its meaning. That is why Hindus still worships gods, because they believe that they can offer access to the ultimate world of God.

The Vedic period is much closer to the Revelation that most of the Indo-European peoples accepted. Vedic man is made up of material elements, *asu* and *manas*. In this case, man depends on the deities he worships. Indra, Varuna, Agni are the most important gods that are relevant in Hindu spiritual life. Those who do not honour the gods have no escape from the world of evil and darkness [3, p. 104]. However, the Hindus practice *shraddha*, a kind of funeral prayer, accompanied by almsgiving and other good deeds performed for the dead. It is believed that all these efforts will lead to good reincarnation. Gods will be overwhelmed by the prayers and they will change the fate of the one who must be reborn. This is the point where we seem to have something in common.

In other words, although pantheism and the idea of death separate us, the fact that Hindus care for the dead indicates a belief in the immortality of an undefined soul. But the purpose of *shraddha* is different from the care for the reposed in the Christian faith.

Unfortunately, starting with the Brahmanic period, i.e., the ninth century B.C., the idea of preserving the soul after death was abandoned and replaced with a belief that the human self reincarnates, is united with the divine or perishes into Nirvana (Buddhists). From a spiritual perspective, human personality disappears; instead, there emerges the idea of atman which unites with Atman or Brahman. Here, everything seems to close and to relativise into religious anthropocentrism. Man becomes his own saviour. The human self, atman, has the same ontological essence as Atman or Brahman. The self is

incomprehensible; it cannot be understood or destroyed [5]. He must return to the great essence, to the universal Atman or Brahman.

Moreover, the Hindu religious world divides into two: those who accept matter as something real and those who believe that the existence of matter is an illusion. The purpose of life is to return into Brahman, which actually exists, but the world is not aware of it. It is a kind of noetic salvation.

What we consider of inherent value is the fact that the followers of this thinking believe in the unity between man, his inner self, and the Divine. What appears distant from Christian mentality is the delimitation from the human body and from creation. Body and matter are either delusional or negative, demonic elements that must be avoided. Meditation on the self can lead to the ultimate union (*Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* 1, 4, 7). Evil is seen as a game of illusions, which makes the human mind and spirit attach to the things it sees. We can compare the man passing over a hidden treasure with the ultimate reality, Brahman, which one pays no attention to every day [6]. Vidya or knowledge is the opportunity of the man who manages to come out of ignorance (avidya), of the world of illusion and existential deception. Through vidya one recognises the presence of Brahman in the human self or the identity of the two realities. The corporeality, the mind, as well as all sensorial activities and perceptions are surpassed in the noetic process, which makes man aware of his identity.

Karma is the negative agent of human value in Hinduism. Jainists go to extremes with the idea of karma, considering it as a subtle mist of materiality that covers the human self as an opaque placenta, preventing him from seeing reality. In this case, they recommend *kevalya* or the sudden pulling out of this karma that keeps the man prisoner in the reincarnation cycle, not giving him the opportunity to see the ultimate reality. Samsara or transmigration is this state of ignorance in which man lives totally dependent on matter, the mental or emotional attachments, which represents the basis of sociability. Detachment from the world or living in isolation is the chance for salvation and escape from suffering. *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* (3, 2, 13) mentions man, who in death receives good or evil according to his previous life. In other words, reincarnation can be good or bad depending on his past deeds and past life attachments. But no matter how good previous deeds may be, they are still not good enough, since they will bring reincarnation.

The Yoga School divides man in two realities: Purusha and Prakriti, which find themselves in a permanent contradictory process. The vicious circle is made up of the avidya-karma-samsara triad, which form the basis of existence. All yoga exercises, all tapas, try to achieve the same thing: breaking this cycle of reincarnation by deepening concentration and detached meditation, as well as by awakening the kundalini energy of human corporeality. In Darshana samkya – yoga man is attached to pain due to his senses and the three gunas or qualities of the spirit. There is *sattva* guna depicting man as intelligent and interested in spiritual knowledge, *rajas* is the guna which makes man active and passionate in everything he does, and finally, *tamas* guna is the state of torpor and inactivity. All three gunas are in fact elements that create attachment. The yogi's goal is the

liberation from these gunas and the state of total detachment.

What can we notice from the things described above? The Hindu man wants to be intimate or even identical to God, but the latter is not a *terminus ad quem*, an ultimate goal. It is a fusion of essences and one cannot know what follows afterwards. Man is a being of dialogue and communion. Well, it is exactly these two elements that are missing from Hindu soteriology. In Christianity, suffering is seen as the opposite of this. While in Christian life suffering means loneliness, the absence of the other, in Hinduism suffering is the presence of the other, the attachment to him and communication through words, through senses or feelings with him. The definition of the body in the Dhammapada is suggestive: “Look at this painted body, a heap of festering wounds, wretched and full of cravings, nothing of which is stable or lasting. Worn out is this body, a nest of diseases, dissolving. This putrid conglomeration is bound to break up, for life is hemmed in with death.” [7] Suffering means attachment to existence, to concrete reality. The best relationship in Hinduism, as well as in Buddhism or Jainism is not an attachment or assumed love, but *compassion*. Man sympathises with his brother. Otherness should be pitied and not necessarily loved or assumed. If you are attached to it, you will help neither him nor you. This is the line of thought that all yoga schools follow. Although they talk about the special relationship with the Divine, in which as an advertising equation they place Jesus too, they do so only because they seek to address an audience with a Christian subconscious. But in the yoga systems, Jesus does not take upon Himself the sins of mankind; He does not love and does not die in order to redeem the world. Jesus (who is not Christ or Messiah for yogis) is a master practitioner of detachment, who has mercy on the people (Matthew 14.14). Mercy is not always an expression of love, for it may also derive from the idea of compassion or willingness to deliver someone from ignorance. The Christian idea is this: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3.16). Love is the existential definition of God. Suffering does not come from the attachment to the world and from the people living in it, but from sinning and estrangement from God.

3. Suffering from the Buddhist perspective

Buddhist thinking regards this combination, called man, as being made up of five basic elements – *skandas*, aspects that constitute the human being. These aggregates are joined together at birth or rebirth due to karma, resulting in what we call the human or animal entity [8]. The *Anatta* doctrine refers to the notion of ‘non-self’ and argues for the need for liberation from the karmic baggage, the ultimate goal of man’s spiritual existence. The inclusion of these five aggregates (*skandas*) gives man the false idea of being a human person (*puggala*), when in fact he is merely a combination. For Buddhists, the elimination of the human self is actually the elimination of suffering, because the state of nirvana means the annihilation of all the realities experienced in the entity and entering a sort of

aneantisation. The moment when the cycle of reincarnations ceases, the transmigration of karma ends, which is the only element that leads to reincarnation [9]. Karmic baggage passes from one existence to another. The ultimate goal of man is the liberation from karma and entering nirvana [<http://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nirvana>]. Human finality is therefore ... nothing.

In Buddhism, to live means to suffer. This defines the first words of Buddha's sermon "This, monks, says Buddha, is the noble truth of suffering: birth is suffering, aging is suffering, sickness is suffering, death is suffering. Association with the loathed is suffering, dissociation from the loved is suffering; not getting what one wants is suffering. In short, suffering is the five aggregates of clinging objects." This statement renders human suffering an ontological definition of Buddhism. In other words, society is the cradle of suffering and, therefore, escaping from it is a chance for liberation. The happy society is in nirvana, but Buddha does not define it in concrete, real terms.

In Hindu religions, whether we refer to Buddhism or Hinduism, human value lies in the fact that man is part of a network in a karmic connection. The whole of creation, whether it is considered illusory or real, is related to a dharma or a law in which karma or attachment, creates a connection between all living entities. But, the feeling that exists between an animal and a human or between people is one of compassion, as they are all prisoners of the flesh, on the basis of previous experiences. We shall explain that from the Christian point of view this is far too little.

4. Chinese religious views on suffering

In Chinese religious thinking, the value of man acquires meaning only when the moral aspect of this system, Confucianism, is fulfilled. Social life is man's *terminus ab quo* and *ad quem*. Everything is centred on social relationing, as the master's teaching explain, a projection of heaven on Earth. Human perfection cannot be achieved through sacred rituals or religious feelings, but through education and observance of the ethical rules of society. The *shu* principle can be explained: 'Never impose on others what you would not choose for yourself'. *Shu* (reciprocity) is the Golden Rule of Confucianism, while *jen* refers to the idea of respect for superiors or for one's parents. The human condition is respected and appreciated in this religious system, which adds more value to the Confucianist of those times. However, what seems to be a negative is that such beliefs do not relate to heaven, to God. In his *Analects* [10], Confucius spoke to his disciples about the futility of relating to God. To worship God is useless unless you have managed to build up a harmonious relationship with the surrounding world: "if you cannot serve people, how can you serve the spirits?" (*Analects* 11, 11). The value of this religion is given by the regulation of social relations so necessary to such a numerous people as the Chinese. In Chinese thinking, suffering means not living in accordance with the rules of Tien, of heaven. The moment the world will follow the model of heaven, suffering will come to an end.

Taoists or daoists took ideas from Confucius's thinking, but they showed more interest in the relationship with the spirit, the divine, than in the relationship with man. Lao Tse's religion aims at achieving universal harmony, both among people and in the relationship with the spiritual. However, it appears that Daoism was greatly influenced by Hinduism, where the relationship with the divine is impersonal. Daoists went further in this indistinction of the world beyond and mentioned tao or dao as the path or the balance between extremes, between yang and yin, between masculine and feminine, between light and darkness etc. The key word in Daoism is harmony ("He who is filled with Virtue is like a newborn child" – *Tao-te Ching*, 55) [11], by which everything has a meaning. Otherwise, justice, knowledge, and piety are nothing but realities full of hypocrisy (*Tao-te Ching*, 18-19). Salvation primarily involves knowledge and deliverance from ignorance. The man who does not have the conviction that harmony between yang and yin is the ultimate goal of existence is like an unborn child in the womb of his mother, not knowing the reality beyond the maternal matrix. When ignorance disappears and he knows the truth about the dao, he can overcome the chaotic state in which he lives and enter the world of Dao, a world Lao Tse hardly describes. Many questions remain, however, which await their soteriological answer. To these questions not only Daoism, but also all Oriental religions give vague answers regarding the idea of eternal happiness.

5. Judaism and suffering

For the Old Testament faith of Judaism, man is a reflection of the divine image. In every man there are two capital impulses: *yetzer ha-tov* and *yetzer ha-ra*. The first impulse involves moral conscience and the pursuit of God. This is what binds creation to the Uncreated. *Yetzer ha-ra* is the horizontal side of man, in search of instinctual needs. Human instincts, the connection with other individuals, has nothing sinful in itself, but when their use is wrong, strictly oriented towards selfishness and pleasure, *yetzer ha-ra* certainly loses its value.

In the Old Testament, the value of man resides in the act of creation, when God is directly involved, not through the world. Man is created due to a special relationship with Yahweh, a fact that creates a responsibility as well. Man becomes superior to the material world and more responsible to God. If the lives of animals are based on instinct, man is responsible to God both for his own being and for his existential environment.

In Judaism, suffering begins with disregarding the divine law, whose absolute master is God. The greatest suffering in the Old Testament is estrangement from God. The Jew who loses Yahweh is rejected by the Jewish community and becomes an outcast of Jewish society. This is the only explanation for the fear of the Jews to believe in Christ. The eloquent example refers to the man born blind, whose parents were afraid to get involved in this miracle. The temple and later the synagogue was the centre of Jewish life and the loss of this sense was the greatest suffering with major social implications.

6. Suffering in Islam

In the monotheist world of Islam, the human condition is presented as imitating the Semitic side of the Bible. The Judeo-Christian tradition was the source of inspiration for Islam, which Mohammed changed according to its creed and its monotheistic rigid doctrine. Men and angels were created for one purpose: to worship Allah (Qur'an 51, 56). After creating man, Allah would have called the angels and commanded them to worship Adam. Satan found it unacceptable because it was a spirit, while Adam was flesh. Iblis said to Allah: "I am better than him (Adam). You created me from fire and created him from clay" [12]. In Islam, the difference and distance between God and man is absolute. Almost we can not speak about a dialog between Allah and humanity. Everything is expressed in the form of subordination and of worship; a relationship of dialogue between the members of creation or between the created and the Divine is absent.

In Islam there is no original sin. All sins and man's sinfulness generally come from the temptation of devils, who want to prevent man from obeying and worshipping Allah. Dishonoring Allah, disobeying the commandments of the Qur'an and trying to ignore Islamic law are each temptations of the devil, which makes man unfaithful. Each person receives two guardian angels, a good one and an evil one, trying to influence man's soul. These two angels will accuse or help the man they accompanied throughout life (*Qur'an*, 50, 17-19) at the final judgment.

The strict monotheism of Islam imposed a relationship of absolute obedience of man to the Divine and a lack of dialogue with the Divine. Man is a *Muslim*, i.e., a subject, and the religion of Mohammed tries to make its followers aware of this state. Total obedience is strictly observed in this religion, because the Prophet who became *the seal of prophets* ceased the transmission of messages from heaven to earth. The world after 632 A.D. became a place of obedience. God said through the angels and the prophets what he had to say.

7. A response of Orthodox Christian theology

In the Christian faith, things are more subtle. Revelation was carried out over the millennia, but Christ revealed the dimension of man's plenitude, i.e., as much as man could acquire. However, God continued to speak not only through his prophets, but also directly, through personal revelation. The desert fathers and even ordinary believers were such guarantees of this revelation, which are part of the *dynamic tradition* or the applicability of the revelation to our concrete existence.

Through Christ, man genuinely becomes an axiological entity. Through the prophets and the Old Testament, man is revealed as part of creation, who receives God's revelation and permanently feels the inclination towards the sin that burdens; with Christ, however, man becomes part of the direct dialogue. This occurred sporadically in the case of the Old Testament patriarchs, but such

cases were rare and happened at long intervals. In the Christian world, the revelational element becomes a Eucharistic normality. Man becomes a part of the liturgical dialogue, of the presence through the word before the Eucharistic Christ. Every liturgy gives man the opportunity of conversing with God. He speaks liturgically to His creation, whether the creation is aware of it or not. Man's soul is the perfect receptacle to sense God's voice or logos in the creation or in the liturgy. Being mature in Christ helps man to discern the divine voice from the noise of the world. The difficult part of the world today is the opacity of humanity's spiritual senses, which are no longer able to receive messages from God Incarnated.

In the Christian world, man's value consists in his vocation as the dialogue partner with God, Who speaks to man through the sacrality of creation, restored by grace through Christ. *Through Christ humanity is not alone anymore. Vae soli* does not apply to Christianity because God is permanently present in man's life. However, a problem arises: the sensitivity of the spiritual feeling, the spiritual eye, which should realise that God is a reality closer to man than he is to himself. *I stand at the door and knock* is not only a metaphor, but also a reality which applies where there are ears to hear beyond the door. Man may or may not discern the knock in the evening hour, depending on the grace that sharpens sight and hearing. Thus, we can say that the Christian man has value in himself. The value of Christianity does not reside in the number of believers or in the number of the baptised, which makes us be proud that we are the most numerous on Earth. No, the value lies in the fact that God came as near as possible to humanity and gave it the grace which makes it able to receive His message and communicate with Him.

The Pentecost was the best chance for humanity to be close to Christ. The common people of Galilee became apostles, personalised theophanies. The saint is essentially a *theophanic topos*, a person who becomes the locus of God in creation. When the Church turns into a synaxis of theophanic topos, the Saviour's words come true: "For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them" (Matthew 18.20). The world itself turns into a place of theophanies and a *macro-ecclesiae*. This is actually the Church's mission in the world: to sanctify humanity in Christ and thereby sanctify the world. It is then that everything becomes a new heaven and a new earth (Apocalypse 21.1). We shall not move on to a new planet, but the earth and the sky will become new, due to the theandric and pneumatic reality. This is the rediscovery of the primordial creational reality, when everything was imbued with the divine grace and in dialogue with God.

In Christianity, suffering is *a fact assumed by Christ and through Christ*. It is assumed by Christ because from the Incarnation and especially from the Crucifixion, it has received a positive meaning. Until the Messiah came suffering was considered a payment for sins. The entire Old Testament is marked by the idea of *punishment* and suffering was the divine punishment. The relationship between God and His chosen people is one of leadership and obedience and getting out of this equation means punishment. The prophets

always tried to explain to the people that the evil/the punishment they receive is a payment for their sinful lives and disobedience to Yahweh [13, 14]. Punishments were quite severe: slavery (Egyptian, Assyrian, Babylonian, Macedonian or Roman) was considered payment for sins or estrangement from God. In the Old Testament, we also find another meaning of suffering other than punishment. In this case, we refer to *suffering as a bet or wager* between God and Satan. Job's suffering was not a result of his sins; he was only a part of a wager between God and Satan. This is a special case, unique in the Bible, as there is no other dialogue between God and Satan. It is rather difficult to understand how God speaks to the devil, but if we admit that God conveys messages to His creation and logos is a form of communication, then, we can agree with the existence of the dialogue between Him and the devil.

In the New Testament, suffering for Christ gains soteriological significance. From now on, human suffering will refer to God's suffering for us and, therefore, we shall be able to connect any affliction of mankind to the sacrifice of the Cross. There are several meanings that Christ's sacrifice gives to suffering.

First, in Christianity suffering is a *theophany*: when suffering, man sees God more clearly. The theophany of tears is authentic and it proves that God is closer to the suffering, than to the one who has all earthly joys of life. Another meaning of Christian suffering is that of *amartiological expiation*. Through suffering, man's hidden sins are forgiven, those that were not erased by sincere confession. Suffering is a kind of confession through the tears of the sick or otherwise afflicted person.

Suffering has a purpose: consolidating the Orante state, the prayer in people's souls. Through suffering, the faithful pray. In his spiritual depth, he sees suffering as a way to communicate with God. This explains why saints and spiritual fathers were miracle-workers and healers for other people than themselves. They believed that healing their own body meant leaving the mystery of the dialogue with heaven. *The thorn in the flesh* (2 Corinthians 12.7), as Paul the Apostle calls suffering, was not removed, because it had a soteriological role. Suffering reminded him of God's mercy and the transience of human life.

Finally, in Christianity suffering strengthens *the agapic community* following the Trinitarian model. People are united in suffering and this manages to bring out the best in them. Remember the disasters experienced by our country in recent years (floods, snow etc...). In this suffering, one could see how good the Romanian soul is, taking action to help those in distress. The Church, state institutions, private companies etc., each of them showed unconditional love, offering what they could give to help their fellow beings.

Christian suffering involves the *pneumatic* presence which makes pain bearable. Through the divine grace man endures suffering better and in a more profound way. He feels comforted by God in a way no man could. There were people in the final stage of cancer who were so serene about accepting the idea of death although one could not find a word of relief for them. And the answer

came from the presence of grace. Suffering brought God's mercy, subsumed in the presence of grace.

8. Conclusion

From the Christian perspective, suffering is an extremely important issue that cannot be compared to other ideas. Only in Christ does suffering acquire authentic meaning. The suffering of Christ is the deepest model of suffering. Human suffering through Christ becomes theandric and pneumatophore suffering, offering man *theoria*, an authentic vision of God.

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