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# THE QURANIC INSTRUMENTALIZATION OF SUFFERING

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(Received 28 April 2016, revised 4 May 2016)

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## Abstract

Both religion and Medicine try to answer fundamental questions related to suffering: what is its source, why is man suffering, what is the purpose of suffering, and how can it be alleviated. Each religion answers differently and these answers reveal the attitude of the adherents of each towards medical practice. The specific Islamic view on suffering is grounded in the Quran. Without a developed theodicy, the ultimate origin of suffering is a part of God's will. In order to reconcile this perspective with the All-Merciful and All-Compassionate attributes of God, the Quran has developed a utilitarian place for suffering, which gives it meaning and purpose in man's life. Suffering is understood as a punishment for sins, a test of faith, and a means to acquire the moral virtues of patience and trust in God. Seen from this perspective, it has a positive role in the spiritual life and directly influences the Muslim perception of the means to alleviate suffering (i.e., medical treatment, cooperation with the clinician, etc.). Healthcare professionals' familiarity with the Quranic perceptions of suffering helps them to understand Muslim patients' attitudes towards illness and healing.

*Keywords:* Islam, Quran, suffering, fatalism, theodicy

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## 1. Introduction

Suffering is a universal human experience which preoccupies both Medicine and religion, as partners in serving humanity. While Medicine tries to relieve or at least diminish suffering (be it physical or psychological), religion mainly aims to offer meaning and signification for it, answering the fundamental question: what is the reason for human suffering. The more religious a person is, the more his religion will mould his attitude toward afflictions, illness, and torment, a clinician's perceived role, the will to fight the disease, etc., which interfere with medical intervention and influence its efficacy. Christian, Hindu, Muslim, etc. patients and healthcare professionals see suffering and its purpose

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differently in their life and in the lives of others. For this reason, especially in the actual globalizing socio-cultural context, it is important for clinicians who aspire to a holistic medical approach to familiarize themselves with different religious traditions' doctrines concerning suffering [1]. This study examines the issue of suffering in Islam, the second world religion, which guides the minds and hearts of more than 1.5 billion people, in an attempt to identify the specific religious-determined attitude towards healthcare and medical treatment.

Despite the common perception, Islam is far from being a monolithic religion, which speaks with a single voice, in regard to the cause of suffering. On some points, different sects, legal schools, political groups, etc. do not agree on the meaning of suffering in human existence [2]. For this reason we refer here to the common denominator of all the different voices that speak about suffering: the Quran, the basis of Islamic life and thought, from which must begin any consideration about the Muslim understanding of suffering [3]. This approach is to the Quran "without exegetes", quoting Cook [4].

As Sachedina remarks, "[...] The Quran was more concerned with the question of belief and disbelief than the question of suffering in human society" [2, p. 73]. Nevertheless, it should be understood that the Quran does not neglect the issue of evil and suffering, but it does not theorise concerning it too much either. Using hermeneutical and analytical methods, subsequently are identified the Quranic instrumentalizations of suffering, as a necessity in the context of Islamic (pseudo) theodicy, and their consequences for the perspective on medical treatment.

## 2. The Quranic aetiology of suffering

Quoting Sachedina, [1, p. 77], "all religions have responded to the question of suffering as a form of evil, in both its moral and physical manifestations", and Islam is not an exception. The difficulty is that the Islamic discourse about the origin of evil is quite hermetic. In this respect, Islam is somehow an atypical religion: it does not propose a sophisticated theodicy because the Quran does not consider it necessary [5]. There, finding and understanding the source of suffering is not an easy task. If we relate the source of evil with free will, then, according to the Muslim theology there are three beings with free will: human beings, demons (including *djinnns*), and God.

The problem of man's free will and his capacity to commit evil can be seen in his creation and the following events. God created Adam "from dust, then (He) said to him: 'Be!'— and he was." (3:59; cf. 15:26; 22:5; 38:1-2) [6], with the purpose to worship Him (51:56). God asked angels to bow before Adam and they did so in the very moment after his creation, except Iblīs. (15:28-31). It is relevant for our purpose to mention that, according to 2:30, God intended from the beginning to put man on Earth, He knew that man will "make mischief therein and shed blood", but He had a plan for man, unknown even to the angels. The story is quite similar to the Biblical one. God taught Adam the names of everything (2:31), offering him knowledge, which made him superior to the

angels (2:31-33). Because Adam had nobody similar to him, God created Eve (4:1). Both Adam and Eve lived pleasantly in Paradise, but with God's behest not to come „near this tree or you both will be of the *Zâlimûn* (wrong-doers)” (2:35). Despite God's warning (20:117), Adam falls into Satan's temptation (7:20; 20:120-121; 2:36) and is expelled from the Garden: “We said: ‘Get you down, all, with enmity between yourselves. On earth will be a dwelling place for you and an enjoyment for a time.’” (2:36; cf. 7:24; 20:123). Adam and Eve sought mercy and God forgave them and promised them guidance (2:37; 20:122).

This leads to three conclusions relevant to the approach to the problem of evil and suffering:

- a) Although man holds a superior knowledge and God warned him, he chooses to yield to Satan's temptation and to commit sin.
- b) Man has the capacity to distinguish evil from right and is able to repent and atone for his guilt.
- c) God's forgiveness eliminates the problem of original sin and the episode of man's fall remains an isolated event, without ontological consequences [7, 8].

Until now, there are no special difficulties in understanding that man can be, because of his freedom of will, a source of evil and suffering for himself, for others, and for the whole creation, in general. Things get quite complicated when taking into account a few Quranic verses, such as:

- God is the one who “makes (whom He wills) laugh, and makes (whom He wills) weep; And that it is He (Allah) Who causes death and gives life [...] And that it is He (Allah) Who gives much or a little (or gives wealth and contentment)” (53:43-44, 48; 57:1-7).
- “Say: ‘Nothing shall ever happen to us except what Allah has ordained for us. He is our *Maulâ* (Lord, Helper and Protector).’ And in Allah let the believers put their trust” (9:51; 13:13);
- “No calamity befalls on the earth or in yourselves but is inscribed in the Book of Decrees – (*Al-Lauh Al-Mahfuz*), before we bring it into existence. Verily, that is easy for Allah” (57:22);
- “No calamity befalls, but with the Leave [i.e. decision and *Qadar* (Divine Preordainments)] of Allah, and whosoever believes in Allah, He guides his heart [to the true Faith with certainty, i.e., what has befallen him was already written for him by Allah from the *Qadar* (Divine Preordainments)], and Allah is the All-Knower of everything.” (64:11).

There are few questions that arise from these texts. The first one is, is man really free to choose between good and evil, as long as all his choices are predetermined by God before he even thought about? Accordingly, is man the ultimate author of suffering, as long as he only follows the prescribed destiny? And finally, has he any responsibility for his suffering or for that of others? A negative answer to these questions leads us to consider that Islam advances a form of radical fatalism. But we will return to this problem subsequently.

According to Muslim theology, where the second category of free will beings is with the *djinn*s. The Quran repeatedly refers to this attribute of *djinn*s since the beginning of man. Iblīs, one of the *djinn*s, chose to revolt and refused to prostrate before Adam, as the angels did (2:34; 7:12; 15:31-34; 17:61; 18:50; 20:116) (for a discussion about Iblīs' nature, see [9]). As a punishment for his disobedience and pride, God cursed and expelled Iblīs from the Garden (15:34-35). Now the role of Iblīs, as he declares, is to lead into temptation unfaithful human beings: "(Iblīs) said: 'Because You have sent me astray, surely I will sit in wait against them (human beings) on Your Straight Path. Then I will come to them, from before them and behind them, from their right and from their left, and You will not find most of them as thankful ones (i.e. they will not be dutiful to You).'" (7:16-17; 15:39-40) Assuming this role, Iblīs, now named *al-shayṭān* (Satan, the demon, the one who diverts people from their destination) [10], incited Adam and Eve to disobey God's command and to eat from the "Tree of Eternity" (2:36): "O Adam! Shall I lead you to the Tree of Eternity and to a kingdom that will never waste away?" (20:120). After the fall, Iblīs continue to tempt men, whispering evil thoughts in men's hearts (114:4-5), and many of them followed him (34:20-21). According to the Quran, Satan's attributes are: the ability to cause fear (3:175), to cause people to slip (2:36; 3:155), to lead astray (4:60), to precipitate enmity and hatred, to make people forget (6:68), to tempt (7:27; 47:25), to cause to forget (12:42). His name is associated with guile (4:76), defilement (8:11), and abomination (5:90) [10]. Through these he provokes people to wrongfully use their freedom of will, which results in sin and suffering. There is single evidence that Satan is the direct author of suffering in people's lives: "And remember Our slave Job, when he invoked his Lord (saying): 'Verily! (Satan) has touched me with distress (by losing my health) and torment (by losing my wealth)!'" (38:41).

No matter if we consider *shayṭān* (demons) the direct or indirect authors of evil and suffering, this activity is under God's control, Who gave respite to Iblīs and allowed his activity (7:10-18/11-19) [3, p. 105].

It can be seen that both streams of discussion concerning the authors of evil, man and demons, lead to the third free will being, God. The Quran strongly affirms that God is the Almighty (22:6), Creator of everything that exists (22:5; 27:60-61; 35:1). Creation itself is a manifestation of God's almightiness, but also of his free will: "He creates what He wills. And it is He Who is the All-Knowing, the All-Powerful (i.e. Able to do all things)." (30:54) The Almighty of God is manifested not only in the act of creation, but also in governing the world. As the Quran states, "And to Allah belong the east and the west, so wherever you turn yourselves or your faces there is the Face of Allah (and He is High above, over His Throne). Surely! Allah is All-Sufficient for His creatures' needs, All-Knowing." (2:115) The Quran emphasizes the Sovereignty of God over creation and man (3:26-27), His mercy (35:2), but also the fact that He determines every human being's thread of life (57:22): "And We cause whom We will to remain in the wombs for an appointed term, then We bring you out as infants, then (give you growth) that you may reach your age of full

strength. And among you there is he who dies (young), and among you there is he who is brought back to miserable old age, so that he knows nothing after having known.” (22:5; cf. 45:26; 40:68)

Returning to the text of 57:22 (cf. 64:11), it means that everything that exists and happens in the world happens through “His will, knowledge, decision, decree, and writing on the preserved table (*al-lawḥ al-maḥfūz*)” [2, p. 67]. The logical consequence is that suffering is also created by God. As Bowker remarks [3, p. 103], “Suffering occurs only within creation, which is God’s creation – and assuming that the universe has not gotten out of his control, then suffering is not out of his control either” [5]. The Quran clearly states that: “[...] if Allah touches you with harm, none can remove it but He, and if He touches you with good, then He is Able to do all things” (6:17); “And if Allah touches you with hurt, there is none who can remove it but He; and if He intends any good for you, there is none who can repel His Favour which He causes to reach whomsoever of His slaves He will. And He is the Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful.” (10:107) Muslim culture connects the occurrence of suffering to God’s “permission” (*idhn*). There is a common saying for expressing sympathy for someone’s loss or illness: *bi idhni-llāh* or *bi mashiyyati-llāh* (it happened with God’s permission or God’s will) [1, p. 65]. From the second text quoted here it can be noticed that God is not only Almighty, All-Powerful, and All-Knowing, but also All-Merciful (*Al-Raḥīm*) and All-Compassionate (*Al-Raḥmān*); in other places it states, “Who responds to the distressed one, when he calls Him, and Who removes the evil” (27:62) [3, p. 101].

At least two difficulties are derived from this perspective. First, if God creates affliction, then this act contradicts His benevolence, compassion and love. An Almighty God that has the power to prevent evil and does not do so is not a just and good God. Secondly, if God prescribes every human being’s destiny, then man is not the real author of evil, as mentioned above. Accordingly, the punishment of man for his sins through suffering does not seem just [1, p. 83].

In this context is raised the problem of theodicy. Islam does not emphasise the need of a rational understanding of evil, but faith in the transcendent God that brings confidence in divine wisdom. Related to this, many passages in the Quran emphasize that the existence of evil must be purposeful and part of God’s plan (35:1-2; 2:155; 67:2; 21:35), a plan than can be only for man’s good, although it involves temporary suffering [2, p. 66]. Having its source in God’s will, suffering must bear significations which remove him from the realm of an “absurd” divinity who is scourging man for unknown reasons. There must be rationale and wisdom behind, because “God is not capricious” [11].

### **3. The Quranic utilitarian purpose of suffering**

If suffering has its origin in the will of God and has a purpose, then what is it? The Quran answers this question by developing a theory of usefulness: suffering is an instrument in God’s hand for the betterment of human beings.

There are identified three main purposes of suffering in man's life: suffering as expiatory punishment for sin, suffering as a test or trial of faith, and suffering as a mean to acquire moral virtues.

### 3.1. Retributive cathartic suffering

The easiest way to interpret suffering is to consider it a normal consequence to a free human agent who made bad choices and wilfully committed reprehensible acts. It is just what the wrongdoer deserves [1, p. 78]. In a religious context, in general, it is a divine punishment for sins or transgressions. This perspective is present in Islam, although it is not the most prevailing.

There are texts in the Quran (3:165; 4:62; 5:49; 6:124; 7:162-163; 16:33-34; 39:51; 42:30, 48) which delegate the responsibility for suffering to the creatures' abuse of freedom. It highlights the problem of the source of evil, as man, and not God. In this context, in the verse "[...] Allah wrongs not even of the weight of an atom (or a small ant), but if there is any good (done), He doubles it, and gives from Him a great reward" (4:40) rests the apparent contradiction between divine love and justice. Accordingly, affliction is a natural consequence of man's own deeds, because: "Whatever of good reaches you, is from Allah, but whatever of evil befalls you, is from yourself [...]" (4:79), or "We wronged them not, but they wronged themselves" (11:101).

Another idea expressed in the Quran is that of suffering being in the spirit of justice (*'adl*); God righteously sanctions sins, but abundantly rewards good deeds, here or in the hereafter [5, p. 42]. Hereby, the suffering man receives from God the just payoff of his sinful acts, words, thoughts. There are numerous texts that explicitly affirm that: "[...] had We willed, We would have punished them for their sins" (7:100; cf. 7:156; 23:74-77; 3:153). Abraham warns his father: "'O my father! Verily! I fear lest a torment from the Most Beneficent (Allah) overtake you, so that you become a companion of Satan (in the Hell-Fire).' [...]" (19:45) as a punishment for the sin of idolatry or for another transgressions (cf. 5:73; 13:31; 24:63; 28:47; 30:36), a warning available for any Muslim. There were whole peoples punished by God for this reason (11:89).

Present sufferings are a warning and an immediate punishment, a foretaste of those to come – "So We sent upon them furious wind in days of evil omen (for them) that We might give them a taste of disgracing torment in this present worldly life, but surely the torment of the Hereafter will be more disgracing, and they will never be helped." (41:16) – the final reckoning that will take place after death [3, p. 116].

This perception of suffering psychologically seems more bearable for the sufferer, making him the only one responsible for it. On the other side, it can be a matter of frustration because it is not always a direct relationship, at least according to human logic, between evil deeds and suffering. Sometimes God delays the punishment (6:43-44) and also there are evildoers who do not suffer in this life. The Quran trenchantly clarify this situation: "And those who dispute

(polytheists, etc. with Our Messenger Muhammad) as regards Our *Āyât* (proofs, signs, verses, etc. of Islamic Monotheism) may know that there is no place of refuge for them (from Allah's punishment). So whatever you have been given is but a passing enjoyment for this worldly life, but that which is with Allah (Paradise) is better and more lasting for those who believe (in the Oneness of Allah Islamic Monotheism) and put their trust in their Lord (concerning all of their affairs)" (42:35-36; cf. 11:7; 11:48). The text has a strong and mobilizing message: even the greatest sinners (*i.e.* the polytheists) do not always receive their punishment in this life, but for sure they will be more severely punished in the hereafter. Their prosperity is only temporary.

Suffering also expiates sins in this life, relieves one from a greater suffering in eternity and ensures a place in Heaven. Seen in this manner, the hardships of this life are a source of rejoicing and a sufficient reason for the pious Muslim to expose himself voluntarily to suffering, as long as enduring it faithfully brings acquittal in the final reckoning of sins [3, p. 112]. The expiatory effect of suffering is not very detailed in the Quran. Referring to martyrdom, the message of the text 3:195 can be extended to all those who faithfully suffer: "[...] 'Never will I allow to be lost the work of any of you, be he male or female. You are (members) one of another, so those who emigrated and were driven out from their homes, and suffered harm in My Cause, and who fought, and were killed in My Cause, verily, I will remit from them their evil deeds and admit them into Gardens under which rivers flow (in, Paradise); a reward from Allah, and with Allah is the best of rewards.'" (3:195; cf. 3:141; 4:74) This dimension of suffering was developed especially in the Sunnah. The *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* hadith collection dedicates five hadiths (7.70.544-548) to the expiatory effect of suffering, but they do not bear upon the subject of this present article. Anyway, suffering can be redemptive only if faith is present, faith „which gives hope against despair and fulfilment against the annihilation of death" [12].

The text of 4:62 broaches the problem of natural evil – evil that is not instigated by any human agent, such as epidemics, cataclysms, etc. – also as a consequence of sins: "How then, when a catastrophe befalls them because of what their hands have sent forth, they come to you swearing by Allah, 'We meant no more than goodwill and conciliation!'"'. In this context, the natural evil is a collective punishment that reminds man of his fragility and mortality. Its purpose is to teach humanity in general a lesson of humility [1, p. 78]. The suffering of disbelievers offers lessons and warnings to the pious Muslims, which confirm and strengthen their belief.

This explanation of suffering entails at least two difficulties. First, it cannot explain why in the paradigmatic battle of Badr, God blessed Muslims with victory, seen as a sign of their true faith (3:13; 3:122-123), while the battle of Uḥud was a test for less convinced Muslims and a reason to ask themselves if Muhammad is a real prophet of God. The next victories of Muhammad finally convinced all his followers that God had vindicated him (3:166) [11]. This problem raised a high-spirited debate in the Muslim theology, which exceeded the explanation of suffering as punishment. Secondly, this perspective does not

solve the problem of the suffering of innocents (*i.e.* infants), who committed no moral evil.

### 3.2. *Suffering as test of faith*

Maybe the most important signification of suffering according to the Quran is that it represents a test of faith. Numerous texts (2:155, 214; 3:140-142, 186; 6:165; 16:92; 21:35; 22:11; 39:49; 47:31) clearly state this role of suffering as a trial to separate the sincere from the insincere, those strong in faith from those with a weak belief [5, p. 44].

This painful test is necessary because of the fragility of the human faith. As Bowker noticed [3, p. 111], “suffering not only forms character, it also exposes it: it reveals man’s true nature. Under pressure a man will reveal what he is really worth”. Texts such as: “When harm touches man, he calls to Us (for help), then when We have (rescued him from that harm and) changed it into a favour from Us, he says: ‘Only because of knowledge (that I possess) I obtained it.’ Nay, it is only a trial, but most of them know not!” (39:49; cf. 30:33-34; 41:49-50), or “And among mankind is he who worships Allah as it were, upon the very edge (*i.e.* in doubt); if good befalls him, he is content therewith; but if a trial befalls him, he turns back on his face (*i.e.* reverts back to disbelief after embracing Islam). He loses both this world and the Hereafter. That is the evident loss.” (22:11; cf. 11:9-11) emphasizes the “guileful” human character. In the quoted texts there are two different situations: man who is calling for God’s help when he is in suffering and denies His intervention after he is saved, and man who is turning his face from God when he is in turmoil. Both situations mentioned in the Quran are unfaithful reactions to suffering.

The Quran clearly mentions that this test is mandatory for acquiring salvation: “Or think that you will enter Paradise without such (trial) as came to those who passed away before you? [...]” (2:214; 3:142, 186; 29:1). Hence, Muslims expect to be tested by God, including suffering, because the Lord puts everybody on trial. He did this with Abraham (37:102-106), the people of Israel in Egypt, who went through “a tremendous trial” from Lord (14:6; cf. 2:49; 6:42; 7:141); with those before them, who “were afflicted with severe poverty and ailments and were so shaken [...]” (2:214; cf. 29:1); and with other people (3:140). If for the believer, suffering can be and it is a blessing, finding fulfilment in it, for the unbeliever it is just a cause of frustration [11].

It is interesting to mention that as suffering is a test, so are prosperity and wellbeing. According to the Quran, “And We shall make a trial of you with evil and with good, and to Us you will be returned” (21:35; cf. 3:186; 7:168). As Aslan underlines, “in the Muslim consciousness, trial through wealth and comfort might be harder than trial by facing evils” [5, p. 43-44].

The stake of the trial is incalculable: acquiring salvation. For this reason earthly suffering is worthy to be accepted and carried out with a strong belief in God. The problem of the source of suffering is irrelevant. It is part of this world; it is a test in which everyone is a subject; it brings the eternal joys of Paradise.

### 3.3. Cultivation of moral virtues through the medium of suffering

Suffering is an instrument for cultivating the moral virtues of the devout believer. The first of the virtues associated with suffering is *ṣabr*. Usually translated as patience, but with slightly different meanings, such as endurance, steadfastness, tenacity or resignation [12], according to the context, it is associated by the Quran with *Al-Birr* (piety). The pious are the ones who believe in Allah, the Last Day, the Angels, the Book and Prophets, give alms to the poor and orphans, set slaves free, perform daily prayer (*Aṣ-Ṣalât*), give *Zakât*, fulfil their promises, and “[...]who are patient in extreme poverty and ailment (disease) and at the time of fighting (during the battles)” (2:177; cf. 2:153, 155-156; 12:18; 16:96; 22:35; 31:17). The text encourages but also blesses those who accept suffering with patience [5, p. 45]. It is a mark of true believers (*Al-Khâshi’ûn*), for whom it is not “extremely heavy and hard” as it is for the unfaithful (2:45).

As we can see, patience or perseverance in hardships, including illness, is considered an indispensable virtue of the pious man. It should not be understood that the pious Muslim is a kind of stoic *per se*. His patience is grounded in at least three pillars suggested by the Quran: suffering is a moment to remember that everything comes from God, absolute trust in God (*tawakkul*), and the belief that temporary suffering has a purpose or a denouement which for the moment is unforeseen.

According to the Quran: “Say: ‘Nothing shall ever happen to us except what Allah has ordained for us. He is our *Maulâ* (Lord, Helper and Protector).’ And in Allah let the believers put their trust.” (9:51) For the faithful Muslim, suffering is not the absence of God, but a moment to remember that God is in control and that one must put his trust in Him (5:23).

Suffering is also a means to attain *riḍâ*, the inner attitude of contentment and well-pleasance with whatever God does. Not very prominent in the Quran (see 7:89; 14:10-13), the concept of *riḍâ* is very well developed in the sufi mystic. It rests on the conviction that God always chooses what is best for man. As Watt mentions, “Approval thus goes far beyond patience, since it accepts suffering with joy because it comes from God and because all that God does for man is for the best, even though man cannot see how suffering is good for him” [11].

The Quran repeatedly relates patience with the trust that God will relieve and reward the patient ones in this life or hereafter (7:87; 11:115; 16:126; 46:35; 50:39; 52:48). The life of the prophets (Muhammad, Lot, Noah, Job, etc.) and the narration of the story of the exodus from Egypt (2:49-50) are examples and also evidences for the faithful Muslim that hardships occur for a limited period of time and God will finally vindicate the suffering ones. As Sachedina points out [2, p. 67], this perspective “seems to reinforce the Muslim cultural attitude of passiveness in the face of afflictions”, and also patience in pain-suffering, motivated by the hope that this will happen only for a fixed period of time. On the other hand, “exposing oneself voluntarily to suffering in the cause of God

can be commended or even enjoyed. [...] conversely fear of suffering is a mark of inadequate trust. Despair is blasphemy.” [3, p. 112] W.M. Watt considers that in its internal dimension, trust is closely connected with the belief that there is no deity but God and His power is all-embracing. The external dimension consists in the refusal of medicines or of any precautions. Presently, this passivity, manifested especially in the Sufi tradition, is obsolete [11].

If suffering (*e.g.* illness) leads to death, than the reward for patience and trust will come in the hereafter. Seen from this perspective, the actual suffering “[...] is insignificant compared with the great rewards of paradise to come, and since it is, in any case, entirely in the control of God, there is no point in being overly concerned about it” [3, p. 116].

Another dimension of trust is that God has a beneficent intention which for the moment cannot be foreseen or it is inaccessible to man’s actual limited knowledge. Relevant to this perspective is the story from 18:65-82. In short, Moses meets a mysterious man (“one of Our slaves, unto whom We had bestowed mercy”) and asks to be taught the knowledge that he received from God. Moses’ interlocutor warns him not to ask for any explanation about his actions until the time comes. On their way, he scuttled a ship, killed a boy, and restored a wall about to collapse, all of them evil or questionable acts. Moses is “unable to hold patience” and is repeatedly asking his companion about the purpose of his actions. In the end comes the explanation: all of them have beneficent long-term consequences. This story has multiple messages in relation to suffering and evil:

- the quality of evil attributed to an act depends on a person’s knowledge and perception;
- only the long-term consequences reveal the true nature of an action;
- considering that the long-term effects of apparently evil acts are good, it means that evil is accidental, not essential, and it has the role of bringing good;
- ordinary humans have a limited knowledge and they qualify an act as good or evil depending upon their immediate experiences;
- patience is preferable to the questioning of subjects which exceed the capacity of actual knowledge because God works in mysterious ways [5, p. 14].

Seen in the context of suffering, this story underlines that the pious Muslim should accept that which he perceives for the moment as hardship is an apparent evil with good consequences, although for the moment inaccessible to his limited knowledge. Indirectly it is an act of humility by accepting the finiteness of his knowledge and restraining himself from useless questions. He must be patient and have faith that God’s deeds are always good, even when the appearances suggest otherwise. Sooner or later he will find out that the real purpose or meaning of his suffering is a good one [3, p. 114]. Until then, he must have patience and trust.

Psychologically, this perspective concerning suffering functions as a shield in combat, reducing anxiety. When man does not have the skills and knowledge to deal with suffering and does not understand why it is happening to him, he turns to *tawakkalala Allah* (trust in God) and has the strong belief that the divine plan is a good one [5, p. 45].

#### **4. Relevance for the approach to medical care**

This utilitarian purpose of suffering confers a special and somehow 'praiseworthy' meaning in the life of the devout Muslim, with profound consequences over the way he perceives medical treatment. Two main perspectives can be delineated, both based on the Quran.

1. Since God expiates man's transgressions, puts him on trial, or helps him to cultivate his moral virtues through pain, therefore it fulfils a positive role and there is no benefit to remove it [2, p. 69]. As a Muslim patient states [13], "This is a trial from God, most exalted and high. He created me as His servant (*'abd*) and out of all the people that He created, God is thinking of me, in giving me this disease. In my suffering, I am getting rid of my sins. I will still be tried [for my deeds after death] but the punishment will be lesser. [...] Why me specifically? God has ultimate wisdom (*hikma*) in this; it didn't just come to anyone. It came to me, God is saving me [from my sins and heedlessness] because now I remember God all the time. A person has to have his beliefs." This attitude corresponds to the belief that God who is sending affliction is the one who also heals it. Ultimately, God is the only healer, according to the Quran: "And when I am ill, it is He who cures me" (26:80). Such a statement suggests a passive or at least sceptical response to illness and medical treatment. But, as Hamdi notices "[...] the common formulation of passive Muslim fatalism grossly misunderstands the ways in which religious dispositions are embodied. Dispositions of acceptance of divine will are far from passive and must be actively cultivated." [13, p. 174]

2. An active attitude, based on the belief that because the human being is the cause of his own suffering, he should undertake to do righteous acts to rid the world of suffering [1, p. 99]. The Quran repeatedly demands that suffering should be contested and alleviated, as far as man can do. It mitigates removing suffering and injustice from society. The recommended attitude is a positive action (2:177). Also from this perspective, the first one who removes suffering is God: „Is He [not best] who responds to the desperate one when he calls upon Him and removes evil and makes you inheritors of the earth? [...]" (27:62), but man is more receptive to the idea that doctors are instruments in God's hand [3, p. 118]; alike it is the medical treatment.

Of course, this separation is not so definite in the day to day life experience. This happens for at least two reasons. First, the subsequent Islamic theology and intellectual tradition has developed, on the basis of the Quran, and also on Hadith, a more nuanced view of evil, suffering, illness, pain, etc. Consequently, active implication weight against fatalism. On the whole,

Medicine flourishes in the Muslim culture, does it not? Secondly, the Quranic precepts are subjectively interpreted by different devout Muslims. Sometimes clinicians have to deal with Muslim patients who refuse any form of alleviation of pain and illness in the name of religious precepts. Other times with patients who are confidently asking for medical help, in the name of the same religious norms. Finally, they meet patients who accept some forms of medical treatment, but refuse others, invoking the appurtenance to Islam.

## 5. Conclusion

Suffering is an abnormal way of existence. From the medical point of view is the effect of diseases that affect the functioning of the human body and from theological point of view is the consequence of sin [14].

Familiarity with the Quranic view of suffering, including illness, affliction, pain, etc. has a special importance for healthcare professionals, especially in the contemporary world, when migration brings together different cultures and beliefs. For healthcare professionals who have to deal with devout Muslim patients it is compulsory to be acquainted with the religious principles of Islam, especially when these interfere with medical treatment, and approach the sufferer with cultural-religious sensitivity. Citing Hamid Mavani [15], "Healthcare professionals who are respectful of the seriousness with which Muslims practice their faith will be a step ahead. Granting respect to the person who identifies with Islam, whether in past family or cultural connections or in present day involvement, is essential in the effort to properly care for patients." Beyond understanding specific attitudes, the clinician can exploit their religious belief in the patient's best interest. Emphasising the idea that an active attitude towards removing suffering corresponds to the Quranic exigencies, that God prefers a healthy believer than a weak one and that the clinicians and the cure work also by God's will, induces a more positive attitude towards medical treatment or alleviation of pain.

## Acknowledgement

This paper was published under the frame of European Social Found, Human Resources Development Operational Programme 2007-2013, project no. POSDRU/159/1.5/136893.

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