

THE CHRISTIAN 'RESPONSE' TO SUFFERING

I. PART I: INTRODUCTION

1. Discussion of Responses that don't work

II. The Duo of Redemptive Suffering and Liberating Suffering

Christianity has opened its eyes to the injustice in the world that cries to heaven for vengeance, but apparently it has not done enough to eliminate that injustice. The post-Christians set out to do so; their suffering at the sight of the world's suffering impels them to draft a new gospel according to which man's battle with cosmic powers enters into a new phase. And some Christians think that they ought to bring the old gospel of redemptive suffering to focus completely on the new one of liberation from suffering.

2. Liberation from Suffering: A Short Journey through Post-Christian Hope

Francis Bacon (1561-1626): A new era has emerged! Can't you see it? We have discovered America; we have developed science into a new era of precision and knowledge; we have become masters of technical achievements unimaginable in past ages. It is time to set behind us that 'old' view of the world. Through the correlation of experiment and method, we are able to interpret nature in conformity with its laws and thus to achieve "the triumph of art [that is, our work! Our productions! Our inventions!] over nature" (*victoria cursus artis super naturam*).¹ Now, here is the way to the future: science and praxis. Through our own progress, we can reclaim once again 'dominion over creation,' which was given to man by God and lost through original sin.² We have recovered what we had lost through the expulsion from Paradise, except now we no longer need to wait on 'faith' to give this to us; we can claim it for ourselves through science and praxis.

Guide: Are you denying faith?

Bacon: No, I do not deny faith. But faith shouldn't belong to the 'level' of things related to 'this world,' to the 'healing of this world,' to the recovery of 'Paradise.' Rather, faith belongs to another level, that of purely private and other-worldly affairs.

Guide: Oh boy! So, faith basically becomes irrelevant.

¹ *Novum Organum* I, 117.

² *Ibid.*, I, 129.

Bacon: Certainly not! We must have *faith in progress*. These inventions that you see, all of these new discoveries, are just the beginning. Totally new discoveries will follow and a totally new world will emerge, and it shall be called, "the kingdom of man."³

Enlightenment Philosophes: reason and freedom — those are the two key ideas that we need. If they can reach their full realization, then we will finally have achieved heaven on earth. Progress means the overcoming of all forms of dependency—it is progress towards autonomous reason and perfect freedom. The kingdom of reason is expected as the new condition of the human race once it has attained total freedom. If only we can attain to fully autonomous reason and total freedom, *then* the perfect human community will arrive. It will arrive by virtue of the intrinsic goodness of reason and freedom.

Guide: But how will you do this? What needs to be done exactly for you to achieve autonomous reason and total freedom?

Enlightenment Philosophes: We need to overthrow whatever is in conflict with 'reason' and 'freedom.' This means that we need to throw off the 'shackles of faith and of the Church' as well as those of the political structures of our time. We need a *revolution!* The dawn of a new humanity, of a new world is upon us!

Guide: Let me see! Ah, the French Revolution! Your attempt to establish the rule of reason and freedom as a political reality. I can see the whole of Europe biting their fingernails to see if your 'hand-made' hope will prevail. I can hear voices across Europe drinking your intoxicating chant.

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Kant (1792): The gradual transition of ecclesiastical faith [that is, the oppressive, immature faith given to us by the church authorities] to the exclusive sovereignty of pure religious faith [that is, faith based on *my reason alone*] is the coming of the Kingdom of God."⁴ The revolutions can accelerate this transition from ecclesiastical faith to rational faith, and thus bring about the Kingdom of God here on earth, the kingdom ruled by reason and science. Let us remember Jesus' proclamation of the 'Kingdom of God.' Jesus announced that the Kingdom is arriving, that is 'imminent.' Well, here it is: we have a new 'immanent expectation,' so to speak. The 'Kingdom of God' arrives where 'ecclesiastical faith' is vanquished and superseded by 'religious faith,' that is to say, by simple rational faith.

Guide: Is that so? Are you pleased with the outcome of the French Revolution? What happened exactly? What do the French call it? *La Terreur*? "The Reign of Terror"? Yes, indeed, after the French Revolution, a period of violence occurred, incited by violence between two rival political factions, marked by mass executions of 'enemies of the revolution.' And in 1794, when things got even worse, the French called it '*La Grande Terreur*' (the Great Terror). What do we do with this 'hope' placed in human's abilities alone to liberate us from suffering?

Kant (1795): Perhaps I may have gotten a bit ahead of myself. Perhaps we must accept that in addition to the natural end of all things in reason and freedom there may be another possibility: that is, an unnatural, perverse end.⁵

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³ Cf. *New Atlantis*.

⁴ In *Werke* IV, ed. W. Weischedel (1956), p. 777.

⁵ I. Kant, *Das Ende aller dinge*, in *Werke* VI, ed. W. Weischedel (1964), see p. 190.

Mr. Full-Mouth (19th Cent.): Ah, those Enlightenment philosophers and their ideals. Their heads are in the clouds. What is needed is true progress: rapid advance of technical development and industrialization. We can create the world that we want — well, the world that *I* want.

Friedrich Engels (1845): Hey, Mr. Full-Mouth, can't you see what you're doing to the industrial workers? The ones that I call the 'industrial proletariat'? Can't you see the terrible conditions that you're putting them in to, to make your stomach even bigger? These conditions are so terrible that it even awoke the Catholics from their slumber (*Rerum Novarum*)! This cannot continue! We need change. We need a revolution!

Guide: Hey, wait a second! Isn't this the same false hope that we saw in the Enlightenment revolutions?

Engels: No! Their mistake was a lofty and impractical vision. We know better. It is economic enslavement that truly imprisons a man. If we liberate him economically, and secure the political, social, and economic structures for a truly free State, then man will be free.

Marx: *Da!* My fellow comrade, you are right. After the bourgeois revolution of 1789, we can see that progress could not simply continue in small, linear steps. It needs a rallying call and a revolutionary leap is necessary! If we take this final step, at last! We will usher in the definitive step in history towards salvation—towards what Kant had described as the 'Kingdom of God'! Here is my rallying cry, here is my summons to salvation: *the Communist Manifesto* (1848)!

Guide: Let us see, my long-bearded companions, this kingdom of yours. Let us see your disciple unfold the kingdom of heaven for us, as the world waits with abated breath for the Kingdom that we *hope for*:

Lenin (1870-1924): *Revolution!* We must usher in the communist state. Let us move forward! Now, standing above the bodies of those who had to be sacrificed for our Kingdom, let us usher in a new age. ... Give me one second, let me see what the Master (Marx) instructs us to do now, after the battles, to usher in this glorious age! Step 1: there should be an interim phase of the dictatorship of the proletariat as a necessity but then Step 2: the perfect world would come into being by itself. End of instructions. Okay, let's move forward. ...

Guide: This is your kingdom? All I can see, as everyone else in the world, is the trail of destruction left in the shadow of these dictators; but not 'kingdom of heaven.' It seems that the error here is deeper. It seems that the problem is that he forgot man. Freedom is not merely a freedom for a 'good State,' but it is also a freedom for evil. He thought that once the economy had been put right, everything would automatically be put right. His real error is materialism: man, in fact, is not merely the product of economic conditions, and it is not possible to redeem him purely from the outside by creating a favorable economic environment.

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Hitler: Achtung! The true kingdom of heaven is here, in the *Drittes Reich* ('the Third Reich'). The first 'Reich' was the Old Testament; the second 'Reich' was the New Testament; at last, the 'Third Age' has arrived on the face of history. We must bring about the 'Kingdom of God' at any cost. We need a 'pure Kingdom,' based on race. Other people are not worthy of this New Kingdom!

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Concluding Reflections on 'hope without God'

Guide: So, what of this 'faith in progress'? How should we understand this today, after World War 2 and the Holocaust?

Theodor Adorno: the problem of faith in progress is this: 'progress, seen accurately, is progress from the sling to the atom bomb.'

Pope Benedict XVI (2007): What he means by that is that the ambiguity of progress becomes evident. Without doubt progress offers new possibilities for good, but it also opens up appalling possibilities for evil—possibilities that formerly did not exist. At the heart of this whole movement that starts with Bacon up to today is that it asks too much of science; it's a kind of hope that is deceptive. **It is not science that redeems man: man is redeemed by love.**⁶ The human being needs unconditional love. When someone has the experience of a great love in his life, this is a moment of "redemption" which gives a new meaning to his life. But soon he will also realize that the love bestowed upon him cannot by itself resolve the question of his life. It is a love that remains fragile. It can be destroyed by death. The human being needs unconditional love. He needs the certainty which makes him say: "neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:38-39). If this absolute love exists, with its absolute certainty, then—only then—is man "redeemed", whatever should happen to him in his particular circumstances. This is what it means to say: Jesus Christ has "redeemed" us. Through him we have become certain of God, a God who is not a remote "first cause" of the world, because his only-begotten Son has become man and of him everyone can say: "I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal 2:20).

Guide: So, how does coming to know God change our hope?

Benedict XVI: anyone who does not know God, even though he may entertain all kinds of hopes, is ultimately without hope, without the great hope that sustains the whole of life (cf. Eph 2:12). Man's great, true hope which holds firm in spite of all disappointments can only be God—God who has loved us and who continues to love us "to the end," until all "is accomplished" (cf. Jn 13:1 and 19:30). Whoever is moved by love begins to perceive what "life" really is. He begins to perceive the meaning of the word of hope that we encountered in the Baptismal Rite: from faith I await "eternal life"—the true life which, whole and unthreatened, in all its fullness, is simply life. Jesus, who said that he had come so that we might have life and have it in its fullness, in abundance (cf. Jn 10:10), has also explained to us what "life" means: "this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (Jn 17:3). Life in its true sense is not something we have exclusively in or from ourselves: it is a relationship. And life in its totality is a relationship with him who is the source of life. If we are in relation with him who does not die, who is Life itself and Love itself, then we are in life. Then we "live".

Guide: So, what does this tell us about suffering? What does suffering have to do with this "Life and Love" that is in him?

Benedict XVI: Our relationship with God is established through communion with Jesus—we cannot achieve it alone or from our own resources alone. The relationship with Jesus, however, is a relationship with the one who gave himself as a ransom for all (cf. 1 Tim 2:6). Being in communion with Jesus Christ draws us into his "being for all"; it makes it our own way of being. He commits us to live for others, but only through communion with him does it become possible truly to be there for others, for the whole. ... Christ died for all. To live for him means allowing oneself to be drawn into his *being for others*. (§28).

⁶ *Spe Salvi*, §26.

3. Redemptive Suffering

Guide: What would this look like, in a Christian's life?

Benedict XVI: Of course, Christians must try to reduce suffering wherever they encounter it; that is, 'liberate people from suffering,' but this can never displace *redemptive suffering*. Because only love can truly heal suffering. Let me call a friend to share with you what this would look like in a Christian life:

Augustine: Salve! The daily life of a Christian is like this: "The turbulent have to be corrected, the faint-hearted cheered up, the weak supported; the Gospel's opponents need to be refuted, its insidious enemies guarded against; the unlearned need to be taught, the indolent stirred up, the argumentative checked; the proud must be put in their place, the desperate set on their feet, those engaged in quarrels reconciled; the needy have to be helped, the oppressed to be liberated, the good to be encouraged, the bad to be tolerated; all must be loved."⁷

Guide: What a beautiful description! Please, tell me then, how should we understand and live out suffering then?

Benedict XVI: Perhaps in the following way:

Suffering is a part of our human existence. Suffering stems partly from our finitude, and partly from the mass of sin which has accumulated over the course of history, and continues to grow unabated today. Certainly we must do whatever we can to reduce suffering: to avoid as far as possible the suffering of the innocent; to soothe pain; to give assistance in overcoming mental suffering. These are obligations both in justice and in love, and they are included among the fundamental requirements of the Christian life and every truly human life. Great progress has been made in the battle against physical pain; yet the sufferings of the innocent and mental suffering have, if anything, increased in recent decades. Indeed, we must do all we can to overcome suffering, but to banish it from the world altogether is not in our power. This is simply because we are unable to shake off our finitude and because none of us is capable of eliminating the power of evil, of sin which, as we plainly see, is a constant source of suffering. Only God is able to do this: only a God who personally enters history by making himself man and suffering within history. We know that this God exists, and hence that this power to "take away the sin of the world" (Jn 1:29) is present in the world. Through faith in the existence of this power, hope for the world's healing has emerged in history. It is, however, hope—not yet fulfilment; hope that gives us the courage to place ourselves on the side of good even in seemingly hopeless situations, aware that, as far as the external course of history is concerned, the power of sin will continue to be a terrible presence.

Guide: So, how are we supposed to deal with sufferings? How can we be healed of it?

Benedict XVI: It is not by sidestepping or fleeing from suffering that we are healed, but rather by our capacity for accepting it, maturing through it and finding meaning through union with Christ, who suffered with infinite love. Our best guides for how to transform suffering through love is the martyrs. Let one speak.

⁷ Sermo, 340, 3; PL 38, 1484.

Paul Le-Bao-Tinh († 1857; Vietnamese martyr): I, Paul, in chains for the name of Christ, wish to relate to you the trials besetting me daily, in order that you may be inflamed with love for God and join with me in his praises, for his mercy is for ever (Ps 136 [135]). The prison here is a true image of everlasting Hell: to cruel tortures of every kind—shackles, iron chains, manacles—are added hatred, vengeance, calumnies, obscene speech, quarrels, evil acts, swearing, curses, as well as anguish and grief. But the God who once freed the three children from the fiery furnace is with me always; he has delivered me from these tribulations and made them sweet, for his mercy is for ever. In the midst of these torments, which usually terrify others, I am, by the grace of God, full of joy and gladness, because I am not alone—Christ is with me ... How am I to bear with the spectacle, as each day I see emperors, mandarins, and their retinue blaspheming your holy name, O Lord, who are enthroned above the Cherubim and Seraphim? (cf. Ps 80:1 [79:2]). Behold, the pagans have trodden your Cross underfoot! Where is your glory? As I see all this, I would, in the ardent love I have for you, prefer to be torn limb from limb and to die as a witness to your love. O Lord, show your power, save me, sustain me, that in my infirmity your power may be shown and may be glorified before the nations ... Beloved brothers, as you hear all these things may you give endless thanks in joy to God, from whom every good proceeds; bless the Lord with me, for his mercy is for ever ... I write these things to you in order that your faith and mine may be united. In the midst of this storm I cast my anchor towards the throne of God, the anchor that is the lively hope in my heart"[28]. This is a letter from "Hell". It lays bare all the horror of a concentration camp, where to the torments inflicted by tyrants upon their victims is added the outbreak of evil in the victims themselves, such that they in turn become further instruments of their persecutors' cruelty. This is indeed a letter from Hell, but it also reveals the truth of the Psalm text: "If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I sink to the nether world, you are present there ... If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall hide me, and night shall be my light'—for you darkness itself is not dark, and night shines as the day; darkness and light are the same" (Ps 139 [138]:8-12; cf. also Ps 23 [22]:4). Christ descended into "Hell" and is therefore close to those cast into it, transforming their darkness into light. Suffering and torment is still terrible and well-nigh unbearable. Yet the star of hope has risen—the anchor of the heart reaches the very throne of God. Instead of evil being unleashed within man, the light shines victorious: suffering—without ceasing to be suffering—becomes, despite everything, a hymn of praise.

Guide: That is certainly beautiful! How can I live that in my own life? What does his capacity for suffering tell me about what it means to be human and to be a Christian?

Benedict XVI: The true measure of humanity is essentially determined in relationship to suffering and to the sufferer. This holds true both for the individual and for society. A society unable to accept its suffering members and incapable of helping to share their suffering and to bear it inwardly through "com-passion" is a cruel and inhuman society. Yet society cannot accept its suffering members and support them in their trials unless individuals are capable of doing so themselves; moreover, the individual cannot accept another's suffering unless he personally is able to find meaning in suffering, a path of purification and growth in maturity, a journey of hope. Indeed, to accept the "other" who suffers, means that I take up his suffering in such a way that it becomes mine also. Because it has now become a shared suffering, though, in which another person is present, this suffering is penetrated by the light of love. The Latin word *con-solatio*, "consolation", expresses this beautifully. It suggests being with the other in his solitude, so that it ceases to be solitude. Furthermore, the capacity to accept suffering for the sake of goodness, truth and justice is an essential criterion of humanity, because if my own well-being and safety are ultimately more important than truth and justice, then the power of the stronger prevails, then violence and untruth reign supreme. Truth and justice must stand above my comfort and physical well-being, or else my life itself becomes a lie. In the end, even the "yes" to love is a source of suffering, because love always requires expropriations of my "I", in which I allow myself to be pruned and wounded. Love simply cannot exist without this painful renunciation of myself, for otherwise it becomes pure selfishness and thereby ceases to be love.

To suffer with the other and for others; to suffer for the sake of truth and justice; to suffer out of love and in order to become a person who truly loves—these are fundamental elements of humanity, and to abandon them would destroy man himself. Yet once again the question arises: are we capable of this? Is the other important enough to warrant my becoming, on his account, a person who suffers? Does truth matter to me enough to make suffering worthwhile? Is the promise of love so great that it justifies the gift of myself? In the history of humanity, it was the Christian faith that had the particular merit of bringing forth within man a new and deeper capacity for these kinds of suffering that are decisive for his humanity. The Christian faith has shown us that truth, justice and love are not simply ideals, but enormously weighty realities. It has shown us that God—Truth and Love in person—desired to suffer for us and with us.

St. Bernard of Clairvaux: This is a great mystery, indeed! 'Impassibilis est Deus, sed non impassibilis!' "God cannot suffer, **but can suffer with.**" — How marvelous is it that the eternal Son, impassible in himself, *became flesh precisely so that he can suffer with us*? He became incarnate precisely so that he can give us the very flesh he incarnated! God made his own body from the virgin precisely so that he could give us himself! Does this not show you the healing power of *com-passio*? Of descending into another's suffering and suffering with him, out of love, so as to transfigure that very suffering?

Benedict XVI: Thanks, Bernie! It is true! Man is worth so much to God that he himself became man in order to suffer with man in an utterly real way—in flesh and blood—as is revealed to us in the account of Jesus's Passion. Hence in all human suffering we are joined by one who experiences and carries that suffering with us; hence *con-solatio* is present in all suffering, the consolation of God's compassionate love—and so the star of hope rises. Certainly, in our many different sufferings and trials we always need the lesser and greater hopes too—a kind visit, the healing of internal and external wounds, a favourable resolution of a crisis, and so on. In our lesser trials these kinds of hope may even be sufficient. But in truly great trials, where I must make a definitive decision to place the truth before my own welfare, career and possessions, I need the certitude of that true, great hope of which we have spoken here. For this too we need witnesses—martyrs—who have given themselves totally, so as to show us the way—day after day. We need them if we are to prefer goodness to comfort, even in the little choices we face each day—knowing that this is how we live life to the full. Let us say it once again: the capacity to suffer for the sake of the truth is the measure of humanity. Yet this capacity to suffer depends on the type and extent of the hope that we bear within us and build upon. The saints were able to make the great journey of human existence in the way that Christ had done before them, because they were brimming with great hope.

What is hope?

Revelation 12

The Woman and the Dragon. 1^{*} A great sign appeared in the sky, a woman^{*} clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars.^a 2 She was with child and wailed aloud in pain as she labored to give birth.^{*} 3 Then another sign appeared in the sky; it was a huge red dragon,^{*} with seven heads and ten horns, and on its heads were seven diadems.^b 4 Its tail swept away a third of the stars in the sky and hurled them down to the earth. Then the dragon stood before the woman about to give birth, to devour her child when she gave birth.^c 5 She gave birth to a son, a male child, destined to rule all the nations with an iron rod.^{*} Her child was caught up to God and his throne.^d 6 The woman herself fled into the desert where she had a place prepared by God, that there she might be taken care of for twelve hundred and sixty days.^{*} 7^{*} Then war broke out in heaven; Michael^{*} and his angels battled against the dragon. The dragon and its angels fought back,⁸ but they did not prevail and there was no longer any place for them in heaven.⁹ The huge dragon, the ancient serpent,^{*} who is called the Devil and Satan, who deceived the whole world, was thrown down to earth, and its angels were thrown down with it.^e 10 Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say: "Now have salvation and power come, and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Anointed. For the accuser^{*} of our brothers is cast out, who accuses them before our God day and night. 11 They conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; love for life did not deter them from death. 12 Therefore, rejoice, you heavens, and you who dwell in them. But woe to you, earth and sea, for the Devil has come down to you in great fury, for he knows he has but a short time." 13 When the dragon saw that it had been thrown down to the earth, it pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child.^f 14 But the woman was given the two wings of the great eagle,^{*} so that she could fly to her place in the desert, where, far from the serpent, she was taken care of for a year, two years, and a half-year.^g 15 The serpent,^{*} however, spewed a torrent of water out of his mouth after the woman to sweep her away with the current. 16 But the earth helped the woman and opened its mouth and swallowed the flood that the dragon spewed out of its mouth. 17 Then the dragon became angry with the woman and went off to wage war against the rest of her offspring, those who keep God's commandments and bear witness to Jesus.^h 18 It took its position^{*} on the sand of the sea.