

Issues and Approaches in Contemporary Theological Thinking about Evil

Christopher Nicolas Pieper*

Why the Hardship? Islam, Christianity, and Instrumental Affliction

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Abstract: Viewing hardship through the Western tradition of theodicy, Western theologians and philosophers sometimes approach their Muslim neighbors with questions about the Islamic perspective on suffering. But merely by asking about “suffering,” these Western friends already project a theological category foreign to most Muslims, particularly those from a non-Western background. In order for Christian and post-Christian Westerners to understand the Islamic approach to hardship, they must first learn to distinguish between affliction and suffering. This requires a careful look at the creation narratives each tradition tells: for example, does God initiate human affliction? And what does the answer to this question say about the nature of affliction, if God is also good? Answering these queries helps one to distinguish Christian and Islamic responses to catastrophe, pain, and even violence. Furthermore, examining the koranic reply may redirect Western persons to teachings within the biblical tradition, which Christians often overlook or avoid. The instrumental role of affliction is relatively unpopular in the West, but dialogue with Islam uncovers the fact that it is a concept neither alien nor unimportant to biblical teaching. In fact, God’s repurposing of affliction is vital to Christian doctrine. Dialogue with Islam may help to recover this Christian lesson.

Keywords: theology, suffering, instrumental affliction, affliction, Islam, Christianity, redemption, Trinity, oneness, interreligious dialogue, doctrine, theodicy, pain, hardship, sovereignty, God’s will, hope, repurposing, transformation, creation, death, illness, Koran, Qu’ran, Bible, Genesis

1 “Suffering” and “affliction”: two words, two traditions

In January 2012, Goedeke Baeke, Jean-Pierre Wils, and Bert Broeckehart published a study in *The Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling*. They reported the perspectives of thirty elderly Muslim women regarding illness and the will of God.¹ Baeke et al. had expected that the women, Moroccan and Turkish immigrants, would differ from the Belgian majority regarding their views of disease and divine sovereignty. Their survey supported that claim. At the same time, it also revealed similarities to Christian points of view enduring among the women’s Christian and post-Christian neighbors.² Like orthodox Christians, these Muslim women

¹ Throughout this article, I will refer to both the Muslim and Christian concepts of God with a single term, “God.” This is the prevalent method in scholarly work, respecting the fact that “Allah” is no more or less than the Arabic term for God. Furthermore, when Christians or post-Christians apply “God” to Islam’s divinity, they make a significant empathic and semantic step toward Muslims. I agree with Miroslav Volf that this is valuable for the interreligious conversation, as Christians and Muslims dialogue (rather than fight) about who the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Moses truly is. Cf. *Allah*, 1–18, 79–126.

² That being said, Baeke et al. do not attend to the similarities of the Muslim women’s views to Christian perspectives. Their focus is on the *difference* of the Muslim points of view from the traditionally Western perspective. As a result, they tend to assume contrast. For example, the emphasis on God’s sovereignty in the Muslim tradition will certainly differ from the view of

* **Corresponding author: Christopher Nicolas Pieper**, Evangelische Freikirche Ekklesia Rot am See, Baden-Württemberg, Germany, e-mail: christopher.p@ekkleisia.info

believed in the authority of God over disease and death. Unlike Christians, they almost unanimously considered God the source and creator of these experiences.³ For this reason, they were more likely than most Christians to thank God for their affliction, viewing life as a test, which God justly administers and by which one can earn access to paradise through patience and gratitude.⁴ Baeke et al. concluded their report, stating “[Muslims’] deep belief in God gives them strength to deal with illness and suffering in a meaningful way.”⁵

The researchers’ closing statement seconds the suggestion of Islamic philosopher, Dževad Hodžić, who observes “that Muslims, thanks to their living faith [...] and considered against modern standards face both their death and those of their dearest with incredible calm.”⁶ Yet the final line of the empirical study ironically also exposes ignorance of the Muslim response to illness and pain. Muslims do not define “suffering” in the same way as Christians. Therefore, to say “Muslims deal with suffering in a meaningful way” is to invite misunderstanding. Halil, an Iranian acquaintance of mine, has clarified, “Muslims do not suffer under their circumstances, so much as under temptation. When we speak about suffering, we are speaking about the temptation of our will.”⁷ The Muslim scholars, Hüseyin Inam and Tahsin Görgün, state the same. Muslims attribute the moral quality of suffering (the badness or evil thereof) only to human action.⁸ Everything else is under God’s direct control and therefore, despite all delusions to the contrary, perfect in design. Physical pain and ailment are common to human life. However, the connection between physical affliction and inward spiritual pain, which the word “suffering” regularly connotes in Christian and post-Christian circles (and which Baek et al. appear to assume), is foreign to the Islamic perspective. Christians who wish to engage their Muslim neighbors empathically should understand this difference. Hence, when I use the word “suffering,” I am referring to more than inescapable physical–psychical experiences of pain, illness, brokenness, and the like. For these experiences, I use the term “affliction.” By “suffering,” I additionally mean a deeper angst, discontent, and existential doubt, which the Western – Christian and post-Christian – worldview frequently associates with affliction.

Baeke et al.’s article contributes significantly to an area of research that is sorely lacking in modern journalism and academia, namely, Muslims’ practical responses to affliction.⁹ I have opened my article with their survey because the authors helpfully examine real-world responses of Muslims to ailment and pain and because they inappropriately conflate the Western concept of suffering and the Muslim concept of affliction. In other words, they initiate readers into a little understood subject, and – by finally misunderstanding it themselves – they underscore how necessary additional study in this matter is.

What do Muslims think about affliction and death? What do Muslims think about suffering? Westerners rarely regard these as separate questions. Meanwhile, the Koran forces the two apart. Whether Christian or post-Christian, those in the West often forget how theological these subject matters are. Examining the Islamic perspective offers us an opportunity to refine our own presuppositions. In answering, “What do Muslims think about affliction and death?” I will thus also be juxtaposing answers to the question, “What do Christians think about these matters?” I believe that comparing and contrasting these worldviews will help us to develop clearer portraits of each.¹⁰

Christian or post-Christian Westerners (e.g., Brown, “What Kind of Church?,” Moynagh, *Every Context*, 73–96; Keller, *Walking With God*, 64–109; Wiher, “Introduction”), but belief in God’s sovereignty is shared by Muslims and Christians (Volf, 95–110).

³ Baeke et al., “Be Patient,” 3, 6. One participant differed from this consensus, calling suffering an evil. She was more isolated from Muslim community than the other interviewees, however, and also reported tremendous suffering earlier in life (e.g., being widowed by her husband’s painful disease) (Ibid., 6).

⁴ Ibid., 3–4.

⁵ Ibid., 8.

⁶ “Erfahrung des Leids,” 113 (my translation).

⁷ Halil is a pseudonym used upon request. His quotation is an anecdote from a series of interviews he agreed to have with me. Although Halil does not represent a scholarly source, his familiarity with Iranian Islam and his independent confirmation of the scholarly research cited in this article make inclusion of his explanation appropriate.

⁸ Inam, “Reflexionen des Leids,” 90–1; Görgün, “Leid als Teil,” 31–3.

⁹ Hodžić, “Erfahrung des Leids,” 113.

¹⁰ It has been pointed out that I customarily refer to *the* Islamic and *the* Christian perspective in this article. I have chosen to do so only for the sake of simplicity, doing my best to describe Islamic and Christian doctrines that the majority of Muslims and

This article is presented from a Christian perspective. Its intent is to regard Islam's theology of affliction honestly, thereby fostering Westerners' intercultural understanding and informing reevaluation of Christianity's own theology of affliction. These three aspects of the project are integrally related to one another. Each section therefore examines both Islamic and Christian perspectives, and together these sections lead to a Christian reassessment of a biblical theology of affliction.¹¹ I begin with the Islamic and Christian doctrines of creation, which reveal the essential relation of God to death and affliction (Section 2). I then continue with the koranic and biblical accounts of God's interaction with death and affliction in history, considering whether and/or how he uses them as his instruments (Sections 3 and 4). And at last, I conclude with the (competing) doctrines of God's oneness and triunity, which have important implications for the relationships of God to humanity and affliction (Section 5).¹²

2 The (non-)creation of death: God's essential relation to affliction

Timothy Keller, whose book on suffering outlines biblical, philosophical, and practical Christian responses to the topic, writes,

Genesis 1 and 2 show us humankind put by God into a world without death or suffering. The evil we see today was not part of God's original design. It was not God's intent for human life. [...] Those of us who sense the 'wrongness' of death – in any form – are correct.¹³

Keller's description is useful for two main reasons. First, it succinctly outlines the widely held Christian perspective of creation and one of its basic consequences: the good God creates the universe without death and suffering.¹⁴ Therefore, death and suffering are alien to God's original good intent; they are corruptions of the good.¹⁵ Second, Keller's summary offers an exemplary foil for the koranic doctrine of creation, death,

Christians would, respectively, acknowledge as representative. I am aware, however, that both Islam and Christianity are diverse. This article serves as an introduction and does not pretend to reflect the beliefs of all Islam or Christianity's adherents. ¹¹ I write of Christians recognizing biblical truths in their encounters with Muslims. This follows an inclusivistic approach to religious truth, but neither requires a Christian to affirm that biblical/Christian revelation is incomplete (viz., *open* inclusivism; Griffiths, *Religious Diversity*, 60) nor that salvation is discoverable outside of biblical/Christian revelation (viz., *soteriological* inclusivism; Tennent, *Religious Roundtable*, 20–2; Tennent, *World Missions*, 211). So long as Christian readers agree that new experiences and encounters with non-Christians may catalyze their own (re)discovery of biblical truth, the premise of this article is one that they should be able to accept.

¹² As Volf suggests, from the Christian perspective these two doctrines are not contradictory. Christians claim the oneness of God and his trinitarian nature. See Section 5 or Volf, *Allah*, 127–48 for more details.

¹³ *Walking with God*, 113–4.

¹⁴ Note again the difference between affliction or death and suffering, which I describe on page 2.

¹⁵ Theologically and philosophically, these statements are currently in debate, however. Scholars like Ronald Osborn (*Death Before the Fall*, 2014) have especially problematized the definition of “death” in evangelical circles, specifically in regard to dogma regarding creation (cf. Walton, *The Lost World*, 57, 159ff). For instance, Osborn writes, “To say that seasonal changes and cycles of birth, life and death in nature, are without qualification, ‘satanic,’ ‘evil’ and things we will someday escape by leaving this veil of tears and illusions behind, may actually be an expression, in Jewish perspective, of ingratitude if not contempt for God's good creation and the earthiness of material existence” (37). The quotation from Keller aids to reflect the majority view among Christians. He does not, though, respond to the idea that death and suffering might be differentiable from physical mortality and pain. Unfortunately, I cannot engage this important question in more depth here. My purpose in this survey is to juxtapose the historical majority views of Christianity and Islam. Therefore, while I neither personally believe that death and mortality nor suffering and pain are ontological equivalents, it would be inaccurate to describe the church's theology *de facto* (insofar as global and historical agreement can be described) as something different. I endeavor to talk about the Christian theology of suffering in such ways that Walton's contributions to the discussion about death and suffering can be held together with my descriptions. Nonetheless, this brief article will not be able to realize the complexity of the underlying conversation.

and affliction. From the koranic perspective, the good God *did* create death and affliction. Therefore, death and affliction are innate to God's original good intent; they are representations of the good.¹⁶

The fifteenth surah refers to this alternative creation narrative. God tells Muhammad, "We send the winds to fertilize, and We bring down water from the sky for you to drink – you do not control its sources. It is We who give life and death" (vv 22–23, trans. Haleem). Likewise, the sixth surah begins, "Praise belongs to God who created the heavens and the earth, and made darkness and light [...] He is the One who created you from clay and specified a term [for you]" (vv 1–2; cf. sur. 67). Both passages apparently contrast the Christian notion of death that Keller describes. According to them, God gives life *and* death, just as he gives light *and* darkness. The Genesis narrative, as Keller points out, details the creation of life but *not* of death, just as it recounts the creation of light but *not* of darkness.

Contrary to Keller, Genesis does not necessarily discount death's part in the creative order, but he is right that the Bible never attributes death's creation to God.¹⁷ This latter observation has long been an important point in the Judeo-Christian traditions, and it has led to the widespread opinion (advocated by Keller) that death and suffering were postlapsarian. The apocryphal Wisdom of Solomon puts the common opinion bluntly, "God neither fashioned death, nor does he delight in the destruction of the living" (1.13).¹⁸ Meanwhile, the Koran does not affirm the second premise – that God delights in the destruction of the living – and does assert the first: "Exalted is He who holds all control in His hands; who has power over all things; who created death and life" (sur. 67.1–2a). Regarding pain and death, the biblical and koranic communities therefore believe in two opposing origin stories. And these origin stories, in turn, influence the ethics of Christians and Muslims.¹⁹

How shall women and men respond to affliction? According to its underlying premise – divine intention – Islam's preferred response to such situations is patience and trust. More than that, Muslims should submissively praise God for the experience of affliction. As one of Baeke et al.'s respondents claimed, "We must be patient and say 'alhamdulillah' (praise be to Allah). We must not complain."²⁰ Lamentation is out of the question.²¹ Praise of God is one's duty in all circumstances.²² A longer excerpt from the Koran demonstrates the sanctity of this worshipful ethic. During the second surah, God says,

Remember Me; I will remember you. Be thankful to Me, and never ungrateful. You who believe, seek help through steadfastness and prayer, for God is with the steadfast. Do not say that those who are killed in God's cause are dead; they are alive, though you do not realize it. We shall certainly test you with fear and hunger, and loss of property, lives, and crops. But [Prophet], give good news to those who are steadfast, those who say, when afflicted with calamity, 'We belong to God and to Him we shall return.' These will be given blessings and mercy from their Lord, and it is they who are rightly guided. (vv 152–157)

As in the previously cited passages regarding death, God once again reveals himself as the agent behind the affliction. Neither the fear and hunger, nor the loss of property, lives and crops are random. They are ordained for the people's examination. I will return to the Islamic perception of affliction's instrumentality shortly. At this point, though, it is first of all important to observe the logical pathway between affliction's divine creation and its divine execution. That which God designs, he designs for his purposes. That which he designs for his purposes, he will also apply for his purposes.

¹⁶ Formulaically, the Islamic logic regarding death and affliction goes as follows: *If* (1) God is sovereign and good, *and* (2) God has created and planned death and affliction, *then it follows that* (3) death and affliction are good. Cf. Bowker, *Problems*, 111–2; Görgün "Leid als Teil," 35–8; Inam, "Reflexionen des Leids," 91–4; Watt, "Suffering," 12–8.

¹⁷ This is an important differentiation for Osborn's book, see fn. 15.

¹⁸ Consider, though, the tension between this verse and Dt 28.63: "See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god beside me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand." Cf. Dt 32.39; 1 Sam 2.6; Job 1.21.

¹⁹ The same is true, of course, for Jews, but their views are beyond the scope of this article.

²⁰ "Be Patient," 4.

²¹ Middlebeck-Varwick, *Cum Aestimatione*, 253–62.

²² Bowker, *Problems*, 101–5.

The Christian perspective differs from these koranic conclusions substantially. Islam denies the randomness of affliction because it claims divine creation of affliction. Furthermore, Islam contains no equivalent of Christianity's doctrine of the Fall. Everything that occurs is totally in God's control.²³ In contrast, Christianity allows for the randomness of suffering precisely because it does not affirm the divine creation of suffering and because it postulates a world order that God has (to some extent) allowed sinfulness to distort. The Judeo-Christian practice of lament is linked directly to these theological postulates. Although the Bible supports the idea of instrumental suffering, it nowhere supports the idea that God universally causes suffering. In the Koran, God regards the period of slavery in Egypt as a "test" of faith (14.6–7). In the Bible, God hears his people's cries of affliction and knows their suffering (Ex 3.7–9). In both cases, God saves Israel. In the former, however, God takes responsibility for the affliction. The koranic portrait of God therefore censures complaint, for one shall submit to God's decision. The biblical portrait of God instead admits complaint, for God hears those who cry out.

3 Using death and affliction: God's instrumental relation to affliction (Part I)

In effect, the Islamic response to affliction is consistently submissive because Muslims believe that God's authoritative relationship to such experiences remains constant. The passage quoted above is representative of God's affiliation with pain: "We shall certainly test you with fear and hunger, and loss of property, lives, and crops." God uses calamities to test people. Indeed, according to the sixty-seventh surah, *all* of life is a test. Humanity's death and its life, the stressful and the pleasurable, exist for that purpose.²⁴ For this reason, to speak about evil or insufferable circumstances is to be guilty of a misnomer from the Islamic point of view. God holds absolute authority over creation and all that is in it. Therefore, that which comes to pass is that which he has allowed.²⁵ And Islam's God, who is "the Lord of mercy, the giver of mercy," does not allow what is evil or insufferable (cf. sur. 2.286; 65.7).²⁶

To put it another way, Muslims believe that the afflictions men and women experience within history are God's gifts to them.²⁷ Islam's theological giant, Al-Ghazali, developed his classical premise upon this

²³ Middlebeck-Varwick, *Cum Aestimatione*, 263ff.; Nagel, *Geschichte*, 45–50, 73ff.; Rouzati, "Evil and Human Suffering," 4–5; Williams, *Der Islam*, 241–62. Anja Middlebeck-Varwick and Nasrin Rouzati discuss the contours of the relationships between affliction, divine sovereignty, human responsibility, and free will. Tilman Nagel takes another approach, introducing readers to the historical landscape of the discussion about God's rule and human action. John Alden Williams provides access to primary texts, such as the *Maturidian Creed* and one of Al-Ashari's rebuttals regarding Mu'tazila theology.

²⁴ Cf. sur. 67.2; Rouzati, "Evil and Human Suffering," 9.

²⁵ Rouzati explains that the Koran seems to differentiate between natural and human-caused "evils," but uses the same semantic root for both (*sharr*). English translations of the Koran usually translate both of these cases as "evil." Nevertheless, in the former case (natural evils), it is quite clear that such events are ordained by God as "tests" (*ibtilā*). In that sense, as Rouzati puts it, these *sharr* situations are merely ones that allow humans to realize their inner spiritual potential, holding fast to God. When it comes to human-caused *sharr* ("evil"), the notion is once more that *sharr* is first and foremost a condition. When a person creates this negative condition for himself and others, others have the opportunity to respond to that *sharr* with the same steadfastness demanded by other *ibtilā*. See *ibid.*, 1–3. In my opinion, these views of evil are a challenge for enacting social justice. Inam admits this problem, seeing the identification of human injustice with God-given *sharr* as a source of political abuse in the Middle East ("Reflexionen des Leids," 94–5). Human injustices are literally being "justified" by emphasizing God's total control and total justice. Moreover, while the Koran prohibits injustice, it also recommends acceptance of conditions that are unequal, saying that these are endowed by God himself (sur. 20.131ff). The focus of this article is not Islam's institutions for social justice, so this commentary will need to suffice. In any case (and this is most significant for the article), Muslims attend carefully to affirming God's perfect justice and omnipotence.

²⁶ Bowker, *Problems*, 105. Regarding God's merciful nature in Islam, notice that all but one surah in the Koran begin with this invocation: "In the name of God, the Lord of mercy, the giver of mercy."

²⁷ Hoover, "Typology," 86–8; Inam, "Reflexionen des Leids," 91–4.

conviction, venturing that ours is the best of all possible worlds.²⁸ Illness and affliction do not simply occur. God grants them. He effects his will through them. The Islamic value of patient, faithful submission (*islam*/الإسلام) is perhaps nowhere more evident to Christians than at this point, but Muslims do not see hardship as a special occasion for submissiveness. Sufis (Islamic mystics) are quick to remind fellow Muslims that wealth and well-being are no less a test than hardship.²⁹ Instead, careful examination shows that Muslims are taught to accept their affliction with the *same* forbearance as their sweeter moments. All of it is to be received with unabating gratitude. Due to the single, divine heritage of “evil” and “good” experiences, Muslims reject separating the two into ontologically dualistic categories. The Muslim shall receive the unanticipated news of death with the same solace as the surprise of new life. This, too, is from God.

Christians commonly resist this deferential expression of Islam. In it, they interpret complicity with evil forces that are real and active in the world. They also take issue with Islam’s ostensible confusion of these diabolical forces with the good God. In their opinion, Muslims’ emphasis on the sovereignty of God – attributing both evil and good to him – disregards the biblically revealed and perceptible tension between these two sides.³⁰ Some Christians go so far as to deny that God ever stands behind human suffering. “Surely,” one might say, “committing women and men to death or affliction is contrary to God’s loving character!”

This well-meaning apology for the character of God, however, reaches beyond the biblical evidence. Biblical wrath is an expression of biblical love.³¹ Christians must consider that the Apostle Paul shares the koranic view that God “specifies a term” for human persons (see p. 4). He announces to the Athenians, “[God] made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, *having determined allotted periods* and the boundaries of their dwelling place” (v 26 ESV emphasis added). At the very least, this means that God has something to do with the length of a person’s life (cf. Job 14.5). And the overlooked text in Acts is not all the Bible attests about God’s involvement in death and affliction. Rather, the Old Testament frequently signals that God enacts and authorizes destruction. The tenth sign of judgment against Pharaoh and Egypt in Exodus 12 is a well-known example (vv 12–13, 23), and other case studies are available in 2 Samuel 24.15–16, Ezekiel 9, and Revelation 8–9. According to these passages and others, Christians can neither claim that God has nothing to do with death, nor that God does not send calamity.³² The Bible ongoingly portrays God as one who warns of and purifies his people by means of painful, even fatal judgment. Not unlike the koranic depiction of God, in the Bible, God urges his people to repentance and calls for their faithfulness. He hastens them to submit to him, even by means of affliction.

To say as much about the biblical God may startle the sensitivities of many Christians. Shock is not my object, however. In an era during which Christians and post-Christians frequently have slanted views of their Muslim neighbors, I am attempting to set straight a few Western misconceptions of Islam. I also intend to apply an Islamic mirror to Christianity, so that Westerners may rediscover neglected aspects of the Christian tradition – aspects that Islam shares. Too often, Christians set up a false polarity between the Christian and Muslim concepts of God. They assume that their own God is of love and of life, whereas “Allah” is of judgment and of death.³³ These attempts at demarcation not only grotesquely misrepresent Islam; they also betray Christianity. In truth, both faith traditions speak of relationship with the loving and

²⁸ Sindler, *Comparative Study*, 79. Al-Ghazali did not mean that our planet is better than other planets, but that God’s creation is the best thinkable creation.

²⁹ Bowker, *Problems*, 128–30; Rouzati, “Evil and Human Suffering,” 9–11.

³⁰ It is important to emphasize again that this is what some Christians *think* Muslims are saying. In reality, orthodox Muslims are equally strong adversaries of the idea that God does evil. This is not what *sharr* (“evil”) means in the Koran (see fn. 25). Muslims are saying that the events that face men and women, whereas they might seem evil to human sensibilities, are actually part of God’s intent. Moreover, the strong Western assumption – a cultural instinct – that human individuals or communities can independently determine which experiences are good and which evil did not develop until the Enlightenment (Keller, *Walking With God*, 64–109; Taylor, *Secular Age*, 539–93). It is more post-Christian than it is Christian.

³¹ Härle, *Dogmatik*, 266–8.

³² Consider also the passages already cited in fn. 18.

³³ Volf, *Allah*, 6; cf. Barisic, “Robertson says Islam isn’t a faith of peace;” Schimmel, “Did Rick Warren Pray to Allah?” Shah-Kazemi, “God, ‘The Loving,’” 88; Shenk, *Christian, Muslim, Friend*, 117f; Siljander, *Deadly Misunderstanding*, 45.

merciful God of life, who is simultaneously no stranger to judgment and death. Based on their conviction that God is confronting evil in the world, Christians rightly reject the notion that all affliction comes from him (cf. Jn 10.10). But Christians also step beyond the bounds of orthodox doctrine when they force God and death or affliction into absolute opposition. The biblical God is not the creator of death, yet he is the God who has created life out of death (2 Cor 5.16ff). The Bible declares that God can and has used death for his redemptive purposes (Rom 5.6ff). That is the scandal of the Christian gospel. By his death, Jesus elects to become life for all who believe (1 Cor 1.18ff).

4 Redeeming death and affliction: God's instrumental relation to affliction (Part II)

In other words, the Christian faith agrees with Islam that affliction has an instrumental function.³⁴ Claiming otherwise denies God's involvement in the prevalent judgments of the Old Testament and, most importantly, rejects the center of the Christian message itself. And yet, as was said earlier, the Christian faith does not approve the Islamic theory that God stands behind every coincidence as its catalyst.³⁵ While the Bible's prophetic books support the view that God directly ordains some events to correct and lead his people, not every circumstance is willed by him. Only on account of Jesus' death and resurrection do Christians return to the possibility of universal instrumentality. Paul strings the meaning of the passion narrative together and argues, "for those who love God all things are working together for good" (Rom 8.28, my trans.).³⁶ He goes on to proclaim that nothing,

neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, 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. (vv 38–39 ESV)

Paul's profound conclusion is that despite the opposition these forces seemingly pose to God, in Jesus, they are all stripped of their adversarial might. God repurposes evil, in order to bring about good for those who love him.

This Pauline teaching unites the Islamic and Christian understandings of affliction on one level, while at the same time setting the two significantly apart. On the one hand, if God is working "all things [...] together for good," then – just as Muslims have firmly held – God's will is at work in all things. No event or circumstance escapes the will of God. Paul is saying that God instrumentally unites all things together for a good purpose. He affirms the Islamic belief that God's righteousness puts all the apparent wrongs to right. Yet on the other hand, Paul still resists the claim that all powers and events were or are good in themselves. Instead, they are presently being worked together for good. God uses painful events instrumentally, without necessarily instigating them. This difference from the Islamic perspective is significant. Christian expressions of grief, lament, and even outrage at affliction are all sanctioned by this single disagreement. Because things occur that are *wrong*, affliction is not a mere circumstance to be borne. Christians suffer, complain, and even rebel at the wrongness of such occurrences. In like manner, Jesus, while aware of God's good purposes, has good reason to turn the tables in the Temple (Mt 21.12ff; Mk 11.15ff; Luke 19.45–46; Jn 2.14–16).

³⁴ Keller, *Walking with God*, 163–85.

³⁵ Ibid., 205–21. On the basis of this difference, Islam categorically rejects the concept of gratuitous suffering and evil (suffering and evil that occur without good reason). Meanwhile, as I describe, Christianity responds with nuance: Ultimately, God works all things (even suffering and evil) together for good, although he may allow bad things to happen that would be purposeless were he not to intervene.

³⁶ A few manuscripts, \mathfrak{P}^{46} being an early example (ca. A.D. 200), support the variant reading, "God is working all things together for good" (συνεργεῖ ὁ θεός). Mainly because of strong external evidence, this alternative is viewed as inauthentic. All the same, it makes a strong case for early interpretation of the text. Copyists assumed that God's agency was behind συνεργεῖ and insert him as the subject.

He is right to weep at Lazarus' death, even though he comes to raise him (Jn 11.35; cf. Lk 19.41). And when he grieves at Gethsemane, Jesus sees his forthcoming passion as it really is: an affront to God and his goodness that God will nevertheless use to manifest his inextinguishable love (Mt 26.36ff; Mk 14.32ff; Lk 22.40ff).

These first and second points combine to form a foundational Christian paradox: the affliction may be wrong, but God is at work in it. God does not cause the tragedy, but he is unfolding its consequences. God does not make nothingness, but he creates out of nothing. God does not invent death, but he breathes life out of death. Unlike Muslims, Christians thus affirm the validity of suffering in the face of affliction, tragedy, nothingness, and death. The adversity of these forces are not illusions. They are real.³⁷ Like Muslims, though, Christians also affirm that God's good and merciful sovereignty ultimately guides all things to their glorious conclusion. For this reason, while Christianity provides room for grief, lament, and outrage, it is also not characterized by them. The narrative arc of the Christian story ought to produce men and women who are joyful, celebratory, and peaceful. Despite truly suffering affliction, Christians ought to respond to suffering with love. Knowing that God loves to work all things for their good, Christians should love and work for the good of all – even their enemies (cf. Mt 5.43–48).³⁸

5 The fount of selfless instrumentality: regarding oneness and Trinity

The fount of this love is the final and perhaps most important difference between the Islamic and Christian attitudes toward affliction or suffering. For all their doctrinal similarities, Muslims and Christians normally fall into sharp disagreement regarding the nature of God. Muslims vehemently critique the Christian doctrine of divine triunity, seeing it as a denial of the absolute oneness of God. The Koran teaches, "Those people who say that God is the third of three are defying [the truth]: there is only One God" (sur. 5.73). By rejecting the trinitarian perspective, Muslims hold that there is no such thing as otherness within God. His eternal love must therefore be a self-referential love, and all expressions of God's eternal love must by extension be byproducts of divine self-love.³⁹ In contrast, trinitarian theology maintains that otherness is eternally within the Godhead. The "persons" of the Trinity eternally give themselves to each other. Christians believe that God's love always has been and always will be other-oriented.

What has this hypostatic particularity to do with affliction and suffering? I will review what I have already written to set up the answer and this article's conclusion:

- For Muslims, death and affliction are God's creation (Section 2). The sense that these things might be "wrong" is thus an illusion. God uses death and affliction as instruments to fulfill his purposes, which

³⁷ This is the key difference between the koranic and biblical depictions of Job. The Koran, which refers in fewer than ten verses to Job (4.163–5; 6.84; 21.83f; 38.41–4), describes Job's patience and excellent service (38.44). He earns God's mercy by his conduct. The Judeo-Christian tradition devotes an entire book to Job and, in the book's frame, shares the Koran's attention to Job's forbearance and faithfulness (Schreiner, "Der Prophet Ayyüb," 58). Between these bookends, however, Job laments and challenges God's justice (Job 9). The biblical figure cries out that he has no arbiter between him and God (v 33). Job's quest for theodicy in the Bible is utterly unlike the koranic Job's resilient patience. Thus, although some Muslim theologians have attended to the theodicy question in reference to Job, they are far less likely to do so than their Jewish or Christian counterparts. Cf. Görgün, "Leid als Teil;" Middlebeck-Varwick, *Cum Aestimatione*, 264ff; von Scheliha, "Annahme und Rebellion;" Schreiner, "Der Prophet Ayyüb;" Ucar, "Ergebung und Erduldung."

³⁸ Despite all the historical and modern evidence to the contrary – that Christians have often poorly loved – any authentic Jesus-follower must make this claim. Jesus appointed such love the definitive mark of his discipleship (Lk 6.27–36; Jn 13.34–35).

³⁹ Volf, *Allah*, 166ff; cf. Shah-Kazemi, "God, 'The Loving,'" 89ff. This does not mean that God does not love people. The Koran explicitly says that he does so (5.54). Volf cogently shows, however – using references to both Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn 'Arabi, two Muslim theologians who uncharacteristically agreed on this point – that the Islamic conception of God's absolute unity necessitates that his love not require any other being. Therefore, Islam postulates a divine love that ultimately always returns to the one divine lover. See also Bell, *Love Theory*, 69ff, whom Volf also cites in his notes on p. 295.

include the testing and purification of humans. Ethically, the proper human response is therefore patient and worshipful submission to God (Sections 2 and 3).

- For Christians, death and affliction are not God's creation (Section 2). While God has and can apply them in specific cases, both may at other times operate against his will (Section 3). Grief, lament, outrage, and the like can therefore be appropriate reactions to death and affliction, for one truly suffers evil. But God takes and redeems these experiences, instrumentally working all things for good on behalf of those who love him (Section 4). Christians therefore ought to react with lives characterized by prayerful joy and thanksgiving.

In Islam as in Christianity, one encounters the instrumental quality of affliction. The Koran suggests that God does not allow affliction to *be* random and purposeless. The Bible submits that God does not allow affliction to *remain* random and purposeless.

But the two faiths have discordant convictions about who the instrumentality of affliction ultimately serves. Throughout the Koran, God loves those who love him. Affliction is a merciful means of awaking love or devotion in women and men, but if they resist submission, God does not love them and affliction becomes mere punishment. That is to say, the instrumentality of affliction finally serves God and his purposes. Just as the Muslim theologians suppose, the purest expression of God's love and the purpose of his mercy is self-love.

Rooted in their trinitarian theology, Christians disagree with Muslims on this last point. When Paul speaks of God working all things for good, he also says that God is doing so "for those who love [him]." Paul does not merely claim that God blesses those who love him. Then he would still agree with the koranic report. Rather, Paul announces that the very purpose of *all* God is doing is for the good of those who receive him. "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Rm 8.31) is an ontological question. Paul is expressing the astounding notion that God – in his very being – is for humanity. He is for the other, doing all he can to unite her to himself, not for his own sake, but for hers. The Pauline perspective on God's ontology revolutionizes the notion of instrumentality. God chooses to use and redeem dire circumstances, not to serve himself, but to love us – his creation.

The instrumentality of affliction is not a popular teaching in the Western church. Many Christians in the West, adopting post-Christian sentiments, display an absolute aversion to suffering. Widespread movements within the church that superficially emphasize favor, wealth, and health accentuate that resistance. With an honest look at their Muslim neighbors, I propose that Christians may rediscover and reclaim important doctrines like the instrumentality of affliction. They will discover how much commonality there is when they observe Islam carefully. And I am confident that such an empathetic glimpse into their neighbors' beliefs will help illuminate who the biblical God truly is. Only Christians, for instance, who rediscover their God as the one who uses suffering, will see God as Jesus Christ reveals him. In Christ, God is the one who redeems humanity's afflictions. In Jesus, God is the one who repurposes our suffering to bless us.

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