

God and the Mystery of Human Suffering

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

CONTENTS

Introduction

Chapter 1: The Hebrew Scriptures

Chapter 2: New Testament Perspectives on Suffering

Chapter 3: Early Christian Sources

Chapter 4: Thomas Aquinas

Chapter 5: Julian of Norwich

Chapter 6: Two Voices from the Shoah

Chapter 7: Jürgen Moltmann

Chapter 8: Edward Schillebeeckx

Chapter 9: Gustavo Gutiérrez

Chapter 10: Elizabeth Johnson

Chapter 11: Toward a Theology of God and Suffering

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS God and the Mystery of Human Suffering

Introduction

1. What assumptions about God and suffering do you bring to this exploration of the tradition?
2. Which biblical text(s) have you found to be most illuminating in facing the mystery of suffering?
3. Is there a particular theologian or spiritual writer who has been helpful to you in dealing with experiences of suffering? What have you learned from that author?

Chapter 1: The Hebrew Scriptures

1. Have you heard the theology of retribution expressed by people of faith? Is there any truth to this approach?
2. What do believers have to learn from the Jewish tradition of the lament?
3. Is there value to sacrificial interpretations of suffering? What are the possible pitfalls in the theology or spirituality of sacrifice?

Chapter 2: New Testament Perspectives on Suffering

1. What does Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God say to you about God's relation to human suffering?
2. What is the significance of the Christian confession of the resurrection of Jesus for our view of God and suffering?
3. How would you interpret New Testament passages about the "necessity" (Mark's Gospel: Greek word *dei*) of Jesus' suffering and death?

Chapter 3: Early Christian Sources

1. How should Christians remain faithful to the affirmation of the essential goodness of creation while also acknowledging evil as a powerful force in the world?
2. Is there value to the affirmation of the immutability and impassibility of God? What truths are preserved in these principles?
3. What is the role of the Christian doctrine of original sin in dealing with the mystery of evil and suffering? Does it provide a complete explanation for the experience of evil and suffering?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS God and the Mystery of Human Suffering

Chapter 4: Thomas Aquinas

1. What do you think of Aquinas's view of God's love for creatures as purely benevolent love?
2. Is Aquinas's treatment of divine compassion cogent for you? Does compassion only characterize love as finite, as William Hill asserts?
3. In what way does Aquinas's focus on the obedience and charity of Christ as the source of salvation influence our understanding of the cross? How does it influence your image of God?

Chapter 5: Julian of Norwich

1. How do you react to Julian's contention that in the suffering of Christ is revealed the depths of God's love for the human family?
2. What is your interpretation of Julian's talk about "longing" in God? How does this idea compare with the view of God found in Thomas Aquinas?
3. Does Julian take the gravity of sin and its effects on people seriously enough?
4. What do you think of the idea that human fulfillment in God will be more complete because of sin than it would have been if there had been no sin?

Chapter 6: Two Voices from the Shoah

1. What do you think of Wiesel's comments on the relationship between evil and indifference?
2. How do you react to Wiesel's interpretation of the Book of Job, especially his emphasis on Job's boldness in arguing with God?
3. What do you make of Bonhoeffer's assertion that "God is weak and powerless in the world"? Is this kind of language true to the Judeo-Christian tradition and helpful to people who are suffering?

Chapter 7: Jürgen Moltmann

1. What are the strengths and weaknesses of Moltmann's trinitarian interpretation of Calvary? What do you think of Dorothee Sölle's critique of Moltmann?
2. Is it true that if God were incapable of suffering in any respect then God would be incapable of love?
3. Is it true that the more a person believes, the more that person experiences pain over suffering in the world and the more passionately he or she asks about God and the new creation?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS God and the Mystery of Human Suffering

Chapter 8: Edward Schillebeeckx

1. Moltmann gives one interpretation of Jesus' death; Schillebeeckx offers another. Which interpretation resonates more with you?
2. What do you think of Schillebeeckx's assertion, "God does not want mankind to suffer"?
3. Does Schillebeeckx's designation of God as "pure positivity" appropriately characterize the God revealed in Jesus?

Chapter 9: Gustavo Gutiérrez

1. What role does the preferential option for the poor have to play in a Christian approach to suffering?
2. What does Gutiérrez's identification of two "languages" in the Book of Job—prophetic and contemplative—have to contribute to a Christian theology of suffering?
3. Would the experience of the gratuitousness of God's love offer meaning and consolation to a person experiencing suffering? If so, in what way?

Chapter 10: Elizabeth Johnson

1. What do you think of Johnson's treatment of divine power?
2. How do you react to Johnson's reply to William Hill about divine love?
3. Is Johnson's appeal to "narrative memory in solidarity" helpful for crafting a Christian approach to suffering?
4. Do you agree that belief in a God who can and does freely suffer with us facilitates the praxis of hope for suffering people?

Chapter 11: Toward a Theology of God and Suffering

1. How would you have responded to Mary's question about how she and her husband should talk about God after the death of their friends' daughter?
2. In your theology of suffering, how do you interpret the crucifixion of Jesus? Which Gospel account of Jesus' death do you find most illuminating?
3. How do you reckon with physical (natural) evil in your approach to God and suffering?
4. Do you think that Christians should speak of a "suffering God"—a God who is affected by human suffering?