

Facing Painful Questions

B Y R O G E R W A R D

What can we, as Christians, say about evil, suffering, and pain? Can God be trusted? Our honest reckoning with pain, as the four books reviewed here demonstrate, is essential to our sharing the good news of God.

Though each of us must suffer and endure pain within our individual circumstances, together we bear the sentence of death and separation. No human speech is complete if it does not connect to this reality. What can we, as Christians, say about evil, suffering, and pain? If the gospel of God is meant for everyman and everywoman, perhaps there is no subject that fits more smoothly into evangelical purposes than an honest reckoning with pain. Indeed, the four books reviewed here demonstrate the significance of responding to pain and suffering as a part of our Christian duty.

The majesty of God's work of redemption in our world turns, according to the biblical writers, on the ultimately personal category of pain. Jesus invites the lame man, "Do you want to recover?" (John 5:6, NEB)[†], and we long for the day when "He will wipe every tear from their eyes; there shall be an end to death, and to mourning and crying and pain" (Revelation 21:4, NEB). Despite such assurances in Scripture, however, we instinctively judge God's character through the veil of our pain or the suffering of a loved one. John Stackhouse, Gary Watts, Douglas John Hall, and Phillip Yancey underscore the Christian's responsibility for understanding God in relation to a larger suffering world *even while* we dwell in the doubt of God's goodness that arises because of our pain. Each writer emphasizes one side or other of this equation: Stackhouse and Hall focus on the task of understanding God and suffering, Yancey and Watts concentrate on the problems of faith that attend pain and suffering. Taken together these writers construct a rich fabric of response to the perplexing question of God's sovereign power and the persistence of human pain.

UNDERSTANDING GOD AND SUFFERING

John G. Stackhouse, Jr., in *Can God Be Trusted?: Faith and the Challenge of Evil* (Oxford University Press, 1998, 208 pp., \$18.95), begins with David Hume's classic challenge to Christian belief: "Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil?" (p. 11). Stackhouse develops the intellectual problems of evil and pain in three chapters and follows these with four chapters of responses.

With great intellectual breadth, Stackhouse looks at pain from various Western and Eastern perspectives. For example, he recounts the story of Siddhartha's quest to overcome transience and pain, becoming Buddha (pp. 22 ff.) Responding to evil is an ingredient in every religious and intellectual tradition, and in this context the Christian response shines the brighter.

Rather than evade the burden of pain for the Christian, Stackhouse heightens the problem by reflecting on the character of God: "The God of predestination, the God of worldwide providence, the God who created all and sustains all and thus ultimately is responsible for all—this God has revealed to us only glimpses of the divine cosmic plan" (p. 103). On the other hand, the gospel of Christ alters the story in a unique way: "Christians have affirmed that *on the cross, things changed*. Mysterious as it remains even to the wisest minds, the fundamental Christian affirmation is that the cross of Jesus doesn't just *show* us things, it *did* something once and for all" (p. 115). What the cross means, according to Stackhouse, is that we have a reason to have faith despite the terrible evil in the world, and to think and to live Christianly as our response to this evil. Of course, *why* this is the case is a significant question. Stackhouse gives two responses. First, the Christian response in a world of pain makes sense because it "fits" its purpose; it does what a religion is supposed to do in confronting evil and comforting those who suffer. Second, it provides a narrative or framework from which we can better understand the realities of the world (p. 149). Stackhouse is careful to limit the force of these reasons for adopting a Christian hope in the face of evil. He does not suggest that such reasons are universally persuasive; there is no knockdown argument here. But he does set the Christian response in its strongest possible light as an intellectual accounting of God's goodness discovered in a world of pain.

Confronting the suffering in the world with Christian fidelity requires that we confront our own failures, says Douglas John Hall in *God and Human Suffering: An Exercise in the Theology of the Cross* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, reprinted 1987, 225 pp., \$18.00). "Our temptation," he warns, "is that we fall into superficial belieffulness—credulity—healing the wounds of the people lightly and degrading the hope that belongs to the gospel of the cross" (p. 27). In five well-developed chapters Hall explores a version of divine reversal. Just as the forces that sought to rebel against

God by killing Jesus only confirmed God's eternal presence in the world, so pain, the most un-godlike aspect of our human condition, gives us access to the deepest meaning and mystery of God's identification with humanity. Hall points out a reluctance to accept this reversal in religion: "It is the propensity of religion to avoid, precisely, suffering; to have light without darkness, vision without trust, and...hope without an ongoing dialog with

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despair—in short, Easter without Good Friday" (p. 126). He concludes that human rejection necessitated the cross. God did not "intend" the cross, but Jesus dying on the cross "meant in the long run that far more spiritual power had been released into the world than if Jesus had lived to a ripe old age and died in quiet retirement" (p. 192).

Hall's theological proposal is that pain calls for strategic action. The human action that rejects God must be reversed, and the pivot point is pain. "The object is to identify oneself with suffering that is already there in one's world, to let oneself be led by the love of Christ into solidarity with those who suffer, and to accept the consequences of this solidarity in the belief—the *joyful* belief—that in this way God is still at work in the world, making a conquest of its sin and suffering from within" (p. 145). In his masterful use of biblical and theological material, Hall sounds the theme that blessedness implies some experience of suffering. It is this mystery of our lives with God that finally gives sense to the incarnation and suffering of God with us.

DEALING WITH DOUBTS

In *Painful Questions: Facing Struggles with Faith* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1999, 240 pp., \$12.99), Gary Watts does not try to persuade unbelievers of God's goodness. Rather he addresses some hard questions that believers must ask when suffering and pain become their foremost concern. He organizes thirteen chapters around what he calls "fact-finding questions," "fact-stating questions," and "fact-changing questions." Fact-finding questions include those like "Why has this happened to me?" Fact-stating questions bring us to considerations of dignity: "Is this fair?" And fact-changing questions—like "Can good come from evil?"—seek to alter the circumstances of our suffering by calling to mind our hope in a world where the power of pain ends.

Watts concludes that the characteristic “change” of attitude accessible to Christians is to respond in love to the presence of pain, and he recommends that we adopt a spirit of adventure in regard to pain. “If life is an adventure, then our expectations must be so aligned,” he writes. “The evil that befalls us is not an anomaly in an otherwise perfect pattern of peace and tranquility. It is an anticipated obstacle on the road to God’s kingdom” (p. 172). If we adopt an attitude of adventure towards life, Watts says, we can choose to create good out of bad circumstances. More than the other authors reviewed here, Watts promotes a voluntarist response to pain and suffering: we can choose to treat adversity as a “great game.” This hopeful and optimistic attitude fits with our American “can-do” spirit, and it also reveals the roots of our dissatisfaction with a painful reality that doesn’t seem to budge. At this point in the argument there is an opening for discussing the importance of community, both in revealing this dissatisfaction and directing responses to it. Unfortunately Watts does not explore this dimension in this book.

Phillip Yancey, in *Where is God When It Hurts?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990, reissued 1997, 320 pp., \$5.99), begins from a similar place as Watts. Yancey recounts a personal encounter with a woman suffering with cancer, and wonders what a Christian should say at times like these. He tours the depths of human responses to pain as well as the rich resources of biblical and Christian writers. Most notably, he emphasizes that pain is a work of grace, since without it our biological life is jeopardized. His focus on the medical facts of physical pain, in addition to a range of literary and religious reflections on the meaning of pain, offers a dauntingly wide field for Yancey to cultivate. Yet in reviewing resources as diverse as the bedside manner of Dr. Paul Brand dealing with leprosy patients, the psychological depths of John Donne’s musings while dying, the probing questions of the book of Job, and the gospel hope for redemption, Yancey excels any author I have read in his care and consistency in understanding people and writers.

“Where is God when it hurts?” is a question that intertwines Christian experience today with thousands of years of human experience and tradition. Yancey avoids cliché and formulaic answers. He dwells in the concrete realities of different Christians’ responses to extreme suffering, such as the paralysis from spinal chord injuries in two athletic young people. Their experiences contribute to the fabric of our collective answer to the question. “True health is the strength to live, the strength to suffer, and the strength to die,” he proposes. “Health is not a condition of my body; it is the power of my soul to cope with the varying condition of that body” (p. 191).

Because he does not use theology as a shield, Yancey may appear at times to make more literary sense than Christian sense. But his work is explicitly grounded in the unique power of a Christian theological approach.

“No other religion,” he says, “not Judaism, not Hinduism, not Buddhism or Islam—offers this unique combination of an all-powerful God who willingly takes on the limitations and suffering of his creation” (p. 233).

God’s identification with the creature and creation in suffering is the common theme that gives all four of these books their power. Because God suffered his Son to live, experience pain as we do, and die, in what other way can we be more intimately connected to the reality of God’s love than in our own suffering and death? Yet this suffering is not the end, but the portal of our vision into our true world and our true life, where pain meets its end through the overcoming power of God in the resurrection of our bodies to eternal fellowship and life.

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