

3

The problems of evil and suffering

3.1

The problem of suffering

An imperfect world

On Boxing Day 2004, many people woke to news that an undersea earthquake in the Indian Ocean had triggered giant waves that wiped out huge areas of coastline in Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Thailand and India. Over the next few days, it became clear that the 'tsunami' had killed over 225,000 people in 11 countries. One-third of the dead were children. A father described how he clung to a tree and could do nothing to stop his wife, seven-year-old son and two-month-old twins being swept away. The suffering did not end there. Survivors had also lost their homes and jobs. The sea water created serious long-lasting damage to ecosystems, freshwater supplies and the soil.



A People lost families, homes and jobs in the 2004 tsunami

Where is God when people suffer? Is this God's judgement? If God exists, what kind of God would allow children to be killed? What about the animals and plant life? Did God know this would happen? Is there any meaning in all of this **suffering**?

Why suffering is a problem

Most of us have not experienced a major natural disaster. We may have floods, storms and even earthquakes but loss of life is usually rare. Yet, we all suffer pain, illness, loss and, finally, death. So suffering is a problem for all of us.

Suffering raises problems for theists, who believe that God is benevolent (all-good and all-loving), omniscient (all-knowing) and omnipotent (all-powerful).

Objectives

Consider why suffering is a problem for people who believe in God.

Understand the questions it raises about God's love, power and purpose.

Key terms

Suffering: when people have to face and live with unpleasant events or conditions.

Responsibility: duty; the idea that we are in charge of our own actions.

BURMA DEATH TOLL WORSE THAN TSUNAMI

CHINA EARTHQUAKE KILLS THOUSANDS

B Did these people deserve what happened to them?

links

Look back to page 9 to remind yourself of the meaning of theist.

Questions for believers

- If God is all-good and wants the best for people, why does God allow suffering that is clearly not good? Are God's intentions bad? What is his purpose?
- If God is benevolent, why does God allow us to suffer? Surely, if he cares for us and wants us to be happy, he would not want us to suffer pain and loss. (If God wills our suffering, he is cruel.)
- If God is omniscient, he must realise that we suffer. Knowledge brings **responsibility** with it. How can he stand by and do nothing to stop our suffering?
- If God is omnipotent and can do anything, God could prevent suffering or stop it altogether. Yet suffering continues. Theists believe that God created the world. If that is so, why did he create a world that contains so much death and destruction? (If God cannot stop our suffering, then he is not all-powerful.)
- Why does God allow innocent people to suffer? What purpose does it serve? People who have lived good and decent lives, children who have not done anything wrong, why should these innocent people suffer?

links

Look back to pages 38–39 to remind yourself of the meaning of benevolent, omniscient and omnipotent.

Activities

Answer the following questions, giving reasons for your answers.

- 1 Can anyone live a pain-free life?
- 2 What would the world be like if no one suffered or died?
- 3 Do some people deserve to suffer?

Discussion activities



With a partner, in a group or as a whole class, discuss the following statements:

- 1 'God cannot be loving and let people suffer.'
- 2 'Suffering and pain are never the will of God.'

Give reasons for your answers, showing that you have thought about more than one point of view.

Study tip

You need to be able to give reasons why suffering is a problem for theists, and outline the questions suffering raises about God's love, power and purpose.

Extension activity

Collect news articles or personal accounts of how people suffer in today's world. Make a note of who, or what, caused the suffering in each case.

Summary

You should now understand that theists believe in an all-good, all-loving, all-knowing and all-powerful God, and be able to explain how suffering raises questions about why such a God allows suffering to exist in the world that he created.

3.2 Reasons for suffering

■ Who is to blame?

Suffering falls into two main categories:

- 1 **Natural suffering** caused by natural events such as earthquakes, volcanoes, floods, hurricanes or drought.
- 2 **Man-made suffering** caused as a result of people acting in a way that hurts themselves or other people. Sometimes this form of suffering is an accident, for example a driver who hits a child running out from between parked cars. Sometimes it is deliberate, for example, murder, theft, rape or abuse.

Some suffering is *both* natural and caused by human actions. The cyclone that caused so much destruction in Burma could not have been prevented, but the delay in getting help to the people who were affected cost many more lives and could have been avoided. People must take some of the responsibility for the suffering of others.

■ Natural suffering

Most natural suffering is no one's fault; it is just the way the earth has developed over millions of years. Scientists can explain the causes of earthquakes or cyclones and can sometimes even predict when they might take place, but there is not much they can do to prevent them altogether. People can build earthquake-proof buildings or flood defences to try to protect themselves from danger, but the forces of nature are powerful and beyond much of our control.

Some people would argue that God is to blame for natural suffering. If God really did create the earth, why did he create a planet where natural disasters happen? If God is powerful, why did he not make a perfect world with just the right climate and no hurricanes or earthquakes to destroy our homes?

A believer might reply to these criticisms by saying that, although God is powerful and created the earth, he is not to blame for earthquakes or bad weather! The same forces that cause volcanoes and earthquakes are the forces that formed the earth in the beginning. People should use their scientific knowledge to develop ways to avoid the suffering that these natural events cause.

■ Suffering caused by people

There is no simple reason for this type of suffering. People may cause suffering to others accidentally by being lazy, thoughtless or ignorant. Others may cause deliberate suffering because of hatred, greed, jealousy or selfishness. People have **free will** – they can choose how to behave. Sometimes they choose to act in a way that hurts themselves or others.

Some people might argue: if God created humans, why did he give them free will? Why did he not make them perfect so that they would always choose to do good instead of evil? If God is so good, why does he not stop people from making bad choices that hurt others?

Objectives

Consider different forms of suffering and their causes.

Reflect upon whether or not God is to blame for suffering.

Key terms

Natural suffering: suffering caused by nature, e.g. because of earthquakes, volcanoes, floods.

Man-made suffering: suffering caused by the actions of humans, e.g. through war, pollution, crime.

Free will: having the ability to choose or determine one's own actions.

Activity

- 1 Make a list of ten ways in which people suffer in the world today. Who or what causes the suffering? Who or what is to blame?



A cyclone is beyond our control

A believer might reply to these criticisms by saying that human freedom is part of our nature, just as earthquakes are part of the earth. People can think logically, can make decisions about what is right and wrong, and can feel responsibility for others. Humans are not programmed like robots always to do good; they are free to make up their own minds – therefore they may make mistakes.



B Who is to blame?

Activities

- 2 Research the causes of **two** kinds of natural suffering.
- 3 Give **two** examples of suffering caused by people.
- 4 Consider whether it is possible for the world to be perfect.
- 5 Do you think that God should stop people from doing wrong? Make a list of the arguments for and against.
- 6 How might an atheist explain the reasons for suffering?

Study tip

You need to be able to explain the difference between natural and man-made suffering, and to give examples of each. You need to be able to explain how believers try to answer the questions raised about God's responsibility for suffering in the world.

Discussion activities

With a partner, in a group or as a whole class, discuss the statements:

- 1 'God is to blame for natural suffering.'
- 2 'Humans are not really free if God knows what we are going to do before we do it.'

Give reasons for your answers, showing that you have thought about more than one point of view.

Summary

You should now be able to explain the difference between natural suffering and suffering caused by people, and discuss why religious people and atheists have different explanations for the reasons for suffering.

3.3 Is suffering unjust? Does it have a purpose?

■ Unjust suffering

It is difficult to see how the suffering of innocent children can ever have a purpose. We sometimes think that people deserve to suffer for their crimes – that their punishment is **just** – but a baby is too young to have done anything wrong. Even people who have lived good lives sometimes suffer terribly. What is the point of such cruelty? It simply seems **unjust**.



A The suffering of an innocent child seems unjust

■ Does suffering have a purpose?

Some people argue that suffering is not always bad. It sometimes has positive benefits. This may be its purpose.

- Some suffering is necessary to keep us alive and well. Pain tells us that something is wrong, so that we can do something about it. If a tooth aches, we can have it pulled out before we develop a serious infection. Pain makes us stop doing things that would cause us serious harm.
- Suffering can make us appreciate things that we take for granted. Temporary blindness, for example, can make someone appreciate the value of sight.

Objectives

Consider in what ways suffering is unjust.

Consider whether or not suffering has a purpose.

Key terms

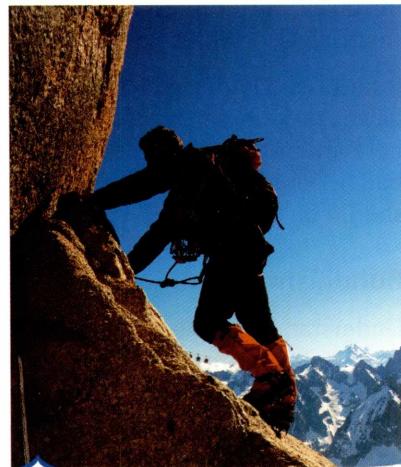
Just: fair or right.

Unjust: unfair or not right.



B Some people risk their lives to save others

- It can make us a better or stronger person if we have to show courage and determination to get through the difficult times. People who experience war sometimes say that it brings out the best in people – their neighbourliness, kindness and unity with others. The self-sacrifice shown by soldiers who give their lives for their country or to save their companions is an example of suffering that helps others.
- Some people suffer to achieve a goal. For example, polar explorers are willing to suffer physical hardship and put their lives at risk in order to reach the North Pole. A mother suffers pain in childbirth to bring a new life into the world.
- Some religious believers argue that suffering is a test of someone's faith. It can help people to remember their religion and God. It is easy to believe in God when everything is going well, but suffering challenges people's beliefs when life is difficult.
- Some religious people think that suffering is a punishment for sin and that it can teach us a lesson. It helps us to see what we have been doing wrong, so that we can change for the better. It is God's way of bringing people back to him.
- Another argument is that suffering is part of God's mysterious plan. We cannot explain it or see its true purpose right now because only God knows what that purpose is.



C A mountaineer suffers to achieve a goal

Discussion activity



- 1 With a partner, in a group or as a whole class, discuss the following statements:
 - a 'Suffering is a punishment for doing wrong'.
 - b 'The suffering of an innocent child cannot be justified.'

Give reasons for your answers, showing that you have thought about more than one point of view.

Activity

- 1 Answer the following questions, giving reasons for your answers.
 - a Is suffering ever fair? Do some people deserve to suffer?
 - b What can people learn from suffering?
 - c How might a believer defend God against a charge of cruelty?

Study tip

You need to be able to explain how believers answer the charge that suffering is cruel and serves no purpose.

Summary

You should now be able to explain why unjust suffering is difficult for a believer to explain when defending God against a charge of cruelty, and how they try to resolve the problem.

3.4

Religious explanations for suffering

Different perspectives

Christians, Jews and Muslims believe that God gave people free will. God does not force people to make the right decisions, so people make mistakes. Suffering is a result of people choosing to do things that hurt themselves or other people.

Buddhists, Hindus and Sikhs explain suffering through the law of karma or kamma. People's thoughts and actions have consequences, here and now, or in a future life. Suffering now may be a result of bad actions in a previous life. Selfishness and sin cause suffering and should be overcome.

Buddhism

Understanding how to overcome suffering is central to Buddhism. The Four Noble Truths explain that life is unsatisfactory, full of suffering caused by craving or desire. People are selfish and never satisfied. Once one desire is fulfilled, another one arises. The three 'poisons' of ignorance, greed and hatred lead to more suffering. The way to stop suffering is to overcome desire by following the Eightfold Path.

Christianity

For Christians, suffering is a result of human freedom to choose actions that cause suffering. The story of Adam and Eve (Genesis 3) shows the consequences of free will. By disobeying God, Adam and Eve brought suffering and evil into God's perfect world. Some Christians think that suffering is a punishment for sin. It teaches a lesson so that people can grow spiritually. Some think that the devil, who tempted Adam and Eve, still tempts people to do wrong today.

Christians believe that Jesus broke the power of evil and suffering over people by his innocent suffering and death on the cross. By rising from the dead and returning to his Father in heaven, Jesus gave Christians hope that death is not the end, but that people will continue to have a relationship with God after death.

Hinduism

Hinduism teaches that suffering is a result of sinful actions in this life and past actions in previous lives. This is the law of cause and effect (karma). It is important to build up good karma, as it will help reduce suffering in the future and help people to gain release from the cycle of birth, death and rebirth.

Islam

According to the Qur'an, Allah gave Adam the world to look after but also gave him free will. This means that humans can choose to sin. Shaytan (the source of evil) was given the job of testing people's faith and character through suffering. It is believed that he does not test people more than they can bear.

Objectives

Investigate religious explanations for suffering.

links

Look back to page 54 to remind yourself of the meaning of free will.



A

There is much suffering in the world

Study tip

You need to be able to give at least one religion's explanation for suffering.

Judaism

Judaism teaches that suffering results from free will given to humans. Adam and Eve brought suffering into the world by choosing to eat the forbidden fruit (Genesis 3). Jews believe that God uses suffering to train or discipline his people (Deuteronomy 8:5) and to bring people back to him (Isaiah 53:5).

The book of Job examines the problem of undeserved suffering (see Case Study below).

Sikhism

Sikhism teaches that selfish behaviour causes suffering. Suffering is a result of karma. People reap what they sow. Actions performed now affect rebirth, so it is important to do good. Why some people suffer more than others is a mystery, but Sikhs do not think that God put suffering in the world to get people to turn to him.

Beliefs and teachings

Know then in your heart that as a man disciplines his son, so the LORD your God disciplines you.

Deuteronomy 8:5

But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.

Isaiah 53:3

Case study

Job

In the Book of Job, Satan challenges God by claiming that if Job is sent great suffering, he will curse God and lose his faith. God allows Satan to send Job great trials – the death of his children and the loss of all his possessions. When Job still praises God, Satan sends him terrible boils that make him scrape his skin with broken pottery. Job still does not sin by cursing God. Job's friends think that his suffering is a punishment from God for sins, but Job insists that he has done nothing to deserve his ordeal and questions God. But one friend argues that God's sovereignty must not be questioned. Suffering is part of God's plan, beyond human understanding. Job repents and is rewarded with more children, a long life and twice the wealth he had before.



B Satan gives Job boils

Activities

- 1 Explain what the story of Job teaches about suffering.
- 2 To what extent do religious explanations for suffering solve the problem of suffering?

Discussion activity

With a partner, in a group or as a whole class, discuss the following statement: 'A God who makes us suffer to get us to believe in him is not all-good.' Do you agree? Give reasons for your answer, showing that you have thought about more than one point of view.

Study tip

'Explain' means that you need to interpret or give reasons for something. This tests your understanding. Question 1 asks you to retell the key points of the story of Job showing what the story teaches about suffering.

Summary

You should now be able to explain that Christians, Jews and Muslims believe that suffering is a result of free will, while Buddhists, Hindus and Sikhs believe suffering is a result of bad karma/kamma in this, or a previous, life.

3.5 Religious responses to suffering



A Faith-based organisations help alleviate poverty

Objectives

Consider how religious believers respond to suffering.

Practical responses

We have seen how religious people try to make sense of suffering, and how those who believe in an all-powerful, all-loving God try to answer the questions that suffering raises about their beliefs. Religions also teach their followers how to live in such a way that suffering is reduced, either for themselves or for other people. If people live good lives and follow religious teaching, they will probably not cause much suffering to others. But most religions go further than this. They teach their followers to help others who are suffering, in active practical ways. All the major religions have organisations that care for people with a wide variety of needs: the sick; the poor; asylum seekers; children with disabilities; people who have suffered bereavement and loss; and so on.

Buddhism

The Buddha taught that the way to stop suffering is to stop craving. The way to do this is by following the Eightfold Path to develop right understanding, right speech and right action. A person needs to overcome their attachment to material things or else they will always want more. Buddhists try to develop compassion for others who suffer. They practise generosity. Giving to others shows that a person is not selfish and attached to their wealth. Buddhists believe in the Middle Way, a balance between wealth and poverty. They realise that people need a certain level of economic prosperity in order to live, but that greed and hoarding money does not allow people to grow spiritually.

Christianity

Trusting in God helps Christians to accept and endure personal suffering as part of God's mysterious will, but they will try to help others who are suffering. The teaching 'Love your neighbour as yourself' (Matthew 22:39) means that Christians should not only feel

Study tip

If you are asked how religious believers respond to suffering, you may answer both in terms of what they say and in terms of what they do to help others who suffer. It is helpful to know how they respond in practical ways through the work of religious organisations.

compassion for those who suffer, but also should take active steps to help them. Christians should follow the example of Jesus who helped the needy and healed those who were sick.

Hinduism

To achieve release from the cycle of death and rebirth, a Hindu tries to practise yoga to develop loving devotion, self-control, knowledge and understanding through study and discipline. Hindus have a tradition of helping their families, local communities and holy men. It is their duty to give and to share with those in need.

Islam

People who cause others to suffer will be judged on the Day of Judgement. Muslims should show compassion towards people who suffer. (One of Allah's 99 names is 'The Compassionate'.) Zakah, one of the Five Pillars of Islam, requires Muslims to give a percentage of their wealth to help those in need, so relieving the suffering of the poor is an important part of Muslim belief.

Judaism

Jews are encouraged to help people who are suffering. The prophet Amos warned people not to become selfish and greedy, but to leave part of the harvest for the poor. Charity is a duty from God. It must be given sensitively so that the needy retain their self-respect and, where possible, encourage the poor to help themselves.

Sikhism

Sikhs try to rise above or transcend suffering. Selfless service (sewa) should be practised to help anyone in need. They emphasise the equality of all people and believe that sharing is an important duty, particularly with those who have little. The communal kitchen (langar) in the gurdwara (temple) serves two meals a day to every visitor, rich or poor. A free vegetarian meal is shared after every weekly service.

Activities

- 1** Give three ways in which religious people could help others who suffer.
- 2** Does your school support any organisations that help others? How do you help?
- 3** What is compassion?

Discussion activity

With a partner, in a group or as a whole class, discuss the following statement: 'Religious people can cope with suffering better than others.' Do you agree? Give reasons for your answer, showing that you have thought about more than one point of view.

Research activity

Practical responses to suffering

Using the internet and/or a library, research the work of a religious organisation that helps people who suffer.

- Buddhism – www.karuna.org
- Christianity – www.christianaid.org.uk
- Hinduism – www.hinduaid.org
- Islam – www.muslimaid.org
- Judaism – www.tzedek.org.uk
- Sikhism – www.khalsaaid.org

Summary

You should now be able to discuss how religions not only try to make sense of suffering, but also help those who suffer, and teach their followers to live in a way that avoids causing suffering to others.



3.6 Evil

What is meant by evil?

We often hear people use the word '**evil**' to describe a horrible event or terrible crime, something that has caused great harm. It is sometimes used to describe an individual, like Hitler or Pol Pot, who has ordered the deaths of millions of people.

Objectives

Investigate what is meant by evil.

In the news...

The newspapers are full of stories about the suffering caused by evil actions. Here are a few examples from the *Guardian*.

China accused America of having '**evil** motives' and trying to undermine the Olympics by officially criticising China's record on human rights. (31 July 2008)

When a young couple were shot on their honeymoon in Antigua, the country's leaders urged people to remove the '**evil**' that is creeping into their society. (30 July 2008)

After 16-year-old Jimmy Mizen was murdered in an unprovoked attack in a bakery in London, his mother, despite her grief, said she felt sorry for the parents of her son's killer. 'They haven't got wonderful memories for their son,' she said, 'all they can think about is the **evil** he's done.' (12 May 2008)

A young Polish student was brutally killed and buried under the floor of a church in Glasgow. The killer... had previously spent 14 years in prison for raping two teenage girls. The judge sentenced the killer to life imprisonment for the 'inhuman' and '**evil**' attack. (5 May 2007)

Study tip

Although the problems of evil and suffering are closely linked, if you are asked about evil, be clear that you are discussing evil itself and not just suffering caused by evil actions.

Activities

- 1 Which of these newspaper reports do you think best describes '**evil**'?
- 2 What do you think caused the evil that is described in these reports?

Evil actions or evil people?

Is there really a 'thing' called evil? Are there really evil people or are there just evil actions? Most of us are a mixture of good and bad. Even murderers serving life sentences may be kind to others. Many massacres and genocides have been ordered by people who genuinely believed they were serving the best interests of their country. How does someone become evil? When babies are born, they are innocent. How does an innocent child grow up into an '**evil**' adult?

An evil act suggests a deliberate cruelty done in the full knowledge that it is wrong. Is there an evil force outside of people that causes bad things to happen? Or is there a supernatural **personal being**, a 'devil', which tempts people to do bad instead of good? Is evil a **psychological phenomenon**, something in people's minds that causes them to harm others or destroy life?



A Myra Hindley

Research activity

The Moors Murders

Using the internet and/or a library, find out about the murders committed by Ian Brady and Myra Hindley. They were described as 'evil' people. Can you find any reasons for what they did?

Myra Hindley repented of her crimes in prison and became a practising Catholic. Can people change from being evil to being good? <http://news.bbc.co.uk> gives a summary of the case in Myra Hindley's obituary.

Key terms

Evil: the opposite of good. A force or the personification of a negative power that is seen in many traditions as destructive and against God.

Personal being (nature of evil): the idea that evil is an evil spirit or devil rather than an impersonal force.

Psychological phenomenon: an idea about the nature of evil that it is something arising from the mind of a person.

Discussion activity

With a partner, in a group or as a whole class, discuss the following statement: 'Some people are born evil.' Do you agree? Give reasons for your answer, showing that you have thought about more than one point of view.

Summary

You should now understand that evil is something that causes great harm to others, and be able to explain how its existence raises questions about whether people are evil in themselves or whether there are only evil actions.



3.7 The nature of evil

Explanations for the nature of evil

There are three main explanations offered for the nature of evil. They were hinted at on page 63.

- 1 Some people think that evil is an **impersonal force** that draws people into doing wrong. It is almost like a magnet, pulling people towards actions that they know are harmful to themselves or to others. Sometimes evil seems very powerful. Alcoholics may describe their addiction as a force quite beyond their control; something that pulls them back into their habit, even when they know they should resist.

When terrible things happen that cause pain and suffering at random and which seem to make no sense, people often feel that there is an impersonal force at work that is beyond reason and the ability of human beings to influence or stop.

- 2 Other people would describe evil as a personal being or devil who causes people to sin. In Christianity, Judaism and Islam, Satan or Iblis is the source of all evil, the opposite of God who is all-good. The devil is seen as someone who tries to trick people into doing wrong. Just as God is thought of as personal, so too God's 'adversary' (the meaning of the word 'Satan') is thought to be a personal supernatural being – the enemy of humankind.

Most people today no longer believe in the devil as pictured in medieval paintings with horns, hooves and a tail, surrounded by fire, but many still believe that there is a personal being who can represent the struggle between good and evil in life.

- 3 Another explanation for evil comes from the study of human behaviour. Today, most people would say that evil is a psychological phenomenon, influenced by a person's upbringing or society in general, or perhaps the result of a damaged mind. Family circumstances vary, but the way parents bring up their children has a major influence on their behaviour. Young people can also be influenced by their friends and act under peer pressure, even when they know it is wrong. Society itself influences the way people act. The emphasis in the media on being rich, famous and beautiful can cause people to act in certain ways that are not always good for themselves or others.

In some cases, when horrible crimes are committed, we look for reasons in the person's background that explain, but do not excuse, their behaviour. Sometimes we think that a person who could murder a child could not possibly be sane. In some cases, this is true. They may be suffering from a mental illness or are mentally unstable and this causes them to act in a certain way.

Objectives

Investigate ideas about the nature of evil or where it may come from.

Key terms

Impersonal force (nature of evil): the idea that evil is a power outside of people that draws them to evil.

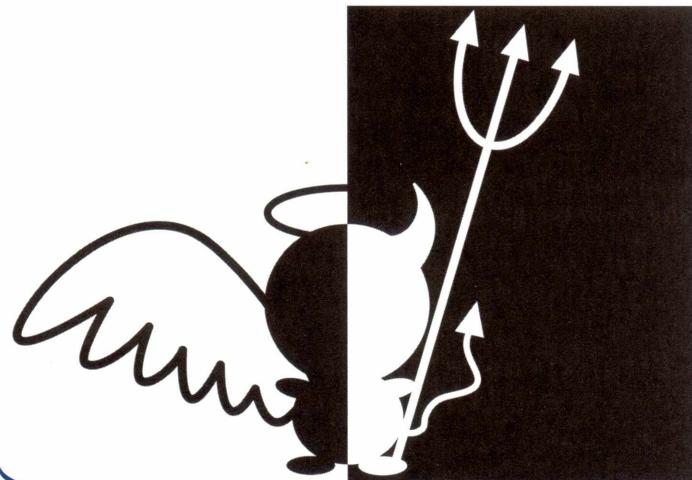
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Look back to page 63 to remind yourself of the meaning of personal being and psychological phenomenon.

■ Who is to blame?

Some people blame God; others blame human nature.

- Evil is God's fault. He created people and gave them free will, allowing them to choose to do bad rather than good. Therefore, it is God's fault that there is evil in the world.
- Evil is our fault, not God's. Selfishness, greed and a lack of respect are simply alternatives to selflessness, generosity and respect. When we give into the 'dark' side of our nature, we do evil. God does not force us, we make the choice ourselves. There is such a thing as man-made evil.



A The struggle between right and wrong

Activity

- 1 Answer the following questions, giving reasons for your answers.
 - a Do you think there is such a being as the devil?
 - b What influences the way you behave?
 - c Re-read the three explanations for evil. Sketch an image for each. Which do you think is the most convincing explanation?

Study tip

You need to be able to explain the **three** different ideas about the nature of evil.

Discussion activity



- 1 With a partner, in a group or as a whole class, discuss the following statements:
 - a 'Blaming a person's upbringing for their evil actions is just an excuse.'
 - b 'Evil is all God's fault.'
 - c 'Humans are not really free if God knows what we are going to do before we do it.'

Give reasons for your answers, showing that you have thought about more than one point of view.

Summary

You should now understand three ideas about the nature of evil, and be able to discuss the opposing arguments of where evil comes from.

3.8 The problem of evil

■ Why evil is a problem

Evil causes suffering, so it is a problem for everybody. However, like suffering, evil creates a particular problem for people who believe in God. Theists believe that God, who created the world and human beings, is all-good, all-loving, all-powerful and all-knowing. However, the existence of evil means that he cannot be all of these things. Evil raises a number of questions for believers.

Extension activity

St Thomas Aquinas (see page 11) admitted that the existence of evil was the best argument against the existence of God. Arrange a class debate on this topic. You might like to present it as a televised *Question Time* type programme. Make sure that you consider different viewpoints.

Objectives

Understand why evil is a problem for believers in God.

Consider the questions that evil raises for believers.

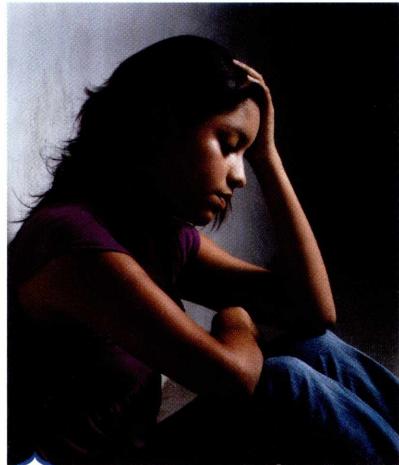
Evaluate religious responses to these questions.

■ Questions for believers

- If God is all-good, why did he create a world where evil is present?
- If God is all-loving, surely he would want his creations to be good too, in the same way that a loving parent would not want their child to behave badly.
- If God is all-powerful, why can he not stop someone before they do evil? If God can do anything, he could stop a murderer from killing, or a thief from stealing. At the very least, he could prevent circumstances that might lead to these crimes. Yet evil continues, so it seems that God cannot do anything to prevent evil. This makes some people say that God is weak.
- If God is all-knowing, he must know that people will sometimes choose evil over good. Why did God give people free will to make that choice?
- Some believers say that everything that happens is the will of God. Does God want evil to happen? This seems to contradict his goodness and care for people.

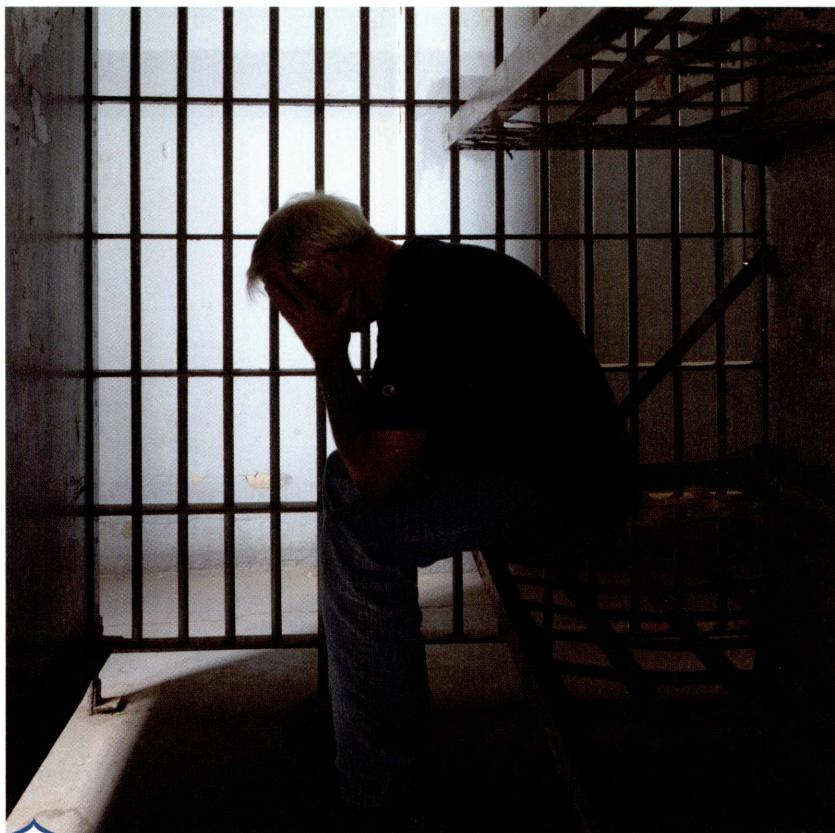
■ Answers

- Religious people would say that the very fact that God gave people the freedom to make their own decisions about right and wrong, shows his goodness and love. He did not create robots that were programmed to do good all the time but gave humans free will, despite the risk that they would use their freedom to hurt others. God is like a loving parent who allows his children to make mistakes and learn from experience.
- Some believers would say that, although God is all-powerful and can defeat evil, he chooses not to use that power to force people to use their freedom wisely. If he interfered every time someone was about to commit an evil act, he would be controlling people and they would not be free.



A Sometimes people struggle to reconcile belief in God with evil in the world

- Other believers do not think that everything that happens is God's will. This would mean that people were not really free to make their own choices because everything would be fixed or determined in advance. God does not want evil to happen, but, unfortunately, people go against his will.



B Why does God allow evil?

Study tip

You need to be able to explain why evil is a problem for theists, and how religious people answer the questions it raises about the existence of a loving, powerful God.

Activities

- Why is evil a problem for people who believe in God? Explain your opinion.
- Are the answers given above convincing? Explain your opinion.

Discussion activity

- With a partner, in a group or as a whole class, discuss the following statements:
 - 'If God allows people freedom, he cannot be all-powerful.'
 - 'If there was no evil, there would be no goodness.'

Give reasons for your answers, showing that you have thought about more than one point of view.

Summary

You should now be able to discuss how evil raises questions for believers about God's love and power, and how they base their response on human freedom of choice.

3.9 Religious explanations for evil

Different perspectives

Christians, Jews and Muslims share the view that God/Allah gave people free will to choose evil or good. Human beings wilfully misuse God's gift of freedom, so evil is their fault, not God's.

Buddhists, Hindus and Sikhs see the source of evil as ignorance, a wrong understanding of the way things really are. The law of karma/kamma requires people to think about their own responsibility for evil, and whether their actions now, or in a previous life, contributed to its cause.

Buddhism

Buddhists believe that evil is caused by people's selfish desires or craving. The root causes of evil are the three 'poisons' of greed, hatred and ignorance. In order to overcome these three poisons, Buddhists try to practise generosity, loving kindness and right understanding or wisdom.

Christianity

Christians believe that everything God made was perfect. Evil came into the world through Adam and Eve's disobedience, sometimes called original sin. When Satan tempted them to eat from the forbidden 'tree of knowledge of good and evil', they realised that they had freedom to choose between right and wrong and would now be responsible for their own actions. When people rebel against God's laws, evil results. People need salvation (rescuing) from sin. Christians believe that Jesus was the 'second Adam' who restored people's broken relationship with God.

Hinduism

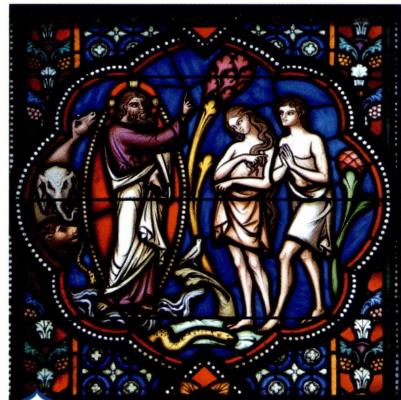
Hindus believe that evil is part of the cycle of birth, death and rebirth. Hindu scriptures tell stories of gods fighting the forces of evil in the world. The story of Rama and Sita, which Hindus remember at Divali, is one such story in which the power of good triumphs over the power of evil. God is like the sun – all light and no darkness – so God is not the source of evil. Just as people cast a shadow when they turn away from the sun, so evil is a sort of absence of God that takes hold when people turn their backs on him. The law of karma means that people can make up for evil actions in this or a previous life by living a good and dutiful life.

Islam

Muslims believe that Allah created a perfect world, including some beings called Jinn who, like humans, had free will. A Jinn called Iblis refused to bow down to Adam as Allah had commanded. Iblis (renamed Shaytan, 'the refuser') tempted Adam and Hawa (Eve) to disobey Allah. Shaytan, the source of evil, still tries to turn people away from Allah. On the Day of Judgement, evil-doers will be called to account and punished. Allah is merciful and compassionate, so those who truly repent will be forgiven. Muslims do not believe in original

Objectives

To consider religious explanations for the origins of evil.



A Adam and Eve disobeyed God

sin. Everyone starts life with a clean slate, but must submit to the will of Allah and resist temptation. Allah's plan for humans means nothing can happen unless he wills it. Allah gives people free will, but knows the outcome of their choices.

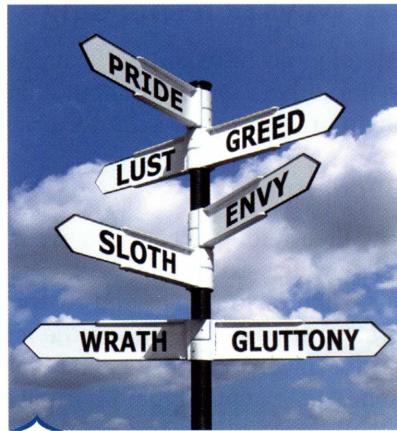
Judaism

Jews believe that God created everything, including evil. God is all-powerful, so evil must be under his control. In the Bible, Satan is created and controlled by God, but also fights against God. Satan represents the tendency people have to stray from the path of righteousness and faith. God is all-loving, so he must have created evil for a good purpose, to allow people freedom to have real choices. God wants people to act justly, be merciful, and walk humbly with God, but he does not force them. People can freely choose to reject God, but if everyone followed God's laws, evil would have no power.

Beliefs and teachings

He has showed you, O man, what is good.
And what does the LORD require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy
and to walk humbly with your God.

Micah 6:8



B People can choose to overcome these evils

Sikhism

Sikhs believe that God created humankind and a spark of his divine presence is in everyone, so they should be respected. Humans are not evil by nature, but they are ignorant and self-centred. They forget to see God in others. This stops them from realising the truth and doing good. God is the source of everything, both good and evil. People are free to choose between good and evil. Sikhs talk about five evils: anger; attachment; greed; lust; and pride. It is up to each person to overcome these.

Activities

- 1 Explain the teaching of **one** religion about the reasons for evil.
- 2 Do you find the explanations for evil convincing? Give your reasons.

Discussion activity

With a partner, in a group or as a whole class, discuss the following statement: 'Evil is the absence of God.' Do you agree? Give reasons for your answer, showing that you have thought about more than one point of view.

Summary

You should now be able to discuss different religious explanations for the origins of evil.

Study tip

You need to be able to describe the way in which at least **one** religion explains the origins of evil in the world.

3.10 Religious responses to evil

Ways of responding

All religions have codes of conduct or rules for living to avoid doing evil to others. But how should believers respond when evil is done to them or when great evils occur in the world or in society?

Buddhism

The Eightfold Path contains five moral precepts that forbid: harming living things (killing); stealing; lying; misusing the senses (misusing sex); and taking drugs and alcohol, which cloud the mind. Buddhists practise meditation to train the mind to avoid evil thoughts. Evil actions have evil consequences, so retaliation is avoided. Hatred is never appeased by hatred; hatred is appeased by love (Dhammapada 5).

Christianity

Jesus commanded Christians to love God and their neighbour. He taught people to love their enemies and, when evil is done to them, to 'turn the other cheek'. The Lord's Prayer says that people must forgive others so that God can forgive them.

Beliefs and teachings

Forgive us our sins,
for we also forgive everyone who sins against us,
And lead us not into temptation.

Luke 11:4

Many Christians worked tirelessly against the great evil of racial discrimination in the USA. Martin Luther King Jr, a Christian minister, won rights for black people through peaceful, non-violent protest.

Hinduism

Hindus meditate and practise yoga to gain control of their bodies and minds, to overcome selfishness, greed and anger and to seek union with God. They respect life and do not harm living things. Most Hindus are vegetarians. Goodness to others gains good karma. When facing evil, many Hindus are inspired by Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948), who used non-violent protest to help India gain independence from British rule.

Islam

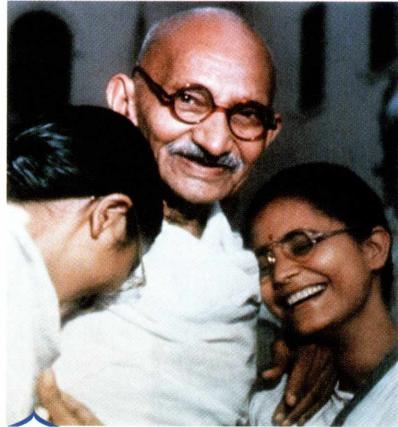
Muslims live by the Five Pillars: faith in Allah and his prophet Muhammad; prayer; almsgiving; fasting; and pilgrimage to Makkah. Allah will judge them on Judgement Day, so Muslims try to live in complete submission to his will and in peace with others. The Qur'an teaches Muslims to stand up for justice and what is right. Muhammad Ali was stripped of his boxing title and was prepared to face jail in the USA for his belief that the Vietnam War was evil.

Objectives

Consider how religious believers should, and do, respond in the face of evil.



A Buddhist monks protesting against the Vietnam War in the 1960s



B Mahatma Gandhi

Judaism

Jews believe that God has made a covenant (agreement) with them to protect and save them if they keep his laws and live holy lives. Evil can be overcome by complete obedience to God. Evil-doers can expect punishment. Just as a father disciplines his son, so God disciplines humans.

The great evil of the Holocaust was a huge test of Jewish faith in God. Although some have lost their faith, many Jews campaign for human rights and record survivors' stories to try to prevent future atrocities.

Beliefs and teachings

Know then in your heart that as a man disciplines his son, so the LORD your God disciplines you.

Deuteronomy 8:5

Children in the Holocaust

Over 1.5 million children died in the Holocaust. The Nazis wanted to create a racially pure society. Jewish children were first expelled from German schools and banned from parks or swimming baths. Then, disabled children, considered 'useless eaters', were taken from their parents for a supposed 'cure', but were secretly killed. Many children died from starvation and disease in the ghettos. Mothers and children were often the first to be gassed at concentration camps because they were not strong enough to be 'selected' for slave labour.

Case study

Sikhism

The Gurus taught Sikhs to practise selfless service and put God at the centre of their lives. The Rahit Maryada, a code of conduct for a virtuous life, emphasises prayer, meditation, a disciplined life, and strong family and community values. Sikhs try to practise five virtues of self-control, truth, patience, perfect faith and compassion. Guru Nanak opposed evils of his day, for example the belief that some people were 'untouchable' (so low in status that they should be avoided) and the custom of a wife throwing herself on her husband's funeral pyre (sati).

Activities

- 1 Explain how believers in **one** religion have responded to injustice.
- 2 Why might an event like the Holocaust challenge someone's faith in God?

Discussion activity

With a partner, in a group or as a whole class, discuss the following statement: 'It is impossible to respond to evil with love.' Do you agree? Give reasons for your answer, showing that you have thought about more than one point of view.

Study tip

You need to be able to explain how religious people *should* respond to evil, and also how they *have responded* to evil in a particular example.

Summary

You should now be able to explain how religious people should respond to evil by trying to overcome it in their own lives and in society, and how many have responded by protesting against evil actions in society.

Research activity

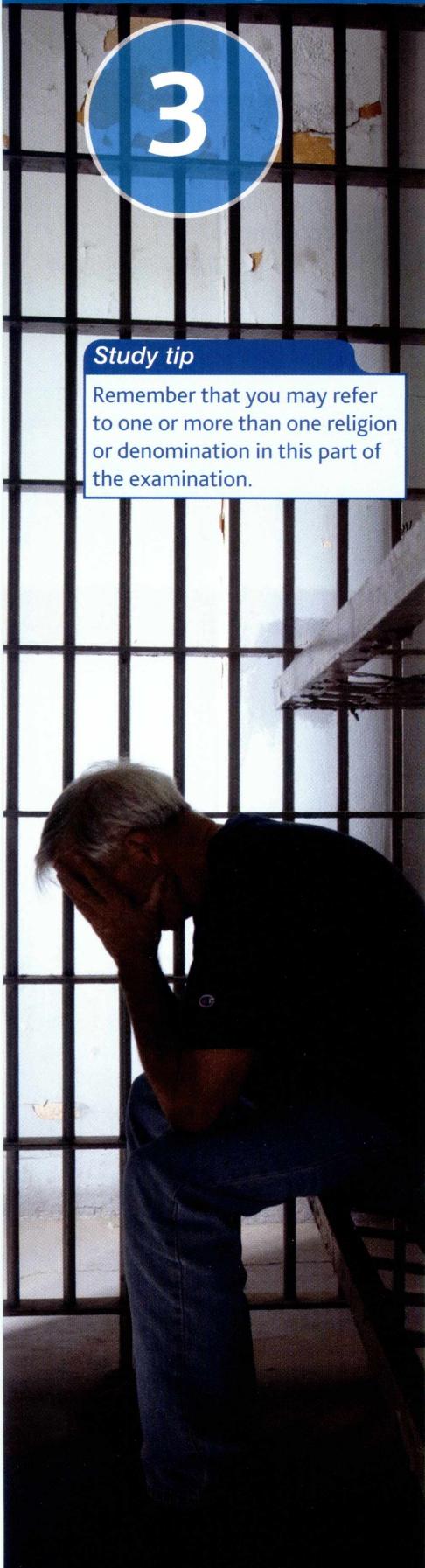
One religion's response to a particular evil

Using the internet and/or a library, find out how religious believers from **one** religion have responded to a particular evil.

3

Study tip

Remember that you may refer to one or more than one religion or denomination in this part of the examination.



The problems of evil and suffering – summary

For the examination you should now be able to:

- ✓ explain why evil and suffering are problems for people who believe in God
- ✓ outline the questions that evil and suffering raise for theists
- ✓ explain the differences between natural and man-made suffering
- ✓ discuss whether or not suffering is unjust or has a purpose
- ✓ discuss what evil is and where it comes from
- ✓ outline religious explanations for evil and responses to it
- ✓ explain how religious believers resolve the problems of evil and suffering
- ✓ outline how religious believers respond to evil and suffering.

Sample answer

- 1 Write an answer to the following examination question:
'All suffering has a purpose.' Do you agree? Give reasons for your answer, showing that you have thought about more than one point of view. Refer to religious arguments in your answer.
(6 marks)

- 2 Read the following sample answer:

I agree that suffering has a purpose. If people did not feel pain, they would not realise they were ill. Sometimes suffering makes a person stronger because they have come through a bad period in their lives with courage and determination. On the other hand, some suffering does not seem to have a purpose. Some suffering is totally pointless like the children in China who died in the earthquake.

- 3 With a partner, discuss the sample answer. Do you think that there are other things that the student could have included in the answer?
- 4 What mark would you give this answer out of 6? (Look at the mark scheme in the Introduction on page 7 (AO2) before you attempt this.) What are the reasons for the mark you have given?

Practice questions

- 1 Look at the photograph and answer the following questions.



- (a) Explain briefly, giving an example, what is meant by 'evil'? (2 marks)
- (b) 'Evil is caused by the devil.' What do you think? Explain your opinion. (3 marks)
- (c) Explain what problems are caused for religious believers by the existence of suffering. (4 marks)
- (d) Explain briefly some of the ways that religious believers have tried to explain why God allows suffering to happen. (3 marks)
- (e) 'Evil proves that there is no God.' Do you agree? Give reasons for your answer, showing that you have thought about more than one point of view. Refer to religious arguments in your answer. (6 marks)

Study tip

Evaluation questions ask you to 'give reasons for your answer, showing that you have thought about more than one point of view'. You must show that you understand why some people will disagree with your opinions.