A Christian Understanding of Suffering and its Critique in the Writings of Albert Camus

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Introduction

Human suffering is one of the most acute and difficult human problems. Everyone at one point or another in his or her life will have to face and struggle with it. It is a problem not only for those who believe in God but also for those who do not. It may be considered to be one of the most universal human problems. For some of those who believe in God, suffering becomes the stumbling block in their spiritual journey. Some reject God because of the physical or spiritual pain that they experience. Others, however, use it as a means of sanctification and purification. The problem of suffering has never been successfully and effectively solved. Centuries and generations have passed and millions of books have been written but it seems that one has to start from the beginning over and over again. Philosophers and thinkers have tried to solve this problem as well as all mainline religions.

The aim of this thesis is to present a struggle with the question of suffering of one of the most important intellectuals of the twentieth century. Albert Camus (1912-1960) wrestled with important and difficult human problems of which suffering was one of the most acute. He considered himself to be an agnostic and challenged Christianity and its response to the problem of suffering. Furthermore, this work presents my own struggle with Albert Camus and the question of suffering as well. Camus is this kind of writer that makes us feel uncomfortable and challenges some of our assumptions that we may have acquired about ourselves, others and God. In today’s pluralistic society, Christians should be familiar with the questions and objections that the secular world has about Christianity. They should be willing to dialogue with contemporary culture and to understand the hopes and pains, joys and sorrow of all people. I hope that my dialogue with Albert Camus will add something to this great enterprise.
Chapter 1

Human Suffering – A Serious Theological Problem

The nature of human beings is to wonder and marvel about their own existence, ultimate destiny and sense of their lives. They discover in themselves a deep gap between their desire of immortality and the inevitable reality of suffering and death.\(^1\) Human beings are the only creatures who do not accept their condition, and the only beings that realize that they have to die. Moreover, in the experience of suffering they recognize their own limitations and wonder what has caused it. The question of the existence of God is thus born.\(^2\) Human beings are the only creatures that try to understand the mystery of death and ask questions about their own limitations. From the very beginning the experience of suffering and evil impelled them to search for its reasonable explanation. Throughout the centuries philosophers, poets, theologians and thinkers have tried to solve and understand the problem of human suffering. Why do people need to suffer? What is the ultimate cause of human suffering?

The problem of suffering is not only a religious problem; it is also a human problem. There is no one who would not have been bothered by the question of suffering at some point of his or her life. It is one of the most complex and difficult human problems. Looking at the problem of suffering from the believer’s perspective makes it even more difficult. Working as a hospital chaplain in Houston, Texas, many times I was asked the same question, namely, why does the good God let me suffer? Peter Kreeft says that the problem of suffering is not a problem in itself but that it becomes a problem when God comes into play (Making 19). The truth is, however, that the problem of suffering pertains to the believer and non-believer alike. For the unbeliever, the existence of suffering “stands as a major obstacle of religious commitment, whilst for the former it sets up an acute internal tension to disturb his faith and to lay upon it a perpetual burden of doubt” (Hick 3). Hans Küng says that even though in theory it may seem that it is easier for an atheist to deal with the problem of suffering, the reality proves the opposite to be true. To understand Auschwitz, (is it even possible?), with its inconceivable and irrational torture and suffering, believer and unbeliever alike deal with an unsolvable issue (123). Truly noteworthy is that even people who assert to be indifferent in regard to this problem become preoccupied with it when they themselves experience suffering.

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1 Chantal Millon-Delson says that the reason for the existence of religion is the tragic reality of death in confrontation with the desire of immortality. For more cf. Chantal Millon-Delson. “Bóg na wygnaniu.” Znak 10 (October 2001) : 9-24

2 Not only has the question of the existence of God but also a problem of human freedom arisen. As C. S. Lewis put it, “From the moment a creature becomes aware of God and of itself as self, the terrible alternative of choosing God or self for the centre is opened to it” (Problem 70).
For a Christian believer the problem of suffering is especially acute and difficult. While the Old Testament speaks about suffering in connection with human sin, the God of the New Testament is the God who is Love (1 John 4:8). In the First letter of Saint John, in the middle of the experience of evil and sin, there arises absolute trust in God and in others. God seems to be bigger and more powerful than human sin and the darkness of the world, and therefore God is love (Bielawski 51). Thus, for a Christian, it is especially difficult to reconcile the existence of a God who is infinite love with the existence of suffering and evil in the world. For some it may even seem to be an unsolvable conundrum. John Paul II writes that because God created us free, we can judge God. The history of salvation is a continuous judgment of God by humanity (Jan Paweł II, Przekroczyć 62). Gifted with freedom, humans are capable of rejecting God and blaming him for all evils that happen in the world. In consequence, a Christian feels that the existence of suffering must have some kind of rational explanation, and that it must be one way or another reconciled with the existence of a loving God. How is it, a Christian may ask, that God who is infinite love, allows and tolerates suffering? Hence, from the perspective of a Christian, the problem of human suffering may be formulated like this: if God is all good, loving, all powerful and omnipotent, why does he not alleviate human sufferings? How is it that a good God who is a supreme being keeps silence in the face of incredible suffering and pain? The problem becomes even more difficult when one deals with the suffering of the innocent, especially children.

Nobody has to be convinced of the existence of a powerful force of evil in the world. One does not have to earn a Masters Degree or Ph.D. in theology to look at the world and discover that there is something desperately wrong. It is simply enough to read newspapers and watch TV to be blown over with the information about assaults, murders, rapes, human trafficking, slavery, wars and so on. The twentieth century, that was supposed to end all wars, witnessed the outpouring of evil and suffering that human history had never seen before. Kolyma and Auschwitz, the killing fields of Cambodia and the Russian Revolution, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, My Lai and Stalin’s reign, will all be remembered as the terrible sins of the depravation and fall of the human spirit. In the twentieth century humanity not only lost faith in itself, but also started seriously questioning faith in a good God. After the experience of World War II, for many it seemed impossible to still trust and believe in God. If before Christianity was charged with excessive pessimism, now it is charged with excessive confidence in the goodness of the human person. After Auschwitz, one can seriously doubt, not only the truth about the intrinsic goodness of the human person, but also of a God who let it happen. People started questioning the existence of a God who looked from the heavens while millions of people, young and

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old, men and women, were tortured, gassed, humiliated and crushed. Some said that faith after Auschwitz is impossible. Hence, the experience of the suffering of the innocent can lead to the denial of the existence of God, which can lead to atheism. It can also lead to the challenge of the goodness of God. Evil is the scandal of the world. This scandal of evil and suffering causes one to ask the fundamental question about the cause and the purpose of suffering in the world.

Throughout the centuries of human thought, there have been numerous attempts to solve the problem of evil. Some of these attempts were philosophical and sophisticated, while others simple and undemanding. Greek and Roman philosophy have tried to solve the problem of evil and suffering. Epicurus said that God is either evil or powerless. Either God wants to destroy evil, but he simply cannot, or he can and does not want to destroy it. Or, he simply is incapable of destroying evil and does not want to do this. If he wanted to but he couldn’t – he would have been powerless. But this stands in opposition to his nature. If he could but did not want to – he would have been evil. This also is against his nature. If, at the same time, he could not destroy evil and he simply did not want to do this – he would have been at the same time evil and powerless. But this means that he wouldn’t be God anymore. Finally, if God is God and can destroy all evil, and wants to do this – why do we have evil in this world? This is the unsolvable problem of Theodicy (Le Guillou 56).

Peter Kreeft in his Making Sense Out of Suffering outlines ten, as he call them, “easy answers” for the problem of suffering. The first three deny God’s reality. These are atheism (the denial of the existence of God), demythologism (religion and God are myths and tales that cannot teach us anything about real life), and psychologism (the rejection of the reality of evil and acceptance of a “subjective god”). The next three propositions deny God’s power and these are polytheism (because there are many gods, god is not all-powerful and omnipotent and therefore he cannot alleviate suffering), scientism (the only god is nature and how nature develops), dualism (there are two gods: a good god and an evil god). The next group of propositions denies God’s goodness. These are satanism (worship of evil), pantheism (God is everything – denial of God’s transcendence), and deism (God created the world and left it for itself). Finally the last


5 The term theodicy comes from the Greek θεος (god) and δίκη (the justice of God) and was first used by Gottfried Leibniz in 1710 in his influential book, Theodicy Essay on the Benevolence of God, the Free will of man, and the Origin of Evil. "The classical expression of the problem of theodicy appears in Western philosophy as a dilemma posed to theistic belief by evil. David Hume in his, Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion, presented the problem: "Is [God] willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and
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proposition is idealism and it denies that evil actually exist (Kreeft, Making 27-45). All of the above answers present a challenge for Christian theology. Some of them may be abolished easier than the others. This thesis’ focus is on the first group of objections; those which deny God’s reality, especially atheism that deny God’s existence. By atheism is understood the claim that denies the existence of any sort of divine being. There may be many reasons and causes of atheism. I claim, nonetheless, that atheism caused by the profound experience of suffering, especially of the innocent, presents a serious problem for Christian theology. “And it is well known that concerning this question there not only arise many frustrations and conflicts in the relation of man with God, but it also happens that people reach the point of actually denying God” (John Paul II, Salvifici Doloris no.9).

The experience of the absurdity of reality, where nothing is understandable, and where fear of death and pain reign, moved many to reject and deny the existence of God. Marcel Neusch is correct when he claims that atheism (like theism) is not just a matter of intellectual speculation but involves essentially a personal choice that engages the entire person. Because it contains an emotional component it cannot be proven, but at the same time it is difficult to refute it. And if the believer cannot convince the atheist, because he or she cannot rationally and reasonably explain the problem of suffering, so neither can the atheist convince the believer who trusts that, even though there is suffering and pain, there is also a God who helps the believer, not so much to understand and comprehend it but rather to bear it (Neusch 279).

The attempt in this thesis will be to prove that the Christian response to human suffering is rational against some of its critiques who claim that Christianity naively tries to reconcile the existence of suffering with a good, loving and omnipotent God. But it is sobering to remember that a Christian response to the problem of suffering is not limited to words and intellectual theories. On the contrary, Christianity moves into the existential realm and claims that God has been actively involved in human history; even more, that God became man and suffered for us. Christianity claims that to search only for rational and abstract explanations

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2 The two fundamental truths of Christianity, namely that God is a Trinity and that the Son of God became man and dwelt among us, has been severely challenged by contemporary thought. It seems to me that it is easier for some to completely deny the reality of the Incarnation, than to accept that the Eternal Son of God shared our condition and suffered for us. For more on that subject cf. James V. Schall’s article, “Is Christianity a Comfortable Religion?” in Homiletic and Pastoral Review 8 (2006) : 8-14.
of suffering would be a mistake. In contrast, the believer looks at the event of the cross and there searches for an answer. A Christian does not believe that God looks down on humanity from the heavens and does not do anything at all to alleviate suffering. Rather, he looks at the cross and attests that God has been actively involved in the world and has been with humanity all along. One cannot forget, attests John Paul II, that God, being omnipotent is also wise, but first and foremost God is love. God who is love tries to reconcile himself with human history. God is Emmanuel, God-with-us, who shares in human life and suffering (Jan Paweł II, Przekroczyć 63).

Now this thesis will look at some of the famous figures in human thought and literature who, in their writings, attempted to show that atheism and a rejection of God can be justifiable and rational if one looks at the abundance of human suffering in the world, particularly the innocent. Fiodor Dostoyevsky (1821-1881) is known to be a prophet of the twentieth century, because in his writings he predicted all the evils that happened in the bloodiest century in human history. Furthermore, Dostoyevsky was the master of the human soul, who was able to show that the human being is capable of anything: of good but also of dreadful evil. He examined the diseases of the human soul and showed that unbelief and atheism are possible and justifiable because Christianity does not answer the question of the suffering of the innocent. Polish laureate of the Nobel Prize in literature, Czesław Miłosz, says that Dostoyevsky criticized Christianity, and especially Catholicism, for its rationalization of the faith. This rationalization of the faith leads eventually to the rejection of God and atheism (Miłosz 23).

Dostoyevsky was convinced of the radical power of evil in the world. According to him, evil is not simply the lack of good. In Crime and Punishment, evil is presented as having its roots in the depths of the human soul. The main character, Raskolnikov, considers himself to be “a decent man” and divides society between “two kinds of persons, the harmless drudges who will do nothing in life except replace themselves and those gifted few who will contribute something to the world” (Kelly 165). Of course, Raskolnikov imagined himself to be in the former group. After he kills an old, rich lady and her sick daughter, and a long process of reflection with the help of Sonia, he discovers the truth about himself, that he is not “a decent man” but rather a murderer who is capable of killing innocent people. Eventually, Raskolnikov is able to repent and realize that what he had done was evil. Dostoyevsky tells us that human beings are irrational, problematic, and full of contradictions. Crime and Punishment presents a thesis that evil has its roots in the human heart, and is only possible because of human freedom. Thus, according to Dostoyevsky, it is the individual who is
responsible for evil because of free will. As was seen above, the rejection of God and moral values spreads evil and suffering in the world. In Brothers Karamazov, Dostoyevsky undertakes and examines important questions about human freedom in regard to God and suffering in the world. Ivan Karamazov tries to justify his atheism and rejection of God because, “if all must suffer to pay for the eternal harmony, what have children to do with it?” (Kreeft, Making 9). While Ivan can understand the sufferings of adults who are capable of sinning and evil, he cannot comprehend why God would let the innocent children suffer.

The poor child of five was subjected to every possible torture by those cultivated parents. They beat her, trashed her, kicked her for no reason till her body was one bruise… They smeared her face and filled her mouth with excrement. And it was her mother, her mother did this. And that mother could sleep, hearing the poor child’s groans! Can you understand why a little creature who can’t even understand what’s done to her should beat her little aching heart with her tiny fist in the dark and weep her meek, unresentful tears to her dear, kind God to protect her?... Do you understand why this infamy must be and is permitted? (Kreeft, Making 8)

According to Ivan, God is responsible for the sufferings of the innocent by not alleviating their sufferings. He understands suffering to be a punishment for sinners and evildoers and clearly children are exempt from that category. Therefore, he decides that he is not going to believe in God, who in his eternal plan for this world, found a place for the suffering of the innocent.

I understand solidarity in sin among men. I understand solidarity in retribution too; but there can be no such solidarity with children. And if it is really true that they must share responsibility for all their father’s crimes, such a truth is not of this world and beyond my comprehension. And so I hasten to give back my entrance ticket, and if I am an honest man I am bound to give it back as soon as possible. And that I am doing. It’s not God that I don’t accept; only I respectfully return my ticket. (Kreeft, Making 8)

Ivan accepts practical atheism. He does not reject the existence of God, but simply says that he does not want to have anything to do with him. Instead, he wants to make sense of a world where God is not present. For him, the commandment to love all people is more important than the commandment to love God, as if these commandments are contradictory. Ivan’s understanding of Christian positions on the suffering of the innocent

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is apparently inaccurate and erroneous. Christianity does claim that in some instances suffering may be the effect of wrongly used human freedom and sin. But to say that all suffering, including the suffering of the innocent, is simply a punishment for sin, would be a simplification and trivialization of the message of Christianity. In any case, if one accepts the presumptions of Ivan, the rejection of God is the only possible and rational answer. Working in the hospital and being asked the question, “what have I done that deserves so much suffering?”, Ivan and his response to that question came to mind. However, there is a problem with this question; simply, from the perspective of Christian theology, the question is wrong. There can be only one answer for Ivan’s question, “What has the little girl done to deserve such torture and humiliation?” She has not done anything and therefore she does not deserve to suffer. This answer, however, does not resolve the problem.

Writing in the 1930s, Leslie Dixon Weatherhead, who was an English Christian theologian, said that far too many Christians, as soon as they experience suffering, look introspectively for a sin that they might have committed for which they are being punished now (106). Nevertheless, I am inclined to say, also from my personal experience, that many people who attend Catholic churches today share the same type of theology. This way of thinking must be challenged because to understand suffering as nothing more than punishment for sin is inaccurate from a Christian point of view. Moreover, as I am trying to prove, this kind of quasi-theology provides the picture of a God who is not a loving and merciful Father, but rather an accountant who only waits to send on humans suffering and pain as the punishment for sin. This God is not the God of Jesus Christ but a god of Jean-Paul Sartre. This kind of God is not lovable and, without doubt, he is not the Christian God, but rather his caricature. As we shall see later in our reflections, the same problem appears in the writings of Albert Camus.

Looking at another example: Elie Wiesel12 (born in 1928), winner of the Nobel Peace prize in 1986, saw during his childhood experiences the horror of the Nazi death camp and experienced his father suffer and die. As a teenager, he experienced and witnessed suffering, humiliation and death. Because of these events,
his faith in God was severely tested. One night in Auschwitz, hearing how his father prayed and blessed the Lord’s name, young Elie protested.

For the first time, I felt revolt rise up in me. Why should I bless His name? The Eternal, Lord of the Universe, the All-Powerful and Terrible, was silent. What had I to thank Him for? (31)

Again and again, one has to face the same question, namely, “Where is God when we suffer?” Being raised in a religious family, Wiesel was taught about the loving and powerful God who so many times had helped his chosen people. He studied about God who freed his people from slavery in Egypt and led them through the desert to the Promised Land. He was taught that God has been so close to his people, but to Elie Wiesel He seemed to be so far away.

Never shall I forget that first night in the camp… Never shall I forget that smoke. Never shall I forget the little faces of the children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky. Never shall I forget those flames that consumed my faith forever… Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. Never. (32)

The faith of a teenage boy in a good and all-powerful God did not survive the confrontation with the reality of the concentration camp where little children, men and women were being slaughtered and burned every single day. Young Wiesel was taught that in order to survive the concentration camp, he must have hope and must not despair. However, he did not find the strength in faith in God but rather in questioning his justice and goodness. He was able to find his strength not in God but rather in rebellion against him. He was the accuser and God was the accused. He no longer accepted God’s silence. Observing how others prayed, he could not understand how it was even possible to invoke the name of God.

But these men here, whom You have betrayed, whom You have allowed to be tortured, butchered, gassed, burned, what do they do? They pray before you! They praise Your name! (Wiesel 64)

Wiesel did not want to accept that all the sufferings that they had to endure were simply “God’s will”, as many others thought. If it indeed was God’s will, Wiesel thought, God must be a monster then. I was faced myself with the similar problem seeing some people “helping” suffering patients by saying that their suffering is “God’s will”. And I heard some patients answering, “If that’s God’s will than I do not have anything to do with that God”.

I have not read anything that would express more profoundly the scandal of evil and suffering than the letter of Josel Rakower. This letter is a powerful example of a faith that is ruthlessly challenged, but nevertheless remains strong. Josel Rakower was one of the Polish Jews who found his death in the Warsaw
ghetto during the uprising in 1943. Before his death, he wrote his testament on a piece of paper. He put it in a bottle and that’s how this shocking document was saved.

If somebody finds these pages and reads them, maybe he will understand the feelings of a Jew, one of the millions, who died abandoned by God, in whom he had strongly believed (...) The world is going through a terrible time now – time, in which God has turned his face away from people who pray to him. God has turned his face away from the world. This is why people are left with their wickedness. Therefore I think that it is natural that when the world is ruled by human wickedness, the first victims must be those, who are pure and holy. It does not mean though that a pious Jew accepts his destiny and says: “God is right, his judgments are true.” To say that we deserve these sufferings would mean to undermine not only our own dignity but that of God’s too. If this is true I am not expecting any miracles and I am not begging God to have mercy on me. May he ignore me, as he ignored million others of his people. I am not an exception and do not expect that God will treat me differently. I will not try to save my life and will not leave this place.

I believe in the God of Israel even though he had done everything to stop my belief in him. I believe in his law, even though I regard his deeds as unlawful. My relation to him is no longer as a servant to his master but as a student to his teacher. I bow down before his majesty but I will not kiss the rod with which he beats me (...).

You say that we have sinned. Of course, we have sinned. And I can understand that we have to be punished for our sins. But I want you to tell me, if the world knows such a sin which would demand such a terrible punishment? I tell you this because I believe in you, I believe in you more than ever.

I cannot praise you for the suffering that you allow. I am dying in peace, but unfulfilled; beaten, but not in despair; believing, but not praying; in love with God, but not repeating blindly “Amen! Amen!” I have followed him, even though he pushed me away; I have fulfilled his commandments, even though he beat me for that; I have loved him, I do love him, even though he humiliated me, harassed me and put me to death. You can beat me, take away from me all that is precious in this world, you can put me to death – I will still believe in you. I will love you forever – in spite of you!¹³

The example of Josel Rakower, unlike Ivan Karamazov, proves that faith in God can be relentlessly challenged, but it does not have to vanish completely. Atheism is not the only possible response to the experience of evil and suffering. For Albert Camus however, the experience of the suffering of the innocent may have only one result: the rejection of God in the name of justice. He challenges a Christian understanding of suffering, but it shall be seen that his critique pertains to what he thought Christianity was.

Chapter 2
Camus’ Challenge of Christianity

Albert Camus, whose books touched on a whole range of political, social, moral and religious issues, continues to be one of the most influential writers of modern literature. He remains “a moral conscience” for the modern-day world ripped apart by violence and uncertainty. When the Swedish Academy awarded him the Nobel Prize for Literature, it congratulated him “for his important literary work which illuminates, with penetrating purposiveness, the problems of the human conscience in the contemporary world” (Maquet 198-199). Camus would certainly agree with the Polish philosopher Leszek Kolakowski who claims that the world in which we live today is a world of people driven out, misplaced and unsure of anything anymore, who continue to look for the lost, spiritual or physical home (Waldenfels, 78). The life of Camus itself proved it to be true. Born in Algeria, he remained all his life a Mediterranean fascinated with physical contact with nature, sea and the sun. Soon he realized, however, that the world in which he lived was full of injustice and hatred. Faced with the terrorisms of the twentieth century, Camus lost his original “innocence” and contact with the Mediterranean culture. He felt nostalgia for it all his life. Even though he would not call himself a philosopher, he struggled with many problems and issues that were strictly philosophical, such as: the problem of evil, the nature of totalitarianism, human freedom, the existence of God and most importantly, the very sense of human existence.

14 J. Onimus writes in Albert Camus and Christianity: “At the age of seventeen, in his “philosophy year”, the young Camus discovered the corroded face which the young Algérois’ adolescent ingenuousness had hidden from him until then. Philosophical reflection, the experience of illness, the spectacle of injustice in a colonial land made him aware of suffering, of old age, of social hypocrisy, and of death; henceforth the world would have for him two faces: the “right” side and the “wrong” (18-19).
The aim in this work is not a topical study of Albert Camus’ writings, but rather careful examination of his critique of Christianity.\textsuperscript{15} A central thesis of this chapter may be indicated by the following quotation from Thomas Merton who calls Camus “a typical ‘post-Christian’ thinker in the sense that he combines an obscure sense of certain Christian values – the lucidity and solidarity of men in their struggle against evil – with an accusatory, satirical analysis of the Christian establishment and of the faithful” (36). It is difficult to say if Camus was an atheist or an agnostic.\textsuperscript{16} For sure, however, his critique of Christianity was in no way as radical as Jean-Paul Sartre or André Malraux. Some even consider him to be a sympathizer of the Christian faith or even an inquirer. There was also speculation that if he had not been killed in a tragic car accident on the verge of his writing career in 1960, he would have embraced Christianity. That well may be, but we do not want to go into this kind of speculation here. Let us, instead, focus on some of Camus’ writings in which he critiques and challenges Christianity, especially its understanding of human suffering.

With this plan in mind, one would be inclined to move directly to The Plague, in which Camus specifically deals with the question that is of interest here. However, for the benefit of the reader, it is necessary to begin with a quick summary of some of the earlier writings of Camus, in which he indirectly touches on the issue. Camus himself attested that all of his works should be read together because they are closely related to one another, and consequently, could not be easily understood in separation (Thody 5). In 1941 Camus published his first well known novel, The Stranger, which won him international acclaim. Even though the book may be interpreted on many different levels, it is understood as a defense of the “philosophy of the absurd” and atheism, as well as a critique of society and organized religion.\textsuperscript{17}

The main character, Meursault, refuses to participate in corrupted society and organized religion that is an integral part of that society. He decides to live in a world of the absurd in which only death is certain and God is not present. He lives on a surface and never has time for any reflection and analysis. Nothing is really

\textsuperscript{15} I share the view of James W. Woelfel who attests that “Camus continues to speak compellingly to every new generation of students who read him because he explores the fundamental issues of morality and the meaning of life as one who profoundly experiences and articulates the pathos of modern existence” (8-9). Christians can learn a great deal from Camus as well.

\textsuperscript{16} Some call the dimension of Camus’ outlook “naturally religious”. He himself attested, “I have a sense of the sacred and I don’t believe in a future life” (Lyrical 364). In another speech he stated, “I wish to declare that, not feeling that I possess any absolute truth or any message, I shall never start from the supposition that Christian truth is illusory, but merely from the fact that I could not accept it” (Resistance 52).

\textsuperscript{17} Thody says that, “With L’Etranger, there are innumerable ways in which you can look at the same text and still make sense of it. Every time you read it, you are carried away by the story and accept absolutely that this is what happened. That is the acid test of any novel, and L’Etranger never fails it. But every time you read L’Etranger, you also see it in a different light” (42).
important. For him, life has no meaning whatsoever. There is no place for love; it is even difficult to say of Meursault if he ever loved anybody. But he is faithful to his personal convictions. Sentenced to death, not for the crime he committed, but because he did not cry at his mother’s funeral, he refuses to play by society’s rules. He wants to remain himself to the end. Visited by the chaplain before his execution, he refuses to talk about God, and expresses his rebellion against all forms of religious thought.

[The Chaplain] raised his head abruptly and looked me straight in the face: “Why,” he asked, “do you refuse to see me?” I replied that I didn’t believe in God. He wanted to know if I was quite sure of that, and I told him that I didn’t have to bother my head about that point: it seemed to me a matter of no importance (139).

Meursault never explains his reasons for not believing in God. He does not know what “sin” is and does not feel any need for redemption. He believes that his death will end everything and therefore he is not interested at all in a religious talk.

The chaplain still wanted to talk me about God, but I started walking toward him, trying to explain for the last time that I had little time left. I did not want to waste it with God (141).

By many commentators, Meursault has been seen as a kind of hero, who was able to remain himself to the end and die for his own truth.\(^{18}\) However, if one carefully examines the novel, Meursault is rather an anti-hero, a poor man that lacks personal qualities, is unable to feel any regrets, is unable to love another person and decides to live on the surface. Because of that, his argumentation for the rejection of God is based, not on an honest search for the truth, but subjective convictions based on what he thought was rational argumentation. One should not judge him too harshly though. One may understand to some extent his position. Meursault, who refuses to love and engage in any kind of relationship, will not be able to believe in God who desires human love.\(^{19}\)

Before moving to the analysis of The Plague, let us focus for a moment on another important work of Camus. In his The Myth of Sisyphus, Camus developed on a philosophical level many ideas he had touched on earlier in The Stranger, namely, the meaning of life and the inevitability of death. Because the world is the place where the absurd dwells, “there is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide” (Camus, The Myth 3). Human beings live in a world in which total and eternal truths cannot be found. They

\(^{18}\) I disagree with Camus, who says that The Stranger should be read as “the story of a man who, with no heroics, accepts to die for the truth” (Thrody 29). Meursault does not die for the truth that he refused to search for all his life but rather he dies for his own truth.

\(^{19}\) For more information and analysis about Meursault cf. Robert J. Champingny book A Pagan Hero, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1969) and Jean Kellog,
live in an irrational universe. Christianity, with its claims to deliver eternal and definitive truths, “dehumanizes and weakens the forces of revolt” (Onimus 38) by placing its hope in an unknown future life and promising something that cannot be known for sure and distracts from the affairs of this world. All that remains is a revolt and rebellion against the dreadful reality. Christianity is an obstacle to this rebellion, says Camus in The Rebel, because it praises resignation to suffering and death in Jesus Christ and thus, it sanctifies it. It does not help people to fight the evils of this world (the plagues), but rather works as an opiate that makes people revolt against the absurd and encourages them to resign (34).

Focusing on the problem of an absurd world, Camus contends that as one sees Sisyphus pushing his stone, one must see him happy. Therefore even though one lives in an absurd world in which God is not present, one should not escape from it by committing suicide. Instead, one should strive to make it a better place. Hence, Camus is proposing “a humanism rooted in man as authentic value; in life, which is to be affirmed in defiance of suffering and death; in love, compassion, and understanding, the solidarity of man in revolt against the absurd, men whose comradeship has a certain purity because it is based on the renunciation of all illusions, all misleading ideas, all deceptive and hypocritical social forms” (Merton 9). As was seen earlier these hypocritical social and religious forms were rejected by Meursault. Camus’ position can be summarized like this: organized and corrupted society, which in the name of law is able to kill and oppress people, must be opposed; similarly, organized religion that places its hope in something beyond this life, proposes easy answers to every problem and glorifies suffering cannot be accepted. The only way that remains justifiable and understandable is the rebellion.

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Even though Camus sympathized with Marxism in his early career, he eventually broke with it. Nevertheless, the above criticism is very similar to what Marxism understood about religion, when it said that it was the “opium for people” and that it distracted people from the affairs of this world. It would be definitely very inconsistent to criticize Christianity for its “dogmatism” and at the same time support Marxist philosophy that is full of dogmatic and materialistic statements.

Sisyphus thus becomes the ideal for all who realize that even though the godless world they live in does not make sense and is full of suffering, they do not give up. “I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain! One always finds one’s burden again. But Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He too concludes that all is well. The universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile... The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy” (The Myth 123). As it will be seen later, all the virtues that Sisyphus embodied will be present in Doctor Rieux and Jean Tarrou in The Plague.

For a better clarification of the point that is being made, let us support it by the following quotation from Woelfel: “Camus decides to live only with what he knows: he chooses a humble lucidity rather than the soaring of faith... Christianity, like other faiths in transcendent reality, says more than Camus believes he can concretely know; it
Finally, one arrives at *The Plague* in which the critique of Christianity by Camus is most sophisticated and is based on Christian understanding of suffering. The action of the book takes place in an obscure town, a typical colonial city, Oran, in northern Algeria. The city is suddenly and unexpectedly struck by the disease: bubonic plague. The people of Oran, being so involved in their banal shallow lives where everything is always predictable and understandable, refuse to accept the reality of the disease. Only when the city is being cut off from the outside world do they realize that they must face reality and fight for survival. As the population is being killed off and shattered, some decide to escape from the town, others decide to stay and fight the pestilence by helping others, and still others only care for their own lives or even profit by the disease.

Camus, in examining human nature and its response to the reality of the disease and death, presents different characters that respond differently to the evil of the plague. Since the interest here is on Camus’ critique of the Christian position in regard to human suffering, the focus will be on three characters: Doctor Bernard Rieux, Jean Tarrou and Father Paneloux. First, Doctor Bernard Rieux, who, even though he does not believe in God or in a future life, decides to stay in the city, help the people in fighting the disease, and in doing so, risks his own life. He may be seen as a modern Sisyphus. Secondly, there is Jean Tarrou, who comes to Oran just before the epidemic erupts and decides to stay in order to help save lives. His ideal is to become “a saint without God” by offering his life for others. Finally, Father Paneloux, an educated and intelligent Jesuit, “with a reputation for solid scholarship as well as for militant Christianity” (Merton 12), tries to make theological sense of the plague by explaining it in his two sermons by using his theology based on Saint Augustine.

In his first sermon that he delivered with great strength and personal conviction, Father Paneloux tries to explain to his congregation the cause and the nature of the plague. In examining his first sermon, one shall see how the thinking of Father Paneloux is well and alive today among Christians, even among priests. Merton calls the first sermon, “a typical of French classic pulpit oratory – a vibrant, authoritarian delivery of all the right answers” (34). Father Paneloux addresses his congregation in second person plural, “you” as if he was on the other side of the fence of the dreadful reality of the plague. His first reaction is to accuse. He starts with explaining that the plague is the punishment from God for the sins of the people and therefore “the just man need have no fear, but the evildoer has good cause to tremble” (Camus, *The Plague* 90). God is in charge makes a postulatory leap beyond this commonly experienced world that he cannot make” (30).

I have to stress one more time that it is sobering to remember that even though Camus criticized Christianity, he remained fascinated with it and possessed considerable understanding of its ideas and devotion to humanity. Unlike J.P. Sartre, he wanted to challenge Christianity, but at the same time to remain in constant dialogue and discussion with its ideas.
and he knows what he is doing but because “too long this world of ours has connived at evil” (90), the punishment had to come. Everybody is guilty. Because God was offended too long, he eventually has turned his face away from the people of Oran.\textsuperscript{24} According to Father Paneloux, people were too naïve to think that their brief formalities with God, “bendings of the knee would recompense God well enough for their criminal indifference” (Camus, \textit{The Plague} 92). But God does not work like that and wants to see his people in church more often. Now it is too late for repentance though and people have to learn their lesson, “the lesson that was learned by Cain and his offspring, by the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, by Job and Pharaoh, by all that hardened their heart against him” (92). But finally, because of the plague, people started thinking about God once more because the narrow path to salvation had been revealed to them. The great evil of the plague can be transformed into a greater good because “God is leading the people through the valley of fears and groans towards the holy silence, the well-spring of all life” (93). Father Paneloux ended his sermon with an encouragement to hope. The people have to hope against hope and pray for deliverance.

In his intellectual sermon, Father Paneloux explains the reasons for and purpose of the plague. He claims that God, sending evil on people as the punishment for their sins, is able to transform this evil into good. This is well known theory of Saint Augustine\textsuperscript{25}, who is the master of Father Paneloux, namely that suffering helps to bring out greater good. The same claim was made by Boethius, who maintains in \textit{The Consolation of Philosophy} that essentially all fortune is good and that evil which happens to people can eventually produce greater good. He supports his claim by quoting Saint Paul, who says that “we are well aware that God works with those who love him, those who have been called in accordance with his purpose, and turns everything to their good” (Rom. 8:28). Because God is disappointed with the conduct of the people, he punishes them in order to give them another chance for conversion. According to Alfred Cordes, Father Paneloux uses the traditional concept of divine providence “whereby God ‘transforms’ evil by having it result in a positive spiritual benefit necessary for man’s salvation” (73). Father Paneloux response “is the easiest one, that of Job’s friends: if God strikes you, it is because you are guilty” (Onimus, 46). There are really no innocents in this earth. Everyone is guilty.

In his first sermon, Father Paneloux claims that the plague is understandable and indeed can be rationally and theologically explained. He thus adopts the well known theory of suffering as the retribution for

\textsuperscript{24} After hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans, many Christian fundamentalists and religious conservatives saw it as the will and punishment of God for all the sins of the city. It was called “God’s judgment on America”.

\textsuperscript{25} According to Augustine, evil is simply a lack of good and does not exist on its own. Its roots can be found in the doctrine of the Fall and the free will of human beings. Because we are truly free, we are capable of choosing evil. For the detailed explanation cf. Gillian R. Evans, \textit{Augustine on Evil}, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990).
Majewski

sin and uses it to explain the situation of the people in Oran. Father Paneloux believes that theology is capable of providing simple and coherent answers on any human problem, including the problem of suffering. But is suffering a problem that needs to be intellectually solved? Father Paneloux in his first sermon represents all these theologians and preachers who believe that they have all the answers on any human problem. Father Paneloux is a perfect example of a preacher who does not associate himself with his flock, calls them in the second person, and tells them how much they have sinned and how rightly they are punished for their wrongdoing. Of course, some may consider the first sermon of Father Paneloux an extreme example rarely realized in reality. The point is, however, that aspects of Paneloux simplistic theology are well and alive today in the minds of many Christians. The assumption of Father Paneloux that “everybody is guilty” neither works as a ministerial tool nor as theological explanation. Instead, it trivializes God and Christianity and, as history has shown, turns many more people away from God than brings them to him. Doctor Rieux characterizes Father Paneloux in these words,

Paneloux is a man of learning, a scholar. He hasn’t come in contact with death; that’s why he can speak with such assurance of the truth – with a capital T. But every country priest that visits his parishioners and has heard a man gasping for breath on his deathbed thinks as I do. He’d try to relieve human suffering before trying to point out its excellence. (Camus, The Plague 199)

In the words of Doctor Rieux, Camus criticizes the dogmatism and certitude of Father Paneloux who lacks humility in the face of suffering and death. Also, he criticizes Father Paneloux for his lack of involvement in the fight against the plague. Doctor Rieux refuses to believe in the all-powerful God of Doctor Paneloux, who punishes everybody without distinction. He states that “if he believed in an all-powerful God he would cease curing the sick and leave that to Him” (Camus, The Plague 120). But it must be noted that even though Doctor Rieux criticizes Christianity, he does it in a friendly manner. He states that “Christians at times say that sort of thing [collective punishment] without really thinking it. They’re better than they seem” (118). Is God from the first sermon of Father Paneloux a Christian God or is he presenting his own idea of God?

One might rightly claim that God from the first sermon of Father Paneloux is a distortion of the Christian idea of God. The God of Father Paneloux only waits to punish his people for all their sins and violently forces his will on the people. Moreover, the theory of Father Paneloux does not explain the sufferings of children, who cannot be punished for the sins that they supposedly committed. Certainly, Father Paneloux’s understanding of suffering did not convince Doctor Rieux, who decided to “fumble in the dark, struggling to make something out” (Camus, The Plague 119). Doctor Rieux would not accept any easy explanation of suffering and especially that of Father Paneloux. Facing the world shaped by death and
suffering, Doctor Rieux asks the question, “mightn’t it be better for God if we refuse to believe in him and struggle with all our might against death, without raising our eyes toward the heaven when he sits in silence” (121). Father Paneloux and Doctor Rieux agree at least on one point: God indeed sits in silence. But while Father Paneloux tries to intellectually explain the silence of God and justify him, Doctor Rieux fights against the plague and identifies with the sufferings of the people.26

Father Paneloux eventually agreed to join the sanitary squads and to help the sick. He spent his entire time in the hospitals and other places where he would come into direct contact with the plague. He was in physical contact with the suffering and some of his theological ideas were challenged severely. He came to the realization that not everything is as simple as he thought; nevertheless, his faith remained unshaken. At one point, the sanitary squad had to deal with a suffering child, Othon’s son, who had fallen ill. Soon Doctor Rieux was absolutely convinced that the boy’s case was absolutely hopeless. “The infection was steadily spreading, and the boy’s body was putting up no resistance. Tiny, half formed, and acutely painful buboes were clogging the joints of the child’s puny limbs. Obviously it was a losing fight” (Camus, The Plague 197). This case was especially challenging for Doctor Rieux and the entire sanitary squad. Not that they had not seen children die before, but in this case they had to watch a child’s agony minute by minute and look at the tortured body of a boy. Father Paneloux joined the doctor in caring for the dying child who at that point “gritted his teeth again. Then very gradually he relaxed, bringing his arms and legs back toward the center of the bed” (198). All Paneloux could do was to stand against the wall and say that if the boy dies, he will not suffer any longer. Eventually he knelt and “gazed down at the small mouth… pouring out the angry death-cry that has sounded through the ages of mankind” (201). He prayed to God to spare this child and after the child has died he made the sign of benediction over the boy.

Finally, one arrives at the climax of the theological dispute between Doctor Rieux and Father Paneloux.27 While they were leaving the room where the child had died, Doctor Rieux said with reproach to Father Paneloux, “Ah! That child, anyhow, was innocent, and you know it as well as I do!” (Camus, The Plague 202). He was openly and severely challenging the theology of Father Paneloux as presented in his first sermon. Doctor Rieux was convinced that it is better to reject faith in God than to agree to believe in God who treats his creation in such a way that the innocent children have to suffer. If the suffering is indeed the punishment for sin sent by God, why is the child suffering? Father Paneloux had to agree with the statement

26 Cordes states that in the view of Doctor Rieux “creation is to be corrected. If a Creator exists, He is less noble than the best in man and has to be improved upon” (75).
made by Doctor Rieux that indeed the child’s suffering was not the punishment for the child’s sins. Finally, Father Paneloux realized that his theology of retribution did not match reality.

Thanks to Doctor Rieux, Father Paneloux could see that the reality of suffering of the innocent cannot be explained as easily as he had attempted. He finally came to the realization that the suffering of the innocent cannot be easily understood and explained as God’s punishment for sin. Nevertheless, his conclusion was that perhaps people should love what they cannot understand, meaning, that one should accept suffering as the will of God even though one does not understand it. Father Paneloux claimed that there is a choice that one has to make: “either one must deny God entirely and reject him entirely, or one must accept everything. Love him in everything, including the death of the innocent child. Including one’s own death. Including a sacrifice and death which are apparently without justification, without meaning” (Merton 35). Of course, Doctor Rieux could not agree with Father Paneloux.

No, Father. I’ve a very different idea of love. And until my dying day I shall refuse to love the scheme of things in which children are put to torture. (Camus, The Plague 203)

For Doctor Rieux, the only possible and justifiable reaction in the face of the suffering of the innocent is not passive acceptance of it, but rather action and revolt against this dreadful reality. Like Ivan Karamazov, Doctor Rieux “refuses the ticket”, i.e. refuses to believe in God if he has to accept the sufferings of the innocent.

As it was already seen, according to Camus, Christianity does not support the forces of revolt but rather glorifies suffering; even more, it worships Jesus Christ, an innocent, who was put to death and thus became a symbol of human misfortune. Camus claims that in the words, “my God, my God why have you abandoned me,” Christ expressed his anguish and the loss of hope like any other human being could do in a similar situation. Camus states that “if Christianity has touched us so deeply it is through its God made man. But its truth and its greatness end on the cross and at the moment when he cries his surrender. Tear out the final page of the Gospel and you have a human religion, a cult of solitude and of greatness is offered to us” (Onimus 49). If the Gospel did not end with the resurrection story but stopped on the cross, Christianity would be simply a human religion: it would become another myth of Sisyphus. Instead, by its identification of God with suffering, Christianity “has made even of the Son of God’s despair an object of mysterious adoration” (Onimus 50). The gospel presented the truth but only up to the ninth hour. For Camus then, Christianity

27 Merton writes that “Rieux has the same quarrel with Paneloux that he has with the city officials. Paneloux, he thinks, is more interested in justifying the ways of God to man than in the plight of man himself” (28).
without resurrection would have more power to transform human life and to support people in their fight against evil. Instead, by its glorification of suffering, Christianity placed it at the very center.\footnote{Woelfel thus summarizes Camus’ point, “the religion whose god reveals himself in the resignation to suffering and death of a crucified man is in a way the most insidious of all the myths of the gods: the god who in his infinite love takes all human injustice, suffering, and dying upon himself precisely functions thereby as a sanctifier.\footnoterefname} 

In his second sermon preached shortly after the death of a child, Father Paneloux tried to make theological sense of everything that had happened. He no longer had all the answers. He no longer addressed the community in the second person plural. He did not use apology but admitted to his congregation that the death of a child made him hesitate. Nevertheless, “he, Father Paneloux, would keep faith with that great symbol of all suffering, the tortured body on the cross; he would stand fast, his back to the wall, and face honestly the terrible problem of the child’s agony” (Camus, The Plague 208). Father Paneloux was trying to grasp the mystery of the child’s suffering. But again, in his attempt he recalled the idea of the will of God and stated that since the death of a child was God’s will, people too, should will it (209). According to Paneloux, one should accept everything as the will of God and submit to him. It was already shown that this position was unacceptable to Camus.

Camus could not agree with Father Paneloux that “one should love what one cannot understand”. According to Camus, when one sees an innocent child die and suffer the only reaction should be revolt. The idea of Father Paneloux that one should submit to God, just because he is God, even though he is cruel and arbitrary and accepts suffering of the innocent simply because they are allowed by God to fulfill his plan, is intolerable. Of course, one must agree with Camus’ critique. But one wonders here what is Camus really critiquing? The question that must be asked, however, is this: is Camus right in his presentation of Christianity? Does Christianity glorify and praise suffering simply because it is a means of redemption? Is it true that Christianity glorifies suffering in a way Camus presented it? Does God really accept the sufferings of the innocent? Is the suffering of the innocent willed by God? These questions shall be examined in chapter three.
Chapter 3
A Christian Response

The previous chapter examined Albert Camus’ critique of Christianity and its understanding of human suffering. His critique and evaluation of Christian understanding of suffering presents a serious challenge to Christianity and its understanding of suffering and, therefore, should be carefully examined. Thus, one comes back to the same question, the question of theodicy that had been posed at the beginning, namely, how can the suffering of the innocent be reconciled with the existence of an all-powerful and all-loving God? As it was seen in chapter two, Albert Camus’ answer was negative: it is impossible to reconcile the existence of the Christian God and the suffering of the innocent. These two can not go together. According to Camus, if one is to remain honest with oneself, one must seriously question and rebel against God who, as Father Paneloux expressed it, desires our awe, adoration and submission even in the midst of incredible suffering and pain. Albert Camus is right when he challenges Father Paneloux’s understanding of God and his theology. It is paradoxical that Father Paneloux’s theology must be challenged and confronted from the Christian perspective as well. For Albert Camus, the only possible outcome of this critique is the rebellion and rejection of God who does not do anything to alleviate the sufferings of the innocent. If the theology of Father Paneloux presents true understanding of God, then one must agree with Camus and accept his position as the only possible one, which is the rejection and rebellion against that God.29

Father Paneloux claimed that God is always right, no matter what, even when he lets the innocent suffer and be destroyed. But one encounters a serious question here. God, presented by Father Paneloux, is not the God of Christian revelation. Thomas Merton thus describes the God of Father Paneloux:

He is anything but the living God of the prophets, of the New Testament, and of the saints. Indeed, the most awful thing about Panneloux is that he is fanatically loyal to a God that is stone-dead, and the stubborn intensity of his well-meant faith does nothing whatever to bring this idol back to life. (38)

Thomas Merton is completely right when he states that the God of Father Paneloux is not a Christian God. If this is true, then Albert Camus was not criticizing true Christianity but rather its deformation in the doctrine of suffering, as an opiate dulling man’s revolt against the plagues that oppress him” (31). 29 In examining Christian theology of suffering Camus states that “in its essence, Christianity (and this is its paradoxical greatness) is a doctrine of injustice. It is founded on the sacrifice of the innocent and the acceptance of this sacrifice” (Brée, 9). For Camus the sacrifice of Jesus who was put to death as an innocent man is not a
theologies of people like Father Paneloux. Albert Camus is wrong when he thinks that in order to remain a Christian one must share the theology of Father Paneloux. Sadly enough, Albert Camus in his early career was exposed to some of the controversial pessimistic Christian writers who did not help him to develop a correct understanding of the Christian God.\(^{30}\) He understood Christian faith as simply *credo quia absurdum* of Tertullian (Merton 37). But Christian faith is something more than that. Christian faith first and foremost is not about intellectual understanding and explaining the difficult issues of life, such as human suffering, but rather about having a personal corporate relationship with the God of Jesus Christ who is love. Father Paneloux’s God cannot be loved. His God is to be feared and adored in whatever he does, even when he punishes the innocent without any reason whatsoever. In challenging this understanding of God, Albert Camus fights against the God who is not only unjust, but also distant and detached from people. If the God of Father Paneloux truly exists he must be called into account for his cruel silence in the face of the sufferings of the innocent. It is hard to believe though that the God of Father Paneloux truly exists. He is definitely not the God of the Christian revelation but rather the product of some Christians, who in their rationalistic attempt to present God, unwillingly brought about his death.

What is then the true Christian understanding of human suffering? The Christian believes that in one’s struggle against suffering one is not alone but that God is present in the very center of this experience. In order to examine the Christian response, one must first turn to the Bible, the main source of revelation. One immediately notices that the approach of the Holy Scriptures to the problem of suffering is not philosophical, meaning, that its main concern is not intellectual explanation of suffering, but rather its approach is existential. One must note however, that there exists a certain development within the Scriptures in their treatment of suffering.

Jos Luyten in his article, “Perspectives on Human Suffering in the Old Testament”, lists three fundamental tendencies: suffering is a punishment for sin, suffering is absurd, and suffering is a source of renewal. These tendencies are often intertwined in the same texts (2). First and foremost the Old Testament rejects dualism and claims that evil and suffering were not intended by God from the beginning (Gen 1:3-31). The picture of the universe in the story of creation in Genesis is one of beauty, peace and harmony. Evil and suffering were not created and willed by God but entered the world as an effect of sin and rejection of God. It is a sign of the incredible love of God but an invitation to resignation to injustice as well as the sanctification of suffering.

\(^{30}\) Camus, in developing his understanding of Christianity was exposed to the writings of Augustine, Pascal and Kierkegaard and thus was influenced by their pessimistic approach to human life. Moreover, in witnessing many Christians collaborating with the Nazis in occupied France, Camus realized that there is something seriously wrong with Christianity and its understanding of God.
is true that some Old Testament texts present suffering as the punishment for sin. The story of the fall from Genesis is clear about that. The rebellion of Adam and Eve against the order intended by God brought chaos, suffering, pain and death. The Book of Wisdom says plainly, “For God did not make Death, he takes no pleasure in destroying the living. To exist – for this he created all things” (Wisd. 1:13-14). Suffering was not intended by God but happens as an effect of abused free will that was given to humans. The effects of the fall (original sin) are clearly visible today.³¹ One can easily imagine a perfect world where love and happiness dwells and suffering and death are not present. But unfortunately, the world that we live in is different – it is full of pain, anguish and suffering. C.S. Lewis claims that it may not be best of all possible worlds but it is the only possible one. According to him, God in creating humans offered them the beautiful but at the same time terrible gift – the ability to freely choose even to a point of rejecting the creator. C.S. Lewis states, “try to exclude the possibility of suffering which the order of nature and the existence of free will involve, and you will find that you have excluded life itself” (25). If one accepts the existence of free will, one must consider the possibility of evil and suffering in the world as well.

The Old Testament, not only presents human suffering as an effect of sin, but also speaks about its absurdity and some positive and educational aspects of it. To attempt a thorough examination of the Old Testament teaching on suffering at this point would take one too far afield from the main focus of this chapter. It would be useful however, to make some observations. Israel in facing great sufferings and being delivered into the hands of the enemy alleges that “the suffering of humankind is undeserved, meaningless and absurd” (Luyten 13). The lamentations of the prophets also provide a good example of questioning the sense of human pain and anguish. Jeremiah, for example, in experiencing the scandal of evil, suffering and loneliness, voices his disappointment and anger. “Why ever did I come out of the womb to see the toil and sorrow and end my days in shame?” (Jer. 20:18). Jeremiah questions the goodness of God in the midst of his suffering, rejection and pain. Paradoxically, like Josel Rakowel, he does not lose his faith but in the midst of anguish experiences the presence of a loving God.

In the Hebrew Scriptures the entire Book of Job struggles with the question of human suffering. Job is another example of a man who does seriously question the goodness of God in the midst of his pain and disease. The theory that suffering is simply the punishment for sin is challenged here: Job is convinced that he

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³¹ Catechism of the Catholic Church states that “all men are implicated in Adam’s sin, as St. Paul affirms: ‘By one man’s disobedience many [that is, all men] were made sinners’: ‘sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all men sinned’ (no. 402). “Following St. Paul the Church has always taught that the overwhelming misery which oppresses men and their inclination toward evil and death cannot be understood apart from their connection with Adam’s sin” (no. 403)
did not sin and therefore he cannot understand why God allows him to suffer. Abandoned by his friends in the midst of his anguish, Job challenges the goodness of God. His friends in order to console him presented the same type of theology that Father Paneloux embraced, namely, God knows better what he is doing and one suffers because one must have sinned. Like Father Paneloux who told the people of Oran that what they have to suffer was sent by God as the punishment for sin, so the friends of Job advise him that his suffering is punishment for sins that he had committed.

Like every other suffering human being, Job asks “why?” and wants to know the reason for his pain. According to John Paul II, “it is a question about the cause, the reason, and equally, about the purpose of suffering, and, in brief, a question about its meaning” (no. 9). Luyten states that the Book of Job comes to a conclusion that suffering’s goals are purification and trial that are “means to correct and bring about the conversion of the sinner and as a seal of the piety of the righteous” (Luyten 21). The author of the book claims that God is able to save through suffering even if this truth cannot be discovered in the middle of anguish. But God did not answer Job why he had to suffer and did not provide Job with the reasonable, intellectual explanation of his pain. Instead, God simply takes his side and questions the way of thinking of his friends (Job 42:7). The sufferings of Job are the sufferings of the innocent one and therefore the friends of Job were wrong when they tried to explain his sufferings exclusively in their relation to the moral order (as Father Paneloux did in his first sermon). The friends of Job claimed that his sufferings were punishment for sins that he had committed against God. The Book of Job ends with the claim that human suffering remains fundamentally a mystery and human beings cannot intellectually understand or explain it. Thus the question of suffering remains unsolved.

It is hardly surprising that the answer provided by the Book of Job would not satisfy the intellectual curiosity of Doctor Rieux. But the Book of Job is not the final word of revelation about human suffering. The main objection of Albert Camus against the belief in God is that God, being omnipotent, does not alleviate the suffering of an innocent child. One has already seen the theory that “the suffering is simply punishment for sin” does not work here. In addition, this answer provided by Father Paneloux in his first sermon not only fails

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32 John Paul II further states that “both questions are difficult, when an individual puts them to another individual, when people put them to other people, as also when man puts them to God. For man does not put this question to the world... but he puts it to God as the creator and Lord of the world. And it is well known that concerning this question there not only arise many frustrations and conflicts in the relations of man with God, but it also happens that people reach the point of actually denying God” (no. 9).

33 John Paul II in this context mentions the educational value of suffering as a punishment that “creates a possibility of rebuilding goodness in the subject who suffers” and calls to repentance. Cf. nos. 12-13.
to explain anything, but also insults intelligent people. Father Paneloux must have agreed with Doctor Rieux, when after the death of a child, he attested that the child was innocent. One may object, however, that a child being born into a sinful world in which suffering is a reality must also suffer. This may well be true but it would not work for Albert Camus either. He would object that the child remains innocent and it would be unjust for the child to be punished for somebody else’s sins.

One agrees with Albert Camus and his critique of the claim that the sufferings are simply punishment for sins. As it was seen, the book of Job challenged that claim, too, but failed to provide the answer about the roots of the sufferings of the innocent. Therefore, a Christian must turn to the New Testament, the main source of Christian revelation, and look for an answer there. “For this is how God loved the world: he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (John 3:16). The answer to the problem of suffering is therefore in the love of God who sends his only Son, who by dying on the cross and freely accepting suffering, makes a total offering of himself in the name of love. As it was seen before, Albert Camus accused Christianity of the glorification of suffering and encouraging its followers to passivity and submissiveness in the face of pain. For him, the gospel ends with the event of the cross and with the desperate cry of Jesus, “my God, my God, why have you abandoned me”. Jesus is one of those thousands innocents, who in the face of incredible pain and suffering rebelled against it and against God who allows it to happen. Christianity with its claim that Jesus saved us through suffering, made the injustice of suffering the keystone of its teaching of redemption. According to Camus, God did not deliver Jesus from his misery but failed him. How thus can submission to that kind of God and acceptance of suffering be rational? “On the contrary”, answers Camus, “it is in his struggle against such a God that man can find order and justice; antitheism becomes an elementary need of the conscience… the Christian who claims to love God could never be perfectly sincere. How can Christianity’s famous charity accept without hesitation the scandal of Evil?” (Onimus, 52).

It was already mentioned that for Camus the gospel only makes sense when it does not end with the resurrection but with the cry of despair of Jesus on the cross. But by ripping out the last pages of the gospel, Camus denies the message of Christianity of its power and makes it a merely human ethics. It must be shown then that the true Christian understanding of suffering does not “glorify it”, as Camus claims, but rather sees it in wider perspective, which is the perspective of the incredible love of God for humanity.

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34 According to Camus, “the rebel is a person who revolts against some aspect of the injustice of the human condition – whether the slave against his master, the sensitive moralist against an inscrutable and omnipotent God, or the reformer or revolutionary against oppressive features of the political, economic and social order” (Woelfel, 95).
In the gospels one finds numerous accounts of Jesus’ encounter with people afflicted by different kinds of suffering, from physical (lame, paralyzed, crippled, deformed, mute, blind, possessed) to spiritual and moral (prostitutes, tax collectors, people rejected by society, outcasts). In encountering the afflicted people, Jesus was never indifferent to their suffering but empathized with them and helped them. Matthew’s Gospel states that “Jesus drove out the spirits with a command and cured all who were sick. This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah: *He himself bore our sickness away and carried our diseases*” (Matt. 8:16b-17). In another place Matthew recounted these words of Jesus, who said, “I feel sorry for all these people” (Matt. 15:32) and later cured the sick and fed the crowd. The entire Gospel of Luke presents Jesus as a universal savior who helps the poor and the afflicted by offering them forgiveness and showing them the unconditional love that God has for them. Jesus never attached any moral label to the sick. In Jesus’ actions the kingdom of God becomes present for people and God shows his incredible power in his actions of healing and raising the dead.

It is indeed interesting that in his encounters with the suffering Jesus never starts from intellectual explanation of the reason of their affliction. Instead of providing them with the intellectual theory about the roots and nature of suffering, he offers them compassion and heals them. At the same time, Jesus challenged popular conviction of his time that suffering is the punishment for sin. The perfect example may be found in the Gospel of John. “As he went along, he saw a man who had been blind from birth. His disciples asked him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents37, that he should have been born blind?’ ‘Neither he nor his parents sinned,’ Jesus answered, ‘he was born blind so that the works of God might be revealed in him” (John 9:1-3). The disciples were looking for the logical explanation of the suffering of the man born blind and wanted to know whose sin caused his suffering. Their presupposition was that it must have been his parents’ sin or his own sin, tertium non datur. But how could he have sinned in the womb? Jesus refuses to play this mind game with his disciples and does not answer their question. Instead he has pity on the man and heals him. One encounters here the fundamental approach that Jesus has toward evil: he does not explain the

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35 Cf. p. 29.
36 John Paul II beautifully characterized the mission of Jesus in these words, “In His messianic activity in the midst of Israel, Christ drew increasingly closer to the world of human suffering. He healed the sick; consoled the afflicted; fed the hungry; freed people from deafness... He was sensitive to every human suffering, whether of the body or of the soul” no. 16.
37 In the Old Testament understanding, physical suffering of affliction is always connected with one’s moral conduct: it is the punishment for sin. It could have been personal sin or the sin of ancestors. Even though this concept was challenged by prophets (Cf. Jer. 31:29-30; Ezek. 18:1nn) it was well and alive in Jesus’ times. Needless to say, it is still alive today.
reasons for it\textsuperscript{38} because one deals here with the mystery of God (Le Guillou, 97). Robrecht Michiels in “Jesus and Suffering – the Suffering of Jesus” states that,

Jesus is opposed to the view, indeed, he dismisses the view that suffering and death are \textit{divine punishment}, that, in other words, suffering and guilt are always related… Most importantly, however, Jesus offered no explanation, religious or otherwise, for sickness and suffering. Instead, he called people to solidarity with the suffering and to the performance of deeds of hope. (33)

Jesus sees suffering in the wider perspective – in the perspective of God’s mysterious plan of salvation.

In the beginning God created humans out of love and desired to have a mutual and loving relationship with them. He endowed them with the beautiful and, at the same time, terrible gift of freedom because he wanted to be loved and adored in freedom. Unfortunately, as the Genesis story attests, sin entered the world and with it suffering and death. But God did not leave humans by themselves but instead constantly searched for a relationship with them, offering them salvation. Throughout the history of salvation, God constantly reached out to humanity hoping for a response. He revealed himself to Moses and chose the nation of Israel through which he hoped to reveal himself to the entire world. As the history of salvation unfolded, God continued to assist his chosen people in promising salvation and deliverance from evil as he had delivered them from the slavery of Egypt, which become a type of liberation from slavery of sin. But God did not stop there. He wanted to be totally involved in his creation by sending his only Son, Jesus Christ. “When the completion of the time came, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born a subject of the Law, to redeem the subjects of the Law, so that we could receive adoption as sons” (Gal. 4:4-5). Many people today do not fully realize the radical nature of the incarnation, the self-emptying of God, who becomes one of us, so that we can become the sons and daughters of God.\textsuperscript{39} One must realize how radical this mystery is. Saint Irenaeus expressed it in these famous words when he said that “in his immeasurable love, God the Word became what we are in order to make us what he is” (54).

The mystery of the incarnation teaches that God is not spectator and bystander of the tragic human history. On the contrary, by its radical nature it attests that God, because of his incredible love for humanity,\textsuperscript{38} In the account from the Gospel of Luke (13:1-5) Jesus also does not answer the question for the reason of the suffering.\textsuperscript{39} Speaking of the mystery of the Incarnation, the Fathers of the Church used the term \textit{admirabile commercium} (marvelous exchange). Jesus Christ, the true God, “joins us to God by his divine and human nature and by his redemptive work; he also brings about a complete exchange between himself and humanity, and exchange both ontological and existential” (Kereszty, 204). Cf. Piotrowski p. 129. On the relationship between the theology of the incarnation and theology of the cross, cf. Joseph Ratzinger, \textit{Introduction to Christianity}, pp. 170-171.
decides to be completely involved with humankind. Unfortunately it is not the image of God that one derives from the sermons of Father Paneloux. God in the theology of Father Paneloux is so distant and uninvolved that it hardly represents the God of Christian revelation. But it is a God that Camus thought Christianity believed in. This mystery of incarnation challenges the position of Albert Camus who believes that an all-powerful and omnipotent God looks down from heaven and approves (or even causes!) the sufferings of people.

The Christian revelation does not stop at the mystery of the incarnation – it goes even farther and finds its conclusion in the Paschal Mystery: the sacrificial death and resurrection of Jesus. It is on the cross that the fullness of God’s love for us is revealed. John Paul II attests that there one must seek the answer to the problem of suffering – in the love of God revealed by Jesus Christ.

But in order to perceive the true answer to the “why” of suffering, we must look to the revelation of divine love, the ultimate source of the meaning of everything that exists. Love is also the richest source of the meaning of suffering, which always remains a mystery: we are conscious of the insufficiency and inadequacy of our explanations. Christ causes us to enter into the mystery and to discover the “why” of suffering, as far as we are capable of grasping the sublimity of divine love. (no. 13)

Camus claimed that Jesus, like one of the million innocent before and after him, was condemned to death against which he rebelled. In addition, he also rebelled against God who did not answer his prayers. Christian theology, on the other hand, claims that Jesus freely offered his life entirely for his mission of salvation. He did not desire to die but he freely accepted his fate. In addition, the event of the cross must be interpreted in the Trinitarian context and in faith. Otherwise, it becomes just another death of the innocent man that does not have any sense. For instance Helena Eilstein considers the Christian claim that God offers himself for us because of love to be just another myth like many other myths of dying and rising gods in the history of religions. According to her, to claim that God offered his Son to a terrifying death in order to save us is cruelty. What kind of God is this that requires his Son to suffer and die in order to restore his relationship with humanity? (Tischner 64-65). Helena Eilstein fails to put the event of the cross in its proper context of love.

The event of the cross must be seen in its true context – in the context of love. “Whoever is without love does not know God, for God is love” says Saint John (1 John 4:8). Without taking into consideration this fundamental truth one would never grasp the mystery of the cross. True love, even in one’s personal experience, is always related with sacrifice. If one truly loves another person one is willing to offer
everything, even one’s own life for another.\textsuperscript{40} If true love always implies sacrifice and if God’s name is love, one may rightly say, that sacrifice is God’s best name. Only in this context one may grasp the mystery of the cross.

Albert Camus failed to understand the mystery of the cross in the context of God’s sacrificial love. But isn’t it true that throughout the ages of Christian thought there were many theologians that failed to present the teaching of Christianity in this context as well? Father Paneloux is not the only one. Paradoxically, it would be more difficult for one to accept the moral standards of Doctor Rieux, who offered everything for the service of others, than to believe in the God of Father Paneloux. Christians can learn a lot from the struggle of Albert Camus. The challenge that awaits them is difficult. They must reconcile the existence of God and the presence of human suffering. Christian theology must continue to struggle with the question of suffering and see it always in the context of an all-loving God who, in order to save humanity, gave us his Son who accepted suffering and the cross. The problem of suffering will never be solved – it will always remain a mystery because God is mystery.

\textsuperscript{40} Raymond Moloney states that “the language of our sacrifice is the language of love. We might understand it better by thinking of two people in love giving each other
Majewski

Conclusion

In his encyclical on God’s love, Pope Benedict XVI reminds us how God’s forgiving love “is so great that it turns God against himself, his love against his justice. Here Christians can see a dim prefigurement of the mystery of the Cross: so great is God’s love for man that by becoming man he follows him even unto death, and so reconciles justice and love” (no.10). Hence, human suffering must be seen in connection with the mystery of the cross of Jesus Christ who “emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, becoming as human beings are; and being in every way like a human being, he was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross” (Phil. 2:7-8).

The question that Albert Camus would pose here is this: “Why has God allowed Jesus to suffer this terrible and humiliating death and thus glorified suffering” and “Why did Jesus freely choose to suffer”? As it was seen in chapter two, Camus claimed that Jesus not only did not accept his fate but also rebelled against it. He was just one more innocent who died in despair not understanding why and for what. In his claim, Camus misses the most important aspect of Christian religion – love. Jesus Christ, by accepting his own fate, did not “glorify” suffering in Camus’ sense. Rather, he showed that one can live a life of radical, sacrificial love. This kind of love does not negate or trivialize suffering but embraces it as an inevitable and unavoidable constituent of human condition. Jesus Christ has showed that one can use one’s own suffering as a mean of one’s own sanctification and spiritual growth. Moreover, suffering may be conquered by human love. Saint John says in his gospel that Jesus “having loved those who were his in the world, loved them to the end” (John 13:1). He has loved us to the point of suffering and pain because to love somebody is to be ready to make sacrifices.

Albert Camus rightly attests that one has to fight evil in the world and rebel against it. One cannot intellectually try to explain the problem of suffering before helping others and doing something for the suffering person. But is Albert Camus right when he claims that if one rebels against suffering one must rebel against God too for the sake of one’s integrity? I have tried to show in the course of this work that it is not necessarily so. When one struggles against suffering, Christianity teaches, God struggles with him or her. But Doctor Rieux’s struggles with God (and Albert Camus’ as well) can become our own struggles at times. It is not easy for one to accept suffering, as it is not easy for one to love. Doctor Rieux is certainly a moral hero who, for the sake of others, risked his own life in order to alleviate the sufferings of his patients. His example challenges many Christians even today. *The Plague* attests that one can be “a saint even without God” and

*gifts. The gifts are a sign of their desire to belong to each other, for that is part of*
achieve the heights of human love and sacrifice. It is indeed a very high ideal that Albert Camus challenges his readers to achieve – to offer one’s life for service to others regardless of personal risk. Therefore, I am inclined to think, that paradoxically Camus’ morality and ideals are very close to the ideals of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The only difference is that while Doctor Rieux tried to love without God and offer his life for others, Christian does the same thing but with God and for God. One can certainly question and debate Doctor Rieux’s (and Albert Camus’ position) and still admire his radical way of life.

My hope is that the reader, after finishing with this work, will reach for some of Albert Camus’ works and struggle with some of his or her own questions, fears and difficulties. I am not in any way an expert on the subject. I have just touched on some of the most important issues and questions and shared with the reader my own struggle with Albert Camus and with the question of human suffering. I wrote in the beginning that everyone, at some point or another, will have to face the problem of suffering and wrestle with it. The struggle with the thought of Albert Camus can help us anticipate that moment with greater preparedness.

what love truly means” (79).
Bibliography


Benedict XVI. *Deus caristas est*.


