

# FOUR FAITHS, ONE CHALLENGE RELIGIOUS PERSPECTIVES ON SUFFERING AND EVIL

**Monday 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2014**

**Shaunaka Rishi Das**

Director of the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies

**Dr Joanna Weinberg**

Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies



**Monday 29<sup>th</sup> September 2014**

**Rev'd Professor Paul Fiddes**

formerly Principal of Regent's Park College

**Imam Monawar Hussain**

founder, the Oxford Foundation and  
the Oxford Muslim College.



**Chaired by the Ven. Martin Gorick,  
Archdeacon of Oxford  
and hosted by St Edward's School, Oxford.**

## **Four Faiths, One Challenge: religious responses to suffering and evil**

*Summary notes of talks given on 22<sup>nd</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> September 2014, events organised by the Summertown-Wolvercote Church Partnership and chaired by the Ven. Martin Gorick, Archdeacon of Oxford.*

### **Notes and commentary by Rob Gilbert**

The world's conflicts easily make us feel helpless and powerless. We want to put a stop to unnecessary suffering such as they cause but how can we do anything about it? I think we can all do something. And I want to suggest that the "Four Faiths, One Challenge" evenings we held in the Partnership in September 2014 are a good example of what we can do to make a difference.

The focus of our evenings was 'the problem of evil': how can a loving and good God have created a world with so much suffering, and also allow that suffering to continue? The trenches of World War I alongside the current conflicts around the globe, the Holocaust and other acts of genocide are particularly powerful examples of the problem of evil. But there are two ways in which our "Four Faiths, One Challenge" evenings gave us opportunities to do something about it.

Firstly, the evenings *prepared* us to make a difference. Continuing to ask questions about suffering and evil, and continuing to take such questions seriously, is a good way to keep our eyes open for suffering around us where we are, where we can put a stop to it ourselves. It is also a good way of reminding ourselves what is important to us in Christian faith and what Christianity has to offer the world, including a God who knows humanity better than humanity knows itself, a God who as one Christmas hymn puts it, 'drain[ed] the cup in a few short years of all our sorrows, our sins, and tears'. Continuing to ask questions about evils and keeping our eyes open to see them helps us to pray for the world's sorrows, and praying for the world's sorrows helps us to end them.

Secondly, the evenings actually *enabled* us to make a difference, enabled us to do something about the world's evils and suffering. Many of us will have friends of other faiths already but "Four Faiths, One Challenge" was a new initiative bringing together leading representatives of Hinduism, Judaism, Islam and Christianity with a shared aim. Hindus, Jews, Muslims and Christians all agree that it is important to listen to other people's points of view with respect, and they all agree that faith in God is an important part of human life and that religious groups have a critical role to play in building better community life for everyone. So "Four Faiths, One Challenge" was a way of demonstrating that the whole world could be at peace, because people of faith can work together to understand better the evil and suffering in our world.

Monday 22<sup>nd</sup> September

Shaunaka Rishi Das, Director of the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies:

Shaunaka began by commenting that Hinduism is incomprehensible to most people – it represents a very different worldview from that found commonly in the West. For example, ‘the problem of evil’ is not discussed, in exact terms. Furthermore, philosophy and theology are combined in Hinduism – they cannot be separated, and Indian theologies have a philosophical basis. It seems to me that we need to be aware of this difference and that not being aware of it leads to the careless use of language which has at times increased prejudice and instilled fear – this point was in fact made by Shaunaka in response to one of the questions at the end of the evening.

In his talk, Shaunaka stated that in Hinduism there is a strong sense that suffering is to be embraced. We suffer because we are ‘out of tune’ with reality; embracing suffering enables us to take responsibility and transform the situations in which we find ourselves. Suffering is to be embraced – both ours, to transform it from within, and the suffering of others, so we can address it and take responsibility for it.

Why does suffering stem from being ‘out of tune’ with reality? A key point made was that from the Hindu perspective there are two main realities: the material, which is temporary, and the spiritual, which is eternal. Everything that exists is part of both. An argument being made was that suffering and evil derive from our desires being misaligned because we have forgotten the truth that our own nature is eternal.

At the heart of Shaunaka’s contribution sat two ideas: that we all want to be happy (which means we aren’t) and that we don’t want to die. We can gain understanding of suffering and evil by focusing on our desire to be happy and by contemplating death. “Death is the music behind every dinner party...Death haunts us.”

Shaunaka defined ‘evil’ as “ill motivation in action” – which means that it has to be *seen*. Because we all want to be happy and do not want to die we grasp at things and opportunities that we think might make us happy and give us ‘life’, make us really ‘live’ and from this stems envy and all manner of evils. “We want to be the main thing” – we think being “the main thing” will make us happy. But of course God is “the main thing” and so we put ourselves in the way of experiencing suffering. But we need to remember that love is an action too – and that we are called to ‘overcome evil with good’, to show that love is stronger than death.

The Hindu word for knowledge means “to see”. What we need above all is knowledge, to understand our situation and transform it. If we see what motivates us for what it is, then we will be drawn away from the evils of life – envy, lust, malice, cruelty, selfishness and so on – which in themselves make us suffer, and towards what is good. Our desires make us suffer because we have “inappropriate desires”. Our attachment to the material makes us frustrated and this makes us suffer.

In terms of the traditional form of ‘the problem of evil’ – how can a good God let *this* happen? – the central issue from the Hindu point of view is that our essential nature, our spiritual nature, was not made by God but shares God’s eternity. God did not give us our freedom, God did not make our choices. Krishna says to humanity “you are an eternal agent”. This gives our choices tremendous importance: we can *choose* to love, we can be creative by our actions, we have a divine spirit. This is the answer that can be made to

suffering and evil as far as Hinduism is concerned. Suffering is subjective – it can't be known by another – but it can be responded to, with compassion. This is what we must do: respond with compassion.

It seems to me that the emphasis on knowledge and understanding leading to a good life that by definition is not grasping (or anything that comes from being grasping) is obviously in harmony with the Christian vision of how life should be. We must 'overcome evil with good'<sup>1</sup>, as St Paul says, and emphasise what we can do about evil and suffering ourselves. An interesting comparison with Shaunaka's argument is also that made recently by Sam Wells, vicar of St Martin in the Fields in London, who spoke at the Oxford Diocesan clergy conference of the "twin terrors" of our lives: sin, and death, and of the necessity of our responding to them in solidarity and communion with each other and with compassion. Indeed, in response to a question about our responsibility for the suffering of others Shaunaka commented that we want love, we want compassion, we want concern and to make these things happen is to take responsibility for suffering – our suffering and that of others. He said that taking responsibility for our actions is part of the process of learning how to love God and of overcoming suffering. Furthermore, he re-emphasised that if we see suffering we *must* respond to it, and that an attitude of non-violence has two implications: (i) you do not cause suffering and (ii) you must do all you can to overcome it.

Joanna Weinberg, Professor of Hebrew and Jewish Studies, University of Oxford:

Joanna began with a quote from Max Weber to the effect that the more transcendent God is thought to be, the more 'the problem of evil' arises.

Her focus was rabbinic Judaism, which gained its distinct form in the wake of the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in AD70 and which has given rise to the modern forms of the faith. In rabbinic Judaism the oral Torah (e.g. Midrash) is a commentary which complements the written Torah (the Hebrew Bible), and one cannot understand the written Torah properly *without* reference to the oral Torah.

Joanna began by saying that the identity of the Jews derives from the experience on Sinai: God manifests himself to the people and they *become* a people. The Hebrew Bible allows a reliving of the experience of Sinai every time it is read, and the key to understanding the Jewish approach to suffering is to understand how that formational experience was then tied up with the worship at the temple in Jerusalem, and how its destruction traumatically fractured the whole idea of 'the Jewish people', the Jewish identity as a nation chosen by, adopted by God. Indeed, the loss of the temple means the loss of the ability to make religious sacrifice and the word 'sacrifice' in Hebrew means 'draw near'. But then how can you afterwards draw near to the God who has adopted you without the temple?

Thus, suffering is part of the experience which shapes the rabbinic texts, and the Jews looked at their whole tradition from that perspective and re-examined it in that light.

Joanna pointed out that in Judaism there is no systematic theology and no uniform view, there are multiple viewpoints. So answers to the problem of theodicy – God's justice, and in other words 'the problem of evil' – are necessarily varied. At the end of our session, under questioning, Joanna commented how the detailed nature of rabbinic Judaism provides a framework within which we have some freedom to find what makes sense to us. Interestingly, she commented that in rabbinic Judaism there is no actual

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<sup>1</sup> Romans 12:21

definition of the phrase “I believe”, the phrase can’t be transliterated into the language of rabbinic Judaism.

Joanna argued that there are, fundamentally, two ways in which suffering can be viewed: (i) as a chastigation of the people and a judgement on them by God, or (ii) as something which prompts us to challenge God as to why he allows suffering to occur. From the second point of view suffering is something in which God joins us.

One word for suffering in Hebrew is equivalent in meaning to ‘chastigation’ and a development of this is the phrase ‘chastigation for love’ – God is trying to improve the people through the effect of their experience of suffering. This is a strand of Jewish thought: but a core rabbinic insight is expressed in the words “There is death without sin and there is suffering without transgression” – the innocent suffer, so how can suffering be a basis for improvement? Joanna told us that, given this, the rabbis could not accept the idea that our suffering is our fault.

Joanna quoted 2 Samuel 7:23: ‘Who is like your people, like Israel? Is there another nation on earth whose God went to redeem it as a people, and to make a name for himself, doing great and awesome things for them, by driving out before his people nations and their gods?’ From this the rabbis drew the inference that God himself was suffering with the people through all their exile. This, Joanna said, represents a vision of God not as transcendent but as himself redeemed by the people: God is not the redeemer, he is being redeemed and he is inextricably linked with his people, the people whom he has adopted. Later, Joanna was asked “Can God be redeemed? Is there that which redeems God?” Her response was: “ ‘You are redeemed’ means you and God are redeemed together. There is no agent”, both God and humanity are subjects faced by evil.

This idea of God is anthropomorphic, says Joanna. For example, if it is believed that earthquakes arise because the people have not paid their tithes correctly, the mechanism that is being proposed for the earthquake is like this: God cries, God claps his hands, God presses with his feet, and the earthquake comes. In this God is expressing his pain over the world’s pain, for example the world’s injustice, and God is suffering with his people and apparently has no power to prevent their suffering. However, in this worldview what can be transforming is *any* gracious act. One gracious act transforms the situation, however much destruction other acts bring.

Joanna continued by pointing out that another core rabbinic reflection was : why did God allow Cain to kill Abel? She reminded us of the end of the story: ‘And the Lord said, “What have you done? Listen; your brother’s blood is crying out to me from the ground! And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand.”’<sup>2</sup> We were told that a *Midrashim* gloss was: “the voice of the blood of your brother calls to me”. Another rabbinic view sees the story of Cain and Abel as being something like two athletes wrestling before a king and accepts that if the king had wished to separate the two men fighting he could have done, but didn’t. Thus, God *allows* Cain to kill Abel. But then in Midrash the phrase “cries to me” is also changed to “cries *against* me”, that is, against God for *not* having interfered. Joanna ended: “So God’s justice is questioned but no answer is given, perhaps because no answer can be given.”

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<sup>2</sup> Genesis 4:10-11

There is a fascinating similarity between what Joanna and Shaunaka said regarding our needing to take responsibility ourselves and to do what we can to redeem the situations in which we find ourselves. And in preparation for our second meeting of “Four Faiths, One Challenge” speaking of God’s suffering alongside us clearly relates to the theology of Paul Fiddes, author of *The Creative Suffering of God*.

Monday 29<sup>th</sup> September

Imam Monawar Hussain:

Monawar began by pointing out that, like Christians, the Muslim concept of God is of a just God, a unique and incomparable reality, 'The Truth' and said that his intention was to share some ideas relating to theodicy, God's justice, not to pretend he had a complete solution to the questions it raises. Monawar's thinking has been shaped by a recent illness, now over, in which he had experienced a shocking indignity and lack of independence. His friends and family had offered various explanations for his illness: that it was a punishment, the result of black magic, or of the forces of darkness; that someone had given him the evil eye, that it was a great test requiring patience, and that God knew why. None of these seemed to Monawar to be a satisfactory response.

To give us the background to a response that could be made from an Islamic point of view, Monawar looked at some different strands of Islamic thought. Starting with 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> century schools, he described how Jahn ibn Safwān argued for a deterministic view of human action, seeing human beings as having little or no choice and being compelled in what they do. For ibn Safwān, human suffering was seen as punishment. In contrast, the Mu'tazilah school of thinking was a rationalist one which believed in the justice of God and the free will of human beings, giving us responsibility for our actions. Monawar pointed out that from the Mu'tazilah point of view God might be exonerated from responsibility for human suffering and evil – but only perhaps when considering the suffering of adults. The innocence and relative powerlessness of children means that their experience of suffering – e.g. ways in which they are mistreated – cannot simply be justified using an argument based on adult free will. So a possibility considered within Mu'tazilah was that the suffering of children is a warning to adults or a reflection of their future sin – but, as Monawar said, neither of these arguments seems satisfactory either. A third school, which has led to the main orthodox Islamic beliefs of today, was Ash'ira which questioned what is good and evil, and took the view that what is good is *defined* by God – what Monawar called a theistically subjective point of view. From this focus on God as *defining* good and evil comes the Islamic law, sharia.

The Ash'ira tradition was exemplified by reference to Qur'anic passages, such as:

'Say: who is the Lord of the heavens and of the earth?

Say: God.' (XIII.16)<sup>3</sup>

'Wherever good visits thee it is of God; whatever evil visits thee is of thyself.' (IV.80).

and

'If, when they wronged themselves, they had come to thee, and prayed forgiveness of God, and the Messenger had prayed forgiveness for them, they would have found God turns, All-compassionate.'  
(IV.66)<sup>4</sup>

So, said Monawar, the tradition says to God: "The good is all in your hands and the evil cannot be imposed on you."

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<sup>3</sup> *The Koran* trans. Arthur Arberry (OUP)

<sup>4</sup> Monawar cited the last two as IV.78 and IV.64 which they usually are; I have given the Arberry edition references.

But if God does not create evil, who does? Monawar next cited the major 11<sup>th</sup>/12<sup>th</sup> century Islamic figure al-Ghazali, who argued that there are three blasphemous points of view: (i) evil exists and God did not create it, (ii) evil exists and God did create it, (iii) evil doesn't really exist. By contrast, Monawar said, evil is in fact "sort of accidental" and therefore does not go against the idea of God's mercy. A simple traditional example was given of a child being 'cupped' – heated cups are placed on the skin to draw out sickness. Here, the child is caused distress but the intention is the good of the child. From this point of view, we will always find good under evil, what looks evil can bring us good as well, and I suppose we must believe it will. This perspective is in tune with what Monawar called the "ethical voluntarism", the justification by intentions, of the Ash'irite tradition.

In the 12<sup>th</sup> century the rise of the Sufi tradition emphasised the conviction within Islam that the spark for creation is love, focusing on and emphasising God's love and mercy not his justice or anger. This dynamic was exemplified by reference to the Qur'an II.28-32, where God tells Adam the names of all creatures, and then instructs him to reveal the names to the angels. God is turned towards Adam and is All-compassionate (Qur'an II.35). Monawar asked how this relates to suffering and evil – and his answer was that Adam only expressed names of mercy and love and gentleness and not majesty or wrath. And in all this we must remember God's infinitude and the fact we don't know or understand as God knows and understands, that we (Adam) must learn from God, be shown the way by God. As a result, it is at moments of distance and separation from God that we experience suffering and evil. Human life is woven out of nearness and distance; nearness to God the All-compassionate gives us good, distance brings evil and suffering.

At the same time, a Sufi analogy for the impact of evil on human lives is a polo stick used during a game in which human lives are represented by the polo ball. This echoes the Ash'irite conviction that under evil there is also good, that evil provides opportunity as well as harm. Being hit by the polo stick shows the ball the way to go, and understanding this and keeping our eyes on God will help us not to feel the pain or evil of suffering. So, Monawar argued, the solution to suffering and evil is the right attitude in life.

So in the end, for Monawar the question is not 'Why?' but 'How?'. Not "Why do we suffer?" but "How should we respond?". We cannot, ultimately know *Why?* – *why* about God's desire for us, *why* about human suffering and evil. But we can answer the *How?* question. How do we respond?

- We respond by our utter dependence on and love of God.
- We respond by our patience and trust in God, and prayer.
- We respond by meeting the challenges of our own societies and communities.

When we contemplate the issues raised by suffering and evil the required response is in answer to the question *How?*, not *Why?*. This was Monawar's conclusion.

#### The Rev'd Professor Paul Fiddes:

Paul began with the story of a woman whose continuous illness sapped her strength, and who commented "I've come to a tacit agreement with God that we just don't talk about this any longer". He both agrees and disagrees to some extent with this point of view. On the one hand, he candidly admitted at the start of his

presentation that in the end no argument to justify suffering and evil is really convincing. On the other, we need to talk to God about our suffering to make sense of it.

Taking the example of Job, Paul pointed out that his friends have a retributive idea of suffering as just desert; but that what matters for Job is that God has not abandoned him. Another important Biblical example of how suffering should be understood is found in the story of the man born blind from John's Gospel (John chapters 9 and 10) in which it is clearly stated by Jesus that no one sinned to make him be born without sight. Jesus then shows that God is faithful to this man. Like Monawar, then, Paul focused from the start not so much on *Why?* as *How?*. In Paul's own words, "We should respond to suffering not by arguing over it but by trying to do something about it". Indeed, Third World Christians are rightly very critical of the Western Christian idea of evil and suffering as a theological problem: the idea is *not* to solve the problem in theory but to do something about it in practice. Wealthier Christians can be so busy being clever about theodicy that we fail to do anything about it.

Having said there is no straightforward answer, Paul then turned to the theological importance of talking about where God *is* in a situation of suffering. Among other things, this is important because it will avoid driving sufferers into silence and take their suffering seriously. Seeking understanding like this is important; a thoughtful faith can enable us to live in the world faithfully, believing in God.

### *The free will defence*

The freedom of creation is a central and vital concept to engage with in thinking about suffering and evil in the world. God desires relationship with free beings – God is in himself relational, that is, loving. God is an eternal spirit of renewal and hope. And people need freedom in order to be creative and to make new things – and freedom like this requires suffering. It requires suffering because growth and development involve change, and growth requires decay somewhere else. We see this clearly in the mechanisms of biological evolution – there is a chaotic element in creation which gives us our freedom. Beyond the evolution of different forms of life, at the personal level suffering also gives opportunities for humans to learn – for example, to learn how to take care. In contrast to this 'natural evil' or 'natural suffering' is moral evil – which derives from our freedom to choose, to make choices.

Paul highlighted two major problems with this argument – first, the idea that suffering is caused by the misdeeds/wrong choices of people should not focus on individuals but on all humanity – and in some sense all creation. Because, second, this argument does not address the apparently needless evils of viruses and cancer, for example. So if the 'free will defence' is to have any force it needs to take the freedom of the whole of creation seriously. All of creation has slipped away from God's presence, from attentiveness to God's will. "We have all fallen away from the path that leads to the flourishing of life which God desires."

So, does the free will defence let God off the hook, on the basis that God did not do wrong himself? God did not impose suffering or act to cause harm, so does this exonerate him? But God's choice to make a free world had risks, and this is why God is not wholly off the hook, because the risks will have been apparent to him, because he is God. So if God must have known that creating the world required the risk that suffering would ensue we need to ask, was it worth it? Was it worth the risk? Is it worth it? To look at this question, Paul referred to Dostoevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov* and the famous focus there on a child torn apart by dogs. The question from Ivan Karamazov is, "Is the whole universe worth the tears of one child?" His answer is: No.

Is it worth it? The question is asked of each of us. We can reply that the satisfactions of human life – love, compassion, companionship, service of others, knowledge, wisdom and so on – make it worth it, but if we do then we shall be making a leap of faith. One important thing to emphasise though is that it is those who suffer most who have most to teach us about how to answer the question, ‘Is it worth it?’. Paul referred to the testimony of a woman who has long been faced with acute suffering through her work with the dying, “I am very sure of the existence of a God and this means I’ve someone to be flaming mad with”<sup>5</sup>.

For Paul, an essential move to make real sense of belief in a loving and just God in a world like ours, with its physical and mental freedom and inherent suffering, is to believe that God suffers too. God must share the suffering that flows from the risk of creation because if a God of love exposes creation to risk then God will expose himself to risk alongside his creation. The central event here to make sense of God’s suffering is the cross of Jesus, in which God experiences the utter limit of human loss. ‘God was, in Christ, reconciling the world to himself’<sup>6</sup>.

Thus, in Sydney Carter’s *Friday Morning*, the refrain is this: ‘It’s God they ought to crucify instead of you and me / I said to the carpenter a-hanging on the tree’.

But how does *God’s* suffering help *us*? Paul offered us two ways of understanding this. First, God’s suffering consoles us, and shows us that God understands our suffering from within. As Jürgen Moltmann has said “There would be no theology after Auschwitz had there not been theology in Auschwitz”. Secondly, the story of suffering helps in itself, the story of God’s suffering helps us to make sense of our own suffering and that of the world’s because God shows us that his suffering has an end in view, has purpose, which is to bring in the transforming power of love. Our suffering can have the same meaning for us and the people we know, love and serve.

In summary, though, Paul emphasised that everyone has to find their own meaning in life and with respect to suffering and evil. We must find our own way of making sense of suffering, our own solution because we cannot have one given to us or imposed on us. He closed, “We must take a daring step over the precipice of suffering”.

### Question time

In our question time after Monawar and Paul had spoken the question of *Why?* was discussed more. Monawar commented that a Muslim response it to say that to give an answer to the question *Why?* is to offer medicine, but we can’t live on medicine and instead have to live on the trust of God and the belief that he is loving and caring and will not let us down. Paul added that the Christian response to the question *Why?* leads us to the reason *why* the question can’t be answered in the end, because you end up up against, faced with God himself; and this is rather similar to the Islamic approach in fact.

In further discussion it was emphasised how essential it is to give a very strong resistance to any suggestion that evil is a punishment for wrongdoing. Reflecting more on *How?* questions it was pointed out that it is

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<sup>5</sup> I am reminded of a comment from Rowan Williams here: “So often, as we are all aware, the problem of theodicy is not experienced as such by those for whom, according to all the discussions, it ought to be an agonising primary question.” From an essay entitled ‘Redeeming Sorrows’ in his book of essays *Wrestling with Angels*, p271.

<sup>6</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:19.

much more difficult to answer questions like “How do we stop cancer?” or “How do we stop people dying of hunger?” than focusing on *Why?*

God’s challenge to us is in the *How?* question, asking for our answers. Focusing on *Why?* is in some sense self-indulgent.

It was pointed out to our speakers that they had not really addressed the issue of an afterlife. Paul’s response was to be clear that this question is focused on eschatology – our understanding of the end of things. He commented that thinking about human lives and evil does require an eschaton, it requires an end, it requires ‘heaven’ as an end in sight. Human lives are too partial and incomplete otherwise, so speaking with sense about humanity and God requires eschatology, requires an understanding of how God makes the ultimate answer to our questions of *Why?* and *How?*. For Paul, all personal beings have the potential to enter heaven, and the judgement from God we undergo should be seen as purgative and transforming.

Monawar’s response was to say that in Islamic tradition Adam is seen as leaving Paradise because he has the seed of love within him; and nothing is as powerful in human life as the love of God. The afterlife is all down in the end to the love of God. He said: “it’s one mercy that we show each other by being loving and compassionate, but there are ninety-nine mercies to come” – God’s love and compassion are overwhelming, will be overwhelming. Paul also emphasised how we must not individualise thoughts of heaven, and understand heaven as corporate and social. And when it comes to the question of hell, then that depends on how you understand ‘heaven’ and ‘hell’, said Paul. Love of God is far more central than us thinking about heaven and hell and God’s love will win in the end – we should focus on that. If a definition is wanted, hell is the deliberate exclusion of God, Paul continued, but the fact is that God’s mercy will win in the end. Nevertheless there is an element of choice here. And if one wants to ask: Why do we live now at all? If heaven is so wonderful why didn’t God put us there directly? Then the answer is, that the time we have now enables us to prepare for heaven in the only way we can and to do our best to make heaven for ourselves here on earth as well.

At the end of the second evening, Martin Gorick invited us to remember that the essential thing which Job’s friends do for him is to go and meet him and offer him consolation. They left their homes and when they saw Job in the distance, they wept and tore their clothes and threw dust on their heads. And [t]hey sat with him on the ground for seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him for they saw that his suffering was very great.<sup>7</sup> Job’s friends make their own answer to *How?* before they try and answer *Why?* This is an example for us to follow, and we ended the evening in silence together and then in a final blessing of peace shared among us all.

## Conclusion

Our two “Four Faiths, One Challenge” evenings were fascinating and a couple of things stand out for me from them. One is the consistency of thinking between our four speakers in arguing that the human response in practice to evil and suffering is far more important than theorising about why suffering occurs and evil gets done. A second is an understanding of God being with us in our suffering, alongside us,

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<sup>7</sup> Job 2:13

knowing how suffering feels; and of God acting through the people who answer the question *How do I respond?* by saying: “Like this...”. God’s suffering as fellow subject with us, God the All-compassionate, God in Christ reconciling the world to himself on the cross – the theme is clear. Finally, a phrase of Monwar’s seems to get it right to me: evil is kind of accidental. Evil is kind of accidental and what’s required of us is to do all we can to take care of each other and our world and to do everything we can to mend each other and our world.