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RELIGIOUSNESS AND THE EXPERIENCE OF SUFFERING*

More or less frequently everyone comes across the sort of experience which he calls suffering. He often regards it with helplessness. Religions, too, each in their different ways relate to the fact, problem, or mystery of suffering. What seems to make religious propositions particularly attractive is the fact that refer to the topic of suffering together with its value for man. Every attempt at revealing the sense of suffering not based on existential reflection is doomed to failure. We cannot therefore expect these one-sided reductionist trends in psychology, which cut themselves off from such analyses, to produce knowledge (let alone psychological wisdom) capable of throwing light on the fundamental human experience of suffering.

To experience suffering means to be introduced into a border situation. Suffering as the basic border situation of man is constituted by the sort of experience which is truly one's own and incommunicable; it affords access to epistemologically new knowledge — sometimes radically new. One cannot change border-situations, nor is one able cognitively to penetrate them. While experiencing a border — situation one remains alone in its presence (cfr. Jaspers 1922, pp. 229—280). In this article I am going to undertake a short description of the world of human suffering and reflect on the place or significance of religiousness in those experiences. I shall refer a few times to my own research on attitudes towards suffering in order to illustrate some responses to suffering as such, as well as to pointing out the functions of religious attitudes in this respect.

THE WORLD OF HUMAN SUFFERING

The world of suffering is diversified and multidimensional (cf. Siu 1988) — it does not easily yield to definitions. We have similar difficulty in characterizing the experience of suffering as we have describing such fundamental human perceptual material as joy, anxiety or encounter (cf. Makselon 1993 a). Every instance of suffering (physical, psychical, or spiritual) is ac-

* This article is a translation of the lecture delivered at I Polish Symposium of Psychology of Religion (The Jagiellonian University, Sept. 1995).

accompanied by a unique atmosphere, a range of simple reactions (fear, aggression), higher feelings (trust, despair) along with dilemmas and crises. Suffering appears in the context of interpersonal and object-relations. K. Jaspers points out that every situation in which one is, not only a phenomenon subject to the laws of nature. It is rather a reality containing the dimension of meaning. This reality in its concreteness is neither a physical nor a psychic phenomenon but both things together. *Suffering is something which is still wider than sickness, more complex and at the same time still more deeply rooted in humanity itself* (John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris* no 5).

The suffering of the person is different than the suffering of other animate beings thanks to his self-consciousness and a capacity for anticipating future happenings. It is maintained that human suffering boils down to biological pain, enriched by evolution and thus humanised. Some researches point out that typical pain brings forth a feeling of shame, an awareness of being punished, isolation, or even — in extreme cases — hatred. Whereas suffering is supposed to make for forgiveness and reconciliation, give birth to love, and lead to personal development (Jorgensen 1984).

Suffering is a common and inevitable phenomenon. S. Freud (1974, p. 217) indicated three sources of the inevitability of suffering: the might of nature, the fragility of the human body, and the imperfection of the organizational structures. V. E. Frankl observes: *Suffering is a part of life and is as ineradicable as fate and death. Without suffering and death life would not be full* (Frankl 1968, p. 106).

In our survey group (486 subjects) there was nobody hoping to avoid suffering. The respondents wrote:

- *besides happiness in this life there must be suffering so that people can be really happy;*
- *suffering is necessary to change one's life and to be able to understand the suffering of others;*
- *the world nowadays is cruel;*
- *there are too many people in the world who can inflict pain;*
- *if one wants to follow Christ, one cannot avoid suffering.*

The presence of suffering can be registered on different stages of ontogenesis. The constellation of personality characteristics, the stability of the system of values, the type of religious or secular Weltanschauung, and the socioeconomic status model the experience of suffering (its intensity, depth, scope, effects). Whilst the above mentioned variables are of definite relevance to how suffering manifests itself, as well as determining its specificity, nevertheless suffering is in a way above all that — it is a universal trait of human nature. Hence the legitimate assertion of the founder of the III Viennese School of Psychotherapy that man is *homo patiens*. In other words, to be human means to experience suffering.

One basic question the psychologist (especially one in practice) has to face is when and how suffering can help people. What makes this problem particularly momentous is the fact that *suffering must be looked upon ne-*

ither as a good nor an evil but a condition which puts an edge on man's sensibilities wheter spiritual or otherwise (Clark 1958, p. 182). K. Dąbrowski appears to be more convincing as he maintains that with some people, suffering triggers off *the need of outward projection, a desire to discharge the accumulated energy in the form of revenge or aggression. Others, as suffering is increasing, show signs of gradual weariness, succumbing to it, resignation, and dwindling energy. Yet others tend to substitute new forms of life for the broken ones* (1975, p. 94).

As we can see, experiences and attitudes with regard to suffering are very diversified. A lot depends on what area of goods, functions or values gets impaired by the experience of evil usually associated with it. One suffers because of the presence of a personal or a social evil, but also as a result of the scarcity of a good or ability. The experience of suffering can be based either on the retro- or on the prospective activity of man. Characteristically, it is much easier to go through physical than psychical or spiritual suffering. Nb. only 3% of the respondents think that physical suffering is more difficult, and 35% — psychic. The rest consider them as equal or have no opinion. They mention the following reasons:

- *physical suffering goes after some time whereas psychical suffering lasts longer;*
- *a healthy body gives no consolation;*
- *it takes a long time and a strong personality to face psychical suffering;*
- *it is difficult to help a ruined psyche.*

From a good many responses we can infer an idea — obvious within the personalist vision of man — that psychical suffering is the correlate of physical and moral suffering. This is proved by the wealth and intensity of emotions associated with suffering. The emotions and feelings linked with suffering which respondents most often mention are: pain — 49%, anxiety — 46%, depression — 41%, hope — 23% (cf. Makselon 1993 b, p. 258).

FUNCTIONS OF RELIGIOUSNESS

In answer to the question of how mankind can be freed from suffering, the subjects usually underlined the role of religion (59%) and kindness (41%). Medicine was chosen by 15% and the improvement in own's material situation only by 7%. To all appearances, kindness in interpersonal relations constitutes an important condition for authentic religious functioning. There is therefore no doubt that it is impossible to exclude a broadly conceived religious factor from any psychological analysis of suffering (cf. Sevensky, 1981). The results of various empirical surveys reveal manifold connections between religiousness and the experience of suffering. For example, when people conceptualize suffering they give it predominantly religious meanings: a small share in Christ's sorrows (28%), a gift from God (18%), a sign

from God (16%), punishment for sins (6%) These expressions are accompanied by others, such as the school of life (12%), the condition in which the question about the meaning of life is posed (14%), mystery (4%). We can also find the significance of the religious proposition in an analysis of effective forms of assistance during psychic suffering. Emphasis is chiefly laid on: being with the sufferer (48%), prayer (35%), talking to a friend (34%), meeting a religious minister (14%), contacting a psychologist or psychiatrist (3%). The religious factor shows up again when we ask about the consequences of suffering. The largest group of our respondents were those whose faith had deepened through the experience of suffering (39%). Slightly fewer respondents wrote about rebellion (31%) and suicidal thoughts (3%). The rest did not feel anything (3%) or had not experienced suffering (14%).

Rebellion against suffering can be conceived of as one the phases of adaptation to it. The rebellion against God is carried to an extreme when the person asks God the question why? And then God is often accused of being vindictive, ruthless and treating one like a toy. Such a God cannot be accepted as Lord and Friend. What we have here is a false image of God.

Let us now remark that the type of religiousness to some extent modifies one's experience and attitude towards suffering. Taking into account two different functions of religion within human personality (the cognitive and the extra-cognitive function) we find out in our research that those individuals who seek in religion the gratification of their intellectual needs — in contrast with those who use religion as source of emotional satisfaction — have a more acute awareness of the inevitability of suffering; are less afraid to ask about its meaning; are less rebellious towards God — though they oftener have suicidal thoughts.

Religiousness is of vital importance for experiencing and understanding suffering for a few reasons at least.

1. **Suffering directs one to God.** The sufferer is confronted with the necessity of a fully deliberate act of obedience to God in faith. Lewis observes that the full realization of one's submission to God may happen only in suffering. If that act is to be perfect, it must be fulfilled out of pure obedience regardless of our inclination or even against it (1961). The acceptance of suffering descending on one against his will is regarded by the believer as grace. Numerous biographies of prominent saints show how the experience of undeserved suffering — interpreted as a gift of God — led to many a conversion, e.g. those of st. Francis or Ignatius of Loyola.

Obedience in suffering is to some extent linked with being ready for sacrifice. A martyr is master of his suffering, because he undertakes it for some purpose; it does not exist in its own right, but for the sake of values whose realization it makes possible. Conversely, in the case of masochistic behaviour, the lack of such readiness means that one has idolized something. Authentic suffering, which is the opposite of autistic suffering, does not get displayed but ties up with humility. As Frankl observes, talkativeness does not become the person who suffers with humility; it behoves one to keep

silent; true suffering is always in silence. Religion can be helpful in such an approach to suffering, only it must not be treated as a painkiller, but as an honest attitude. Then it teaches distance from one's own suffering. *Ultimately the Christian religion stops short of the mystery of suffering. It does not solve the problem of suffering, but points to the suffering of God as closely linked with the suffering of man* (Sujak 1975, p. 283).

2. The religious conceptualization of suffering knocks down the false vision of life devoid of all effort and trouble. Psychologists have often questioned such a philosophy of life. C.G. Jung wrote that psychotherapy should not make one believe that suffering is an illusion, instead, it ought to teach one how to attain in steadfastness and philosophical patience in the face of suffering (cf. Moreno 1970). A. Maslow warns that depriving people of suffering and over-protecting them from it may even prove disadvantageous, for in turn, it is an expression of disregard for the integrity, the inborn nature, and for the future development of the individual (Maslow 1968).

3. Suffering leads us to the question of the purpose of life. It urges that purpose, making it problematic or fulfilling it. In order to fill suffering with meaning, it is necessary to transcend it. Suffering has sense only when there is some purpose to it. While accepting suffering, we infuse purpose not only into suffering, but through suffering, also into something not identical with it — we transcend suffering. Sensible suffering always points beyond itself to something which is its purpose. In a word, the sense behind suffering is first of all sacrifice.

While focusing on what is relevant for the spiritual dimension and bearing in mind the transcendental character of suffering, religion tries to define an answer to the question about its sense. In *(Salvifici Doloris)* we find an answer short, but loaded with psycho-religious consequences. We read: *Suffering is present in the world in order to release love, in order to give birth to works of love towards neighbour, in order to transform the whole of human civilization into a (civilization of love)* (no 30).

The above mentioned words imply three aspects of the sense of suffering: a) i n d i v i d u a l (intrapersonal) — an attitude of respect for the world of one's own feelings and an opportunity for the activation of personal sacrifice in suffering;

b) i n t e r p e r s o n a l — a motivation to engage in various pro-social activities. The Good Samaritan is the evangelic exemplification;

c) u n i v e r s a l (pertaining to civilization) — social suffering recognized as an extra or superindividual reality alters preferences within the compass of valuation and social perception. We are talking of a new or, more precisely, regenerated type of civilization — the so called civilization of love. It is characterized by a special quadrinomial of value preferences: person > thing; to be > to have; ethics > technology; charity > justice.

A change in the above hierarchy of objectives leads to disregarding man. Then homo patiens is seen as a thing of no importance (once a thing is more

important than the spirit) and technology (e.g. medical) justifies everything that is done to man. This is the way in which the civilization of death manifests itself.

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RELIGIJNOŚĆ A DOŚWIADCZENIE CIERPIENIA

Streszczenie

Cierpienie jest podstawową sytuacją graniczną człowieka. Odwołując się do klasycznych prac psychologicznych oraz myśli Jana Pawła II, zawartych w *Apostolskim liście o chrześcijańskim sensie ludzkiego cierpienia „Salvifici Doloris”*, i własnych badań, autor najpierw opisuje bogaty świat ludzkiego cierpienia, a następnie zwraca uwagę na zasadnicze funkcje religijności w przeżywaniu cierpienia. Stawia 3 tezy: (1) cierpienie ukierunkowuje człowieka na Boga, (2) religijna koncepcja cierpienia burzy iluzoryczną wizję życia i (3) doświadczenie cierpienia wprowadza w problematykę sensu ludzkiej egzystencji. Personalistyczna analiza egzystencji człowieka, opierająca się na koncepcji cywilizacji miłości, pozwala wyodrębnić następujące wymiary sensu cierpienia: intrapersonalny, interpersonalny i uniwersalny.