

FACTFILE:

AS 8 PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION RELIGIOUS STUDIES

GOD, ATHEISM AND THE PROBLEM OF EVIL



God, Atheism and the problem of evil

LEARNING OUTCOMES:

Students should be able to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of, and critically evaluate evil, suffering and the theodicies, including:

- The concept of evil in the form of natural suffering and moral evil;
- Solutions to the problem of evil for the atheist;
- Solutions to the problem of evil for the religious believer with reference to the free will defence argument;
- The Augustinian theodicy;
- The Irenaean theodicy including reference to Swinburne's views on natural evil;
- Hick's modifications to the Irenaean theodicy;
- Process theodicy;
- Criticisms of Christian solutions to the problem of evil from the writings of Camus and Dostoyevsky.

Watch the following clip for a good overview of the topic:

The Problem of Evil: Crash Course Philosophy #13

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9AzNEG1GB-k>

THE CONCEPT OF EVIL IN THE FORM OF NATURAL SUFFERING AND MORAL EVIL

Philosophers consider two different types of evil, both of which call into question the existence of God.

Natural Suffering

Natural suffering refers to suffering caused by natural events such as volcanoes, earthquakes, tsunamis and disease – natural evil is a consequence of the malfunctioning of the natural world. Humans have little or no control over it.

Case Study

An earthquake in Nepal in April 2015 killed almost 9,000 people and injured another 20,000. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/zgkksrd/revision/5>

Moral Evil

Moral evil refers to evil caused by humans towards each other such as murder, torture, war, theft, etc. Humans are responsible for moral evil in the world and have full control over it.

Case Study

White supremacist Brenton Tarrant killed 51 people at two different mosques in New Zealand in March 2019. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-53919624>

Within the Abrahamic faiths of Christianity, Judaism and Islam, it is accepted that God created a perfect world and sin/evil entered the world as a consequence of Adam and Eve's choice to disobey God when they ate the fruit from the tree of knowledge. These Abrahamic faiths also agree that Satan, in the form of a serpent, tempted Adam and Eve to disobey God and therefore Satan is also responsible for bringing evil in the world that was perfectly created by God.

From the Genesis account of creation, it is evident that evil originates from two sources:

1. Satan

Satan tempted Adam and Eve to eat the forbidden fruit. Some Christians believe that Satan is the fallen angel Lucifer who rejected God and who is the source of evil. 2Peter 2:4 states that *God did not spare his angels when they sinned, but sent them to hell, putting them in chains of darkness to be held for judgement*. Satan also tempts Jesus on three occasions when he is in the wilderness for 40 days and nights (Matt 4:1-11 & Luke 4:1-13) and is the reason why Judas betrayed Jesus according to Luke 22:3.

2. Adam and Eve's misuse of Free Will.

God has created humans with free will. Adam and Eve had the freedom to ignore the voice of temptation or to act on it. Likewise, today some people use this freedom to love God and treat others with respect and compassion. However, others abuse the gift of freedom and use their freedom to disobey God and mistreat others.

Solutions to the problem of evil for the atheist

The extent of natural suffering and moral evil in the world has led philosophers such as Epicurus and David Hume to conclude that a loving and powerful God could not exist. For example, **Epicurus** (342 – 271 BCE) claimed that if God is both omnipotent and omnibenevolent then evil should not exist. However, evil does exist therefore God must not.

German philosopher **Friedrich Nietzsche** (1844 – 1900) considered the flaws and imperfections in the natural world and the suffering that resulted from such imperfections. He concluded that there is no natural order or pattern to the world, there is no design and clearly there is no God. Due to the extent of suffering and evil in the world, **Stephen Fry** (born 1957) commented "The God who made this universe, if it was created by God, is quite clearly a maniac."

TASK

Modern atheists such as **Stephen Fry** are very critical of a God who would tolerate human suffering. Watch a short interview on the topic of suffering by following the link below:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-suvkwNYSQo>

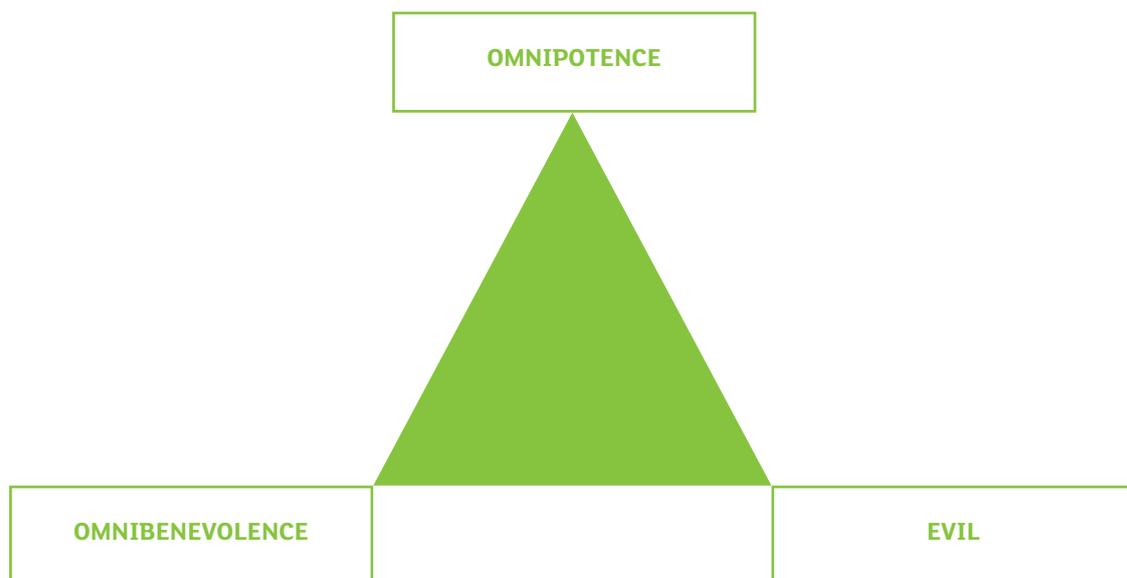
The atheist philosopher **J L Mackie** (1917 – 1981) argued that the existence of evil challenged the existence of a loving and powerful God. He outlined the problem as follows:

In its simplest form the problem is this: God is omnipotent, God is wholly good; and yet evil exists. There seems to be some contradiction between these three propositions.

Mackie outlined the following three propositions:

1. **God is omnipotent** – he is all powerful, he created the world out of nothing and therefore must take responsibility for creation. He has the power to do anything that is logically possible therefore could create a world free from evil and suffering.
2. **God is omnibenevolent** – he loves his creation and therefore would wish to end all evil and suffering. An all-loving God would not want his creation to suffer.
3. **Evil exists** – therefore God is not omnipotent, or God is not omnibenevolent and if God does really exist then he isn't really worthy of worship!

An **inconsistent triad** consists of three statements and only two can be true. Mackie argued that the following three propositions were inconsistent, and thus, that at least one of these propositions must be false.



Mackie argued that these propositions were inconsistent, and that the existence of evil disproved the existence of God. In a later work, *The Miracle of Theism*, Mackie modified his position. He argued that the problem of evil does not absolutely prove God does not exist but at the very least there needs to be 'a serious change in at least one of its (theistic religions) central doctrines.'

American philosopher **William Rowe** (1931 – 2015) agreed with Mackie and formulated the argument that the existence of evil lowers the possibility that the God of theism exists.

Rowe takes both human (an innocent child who is the victim of violence) and animal suffering (a fawn trapped for several days in a forest fire) into consideration and concludes that 'There does not exist an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being' because such a being could have prevented this suffering.

Jewish theologian **Richard L. Rubenstein** (born 1924) took a similar view and argued that the suffering experienced by the Jews during the Holocaust called into question the Jewish concept of God, in particular a God who had a special purpose for the Jewish people in the history of the world. As a result of the deaths of over six million Jews during the Holocaust, Rubenstein believed that he could no longer support the idea of an omnipotent God. He wrote 'We live in a time of the death of God ... After Auschwitz, what else could a Jew say about God?' This human experience of suffering has led many other to question the existence of a loving and caring God including Nobel Peace Prize winner, **Elie Wiesel**.

Solutions to the problem of evil for the religious believer with reference to the free will defence argument

Many religious believers turn to scripture in an attempt to solve the problem of evil.

In *God's Problem*, the American biblical scholar **Bart Ehrman** (born 1955) considers various ways in which scripture attempts to tackle the problem of evil.

1. Suffering exists due to the work of Satan

As mentioned above, some religious believers argue that Satan is responsible for the existence of suffering in the world and therefore God cannot be held accountable for it. Consider the following excerpt from Genesis 3:1-6 outlining the Eve's temptation:

Now the serpent was craftier than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?"

The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.'"

"You will not certainly die," the serpent said to the woman. "For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.

2. Suffering is punishment from God for human abuse of free will

Suffering is considered by some to be the punishment for sin e.g. Adam and Eve's punishment in Genesis 3 when they were expelled from the Garden of Eden.

Consider the following excerpt from Genesis 3:16-18 outlining God's punishment of Adam and Eve:

To the woman God said, "I will make your pains in childbearing very severe; with painful labour you will give birth to children ..."

To Adam he said, "Because you listened to your wife and ate fruit from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat from it,' "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field.

Therefore, suffering exists because of human sin, not because of God. There are many other examples of human suffering due to disobedience to God. For example, in Luke's Gospel, Zechariah is punished because he didn't believe the angel Gabriel's message about John the Baptist and was unable to speak for some time as a punishment. The punishment given to the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah as recorded in the Old Testament was much worse:

Then the Lord rained down burning sulphur on Sodom and Gomorrah – from the Lord out of the heavens. Thus, he overthrew those cities and the entire plain, destroying all those living in the cities – and also the vegetation in the land. But Lot's wife looked back, and she became a pillar of salt.

The view that suffering is a punishment from God is still held by some Christians today including the Westboro Baptist Church who conduct anti-gay protests at military funerals. They argue that homosexuality should be a capital crime and that all gay people and supporters of equality are destined for hell. They believe that AIDS is God's punishment for accepting homosexuality (like the plagues in the Old Testament) and in the aftermath of the Boston Marathon bomb (2013) they tweeted that God sent the bombs in a fury over same sex marriage.

3. Suffering can lead to positive outcomes

Suffering is used by God to make a person's faith stronger e.g. in Romans 5:3-5, Paul writes *suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope*. Some people take comfort that suffering is part of God's plan and some Christians believe that they are called to suffer just as Jesus suffered. Jesus' suffering to atone for sin followed by his resurrection also shows that suffering in the short term can bring greater benefits in the long term.

4. Suffering is part of God's plan which humans will never understand

The example of the Prophet Job in the Old Testament can be used to illustrate this point:

- Job was a good and devout man with seven sons and three daughters, and he was the richest man in the east.
- Satan told God that Job would not have the same amount of faith if he wasn't so fortunate. God allowed Satan to test Job's faith.
- Satan took everything from Job – his wife, children, wealth and health. Yet Job's faith remained strong and he was willing to accept his fate because he believed the reasons why bad things happen to good people can't be understood by the human mind. He declared:

I was born with nothing, and I will die with nothing. The Lord gave and now he has taken away. May his name be praised! (Job 1:21)

- In the end, Job's unwavering faith was rewarded, and God restores his family, property and health.
- Like Job, many religious believers today accept that they will never understand the purpose of evil and suffering, they simply put their trust in God.

5. Suffering is a test to prove that faith is genuine

Suffering is used by God to test a person's faith e.g. Abraham and Sarah suffered from infertility. God promised them a son and when Isaac was born he was very precious to them. However, God asked Abraham to kill his son to test that his faith in him was genuine. Consider the following from 1Peter1:6-7

Though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed.

The Free Will Defence Argument

Philosophers such as **Alvin Plantinga** (born 1932) have developed their explanation for the problem of evil through the free will defence argument. The idea of Free Will is clearly evident in the Fall Narrative presented in Genesis 3 when Adam and Eve freely opted to disobey God (see above). Plantinga writes:

“It is up to God whether to create free creatures at all; but if he aims to produce moral good, then he must create significantly free creatures upon whose cooperation he must depend. Thus is the power of an omnipotent God limited by the freedom he confers upon his creatures.”

TASK

Watch a short clip summarising Plantinga's Free Will Defence Argument:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n0tLR08_qRI

The Free Will Defence Argument asserts that God created humans with free will or the ability to make their own choices. This was necessary otherwise the earth would be full of humans who behave as God wanted but they would have no autonomy. However, as humans are morally imperfect, they sometimes use free will to choose evil causing suffering.

God is omnipotent and could prevent the pain and suffering caused by human abuse of free will. However, to do this he would have to remove free will. It is argued that God believed that it is better to allow freedom and the terrible consequences than to take away freedom and have humans no better than programmed robots. **CS Lewis** (1898 – 1963) referred to a world without free will as a world of automata – of creatures no better than machines. He wrote "Free will, though it makes evil possible, is also the only thing that makes possible any love or goodness or joy worth having."

THEODICIES

German philosopher **Leibniz** (1646 – 1716) coined the term **theodicy** in 1710 and it refers to the attempt to justify God's existence despite the presence of evil in the world. There are two main theodicies, and both use the idea of **free will** and the book of Genesis to explain the problem of evil.

The Augustinian theodicy

The **Augustinian theodicy** is described as a **soul deciding** theodicy and is based on the work of **St Augustine** (354 – 430):

1. God is NOT responsible for the existence of evil and did not create it. God is totally good and at each stage of creation, God saw that what he created was 'good' and this is reinforced at the end of each 'day'. (Genesis 1:31)
2. Evil only exists because something 'good' went wrong therefore evil is a **privation** or a corruption of good.
3. The Fall as outlined in Genesis 3 is the perfect example of how everything God created was 'good' yet how human abuse of free will leads to sin and its consequences e.g. human suffering is a consequence of sin.

Augustine's theodicy as described as a **soul deciding theodicy**. If humans decide to use free will to do good, their soul will be saved. However, if humans decide to use free will to act in an evil manner, then they will be punished for eternity. In other words, people's use of free will, will decide their fate.

A Summary of Augustine's Theodicy

- Augustine argued that evil exists because God gave humans free will. Humans abuse this free will when they commit evil acts.
- He used the example of 'The Fall' in Genesis 3. Adam and Eve abused their free will and brought evil into an otherwise perfect world.
- How humans use free will determines whether or not they will get to heaven or hell.
- Therefore, Augustine's theodicy has been referred to as a 'soul deciding' theodicy.

This theodicy has faced much criticism:

- The Augustinian theodicy only explains moral evil. He believes that evil and suffering are a consequence of human abuse of free will. What about natural suffering? Should God not take responsibility for natural suffering, the suffering beyond the control of humans?
- Schleiermacher was critical of Augustine's theodicy because, he argued, how can a perfectly created world go so wrong so quickly? Therefore, an omnipotent God must share some of the blame for evil.
- The Augustinian theodicy relies very heavily on The Fall from Genesis 3 which was not an actual event in human history. Some people argue that it is wrong to use a myth like this to try to defend God and justify the existence of evil in the world.

The Irenaean theodicy including reference to Swinburne's views on natural evil

The **Irenaean theodicy** is described as a **soul making** theodicy and is based on the work of **St Irenaeus** (130 – 202). This theodicy argues that both natural and moral evil have a purpose. He makes the following points:

1. God created humans in his image but with the freedom to do good or to make mistakes and learn from them. Therefore, evil is necessary for human development. For example, if no one ever needed help then humans wouldn't need to develop qualities such as bravery, compassion and generosity;
2. Irenaeus argued that God must be at an **epistemic distance** from humans to ensure that belief in him is always a free choice and that behaviour is never coerced;
3. Human use of free will and how they respond to moral and natural evil will enable them to develop morally and spiritually so they can move from simply being created in God's **image** to actually reflect God's **likeness** in how they act and behave towards others.

Irenaeus's theodicy as described as a **soul making theodicy**. Evil exists so that humans can develop their souls by learning from suffering and becoming better people as a result.

A Summary of Irenaeus' Theodicy

- Irenaeus argued that evil exists because God wants humans to respond positively to suffering so that humans can become more like God.
- He used the example from Genesis 1:26 – humans are made in the 'image of God' but humans are 'unfinished' or not perfect.
- If free will is used correctly, the human response to evil and suffering helps humans grow and develop to reach moral and spiritual perfection, like God.
- Therefore, Irenaeus' theodicy has been referred to as a 'soul making' theodicy.

This theodicy has also faced criticism:

- Some Christians argue that the Irenaean theodicy discredits the importance of Jesus' death as atonement for the sin of humanity. According to Irenaeus' theodicy, salvation is achieved through growing to be in the likeness of God. Jesus' suffering, death and resurrection appears to no apparent significance for salvation.
- Unlike Augustine's theodicy, Irenaeus' theodicy can account for natural suffering. However, it still can't justify God's existence due to the extent of human suffering. Did six million Jews really need to die during the Holocaust so that some humans could reflect God's likeness better? What about the 300,000 who died in the 2010 Haiti earthquake? Welsh philosopher **D Z Phillips** (1934 – 2006) rejected this theodicy because it presents suffering as being instrumental and he argued that suffering cannot be justified regardless of any good that comes from it.

However, Christian apologist **Richard Swinburne** (born 1934) developed Irenaeus' idea that suffering can be beneficial and believes that humans need to experience the pain brought about by natural suffering in order to inform their moral decision making.

"If men are to have knowledge of the evil which will result from their actions or negligence ... then there must be serious natural evils occurring to man or animals."

Swinburne disagreed with the claim that there was too much natural suffering in the world:

"The fewer natural evils God provides, the less opportunity he provides for man to exercise responsibility."

Hick's modifications to the Irenaean theodicy

English philosopher **John Hick** (1922 – 2012) supported Irenaeus' theodicy and the idea that God purposefully created himself at an **epistemic distance** from creation so that his goodness is not always evident, otherwise he would limit human freedom. Therefore, God couldn't intervene and prevent the Holocaust or prevent natural disasters such as the Haiti earthquake.

Hick disagreed with Augustine that humans were created perfectly and fell away from this state of perfection. Instead, similar to Irenaeus, Hick argued in favour of a two-stage process of creation: the first stage involved humans being created in the image of God with the potential to grow in the likeness of God. At this stage, humans were left imperfect or unfinished. The second stage of creation is complete when humans spiritually mature into the likeness of God and this is only possible through the experience of evil.

In order to give them the freedom to come to Him, God ... causes them to come into a situation in which He is not immediately and overwhelmingly evident to them. A world without problems, difficulties, perils and hardships would be morally static. For moral and spiritual growth comes through response to challenges.

Hick believes that the evil humans encounter gives them the opportunity to use free will to develop important virtues such as courage and justice. These virtues are 'intrinsically more valuable than virtues created within him ready made without effort on his own part.' Hick's theodicy has been referred to as the 'vale of soul-making' theodicy – the world is a place (a 'vale') where individuals are spiritually and morally strengthened and improved.

Hick's views are helpful for many religious believers who accept this as a solution to the problem of evil. However, for others, claiming that God is at an epistemic distance from creation implies that God is transcendent and unknowable. If this is the case, what is the point in praying to God for intercession which is one of the key aspects of Christian practice.

Hick's approach has also been called into question by atheist philosophers. Could an omnipotent God not have found a better way than to create a universe that he can't control and causes so much unnecessary suffering of millions of innocent people? American philosopher **Michael Tooley** (born 1941) argues that the suffering of people with terminal illness, the suffering of children and animals does not lead to any moral or spiritual development of humans.

Process theodicy

Process theodicy is an alternative approach to defending the existence of God despite the extent of evil and suffering in the world. It reaches a compromise in relation to the divine attributes. For example, the philosophers who accept this approach (A N Whitehead and D Griffin) agree that God is benevolent but that he is not be omnipotent and is therefore unable to prevent evil. They claim that God is part of the universe he created so he too is bound by the laws of nature. Following this approach, God cannot be blamed for the existence of evil. However, this approach does not sit well with traditional Christian beliefs as it undermines God's power.

Criticisms of Christian solutions to the problem of evil from the writings of Camus and Dostoyevsky

As reported on the news on a daily basis, the extent of human suffering in the world either through natural or moral evil is horrendous. As of October 2020, there have been over one million deaths across the world related to COVID 19. Meanwhile, as reported by the World Health Organisation, a child under fifteen dies every five seconds around the world, mostly of preventable causes. An estimated 6.3 million children under fifteen died in 2017 with over five million of these deaths occurring within the first five years of life. Some philosophers have used their works of literature to highlight the problem of human suffering and in particular the suffering of innocent children.

Dostoyevsky – *The Brothers Karamazov*

One of the greatest attacks against the existence of God can be found in *The Brothers Karamazov* by Russian author **Fyodor Dostoyevsky** (1821 – 1881). In the novel two brothers discuss God's creation and Ivan (an atheist) uses a series of examples of the suffering of children to convince his theist brother Alyosha (a monk) that his belief and trust in God is wrong. Ivan asks Alyosha 'What have they [the children] done to deserve this?' and readers are led to conclude that either God exists but he doesn't care about the suffering of innocent children, or that he lacks the power to help or that he simply doesn't exist.

The examples used as part of the dialogue between Ivan and Alyosha are historical as Dostoyevsky took them from Russian newspapers from the time. They include:

1. A five-year-old girl was tortured by her parents who hated her. On one occasion, she was beaten and covered in her mother's excrement (because she wet her bed) and was locked in the outhouse. As her mother sleeps inside, the girl cries asking God to protect her.
2. A young boy injures the hunting dog belonging to a local Lord. The boy is caught, stripped and sent off running across the fields. The hounds are set on the boy. They catch him and tear him to pieces in front of his watching parents.
3. Turkish soldiers play with a baby. They make it laugh, hold a pistol 4 inches from its face. The baby reaches out to grab the pistol and the soldier shoots the baby in the face.

Ivan asks Alyosha 'What have they done to deserve this?' He argues that God must take responsibility for everything that happens in the universe he created. He concludes that there is nothing that can make this suffering worthwhile and he consequently rejects God's world. He rebels against God, "returns his ticket" and refuses to play God's game. Alyosha is appalled by his brother's attack but he has no answer.

If we accept that God has planned out everyone's life from conception (*'before I formed you in the womb I knew you'*) and that Jesus values childlike qualities (*'the kingdom of God belongs to such as these'*) how can this be allowed to happen? Either God exists and he doesn't love creation, or he lacks the power to help or he simply doesn't exist.

Camus – *The Plague*

In *The Plague*, written by French philosopher **Albert Camus** (1913 – 1960), the absence of God's intervention is called into question as the city of Oran is devastated by a plague. Camus reflects on the idea that such a time of crisis is evidence that either God doesn't exist or if he does, it is actually God who is evil. Two of the key characters in the book are the priest Paneloux and the agnostic doctor, Dr Rieux. Paneloux, believes that the plague is a punishment sent from God whereas Dr Rieux argues that the death of children were the innocent victims of an indifferent God. In a conversation between the two characters, Rieux says:

'No, Father', he said, 'I have a different notion of love; and to the day I die I shall refuse to love this creation in which children are tortured.'

Consider the following excerpt from *The Plague*:

"Paneloux gazed down at the small mouth, fouled with the sores of the plague and pouring out the angry death-cry that has sounded through the ages of mankind. He sank on his knees, and all present found it natural to hear him in a voice hoarse but clearly audible across that nameless, never ending wail: "My God, spare this child!" But the wail continued without cease."

Despite the points raised by Dostoyevsky and Camus, many religious believers accept that evil and suffering must have a purpose, otherwise why would God allow it to exist? Belief in the afterlife is an important aspect of the Christian faith that makes it easier for many people to accept evil and suffering in this world. Christians believe that Jesus' death can remove sin so that people can get to Heaven where eternity will be spent free from suffering. Jesus himself tells us that the righteous will be rewarded e.g. in the Parable of the Sheep and Goats:

Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.

Matthew 25:31-46

Christians look to Jesus' own suffering and accept that suffering on earth cannot be overcome and may be part of God's plan that they simply have to accept. Prayer and reading the Bible can help some Christians cope with suffering.

Finally, Christians can overcome suffering and evil by working against it. Many Christians look to the example of religious leaders such as Mother Teresa, Desmond Tutu and Martin Luther King who devoted their lives to ending the suffering caused by both moral and natural evil. Ordinary Christians also play their part in the fight against evil by working to alleviate suffering by supporting a number of charitable organisations.

TASK

Answer the following questions:

1. Outline the two types of evil using examples to illustrate each type.
2. What are the origins of evil?
3. With reference to the inconsistent triad, outline the problem of evil.
4. Explain the various ways scripture can be used to explain the problem of evil for religious believers.
5. What is the Free Will Defence Argument?
6. How does the Augustinian theodicy attempt to solve the problem of evil? Does it succeed?
7. How does the Irenaean theodicy attempt to solve the problem of evil? Does it succeed? Do Hick's modifications improve it?
8. Considering the suffering presented by Camus and Dostoyevsky, do you think there can be a solution to the problem of evil for religious believers?

