

Pain, Passion and Compassion

A Response to Sarah Coakley

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On the turning away
From the pale and downtrodden
And the words they say
Which we won't understand
Don't accept that what's happening
Is just a case of others suffering
Or you'll find that you're joining in
The turning away

D. Gilmour

With Easter Week still present in mind, the first theme which announces itself to a theologian addressing the question of pain will most likely be that of the Passion. The Passion of Christ. The "Man of Sorrows," who was known in the Swedish translation of the Hebrew Bible until the year 2000 as the "Man of Pains", *smärtornas man*. However, as most theologians know very well, this is not an altogether uncontroversial topic. Particularly in the aftermath of Mel Gibson's much debated interpretation of the Passion in 2004, people tend to be, to say the least, put off by the violent tale of the bleeding Savior. And anyway, why would we want to spend our Easter vacation staring into the gloomy and tormented face of Jesus Christ when we could instead rejoice in candy-coloured feathers, chocolate eggs and crackling bonfires?

Still, to some people, the tale of the suffering Christ does carry some meaning, even in the present day. The commemoration of the Passion, in the liturgical year of the church, offers an occasion to simultaneously contemplate on our own *compassion*, our empathy for the pain and suffering of other human beings. But also, and per-

haps even more importantly, to reflect on our own partaking in humanity's perpetual passion, i.e., in repressive structures and collective violence, which few of us could claim not to be entangled in at one level or another.

The question I would like to address, although perhaps not answer, in this short paper is whether the Passion story still today, and not only to a few faithful ones, can serve as an incitement precisely to this kind of self-examining reflection. In other words, is it possible to retrieve through the Passion a narrative framework which alerts us and urges us never to grow complacent or to remain passive when confronted with the pain and suffering of another human being?

On the narrative mediation of pain

Having put this question on the table, let me now turn my attention to the impressive and in many ways thought-provoking collection of papers edited by Professor Coakley under the title *Pain and its Transformations*.¹ Among the many merits of this volume is its wide range of researches — from neurobiologists to psychiatrists and theologians — which allows for an extensive interdisciplinary investigation of the complex and intriguing topic that pain constitutes. Although not altogether without tensions between representatives of some of the more distantly re-

¹ Sarah Coakley and Kay Kaufman Shelemay (eds.), *Pain and Its Transformations: The Interface of Biology and Culture*, Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2007.

lated disciplines, a number of exciting cross-fertilizations are revealed, which may well enrich the future reflection on pain within the various particular disciplines.

From a theological viewpoint, one of the more challenging perspectives revealed is the observance, made by cognitive neuroscientists, of how higher-order neural processes in fact reach down and modulate incoming sensory information, with the implication that larger patterns of meaning to some extent shape our perceptual apprehension of the world. As emphasized by neuroscientist Howard Fields, there is, in other words, an intrinsic relationship between our experiences of pain and the narrative patterns through which we (simultaneously) interpret pain. Or, to put it even more straightforwardly, physical pain — to the extent to which it is conscious — is always already neurally interpreted.²

If it is true that our sensitivity to pain is to an important degree a matter of “learned hermeneutics”, it becomes of prime interest to investigate how various interpretative frameworks might serve as mediators of meaning with the potential to either alleviate or intensify pain. And this is precisely where further studies are required of how pain and suffering are construed in and by various mythological, philosophical, ritual and literary narratives.

In her own major contribution to the volume, Sarah Coakley offers an excellent example of such a study.³ Through a careful reading of the spiritual writings of the sixteenth-century Carmelites Teresa of Ávila (1515–1582) and John of the Cross (1542–1591), Coakley reveals an intricate understanding of the relation of psychic or spiritual pain to physical pain. To both these authors, writing in the early dawn of modernity, pain and suffering appeared as a purgative precondition of spiritual transformation. Interest-

ingly, however, the objective of the painful spiritual journey — which is precisely that of a higher spiritual transformation — does *not* imply the end of pain and suffering. Rather, this transformation, which is interpreted as an appropriation of Christ’s life and sufferings, implies a refined capacity to continually live with the pain and suffering which are a necessary part of all embodied life.

Given the crucial part played by interpretation in the experience of pain, one can, as does Coakley in her conclusion, ask whether these accounts of spiritual development — including the construal of pain implied — might offer helpful clues to our capacity to cope with experiences of pain. Can, in other words, these narratives, and the practices they involve, palpably affect the felt quality of physical pain?

I shall leave that question open for our further discussion. What I would like to do instead, is to stretch Coakley’s conclusion in another direction and return to my initially announced question whether the contemplation of Christ’s passion can render us more sensitive to the pain and suffering of other human beings. Now, I shall immediately make clear that such a perspective is already hinted at in Coakley’s reading of both John and Teresa. Accordingly, she stresses that the spiritual transformation aimed at by both authors ultimately does not have merely individual but also *communal* significance.

Thus, for Teresa, the appropriation of Christ’s life and sufferings does not only imply an incorporation of the self into the life of the Trinity, but also a call to *imitate* Christ in his sufferings. And this imitation is played out nowhere else than in the continuing partaking in the pain and hardship of ordinary shared human life. This communal aspect is also beautifully expressed in John’s use of the metaphors of wounds. Having gone through the “dark nights” of the spiritual journey — with all the pain involved — John is still left with a wound. So the very *healing* brought about by the union with Christ entails that John is marked by a wound — the wound of love, which leaves his soul open to God’s further love, but also the wound of contrition, which prevents him from growing complacent, from turning away from the pain and suffering of his fellow human beings.

² See further Howard L. Fields, “Setting the Stage for Pain: Allegorical Tales from Neuroscience”, in Coakley and Kaufman Shelemay (eds.), *Pain and Its Transformations*, pp. 36–61.

³ Sarah Coakley, “Palliative or Intensification? Pain and Christian Contemplation in the Spirituality of the Sixteenth-Century Carmelites”, in Coakley and Kaufman Shelemay (eds.), *Pain and Its Transformations*, pp. 77–100.

Hence, to both Teresa and John there seems to be an integral bond between passion and compassion, between sharing in Christ's pain and being attentive to the pain of one's neighbor. This should, however, not surprise us. If we look more extensively at the Christian tradition, we find that the compassion motive — emblematically expressed in the mourning women at the foot of the cross — is inscribed in the Passion narrative from its very beginning. It is also worthwhile recalling that the compassion motive has been an important part of Christian art throughout the ages. Here, one can especially point at the visual representations of the Passion in the Western tradition during the High Middle Ages, where it was a deliberate motive to induce feelings of compassion and contrition in the viewer. Contemplating the image of the suffering Christ, in other words, became a matter not only of sharing in his pain, but also of revealing the believer's own partaking in the crimes against divinity. However, the aim was not only to engender feelings of compassion and contrition before God, but ultimately before the suffering of *all* others.⁴

Once we again touch upon the question whether contemplation of the suffering Christ can serve as a narrative pattern which enhances our attentiveness to the pain of the "other". These fragmentary historical examples indeed indicate such a possibility.

The danger of glorifying unnecessary suffering

Still, this is far from the whole story. If the Passion narrative, at its best, has served to alleviate pain for people in agony and to enhance feelings of compassion, there is a long and indisputable register of more sinister effects which the same narrative has had throughout history. These effects, which have been brought to light in an unparalleled way by modern feminist critique, concern above all the Passion story's tendency to

foster patterns which glorify pain and suffering as something which has a value in itself and which therefore we should not necessarily try to overcome. To pick but one example, one can think of Rita Nakashima Brock's and Rebecca Parker's painful accounts of how the narrative of the suffering Christ in certain Christian contexts is used by both victims, perpetrators and church authorities to legitimate and preserve relations of domestic violence or sexual abuse. Hence, you would find abused Christian women encouraged by their spiritual advisors to remain faithful to their violent husbands, as "Christ did not turn away from the cup of suffering," or, equally appalling, Christian teenagers who endure abusive sexual relationships in the conviction that their suffering makes them more Christlike.⁵

Taking note of these horrible accounts, it is, however, important to observe that these destructive patterns do not naturally follow from the Passion narrative itself, but rather from a particular theology of atonement which, in parts of the Christian tradition, has been projected onto the story of Jesus' suffering and death. The theology in question, which can be traced back to certain currents of scholasticism and which reverberates in much of both Catholic and Protestant theology, teaches, in short, that God's honor demands satisfaction for human transgression and that the sacrifice of Jesus therefore is a necessary ransom to be paid if God's reconciliation with mankind is to take place.

So the argument, forcefully put forth by Brock, Parker and numerous other theologians, is that the idea that God himself somehow requires the suffering of an innocent victim has shaped — and continues to shape — cultural structures which sanction oppression, victimization and glorification of unnecessary suffering. Looking at the very concrete cases presented by Brock and Parker, but also, looking around at a world where honor-related violence and distorted notions of retaliation thrive, it is, of course, hard to contest the pertinence of this critique.

⁴ See further Gabriele Finaldi, "Passion and Compassion", in idem (ed.), *The Image of Christ: The Catalogue of the Exhibition SEEING SALVATION*, London: Yale University Press, 2000, pp. 104-107.

⁵ See Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us*, Boston: Beacon Press, 2001.

A face to set against the violence

With this critique in mind, let me now finally return to my question as to whether it would be possible to retrieve through the Passion narrative an interpretative framework which might play a constructive role in our coping with experiences of pain.

Some of the theologians who have directed this critique indeed seem to suggest that it would not. Thus, Rita Nakashima Brock, in her own constructive conclusions, stresses that if we want to break free from the violent and oppressive structures that certain theologies of the cross have fostered, we need to do away not only with the violent representations of Christ in our tradition, but also with the emphasis on the particularity of Jesus' suffering and death.⁶

I am, for my own part, less sure about this. My worries, more precisely, are that in this eagerness to distance ourselves from the violence and particularity in the sufferings of Jesus of Nazareth, we tend to reveal something about our more general inclination to turn away from any particular victim. As psychiatrist Laurence Kirmayer points out in his revealing contribution to the volume, this inclination certainly seems to be an inevitable part of our constitution as human beings, one which probably can be related to our inability to accept our own powerlessness to alleviate the pain and suffering of others.⁷ The interesting question in this light is, of course, to what extent we are able to modify this original inclination.

Which brings me back to the Passion story. One reason to take leave of it would certainly be the fear that it might induce and strengthen this inclination. In other words, with its emphasis on violence and suffering, the Passion runs the risk of making us indifferent towards pain and suffering, or even worse — it might entice us to reenact its violent logic. But this is precisely where I believe we are mistaking ourselves. For is it really the violence depicted — the bruised body

and the bleeding face of Christ — which risks corrupting us, and not rather the ideological framework which teaches that this violence somehow is divinely sanctioned?⁸ Does not the tortured gaze of Christ, when stripped away from this sinister theology, on the contrary call out for our compassion and thus remind us of the unrighteousness of the turning away from any particular victim?

To spell out the point that I am trying to make here a little bit further, let me recall an important distinction made by Emmanuel Levinas in his philosophical reflections on pain and suffering. Although sometimes inevitable, Levinas comments, the pain and suffering of the other — of every other, including the self as the other's other — is senseless, absurd and utterly unjustifiable. But just as pointless, ugly and unjustifiable as the suffering of the other happens to be, the self's suffering for the other's suffering is, to the same degree, meaningful and essential. For it is precisely this second kind of suffering, i.e. the pain I experience when confronted with the suffering of my neighbor, which evokes my responsibility to care for and ease his or her pain.⁹

The value of this distinction between the pain and suffering of the other and that of the self — between passion and compassion if you wish — is that it allows for a rejection of all forms of glorification of pain and suffering *per se*, without ever permitting us to turn away from the actual pain and suffering of particular victims throughout history, let alone in the concrete life surrounding us.

To begin to conclude, what I am suggesting is that the Passion — enacted literary, visually or musically — indeed can function as a narrative structure which enhances our attentiveness to the pain and suffering of others, but that this requires, precisely, that it is viewed in light of this

⁶ Cf. Rita Nakashima Brock, *Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power*, New York: Crossroad, 1988, p. 250.

⁷ Laurence J. Kirmayer, "On the Cultural Mediation of Pain", in Coakley and Kaufman Shelemay (eds.), *Pain and Its Transformations*, pp. 363-401.

⁸ Cf. S. Mark Heim in his *Saved from Sacrifice: A Theology of the Cross*, Grand Rapids, Mich. and Cambridge, Mass: Eerdmans, 2006, pp. 108-133. See also Michel Demaison, "Peut-on dire aujourd'hui que la souffrance de Christ et la nôtre sont rédemptrices?", in Catherine Perrotin et Michel Demaison (red.), *La douleur et la souffrance*, Paris: Cerf, 2002, s. 153-156.

⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre nous. Essais sur le penser-à-l'autre*, Paris: Grasset, 1991, pp. 100-112.

distinction between passion and compassion. More particularly, this means that we should have to turn our back to every sacrificial theology which sees the suffering and death of Christ as a necessary part of the atonement, *without* turning our back to the particular victim who is made visible at the cross. In this respect, a great deal of work has indeed been achieved in recent decades, not only by the already mentioned feminist critique, but also by René Girard in his many influential works on the particular anthropology which successively unfolds in the Jewish and Christian traditions.¹⁰

Accordingly — and not unlike Levinas by whom he is partly inspired — Girard interprets the Passion story in the light of the prophetic theology of the Hebrew Bible. This theology, as you know, pictures a God who manifests himself in the world by taking sides with the weak and powerless, a God who allies himself with the ones who are rejected by the order of this world: the widow, the poor, the exiled. A God, furthermore, who takes pains to rehabilitate persons who have unjustifiably suffered, such as the figures of Joseph or Job. What is disclosed here, as Girard observes, is a theological anthropology which persistently stresses the innocence of the victim and thereby undermines the scapegoating logic characteristic of so much human culture.

Read in this light, the Passion story more than anything reveals God's identification with the victim and thus manifests a forceful rejection of the entire idea of a divinely sanctioned logic of sacrifice. God's will is not revealed in the execution of Jesus at the cross, but rather in the man who filled a sponge and offered him to drink at the cross, or, in the women who kept watch at the foot of the cross until he gave up his breath.

The value of this narrative reversal of victim and perpetrator — God no longer being on the side of the vanquisher — can hardly be overestimated. As Laurence Kirmayer points out with reference to the transformative effects of rituals,

the way a ritual — or indeed any form of cultural narrative — structurally orders suffering is likely to influence the worldly predicament of the sufferer by shaping how others view the sufferer, and thereby alter his or her social position in one direction or the other. In this perspective, the Passion story — read in line with the Hebrew prophetic tradition, as suggested by Girard and others — might well serve as such an interpretive framework which alters the position of the sufferer in the more benign direction.

What I am suggesting, in order words, is that the Passion story, once divested of the sacrificial theology so often ascribed to it, might serve as a narrative structure which enhances our sensitivity not only to the exposure and vulnerability of (potential) victims, but also to our own inclinations to take part in repressive or scapegoating structures which create victims.

So, by way of conclusion, why would we want to spend our Easter vacation staring into the gloomy and tormented face of Jesus Christ? Certainly not because this offers us something unique, new or exiting. This tormented face and agonized gaze is only too familiar, as are the numerous tormented faces and agonized gazes which stare at us every time we turn on the news or open the morning paper. The Passion story, in this respect, offers only another example of humanity's seemingly bottomless potential for violence and victimization.

But perhaps it is precisely here that we find a good reason *not* to turn away from the violent tale of the bleeding Savior: because this tale is *not* unique, because marginalization and persecution of human beings persevere in every new time, in every culture. But also because this tale, in all its commonness, nonetheless contains a unique element. Because this particular tale about this unparticular execution as it has (partly) been narrated throughout history testifies to a God who rejects sacrifice and declines the blood of the innocent. It is for these reasons, among others, that we continue to recount the Passion of Christ. To give a face to the victim. And to the victimizing tendencies subtly present in each of us. But also to give a face to forgiveness. To have a face to set against the violence.

¹⁰ See, above all, René Girard, *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde. Recherches avec Jean-Michel Oughourlian et Guy Lefort*, Paris: Grasset, 1978; *Le Bouc émissaire*, Paris: Grasset, 1982; and *Je vois Satan tomber comme l'éclair*, Paris: Grasset, 1999.