

[For the purpose of this exemplar the significant religious question is: What is the nature of suffering as understood in Catholicism and Buddhism.]

Catholics believe God is a good and loving Creator who has created us in his image and likeness. Because of this belief, Catholics need to understand why there is suffering in the world. One understanding is that we have free will so can make wrong choices that lead to suffering. This understanding was developed by St Augustine in the 5th Century and is supported in the Bible, "We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way" (John's Gospel). Catholics have developed other beliefs to understand suffering. For example, Irenaeus in 2nd Century, argued that suffering is necessary for spiritual development and is part of God's purpose. A more contemporary idea is that God suffers too. Through Christ's suffering and pain on the cross of crucifixion, God submitted to the same suffering that many people do. Jesus suffering is seen as showing his unconditional love as well as paying the price for our sin. "Every single human life is infinitely valued by God, valued so much that God himself accompanies each one, in good times and bad, and desires us all to dwell with him forever in heaven" (Catholic Net).

Catholic teaching on suffering is very significant as it is seen as a challenge to the teaching, which affirms that God is good. Those who want to argue against the existence of God often use this as an argument they say that if God is good and all powerful he would not allow suffering. However, this argument assumes people can know the mind of God. It is important for Catholics to understand the place of suffering and explain the even suffering and death are in God's control – "There is nothing in life, or death... that can separate us from God's love..." Romans 8:38-39. Most Catholics would affirm that suffering is a mystery of faith and quote St. Paul – "for now we see through a glass darkly but then we will see face to face" (1 Corinthians 13:12).

Suffering is central to the Buddhist tradition and followers of Buddhism focus on understanding the nature of suffering. The Buddha said, "Life is suffering." Buddhists are encouraged to explore what suffering is and means in their life. Buddhists believe the problem is that we want to hold on to things in life and not let go and this attitude leads to suffering. Suffering is clearly a very significance belief in Buddhism and its importance can be seen in the four Noble truths where the Buddha outlines the meaning of life, these are:

1. Suffering exists
2. Suffering arises from attachment to desires
3. Suffering ceases when attachment to desire ceases
4. Freedom from suffering is possible by practicing the Eightfold Path

Buddhists think that even meditation and mindfulness on their own will not achieve selflessness, because these actions can themselves be a source of pride. They believe human self-centeredness has to be overcome if true realisation and freedom from suffering is to occur

"When you've seen beyond yourself then you may find peace of mind is waiting there." George Harrison

For both traditions, the existence of suffering is important and both think suffering is real. They both think that people make choices that can cause suffering. The difference is that for Catholics creation is good and created by God and that God has a purpose for suffering even if we do not fully understand it. For Buddhists life is suffering and the goal is to find release from the cycle of suffering. Buddhists try to find a way of life that stops suffering coming into being and, that cuts off its causes in one's life, attitudes and behaviour. Real change and real improvement are only possible when the right effort is made at the right tasks such as following the Eight fold Noble path. Both traditions have an understanding that the way we live our lives helps us to accept the suffering we have and this often helps us to lead better lives in the long term.

Beliefs about suffering are important not only to the religious traditions but also to wider society, as these two traditions have made important contributions to the thinking of societies where they are dominant or have been dominant historically. ①

In New Zealand, Catholics as part of Christianity have shaped quite a lot of our thinking and society general tends to think that people make choices, ②

which can lead sometimes to suffering— like drink driving, drug taking. ③

Other suffering which, happens because of earthquakes, is often termed an act of God – that it is just a part of reality that we must accept. Catholics understand that God suffers with us and has encouraged Catholics to work to remove suffering through groups like Caritas or St Vinnies. ③

Buddhism also suggests we should work to improve the situation for our fellow human beings ②

by living lives that reflect the peace and harmony reflected by Buddha himself. ①