

Introduction

THIS BOOK EMERGES FROM MY GIFFORD LECTURES DELIVERED AT THE University of Aberdeen in September 2016. I'd like to thank the Gifford Committee at Aberdeen for inviting me to give these prestigious lectures; it was an enormous honour. I would also like to thank the School of Divinity at the University of Edinburgh for giving me the space and time to think of how best to write the lectures for subsequent publication. During my academic career I have been privileged to sit on the Gifford committees at the universities of Glasgow and Edinburgh and I know full well the deliberation that goes into thinking, discussing and then finally extending an invitation to someone. When I received the invitation from Professor Philip Ziegler to deliver the lectures in 2016, I knew almost instantly that my chosen theme would be human struggle alongside themes of suffering and hope. Struggle is both a personal and universal reality of human life and always present in theological, philosophical and sociological literature. Yet it has remained somewhat ignored in scholarship as historically greater attention has been given to the phenomenon of human suffering. The terms may often overlap and be used interchangeably and the definition remains a challenge. Struggle seems to be more about hope in the midst of all kinds of moral, societal and personal uncertainties; whereas suffering is often about a certain despair and anguish, a lostness of the human condition. Struggle is part of the learning process and should be expected as essential to life. Human beings can witness each other's struggle and find mutual respect in the process, knowing that at the end of the struggle is a sense of personal achievement.

I also knew from the outset that I wished to explore struggle in a comparative setting, namely Christian and Muslim reflections. There are many approaches to interreligious work and there are potentially many outcomes. Comparative work remains a contested approach, even regarded with confusion and some suspicion at times. Yet the discipline in all its

forms, is gaining interest in the academy. Studying religious writings and other forms of reflection outside those of our personal faith or academic discipline, broadens and deepens our scholarly horizon and, in my view, should be encouraged as an intellectual and moral good.

One reason for the rise in intellectual curiosity is because of the fundamental changes in our attitude to conceptualising and defining the word truth. Our understanding of truth has been undergoing a radical shift over the last few decades. More and more of us appreciate the philosophical challenge of speaking of truth in absolutist terms even as we speak of our religious particularities. We also recognise the limits of language when we struggle to speak and write of truth and transcendence. Most importantly, those of us who value dialogical settings also value the spirit of self-reflection, which are necessary ingredients for expanding the parameters of our scholarly life and experience.

My hope was to finish the book by late 2018, but the completion of this book was delayed by a number of research and international scholarly opportunities which came from subsequent grants received from the Henry Luce Foundation, The John Templeton Foundation and the Issachar Fund; I am grateful to all these funders for their generosity in acknowledging my work. The conferences and activities associated with these research grants created an intellectually stimulating and productive intervening period bringing together Christian and Muslim scholars in a number of settings. We met in different parts of the world, debated various theological and philosophical issues and reflected on the importance of doing theology as a scholarly but also as a lived discipline. These encounters over the last few years have hugely enriched my appreciation of both religious traditions. While these conversations and meetings were not on the theme of human struggle, for me, the words ‘human struggle’ loomed everywhere.

Words such as struggle can be interpreted in multiple ways but in this book, struggle is often allied to theological and anthropological dimensions of human suffering. Despite the differences in meaning, both point to the essence and the paradox of the human condition. We want to avoid struggle and yet it is during times of struggle that we become, we grow and we find deeper purpose and meaning in life. Writers and thinkers from all cultures and civilisations understand that we learn to live as we struggle and that the concept is indispensable to our potential, and central to giving greater weight to our lives.

When I mentioned the word struggle to my colleagues and friends, many immediately said, ‘you mean *jihad*?’ After all, this word has come into our

consciousness in rather dramatic and tragic ways over the last couple of decades. *Jihad* is a central and complex concept in Islamic thought. It has evolved from the early period of Islam and encompasses spiritual and personal struggle as well as the old and new forms of militant struggle that today define the narratives of enmity and hostility towards the West. The central importance of *jihad* in Islam can be illustrated by citing a famous *hadith*, whereby the Prophet is reported to have declared upon returning from battle, ‘We have returned from the lesser *jihad* to the greater *jihad*’. When asked what constitutes the greater *jihad*, he replied, ‘It is the struggle against oneself’. This lays out the famous distinction in Islam. The greater *jihad* is internalised as a spiritual and moral struggle, a process of honestly and critically engaging the self. The lesser *jihad* involves physical battle often portrayed in the classical world, against enemies and unbelievers. Many Muslim scholars recognised that persistently and patiently trying to improve oneself for the sake of God was a much harder challenge than a simple death on the battlefield. They saw that religious life is ultimately one of constant struggle, perseverance and self-improvement in the presence of God.

The distinction between the greater and lesser *jihad* became particularly influential in Sufi mystical thought. Sufi thinkers understood the greater *jihad* as the daily battle against selfish desires and worldly temptations. These threatened to lead the believer away from the disciplined, religious life. On this note, the eleventh century theologian philosopher Ghazali famously declared, ‘Never have I dealt with anything more difficult than my own soul, which sometimes helps me and sometimes opposes me’. Ghazali compared the human body to a city that was governed by the soul and besieged by man’s lower, base instincts. He portrayed man’s battle against his own selfish desires as the greatest battle facing the believer, yet also as the necessary means of gaining spiritual insight and intimacy with the divine.

Jihad means exertion, striving in the way of God, the internal struggle, the greater struggle, the journey of the self and the soul which has largely now been reduced to offensive and defensive war or erroneously called holy war. Today the words *jihad* and *jihadist* have become part of our English vocabulary and been reduced largely to ideas of terrorism or violent militancy within certain Muslim groups or individuals hostile to the West.

But these lectures are not about *jihad* – there are countless books on *jihad*, martyrdom and the historical, intellectual and mystical dimensions of this concept. When I think of struggle, I think of it as a reality intrinsic to the human condition. Struggle and suffering are fundamental human experiences. The themes of human struggle and suffering are vast but this is not a humanist project or some grand narrative of a universal category. Suffering

and struggle arise through all kinds of natural calamities and human injustices – war, famine, exploitation and degradation, the continuing legacies of slavery, colonialism, racism and other inequalities. But this book contends that notwithstanding societal and political injustices, it is our individual struggle, the struggle of our inner lives, which compels us to face our humanity.

The purpose of the book is to explore human struggle expressed by philosophers and cultural theorists but also through the lives of select Christian, Western and Muslim writers. In the two chapters dedicated specifically to this Christian–Muslim comparison, I have taken the writers as a ‘pair’ and given equal weight and significance to both thinkers. It is the quality of their writing and their individual struggle which has drawn me to them. Not one of these thinkers carries the impossible burden of representing the fullness of their faith, either Christianity or Islam. There is no privileging of one over the other, rather it is their unique place and struggle in their historical settings and their personal lives which distinguishes them. How did these thinkers deal with the personal and social challenges they faced and what did their writings reveal about their understanding of their faith?

One can legitimately ask why these writers and why these pairings? The choice of writers is based largely on my own interest and the ways in which their writings often cross theological and literary boundaries. For different reasons, each of these writers has assumed almost legendary status and each continues to be widely read and debated among the lay and scholarly communities. My humble offering in the following pages does not presume to do justice to their achievements and legacies but I do find the complexity of their personal lives and their writings, an enormously powerful resource for comparative work.

The first chapter provides a range of philosophical and theological perspectives which explore the multiple ways thinkers have reflected on life’s meaning, suffering and hope. Beginning with human desire as the basis for all want and restlessness, these reflections show the rich array of perspectives both in Christian and Islamic literature as well as in Western thought more broadly. The chapter attempts to explain how struggle and righteousness are often in contrast to suffering and hope in our understanding of God.

The Christian and Muslim writers explored in Chapters 2 and 3 all responded to personal, political and intellectual challenges. Their writings reflect how their faith and their search for meaning in life inspired them to rethink the universal themes of love, loss, the crisis of faith and personal

salvation. They often suffered in their personal lives from their own doubts even as they knew that belief in God was essential to a meaningful life.

I am indebted to the vast resources of primary and secondary literature which are already available to scholars and which I have consulted to present reasonable biographical introductions to each writer, situating them in their historical and political context. The central aim of these chapters is to examine how each writer drew on his religious and philosophical resources to speak of the personal as well as the more universal theme of struggle and suffering. While one particular set of writings is highlighted in each chapter, I have used selections of their other works to explore the theme in its fullness. I hope this approach appeals to scholars of theology, religion, philosophy and literature. There is no one audience and I hope that the appeal of this kind of writing lies in its ability to stretch our imagination, to think in new ways about people and their religious landscapes.

While several centuries divide the Muslim theologian/philosopher Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1058–1111) and the Austrian poet, Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926), both men write of their spiritual struggle and the essence of much of their thinking is to be found in their ‘letters’. Throughout history, letters have expressed various intents but they often contain a distilled essence of a writer’s deepest anxieties and hopes. In their ‘letters’ both Ghazali and Rilke try to teach someone younger the wisdom and reverence which emerges from their own restlessness in the search for God and divine beauty. Solitude and the cultivation of the inner life is a persistent theme in their works and brings together two religious thinkers in an unusual symmetry.

Despair and hope are concurrent themes running through most of these writings. In the case of the German theologian and activist Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–45) and the Egyptian thinker and activist, Sayyid Qutb (1906–66), the political contexts of Germany and Egypt are crucial to understanding the development of their theological stance. Qutb argued that religion is not a mere theory, but also a programme, a reality and a movement for life. His gradual stance was that any action that is not inspired by faith and divine law has no value in the eyes of God. According to Qutb, that fight is not a temporary phase but rather an eternal state, because ‘truth and falsehood cannot co-exist on this earth’. Bonhoeffer’s struggle was not just his own conscience in the face of the Nazi regime but his deep concern for the church and what faith in Christ really means for the Christian life. The charge of assassination attempts led to the imprisonment and subsequent execution of both these men. Their deaths immortalised

their legacies and for different reasons, they remain two of the most outstanding and controversial religious figures of the twentieth century.

In Chapter 4, I explore the select writings of two contemporary Muslim scholars who have written extensively on what they saw as the crises in Islamic thought and society. Epistemological and philosophical inquiry is essential to articulating Islam in all its intellectual and contemporary diversity. As a faith, Islam is lived, practised, but also contested and challenged from within and by external global events. While both these scholars emerge from Muslim countries, their scholarship has flourished enormously in the Western world making them authoritative and influential voices albeit in different ways. Both the French Algerian academic, Muhammad Arkoun (1928–2010) and the American Egyptian scholar, Khaled Abou El Fadl (1963–) explore particular methodological approaches to the study of Islam. For these scholars, Islamic thought has to free itself from its own epistemological shackles, yet cannot be simply an intellectual enterprise. As Muslim scholars, they have a greater obligation to Islam where their search for the moral and the spiritual is fundamentally tied to the search for the ethical and the beautiful.

The fifth and final chapter focuses on contemporary sociological and political anxieties. Scholars and social and cultural theorists speak of the fragmentation of contemporary Western societies and the fading of religiosity with nothing to replace the human yearning for meaning and the transcendent. Struggle has been manifest in various ways throughout history and the quest for human rights and equality remains acutely relevant in today's world. This chapter also reflects on the issue of racial inequality and Black suffering in the American context. It focuses on the writings of Cornel West, who remains one of America's most celebrated and vocal public intellectuals. He continues to be an important African American voice who speaks of the Black struggle, the indefatigable demand for justice and the force of the prophetic imagination.

A Note on COVID-19

When the manuscript cleared the review process, the world was already suffering the impact of the global pandemic, COVID-19, the highly infectious disease caused by the most recently discovered coronavirus. According to the World Health Organisation, this new virus and disease were unknown before the outbreak began in Wuhan, China, in December 2019. COVID-19 is now a pandemic affecting many countries globally.¹ The outbreak of coronavirus

¹ www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/coronavirus-disease-answers

INTRODUCTION

7

disease has created a global health crisis with a deep impact on the way we perceive our world and our everyday lives. The rate of contagion and patterns of transmission meant that for weeks, the major cities and populations of the world went into lockdown with people staying indoors in their homes and unable to go out or travel except for the most essential needs. The phenomenon of social distancing and not being able to physically meet friends and family became a reality and the emotional and psychological impact of this disease on our lives continues. For the sake of safety, societies had to refrain from the inherently human activity which is to find solace in the company of others. As most businesses and workplaces physically shut for months, the economic and psychological effects of this contagion will be huge. Societies and governments around the world continue to manage public alarm and safety according to scientific advice about the danger from this virus. While the race for a vaccine continues, COVID-19 is still not fully understood as a virus and a disease and all kinds of policies are being put into place to limit the spread and deaths from this contagion. The alarming spread of this virus and the measures to contain it have brought in a particular kind of universal human struggle, in which all the norms and expectations of the world as we experienced it, suddenly changed overnight. For those who have survived, life continues with all its challenges, as the world slowly and gradually comes to terms with the unfolding of ‘the new normal’.

Human Struggle: Literary, Theological and Philosophical Reflections

‘**A**LL LIFE DEMANDS STRUGGLE’, SAID POPE PAUL VI. THERE IS SOMETHING prophetic in the notion of human struggle, in affirming that facing difficulties is essential for human potential and development. We experience struggle in so many aspects of our lives, in broken relationships, in ambition, in accidents and disease, in lost loves, unrequited and forbidden loves, sickness and death, and unfulfilling jobs and failed dreams. We are struggling for or towards something: this gives struggle a hint of hope and potential, the sense that the present pain – physical or emotional – the present injustice will pass, will end by and through human efforts.

The word is used in this book in its broadest philosophical and theological sense where it is often aligned to suffering, although suffering conveys a greater sense of the tragic. For Freud, death and suffering were linked as it is death which takes away all of life’s meaning – that not only can we not imagine our own death but that the whole process of civilisation is a self-defence mechanism to substitute for the anxieties of death. Here, culture is a collective means to ‘render human mortal life bearable and even meaningful’. Yet the paradox for Freud is that it is because of this very civilisation that we suffer. For Freud, modernity may have made our lives easier but not happier and he asks, ‘What good is a long life to us if it is hard, joyless and so full of suffering that we can only welcome death as a deliverer?’¹

Linguistically, suffering can also mean to ‘endure’ and this is particularly telling, since in Latin *duras* means hard. Hence, to *en-dure* means to harden oneself, so as to be able to take on that which is difficult. Suffering can be seen and interpreted in multiple ways across cultures and throughout history. Suffering is always more than a physical state. As Elisa Aaltola writes, ‘Unlike

¹ Sigmund Freud, *Civilisation and Its Discontents*, 1941, trans. by David McLintock, London: Imago Publishing, 2002, 24, 26–7.

pain, suffering touches our whole being: our bodies, emotions, and thoughts become governed by it, and thus it is exceedingly difficult to avert attention away from its hold. Suffering stays with us, we cannot escape it, and it becomes the definer of many of our mental contents and even our very existence'.² Suffering in its broadest sense, whether mental or physical, 'is always borne by individual human beings, and to recognize suffering is to recognize the suffering of individuals, and not merely of the mass. Suffering, we may say is always *singular*'.³

Suffering can also point to anguish and despair, a certain lost-ness of the human condition. As partly owing to its holistic dimension, suffering also often appears hopeless. Thus, it seems there is a difference between struggle and suffering. Struggle contains a sense of hope in the midst of all kinds of moral, societal and personal uncertainties. Struggle is part of the learning process. It's to be expected and honoured. Humans can witness each other's struggle and find mutual respect in the process, knowing that at the end of the struggle is a sense of personal achievement.

Despite the differences in meaning, the words are often used interchangeably. In addition, evil, at least in what is termed the Judaeo-Christian West, also subsumes sin, suffering and death. There are however distinctions in that suffering is often that which happens to us, it affects us whether physically, psychologically or spiritually. As Paul Ricoeur says, 'Suffering sets lamentation against reprimand, for if misdeeds make people guilty, suffering makes them victims'.⁴ We will not be able to avoid some struggle or suffering in our lives but our challenge is to find meaning in these conditions. Struggle and suffering are often connected by human hope. Viktor Frankl (1905–97) claimed that man's search for meaning was the primary motivation in his life. He wrote movingly about his own life and experiences in the Nazi concentration camps, including Auschwitz. He argued that suffering is an ineradicable part of life without which life would not be complete and added that 'if there is a meaning in life at all, then there must be meaning in suffering'.⁵ While unnecessary suffering should not be seen as heroic, one has to accept one's suffering as a task for we are all unique in the way we accept this burden:

² Elisa Aaltola, 'Philosophical Narratives of Suffering: Nietzsche, Levinas, Weil and Their Cultural Roots', in *Suomen Antropologi*, 43:3, 2019, 22–40, 23.

³ Jeff Malpas, 'Suffering, Compassion, and the Possibility of a Humane Politics' in Jeff Malpas and Norelle Lickiss (eds.), *Perspectives on Human Suffering*, Springer: Dordrecht, 2012, 14.

⁴ Paul Ricoeur, *Evil: A Challenge to Philosophy and Theology*, trans. by John Bowden, London: Continuum, 2007, 36.

⁵ Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, London: Ebury Publishing, 2004, 105 and 76.

The way in which a man accepts his fate and all the suffering it entails, the way in which he takes up his cross, gives him ample opportunity – even under the most difficult circumstances – to add a deeper meaning to his life. It may remain brave, dignified and unselfish. Or in the bitter fight for self-preservation, he may forget his human dignity and become no more than an animal.⁶

For Frankl, when faced with a hopeless situation, ‘what then matters is to bear witness to the uniquely human potential at its best, which is to transform a personal tragedy into a triumph, to turn one’s predicament into a human achievement’.⁷

It appears that struggle is a particular kind of paradox of the human condition because as much as we think we should avoid struggle, struggle defines the human condition. History throws up countless examples of people who have captured our imagination through their personal struggles and legacies. Dr Martin Luther King Jr (1929–68), Baptist minister and one of the pivotal leaders of the American civil rights movement of the sixties, used the word struggle often when he spoke of the urgency of raising political consciousness to bring about social change and racial justice. In one of his many famous addresses, delivered at the Sheraton hotel in New York City in 1962, he begins by saying, ‘Mankind through the ages has been in a ceaseless struggle to give dignity and meaning to human life’.⁸ King also saw a positive light in human struggle, the human will to continue despite all obstacles: ‘Tragic disappointments and undeserved defeats do not put an end to life, nor do they wipe out the positive, however submerged it may have become beneath floods of negative experience’.⁹

Famous for his oratorical skills, he spoke profoundly and provocatively of freedom for Black Americans and the necessity of ending discrimination, oppression and racial injustice. He wrote and spoke about the challenges for the Black struggle movements which involved other leading players but within which he became one of the most charismatic leaders:

Human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable. Even a superficial look at history reveals that no social advance rolls in on the wheels of inevitability. Every step toward the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering, and struggle; the tireless exertions and passionate concern of dedicated individuals.¹⁰

⁶ Frankl, *Man’s Search*, 76. ⁷ Frankl, *Man’s Search*, 116.

⁸ <https://viewing.nyc/dr-martin-luther-king-jr-1962-civil-rights-speech-in-new-york-city/>

⁹ <https://viewing.nyc/dr-martin-luther-king-jr-1962-civil-rights-speech-in-new-york-city/>

¹⁰ Martin Luther King Jr and Coretta Scott King, *Words of Martin Luther King Jr.*, New York: Newmarket Press, 2001, 41.