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**Muslim Responses to Suffering**

For Muslims, Allah is omnipotent. He is the cause of all things, suffering included. Allah’s will determines all, and humans are not to question His motives. But suffering can be understood by humans as either punishment or test. In the case of the former, suffering reminds Muslims of the sins they have committed, encouraging repentance and reform. In the latter case, suffering tests the faithfulness of Muslims, revealing one’s spiritual character to oneself and Allah. In both cases the Muslim who patiently accepts and embraces suffering is a righteous follower of Islam.

Many of the means by which Muslims respond to suffering are institutionalized in the Five Pillars of Islam. Muslims are expected to give regularly to charity by paying *zakat*, a consistent portion of their income. Praying and remembering God’s name are constant necessities to endure one’s own suffering. And the physical difficulty of completing the pilgrimage to Mecca and fasting during Ramadan embeds suffering in a way that makes its eventual alleviation spiritually rewarding. Muslims recognize that suffering is an essential aspect of human existence, and that in many instances one’s response to it demonstrates one’s true commitment to Allah. But Muslims also seek to alleviate the suffering of others whenever the opportunity arises.

One scholar of Islam, John Bowker, identifies two types of Muslim responses to suffering: the “hard”/passive response and the “soft”/active response. The hard response is closely associated with the internal struggle that necessitates patient acceptance of the will of Allah and constant meditation on His name. In many ways, this process is linked with the concept of greater Jihad, in which the follower struggles against the temptations and desires of the self. Conversely, the soft response is representative of active, external efforts to alleviate suffering in accordance with the prescriptions of Islamic scripture and law. Such efforts are sometimes associated with the lesser Jihad, an external struggle against the enemies of Islam that sometimes takes a violent or militaristic form. Both responses to suffering demonstrate that the understanding of and response to suffering are not only deeply embedded in Islam’s beliefs and practices but also profoundly formative to its involvements and interactions in world history.

**Works Consulted**

Bowker, John. *Problems of Suffering in Religions of The World.* Cambridge University

Press. 1970.