



# Theodicy, Religion and Compassion

explored from a Buddhist/Humanist  
Perspective by John Baxter  
see [www.johnbaxter.org](http://www.johnbaxter.org)

# Special Divine Action SDA

Profs. McGraw, Harrison, N.T.Wright, and Drs R.Williams , Pinsent, Sollereder

- **God is immanently present** and active throughout the cosmos while at the same time **nudging natural processes along in creative ways** to achieve special evolutionary ends, like human consciousness.
- God also brings about **spectacular results** in order to encourage and inspire those he has chosen as **in the miracles and resurrection of Jesus.**
- God makes himself known to man by **Grace**, (sacraments ?) **Inspiration** (scriptures ?) and **Providence** (miracles and intervening in history?).
- **WITHOUT SDA THEOLOGY IS DEAD** (Pinsent

**Theodicies** attempt to vindicate or provide examples of divine providence in the face of the existence of evil.

Theodicies presuppose an acceptance of monotheism **Jewish, Christian or Muslim.**



- **THEODICIES**

- Religions based on monotheism face a problem.
- We live in a world where unmerited suffering, horrible cruelty and unbearable pain – that is evil - are all too obvious.
- How is one to reconcile this with the actions of a loving, all powerful, all knowing God?
- By constructing theodicies, JEWISH, CHRISTIAN or MUSLIM.

## ADVANCED RELIGION HAS ANOTHER OPTION

# NON-THEISTIC RELIGIONS

- “A series of religions arose in the millennium before the common era that maintained that **the superhuman order governing the world is the product of natural laws** and not of divine wills.” (Harari, Sapiens p.249)
- These include Jainism, **Buddhism**, Daoism, **Confucianism**, Stoicism, Cynicism, Epicureanism and we should add, following Harari, **Humanism**. (*Indian religions are mainly theistic*).



# The Buddha Way. The First World Religion

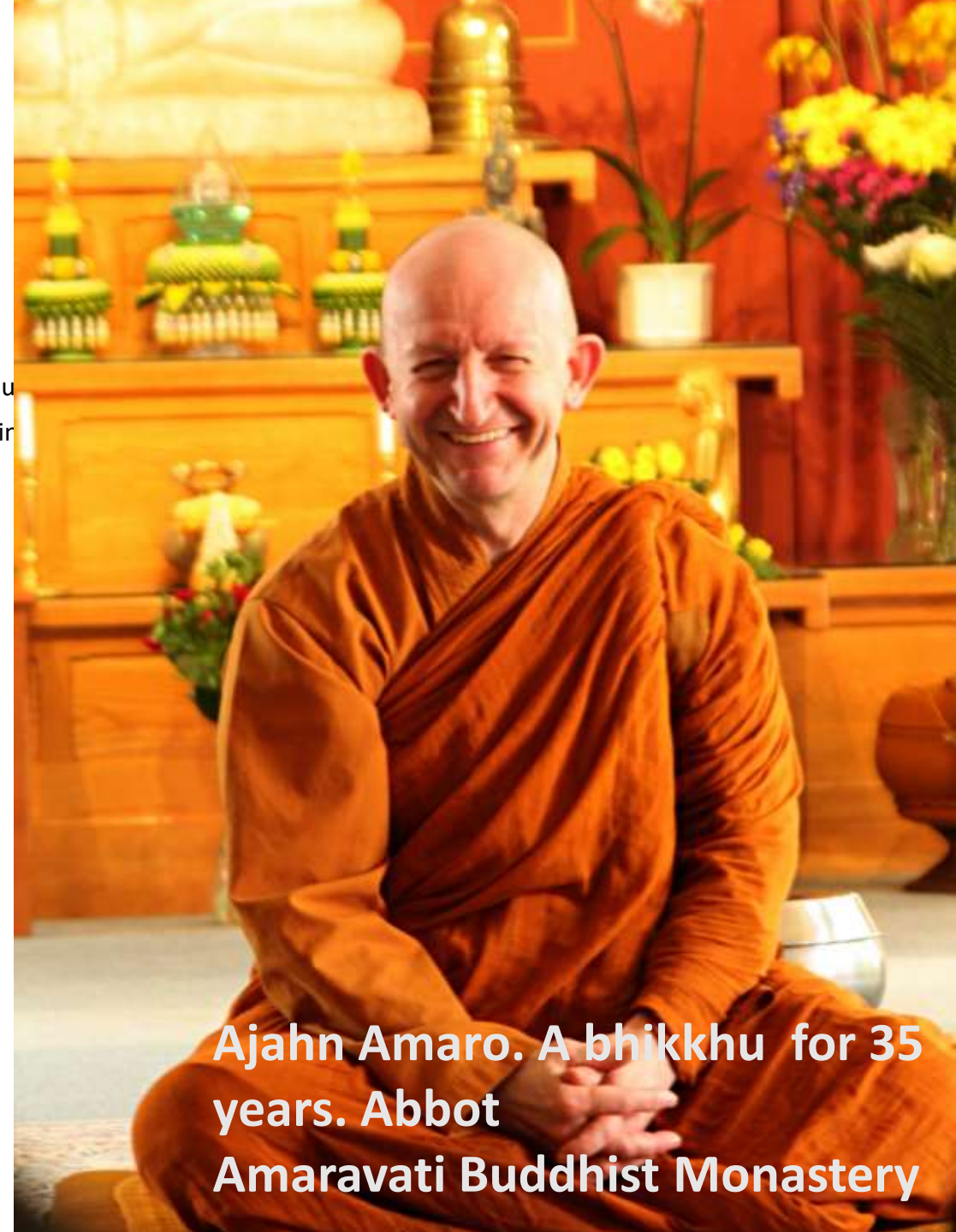




# GOTAMA – The Enlightened One. The Buddha

- He **refrained from worshiping** any divinity, and from offering prayers, sacrifices, consulting oracles, u
- He also **disapproved of claims to perform “miracles”** like levitation saying it was a distraction from ir simply translated as “suffering”.
- His focus: **understanding our nature and condition as human beings** and how we cause misery for ourselves and others as we live in a world in which so much goes wrong. His aim “enlightenment” through the training of the mind, the development of insight and responsible, compassionate behaviour.

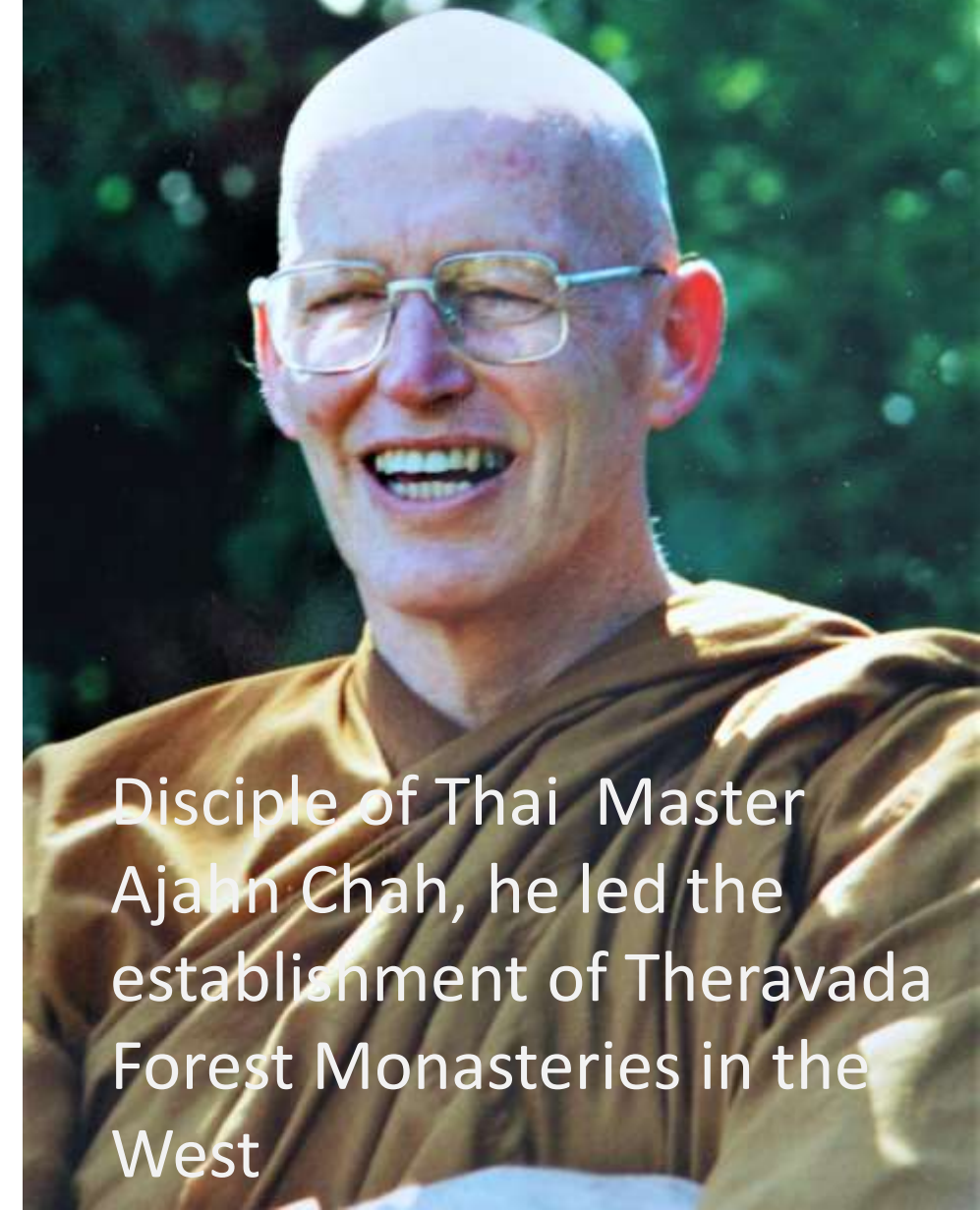
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Ajahn Amaro. A bhikkhu for 35 years. Abbot  
Amaravati Buddhist Monastery

- Gotama pointed out that ***dukkha*** (dissatisfaction, alienation, suffering, mental and physical pain), is **inescapable**. **Disease, old age and death are the fate of everyone** regardless of who we are or what we have and we attempt to evade them by craving false forms of happiness and distraction.
- Our cravings can be **acquisitive**, forms of **greed** and patterns of addictive behaviour,
- **Negative**, forms of **hatred**, anger self-loathing and denial.
- Most seriously, forms of **delusion**, error, superstition, blindness and prejudice.
- He also emphasised that **we can choose** and our intentional actions and thoughts, **kamma**, have inescapable (if not predictable) moral consequences.
- What is needed for true happiness is to tame craving, achieve balance, and attain a true “middle way” between greed and hatred based on **seeing things as they really are** so we can act compassionately, honestly and responsibly.

# Ajahn Sumedho



Disciple of Thai Master  
Ajahn Chah, he led the  
establishment of Theravada  
Forest Monasteries in the  
West



# HUMANISM

Despite significant active religious minorities, most people in the UK today class themselves as “having no religion”, unbelievers or humanists.

Yuval Noah Harari in **Homo Deus The Humanist Revolution** Ch7 describes how Humanism, in its thinking and values, has become the default position in Western cultures. He examines how wide its influence has become and sets out three different forms it has taken and the threats it now faces.

*an illuminating, and provocative piece of writing.*

# Humanists UK



Prof Brian Cox  
Physicist

Prof. Alice Roberts.  
Anthropologist,  
Anatomist. President



Prof. Jim Al Khalili  
Currently working  
on Quantum  
Biology.  
Vice-President



“We advance free thinking and promote humanism to create a tolerant society where rational thinking and kindness prevail. Help people develop their own views, be happier and more fulfilled in the one life we have. Through our ceremonies, education services, community and campaigning work, we strive to create a fair and equal society for all.”  
Andrew Copson (Executive Head)

[It keeps its programme restricted to five campaigns: Against “faith” schools and unregistered schools, Pro Secularism, Human rights and equality, Legal humanist marriages, and open Religious Education. Against Bishops in the House of Lords, and pro Assisted dying.](#)

It has among its growing membership many prominent scientists and media luminaries like Professor Alice Roberts. Its basic stance is “non-religious” in that most members are atheistic or agnostic and consider that this is the only life we have.

They do not, as Harare and I do, speak of Humanism as a religion, but rather as a life-stance or world -view.

It is not anti-religious, but is in favour of the sort of **open, multi-faith, multi-life-stance Religious Education** which was promoted particularly **by Professor Ninian Smart and now continues to be promoted by his successor at Lancaster, Professor Linda Woodhead.**

# *No Theodicies for Buddhists and Humanists*

- Humanists **see evil as being the result of human choices** and the future and wellbeing of humanity as being in our hands alone and so like Buddhism it has no place for a theodicy.
- This means the Buddha Way and modern liberal Humanism are not incompatible because of **the centrality they both give to our humanity, the alleviation of pain and suffering** and the promotion of happiness.



# Why am I unhappy about The SDA Approach?

1. Only considers Christianity

2. Seems strongly biased against metaphor, symbol and the psychological interpretations of religious texts, rituals and practices.

3. It assumes historical external events are needed to trigger belief and faith.

4. Favours “objective” and literal interpretations so blurring any distinction between magic, superstition and science.

# Will Any Serious Scientists Buy SDA?

- Here I think of **Professor Marcus du Sautoy** (successor to Professor Dawkins) who writes:
- “I reject the existence of a supernatural intelligence that intervenes in the evolution of the universe. This is a rejection of the God people assign strange properties to – such as compassion, wisdom, love – which makes no sense when it comes to the idea that I am exploring.” (What we Cannot Know p411)
- The idea he is exploring is that **“God” might be a good name for that which we cannot ever know.**
- I also think of **Professor Martin Rees** who rejects the resurrection “as an historical and physical event” as his old teacher Professor Polkinghorne does, but sees himself as “an unbelieving Christian” and member of the Church of England. He thinks atheists and theists have much in common and can work together, a position I strongly commend.

## • *Theodicy from the Jews to Paul*

- The Jewish Scriptures have theodicies in **Job, Isaiah and Amos**.
- Two other examples of theodicy can both be seen in Paul. Romans 8:18-25
- **“For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.”**
- This “glory” as is made quite clear in his letters, refers to the **“life everlasting”** or “eternal life” that the Christian can expect to experience after death,
- Also, as he strongly believed, it referred to **the imminent arrival of the End of the World**, the Day of Judgement, the Eschaton, the Parousia. It is then when the risen Jesus, who Paul had never met “in the flesh” but worshipped as “Son of God and Saviour of the World,” would return.



# ESCHATON, PAROUSIA, SECOND COMING

God will provide his chosen with a “resurrection body” at the end of the world. “When the last trumpet sounds – the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed as well, because our present perishable nature must put on imperishability, and this mortal nature must put on immortality” (I cor 15).

“Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen.” Rev. 1:7

So he comes to establish his Kingdom, reward his faithful followers, and punish the damned. (see Daniel and Mt 25;46.)



# The Apocalypse as SDA Fails to Occur

- This vision of a Day of Judgement was first adapted by Jews from Zoroastrianism it seems. They used it to encourage themselves in the face of national humiliation and persecution at the hands of the **Greek Seleucids** and then of the **Roman invasion of Palestine**.
- It was taken up by the Pharisees and Zealots (referred to in the Gospels,) then by **John the Baptist, by Jesus himself (Mark Ch13) and of course Paul who got it directly from the Pharisees**.
- When after Paul's death the expected cataclysm failed to materialise and the Western Church became the official religion of the Roman Empire, the Jews who were left after **the fall first of their Jerusalem Temple**, seemed to have de-emphasised Apocalyptic speculation and turned to Torah and Talmudic study and the meticulous practice of its precepts and the building up of synagogues in order to maintain their identity in the Diaspora.

- **The Christian Life after Death Theodicy**

- The Christians then focused on preparation for the next life. Christians developed a theodicy which emphasises that **all who turn to Christ, regardless of their sufferings and sins in this life, can expect the reward of salvation.** Heaven with Jesus. This would be both now and in the next life when they would finally receive a “resurrection body” - if only they repent, accept Jesus as Christ, Son of God and Saviour, and join his One True Church through Baptism.
- As a way of dealing with suffering does it work or is it a way of manipulating the poor and weak into compliance with their exploitation? Marx etc.





- **The Apocalyptic SDA Theodicy Resurfaces Among Christians**

The earlier Apocalyptic Theodicy has not gone away,

- At times of extreme crisis like **the Black Death** and the **30 Years War**.
- It jumped to North America with a series of “**Great Awakenings**” and the growth of Millenarian Sects, Adventists, Mormons and Witnesses. All saw signs of an immanent Second Coming.
- Now it is linked with **supporting Israel** as born-again Bible Believing Evangelicals await Jesus’ Second Coming to Jerusalem when the Jews will see the error of their ways and accept him as their Messiah - and Son of God. (Sutton: American Apocalypse)
- This was clearly the view of the American pastor Trump brought over to speak at the ceremony when the US recognition of Jerusalem as capital of Israel was announced, in order to play to his backers back home.



**It seems many US Evangelicals now see Trump as harbinger of the Apocalypse**

- This approach was no surprise to his Israeli audience. They know that smiling when this Christian theodicy is trotted out is the price they need pay for receiving vast quantities of American military aid.
- They, however, as Jews have been faced with **the enormity of the Holocaust** and of wondering what possible theodicy they could have to deal with that.

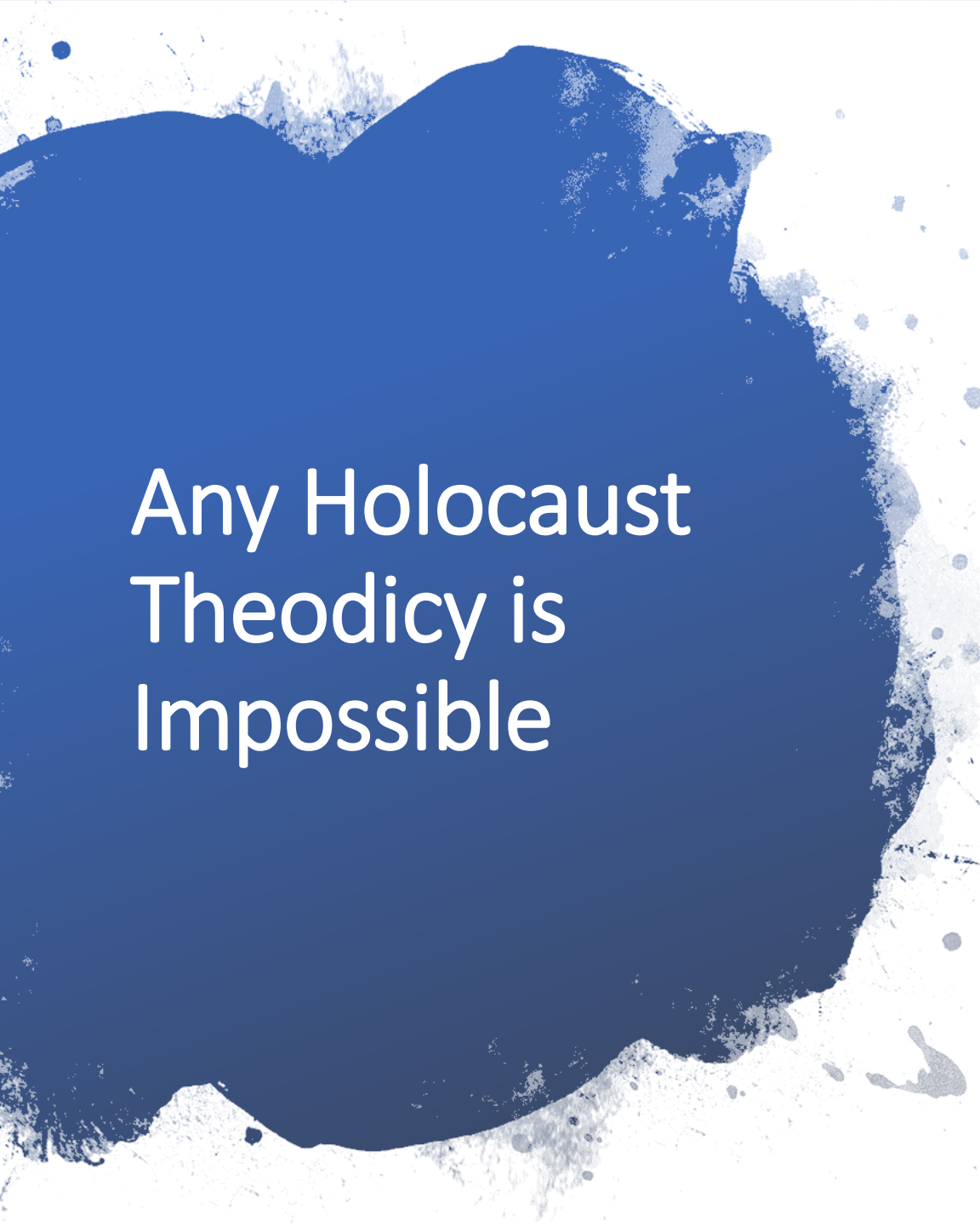


- Eduard Borysov has written an illuminating online paper entitled **Theodicy and the Holocaust, a Critical Evaluation**
  - A. The Holocaust makes no difference. Remember Christian persecutions of the Jews.
1. **Attempts at a Jewish Theodicy of the Holocaust**  
He notes some assert it is “**because of our sins we were punished**” and “**Auschwitz is our just retribution.**”
  2. Then there is the substitutionary theory. “**The Holocaust is the ultimate in vicarious atonement. Israel is the “suffering servant” of Isaiah (ch53f)”** and “**Jews are the ultimate atonement. Jews had to suffer for the loss of (their) faith (in God) and the secularisation that had been taking place amongst them.**”
  3. The “**positive theodicy**” in seeing the birth of the state of Israel as a justification for the sacrifice that was offered in the crematoriums. In fact he points out either as a religious theodicy or as a secular Zionist way of thinking **the setting up of the state of Israel** for Jews and the denial of the rights of Palestinians to own or return to their land **is seen as the will of God and justifiable because of the Holocaust.** In fact such thinking has become **almost normative in Israel** and amongst diaspora Jews.



# .Creating A Holocaust Theodicy is Questionable

“The Holocaust is the maximization of human evil, the price mankind has to pay for human freedom. The Nazis were human beings not gods: Auschwitz reflects ignominiously on humanity. It does not touch on God’s existence or perfection.” And a final quote from Arthur Cohen: “The Holocaust is an inscrutable mystery. Like all of God’s ways it transcends human understanding and demands faith and silence.”



# Any Holocaust Theodicy is Impossible

- **Richard Rubenstein.**  
**After Auschwitz** 1966
- “The Holocaust is proof that God is dead - if there were a God, He would surely have prevented Auschwitz; if he did not, then He does not exist.”
- “The thread uniting God and Man, heaven and earth, has been broken. **We stand in a cold, silent, unfeeling cosmos, unaided by any powerful power beyond our own resources.** After Auschwitz, what else can a Jew say about God?”
- “**Human life is purposeless and void of any transcendental** aim ... the meaning of life can and should be construed only subjectively. The Jews must abandon their theological illusions and create meaning for life in their own community.”

Even without God , community and identity  
can give meaning.

- Borysov concludes: “In spite of my disagreement with the atheism of Rubenstein, he provides **an alternative meaning for life - that a Jew needs to identify (himself as a member) in his religious community.**”
- These Jewish responses are surely relevant for Christian theologians



# Theodicy in Islam

Many stories, themes and personalities from both the Jewish and Christian Scriptures have been incorporated into the Koran and the Hadith

- As well as promoting a vividly described **Paradise and Hell for a life after death** theodicy, these include the idea of an **apocalyptic Day of Judgement** and of **Jesus/Isa** returning to Jerusalem to establish his rule - so leading **to mass conversions to Islam!**



# The Muslim Apocalyptic Theodicy and Islamic State

- For most Muslim history however, these Last Days teachings have been peripheral. Now with the revival of Islam initiated by **Sayyid Qutb and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt** as they smarted under Western political, and cultural dominance, this apocalyptic theodicy has been revived and used to deadly effect in the Muslim reactions against Western dominance seen first for the West in **the 11-9-2001 Twin Towers attack of Al-Qaeda**.
- Subsequently we have seen the brutal “theology” and exultant violence displayed on social media by the supporters of an **Islamic State “New Caliphate”** who think that the establishment of an uncompromisingly fundamentalist Islamic state will encourage that return of Jesus/Isa. and universal conversion to Islam. Views rejected by almost all Muslims as a perversion of Islam.



How do these Theodicies,  
Jewish, Christian and Muslim  
relate to our basic moral values?

- **Compassion,**
- **Sympathy, Empathy,**
- **Love for Others.**

# LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOUR – FOR THE JEWS

- **Compassion** in the Jewish scriptures is always **linked to justice and the support of the poor**. This has been seen as primarily devoted to family and other members of “the chosen people.”, but not exclusively.

All men are looked after by God in a “Noachic Covenant” and working animals deserve rest on the Sabbath and that the “stranger” deserves to be treated justly and with compassion.

They are in a special Covenant Relationship with God if they seek to observe the Torah.

Their treatment at the hands of Christendom has however been pretty dire and the Holocaust took their suffering and extermination to a whole new level. Despite this when it comes to practical compassion the Jews remain by far the biggest givers to all forms of charity and their contributions to western culture and society have been out of all proportion to their numbers.

# For the Muslims Compassion has been focussed on members of the Ummah,

- The Islamic Community has always been open for anyone to join who accepts Allah and his Prophet.
- Christians and Jews as People of the Book were tolerated if they paid a tax and on occasion Jews were encouraged to settle in Muslim lands, though **not since the establishment of Israel on formerly Muslim ruled land which is seen as against the will of Allah by almost all Muslims.**
- For Muslims **Zakat** means payment to support the poor and is regarded as a primary religious duty.
- *For those outside the Ummah, such as Buddhists, Hindus, Humanists Atheists and any others, toleration could be and still is “very limited” to put it mildly, if conversion was not or is not accepted.*



# Compassion for Christians and Humanists

- Historically **Christianity** has been less tolerant of “infidels” than Islam.
- Jesus taught that God is father of everyone and every hair on our heads is numbered. **Love your neighbour as your self** means even the heretic, the pagan, the adulteress or yes, your enemy. Similar to Gotama Jesus said, “In as much as you do this to these the least of my brothers, you do it to me.” (Mt 25.40) This, together with Paul’s baptism of pagans advertised that **Christianity was and is open to all, Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female in a Universal Church.**
- This council of perfection Christians have found hard to accept when it has come to **slaves, women and those seeking same sex relationships.**
- Bereft of Buddhist influence **Humanism in the West** has grown right out of this Christian view of seeing every person as being of “ultimate value”. So promoting **universal brotherhood/sisterhood, human rights and interdependence**, even as belief in God and the supernatural SDA was challenged in the Enlightenment and has for many melted away, often it must be said because the traditional theodicies for Christians and Jews have lost all moral credibility.
- When it comes to compassion, humanists simply see such behaviour as natural and based on **fellow feeling and empathy**. (utilitarianism Mill, Singer) Humans have evolved to take care of each other and we find meaning in doing so. William **Beveridge**, who promoted pensions, social security and the setting up of the NHS, to provide free medical care for all, saw himself as a “materialist agnostic”.

# Buddhist Moral Goals: The practice and develop of **Metta** - Loving kindness, **Karuna** - Compassion, **Mudita** - Altruistic Joy, **Upekkha** - Equanimity

- **For Buddhists**  
Rejecting the *varnas* or castes of Hindu society Gotama taught that the path to “true nobility” was open to all, men and women, rich and poor, regardless of class. In his promotion of **the Noble Eightfold Path, the Four Noble Truths and the Five Moral Precepts (evade killing, stealing, adultery, lying and addictive substances)** he spelt out how to do this in easily memorised form.
- **Generosity and compassion for others he taught is the first step on the Path** together with compassion towards one’s own body, feelings and emotions and his key teaching is that self-centredness is the greatest cause of suffering for the individual and those around. All this is simply **based upon our humanity** for he drew no clear dividing line between Buddhist and others.
- What is more he saw **religious tolerance as something fundamental to the good life**. He also set up a community of renunciates, **the monastic Sangha** to provide a deeper training in the practice of meditation and life-style and to preserve and communicate his teaching.
- This has led to a growing interest in and practice of Buddhist meditation by Western teachers, monastic and lay, which has now taken off in the **mindfulness movement** as practiced and promoted here at the Oxford Mindfulness Centre with its links to the university and the Warnford hospital.

# The Oxford Mindfulness Centre.

## Warnford Hospital



He has set up a careful teaching and accreditation structure with minimal reference to its roots so as not to put off Christians or Humanists . Mark Williams is a priest and canon of Christ Church.

Following Dr Jon Kabat-Zin, Mark Williams as the Oxford Professor of Clinical Psychology has introduced Meditation Training based on Buddhist practice and has been applied it in a wide range of fields from the therapeutic to the educational, to the political.



# Where is the link between Theodicy and Compassion?

No “Theodicy” but a Path, a Way

- Gotama also taught **respect for the environment and plant life and compassion towards animals and encouraged (without demanding) vegetarianism. The monotheisms?**
- Buddhist monastic lands have also always been places where **all life is protected.**
- 
- Gotama could not however have foreseen the dire catastrophes we now face – **global warming, population growth, climate change, and multiple planet and life endangering threats.**



# THE 3 RELATED SDA MONOTHEISTIC THEODICIES OF THE ESCHATON NOW FOCUS ON THE MIDDLE EAST

Despite their generosity the Jews' very successes and upward social mobility have provoked the ugly and persistent **blight of "anti-semitism"** meaning anti-Jewish prejudice.

This has been made worse by the polarising politics centred on **Jerusalem, Zionism and the presence of the Jewish state of Israel in Palestine.**

- *Now we see the three monotheistic theodicies of the Eschaton, Jewish, Christian and Muslim when taken literally as describing SDA, inflame minds on all sides towards violence and intolerance so contributing to make the world a very dangerous place, BUT IT IS NOT JUST THIS WE FACE*



**Pope Francis**  
**Laudato Si**



**Greta Thunberg**  
We don't seek praise.  
We just want to  
wake the adults up.



**David Attenborough**  
**Climate Change,**  
**The Facts.**

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David Wallace-Wells. **The Uninhabitable Earth.** A Story of the Future



## **APOCALYPSE NOW**

A quiet game of  
golf while  
California burns  
2018



Should we now  
wait for the Jewish,  
Christian or Muslim  
theodicies of  
**DIVINE**  
**INTERVENTION**  
to come true in a  
literal sense with  
**SPECIAL DIVINE**  
**ACTION ?**

- that, “We stand unaided by any power beyond our own resources.”
- Wallace -Wells says “If we allow global warming to proceed, and to punish us with all the ferocity we have fed it, it will be **because we have chosen that punishment – collectively walking down a path of suicide**. If we avert it, it will be because we have chosen to walk a different path, and to endure.” (The Uninhabitable Earth p229)
- No-one and nothing is coming to our rescue except ourselves and if our grandchildren are to survive we need contemplate drastic action.
- **ONLY 10 YEARS LEFT  
BEFORE IRREVERSABLE  
CATASTROPHE**



# Two Bishops of Durham.



1984-1994. David Jenkins: "The resurrection was not a single event, but a series of experiences that gradually convinced people that Jesus's life, power, purpose and personality were actually continuing."<sup>4</sup>

IS WRIGHT WRONG  
[www.johnbaxter.org](http://www.johnbaxter.org)



2003 – 2010. Tom Wright: "The resurrection is a historical event." Has also defended a literal belief in the Second Coming and the [resurrection of the dead](#) with a transformed "resurrection body" to live in a transformed world. "Life after life after death."

- IS WRIGHT WRONG?
  - John Baxter
- [See www.johnbaxter.org](http://www.johnbaxter.org)  
for full paper.

# Religion

- **My basic understanding of religion** is based on Geertz, Smart, Diamond and Harare. Religions cannot be understood simply through statements and reading.
- **Religion.** All religions are **prescriptive belief systems which sustain and create communities**. They are multi-faceted and communicate through shared stories, ceremonies, symbols, rules of behaviour, music and singing. Using all of these and possibly more, **they facilitate an apprehension that transcends the individual as to what reality is and how we should respond to it and to each other**. As products of human evolution and the way our brains work, they enable our species to co-operate on a mass scale as no other species can.

# Harrison. Bampton Lectures 2019

- Conclusion.
- “It may well be that in the overall scheme of history western secularity and scientific naturalism are not the terminus of all human cultures, but an eccentric side-track that leads to a dead end.”
- Really?