

Speculating God's Will

– Was the Tsunami a Divine Punishment?

By

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“[Reason] is not given us to know God, but to know the world.”

– Emil Brunner

Responding to Natural Disasters

Every disaster, big or small, will evoke multifarious responses and emotions. Take for example the recent Indian Ocean tsunami that left hundreds of thousands of people dead or homeless. It is indeed heartening to note that millions around the world responded swiftly by donating in cash and kind to ease the sufferings of the people in affected regions. The fact that many came forward to help also tells us much about how the disaster had affected them. Many of us were trying to make sense of what had happened by tuning in to news report every single hour. But when the extent of the destruction had dawned upon us, we stood empty and naked before the reality of it and we start asking “why”. While those who were directly affected and survived the tsunami ask, “Why me, Lord?”, we ask, “Why them, Lord?” There will also be some people who will ask, “Why not?” The first two “whys” reflect our existential condition – the awareness of our finitudeness facing the infinite (i.e. death and beyond). The last “why” reflects our ideological position – the way we perceive reality. While the former “whys” is a situation in need of meaning, the latter “why” is a situation of applying events into our pre-conceived structure of meaning. The former “whys” is best exemplified by those who pose the question of “where was God?” while the latter by those who directly impugned God by calling the disaster a manifestation of divine wrath or simply, “God’s punishment to the erring ways of mankind.”

The (un)Fortunates’ Attempt to Justify “Why” Disasters Happen

The perception that natural disasters are God’s way of punishing mankind is always present in certain segments of our community’s mind. For example, several e-mails were floating around immediately after the December tsunami, calling it a “divine punishment” (balak Tuhan) – that God is trying to teach mankind a lesson or two. Such rationalisation actually reveals the fact that the fortunate are indeed troubled with the fact that they were spared. As put forth by Max Weber, “The fortunate is seldom satisfied with the fact of being fortunate. Beyond this he needs to know that he has a right to his good fortune. He wants to be convinced that he ‘deserves’ it, and above all, that he deserves it in comparison with others. He wishes to be allowed the belief that the less fortunate also merely experience his due.”¹ This frame of mind gives rise to the “divine punishment” thesis. If one were to dissect this mentality, it is evident that the core of such mindset is contempt for humanity – one only stops short of saying that the victims of the tsunami deserved it. Perhaps, a friend of mine’s

¹ Max Weber, “*The Social Psychology of the World Religions*,” in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, eds. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills. New York: Oxford University Press, 1946. p. 271.

statement best reflects this mentality. In a conversation with him, he blurted out, “People are asking why it happened. I say, why not? After all, God is teaching us a lesson!” Such rationalisation reflects the need to justify oneself why he was spared of the tragedy.

Are Natural Disasters God’s Punishment?

Of course, any attempt to answer why it happened creates several immediate problems. **Firstly**, any attempt to discuss “why” involves some form of metaphysical speculating. This in itself will divert our attention from addressing the situation in concrete terms. While people are busy providing aid and working out a system to minimise deaths in future disasters, we spent our (unfortunately mediocre) ‘intellectual’ energies (much less our physical energies) discussing issues that have no concrete bearing in addressing the problems faced by those affected by the disaster. At times, such speculating exercises will take an apologetic tone. For example, there was a claim made that the Turkish earthquake in 1999 was predicted in the Qur’an. According to the claim, the year 1999 corresponds to the 99th chapter of the Qur’an, which incidentally was a depiction of a tremendous convulsion and uprooting. Of course, such linkages were selective. What makes the Turkish earthquake worthy of mention in the Qur’an, as opposed to other similar (and much more devastating) earthquakes, was not explained. The argument then is not far from those who selectively claim that many major earthquakes took place on Sundays. The point to note here is that such speculative enterprise is, in actual fact, making a mockery of religion and subjecting it to ridicule.

Secondly, when we assert that God intends to punish mankind through natural disasters, we are assuming that we know what is exactly in God’s mind. But no finite mind can grasp the Infinite. Yet, people who saw natural catastrophes as divine punishments are dead-sure that that was how God intended it to be. In seeking meaning, one creates his own judgment and transposes it to God such that he becomes God’s spokesman and representative to His Will. While it is true that the Qur’an contains references of destructions of whole cities and population as God’s intervention to correct the corrupt ways of mankind, it takes a wild leap of meaning to draw a parallel between those stories and natural phenomena today. The most common flaw here is to assume that God’s interventions as narrated in the Qur’an were natural phenomena when the motive of these stories are the *extraordinary* and *supra human*.²

Thirdly, it induces a sense of ethical paralysis. Ethical paralysis is a situation where one is impaired from thinking in terms of the ethical but instead succumbs to narcissistic moralism. For example, it is very easy to avoid any responsibility of helping victims of the disaster if they are indeed subjects of divine wrath – for helping them will be akin to going against what God intended it to be. One might also be contented to stop short of anticipating future occurrences and thus stops short of finding ways to minimise loss of lives and damages. If natural disasters are divine punishments, then we ought to let God do his business and not try to construct an earthquake detection system in the Indian Ocean. This seems to be the logical conclusion if we wish to see the recent tsunami as God’s punishment.

² The most common verse used to support “divine punishment” thesis is perhaps, verse 6:65. But to assert that God has power to send calamities (as indicated by the verse) is different from the value-statement that calamities are indeed a punishment from God.

Fourthly, the recent tsunami had exposed some ideological inconsistencies in the proponents' belief-system. If the tsunami was meant to "punish", it will be interesting to note the following: One, the largest number of deaths were Acehese. Acehese, generally, were faithful Muslims – exemplified by the fact that the tsunami had indeed strengthened their resolve in God rather than swept away their faith. Aceh itself, affectionately known as Verandah of Mecca (*Serambi Mekah*) was known for its religiosity and calls for the implementation of *shari'ah* – regardless whether it was a ploy to demand for independence or otherwise. Even if we were to argue that God wanted to punish them for the strife and conflicts, it will be interesting to note that many of the Acehese rebels were safe in the higher altitude of the jungle areas and spared from the coming waves that struck those in the towns of Melabouh, Banda Aceh and other small villages, which were largely inhabited by fishermen who try to make ends meet every single day. Two, we must also take into consideration that many of those killed, especially in India and Sri Lanka, were women and children – whose lives were already hard enough than to be part of the imagined political global conspiracy against the Muslims. But then, as some would argue, what about the thousands of party-loving, bikini-clad Westerners who were in Phuket – surely they deserved it? If we were to accept this reasoning, then it might seem that in order to punish those in Phuket, God had to sacrifice hundreds of thousands more as "collateral damages". Let us not forget that the hundreds of thousands were Muslims, spanning from Aceh in the East of the Indian Ocean, to Bangladesh in the north and to Somalia in the west. Three, if natural disasters such as the recent tsunami and earthquake were a mandate from Heaven to punish the erring ways of mankind, perhaps it will be more effective to cause an earthquake, not only in the centre where moralists will agree that there is widespread immorality and decadent cultures, but also in areas where there are no fault-lines.

Fifthly, pointing to natural disasters as God's supra-natural interventions in contrast to seeing it as a natural cause process is an empty rhetoric. According to the uncompromising monotheism of Islam, God is ever-present in this ever-changing world. If everything is in a state of flux, then God is constantly having a hand in the creative processes of this world. In short, we can safely assume that everything that occurs in this world is an act of God – be it good or bad. This poses a dilemma for proponents of the "divine-punishment" thesis: Does that mean that when we are going through our normal lives, in relative comfort and absence of misery and suffering, God is absent? If the answer is yes, then we are submitting to a deistic conception of God – that God is detached from our everyday lives until we come to witness Him awakened and coming at us in wrath and might (like a tyrant awakened from his slumber). If we were to reflect deeper, this conception of God is no different from those who live their everyday lives without any care for divine presence but will conveniently seek the divine in times of need; both uses God to his or her advantage while ignoring His role and presence in better times. But if the answer to my previous question is a no, then it makes little sense to talk of natural disasters as divine act, since we agree that even the absence of such phenomenon is still a divine act. Thus, the whole discourse on disasters-as-an-act-of-God gives us no further insights than what we already ought to accept – that He is ever-present (Q. 2:115) and neither slumbers nor sleep (Q. 2:255).

“Divine Punishment” Thesis as Myth-Making

Despite these highlighted problems, linking natural catastrophes to divine punishments persists within certain segments of the community. In fact, such ideas are observably popular amongst certain religious fundamentalist circles. Such ideas, undoubtedly, serve to bolster certain ideological agendas. In the centre of fundamentalist conception of the universe is the view that the world is witnessing an unfolding eschatological drama of good versus evil, culminating in the triumph of the former. Thus, natural disasters are seen as part of the drama to return all things in submission to the divine. This in turn strengthens their resolve that the struggle (read: agenda) must be pursued, having received a boost from the Heaven itself. This bolstering of group ideology through selective interpretations of events or phenomena is akin to what is termed as myth-makings. According to Bronislaw Malinowski, a myth “expresses, enhances, and codifies belief”, as well as “safeguards and enforces morality”.³ Thus, it will not be surprising that some segments of people will use the recent natural catastrophe as evidence of a perceived anomie and as “God’s warning” of an even bigger catastrophe should mankind not heed “the(ir) advice” and follow “the(ir) true path”. We saw, for example, how some people attributed the Turkish earthquake in 1999 to God’s punishment to Turkey for accepting a secular-style of government and clamping down on religious expressions such as donning of hijab in certain public institutions. Strangely though, there was a relative silence on “divine punishment” thesis when the Iranian city of Bam was hit by a major earthquake that left an estimated 30,000 dead in 2001. The reason was obvious – Iran, unlike Turkey, is purportedly an Islamic State and silently, was an inspiration for many Muslim fundamentalists. I have yet to hear remarks passed that Iran was “divinely punished” for being Shi’ite.

But almost immediately, when the US city of Florida was hit by a series of typhoons, I hear remarks that this was divine punishment for US interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq. Perhaps we are in need of lessons on meteorology and geography.

Such myth-makings are a result of utopian thinking. According to Karl Mannheim, a state of mind is utopian when it is incongruous with the state of reality within which it occurs.⁴ The truth of the matter is, natural disasters are, tautologically, simply natural. We now seems to be in a much fortunate position to reflect upon humanity’s humble beginnings. In a pre-scientific age, natural phenomena were indeed attributed to some supernatural interventions. Early civilisations were filled with mythologies that formed part of the mental structure of the pre-scientific mind. Thunders, floods, earthquakes, eclipses and such were testament to the wrath of God or the gods, or simply connected to the magical, miraculous and the fantastic. Such myths sought to rationalise or explain the natural or physical world in which the primitive man stood in awe.⁵ Today, there is no need to appeal to such myths; just like how Prophet Muhammad once censured his people for suggesting that the solar eclipse (that coincided with the death of his 10-month old son, Ibrahim) was a sign of Heaven’s grief: “O people, the sun and the moon are two signs of Allah, they do not eclipse because of the birth or death of any person.”⁶

³ Bronislaw Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays*. Illinois: The Free Press, 1948. p. 79

⁴ Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1985. p. 192.

⁵ Andrew Lang, *Myth, Ritual and Religion*, vol. I & II. London: Longmans, 1913.

⁶ Al-Bukhari, *Kitab al-Jumu’ah*, hadith no. 990; cf. Muslim, *Kitab al-Kusuf*, hadith no. 1508.

We now understand better natural phenomena around us. The recent earthquake corresponds to the fault-line of two continental plates. If any, it reveals our human weaknesses of ignoring our delicate connection to our natural world and our failure to anticipate a destructive tsunami akin to those witnessed in the Pacific Ocean. For the religious, there are two options open to him: One either attributes natural disasters to divine wrath or accepts them as part of the casuistic processes of nature as determined by God (*sunnabtullah*). The former brings contempt to humanity and produces incoherence in one's mental structure as discussed above. The latter gives us a reason to struggle further to understand the divine through understanding our world in scientific terms.

As for those who asks "where was God amidst all these pain and sufferings", I am more inclined to believe that God is present in the pouring of compassion and help to victims of the disaster. As put forth by Boethius, "...if there be no God, from whence cometh any good?"⁷ To those who question where was God, perhaps it will be useful to take heed of the Qur'anic dictum: "God does wish to lighten your (difficulties) for man was created weak (in flesh). (Q 4: 28). And this is perhaps how we strengthen our faith in the midst of the absurdity of life *in-itself*.

[This article was published in *The Muslim Reader* magazine, Jan-Apr 2005 issue.]

⁷ Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*. (1609). Interestingly, much of the discussion on theodicy was centered around the first part of Boethius' formulation: "If...there be a God, from whence proceed so many evils?"; The second formulation, "And if there be no God, from whence cometh any good?" Boethius' formulation acknowledges both the scandal of evil and the mysteriousness of good. But it is certainly interesting that the nature of good itself was scarcely given much attention by many. In the Qur'an itself, God was portrayed more of a loving and kind Being than one full of wrath and anger.