

Transcending The Divine

In Post-Tsunami Aceh

By

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In the wake of the Boxing Day tsunami catastrophe, recent developments in Aceh suggest that certain religious groups are upping the ante in their blind fervour to perform God's bidding. In one instance, it was reported that an Indonesian-based Christian group cloaked by the name Light of Love for Aceh have been vying to bring 50 Muslim orphans back to a Christian orphanage in Jakarta.

Given that Aceh is hailed by its predominantly Muslim denizens as the first Islamic province in Southeast Asia, it is understandable that such efforts would incite deep resentment amongst the suspicious locals as well as regional Muslims against foreign Christian aid workers. In fact, some of Indonesia's most influential religious clerics from the Indonesia Council of Ulemas have warned of a global Muslim repercussion if such latent proselytising initiatives masked in humanitarian projects were to continue. As thousands reel from the aftermath of the disaster, the last thing they need is religious groups clambering to proselytise.

To the wider world, these incidences reflect a growing tension between affected parties that could adversely affect relief efforts. Taking credence from the Southern Thailand dilemma, one can imagine that should conflicts between faith communities erupt, pockets of militant Muslim radicals from the likes of Al-Qaeda, Jemaah Islamiyah and Laskar Jihad will certainly join in the fray. Inciting religious affiliation entrenched in the concept of the global Muslim community or ummah ala bin Laden and Al-Zarqawi, the Aceh conundrum can very well be the perfect condiment that extremists need to recruit sympathisers to their wayward cause.

Already some Muslims are seeing this disaster as a divine punishment or bala' from God, thus implicitly suggesting that those who perished were a deserving lot. To counter this exclusivist worldview, Prof. Ibrahim Abu' Rabi, a Muslim scholar based in the US, urges the Muslim community not over-rationalise the tsunami disaster on religious grounds but rather focus on the lessons derived from its aftermath during a recent visit to Singapore. He stresses the imperative need to embrace the Islamic notion of ihsan or compassion in upholding a humanitarian worldview by helping the sufferers. As survivors turn to religion in a desperate bid to regain their foothold, he is reiterating the point that distribution of humanitarian aid must not be delegated to a secondary role.

Yet a glimmer of hope shines through for humanity. It is perhaps encouraging to note that the majority of the Muslims in Southeast Asia have reacted positively in dispensing much needed aid. Muslim organisations in Singapore have managed to raise funds to alleviate sufferings of the Acehese people. Although their response has considerably sluggish, the 57-member Organisation of Islamic Countries (OIC) headed by Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi has contributed a substantial amount totaling US\$118 million (S\$190 million) amidst international pressure.

Still, such efforts must transcend the self-made boundaries of faith to benefit survivors of the tsunami disasters in Sri Lanka and other affected non-Muslim areas. In light of this, the world can applaud efforts by The Islamic Religious Council of Singapore, or MUIS, which have established a fund aptly named the Rahmatan Lil Alamin, or Blessings for All. As the name suggests, money raised from this fund will be channelled to provide relief for victims of calamities, regardless of race or religion.

In a world where a slew of disparaging efforts committed by extremist Muslim groups have figured prominently in the media, such initiatives of peace represents a refreshing whiff of affirmative insights that enhances humanitarian values which have hitherto been largely derided by hijackers of the Islamic faith. While the battle is far from over, it would seem that at this juncture the moderates have passed the litmus test and gained the upper hand in the ideological civil war within the Muslim world today.

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