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WHERE IS GOD THE MERCIFUL WHEN DISASTER HITS HIS SERVANTS?

A Response to John Campbell-Nelson

Muhammad Machasin

Problems and Objectives

The main problem of Campbell-Nelson's paper, "Religion and Disaster", is how a believer puts his/her belief in a merciful and caring God "face to face" when that disaster may take the dearest of his or her family and possessions.¹ At times it is very difficult for a believer just to accept from their religious traditions – for example that disaster is meant to be lesson from God that may be punishment for the sin that he or she has done, since it does not make sense or appear just for those who perished in the disaster, or for small children losing their parents. What lessons can be learned? If disasters are meant to be a punishment from God, then a believer may feel unfair treatment, for there are perhaps many others committing greater sins without any punishment from God.

¹Page numbers in the body text refer to the Indonesian version of the paper in Zakaria J. Ngelow et al., *Teologi Bencana; Pergumulan Iman dalam Konteks Bencana Alam dan Bencana Sosial* [Theology of Disaster; the Struggle of Belief in the Context of Natural and Social Disaster] (Makassar: Oase, 2006), 95-109.

It would appear that there are no significant differences between a God who works with disasters and an unmerciful Devil.

Understanding this problem and seeking an appropriate pastoral approach to the trauma that the victims have of the disaster, constitute the reflective objectives in this paper. Why disaster – in this case the earthquake that hit Alor Island in 2004 – happened, is an additional question that deserves attention. Four theories are proposed, the first three of them being based on the lack of knowledge of the proper cause of the earthquake, and the fourth a scientific explanation helping people understand why the disaster happened – but does not satisfy those who need answers related to belief. Based on this scientific explanation they may come to a theological conclusion that it was God who constituted the real cause of the disaster, but then a faith question arises: Why did God create an unstable earth?

This raises the essential “theological” question: How does a scientific explanation treating geological issues co-exist with a religious explanation giving priority to value and meaning? The understanding that people have of this question may determine both the attitude and actions that they take after the disaster. If, for example, they understand the earthquake as having been caused by God’s anger, then repentance is the most appropriate action; but if they know that it is caused by a shift or collision of plate tectonics, then building stronger houses is the answer.

The Proper Attitude of a Believer

The explanation that tries to blend both scientific theories of natural forces and a deeper theological meaning is to say that God is conducting a continuous creation in the process of nature. Erosion of soil by rain and wind will make the surface of earth uniformly smooth and ultimately under water unless there is another work counteracting this. Here it we can see earthquakes elevating some parts of the earth’s

surface and the eruption of volcanoes pouring forth lava from the earth. Thus, the disaster happens because people live in God's workplace and therefore, the only choice for them is to leave those earthquake-prone areas.

The next problem relative to this explanation that may disturb believers is that faith and piety do not seem to be able to protect them from disaster. This frightens those who are accustomed to understand these events as God's reminder to sinners that they may come back to His righteous ways, as is told in the biblical story of Eliphaz, who tells Job that his suffering from skin disease is the result of his sins. However, Job persisted since he did not feel he had committed such sins by which he deserved such punishment. It was long after his friend left that Job realized he had misjudged God of unfair punishment to him, since he had no right to measure God's deeds with his own understanding.

It seems that the repentance of Job is the last attitude that a believer is suggested to take in light of God's work and can be taken as basis for proper pastoral work. It is of great importance for a believer to exalt God and to accept whatever "fate" He gives to him/her, although the basic question is still unanswered: Where is God whom we exalt and worship when disaster strikes and destroys almost everything we have? It is true that we are His creatures and He can do whatever He wants to do with his own possessions. Nevertheless, we may then ask if there is any significant difference between believing and disbelieving, between obedience and disobedience when facing disaster. Does this have any effect whatsoever? It would seem that belief and obedience have no effect on God's might and greatness. They may only effect the believer in making him or her strong enough to deal with disaster and other difficulties of life.

However, the hope of salvation in the hereafter can console believing victims. Based on the belief of later salvation, we can say that those who

perish by disaster are actually saved by God from the aftermath that may yield even greater suffering. From God's perspective, their duty has been fulfilled and it is the survivors that should continue to live as witnesses of His mercy – the success of which is not measured with goals achieved and its term is not measured by length or shortness of time. It is only God who knows the infinite mystery of life. However, we may ask whether this explanation is really satisfying. Referring to the scripture of Islam, for example, we may find hints of this. It is stated in the Qur'an, for instance, that:

... it is possible that you dislike a thing which is good for you, and that you love a thing which is bad for you. But Allah knows, and you know not. (2/the Cow: 216).

In another verse, the scripture says:

These are the Signs of Allah: We rehearse them to you in Truth; and Allah means no injustice to any of His creatures. (3/the Family 'Imrân: 108).

Accordingly, what seems to be God's indifference may be understood as suffering that can be understood as the existence of the mystery of His wisdom that human beings cannot grasp. In the words of a prominent liberal Muslim thinker (the Mu'tazilites), al-Qâdlî 'Abd al-Jabbâr (945-1025) "God's view of his servants, concerning affairs of religion and divine obligation,² is better than their own view of them themselves."³

It is perhaps in this light that God is often described not only as the Merciful, the Most Generous, but also as the Torturer and the Revengeful. His acts are not dependent on what his servants do. However, one may wonder whether such a description, which we find in

²The original Arabic text reads *انه تعالى أحسن نظرا لعباده منهم لأنفسهم وفيما يتعلق بالدين والتكليف*. Here I omit the conjunction *و*, since the writer says that the last phrase is a restriction (التقييد) to the previous.

³Cf. his *Sharh al-Uṣūl al-Khamsa*, in the version of *Qawâm al-Dîn Mânkdîm Ahmad bn Ahmad bn al-Husain bin Abî Hâshim al-Husaynî Shashdîv*, ed. 'Abd al-Karîm 'Uthmân (Cairo: Maktaba Wahba, 1965), 133.

almost all of scripture, is more reflective of the inability of human beings to grasp the mysteries of the world in which they live than to understand the nature of God.

Pastoral Attitude

Campbell-Nelson suggests in his conclusion that we avoid blaming anyone in dealing with disasters. To blame anyone, including oneself, will not help the victims, except for the fact that it may release the anger in their heart but with the danger of it being focused on the wrong targets. Nevertheless, taking the psychological condition of the victim as a chance to lead them into repentance and returning to the right path is the same as creating an opportunity for proselytization.

There is nothing wrong in making someone realize the weakness of his position, the insecurity of his condition or the unhappy situation that he may face because of the unpredictability of “mother-nature”, or God. Thus, what is done here is not blaming bad deeds as the cause for disaster, but rather considering the psychological condition of the victims and making them aware of bad things that they have done. It can be said that to die in the condition of belief and piety gives more hope and is more meaningful than to die in one’s sin. Especially if we remember that there is only a slight line between worldly safety and unsafety.

The second conclusion is that we should not dwell on sorrow because of the disaster. We cannot but accept this conclusion. However, trouble and sorrow belongs to us as human beings; since without it we are no longer human. What one must remember is that the events should not overwhelm the victims, crushing their hopes and preventing them from living the remainder of their lives still trusting God.

I think we have to say “amen” also to the conclusion that pastoral help is needed by many of the victims in order to regain normal life after

the shock and deep grief resulting from the disaster. They have to focus on recovery, both as individuals and as community.

The Still Unanswered Question

There has been a lingering question during the writing of this response: Can religion, in the face of disaster, be replaced by psychology or humanism to reinforce the spirit of the victims? To seek the answer to questions related to disaster from a theological perspective and make it satisfying for a believer, has many similarities with psychological advice aiming at awakening his or her mental strength in order that he/she may survive. With this mental strength he or she may overcome his or her trauma and sorrow, and return to normal life.

The religious loyalty to supernatural sources and basic sacred teachings, that for some make religion far better than “man-made” sciences sometimes constitutes an impediment for developing satisfying religious attitudes and advice. We may be trapped in our loyalty to a certain way of understanding, whereas there are in fact various methods and understandings that are latent in religious traditions. On the other hand, the weakness of human work that results in the emergence of science can be amended by the existence of many individuals in different places and times, working to continuously to find the best approach and theories and the most effective techniques.

Another available choice is that both religious explanations and science may not always be put in opposition, but sometimes they can be used together to explain in accordance with different conditions faced by people. There is a time where religious explanations can give a better solution, as in the case of death of those we love, but there are also times where a scientific explanation is more satisfying; and often the combination of both will give a more satisfying answer.

Conclusion

What is the answer to the question posed in the title of this response-paper? God is there in the heart of believers, who sometimes are able to avoid or survive the disaster, but in other cases cannot avoid it when disaster strikes. Sometimes people may be saved by chance, so that religious people consider it “God’s help”. It is true, as in the story of Job, that human beings may not consider themselves that important to God for having given loyalty to Him. Perhaps they hope that being obedient will make God obliged to give His help and mercy to them. However it is true as well that a believer may have more hope for temporal salvation based on his or her loyalty to God and good deeds. Nevertheless, we all have to accept whatever fate God has in store for us. *Fa-laka-l-hamdu ‘alâ mâ qadait* is a phrase in the prayer of most traditional Muslims, meaning “For Thee is all praise for anything that Thou have destined for me”. In front of Thee, I am powerless, except by the power that You give me and You can take it again any time You will.

Bibliography

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