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A CRITICAL REVIEW: RELIGION AND DISASTER

A Response to John Campbell-Nelson

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This response is titled, “A Critical Review of Religion and Disaster”. The word “critical” is used carefully. I find hardly any weaknesses in the argumentation of the paper. However, I meditate on John Campbell-Nelson’s words and localize them in our context as Yogyakarta people who were deeply wounded from the earthquake disaster that happened here on May 27, 2006. I do not know where I am in the four answers to the questions: Are you all right? and Why did this have to happen? Campbell-Nelson says that four theories emerge from these questions. The first answer as to why it happened, relates to government policies. The second answer refers to a local myth. The third answer, from church leaders, refers to the judgment of God. The fourth answer is a geological explanation of the causes of the earthquake. Through the last category, Campbell-Nelson says that many people in Alor believe that God did not cause this event. However, if, the current theory of geology explains the earthquake as a result of the moving of two continental plates, it does not answer the question of why God created such a restless earth.

For me, an answer depends on the question, which is determined by the communities whose convictions are shaped by their worldview, scientific framework, global information, previous memories, struggles, social classes, gender, and territorial awareness. The questions reflect their capability to interpret their everyday experiences in the ways that make them meaningful. People are always in process. The idea of a fixed category for reflecting on a people's theology of disaster should consider the growth of their understanding on the issues as time passes. Most religions assume that God created this earth. However, evolutionary theory suggests that this earth is a result of a long process of earth formation over millions of years. Microsystems are being made and re-made. As Campbell-Nelson points out, a Christian theology that assumes ongoing creation will come to the understanding that God is still working through the long process of making and re-making this earth.

However, disaster is not only about the question of why it had to happen. I was running with my dog, Dusky, when the 5.9 tectonic earthquake hit Yogyakarta on Saturday morning, May 27, 2006. The first question that blasted in my mind at the time was, Where is the source of the earthquake? Since we live close to a very active volcano, Mt. Merapi, many people in Yogyakarta thought the earthquake might be connected with the eruption of Merapi. The government of the Sleman district had prepared the people around Merapi to face the possibility of an imminent eruption of Merapi. Government preparations were different from "Grandfather" (*Mbah*) Maridjan who was known as the "Keeper of Merapi" (*Juru Kunci*). Mbah Maridjan assumed that he was part of the power of Merapi. He holds Merapi rituals, as well as praying five times a day as a Moslem. When the *wedus gembel* (literally "white sheep" – which are dangerous clouds of super hot gasses that flow down the mountain) erupted, he walked around his house, greeting the clouds by saying *Assalamuailakum* with his hand facing to the

"white sheep" as he blessed the killing clouds with a peaceful voice. Then the clouds turned back in the opposite direction from the area where Mbah Maridjan was standing. Surely, Mbah Maridjan's human behaviour of not running away from the threat of disaster cannot represent the people of Alor, much less all of Indonesia. A person like Mbah Maridjan is rare.

However, the theological response of Mbah Maridjan shows a similarity with most common people in Java when they have to face disaster. Yunita Winarno studies a farm community in West Java whose rice fields were attacked by rats that brought a plague of pests to the region. These farmers don't understand that the plague of rats was stimulated by using pesticides that killed other predators and disrupted the balance in the ecosystem. After they learned about ecosystem cycles and returned to their organic systems of farming, they were able to overcome the disaster. These farmers' knowledge grew by mixing science with their religious beliefs that the sources of their lives is in the hand of God. They didn't create a dichotomy to deal with these issues. Winarno says that when they were still unclear about the source of rats, they went to the *Kyai* (Muslim leader) to ask for holy water to spread in their fields. At the same time they tried to understand a scientific response toward the sources of pest disease that brought damage to their harvest. Water and oil are seen in many religions as mystical instruments to mediate the power of God. In my study of social disaster in North Moluccas due to communal violence, I came to understand that the logic of religious understanding was still based on pre-Islamic and pre-Christian concepts that were given new meaning within the old forms. The old beliefs were rejected conceptually, but the new practices still incorporated old forms and substance in times of emergency-like disaster.

Campbell-Nelson refers to a list of disasters that indicate the complexity of attempting a coherent study of the roles of religions in

interpreting and alleviating sudden, large-scale disruptions of human life. Campbell-Nelson's observations are very interesting to consider in relation to the assumptions made by particular religious communities in response to disaster. Throughout his paper, his analysis of the roles of religions can be distinguished from the response of a religious person towards what is happening in their current life. When people reflect on their theological understanding of why the disaster happens, they might start with an attitude of blaming other people. For me, the position of blaming someone or something as the cause of the disaster is seldom the final determinant of their human behaviour. People tend to begin with blaming, then move forward in a process of introspection, if they want to create new meaning in their life. Without the process of introspection, they will never come up with an adequate response to the disaster they face. Reflecting on the past can start with blaming someone or something as the cause of the disaster. But the survival instinct of human beings tends to adjust their mechanism of interpretation in a time of chaos. At least, that is what I have seen among the women survivors of the May 27 earthquake in Yogyakarta during the first few weeks of the emergency. Perhaps men to tend to ask more questions, but women tend to focus on their internal crisis by doing many things. During their immediate response to strengthen their whole family to face the disaster, women play big roles. The question of why the earthquakes happen is not as important as the question of what I have to do in this chaotic situation. I think this is the important religious question for many survivors.

For example, Ibu (Mother or Mrs) Wanti reflects on her memories of Ibu Ngatiah whose strong laughter rang out from her house the night before the morning quake. Less than 8 hours later, from the same house she heard crowing, screaming and crying. When she heard the sound of laughing, she offered up in her heart a prayer of thanksgiving to God. She didn't go out to reach the voices. But when she heard the sound of

crying, while still offering thanksgiving in her heart, she ran quickly to reach the screams. Passing others who wept in despair, she climbed through the ruins of her neighbour's house to dig for Ibu Ngatiah. Ibu Wanti could only give such a heroic response because her mechanism of introspection works very well. As a Christian, to live like Christ for others is the core of her theology. Ibu Wanti was able to save two of Ibu Ngatiah's children whom she dug out of the ruins, but her Muslim friend and a neighbour, Ibu Ngatiah, died in her arms. She whispered a prayer in the bleeding ear of Ibu Ngatiah. In that prayer for Ibu Ngatiah, which only Ibu Wanti knows, she expressed her conviction that God loves her and wants to have her back soon. Disaster is seen as chaos but it doesn't separate human beings from the blessing of God. With this theological interpretation, she could help many people. Many people, from all religious traditions, draw on their different faiths as a basis for reaching out to the victims of the disaster.

The hermeneutics of disaster cannot revolve around blaming. Reflecting on the past in order to change present conditions requires introspection, reformulation and reaffirmation. Sometimes there is a contradiction between our understanding and our experience. In the process of our reflection and practice the contradictions are smoothed out as time goes by. This process helps the people continue to retell their story in a way that accommodates different aspects of their spiritual relationship to the Creator. In most religious traditions, nature is seen as the creation of God, with which human beings need to live in harmony. Disaster, which brings death to human beings, shows the power of God. Faith prompts the feeling in our hearts that though the earth may disappear, the love of God will always remain with human beings. This foundation of thought leads people like Ibu Wanti to rebuild their families, neighbourhoods and society after experiencing the destruction of death and ruin.