

SO-CALLED "NATURAL" DISASTERS

III. The Aftershocks to Our Religious Beliefs

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Unhappy mortals! Dark and mourning earth!
Affrighted gathering of human kind!
Eternal lingering of useless pain!
-- Voltaire, *Poem on the Lisbon Disaster*, 1755

(T)housands of pilgrims to a Marian shrine (on India's coast) were washed away as they attended mass...(A) divinity student.. said she watched one man shout: 'There is nothing! There is nothing! Where is God? What is God?'
- [Chicago Tribune](#), 12/31/04

The powerful [Sumatra quake and tsunami](#) not only moved whole islands, [caused the Earth to wobble](#), and took more than [160,000 lives](#).

They also shook our world views to the core, and placed a tremendous PR burden on the [more than 100 competing members](#) of the global "non-profit" religion industry.

This is partly because of the sheer scale of the disaster. But it is also because this was surely **one of the most ecumenical "natural" catastrophes** in history.

While at least half the victims are Muslim, there are also substantial numbers from most of the world's other major religions, including Hindus, Buddhists, Christians, Jews, Jains, and Sikhs, as well as many non-believers.

This has posed an interesting explanatory challenge to all these different religious perspectives at once, and has allowed us to compare their responses. When we do so, as discussed below, we find that many of them have been **unhelpful, anti-humanitarian, and even downright loony**.

Indeed, the **aftershocks that the tsunami has caused to religious mythology, especially to the curious views held by true believers, fundamentalists and extremists of all persuasions,** may be among its few benefits.

Meanwhile, of course, the crisis has also permitted those of us who are perhaps a little less certain about Divine Will to join together in what has become **an unprecedented, salutary transnational effort** to help some of the world's least well off.

We truly hope that the Gods *are* watching -- They may learn something.

A Wave of Skepticism?

On the one hand, many of the world's faithful are now questioning their religious beliefs – a logical reaction that parallels the wave of skepticism that swept across Europe after the devastating Lisbon tsunami of 1755.

According to these new skeptics, recent events in South Asia have demonstrated that our modern gods may not be quite as powerful, helpful, or attentive as we might have hoped.

As a former head of the Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum put it, perhaps we are dealing with a real "nebbish" here.

Certainly the notion of "praying for the victims," as one Protestant minister blithely suggested that we do at a memorial service that I attended this week, **seems a little odd in this situation.**

After all, if Poseidon were willing or able to help the innocent victims of this disaster, presumably He would have done so several weeks ago.

The fact is that we may just have to rely upon each other. That leaves precious little extra time and energy to pay homage to diffident bystanders, no matter how immortal.

Sending Us a Message?

On the other hand, some true believers are stubbornly digging in.

Under the gun to explain how the mass suffering produced by the tsunami is consistent with the existence of Supernatural Powers, they have reverted turned to variations on the age-old theme of **"blaming the victim."**

As these [fundamentalists](#) would have it, Poseidon (or Allah or God or Shiva or karma or... ..) is just "angry" with some or all of us, and is **trying to send a message.**

According to this anti-empathetic view, the millions of people who have suffered from this tsunami -- and presumably all other disaster victims from the Genesis Flood on down -- richly deserved what they got, or were sacrificed to teach the rest of us "lessons."

The precise messages sent and the lessons to be learned are a bit murky, but there is no shortage of proposed alternatives:

- ✧ For example, [Godhatessweden.org](#), a website owned by the Topeka, Kansas-based **Westboro Baptist Church**, has suggested that the suffering of "filthy, faggot Swedes" in the tsunami disaster was [punishment from God](#) for Sweden's tolerance toward homosexuality. This particular church has also sponsored another website that features a [rather tasteless proposed design](#) for a monument to tsunami victims.
- ✧ **Sheik Fawzan Al-Fawzan**, who is Imam of Prince Mitaeb Mosque in Riyadh, a professor at Imam Mohamed Bin Saud Islamic University, and a member of Saudi Arabia's Senior Council of Clerics, its highest religious body, suggested in a recent [interview on Saudi television](#) that the tsunami was "sent by God" to punish South Asian countries for immoral sexual activity, and for letting [gay people into their countries](#).

The illustrious Sheik has also argued that "[slavery is part of Islam](#)," and that those who deny this claim are **"infidels" who deserve to be beheaded.**

- ✧ One leading American fundamentalist commentator, **Bill Koenig**, [has suggested](#) that a disproportionate number of Christians miraculously survived the tsunami, compared with their Muslim or Hindu brethren. (Presumably Bill did know that there were more Muslims and Hindus than Christians in the region to begin with...)
- ✧ **Todd Strandberg**, the founder of [Raptureready.org](#), [suggested](#) that the tsunami was a clear sign of the beginning of the "end times" when Jesus returns to Earth to punish our sins. (Presumably 1755 was just a false start...)

- ✎ Similarly, a Salvation Army officer in Sri Lanka commented that it was indeed very odd that "[All of our officers \(clergy\) survived](#).... God spared their lives."(...Although he admitted that some of them also had SA flotation devices....)
- ✎ Another proto-Christian website argues that disasters like the recent tsunami and the Flood in Genesis don't make God a "mass murderer" because "[there is no such thing as an innocent human](#)." (...and unless you are *absolutely* innocent, or can swim really well, you deserve to drown.....)
- ✎ Korean "scientists" have [demonstrated conclusively](#) that Noah's ark was strong enough to have withstood a tsunami and floods even larger than the Sumatran one - - like those produced by the Genesis Flood. **The Reverend Sun Myung Moon**, who recently described himself as "[the Messiah](#)" at an event held in his honor at the US Congress, is evidently planning to enter the ship-building industry.
- ✎ **Israel's Chief Sephardic Rabbi, Shlomo Amar**, the President of its High Rabbinical Court, [also saw fit to blame the tsunami victims](#), asserting that God was punishing people who failed to fulfill the seven "[Noahide commandments](#)," those that G_d supposedly gave to Adam and Noah. (He also promised to tell folks around the planet what the "Noahide commandments" are.)
- ✎ **Pandit Harikrishna Shastri**, a Hindu priest at New Delhi's Birla temple, told Reuters the tsunami was caused by a "[huge amount of pent-up man-made evil on earth](#)" and by the positions of the planets. He did not resolve the perplexing question of whether we should deal first with the stockpile of evil or the planets' positions.
- ✎ To Buddhist **Ananda Guruge**, a former Sri Lankan ambassador who teaches at California's Buddhist-affiliated [University of the West](#), "[Buddhism makes people responsible for their own fate](#)," and the region's "bad collective karma" may well explain the disaster. (He did not clarify whether regions that have not experienced destructive tsunamis necessarily have *terrific* collective karma.)
- ✎ To Ruth Barrett, a Wiccan high priestess who heads a Wisconsin temple dedicated to the goddess Diana, the disaster was simply a chiropractic problem. It was caused by "[Mother Nature stretching](#) — she had a kink in her back and stretched."

Interestingly, [the religious extremists who advocate](#) these hard-shelled positions often take a different view when the victims of a disaster are closer to home -- in New York, Oklahoma City, or Jerusalem. But not all -- recall the **Reverend Jerry Falwell's [conclusion that](#)** that 9/11 was God's vengeance for abortion and gay rights.

The secular humanists in the audience also have to ask: Were the **sixty thousand children** who have died in this tsunami disaster so far, and the **400,000+ other children who have lost their parents** really old enough to understand, much less deserve, such punishment? Precisely what lessons are we supposed to draw from their capricious fates, other than that we have to prepare more carefully for such disasters -- and make sure that **Jehovah** enrolls in an anger management course?

These extreme fundamentalist interpretations also remind us of [J.L. Mackie's](#) conundrum: **"If God is Good, He's not God. But if God is God, he's not Good."**

In other words, if it just so happens that an arbitrary, vindictive, brutal **Satan** now rules the world, does that necessarily mean that we are obligated to worship Him?

As the 19th century poet [John Todhunter](#) once put it:

On his cross still hangs the Saviour
Bears our sins in dreadful sum
Eighteen centuries and three quarters
Yet his kingdom is not come.

"It is finished!" Was it finished
When thy path of pain was trod?
Thou didst bear the sins of mortals,
Who shall bear the sins of God?

No Cell Phones in Hell?

From the standpoint of "sending us a message," surely Poseidon must also understand that many of us have cell phones and email. Personally, I have preset my spam filter to let all messages from Absolute Deities pass right on through.

Indeed, it turns out that there were thousands of cell phones and Internet addresses even in [Banda Aceh, Indonesia](#) and [the Andaman and Nicobar Islands](#), as well as India, Thailand, and Sri Lanka.

For that matter -- a point that should be of particular interest to the **dozens of seismologists and tsunami experts around the globe who received almost instantaneous warnings** of the December 26 undersea earthquake's severity, **but now say they "[just didn't know who to call](#)"** -- there are also online telephone directories for the residents of **all these places** -- including [Banda Aceh](#), [Sri Lanka, numbers](#) of [Phuket, Thailand](#), and [TamilNadu](#), on the southeast coast of India.

Starting from scratch, it recently took **two [SubmergingMarkets™](#) journalists just 15 minutes** to locate hundreds of long-distance numbers and Internet addresses for dozens of hospitals, schools, hotels, lawyers, doctors, local businesses, and government offices on the frontlines of the tsunami -- not to mention US Embassies, consulates, and military bases.

But evidently all these phone numbers and Internet connections ***just happened to be busy precisely*** when the earthquake struck. That ***must have*** prevented all the international experts from getting through.

Perhaps Poseidon was trying to send us a message after all.



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