

Among Ourselves

THE TSUNAMI TRAGEDY LESSONS FOR OUR FUTURE

In this first issue of the **Info on Human Development** for 2005, we would like to share with you some analysis and reflections that have come from various sources and from people of different faiths. They highlight the theological, humanitarian, spiritual, political, economic, social and ecological dimensions of one of the greatest tragedies of the modern day era. It is indeed difficult to understand the mystery of God in moments of pain and despair. But what seems to have emerged in the various reflections, is our readiness as a human community to go beyond the mere event that happened in so many countries around the Indian Ocean and continue reflecting and discerning on these complex and diverse sets of experiences. It has made many of us to stop and to dare to ask some fundamental questions about the meaning of life. Amidst the myriad of human interventions and countless untold stories, we hope to continue the ceaseless quest for more human solutions. We should not just react to the tragic deaths but plan our moves to continue our commitment to the living and a new life for the next generation. The trauma and the pain have not disappeared in the hearts and minds of those who lost their loved ones, neither should it in our hearts.

The big question is: How can we make changes to the traditional approaches to Emergency Assistance and Development Aid so that it will pave the way for a more human life for these persons, families and communities? We are all aware that this “natural tragedy” is also accompanied

by “human folly”, that is expressed in innumerable ways. We should all be shocked by the fact that amidst the absence of basic needs, hundreds of tons of food and other essential items are lying in the containers at the ports and warehouses, bogged down by bureaucratic procedures and security concerns. This is not yet the end, with millions of dollars kept away in bank accounts because of the lack of proper co-ordination between the donor agencies and the implementers of rehabilitation plans. To make matters worse, there seems to be the lack of willingness to work together on the part of both the donor agents, as well as those assisting the victims of the tragedy. Has the time come for setting up of an international body and a permanent global fund to look into the long term developmental objectives of persons and communities? In the past, religious groups and humanitarian organisations have attempted faithfully to be the Good Samaritans. The challenge today in the light of the experiences of the Indian Ocean Tsunami Tragedy is the setting up of a Network of Good Samaritans. They can be given the responsibility of ensuring and sustaining long term commitment to the victims of such tragedies and in collaboration with civil society and governments and even possibly, the United Nations.

Finally, this commitment to long term sustainable development has to be born out of a new consciousness of the need to move beyond the rationalism of the instant supply of aid and the urgent demands of tragedies. There has to be a growth towards a greater sensitivity to human pain and suffering in general that flows from a greater sense of our common humanity. We are also today aware that not only are there increasing numbers of human tragedies but also new forms of human agony aggravated by poverty and various forms of violence and counter-violence in so many parts of the world. They are not the temporary and the transitory but the permanent and the structural human tragedies. They have become a part and parcel of the stage opera of the modern day humanity. For example, 200,000 people die of hunger, malnutrition and lack of medicine each day in Africa alone but why don't we find this in the headlines of all our major newspapers all over the world the next day?

CONTENTS

Honour To The Dead And A Warning To The Living	2
The Tsunami Tragedy: Divine Fury Or Human Folly?	8
The Tsunami Tragedy	12
The Existence Of God And The Recent 'Tsunami': A Christian Point Of View	13
A Christmas Tsunami	16

HONOUR TO THE DEAD AND A WARNING TO THE LIVING

Coming to Terms with Tsunami

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“Honour to the Dead and a Warning to the Living”. These are the words I found written beneath the statue of a prisoner standing in former Dachau concentration-camp. The bronze statue represents all those innocent people killed by the man-made horror and tragedy of Nazism. These words were ringing in my ears in the afternoon of 26 December as I went from village to village in the coastal areas of Kanyakumari district, Tamilnadu, to see the devastation and havoc of the tragedy. Here is a catastrophe caused by the fury of nature. It comes as well as a warning to humanity to set its home in order.

We deeply mourn the death of over 150 thousand people and honour their memory. Most of them are among the poorest of the poor in Indonesia, Thailand, Sri Lanka, India and all the way in West Africa. Thousands of people were buried without the minimum honours every culture reserves for the dead. There were no individual graves. They were buried as one among many in mass graves, often unseen and unidentified even by the closest of relatives. Not in few cases, there were really no one to honour them or identify them, because entire families were wiped out along with their homes and possessions.

The irreparable loss of the dear ones has left deep pain, anguish, desperation and trauma in the survivors. The plight of the survivors is the case of “the living envying the dead”... The magnitude of the tragedy is to be measured also in terms of the five million displaced people and families. Many of them live in crammed camps, facing the threat of epidemics, with poor sanitary conditions. Hardest hit perhaps were the Banda Aceh, the provincial capital in Indonesia, the various parts of Sri Lanka and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands of India. The highest number of loss of life has been reported from Indonesia with over one hundred thousand dead. About seventy percent of the people in Banda Aceh lost their lives. In Meulboh fifty percent of the people in the town fell victims to the killer waves.

With their dear ones gone, and their means of livelihood like the boats and catamarans shattered to pieces and swept away by the swirl of the tsunami waves, the survivors face a bleak future with little prospects. While we honour the dead and are in solidarity with the anguishing survivors, we need to take the tsunami disaster also as a serious warning. Here is an occasion to radically rethink the shape of our world and societies, its relationship to nature, its model of development, choices and priorities.

The Human Dimensions of the Calamity

The loss of so many dear ones, and in many cases the wiping out of the entire family has left the victims inconsolably grief-stricken. The dear ones have been snatched away from them within seconds, and seeing them vanishing, never to be seen again has left deep trauma in the survivors. Many fishermen and women have lost not only their boats and catamarans, but also their children – the human saplings, the insurance for their lives and for old age. According to some estimates, the number of children dead would be around 50, 000. The death of so many children means loss of future. On the other hand we have large number of children who have been orphaned, deprived of their loved fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters. In the case of children the security of the family and of their familiar setting is important for their growth, the absence of which is bound to create trauma in them. These are some of the experiences the victims are struggling to cope with, and they will need so much of love, attention, support and care before they could retrieve their bearings.

In relief and rehabilitation work this deep human reality tends to be forgotten. While people require the material things, for all of them what is more important is strength and courage to face the situation that seems to have shattered all prospects of future. The victims will need a lot of listening, consolation and people who could empathize with them and be in solidarity. Many of them are still in relief camps having lost their homes without any trace, and with nowhere to go, and none to fall back upon. We are in the face of people who were deprived of the opportunity to mourn their dear ones and bury them, and carrying deep in them a sense of guilt. Money cannot solve all the human problems. This truth is nowhere more evident today than among the tsunami victims. This is something the generous donors both in the country and abroad should realize.

Providing food, clothing and shelter is a response only to a small part of the tragedy, while the larger part will continue to haunt the victims for a long time. When a mother, as it happened in Nagapattinam, was trying to hold together tightly her four daughters, and sees the futility of her efforts when the roaring waters snatches all of them from her embrace, the sense of loss of vacuum and deep pain of this mother, no amount of relief work could make good. Being in relief camps with large number of people may for sometime

cushion them from the full human impact of this tragedy. But when they move out of these camps, the magnitude of the loss will come down on them crushing.

Speaking of the human dimension, I should mention also the general sense of fear that has gripped the victims. For centuries and millennia the fishermen have braved the seas and knew how to negotiate it when it turned rough. They were out of wits on 26 December in the face of tsunami, and became helpless like others when the fury of the waves overturned even heavy trucks and cars on the shore and tossed them around as little toys. I live hardly three hundreds yards from the sea, and I see the fishermen in these days sitting on the shore gazing at the sea that let them down, and at times mending the tangled nets they managed to salvage. For the first time in living memory, the fishermen are afraid of the sea – the sea they looked at as the source of their livelihood and as the defining element of themselves. The disaster has led them to view the sea in a different light now.¹

United in Disaster

The national borders do not seem to have anything to do for tsunami that hit the victims without any distinction. But as in almost all natural calamities, the poor have been the worst affected, and in large numbers too. We are in the face of a tragedy that has unveiled how the destiny of human beings is bound together. Waves of discussions and debates were generated by globalisation as the epicentre. How and to what extent our world is one is no longer a matter of debate. Everything was dwarfed by the giant tsunami waves that hit the countries around the Indian Ocean. India has known the Bhopal tragedy, Gujarat earthquake and Orissa floods. Here is a disaster it shares with other countries of the rim of Indian Ocean. The scene of havoc is the same whether it is Indonesia, Thailand, Sri Lanka or India; the problems faced are similar. Yes, the earth is one; the humanity is the same wherever it suffers. The global character of this tragedy is seen in the thousands of deaths among foreign tourists hailing from different countries, with Sweden, Germany, Italy counting most numerous victims and missing people. The bondedness of human beings is so deep that religious distinctions cannot stand in the way. This was proved in innumerable stories of assistance to the victims starting from the very moment of the disaster. The victims were the first ones to help other victims with no consideration of caste or creed. Though organizations may be religious (Hindu, Christian, Muslim, etc) , they all went beyond religious affiliation to help out anyone in need. The well-known *dharga* of Nagur near Nagapattinam in existence for the past 480 years permitted for the first time corpses of Hindus to be buried in its cemetery – so also those of Christians, without any distinction. Christian schools and institutions became the haven of protection for people of all religious traditions at the time of crisis. In Kanyamkumari district a Hindu leader opened his Kalyanamandapam for the Catholics who fled fearing the tsunami waves. The same kind of experience was there in other affected countries. In east of Sri Lanka, for example, the traditional ethnic and religious divide between Muslims

and Tamils were set aside. The Muslims fed the Tamil victims and offered them protection.

The manifestation of this solidarity is a sign of hope. We would only wish that this does not become an ad hoc expression at times of catastrophes, but remains as an abiding culture and way of life. Religions need not be woken up to this basic humanity in all of us only with rude shocks and disasters. When corpses started rotting there was no difference between the high and the low caste. The stench was the same. The absurdity of man-made purity-pollution could not be anywhere more in evidence. Is it not a lesson also for the religions to get out of dehumanising caste distinctions based on purity and pollution?

Tsunami – The Curtain-Raiser of Contradictions

The ugly face of our society and the world which were hidden behind the curtain are now exposed by the tsunami. To begin with, tsunami disaster has exposed the contradictions of the present Indian economy, and the global economy at large. In the past few years, the critique of the poor and the marginalized on the economy that deprived them of the basic necessities of life were countered by the pontiffs of neoliberalism saying that they knew better how to steer the country to true development and prosperity. The tsunami tragedy has shown that the country has plenty of financial resources. Things were certainly different some fifteen years ago. Money seems to be readily available, if we note how rich individuals and corporations vie with each other to donate for the relief of the victims.

This picture of a financially strong side manifested at the time of crisis is in stark contradiction to the situation of daily life in which the poor find themselves deprived of basic health care, food, employment, etc., which are all so very necessary for a dignified human life. As Amartya Sen has noted in a recent interview, the chronic malnutrition especially of children in India is very high – to the level of 40 – 60 percent. In terms of comparison it is higher than even Sub Saharan Africa where malnutrition of children is 20 - 40 percent.² What kind of economy is it that allows millions of children to starve and claim at the same time that the economy is strong? Whose economy is it any way, and for whose benefit, and how is the strength of an economy is measured?

Another area of contradictions is in the field of technology. Tall claims are made about the technological developments in India, and Asia at large. Biotechnology is projected as the most important innovation in the decades to come with a lot of prospects. Millions are being spent in Asia for research and adoption of technology. With all that India and other affected countries like Thailand, Sri Lanka and Indonesia have not been able to protect the poor from falling prey to the waves. The high level of technology adopted for industrial purpose contradicts the lack of minimum technological involvement in protecting the poor. This is true as much of India and Asia, as the rest of the world.

Let us take, for example, the case of communication

technology. Our world is today characterized as “global village” primarily because of the swiftness of communication that binds its different parts. Computer jargons and communication buzz words fill the air. And yet, when it was a question of protecting the lives of the poor victims who lost their lives in tsunami, the communication miserably failed. There was no proper communication infrastructure or contingency plans to evacuate the people in times of emergency. More than two hours elapsed after the waves struck Nagapattinam and Chennai at the Bengal coast, before the killer waves reached Kanyakumari. In this district in which almost one thousand people were killed – many of whom are children - lives could have been saved with a lot more alertness, and if things were communicated and emergency plans were put in place. Some survivors told me that at the coastal villages people were in fact watching on TV about the havoc in Nagapattinam and Chennai. Where was technology and communication at that moment? Where were the experts? Their ineffectiveness at the moment to foresee the effects and warn the people did not happen with such disastrous consequences.

We need to think about the contradictions in the matter at the global level. Technology has become a means to protect exclusively the lives of only those who can afford, and not of the poor men, women and children. I am referring to Pacific Ocean’s Tsunami Warning Centre in which 26 countries of the Pacific Rim, including North America and South America form part. These countries exchange among themselves informations about tsunami. There seems to be sufficient evidence to the report that the tsunami would hit the countries around Indian Ocean was known, and yet this information was not passed on, since these countries do not form part of the “club” of countries having the tsunami warning system. If such is the case – as seems to be with more and more evidence coming to light - this poses serious questions about the moral culpability. That they could risk the lives of thousands of poor fishermen and women by withholding vital information of safety turns them into heinous murderers of no lesser grade than war criminals. Even assuming that there were efforts to communicate the imminent danger, the communication networks simply failed. What an irony that this should happen in a world that boasts of “communication revolution”! Whatever communication and warning there was, it was “too little, too late, for too many”.

What we find is that technology could be killing for its nefarious effects. There is also the other aspect of its killing by monopolizing it and turning it into an instrument of the privileged. Racism, purity-pollution, hierarchy are some of the traditional forms of discrimination. Technology has joined this infamous list. It is made to serve differently the high and the low, the rich and the poor. The tsunami has raised the curtain for all of us to see this ugly aspect of a pro-rich oriented technology in the global world, and its atomised high specialization with none in charge. It is reported that one of those who from the warning system picked up the signals of what was happening beneath the ocean, did not pass it on simply because, as he said, it was not his job! ³

Tsunami and the Environment

Something should be learnt out of this horror on our relationship to environment Tsunami is a wake-up call to things even worse that could befall our earth through global warming. This is not a danger that we could comfortably postpone to think of later. It is already in the process, and the results could be catastrophic and apocalyptic in nature. Flooding of the earth by the seas like in the Biblical narration of the flood by rain in Noah’s time, is something that the consumer world is creating. Today’s unbridled consumerism is tomorrow’s flooding, if what the experts are telling about the global warming is true – as seems to be the case more and more. “The greatest polluter of the earth”, the US does not seem to be concerned about it seriously as it may affect its present affluent life-style. How strange that this imperial power is refusing to sign the Kyoto protocol limiting carbon emission. The poor of tomorrow will be paying for this senseless disregard for the future. It is reported, for example, the Swiss Insurance firm Swiss Re has paid about hundred billion dollars as claims connected with natural disasters in the year 2004 alone.⁴ If we take into account the millions of people who are not covered by any insurance in the developing world, and the damages they have suffered, the picture of the extent of natural calamities affecting us is simply staggering.

One thing that tsunami made clear is that it is not effective where there existed ways and means of protection. It is said that Andhra Pradesh in India was not affected by the tsunami because of the mangroves which serve as a buffer and protective device against the onslaught of the waves. Similar measures taken in Vietnam has served as protection for the people of Mekong delta. Such measures need to be intensified in areas prone to natural calamities, and thus ensure most effective ways of minimizing causalities at the time of crisis.

Tsunami is a rare phenomenon, and we do not expect it to happen every other year. But what the vulnerable poor fishermen and women require is protection in daily life from the continuous erosion that is taking place. In many villages, the sea has eroded slowly but steadily washing off huts and shanties of the poor. The erosion could be prevented by immediate measures of placing large stones into the sea-front. It has been noted that those few villages, and the town of Pondicherry were saved because of these measures. But most of the coastal area – specially the vulnerable low lying ones – lack any such protection. The tragedy that has happened should serve as a warning to the states to give priority to save the lives of the poor than to protect the wealth of the rich. If only the states show up one tenth of the care they take for the security of the privileged, things would be different.

There is a correlation between the condition in ordinary circumstances and in situations of emergency and crisis. Experience has repeatedly proved that wherever there has been better conditions in terms of infrastructure, it has been less difficult to handle extraordinary situation of crisis and emergency. That applies to the tsunami disaster as well. A

state that does not provide the people in normal life the necessary infrastructure facilities will not be in a position to protect them in times of crisis. The tsunami trial has made it clear how poor the infrastructure conditions are. In several places, the civil administration and state machinery were conspicuously absent in the most crucial two days following the disaster. The survivors felt let down by the state in the time of their worst crisis, because it was not prepared to handle the situation.

The Phases of Relief and Rehabilitation

A doctor was heard saying how he could tell someone who has lost all her dear ones and her home that she should boil her drinking water. That is an inkling into the problems and difficulties of relief and rehabilitation work in the aftermath of tsunami. The response to the tsunami began with a swing into action to save lives, though more lives could have been saved if the state and its machinery have been alert. It involved also a tentative survey of the extent of damage caused in each country, region and village. Close on the heels came the response in terms of providing protection and shelter to those who were uprooted, and supplying clothes, primary medical care, etc. There is the most difficult and challenging phase yet to come which calls for greater endurance. It is the matter of rehabilitating the affected victims and making them stand on their own legs by providing the means for employment. We could only wish that the initial heroic responses will continue, and see through that the victims are really settled with a home of their own and with the possibility of livelihood for the future. This work of rehabilitation is of a longer duration. To adopt a Biblical phrase, "blessed are those who endure" in this challenging task of accompanying the victims in their resettlement.

We should be careful not to make the relief and rehabilitation as the work of outside forces and agencies. Most important for a lasting solution is the participation of the community. This is required at all levels. That makes the rehabilitation work even more challenging. Experiences in different parts of tsunami hit areas are telling us that rehabilitation is a community project and cannot be executed by any organization or agency, however much they may be in possession of material resources. Most important is the enlisting of the community cooperation. Not in few localities the work of voluntary agencies is causing a lot of confusion in the relief and rehabilitation work, for failing to enlist the active participation of the local people.

Lopsided Priorities

We cannot fail to note how at the global level billions of dollars are invested in researches and technological applications that benefit those who could have the money and the means. One may argue that in the course of time these technological and scientific researches will percolate and benefit the poor. This prospect need not be contested. But the failure is that of an approach that starts from above

and not from below. Science and technology need to be closer to the public, and especially the poor. I mean to say, that technology should concentrate on the life and safety of the poor here and now, whether it be protection from the ravages of nature, or areas of health that affect the poor most. Tsunami is a powerful reminder to set our priorities right. This applies to the scientific community as well as to the states, policy makers and planners.

Those means and measures that involve the people themselves for their security have the prospect of greater success. A very telling example is what has come about in Bangladesh. Ravaged by the fury of the cyclones and floods year after year, Bangladesh learnt to create a community-system of self-protection. With the help of the local people about 2000 cyclone shelters have been built which protect the people of the low-lying and vulnerable coastal areas. Bangladesh has also created an army of volunteers numbering over three thousand who are trained for disaster management, and they are perpetually vigilant, discussing periodically among themselves, and they are equipped with such simple and effective means of communication as local radios and megaphones to alert the people of the impending natural disaster.

The tardiness of the state to which I referred could be explained in the light of the lopsided global political and economic developments. Since 1989, we are in a period of unbridled capitalism and neoliberalism in Asia. The period of healthy mixed economy is gone. The ideal of welfare state that was projected as an important institution to hold in check the ruthless and exploitative prowess of late capitalism has vanished into thin air. The result is the abandonment of the poor by the state whose heart is with the rich and which does not fail to dole out favours to the corporations. The situation in this respect is identical, whether it is Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Thailand or India.

The Imported "Saviours"

There is a myth handed down and now sanctimoniously routinized in which the developed countries of the West are the saviours from any disaster befalling poor countries. The tsunami presented the large screen to project such an image in an unprecedented manner. There is no need to teach the media on how to blow up things. I can imagine how the western media might show the rushing of the western chivalrous knights with goods and money to save the weak in the affected regions. These images need to be confronted with actual facts and reality. What is concealed in the image of a saviour West is the fact that the overwhelming amount of human and material resources are generated locally, and the most difficult part of saving operations are done by the local people themselves. This is true in great measure of all the affected countries, and especially of India. When India declined foreign help, this was no pretension. The country has so much of human and material resources that it could manage such calamities by itself. The same attitude was taken also by Thailand. This may hurt many westerners who would like to see India and other countries carry begging bowls

appealing to the West, to its largesse and its moral sentiments. They may feel as having been deprived of the opportunity of playing the good Samaritan.

There is no doubt about the deep human compassion and solidarity that move individuals in the western countries to reach out to those in distress, in ways possible to them. We appreciate this humaneness and sense of solidarity. The problem is when states and institutions make a politics out of the help they give, and mislead their people with distorted picture of the extent of this help. It may be interesting to note that the 100 crore rupees (approximately 20 million U.S. dollars) donated by Mata Amirtandamayi, a woman from the Indian state of Kerala, donated for the tsunami victims of the country is a little more than the 15 million the president of the richest nation of the world, George W. Bush promised initially for all the tsunami victims of Asia! What the New York Times noted about the image of an average American has about the aid his or her country gives could be very similar in other western nations. "According to a poll more Americans believe that United States spends 24 percent of its budget as aid to poor countries; it actually spends well under a quarter of 1 percent"⁵. Eric Schwartz, former National Security Council's senior director for multilateral and humanitarian affairs in the Clinton administration, observes that, "even with the president's proposal in 2002 to increase substantially the U.S. commitment to development assistance, the United States was still spending less than 0.2 percent of its gross national income on development aid in 2003, putting us at the bottom of the 20 or so industrialized countries"⁶.

Probably very little is talked in the West about the bulk of the resources, financial and otherwise raised locally, and this is true in varying degrees of all the countries affected by tsunami. The other aspect of the whole relief work is that most of the help both local and from abroad may cease once the shock of the tragedy is over. The victims will be forgotten at a juncture when more substantial and lasting assistance would be needed – in rebuilding their homes, in acquiring the tools for their fishing, or creating opportunities for employment. This part of the response is not an easy one. Probably few will be left in the field to support the victims. Could a change come about in this? We could only hope so.

“Good Samaritans” Meet in Jakarta

Imperialism is clever, and it knows to instantaneously don the Samaritan's robe. We only hope that the much trumpeted Jakarta Summit which brought some of the imperial powers as donors of aid does not turn out to be yet another exercise in hypocrisy with perfunctory and predictable expressions of sorrow and solidarity. The proof of the pudding is in the eating. If it does not become a mere summit of promises, the aid proclaimed should actually be given and indeed without delay. A stitch in time saves nine. The aid that comes forth just now can save many lives. The fear is that, as in the past, only a fraction of the promised aid actually will be given. Moreover, there is also fear that the aid already promised for some other emergency be transferred to tsunami victims. This is not an unfounded fear, and it came forth

from the mouth of the secretary general of the UN, Koffi Annan himself, when he cautioned the donors that one should not “rob Peter to pay Paul”.

The callous indifference and apathy manifested in the first days of the disaster by some of the imperial powers, so evident in the derisory pittance they promised in aid, was somehow made good by the Jakarta summit – at least they may believe so. Certainly the display of solidarity in Jakarta was an opportunity for these powers to affirm certain control over the countries at the rim of Indian ocean. We would wish that the imperial leaders who expressed so much shock over the destruction by the tsunami waves by flying over the affected areas would do well to do the same exercise in Iraq and see the devastation effected, and the innocent people killed, the homes shattered and lives crushed, for which they have, not the tsunami but themselves and their war-mongering and predatory economic interests to blame. When there is no real contrition for the devastation in Iraq and Afghanistan, the apparent solidarity by the ruling powers could be interpreted as no more than a show on the world-theatre. I am reminded of a proverb in my mother-tongue, Tamil, which says that the “wolf was shedding tears because the lamb was getting wet in the rain!”.

Tsunami and Third World Tourism

There were large number of western tourists who were killed in the different countries affected by tsunami, especially in Phuket in Thailand. While we mourn the loss of their lives, tsunami is also a warning regarding the present state of tourism, especially as it is being promoted in the developing countries. For past several years I have been associated with the Ecumenical Coalition on Third World Tourism in which already two decades ago we took up critical involvement and reflection regarding the exploitation rampant in this kind of tourism, specially involving women and children, not to speak of other aspects of this entertainment industry.

Unfortunately, caught up in the current system of economics, countries like Thailand, Sri Lanka and Indonesia viewed tourism as a means to boost up their economy unmindful of the social, cultural consequences and the violation of human rights it involves. Tourism is volatile, and to rely on it by any developing country would be unwise. If tourism is good for Switzerland or Austria, it does not apply in the same way for the developing countries of Thailand and Sri Lanka. The search for tropical paradises by the tourists from affluent western countries cost the people of the land their dignity, their rights, their culture, and their environment. Governments of these lands have been conniving with an industry from which the local middle-men and foreign agencies benefit, leaving some crumbs to the poor.

The tsunami should serve as a salutary warning. The poverty of the local people and their despondency lead them to view tourists from affluent countries as demi-gods and goddesses, and this could be a very demeaning experience for the local people. It is not out of place to speak of *victims of tourist industry*. The servicing of tourists in the best possible manner means for the local people deprivation of



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such important resources as water, energy, food, all the more so since the tourists coming to Asia continue the same consumer style of life as in their countries, overstretching their demands on the meagre available resources of the local people. Has not tourism assumed a predatory character?

Tourism cannot go on in the present fashion. It calls for a radical rethinking. It may be surprising for many to know that tourism is *the biggest industry in the world today*. Now that tourism has cost so many lives, it is the time to unmask the myths propagated both by national and international tourist industrial agencies. Tsunami is an occasion for us to think seriously about the effects of this tourist industry on the poor host countries of Asia. Issues like sex tourism, abuse of children connected with tourism must be taken up now.⁷ In Asia we need to seize this opportunity to expose these things that are concealed beneath the glamour and advertisement of the tourism industry which entice the western men and women to our parts of Asia.. But what are the real prospects? Is tsunami going to stop the rush of tourists to Asian countries? Or, perhaps, tsunami is only a temporary break, to go back again to the same old tourist practices?

Conclusion - The Silver-Linings

After the initial surge of sympathy and solidarity, the survivors and the victims are in danger of being wiped out from the public memory. There will be many trivialities with which media will need to occupy itself for its own survival. It will talk about cricket, baseball and the sport stars, and about Hollywood and bollywood celebrities. In hindsight tsunami will appear to them as only an intermezzo in their cosy way of life. The apprehension that the tsunami victims will be forgotten is then real, both at the national and at global level.

The aftermath of the tsunami tragedy has also revealed the change that has taken place in the past few years. Here we have some silver linings that augur well for the future. The relief workers and others in the field cannot but be struck in several places by the sense of dignity in the victims, which they have not lost in spite of everything. Yes, even when they lost everything, the one thing that remained unscathed is their self-respect. In fact, in most cases these were people who lived through their hard labour as fishermen and as industrious fisherwomen, or diligent workers in other

professions. Their hard work was a source of their respect and dignity. The relief and rehabilitation work cannot simply ignore this fact. A clear sign of their self-respect was the refusal by the victims in several places to accept the used clothes thrown at them. "The crucified people", about whom Jon Sobrino never ceases to remind us about, have not lost their dignity and self-respect, and they need to be treated not with used clothes but new ones. The bleeding-heart Indian middle and upper class can certainly afford it. Further, the rehabilitation work has to mainly depend upon local resources and more importantly it should be done in such a way that the local community is the chief agent of its own reconstruction. The people need to be active participant in decision making regarding their future. This will correspond to their sense of self-respect.

This calamity of apocalyptic proportions that has visited our Asian countries has shown also the triumph of the human spirit. Human suffering has been either a moment of confirming and reasserting one's faith, or a moment of questioning God; a time of either shattered hope or strengthening of hope through the testing fire, or shall we say, through the testing waters. The tsunami perhaps was an event in which probably there were more people asking critical questions in their minds regarding a God who permits the innocent ones to suffer. In fact, a large number of those who perished are children. Victims who have been so brutally struck and deprived of everything could not be exhorted to resignation. If God appeared to be silent in the disaster, many are beginning to realize her speaking in the outpouring of love and solidarity with the survivors in an unprecedented way. The stories of dedication and passionate engagement of people who work for the victims is the fresh revelation of a God who seemed to be away and absent at the moment of the tsunami strike. Similarly, God seems to break her silence in the spirit of resilience we find in many victims in spite of the most tragic things that have visited them.⁸

¹ The fear has gripped also those elites who cared to have their villas and holiday houses close to the sea, and prided themselves of their privileged sea-facing resorts.

² *The Hindu*, January 9, 2005

³ This is what was reported by that person in BBC Radio 4. See *The Independent*, 2 January, 2005.

⁴ Cf. *The Independent*, 27 December, 2004. One needs to only think of the hurricanes that struck the Florida or the typhoons and calamitous weather that visited Japan in the year 2004.

⁵ *The New York Times*, 30 December, 2004.

⁶ *The Seattle Times*, 9 January, 2005

⁷ Felix Wilfred, "Third World Tourism: A Pressing Theological Concern", in T.K. John (ed), *Bread and Breath* (in honour of Samuel Rayan) Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, Anand, 1990, pp. 237-254.

⁸ Felix Wilfred, *The Sling of Utopia. The Struggles for a Different Society*, ISPCK, Delhi, 2005.

(The article was also published in **Jeevadhara**, January 2005)

THE TSUNAMI TRAGEDY: DIVINE FURY OR HUMAN FOLLY?

Chandra Muzaffar

In the wake of one of the greatest natural calamities in living memory, one hears voices from different religious communities proclaiming to the world that the Indian Ocean tsunami was ‘punishment from God’ meted out to the human family for all our ‘sins and vices.’ A rabbi from Israel, according to a news agency report a few days after the 26 December catastrophe, made this observation. So have certain Christian evangelists in the United States and various Muslim theologians from Morocco to Malaysia. According to a Muslim theologian in Malaysia, the tsunami is ‘a lesson’ and ‘a reminder’ to humankind that we should not “violate Allah’s commandments.” Some Hindu priests in India have also concluded that the gigantic waves which killed at least 150,000 people in a number of countries were proof of God’s wrath. Even a Buddhist priest in Sri Lanka was quoted in the media as saying that the disaster had struck because people “were not living according to the laws of Buddha.”

Sins; vices

From ancient times, people have sought to explain grave natural disasters as violent expressions of the anger and fury of gods and deities. The Egyptians of antiquity for instance tried to appease their vengeful gods through human sacrifices. In the sacred texts of revealed religions such as Christianity and Islam too there are references to God causing floods and earthquakes to happen as a form of punishment for some community or other that had deviated from God’s teachings. It is significant however that in both the Bible and the Quran it is only after certain vices had spread within a community for a considerable period of time and concerted attempts to reform the community through Prophets and Prophecy had failed that God finally punishes the community in question.

Following the logic of the scriptures, one is justified in asking: what were the collective sins of the people of Aceh in Indonesia or of the tsunami ravaged communities in Sri Lanka and in Tamil Nadu, India – the three worst affected areas – that they deserved to be wiped out by ‘God’s wrath’? Though the tsunami killed people at all levels of society, the majority of its victims were the poor. These were people who struggled to make ends meet day in and day out and had very little in life. Many of them were also, by the conventional criteria that religious elites employ, pious people who would not fail to attend mosque or temple or church when the occasion arose. As a case in point, the people of Aceh are widely regarded as devout Muslims. And Aceh itself has a long and illustrious tradition as a centre of Islamic learning and scholarship. What is even more telling – if one

persists with the argument about the people’s sins – about 40 percent of those who died in Aceh were children. Indeed, if we took into account the tsunami victims from all the other affected places – Phuket in Thailand, Penang and Kuala Muda in Malaysia, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Maldives, Andamas and Nicobar in India, Tanzania, Kenya and Somalia – at least one third of the dead were children. One is compelled to raise that question again: what abominable vices did these children commit?

No, the tsunami was not God’s punishment. The victims were no more and no less sinful or sinless than those who were not touched by the tsunami. It is not only wrong but utterly immoral to even suggest that the tens of thousands who perished were being punished by God. This is the sort of simplistic, superficial interpretation of natural and social phenomena that is typical of certain religious leaders and lay people who have an archaic and atavistic understanding of religion.

There is another way of looking at the tsunami tragedy which is more rational, logical – and humane. It also makes much more sense from a religious perspective, if we equate the essence of religion with its underlying principles and values.

Knowledge

Most religions emphasise the importance of acquiring knowledge about the workings of nature. This is certainly true of various branches of Hindu philosophy just as it is true of Buddhism. In the Quran, the human being is encouraged to understand nature – the handiwork of God – not only because it is a huge depository of knowledge but also because it offers intimate glimpses of the mysteries of creation.

Our knowledge of earth movements, earthquakes and tsunami waves is still somewhat limited. We have not



accumulated sufficient geological evidence, for instance, to estimate how frequently tsunamis occur, in the wake of undersea earthquakes or landslides. Similarly, while we have some understanding of the speed of tsunamis we know very little about how they crash ashore.

It is not just knowledge about nature that we should seek. In Islam, as in Buddhism and Taoism, there is a profound appreciation of the relationship between the natural world, the animal kingdom and the human family. This interconnectedness between all living things – one of the most fundamental insights of religious philosophy – is relevant to our understanding of the tsunami tragedy. For reports from Sri Lanka, Thailand and Indonesia seem to suggest that animals guided by their ‘sixth sense’ may have known that the tsunami was coming and had moved to higher ground. At the Yala National Park in Sri Lanka, home to hundreds of elephants, crocodiles, wild boar, water buffaloes and monkeys, rescue operations found human bodies floating in the flooded part but no animal carcasses. If we had some understanding of these early warning signals from the animal kingdom – as indigenous communities in Car Nicobar and Thailand apparently had and therefore took appropriate measures – we could have perhaps saved tens of thousands of human lives. This is precisely what the Chinese government did in 1975. Before a huge earthquake measuring 7.3 on the Richter scale hit the city of Haicheng, the inhabitants were evacuated, largely because of the change behaviour of various types of animals. As a result, some 90,000 people were saved though the city itself was destroyed. By the same token, mangrove forests and other coastal vegetation, it is said, can “soften the impact of tsunamis”. According to media reports from Aceh, “Simeuleu Island, only 40 km from the epicentre of the Dec 26 quake, was saved by the wild belt of mangroves: just as “five villages 100 km to the south east of Banda Aceh in Julok were saved by the extensive mangroves in that area.”

What this shows is that if our concept and practise of knowledge was based upon this principle of interconnectedness between nature, animals and human beings, we could have developed seismology, geology and other sciences which are relevant to our understanding of earthquakes and tsunamis in a more wholistic and integrated manner. After all, as we have noted, this is how religion conceives knowledge. If we have failed to do this, it is because we have become unthinking, uncritical devotees of a compartmentalized, fragmented, technologically driven, quantifiable notion of knowledge which is paraded in the name of ‘modern science.’

Complacency

To put it in a nutshell, we must be honest enough to admit that our inability to nurture a religiously inspired understanding of science and knowledge which is wholistic and integrated, is one of the indirect causes of the tsunami tragedy. The other indirect cause is the way in which our governments approach matters of vital importance to the people’s well-being. Governments along the Indian Ocean rim should have established an early warning system for

tsunamis in the region decades ago. They were reluctant to do so until the recent catastrophe because the Indian Ocean, unlike the Pacific, is not tsunami prone. This is not a convincing argument at all. As geologist, Brian Atwater of the US Geological Survey put it, “Sumatra (where Aceh is) has a ample history of great earthquakes, which makes the lack of a tsunami warning system in the Indian Ocean all the more tragic. Everyone knows Sumatra was a loaded gun.”

Installing an early warning system would have been well within the means of the Indian Ocean states. The actual equipment for measuring water pressure variations – a tsunameter – would have cost only 250,000 US dollars. A few tsunameters would have done the job. Of course, a system for alerting critical agencies and disseminating information among the people about the imminent tsunami onslaught would also have to be put in place.

If ruling elites in the region have failed to attend to this, it is partly because of a certain complacency at their level which often inhibits early and effective action especially in matters pertaining to the public weal. While some of the governments are proactive and forward looking, there are others which are lackadaisical and plagued by bureaucratic inertia. Needless to say, these are attitudes which are inimical to the public good. They violate a basic principle of ethical governance embodied in all our religions – the principle that a ruler should accord the highest priority to any move or measure that protects the lives of his people.

Complacency may have cost lives in the tsunami tragedy in yet another sense. There is now some evidence to suggest that the first person in the world to know that the December 26 tsunami was coming, geophysicist, Dr. Stuart Weinstein of the Pacific Tsunami Warning Centre in Hawaii, tried desperately “to flash warnings around the world. But his frustration reached fever pitch as his phone calls rang and rang without answer – and the few who did respond failed to understand what he was saying or grasp the magnitude of the danger their countries were facing.” Apparently, Dr. Weinstein made attempts to contact officials in Sri Lanka, Indonesia and Australia. Partly because it was the day after Christmas, communication was difficult. Nonetheless, one would expect at least a skeletal staff to be working at meteorological stations and critical government agencies in the Indian Ocean region on Boxing Day.

Debasement of the Human Being

Perhaps it was more than complacency in at least one tsunami hit nation. Apparently, some official at the Thai Weather Bureau had an inkling of the imminent tsunami onslaught but did not want to alert the public because they were afraid that if it did not materialise they would be condemned for scaring away tourists. This had happened to a senior Weather Bureau official before. It shows how the tourist dollar has become so overwhelmingly important in Thailand – so important that the human being is readily sacrificed at its altar. This diminution and even debasement of the human being is contrary to the way in which most religions envision human dignity.

The debasement of the human being is self-evident in yet another instance, this time involving yet another country. In the state of Tamil Nadu in India, some of the poorest of the poor who live in makeshift huts and hovels close to the beaches were swallowed up by the tsunami waves. For years, neither the State nor the Federal government had given any attention to their housing needs. Like other marginalized sections of society they were left to fend for themselves. It is only after the catastrophe that government leaders are talking about prohibiting people from putting up temporary structures on beach fronts. But it is doubtful if this is an indication of a change in the mindset of the ruling elites – a change which will result in the material and social transformation of some of the most deprived and despised castes and classes in Indian society who have suffered so much from the tsunami catastrophe.

Our Folly

From our analysis it is obvious that our inability to develop and apply knowledge in a wholistic manner, our failure to install an early warning system, our complacency, our inefficiency and indeed, our neglect of the poor have all contributed, if obliquely, to the tsunami tragedy. It bears repeating: the tsunami tragedy is not God's fury; it is our folly. More than that, it is the sort of human folly which repudiates certain underlying philosophical values and principles in religion.

This does not mean of course that if we had done everything right there would not have been the tsunami or the earthquake. All that we are saying is that we could have minimised the colossal loss of human lives and perhaps reduced the massive damage to property. For we know that earthquakes occur all the while and once in a long while they generate tsunamis. According to a Malaysian geologists, Professor Ibrahim Komoo, "half a million earthquakes occur in a year." He adds, "...no place on earth is safe or free of natural disasters."

In other words, natural calamities are as much a part of our existence as human tragedies. They happen. We learn to live with them. And to accept them. For those of us who believe in a Divine Power natural calamities like human tragedies are moments for reflection and introspection. It is in that sense that the tsunami catastrophe of 26 December is significant.

Reflections

Apart from the reflections we have already presented in this analysis, particularly the importance of understanding the workings of nature in the context of a more integrated concept of knowledge, there are perhaps seven other points that are worth pondering upon.

One, the tsunami tragedy is a grim reminder of the fragility of human life. As with every other natural calamity before this, we realise once again that the human species is utterly vulnerable.

Two, our fragility and vulnerability should make us



humble. The tragedy should persuade us to cultivate positive values. It should enhance our sense of justice; deepen our compassion for all that lives. The tsunami which has revealed to all of us how transient life is, should strengthen our desire to do good. For that is the real reason why we are here on earth.

Three, in this regard, human beings everywhere have demonstrated that they are capable of reaching out to the other by contributing their time, their energy and their money towards all the magnificent efforts at the local, national and global levels to bring relief to millions of tsunami victims who have lost their loved ones, their homes, their livelihoods, their everything. There has never been a humanitarian endeavour of this sort in history which has witnessed such widespread participation by the ordinary citizens of the world in the noble cause of helping fellow human beings who are in dire need.

Four, in the process of helping fellow human beings, individual and groups in different parts of the world have penetrated ethnic, linguistic, cultural, religious and national barriers as never before. The tsunami tragedy has brought to the surface a feeling that we are one. This is one of those rare occasions when our common humanity overwhelms our specific identities. Of course we know that this sentiment is ephemeral but while it lasts it gives us hope. For it shows that in spite of everything, the human being is capable of transcending his religious or cultural self and discovering that one identity that is perennial – his human identity.

Five, at the same time the tsunami tragedy has, as expected, also revealed the ugly side of the human being. There are reports from many of the affected areas of individuals stealing aid items meant for the victims; of officials siphoning off cash assistance offered to bereaved families, of unscrupulous people attempting to sell off orphaned children; of religious zealots trying to convert orphans to their faith. Then there are politicians seeking mileage from media events connected with the aftermath of the tragedy just as there are governments that are consciously exploiting relief operations in order to refurbish their public image. Neither should one forget those rich kingdoms that have been niggardly in their financial contributions to the tsunami victims.

Six, the ugly acts of some in contrast to the beautiful deeds of the many encapsulates the eternal struggle within the human soul to overcome what is based and reach out to the sublime. The tsunami tragedy has made us more conscious of this. Distinguishing between right and wrong, differentiating between good and evil is a challenge that faces not just individuals but also communities and nations. Against the backdrop of the 26 December catastrophe, it has become even more imperative for the human family as a whole to choose to live in accordance with the values of universal justice, global love and international solidarity.

Seven, for those of us who believe in God and whose belief is reflected in a commitment to universal justice and an inclusive humanity, the tsunami tragedy has helped to strengthen rather than weaken our faith. In the midst of all the pain and suffering, we rejoice, together with millions of Buddhists, Christians, Hindus and Muslims at the sight of a statue of the Buddha or of a Church or of a Temple or of a Mosque still standing upright on a desolate landscape when every other structure had been destroyed and devastated by the ferocity of the tsunami waves. These places of worship have become symbolic testimonies to the enduring power of faith.

But there is an ever more potent expression of the power of faith. It is in the miraculous way in which some babies had survived the tsunami – babies in almost every affected area, from almost every religious community. It is as if a Divine Arm had cradled each and every one of them and delivered them to the Bosom of Life.

Through these miracle babies, God has once again asserted an eternal truth: that God is, and has always been, the God of the whole of humankind, of all the universes. God is not the prized possession of any particular religion or community.

God has done something else through these miracle babies. God is telling us that in spite of all our follies, God has not lost hope in the human race. Indeed, God has renewed God's faith in humanity. And that should inspire us to continue to struggle for a just and compassionate world.

Source: **Just Commentary**, International Movement For A Just World, Vol 5, No. 1, January 2005



David Snyder

con't from page 19 >

And perhaps we will see in those images
of the Father holding the limp body of his dead child
the image of the Father who spoke the Word that becomes
flesh
and whose grief and suffering take flesh still
in body and blood
offered for the life of the world
and placed into our empty hands
that we might life
even in the face of death

And perhaps when we have heard that Christmas story
the story of God speaking a word
which becomes human flesh
and falls victim to the full force
of the waves of horror that assail the earth and its inhabit-
ants,
a Word which continues to take flesh
in all the suffering and grief and desperation
perhaps then we will be capable
of hearing the story of resurrection
and recognising that our songs of endless bliss
and our promises of sorrow turned into joy
are reduced to pious platitudes if they are not seen
in their contexts of unspeakable fear, death and anguish

I pray that we
and I
might have the courage and compassion
to recognise the Word that God speaks this week
and follow where the Word calls
into the places that terrify and horrify us
the places where we will know what it means
to cry our for salvation
the places
perhaps the only places
where we are capable of knowing
the Word of resurrection
the Word made flesh
the Christ born of Mary.

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Source: **Vidyajyoti, Journal of Theological Reflection**, Volume 69, No. 2, February 2005.

THE TSUNAMI TRAGEDY

S. Arokiasamy, SJ

All our readers remember how the morning of the day after Christmas 2004 saw a huge destruction of human life and of the homes and livelihood of thousands of mostly fisher folk families in the coastlands surrounding the Indian Ocean. The cause of death was a very sudden outburst of sea fury, produced by a great undersea earthquake at some point between the north of Sumatra in Indonesia and the Indian Andaman and Nicobar Islands. The tsunami was the result, we are told, of a geological undersea dislocation due to the pressure of the Indian subcontinental plate on the Asian plate. Whatever the scientific explanation, the catastrophe reminded us that we are in an unsettled and changing universe, not a completed and stable world. The evolution of the world continues, and change, like birth, often happens in blood and violence. Nature is not always benign, as poets would make us believe. The harmony of life we all seek, often by 'going back' to nature, is not a readymade product we have just find on the sea shore or in the mountains, and make our own. It is a harmony to be created. And we all have our responsibility in this.

About twelve countries have suffered the havoc of the tsunami. Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India, especially Tamilnadu, and Thailand have suffered most. The horror of this story cannot be told. We had glimpses of the depth and the intensity of the human tragedy when we watched, and continue to see in the media and TV reports, the physical, psychological and spiritual suffering etched on the stunned faces of survivors, some of whom lost everyone in the family except one to tell the story of the heart-breaking tragedy – and for many families, not even this.

There is humanly no way we can bring meaning out of this sea of death. The event is a challenge to our humanity and also to our faith. Our reaction can only be one of silence and deep sadness for the dead, for the lonely, and for those who see no meaning in life. We must allow the *com-passion* that dwells within to become what its name means, a "suffering with." During this Lenten season we have just begun we shall also hear in the cries of all those children, mothers and despairing breadwinners echoes of the shout of the crucified victim of Palestine, *Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachtani?* (Mk 15:31, Mt 27:46). We need to own the never understandable mystery of suffering, and respond to it in active solidarity with our brothers and sisters. All tragedies are specific and each story of loss is unique in its pathos. Each victim needs company.

One hopeful sign is that people everywhere have tried to reach out to the suffering in one way or another, testifying to the humanity of our people – except for the merchants of blood, heartless people who steal from the relief programmes meant for the victims! To make matters worse, even the common experience of suffering some allowed inhuman

caste prejudices to interfere with the process of relief distribution. The *dalit* hunger was less worthy of compassion!

There is now a growing concern for the rehabilitation of the affected people. We hope that global solidarity shown at the beginning of this tragedy will continue to be effective in the long process of reconstruction. The global response of empathy and generosity is an outcome of a basic sentiment such tragedies awaken in people everywhere. For all of us this is a moment of inter-human and inter-faith solidarity for outreach and service, which should be the way of believers everywhere. This is a moment for a globalisation of solidarity built on the foundation of our shared humanity. While we feel the pain of loss and devastation of those who are near us, we may ask the question, Do I feel also in some way the pain and the tragedy of people in Sri Lanka, our next door neighbour? Do I have a sense of solidarity in front of the great destruction of the Aceh province of Indonesia? Do these people figure in our prayer and life of faith? How present are they in our concern, our humanity, our faith?

When we heard and saw the scenes of the tragedy suffered by the pilgrims at Velankanni, we experienced a frightening challenge to our faith. The tragedy struck people of all religions. But the question raised by the death of so many pilgrims there hits us with particular poignancy. People who trusted in Mary's protection were washed away by tsunami waves. Whatever be the reasons for the great flood, for the pilgrim victims of Velankanni and, for that matter, for all victims, faith is put to a severe test. Even the people who reached out to them in solidarity felt their faith shaken. Perhaps many found their faith purified and renewed by the practice of a hope-driven solidarity and service. Christian faith is "adamantine" in character, and is tested, purified and made fruitful if its focus remains on the inscrutable Mystery of Love, even in the absence of any human understanding or created support. For Christians the resources for such a tested and purified faith is Jesus crucified and risen. Our faith springs out of the kenosis of the Lord. The season of Lent is *the* time for us to grow into such a tested, purified and fruitful faith, through a deeper conversion to Jesus Christ, his ways, his Gospel, his compassion. For he *is* God's own irrevocable covenant with humankind, with the powerless in particular.

Source: **Vidjyayoti, Journal of Theological Reflection**, Volume 69, No. 2, February 2005.

THE EXISTENCE OF GOD AND THE RECENT 'TSUNAMI': A CHRISTIAN POINT OF VIEW

Fr. Vimal Tirimanna, CSsR

During all my 18 years of Catholic priesthood so far, never have I come across so many questions about God as I did during the past month or so, since the 'tsunami' hit the countries around the Indian Ocean on 26th December 2004. As a matter of fact, if there is anything positive that the tsunami did, it has brought back with vengeance the 'god-talk' which was absent for decades in public conversation. All over the world, people who had no time for God, has all of a sudden begun to talk about God! Even the BBC in one of its special programs in the aftermath of tsunami, had a special discussion on the role of God in such devastating natural calamities. Although such 'god-talk' has returned, it does not necessarily mean that it has returned to affirm the existence of God or to increase our faith in Him. On the one hand, the atheists and skeptics seem to revel in 'god-talk' in the aftermath of tsunami simply to question His very existence, to deny such existence or even to ridicule those who believe in His existence. Their classical, rhetorical question is: "If there is God, what was He doing when so much of devastation was taking place, in and around the Indian Ocean countries?" On the other hand, there are believers in God who dare render bizarre interpretations to the recent sea-tidal wave, some even going to the extent of saying that it is God's punishment or it is God's way of warning the world about the immoralities that had been taking place, especially in and around the coastal areas of Asia "in the form of sex tourism"! I wonder whether the latter group would even dare propose such interpretations if they themselves or any of their near and dear ones were to be among the victims of the recent tsunami! Such an outlandish interpretation is non-biblical and surely contradicts the concept of a God of Love. Of course, in the Bible, we read so many stories where God used nature to manifest His messages (for example, in the Book of Exodus), but the overall thrust of all those manifestations was that of a loving, compassionate God. In between the above-mentioned two extreme groups which are poles apart, there are some who reluctantly concede the existence of God (at least as "a mysterious power"); but they say that even if there is a "god", the tsunami-like catastrophes go on to show that such a god is not interested at all in our humanity or in what happens to that humanity. Then, there are also those firm sincere believers in God who ask: "If God is compassionate and caring why did God allow such things to happen?"

As a human being and as a believer in God, I too cannot help but ask the question: "Why? Why did God allow such a

terrible disaster?" How can God allow so many innocents to be just wiped out instantly or how can He allow so many (especially little children) to be orphaned, and that too, within a matter of just 20 or 30 minutes? Although this is a very human question, I must admit that I do not have a clear-cut answer, simply because I am not God! Although I am a firm Christian believer in God, I have no way of reading God's mind; neither do I claim to be competent to do that. But, based on what the Bible and the Christian Tradition (Revelation) say about God (i.e., based on how this God had been acting in the past), I know that God cannot simply intend evil, for it is a denial of His very self. Ever since He gave reasoning power and freedom (to choose good or evil) to human beings, He has tolerated evil which is a direct result of human sin, human inclination to evil. In other words, the God of the Bible never intends evil, but He permits or allows evil, by simply permitting/allowing the free will of men and women to choose evil, if and when they wish to do so. However, the same Revelation clearly tells me that God is the One who is in full control, in the sense that He is the One who can use even evil (which is caused by human sin) to achieve good. He is the One who can use crooked lines to write straight! As a Christian believer, I believe that He (the Creator) is always in full control of His creation.

I am aware that when I say evil is due to human sin (which is the result of free human choice), some readers would immediately ask whether the tsunamis are created by human sin. Surely, some natural disasters are man-made. For example, floods, global warming and its repercussions,etc., are due to our own human irresponsibility and selfishness. But scientists tell us that tsunamis are not merely due to man-made causes but are also part of the continuing evolutionary process of our planet. If this is true, then, God



as the Creator of the universe (and as the author of the evolutionary process) may have His own mysterious plan in His continuation of that creative process. We Christians believe that God's creation is not a once and for all affair. It continues, at times, even using human agents. If so, God alone will know how He would use such natural calamities (even those calamities which are essential elements of the continuing evolutionary process) for our ultimate good. I repeat none of us, however spiritual or however theologically competent, can read the mind of God, simply because God is God, and we are humans, His creatures. As Cardinal Murphy O'Connor of Westminster is reported to have said in his recent sermon on the feast of the Epiphany: "We cannot understand why God permits such evil things to happen because we cannot understand what it is to be God"! There are certain things in this world, to which as the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Rowan Williams said, we believers can only relate in amazement and silence. In the face of the recent tsunami, men and women have experienced their littleness, their limitedness, as mere creatures. This is precisely what the Psalmist exclaimed: *O Lord, how majestic is thy name in all the earth! When I look at thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars which thou has established; what is man that thou art mindful of him, and the son of man that thou dost care for him?* (Psalm 8)

Then, there are some others who ask: "Where was God when all these terrible things happened?" It has always been my personal experience that it is precisely in His apparent absence that God is present most forcefully. For example, while hanging on a cross, fully abandoned between heaven and earth, Jesus Himself felt the absence of God even to scream out: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" But then, it was precisely at that very moment on Calvary that God was most forcefully present, when the humanity was redeemed. In other words, where He is apparently absent, He is present most forcefully. After all, we Christians believe in a God who became one of us; His name is "Emmanuel", which means "God with us". In a recent homily, the Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Angelo Sodano is supposed to have referred to the question posed by a poor wayfarer who fell into the mud. "Where are you, my God?", the pilgrim cried out as he sank in the mud. But he immediately heard a mysterious voice that responded from on high: "I am with you in the mud!" This is precisely the Christian answer to the question: "Where is God during the tsunami?" He was there right in the midst of the victims of tsunami, and He is there right in the midst of the millions of suffering survivors of tsunami!

As a believer, I also hold with the Bible that life comes from God; He is the origin of all life. If so, as the One who gives life in His own mysterious ways, He also has the right to take it back in His own mysterious ways. It is this pivotal belief that most of us, modern men and women, would be reluctant to agree with, but then, isn't it a fact? Which of us has control over our lives? Every time a new life is born or every time someone dies (when a life is gone!), it is surely a stark reminder to us that we are utterly finite, and that God alone is infinite. Although we humans have mastered science

and technology to control even certain aspects of our enormous universe, as for instance, sending satellites to distant planets and perform complex experiments there, we are yet to control natural disasters like tsunamis, earthquakes, floods,etc. This is yet another reminder of our limitedness as compared to God's infiniteness. The recent tsunami is also a powerful reminder to us, modern men and women, how uncertain life is, no matter how secure we try to make it. Surely, none of the many thousands of victims and millions of survivors, did ever dream that this sudden calamity would befall them. As a matter of fact, some of them were holidaying on our southern and eastern coasts or were on their way to such a relaxation. They were caught totally unawares. This uncertainty of human life is expressed in the Bible, by the author of the Book of Psalms when he says: "In the midst of life is death"!

It is precisely because all life comes from God that we Christians are committed to respect life, especially human life, without any discrimination. In other words, human life, which is created in the image and likeness of God, which is redeemed by the precious blood of Jesus Christ and which is sanctified by the Holy Spirit, is precious to us Christians. So, human life is to be protected at any cost. However, we as Christians also believe that human life here on earth is not an end in itself. Our life on earth is only in a transient phase; it is only a preparation to eternal life, to life after death. So, death, however cruel, it may appear to our human eyes, is not the end of everything for a believer. Death is only an entrance to eternal life, which enables us to behold God face to face, for ever. The thousands of tsunami deaths are surely irrational according to our human wisdom/reasoning, if we regard life on earth as an end in itself. However, if we believe in an after-life, then, it need not be so. Such deaths can simply be part of God's mysterious ways.

I must admit that after traveling in some of the tsunami-hit areas and meeting some of the survivors here in Sri Lanka, I myself was shattered, especially after hearing the pathetic stories of survivors, who had lost everything they had, perhaps, except what they were wearing at the time. Still worse and heart-breaking was to hear how in certain families only one or two members managed to survive. The question "why" returns with a vengeance! But then, this is precisely what happened to Jesus on the cross! None of the believers could ever explain (on purely human terms) 'why' Jesus Christ the just one, the holy one, the innocent one, the Son of God, had to die like a criminal on a cross. No one could explain 'why' God allowed such a thing, and that too, to His own Son! If so, who would dare to explain the "why" of the recent tsunami, as far as God is concerned?

This all important "why" in the aftermath of tsunami is posed mainly because so many deaths and sufferings are apparently senseless. But would any answer to that "why" satisfy those who pose that question? As the Archbishop of Canterbury rhetorically asked in an important article in *The Sunday Telegraph* in the aftermath of tsunami: "If some religious genius did come up with an explanation of exactly why all these deaths made sense, would we feel happier or safer or more confident in God?"



In the aftermath of tsunami, some of us ask the question ‘why’, simply because so many thousands lost their lives and so many millions lost their homes and belongings. But surprisingly, we do not ask the same question when similar things happen almost daily in our world. Is it the massive number of the dead, the massive number of the victims that makes the difference, in raising this question? For us Christians, whether it is the loss of one person or the loss of thousands of persons, a loss of human life (that could have been prevented) is surely an evil. In the same breath, I must say that I am not only amazed but also amused by this question of ‘why’ being never asked with regard to the thousands of deaths that are caused due to avoidable human causes like unjust socio-economic structures in the world which make people die of starvation, malnutrition, sickness,...etc., almost every minute! If we keep an account, we would see that such daily humanly-infused deaths are much more in number than the number who died that fateful 26th of December! Why are those who raise the big “why- question” in the aftermath of the recent tsunami, so quiet about such man-infused deaths? Would they ever dare ask “why” when thousands of people die daily due to man-made causes? Moreover, in our Sri Lankan context, what about the number of deaths (often, of innocents!) that are caused daily on our roads due to reckless driving? Statistics tell us that at least five persons are killed on our roads everyday, often due to careless driving. Even here, would one dare blame God, and ask why God allow such deaths (though we are fully aware that they are due to our own carelessness and selfishness on the roads)? Or when such man-infused deaths take place where are those who ask the question: “where is God?”

There are those who raise the question: “What was God doing when this calamity took place?” They seem to imply that God (if He exists and if He cares for us) ought to intervene and check such natural disasters. The Archbishop of Canterbury gave a fitting response to such people in his article in *The Sunday Telegraph* in the aftermath of the tsunami, when he wrote: “There is something odd about expecting that God will constantly step in if things are getting dangerous. How dangerous do they have to be? How many deaths would

be acceptable?” Those who ridicule the perceived divine “passivity” in the face of tsunami-like natural disasters, ought to first of all answer these vital questions.

One of the lessons the tsunami taught us was not to discriminate! In our country, it did not hit only the Sinhalese or only the Tamils or only the Muslims! This very non-discriminatory way of claiming the lives of and victimizing our citizens has ironically made us come together as a nation, at this critical juncture of our history, irrespective of race, religion, politics or caste. What some of us good-willed people could not do for decades (i.e., uniting our nation), the recent tsunami seemed to have done in just 20 to 30 minutes! But then, at what cost? The crucial question is: will we be able to hold on to this unprecedented sense of national unity at least for sometime? We cannot expect our political leaders alone to be responsible for holding on to such unity though surely they have a crucial role to play; we, all citizens, especially at our grass-roots need to shed our racial, religious and political prejudices aside, and seize this opportunity, as a God-given opportunity. That itself will eventually be a proof of God’s control over events and peoples aimed at the common good of all humanity.

Finally, another good that has ensued in the aftermath of the tsunami is the unprecedented sense of human solidarity across the globe. The amount of aid and good-will that began to flow into our country is unprecedented. Both the east and the west united in pumping in enormous amounts of aid and personnel to help our battered nation. Political and Religious leaders of different countries made it a point to pay visits to express their solidarity with and support to us. This sense of solidarity forced Cardinal Murphy-O’Connor to say that in the recent tsunami there had been much death but also a certain birth: the birth of a realization that countless millions of people from all over this world belonged to one world! In some countries, school children pooled together their own savings and collections to help their counter-parts here in Sri Lanka. As I am penning down these thoughts, I just heard over the radio how one small American child who was moved by the recent tsunami sent just five dollars she had collected for the tsunami relief work! Even some ordinary foreigners voluntarily came to our country to give a hand in relief and rehabilitation work. The photograph in one of our dailies of one of the Australian members of parliament doing manual labour in reconstruction work was not only very moving, but also a strong signal to our very rhetorical politicians of all hues to come down from their high pedestals and be with the people (as they always claim they are!) in this hour of need. International experts are of the opinion that never has there been so much of human solidarity across the globe. All in all, in the aftermath of the recent tsunami, I felt proud to be a human being belonging to this one massive human family! In spite of all the evil that seems to dominate our contemporary world, there still seems to be a lot of good, a lot of what it means to be human. This alone is further evidence for me to believe in a God who is good and intends good even through the perceived evil events!

A CHRISTMAS TSUNAMI

Nathan Nettleton

Texts: Jeremiah 31:7-14; Psalm 147:12-20; Ephesians 1:3-14; John 1:1-18

Message: In the face of monumental devastation and suffering, God speaks a word, and the word becomes flesh.

Sermon

Nine nights ago we gathered here to sing and celebrate
We told stories about a baby
A baby who would save the world
A baby whose birth was greeted by angels
A baby whose birth meant tidings of joy for all people everywhere
We spoke of God-made-flesh
Cute chubby baby flesh

We sang familiar songs
We enjoyed familiar company
We smiled at baby Piper playing over here as we sang about the baby
We drank champagne and ate Christmas cake
God was in heaven and all we well with the word
Or so it seemed

But all was not well with the world
A pressure was building up deep beneath the surface
Two unyielding forces were pushing against each other
And we sang on, oblivious
And others partied on
And holidayed on
Walked along moonlit beaches hand in hand
Wrapped final presents as the kids fell asleep
But underneath, the pressure grew and grew

“All is calm, all is bright” we sang
“Sleep in heavenly peace”
:Now you here of endless bliss” we sang
“While mortals sleep, the angels keep their watch of wondering love”
“We will live forever more, because of Christmas day”,
we sang
But the pressure grew and grew
knowing nothing of the bliss of our songs
or the angels’ watch

Nothing gave way that night, or the next
But the pressure went right on building
And the next morning all hell broke loose
It was a simple thing really
Those two great forces pushing against one another
One slipped a bit
The earth shuddered

The pressure was released
All quite simple
The sudden movement caused a wave
Quite explainable

But as the churches went on singing that Sunday morning
Singing songs about that lovely baby again
That wave was tearing babies out of people’s arms
Sucking beds out through hotel windows with people still in them
Dumping sharks in swimming pools
Turning idyllic beachside villages into churning soups of angry water and broken glass and car parts and blood and corrugated iron and dying children and splintered wood

It was all over in minutes
The water ran back into the sea
taking with it whatever it wished
whatever it hand’t impaled or trapped or buried

We’ve all seen pictures of what it left behind
Haunting horrible pictures
Mud and ruins and corpses
Tens of thousands of corpses
Old, young, men, women
The life sucked out of them
Dead children strewn everywhere
Hundreds and hundreds of dead babies

What which is this who laid to rest on Mary’s lap is sleeping?
What child is this who laid to rest in the mud and devastation of Aceh?
And what child is this?
And this?
And this?
Who knows?
Corpses everywhere
Battered lifeless unnamed corpses

Every now and then there is a scream
and one of the living gives a name to one of the dead and grieves
and thousands more lay waste in the sun
some perhaps with no one left alive who knew their name.

What can we say?
Who wants to sing of cute babies now?
Who wants to stand up and talk of the Word made flesh?
There's flesh strewn all over the streets
Broken lifeless flesh
Beginning to bloat in the sun

What do those songs we were singing mean now?
Do the angels' tidings of great joy mean anything in the
face of this?
Can we stand in the mud and debris of Banda Aceh or
Phuket or Galle
and speak of the one who is called Emmanuel
God with us?

Or would it sound obscene?
But that's the challenge isn't it?
Because if the Christmas gospel has nothing meaningful to
say
in Tamil Nadu or the Maldives or Meuloboh
then it doesn't really have anything meaningful to say at all
Someone once said
- perhaps it was Athol Gill
I can't remember -
that any theology that can't be preached
in the presence of parents grieving over their slaughtered
children
isn't worth preaching anywhere else either

But in the midst of the carnage and shock and horror
what can we say?
There are no words
The lovely lines of peace on earth and goodwill to all
sound impossible trite and hollow

And worse still
we are afraid to even speak the name of God
aren't we?
For inside there is a horrible question
that we dare not face
that we don't know what to do with
It is not just that our faith seems to lack adequate words
of comfort
It is that our faith is not sure that God is not to blame

What did our psalm say just a few minutes ago?
Our words of sacred scripture?
God sends the snow and frost and hail
God speaks, the ice melts
God breathes, the waters flow
That's what it said

And if we believe that
If we believe that that is not just poetic hyperbole
but fundamental doctrine
If we believe that God directs the weather
that God speaks and the earth shudders
that God can calm the waves with a word

then we can escape the awful conclusion
that the tsunami is God's doing?

And what did John say in our gospel reading?
All things came into being through him
and without him, not one thing came into being
The tsunami?
Through him?

Those who shake their fists at heaven
and say that either there is no God
or that God is a callous tyrant
have got irrefutable evidence on their side this week
Perhaps every week
Even if God didn't directly make the tsunami
doesn't God have to accept responsibility
for creating the things that create tsunami?
Or is God somehow exempt from manufacturer's liability
questions?

Let us not speak too hastily in defence of God
lest we guilty of simply trying to prop up our own shaky
faith
and silence the doubts and fears that lurk within all of us
Let us allow God to speak for himself

Another preacher rang me up on Thursday
he needed to know that he wasn't the only one
with a head full of horror
wondering how to preach the gospel this week
It's lonely, he said,
being the one who has to find words to say
Impossibly daunting too
bearing the responsibility of preaching the gospel
in a week when the news of the world
seems to make a mockery of it
It struck me that we preachers should probably feel like
that every week
charged with the responsibility to speak the word of God
to desperate people
in a world that seems always capable
of proving our every word a lie

So my friend and I are stuck
As much as we might want to flee the wave of fear and
uncertainty
that threatens to uproot us
and suck the life out of our faith
we have been called to preach the faith of the Church
in season and out of season
and preach it we must
So I cannot hid behind my own advise
to let God speak for himself
because when God speaks for himself
I am one of the ones God has called
to interpret to you the word God speaks

And at times like this

such a responsibility can feel a bit like some of those awful pictures
I can feel a bit like the man wading through the chaos
with his beloved child cradled in his arms
limp and lifeless
Here is the gospel
the faith of the Church
Is there life in it yet?
Or has it drowned in the angry wave of awful reality?
I'm not sure
but dead or alive I still love this child

I can't speak to you as one who has the answers
Like you I am looking for signs of life
amidst the chaos and devastation
But I can and must speak as one called by God
to interpret what God says in the face of all this
So what does God have to say?
What word am I to interpret?

There is a Word from God
And the Word became flesh
The Word became flesh and cast in his lot with us

Why do we call Jesus "the Word"?
We call him the Word because he is what God has to say
What God has to say is made flesh in the Word
All that God has to say is made flesh in the Word
What God has to say in the face of unspeakable suffering
is made flesh in the Word

There are all too many other words spoken about God
Everyone has an opinion
Some will say that God is absent, dead or doesn't care
Some will say that God is all-powerful
that nothing happens except at God's say-so
and that yes, tsunamis only happen if God wills them to
Some will say that the tsunami is God's judgment
words words words
there are no end of words about God
But what does God have to say?
Jesus

God, are you all-powerful?
Jesus
God, do you care?
The Word becomes flesh
God, did you make the tsunami?
The Word becomes flesh
God, where are you?
The Word becomes flesh

Of course there is always a temptation
to try to repackage the Word
to make it say what we wish it would say
We want a messiah who will protect us from every danger
and we can find words about God that will say that
We want a messiah who can calm the waves before they

get us
and we can find a story of Jesus doing that
We want a messiah who will rid in triumphant
like the calvary at the last minute
and vanquish all that would harm us
and bring us singing and weeping tears of joy
to the victory banquet
Our reading from Jeremiah speaks with such words
But if we make the words say whatever we want
we may miss the Word that God speaks altogether
the Word that takes flesh

Because God has spoken a Word
and it hasn't charged in like the cavalry
God has spoken a Word and it did make the world shudder
The World became flesh
and the world shuddered
and a great wave of hostility and selfishness and bitterness
rose up
and flung itself against the Word
devastating all in its path
killing even children in its rage
snarling, surging, seething, smashing
a great wave of darkness
furiously seeking to annihilate the light

And where was God as the wave hit?
Wasn't God right there bearing the brunt of it
Wasn't God there clinging to his beloved child
only to be overwhelmed by the wave
and have the child ripped from his arms
and torn away on that surging flood of hatred
and battered and smashed and pierced
and tossed limp and lifeless to the earth

As a father
I've been tormented by those images this week
Imagining myself trying to protect my child
as the wave hit
desperately clinging to her with every ounce of strength
only to feel her ripped from my arms
and torn away in the surging blackness
and then later hunting for her
in the chaos and ruins
checking body after body
desperately hoping none of them are here
that somehow she will have been washed to safety
and then finding her crumpled and lifeless
and blindly carrying her limp body
looking for someone who could help
but knowing in the hollow depths of my guts
that nothing can help
and seeing in the eyes of everyone who passes
that to all but me she is just one more
of a hundred thousand corpses

It took three days of news footage before it really got to me

It finally broke me when I saw footage
of a mother in Australia
who had just got news that her daughter
who she thought had been lost was safe
and she wept tears of joy and relief
and it struck me
that everyone of those hundred thousand corpses
represented a real person
over whom there would be no such tears of joy and relief
and I wanted to hold my daughter close and cry
but I couldn't
because ironically she was at the beach with her mother
so I broke down
and sobbed alone.

Do I have any idea what it would really feel like?
I doubt it
It was bad enough just imagining it
I don't know how I'd cope if it was real
I certainly wouldn't want to be hearing any comfortable
clichés
like all things working together for good
or they've gone to a better place

I doubt whether I have any idea what it would really feel
like
but I reckon God does
because when we cried out for answers
for explanations
for deliverance
God spoke a word
and the Word became flesh
as a beloved child
and the child was torn from the Father's arms
by a ruthless wave
and the waters of death closed over him
and spat him out as just another
of the hundreds and thousands and millions
of unnamed innocent victims
down through the ages

I reckon God knows
And I reckon that as hard as we might find it
to talk about flesh
while the nameless flesh of countless corpses
are necessarily treated as little more
than a threat to public health
and piled into mass graves
God is still not afraid to be identified as flesh
fragile flesh
brutalised flesh
limp and lifeless flesh

Because the promise of Christmas
is not just that the Word became cute and chubby baby
fleshy
but that the Word became flesh
and cast in his lot with us

hunted flesh
despised flesh
tortured flesh
dead and buried flesh
three days dead flesh stinking and a threat to public health

And although our story of the Word made flesh
does not stop with dead and buried
we will not really understand the rest of the story
if we think of resurrection as just some kind of miracle
cure
which means that death is no longer part of Christ's reality
In the book of Revelation we see the vision
of the risen one on the throne
who still looks like one mortally wounded
The risen one is still the crucified one
The rising one is still the being-crucified one
The people who say all crosses must now be empty are
wrong
because the risen Christ is still
the suffering and drying Christ
The risen Christ who promised we would meet him
in the least of these desperate and vulnerable ones
can be seen lying dead in the mud in Khao Lak and
Meulobo
The Word became flesh

If you want to see what God has to say in the face of this
go walk among the ruins of Banda Aceh
or just turn on your TV
for God is speaking
and the Word has become flesh

Perhaps as we begin to see what God is saying
we will begin to comprehend how blasphemous
so much of what we blithely say about God really is
and how chillingly we treat powerful and dangerous
realities
and casual and comfortable little things

Perhaps when water is flung at us in a few minutes
to remind us of our identity
as those who have been buried
in the deep waters of death with Christ
perhaps this week we'll have
a little more sense of what a serious matter it is
to go under the deep waters of death

Perhaps when we hold out our empty hands
to receive the piece of bread we will be offered shortly
we will recognise something of our solidarity
with desperate hungry people
holding out empty hands
for the food aid the world is trying to muster

con't on page 11>

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con't from page 1 >

The reasons are obvious, we will not be able to meet their needs through our Charity translated as Emergency Relief and Development Aid.

With all our charitable contributions, we will not be able to make much difference to the sufferings of our sisters and brothers in the world of the South. Can it be possible, that when human persons unable to take up the challenge of loving the neighbour and taking care of the ecology and environment have to come to the easy conclusion that these are acts of the vengeance of God and the rage of God. We seem to be completely oblivious to the fact that human folly also plays a pivotal role in many of these modern day tragedies. It is true that human persons, communities and nations have been gradually de-sensitised to human agony and suffering. This may be due to the fact that we have yet to realise fully that the God of Charity, Love and Compassion is also the God of Justice.

This God of Justice sustains our hope since we can evidence the concrete manifestations of the betterment and well being of each human person and the whole of humanity. Justice builds the foundations for Peace to emerge. This Peace is the result of dialogue and reconciliation among peoples and nations. The God of Justice is not the God of Rage, Revenge and Retaliation that we create to justify our own acts of violence and counter-violence, wars of freedom and acts of terrorism. The God of Goodness is also the God of Just Peace that flows from Mercy.

Our reflections on the Tsunami Tragedy has made us even more convinced that people of all faiths with the firm belief in the One God - Being can bring a new ethos to the human family. We can together with the God of Mercy and Peace turn our state of permanent tragedies into stepping stones for a new heaven and a new earth.

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