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## **Religion and Disaster**

**A Critical Reflection Post Alor Earthquake 2004**

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# Religion and Disaster: A Critical Reflection From Alor Earthquake 2004

**John Campbell-Nelson**

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## *Introduction*

As we gather today to discuss religion and disaster, anywhere from 200,000 to 350,000 Indonesians are living in camps and temporary shelters as a result of the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami, the 2006 Yogyakarta earthquake, recent flooding in Sumatra, the ongoing mud flows in Sidoarjo, East Java, as well as people who are still displaced due to the communal conflicts that swept many parts of Eastern Indonesia in 1999-2000, including the evacuation from East Timor after it gained its independence in 1999.<sup>1</sup> And these are just the extraordinary disasters. IDP (internally displaced person) estimates do not take into account hundreds of smaller groups who have been displaced by landslides, flooding, volcanic activity, and more localized social conflicts. Let us welcome all IDPs as honorary participants in this conference, and keep them in mind as we speak.

The list of disasters above indicates the complexity we face if we want to think coherently about the role religion plays in interpreting, alleviating, and sometimes contributing to sudden, large-scale disruptions of human life. As to their causes, the list includes what are clearly natural disasters (earthquakes and floods), social and communal conflict (including conflicts perceived to be between religious communities), failures in foreign policy (East Timor), and at least one industrial disaster (Sidoarjo). In some cases the distinction between natural and human causes is not easy to make: the severity of flooding in Sumatra is widely attributed to illegal logging and the inability or unwillingness of the government to put a stop to it. Conversely, although the mud flows in East Java were triggered by the exploratory drilling of an energy company, the underlying geothermal forces are far beyond human control.

For many victims, it matters little to their misery whether the disaster comes from natural causes, human error or political intrigue. They experience themselves as caught up in events beyond

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<sup>1</sup> Figures are hard to come by. The United Nations placed the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Indonesia at 535,000 in 2003, down from a high of 1.4 million in 2002; most recent estimates range from 200,000-350,000. The Indonesian government does not release statistics on IDPs. Source: Internal Displacement Monitoring Center Report, 19 July, 2006, see [www.internal-displacement.org](http://www.internal-displacement.org).

their control and beyond their resources to remedy. The agents of their suffering are often as mysterious as divinities; and when these can be identified – whether politicians, the military, religious extremists, or large corporations – they seem as far beyond the victims’ reach as God – farther, perhaps, because God at least can be petitioned in prayer.

Categorizing disaster by cause is further complicated when we take the interpretive role of religion into account. From a secular point of view we could construct a continuum from purely natural causes on one end to human-induced (political, social, economic) causes on the other. However, religious perspectives introduce other possible agents that may seem highly realistic to local populations. The Hebrew Bible often makes little distinction among the earthly agents of disaster – whether flood, drought or the armies of Babylon – as expressions of the wrath of God. Monotheistic religions are predisposed to see the hand of God in every large-scale event as blessing, punishment, vengeance or call to repentance. Those with a dualistic orientation may well see the hand of the devil. In addition, indigenous religions and folklore often attribute disaster to spirits of place or ancestors angered by violations of tradition and cosmic order.

Whether we are sociologists examining the role of religion in disasters and their aftermath, theologians trying to interpret the meaning of a disaster in the light of a particular faith tradition, or care-givers seeking to nurture the recovery of a post-traumatic population, it is essential that we take account of the complexity and the full range of interpretive possibilities that are present in the social context of a given disaster.

At the same time, we must focus if we are to see anything at all. A different set of theological issues is posed depending on whether we are dealing with the powers of nature or with the human capacity for evil. Care-givers are also aware that the process of recovery from trauma is quite different depending on how the disaster is perceived – whether as due to natural causes or due to human agency. Civil conflict, for example, raises issues of vengeance and reconciliation that are generally less evident in the aftermath of a flood or an earthquake.

For these reasons, I will not attempt a general discussion of religion and disaster. Instead, in this paper I will focus on one particular disaster and the response of a particular religious community to it, and then try to lift up some implications for the study of religion and disaster in other contexts. I choose the disaster with which I am most familiar, the 2004 earthquake on the island

of Alor. The reflections that follow are drawn from a series of interviews with survivors and discussions with pastors that my wife and I conducted during the weeks following the quake.<sup>2</sup>

### ***Standing on Shaky Ground: Theology of an Earthquake***

The quake that struck Alor in the early morning of 12 November 2004 was centered some 10 kilometers beneath the ocean floor just north of the island. In a few minutes, thousands of Alorese had lost everything but their lives. Families lost their homes and furnishings, villages lost their water supply as wells caved in and springs were choked off by landslides, children lost their schools, worshippers lost their churches, and farmers even lost their fields as rice paddies became rolling hills, irrigation channels crumbled, and hillside gardens slid into the valleys.

This earthquake was about 7.5 on the Richter scale and the strongest to have hit Alor in memory, although much smaller than the great Indian Ocean quake that was to strike six weeks later off the coast of Aceh. About 35 people were killed and more than 200 wounded. Approximately 6,000 homes were destroyed, along with 450 places of worship (mostly Protestant Christian churches, the majority religion on the island).

Anyone who faces such a loss will react: some wept uncontrollably, some wandered in confusion, some had nightmares and others were afraid to sleep. Some were angry, but frustrated because they could find no target for their anger. All were afraid, stunned at their vulnerability. Several people reported that the saddest thing was the realization that one's own home, the place that symbolized comfort and safety, had become the greatest threat. As the initial fear began to fade, it was replaced by a sense of collective grief in the face of such widespread loss.

The next question after "Are you alright?" was "Why? Why did this have to happen?" In the weeks following the quake three different popular theories were debated concerning the causes of the earthquake, with a fourth explanation that emerged after geological information became available from church and NGO aid workers.

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<sup>2</sup> Adapted from my essay, "Bumi Tidak Tenang: Sebuah Studi Kasus tentang Gempa Bumi di Alor," in *Teologi Bencana*, ed. Zakaria Ngelow et al (Makassar: OASE Intim, 2006), pp. 95-110.

The first theory blamed the Mining Department of the regional government that had recently begun exploratory drilling for geothermal energy in an area nearest the epicenter of the quake. There had long been a hot springs in that location, which dried up due to the quake. Some people believed that the drilling had disturbed a reservoir of geothermal energy, causing underground explosions that were the cause of the quake. Thus, they placed the blame for the earthquake on the Mining Department and the regional government. In the initial weeks after the quake, government officials found it wise to stay away from the area unless they had a police or military escort.

The second theory was still focused around the drilling location, but was rooted in local myth. A traditional story told of a witch who had been trapped in her cave and buried alive by villagers who were jealous and fearful of her powers. The wrath of the witch bubbled up from underground in the form of the hot springs. When her grave was disturbed by the drilling, she shook the earth. In another version, the island of Alor was believed to rest on the back of a great dragon whose sleep was disturbed by the drilling. In both versions blame for the earthquake tended to lie on the local government and the tribal elders, who should have known enough to ask permission of the witch/dragon through proper rituals and sacrifices before they authorized the drilling.

The third theory seemed to be partly spontaneous and partly a reaction by Christian leaders to the other two theories. The earthquake was seen as God's judgment on the sins of the people of Alor, or at the very least a call to draw nearer to God.<sup>3</sup> Church leaders felt the need to reassert the sovereignty of God in the face of modern technology (the drilling project) and the local powers of place. The idea that a witch or a dragon could destroy so many churches was particularly galling.

Unfortunately the initial theological response raised other questions that were not so easy to answer: Are the sins of the Alorese so much greater than the sins of neighboring ethnic groups that they alone were subjected to the scourge of God? This felt like blaming the victim, and was hard for any self-respecting Alorese to accept. Second, it was pointed out that just because a traumatic event makes people draw nearer to God doesn't mean that God intentionally caused the

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<sup>3</sup> For the same interpretation of a social conflict, see Jerda Djawa, "Mencari Makna Penderitaan: Refleksi Pengalaman dalam Konteks Kerusuhan di Halmahera," in *Teologi Bencana*, pp. 65-72.

disaster. Passengers in a bus call out “God, help us!” when the bus crashes, but that doesn’t mean that God wrecked the bus just to hear the people cry. Many people saw the quake as a punishment from God, but perhaps just as many responded spontaneously, “This is not God’s judgment!”

In the midst of this conflict of interpretations, a fourth theory emerged from outsiders who came to aid in the disaster response. They offered explanations based on the geology of plate tectonics. Alor is situated not far from the point where the Euro-Asian continental plate meets the Australian continental plate. Because the Australian plate is advancing slowly toward the Euro-Asian plate, pressure builds up and is eventually released in the form of an earthquake. By virtue of its geological location, Alor (like Sumatra) will always be subject to periodic quakes. The morality or immorality, faith or faithlessness of the people of Alor is unlikely to have any effect on the movements of continental plates. Furthermore, seismographic data indicate that the quake was centered 10 kilometers beneath the sea. It is not possible for exploratory drilling that had reached only several hundred meters to have caused the quake. One man made the analogy, “That would be like saying that scratching your head gave you a stomach ache.”

Many Alorese found the scientific explanation helpful, especially as it was accompanied by maps from the US Geological Survey<sup>4</sup> and the use of flat rocks to demonstrate what happens when continental plates come together. On one hand, they were pleased to have a better understanding of the immediate cause of their suffering. On the other hand, this explanation was void of meaning in terms of their religious faith. It said nothing one way or the other about the role of God in the event.

The scientific explanation did, however, reframe the question: If the quake was caused by the shifting of continental plates, then the One who created these plates must be seen as the ultimate cause of earthquakes. So the question becomes, “Why did God create such a restless earth?”

### ***Holding God Responsible***

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<sup>4</sup> The US Geological Survey website is an excellent resource on natural disasters: [www.usgs.gov](http://www.usgs.gov).

The tale of origins is a form of folktale that purports to explain how certain puzzling aspects of the world came to be. How did the elephant get its trunk? Why do giraffes have such long necks? Why did God create mosquitoes? Many English-speakers will be familiar with the form from Kipling's *Just-So Stories*. Several similar tales appear in the Bible: Why do the peoples of the earth have so many languages (Genesis 11)? Where did the rainbow come from (Genesis 9)? Aside from their function as entertainment and teaching tools for children, such tales convey the conviction that everything has its meaning and purpose, as long as we know the story behind it. However puzzling at first sight, the world is ultimately intelligible.

For the most part such stories have been replaced in modernity by scientific explanations on one hand and theological interpretations on the other. The anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski gave the formative account of this process in his *Magic, Science and Religion*.<sup>5</sup> According to Malinowski, a primordial unity in myth and magic has evolved over time into two separate ways of knowing: science and religion. Science explores the technical/operational aspects of reality, and religion deals with meaning and values. In the case of the Alor earthquake, for example, the story of the witch and the dragon is displaced by plate tectonics on one hand and the idea of divine judgment on the other.

The problem remains that we have not yet identified a meeting point between the scientific and the theological explanations, between the science of earthquakes and the wrath of God. What is the relationship between a geologic process occurring over millions of years and affecting the entire face of the earth and the idea that as of November 2004 the sins of the people of Alor had become too great for God to put up with any more? This kind of conflict between scientific explanation and religious interpretation seems to arise with varying levels of absurdity whenever science and religion are in the same room; perhaps it is a chronic condition of modernity. However, if no attempt is made to resolve the contradictions, we are threatened with schizophrenia.

Moreover, this is not simply an intellectual problem. People can live quite comfortably with a host of intellectual contradictions, but disaster has a way of forcing us to make choices. Whatever interpretation is eventually accepted by the population will have a direct influence on

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<sup>5</sup> Bronislaw Malinowski, *Magic, Science, and Religion* (New York: Free Press, 1948).

their behavior in response to the disaster. Although by no means everyone cares to contemplate the science and theology of earthquakes, they have no choice but to respond to the sudden dismantling of their lives, and their responses will reflect assumptions they have made (or been given) about cause and effect. If the quake was a sign of God's wrath, then repentance and prayer are the most effective preventive measures. If the quake was caused by the wrath of an ancestral witch, then the appropriate propitiatory rituals must be performed. In either event, rebuilding our homes and churches using earthquake-resistant architecture is hardly relevant. If the geological explanation is accepted without corresponding theological interpretation, the resources of faith for healing wounded hearts and communities will be hampered.

As it happens, there is an explanation of the earthquake that can incorporate both the geological and the theological aspects without doing serious violence to either – even if it has something of the flavor of Kipling's "just-so" stories and not all people of faith may be willing to accept its implications. From the geological perspective, we know that even the hardest rock will erode over time when exposed to sun, wind and rain. Wherever the surface of the earth is exposed to the elements, it is ever so slowly flattened by erosion. Conversely, tectonic motion is slowly but continuously causing portions of the earth to rise. In the case of an earthquake, this ongoing motion is suddenly apparent – the Indian Ocean quake of 2004 caused the sea bed to rise as much as 15 meters in some places. This happens indirectly as well when one continental plate is subducted beneath another and forced toward the hot center of the earth where it expands again as magma and returns to the earth's surface in the form of volcanic eruption.

In this way, between the erosion that melts away the earth and the tectonic motion that lifts it up again, the surface of the earth is being continually (if very slowly) renewed. A striking example of this process is the fact that the peak of Mt. Everest, the highest point on earth, is composed largely of marine limestone.<sup>6</sup>

If we look at the same data from a theological perspective, in Christian theological tradition the entire process is seen as the action of the Creator God. The idea of *creatio continuo* has long had a place in theological tradition: that the work of God in creation was not completed and abandoned on the seventh day (Genesis 1), but that God continues to renew and enrich the

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<sup>6</sup> An excellent account of plate tectonics for the general reader is John McPhee, *Basin and Range* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1980).

created world. In the matter of tectonic motion, it can be said that in this way God restores the face of the earth. If there were no plate movement lifting up the earth, then the earth's surface would long ago have eroded into a smooth ball, the globe would be completely covered in water, and the fish would inherit the earth.

In this point of view, earthquakes must be seen as a consequence of God's ongoing creation. Put simply, God is still raising up Alor from the sea; earthquakes are a sign of God's work and a risk that must be accepted by those who live in a divine construction zone.

When this perspective was lifted up in discussion with pastors and church elders in Alor, they seemed satisfied. The scientific explanations they had received could be incorporated into the faith perspective that they had long held without significant contradiction. In addition to healing the rupture between the perception of reality and the assurance of faith, there was the added benefit that local government and the Mining Department were let off the hook and the church had a plausible narrative to refute the witch/dragon theory.

It would be nice to leave the story here with a theological happy ending. Unfortunately, the issue is a bit more complicated. Some people of faith find it difficult to leave behind the moralistic interpretation of disaster, in part because it is so well attested in the Biblical tradition (I can think of only Job and Jesus who consistently reject moralism in the face of suffering). Perhaps the strongest motive for embracing the idea of disaster as punishment is because it offers the possibility that a people's piety can protect them from disaster. If faithlessness brought on the disaster, then faithfulness can prevent a future one. But if earthquakes are inevitable and completely unrelated to human behavior, then all we can do is accept the risk or move closer to the center of a continental plate where earthquakes are rare (but tornadoes, snowstorms or drought may not be). Contemplating the idea that religious faith is not a shield against danger leaves many people feeling more exposed and vulnerable than contemplating the ruins of their homes.

What makes the moralistic position dangerous in the wake of disaster is that it requires someone to blame. If we all were content to blame only ourselves, the consequences may be debilitating, but would not lead to social conflict. Too often, moralism leads to scapegoating. In Alor, government officials were threatened and nearly beaten by angry survivors because they had approved and promoted the drilling operation; mining staff were evacuated. In Aceh, young

women are targets of persecution if their dress does not seem sufficiently modest or they socialize too freely with male friends, because female immorality has been identified as one of the sources of divine wrath that brought about the tsunami. Church historian Martin Marty notes that after the Lisbon earthquake of 1755, priests roamed the streets hanging people whose bad morals were thought to have caused the quake.<sup>7</sup>

The Judeo-Christian tradition has found no better answer to this problem than the admittedly enigmatic conclusion to the book of Job. Human beings are not the measure of all things; God has larger purposes for creation than reward of church-goers and punishment of unbelievers, but that does not mean that God does not care about our fate. An Alor pastor we met in front of the ruins of her church gave a profound witness to this insight by a gloss on the language of Job 1.21: "All that we have, God has given us," she said. "Now the Lord has taken it all away. But the Lord will give again."

Such an affirmation of faith is perhaps a good point at which to leave the discussion of Alor and begin to draw some broader implications for the study of religion and disaster. In the account above we have touched only tangentially on the role of religious institutions in disaster recovery or the role that religious faith plays in counseling trauma victims. Important as these aspects are, they are basically secondary to the role religion plays in *interpreting* disaster by providing a conceptual, narrative or theological framework within which survivors of disaster can seek meaning in what has happened to them and begin to face an uncertain future.

### ***The Hermeneutic of Disaster***

Hermeneutics originally gained currency as the art of interpreting the meaning of texts, particularly sacred texts, but it has long since been incorporated by the social sciences in relation to the interpretation of cultures, and more generally as the epistemological foundation of the human sciences (Gadamer).<sup>8</sup> A hermeneutical approach to the study of religion and disaster is

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<sup>7</sup> Jose Antonio Vargas, "Seeking the Hand of God in the Waters," *The Washington Post*, Dec. 31, 2004, p. C01.

<sup>8</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Seabury, 1975). An excellent general introduction to hermeneutics available in Indonesian is Richard E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics* (Evanston: Northwestern, 1969).

appropriate because both are fundamentally related to how people structure (and in the case of disaster, restructure) the meaning of their lives and the life of their communities.

In ancient Greece a boundary marker was called a *herm*, and the corresponding verb *hermeneuein* referred to the act of transporting something across boundaries. It came to mean “to translate” – to carry meaning across the boundaries of language. The Greek messenger god was Hermes who crossed the boundaries between the gods and humans. In the context of our discussion, I see disaster as the “boundary” in question; in this case, a radical disruption of life that creates a rift between “before” and “after.” The task of a hermeneutic of disaster then is to build a bridge spanning that rift, a bridge that enables people to incorporate an unrecoverable past into an unexpected future.

At the outset it may be helpful to ask, Why a hermeneutic of disaster rather than a theology of disaster? The short answer is that systematic theology begins at too great a distance from the ruined homes and fallen steeples of the disaster zone. People digging out from the rubble do not want a general answer to the problem of theodicy<sup>9</sup>; they want to know why *this* particular disaster has befallen *them*. Dogmatics all too often produces a rush to defend one’s concept of God from the disaster rather than provide strength and comfort to its victims. (Many pastors in Alor, once they reflected on their first sermons after the earthquake, admitted they had made this kind of mistake.) The advantage of pastoral hermeneutics here (the approach most commonly employed by practical theology) is that it doesn’t have to answer for all misfortunes everywhere; it just has to deal with the problem at hand.

A second reason for taking the hermeneutical approach is that disaster is as much a concept as it is an event. Of course raw *numbers* are involved – a child who drowns in a storm drain is a family tragedy; a hundred children swept away by a flood is a disaster – and yet for each of those children there is a grieving family. The *sudden and unexpected* cause of death also plays a role. The United Nations World Food Program estimates that 25,000 people die globally of hunger-related causes every day – that’s a tsunami every two weeks – and yet there is no 24-hour TV coverage of the hunger disaster.

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<sup>9</sup> The problem of divine justice. See Andreas Yewangoe and Gerrit Singgih’s essays in *Teologi Bencana*.

The mention of television reminds us that disasters are heavily *mediated*. Perhaps a hundred thousand East Timorese died of starvation in “resettlement” camps during the years after the Indonesian invasion, but there was little international concern because no one was there to broadcast it. By contrast, nearly everyone with a television set has seen the World Trade Center towers collapse at least a dozen times. Survivors of 9/11 are local celebrities, whereas I have heard many Timorese say of the Indonesian occupation, “We were afraid we were going to die and no one would ever know.” It took the internationally televised footage of the 1991 massacre at Santa Cruz to legitimate the disaster status of East Timor.

The *social location* of a group may have much to say about how they interpret a disaster. Farmers in Timor, who mostly live outside the cash economy, were largely oblivious to the 1997 Asian monetary crisis, although they were amused when civil servants began asking for land on which to plant a garden because they could no longer live on their salaries. In Alor, the “leveling” impact of the earthquake was not merely physical; the relatively affluent suffered the greatest losses when their brick houses collapsed, whereas the bamboo homes of the poor rarely fell down. In extreme cases, an oppressed group may see disaster for their oppressors as divine deliverance for themselves, following the example of the biblical plagues of Egypt that moved Pharaoh to release the Hebrew slaves. More than a few Christians in Eastern Indonesia react to news of a disaster that affects Indonesian Muslims with a thoughtlessly fiendish piece of folk theology: “See, they burn our churches and murder our pastors, but we don’t need to fight back. God is punishing them for us.”

A third reason for giving priority to hermeneutics, and for me the most important, is that by attending to all the narrative strands that make up the web of post-disaster discourse, we are able to place the interpretations offered by religious traditions in the context of cultural and political factors that are also at play in order to see how they interact. I tried to give a simplified example of this in my explication of the debates and discussions following the Alor earthquake.

The case of Alor also calls attention to the crucial role of the natural sciences in interpreting disaster. Even a rather primitive explanation of plate tectonics did a great deal to dispel the cloud of mystery surrounding the earthquake, which in turn helped theological reflection move beyond contentious moralism. Under the influence of the contextualization and liberation movements Christian theology has benefited greatly from dialogue with the social sciences, but it

has been much slower to incorporate insights from the natural sciences.<sup>10</sup> A growing concern with ecology has begun to open new avenues, and certainly the study of natural disasters will not go far without a basic understanding of the science of earthquakes, hurricanes, bird flu, global warming, and the like. It should be noted that Islam has a long and noble tradition of promoting the natural sciences as an explication of the glory of God's creation.

Despite its clarifying power, natural science is but one element in the contestation over how a disaster is to be understood. As we saw in Alor, sermons and seminars compete with speeches by government officials and political operatives, newspaper editorials, public information campaigns by NGOs, the judgment of tribal elders and late-night conversations in temporary shelters.

The conflict of interpretations is not entirely due to differing perceptions of the true nature of the disaster. Most public and communal institutions have a need to establish their presence and reposition themselves in the face of disaster. They want to absolve their god, their policies, their morals or their traditions from blame. Not infrequently they interpret the disaster in such a way as to gain advantage over their opponents, and the post-disaster recovery period becomes a playing field for the continuation of pre-disaster rivalries.

In Aceh, both GAM and TNI accused one another of taking advantage of the tsunami to improve their positions in the secessionist conflict. Christian fundamentalists proclaimed that God had flung wide the gates of Aceh to let Christ come in, while proponents of Syariah claimed the tsunami was a warning from Allah to be more zealous in obedience to Islamic law. Meanwhile, the United States, mired in Iraq and Afghanistan and chafing under accusations that it was anti-Islamic, was delighted to have the opportunity to demonstrate that it cared about the fate of Indonesian Muslims. Some Islamic opponents of US foreign policy responded by accusing the U.S. of causing the tsunami by exploding a massive undersea nuclear device. In the face of such a Babel of interpretations, any theological response and any emergency aid by religious organizations has to take into account that it will inevitably become entangled in the politics of disaster.

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<sup>10</sup> A notable exception is the work of John Cobb and Charles Birch, a theologian and a biologist. See their *The Liberation of Life* (London: Cambridge, 1981), Cobb's *God and the World* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), and Birch's *Nature and God* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1965).

Finally, a hermeneutic of disaster is not simply about understanding the past; it is about forming a communal narrative through dialogue and consensus that will enable survivors to recover what they can from their past and find the resources they need to build a new future. People need to find and create meaning about what has befallen them in order to move forward. Without this process they can only move on by walling off the part of themselves that is still crying out “Why?”

### ***Conclusion***

This brief reflection on a very large topic leaves many aspects of the study of religion and disaster still unexplored. The essays collected in *Teologi Bencana* (Theology of Disaster) are perhaps the best place to start for those who read Indonesian. The relationship of religious narratives of creation and destruction to the interpretation of disasters is a rich and fruitful area of study,<sup>11</sup> as is the study of indigenous cosmologies and concepts of order.<sup>12</sup> (To understand how people deal with disorder, it is helpful to know their prior concepts of order.) Ecology and Eco-theology will have much to say about disaster and human responsibility.<sup>13</sup> There is a growing literature on the praxis of post-traumatic care,<sup>14</sup> and in relation to disasters caused by social conflict we have studies of peace-making, reconciliation and transitional justice.<sup>15</sup> So there is much to do.

In the Indonesian context, scholars have the opportunity and the responsibility to be engaged in the recovery of communities stricken by natural and social disaster. I conclude this essay by offering several criteria by which to measure a hermeneutic of disaster that is responsive to the needs of survivors:

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<sup>11</sup> See Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992).

<sup>12</sup> *Cosmogony and Ethical Order*, ed. Robin Lovin and Frank Reynolds (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1985).

<sup>13</sup> For human connivance in large-scale disaster, see Jared Diamond's popular *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Survive* (New York: Penguin, 2005) or Clive Ponting, *A Green History of the World* (New York: Penguin, 1991).

<sup>14</sup> See J. Jeffrey Means, *Trauma and Evil* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000)

<sup>15</sup> Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996); Martha Minow, *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998); Priscilla Hayner, *Unspeakable Truths* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

- Is it realistic? Can people recognize their experience of disaster in it?
- Is it faithful to the best wisdom of their religious tradition? Can people recognize their experience of faith in it?
- Is it just? Does it avoid privileging the experience of one group over that of another? Does it provide a barrier to scapegoating while acknowledging human responsibility?
- Is it humane? Does it acknowledge the pain and loss people have suffered while affirming the value and dignity of human life?
- Does it provide a context of meaning within which survivors can pick up the broken strands of their lives and carry them forward to a new and unexpected future?

Few nations have experienced the number and intensity of disasters that Indonesia has in recent years, and few have shown such resiliency in absorbing so much suffering. May God bless the millions of survivors of disaster in Indonesia who may well feel they have been cursed.