

# Not divine vengeance

Islam

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## Friday feature

WAS it the vengeance of a just and benevolent God who is angry with men, women and children 'tainted with sin,' revelling in the tourist resorts on the warm and hospitable beaches washed by the Indian Ocean's waves? Those who are religiously inclined may be asking themselves if the tsunami havoc of last month that claimed 150,000 lives or more was a re-play of the pre-historic deluge of Noah.

Nothing can be more preposterous than such a thought. This is not the first case of a natural disaster of this kind in recorded history when human failings were not the remotest cause and where the elements of nature alone were the agents of destruction and devastation — earth's primeval plates under the bed of the ocean shifting and swerving, thereby prompting the otherwise calm waters to rise like an enraged giant waking from deep slumber. Earthquakes, cyclones, inland river floods and volcanic eruptions have caused worse disasters in the past.

All rational minds will view these natural disasters not as cases of God's fury but implementation of the Divine law of ecological balance of which modern man, at this stage of intellectual development, has become aware and at a time when ecology has acquired the status of a science devoted to the study of plants, animals and humans in relation to the environment.

But natural disasters on this scale have been, through the ages, seen in a different light by sages.

Buddha (563 BC), after receiving 'enlightenment' in the wake of a protracted period of penance and meditation, concluded that the world is evil and human life basically unhappy because of carnal desires in every soul. Seeking 'nirvana', or extinction, by renouncing the world was the recommended recipe.

Buddha's contemporary, Zoroaster of Persia, in order to reconcile the goodness of God with the ills and pains of actual life, bifurcated God, function wise, Ormuzd, con-

cerned with things good and noble, having a fleet of angels of virtue; and Ahraman, concerned with things evil and bad with an equally large fleet of angels of vice. This is how he explained the dualism in nature.

In Greece, the land of philosophers and sages, Pythagoras, a distant contemporary of Buddha and Zoroaster, also sought to explain this duality by postulating that the sources of good and evil were separate. But since, like Buddha, he too did not believe in God and the after-life, he thought that every soul had to atone for his/her sins and vices in this world, through a process of transmigration an unending chain of births and rebirths.

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Hinduism, which was later introduced in India by Aryans after occupying that country in sixth century B.C., the period when the preachings of Buddha, Zoroaster and Pythagoras, had gained sufficient currency in the Middle East and Central Asia, rests on the dogma of 'Awa-Gawan' or endless arrivals and departures of soul, i.e. an interminable cycle of births and rebirths till the attainment of 'mukti' or salvation. Also, a kind of trinity of supreme gods became the main plank of the Brahmanic theology — Brahma being the creator, Vishnu the preserver and Mahesha, the destroyer.

According to the Quran, Allah, the one and only God, has declared that "no calamity befalls but with His leave" (64:11). Thus, calamities and miseries and misfortunes that afflict mankind are traceable to the

Almighty's inscrutable grand design and are the natural consequence of the divine laws governing the smooth functioning of the universe until the apocalypse, or Qi'amat, occurs to destroy the existing system and erect a new order to dispense justice — rewarding resurrected humans for good deeds performed on earth and punishing them for bad deeds within the external framework provided to each individual and his/her in-built and inborn capacity.

One has to bear in mind that, according to the Quran, human beings have been "created in affliction" (90:4) and that "every soul must taste death and will be tried with evil and with good (21:35) and, finally, "this life of the world is but a pastime and sport, life hereafter being the real life" (29:64). These cryptic hints paint a complete picture of the present world, peopled by "weaklings"

(4:28) facing "affliction" but not tainted with "original sin" transmitted, supposedly, by the first parents, who incurred God's displeasure right after their creation in their primordial abode.

According to Islam, the question of atonement for any kind of sin in the present world does not arise nor any kind of punishment from above, in the form of a calamity or natural disaster, is due in the present life. Past cases of punishment meted out to citizens of "evil" city-states, who were repeatedly warned by local prophets sent by God, are a part of ancient history.

So a Muslim who believes that the ills and afflictions of the present life are not worth worrying about in a world unabated by ephemeral mortals are likely to treat natural disasters merely as a chance happening for people to die the inevitable, pre-ordained death, which is the passage to face one's Maker in the next everlasting world.

But those who think that all the misery, suffering and affliction seen around in this world are a picture of the divine scheme of gruesome retribution and punishment, then any effort to alleviate human sufferings will not be a noble act of charity and a humanitarian step to help fellow human beings in their hour of distress. It will, according to them, be a criminal act of intervention in the dispensation of divine justice.