

## The Responsibility to Reflect

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**Abstract:** *We have a God-given responsibility to reflect missiologically on the Asian Tsunami says Simon Steer, Principal of Redcliffe College. He says that we must reflect deeply on the disaster but we must also seek God's perspective and see the wider issues he wants to put on the hearts of his children, to see them act and respond seeing the response to the Tsunami as the potential beginning of something good rather than just the end of something terrible.*

### Introduction

It may seem too early for missiological reflection on the tsunami that has caused such devastation in South Asia. Our initial responses, quite rightly, have been emotional and practical.

A friend of mine working in Indonesia e-mailed me as she was sitting in a small airport waiting to go to Medan to participate in the relief effort in Sumatra. A special fund-raising programme was being shown on Indonesian television at the boarding gate. Images of the tragedy were broadcast: a mother trying to revive her dead child, still wet from being pulled from the water; bodies littering a flooded street; a woman sobbing uncontrollably when meeting Indonesia's President during his emergency visit to Aceh. My friend, normally an efficient business-like administrator, found tears falling from her eyes in the airport lounge that morning. She writes, "I was embarrassed for a moment, thinking I must be drawing attention to myself. But then I remembered: all of Indonesia is crying. I was not alone. It was okay."

We feel deeply the sudden loss of life on such a scale and the untold suffering caused to families and entire communities. We seek to show compassion through financial contributions to the relief effort, through our prayers and in silent contemplation.

With the emotions and the actions, however, come questions, doubts, analysis. As Christians, our theological response to the tsunami includes emotional and humanitarian reactions but needs to go beyond them. It is for this reason, that we have decided to devote this issue of *Encounters* to theological and missiological reflection upon the events that began early on Sunday, 26th December 2004 and have affected millions of lives in Indonesia, Thailand, Sri Lanka and India. Much of what we say may be tentative and provisional, more a case of raising the right questions than providing the right answers. We hope, however, that the various articles will prompt many of you to share your own reflections and that the Holy Spirit will help us to make sense of what so often seems incomprehensible.

### Where was God?

Few events in recent history have prompted so many people to ask theological questions, as has the Asian tsunami. As the *Christianity Today* website puts it, "Supernatural causation and divine culpability are the hottest debates coming out of the Indian Ocean devastation."

The website goes on to cite scores of press articles from around the world which have focused in various ways on the question of theodicy. A few representative quotes must suffice for the moment. Allan Laing, in the *Glasgow Herald* writes, "God, if there is a God, should be ashamed of himself. The sheer enormity of the Asian tsunami disaster, the death, destruction, and havoc it has wreaked, the scale of the misery it has caused, must surely test the faith of even the firmest believer." Writing in the *Sunday Telegraph*, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, suggests that it would be wrong if faith were not upset by the catastrophe. He writes, "the traditional answers will get us only so far ... 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? Wouldn't we feel something of a chill at the prospect of a God who deliberately plans a programme that involves a certain level of casualties?"

A more robustly positive response to those who get angry with God is given by Michael Novak in *National Review Online*. Novak writes, "They do not blame just any God, they blame the God of Christianity, for in Christ the world has been given an even more vivid image of divine concern for the poor, the lowly, and the needy, and of divine gentleness, friendship, and love... The question is not, 'Does God measure up to our (liberal, compassionate, self-deceived) standards?' The question is, 'Will we learn ... how great, on a far different scale from ours, is God's love?'"

We should not be surprised, perhaps, by the lack of unanimity among Christian commentators. But does the lack of a clear voice inevitably reduce apologetic effectiveness or is a diversity of perspective a healthy phenomenon that allows the Christian response to gain a hearing in a variety of contexts?

One writer to *The Times* is in no doubt: "In the light of the seeming inability of church leaders to give any kind of acceptable theological explanation of the tsunami disaster, or of previous disasters great and small, it is perhaps little wonder that there are fewer baptisms, even fewer confirmations and dwindling congregations. After centuries of claiming to have the truth and a unique mission to explain and interpret God and his requirements to us, church leaders are suddenly found wanting. Could it be that they never really knew?"

Writing on the same day, the Reverend Rodney Hacking sees the tragedy as sounding the death knell for a particular expression of Christian faith. Claiming that the Boxing Day disaster is the "greatest single event of spiritual significance since the Holocaust", Mr Hacking writes, "The very idea of an interventionist God has been seen most clearly for what it is: a children's fantasy. Santa Claus religion died on Boxing Day. We have to grow up and faith has to grow up. The spiritual task of those of us within the Churches has been heightened: how to speak meaningfully about our human condition. In the face of that, evangelicals' reports of God performing tricks in response to their prayers ... will be revealed for what they are: nothing at all."

In one of the most helpful reflections, the Rt Rev Duleep de Chickera, Bishop of Colombo, Sri Lanka, speaks of the relevance for the churches of South Asia of the "vulnerable God" theory. He writes:

"A powerful dominant God is distasteful and alien to the poor and powerless. Much more, the vulnerable God theory flows very much from the text as well. The incarnation clearly conveys a God of love who deliberately takes on vulnerability to identify and save ... God is love and the freedom that love confers imposes inherent restrictions on controls on all creation ... So the loving, liberator, parent God who was not in the wind, earthquake and fire was certainly not in the tsunami.

The vulnerable God, however, is not a passive God ... In Christ God took human form to stand with humans in our suffering and loss. As God was in the historical incarnation, so God has been with those who suffer grief and loss.

Dominance, whether in our theologies about God, leadership, aid or attitudes, is anti-Christ and counterproductive to peace, justice and reconciliation. The way forward for all, South Asians who grieve as well as the world at large, is mutually to wash each other's feet."

We welcome your responses to these points of view and others that you have come across. What is your own answer to the question "Where was God when the tsunami struck?"

To further prompt your thoughts, the editors have asked Dr Rob Cook, Redcliffe's Academic Dean and tutor in theology, to contribute an article to this edition of *Encounters*.

## **Missiological Issues**

Christian relief and development agencies and mission organisations are significantly involved in responding to the devastation caused by the tsunami. So, of course, are thousands of churches and individual Christians throughout the affected region. Other religious communities and people of no religious faith have also responded with great compassion.

No doubt there are many issues, both practical and theoretical, that face those engaged in Christian mission in such a context. In this edition of *Encounters*, we raise some of them through interviews with Fiona Wilson (formerly with Tearfund, now with Integral) and Nick Cole (OMF). Let me try to prompt your response by posing a number of questions.

First, what distinguishes Christian responses to the disaster to any other responses? Apart from the fact that certain organisations will be known (at least by some) to be Christian, should we expect the content and nature of Christian involvement to be distinctive? Linked with that, what meaning does integral mission have in such a context? Redcliffe College is an Associate Member of the Micah Network of Christian agencies committed to a holistic or integral vision of mission. The value of such networks was demonstrated to me when I received an e-mail informing me that, through its website, the Micah Network is providing space for member organisations to share what they are doing and to highlight the needs for further assistance. This has facilitated co-operative efforts and the sharing of resources and expertise. The website carried an extraordinarily moving account from a representative of an indigenous Relief and Development Agency in Sri Lanka. As he outlined the scale of the relief effort, I found myself wondering what evangelism means in such a context. When physical needs are so overwhelming, does integral mission's commitment to the unity of word and action appear unrealistic and insensitive? The relevance of this question was emphasised by my Indonesian contact. She writes of the importance of building relationships of trust with the Muslims of Aceh for the long-term. She reports that there are already some Muslims who are protesting the "Christianisation" efforts of some relief teams. Some church groups have apparently gone in without careful planning and simply started talking to victims about Jesus. For some time to come, Christian agencies throughout the region will be faced with the challenge of how to practice integral mission with integrity.

Is part of that integrity an enhanced willingness on the part of Christians to work alongside those of other faiths? Does a disaster on this scale demand a minimising of distinctives for the sake of a united and coherent humanitarian response? In a moving article in *The Times*, the Bishop of Colombo, Sri Lanka, spoke of people in that country reaching out to the "other" regardless of ethnicity or religion. He spoke of working alongside a Muslim imam on relief efforts that unite Sinhalese and Tamil communities. The Bishop writes, "All over the affected areas numerous temples, kovils (shrines), mosques and churches simply opened their doors to all in need. Here were welcome glimpses of community under God, the nourishing potential in Sri Lankans and possibly the beginnings of a new model and perspective for wider sustainable peace." Can we combine such a commendable ecumenicity with a necessary emphasis upon the uniqueness of Christ?

One final question concerns priorities, the allocation of resources and attention. Are we in danger of losing sight of other missiological challenges in the face of the huge focus upon the tsunami and its aftermath? Is one aspect of the Christian response to remind the global community that the suffering caused by natural disaster is far less than the suffering that human beings inflict on one another? The point has been starkly made by Rabbi Michael Lerner, quoted in *Christianity Today*: "Two weeks ago the United Nations issued a report detailing the deaths of more than 29,000 children every single day as a result of avoidable diseases and malnutrition. Over 10 million children a year. The difference between the almost non-existent coverage of this ongoing human-created disaster and the huge focus on the terrible tsunami-generated suffering in South East Asia reveals some deep and ugly truths about our collective self-deceptions. Imagine if every single day there were headlines in every newspaper in the world and every television show saying: "29,000 children died yesterday from preventable diseases and malnutrition." Putting it more positively, are there ways in which we can build upon the remarkable outpouring of compassion towards the victims of the tsunami, in order to promote a renewed commitment within the Christian community and beyond to address in the name of Christ the massive and enduring challenge of human need?

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