



## Reflections on the Tsunami

*Wa'l 'Asr Innal Insana lafi Khusr...*<sup>1</sup>

*By the testimony of time, surely humankind is in a state of loss...*

The exegetes mention that the testimony of time, mentioned in this verse, refers to the testimony of each era's extraordinary events, events that indicate the incomparable power of God. In our time we have seen many such events. The recent tsunami, which shook the regions in and around the Indian Ocean, is only the latest. Only God could have ushered the awesome power unleashed by the earthquake that moved the island of Sumatra 100 feet, yet left it intact. Only God could have ushered the awesome power to send a wave of water, whose depth reached from the surface of the water to the ocean floor, thousands of miles across the ocean at speeds exceeding five hundred miles an hour. Only God could devise an "early warning system" which told myriad species of animals to flee to the safety of high ground. Only God.

Yet many, even some professing faith in Islam, having seen such an awesome display of God's power, question His Wisdom. Why must our faith be constantly tested? Why did so many unsuspecting people have to perish? Why were children sweep from their mothers' arms? Why, once again, are Muslims the majority of those suffering from such calamities? Why?

In many instances, for us Muslims, such questions arise from our ignorance of the basic teachings in our religion, and a lack of knowledge of Islamic eschatology. Let us endeavor to answer some of the above questions. Perhaps, by so doing we can see the Wisdom of God as it manifests itself in events such as the recent tsunami.

But first, let us reflect on the animals saved from immediate destruction as those awesome waves smashed ashore. Perhaps we humans could produce a devise capable of warning a single species of animals against imminent danger. For example, a shrill siren that dogs could hear over an area encompassing thousands of square miles. What are our chances of developing a signaling devise that could send a comprehensible message simultaneously to all of the animal species in a given area, and instructing them to head in the same direction? Who could devise such a devise?

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<sup>1</sup> Al-Qur'an 103:1-2.

For Muslims the answer to the latter question is easy. God possesses and has used such a device to communicate with the animals, heavens,<sup>2</sup> and the earth.<sup>3</sup> It is called divine inspiration. He says in the Qur'an, "*And your Lord inspired the bees to build their houses in the hills, in trees, and in human habitations.*"<sup>4</sup> The exegetes mention that this inspiration was God's communicating to them and causing them to understand what He intended.<sup>5</sup> If God has thus communicated with the bees, and instructed them to head for the hills, among other things, His communicating to all of the animals a similar message is no more difficult or incomprehensible.

This world, as God repeatedly informs us in the Qur'an, is the abode of trials and tribulations. God says, "*He who has created death and life in order to test which of you is best in deed. He is overwhelmingly mighty, oft-forgiving.*"<sup>6</sup> He also says, "*We will surely test you with a measure of fear and hunger, and loss of wealth, lives, and the fruit [of your fields and labor]. Give glad tidings to those who patiently persevere.*"<sup>7</sup> Similarly, "*Do people think that they will be left alone merely saying, 'We believe!' and not be tested?*"<sup>8</sup> All of these verses emphasize that this world is an abode of tests. The object of life is not to avoid or deny its tests and trials, rather to successfully pass them.

Another verse forthrightly presents a fact alluded to in the above-citations. Namely, the tests in this world will involve what we refer to as good, and what we refer to as evil. God says in that regard, "*Every soul will experience death, and we will test you with evil and good, as a trial; and unto us you will return.*"<sup>9</sup> This verse makes it clear that God has never promised us a rose garden in this worldly life. Muslims were never promised that we would win every battle.<sup>10</sup> We were never promised that our "Ummah" would march triumphantly through history, in Hegelian or Darwinian fashion, leaving inferior systems of belief, and societal organization strewn in our wake. And we were certainly never promised that we, contrary to the view of some Islamic thinkers, especially those influenced the positivism of Auguste

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<sup>2</sup> Al-Qur'an 41:12.

<sup>3</sup> Al-Qur'an 99:5.

<sup>4</sup> Al-Qur'an 16:68.

<sup>5</sup> See for example, Imam Abu Muhammad, al-Husayn al-Baghawi, *Ma'alam at-Tanzil*, (Beirut: Dar al-Ma'rifa 1407/1987) 3:76.

<sup>6</sup> Al-Qur'an 67:2

<sup>7</sup> Al-Qur'an 2:155

<sup>8</sup> Al-Qur'an 29:2

<sup>9</sup> Al-Qur'an 21:35

<sup>10</sup> One could reflect on the message of Al-Qur'an 3:140, to ascertain the veracity of this statement. In this verse God mentions, "*These varying fortunes [victory, defeat; strength, weakness; influence, impotence] we alternate between people. This is in order that God shows who truly believes, and that He takes from your ranks martyrs. And God loves not oppressors.*"

Comte<sup>11</sup>, would be able through science to conquer the forces of nature which have always hung menacingly over the head of humanity, threatening to consign us to the “misery of the human condition.”

The great sage, Ibn ‘Ata Allah Sakandari, beautifully captured the reality of this world, and what our expectations in it should be, when he said:

Do not find the occurrence of tribulations strange as long as you are in this worldly abode, for it [the world] has only manifested what it is fittingly described by, its intrinsic characteristic.<sup>12</sup>

Our living in this world will inevitably bring us tests. Those tests are subtle and open, they occur in great and small things. Through these tests, God shows which of us truly believe, and which of us are empty claimants.<sup>13</sup>

Just as God has informed us that tests and tribulations are the nature of this world, his Messenger, Peace and Blessings of God upon him, has informed us that those tests will include earthquakes and other natural disasters. This is especially true as humanity enters the twilight of its time on earth. He said for example:

The hour will not come until knowledge is taken away, earthquakes become numerous, time passes quickly, tribulations appear, chaos reigns –that is to say widespread killing; [it will not occur] until wealth becomes abundant among you, to a point where it is superfluous.<sup>14</sup>

This particular narration aptly describes our times. That being the case, we should view the oftentimes unsettling events transpiring contemporarily as a fulfillment of what our Prophet, Peace and Blessings of God upon him, has foretold. The occurrence of these events should only strengthen our faith, deepen our conviction to avoid participating in the strife which he informed us of, and inspire us to work to alleviate the suffering of those immediately affected.

Human suffering is real. However, human perseverance, and human dignity are just as real. They allow us to nobly endure the trials of this world. As Muslims we are assisted towards this end by our knowledge that any suffering we experience in this world expiates our sins. Our Prophet, Peace and

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<sup>11</sup> The influence of Comtean positivism was especially strong in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Egypt. Its influence on Muhammad ‘Abduh is undeniable. Abduh wedded that positivism to his effort to create what he viewed as a viable Islamic worldview, along with a viable political and social morality. Abduh then influenced a generation of Islamist thinkers, most importantly Rashid Rida. Through them, positivist thinking became one of the distinguishing features of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Islamic movement. For an indication of Comte’s influence on ‘Abduh see Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age 1798-1939*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) pp. 138-140.

<sup>12</sup> Ibn ‘Ata Allah al-Sakandari, *Al-Hikam wa’l Munajata al-Ilahiyya*, (Damascus: al-Maktaba al-‘Arabiyya, nd) p. 19.

<sup>13</sup> Al-Qur’an 29:3. In this verse, God says, concerning the tests of this world, “*In order that God will show which of you are truthful, and which of you are liars.*”

<sup>14</sup> Al-Bukhari #1036.

blessings of God upon him said, “There is no calamity that afflicts the Muslim except that for that God expiates his sins, even [something as slight] as a thorn that pricks him.”<sup>15</sup> He similarly declared, “Nothing afflicts the Muslim, neither fatigue, pain, anxiety, sadness, injury, nor grief; even the pricking of a thorn except that for that God expiates some of his sins.”<sup>16</sup>

These narrations call our attention to the fact that the believer’s brief stint in this world is a preparation for eternal life. Our understanding of suffering, justice, the trials of this world, and many other issues integral to any meaningful assessment of the human condition, are incomplete and inevitably misleading when they are divorced from considerations of the next, eternal life. How bad can any suffering in this world be if it is opening the door for unimaginable, eternal good in the life hereafter?

In conclusion, those who drowned in the tsunami are martyrs. Those who were crushed by demolished structures are martyrs. Those who will die of dysentery or cholera will be martyrs. They have all gone on or will go on to the good God had prepared for them. Our Prophet mentioned in that regard:

The martyrs are in five categories: One who dies during the plague; one who dies of dysentery; one who dies by drowning; one who dies in a demolished structure; and one who dies struggling in the way of God.”<sup>17</sup>

Paradise will be theirs. Their cases are closed.

As for us, what will be our case? Will we humble ourselves before the awesome power of God, or will we continue to display our destructive hubris? We will continue to take the blessings of food, clean drinking water, and shelter for granted, or will we fall unto our knees, raising our hands towards heaven, our eyes flowing over with tears, thanking God for these blessings from the depth of our hearts? Will we forget about the suffering victims of the tsunami as soon as the gatekeepers decide that other stories are more newsworthy and the images disappear from our televisions, or will continue our relief and fundraising efforts? And perhaps most importantly, will we watch scores of people bury their dead, and continue to neglect preparation for our own inevitable demise?

Your Brother in Islam,

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<sup>15</sup> Al-Bukhari, #5640.

<sup>16</sup> Al-Bukhari# 5641.

<sup>17</sup> Al-Bukhari #653; and #2829.

