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SPIRITUAL AGONY: Muslims in Jakarta weep during special prayers for the dead

COUNTLESS SOULS CRY OUT TO GOD

RELIGION: After a cataclysm of Biblical proportions, people of all faiths ask, Why us? Why here? Why now?

BY KENNETH L. WOODWARD

THE WATERS THAT ROSE UP from the deep last week, drowning tens of thousands of people across a wide arc of South and Southeast Asia, were a cataclysm of Biblical proportions. But most of those who survived to weep and mourn—like most of those who died—had never heard of Noah or the Biblical God of Wrath, figures so familiar to Christians and Jews; they were, instead, Hindus, Muslims and Buddhists. Caught up in the disaster, they had no time for religious ceremonies of any kind. In Sri Lanka, as in coastal southern India and along the beaches of Indonesia, there was only time to dig huge holes in the ground and shovel in the dead. “In this kind of tragedy, there is no religion,” said Syed Abdullah, a local imam in the ancient south Indian port of Nagapattinam, where Muslims, Hindus and Christians have lived together peacefully for centuries. “Let the dead be buried together. They died together in the sea. Let their souls get peace together.”

But no survivor of a disaster of this mag-

nitude can long avoid asking the Job-like questions, “Why us? Why here? Why now?”

HINDUS: Those hardest hit by last week’s tsunami were poor fishing communities whose inhabitants—mostly Hindus—are untutored in refined theological speculation on life and death. For them, all of life is controlled by the play of capricious deities. Yet their religious world views and practices provide a measure of spiritual relief from the toil of their labor. Along the coast of south India, Hindus tend to worship local deities, most of them female and far down the Hindu hierarchy of divinities. But like Shiva and other classic gods and goddesses, these local deities are ambivalent: they have the power to destroy as well as to create. The ocean itself is a terrible god who eats people and boats, but also provides fish as food. “Hindus use the deities to think about and explain happenings like the tsunami as destructive acts of god,” says Richard Davis, a specialist in South Asian Hinduism at Bard College in New York. “Relating to the local deity and cooling her anger through propitiation is more impor-

tant than thinking about personal or collective guilt for what has happened.”

BUDDHISTS: Among coastline Buddhists in Thailand and Sri Lanka, two of the hardest-hit areas, there are many weather gods to both blame and propitiate with assorted prayers and offerings. “But when the time comes to make sense of it all,” says Donald Lopez, professor of Buddhist studies at the University of Michigan, “Buddhists will look to the idea of karma and ask what they did, individually and collectively, that a tragedy like this happened.” Their main concern will be to generate good merit that can be transferred to the deceased as a positive force in their next lifetime. To this end, families will go to a temple to pray or have a special ceremony performed by a monk acting as an intermediary in the transfer of merit.

MUSLIMS: Like the Bible, the Qur’an recognizes no natural laws independent of God’s will. All that happens is Allah’s doing, and nature itself—wind, rain, storms—constitutes signs of his mercy and compassion. Even the destructive tsunami, therefore, must have some hidden, positive purpose. “Ninety percent of Muslims will understand a tragedy like this in this way,” says Akbar Ahmed, chair of Islamic studies at American University. “On the individual level, they also have this notion that God is testing them by taking away a child or a spouse. Will you lose your faith or will you continue to believe?” This idea of testing and the patience it requires, Ahmed argues, provides “an in-built psychological cushion which allows Muslims to absorb a tragedy of this scale.”

CHRISTIANS: Though a minority in places like Sri Lanka and south India, Christians also had to look to their faith to make some sense out of the sudden loss of lives and of whatever possessions they had accumulated. For them there is the example of Jesus on the cross—the God who takes on human flesh and, with it, a criminal’s cruel torturing and death. But even though the acceptance of suffering is deeply embedded in the Christian world view, the death of so many innocent children alone was an excruciating test of the Christian belief that their God is a God of love.

Job, too, was tested, his patience tried to the extreme. But he was only one just man. Whole families, whole communities, countless pasts and futures have been obliterated by this tsunami’s roiling force. Little wonder that from Sumatra to Madagascar, innumerable voices cry out to God. The miracle, if there is one, may be that so many still believe. With SUDIP MAZUMDAR in New Delhi

Most mourners have never heard of Noah or the God of Wrath.