Conflict over causation of catastrophe

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Introduction

A stress/trauma assignment in the Cook Islands raised questions about the effect of certain Christian belief systems on a small community in the immediate post-impact period of recovery from a devastating cyclone. To a trauma psychologist with religious convictions it suggested that the specific attributions the clergy made for the cause of the calamity were inappropriate and anachronistic. The topic will be opened up, its antecedents traced, and the implications explored. At issue is the validity of moral transgression being used as the cause of natural disaster, when tenable and well-attested scientific alternative explanations were available. It is a contentious matter that academics, practitioners and emergency workers, as well as theologians and the practicing clergy, might care to ponder.

Although the matter came to the fore from observations in the Cook Islands, it has been known to arise after disasters that have occurred elsewhere. Following the Mt Erebus air crash (Taylor & Frazer 1982) for example, at least one health professional and one detective working in the Auckland mortuary ascribed the tragedy to the people of New Zealand having departed from the paths of righteousness. Others clutched at metaphysical straws to account for having by chance avoided going on the fatal flight themselves, and a few were tantalised with feelings of guilt for having encouraged their friends to take the trip. Then in the south of Italy many of the local population attributed a widespread and destructive earthquake to God expressing His displeasure with them.

Subsequent assignments in Tuvalu and Fiji showed variations in the kind of interpretation that members of different religions gave after calamities (Taylor in press). From this it does seem that human beings have a general need to ascribe meaning to events that have occurred, and that religion provides a ready source of explanations that some of the clergy apply implicitly and others use with discernment. The former are reluctant to ascribe events to chance, and even when valid alternatives are available they are not averse to accepting irrational and sometimes punitive explanations. In doing so they risk perpetuating ignorance, and they add to the burden of suffering of casualties at a time when support and inspirational leadership is required in abundance to promote recovery.

The argument is that religious explanations for catastrophe, like any other, should not be regarded as sacrosanct but be examined in the light of the prevailing knowledge of alternatives. With that in mind this article will look further into the matter with regard to Christianity. Other disaster practitioners might care to follow suit and consider the kind of explanations propounded by different religions for their followers.

The particular event

Tropical Cyclone Martin struck the northern group of Cook Islands on the afternoon of Saturday 1st November 1997. It had the greatest effect on Manihiki, a circular string of remote low-lying coral atolls with a population of about 630 settled in the two villages of Tauhunu and Tukau. Eyewitness accounts indicate that the crescendo lasted about 30 minutes, during which time the biggest wave surged above 30 metres. In the ensuing chaos 11 people died, nine were missing, and many were injured. Widespread damage was caused to housing, public facilities and roads, and to the offshore accommodation and equipment relating to a lagoon pearl-fishing industry. Small boats, demolition debris and household contents were cast about and sheets of corrugated iron roofing were wrapped like tape around high trees.

In the aftermath the closely knit community did much to facilitate its survival until emergency help in the form of food, fresh water, shelter and clothing came from outside. It gathered people together in the safest spots, sent out search parties to comb the foreshore and the reefs for the missing, cared for the special needs of the sick and the elderly and organised a daily routine to take care of essential activities (Taylor 1998).

The resident lay preachers of the Cook Island Christian Church, the Latter Day Saints, Roman Catholic and the Seventh Day Adventist played a full part in the commendable community response. But each in turn struck the same discordant note at their daily religious meetings when they obliged their followers to search their souls to discover, disclose and expiate the unspecified sins they were assumed to have committed that brought the catastrophe about. Their joint focus was on the book of ***Revelations*** rather than on other parts of the Bible that would have given immediate spiritual comfort to the bereaved and the bereft. None regarded the disaster an inexplicable 'Act of God' or a case of ***force majeure***, in the sense which commercial insurers use the term. Much less did they consider it a meteorological change wrought by the well-substantiated weather pattern of ***El Nino***.

Normally the Christian Churches play an integral part in the daily life of people in the 15 widely scattered communities of the Cook Islands. But in this instance their post-disaster admonitions left the survivors either despondent or angry, according to the extent of their acceptance of clerical authority and their respect for the politicians that echoed the condemnation. The despondent did not question the justice of innocents being sacrificed for the transgressions of the living, although among the 20 fatalities was a clergyman, his wife, young children and others like them whose behaviour particularly was beyond reproach. Nor did they question the enormity of the punishment for any sins that they themselves might have committed. Instead, they accepted the moral condemnation and tried to recollect incidents for which they had to atone. They were under some urgency to respond, because the yearly sequence of tropical cyclones had just begun and there was the prospect of more devastation to come unless they made amends without delay.

The angry rejected the moral impositions. They were a small group that had been educated abroad and were aware of alternative and more empirical explanations to account for the calamity. They avoided the community prayer meetings and mostly kept silent on other occasions for fear of causing disruption during the immediate post-impact period when the community's future was at stake. It was a price they were prepared to pay at the time.

To this health professional from outside the framework, the moral obligation imposed on the survivors in the

immediate aftermath of the disaster endangered their already fragile sense of security and self-esteem. It induced self-blame that was a maladaptive method for coping with continuing trauma (cf. Holahan, Moos, & Schaefer 1997). It reinforced feelings of helplessness, created an extra burden and impeded the recovery of survivors at a time when encouragement, inspiration and support from all sources would have been more likely to help them maintain their desperate existence. It also introduced an element of discord at a time when the community needed to affirm its bonds, share its grief, praise the heroism of its members who endangered themselves to save others and consider its future location.

In response to direct questioning about my personal position at open community meetings in the Cook Islands at the time, I could only say that in all honesty for me there were other more compelling explanations than the religious to account for the cyclone. Shortly afterwards I was able to forward posters on the origin of natural disasters that had been written in several Polynesian languages and illustrated by the Ministry of Emergency Management in New Zealand specifically for the information of some of its urban communities. But later, with distance, detachment, access to theologians and libraries, I took the opportunity to reflect on the historical explanations of religious adversity, before trying to resolve the issue – at least to my own satisfaction.

Historical explanations for adversity

Although explanations to account for catastrophe have long been pronounced, Beit-Hallahmi and Argyle (1997), the joint authors of a most comprehensive book on religious behaviour, belief and experience, made no mention of them. In breaking fresh ground an initial overview would suggest that different explanations for disaster reflect the prevailing educational, experiential and intellectual climate of the times in which they were made. The explanations are like myths—defined by McLeish (1996, p. *v*) as providing 'the continuum of identity which allows the community to make sense of everything it experiences or thinks'- except that they are based on either supernatural belief or scientific proof, and sometimes a mixture of both. The first is drawn either from superstition or scripture, the second from observation and verification, and the third from an amalgam when either kind of explanation alone is insufficient to account for the facts as observed. The particular kind of explanation adopted reflects the belief/value system of the advocate.

The ancients had an array of Gods that they perceived to be capricious (Ogilvie 1986). Over time they imbued them with the power of commanding the forces of nature to punish mankind severely for failing to pay proper respects. In Ancient Rome the Emperors required the priests to consult the treasured Sibylline texts to account for the occurrence of droughts, earthquakes, famine, floods, plagues, pestilence and volcanic eruptions. When called upon in this way, the priests had either to give advice about placating one of the existing Gods, or to go abroad to find out about others that inadvertently the populace might have offended.

The early Missionaries found similar Deities being worshipped by South Sea Islanders, and one of them (Ellis1829, vol.1, pp. vii–viii) wrote critically of the people and the practice as follows:

> '(They) appear under circumstances peculiarly favourable to happiness, but their idolatry exhibits them as removed to the farthest extreme from such a state. The baneful effect of their delusions was increased by the vast preponderance of malignant deities, frequently the personification of cruelty and vice. They... regarded their (religious) duties with horrific dread and worshipped only with enslaving fear'.

The Islanders for their part, according to Gilson (1980, p. 32), a sociologist reporting from records much later, regarded the Missionaries as

> 'powerful white chiefs whose supply of valuable articles and fleet of ships seemed inexhaustible, but whose prime concern was that the people should observe special injunctions pronounced by the supreme Jehovah. A breach of these rules made them very sad; when they became sad they expounded on the fate of sinners in the afterworld. ***An occasional disaster indicated that retribution might come even sooner'.*** (My emphasis).

Such was their power, that the Reverend John Williams and his two local assistants converted the entire population from pagan polytheism to Christian monotheism within the short space of 20 years from the time of their arrival in the Cook Islands in 1821 (Gutch 1974). The conversion retained the punitive rationale for natural disasters, but consistent with the wider teachings of Christianity at the time, construed it as a punishment imposed by God on communities for the moral transgression of their members rather than for any failure to pay respects. The Missionaries hoped that by persuading the islanders to ascribe the power of punishment to a single God rather than to many, and by coming to regard calamities as indicators of His wrath for their iniquities, the converts might also relinquish the practice of punishing each other so severely.

The monotheistic explanation for disasters remained and still remains central to the existence of the Cook Islanders (cf. South Pacific Bureau for Economic Cooperation 1979), although apparently traces of early polytheism are still to be found (Luomala 1984). Yet paradoxically in official quarters concerns have been voiced about global climatic warming and associated sea level changes (Brook, Basher, Bruce, Parsons, & Sullivan 1991, p. 2). The Islands government has also embarked on a five-year planning scheme, set priorities, and improved managerial infrastructures for coping with disasters (UNDRO 1990).

Resolving the discrepancy

While it could be argued that a patchwork of inconsistent explanations for disasters has more appeal than one of consistency, intellectually the dissonance is somewhat untenable and in practice it has undesirable implications. A few clergy from different theological schools agree and they have given pointers to show how the problem might be resolved. For example an Old Testament Scholar Rabbi Michael Abrahams of the Wellington Liberal Synagogue (private communication 18 December 1997) would ***finesse*** the question by redefining the theological rationale for regarding disasters as Divinely inspired punishments. He suggested that the clergy should give more consideration*:*

- to God's specific covenant not to harm mankind (Genesis 9:13)
- to God's concern for the spiritual recovery of the wicked and not for their death (Ezekiel, 33: 10)
- to the shift of emphasis in the Old Testament away from corporate guilt for sinful behaviour to that of individual guilt for such transgression.

In their writing other theologians (cf. Robinson and Edwards 1963; Geering 1986) have suggested that the clergy should place more emphasis on inner spiritual growth and redemption through worship than on outward behavioural conformity through fear of punishment. Spong (1991, p.33) would have each generation of the religious re-interpret the world in the light of the knowledge and suppositions currently available.

Geering (1994) would have the myths of creation and catastrophe regarded as stepping-stones en route to the religious existential core of humanity.

Somewhat in advance of such propositions, Douglas (1980, pp. 1234–1237) cited Greta Hort to suggest that with the exception of the death of all the first-born, the ten disastrous plagues of Egypt were linked biologically rather than theologically. He said that they could have been the outcome of a series of events that began with an abnormally high tide that carried fine particles of red earth and micro organisms. According to him these events in turn would have poisoned fish, caused frogs to swim ashore, and bred an abundance of mosquitoes and flies that infected cattle and gave skin rash to humans. The heavy rains that followed would have ruined the staple food crop, caused floods, and made conditions suitable for locusts to breed. The subsequent drought that completed the cycle would have baked the ground, from which a three-day whirlwind would have blown particles of dust about that blocked the light of the sun.

However, a reading of the original paper shows that in making connections between what was thought previously to have been a series of calamities, Hort (1957) herself was seeking simply to establish the historical truth for the actual occurrence of the plagues. She was not trying to offer a biological alternative for the widely held theological explanation for the disasters as forming an 'invincible sequence and growing severity'. No doubt had she done so, she would have created uproar, because in the words of Dr. Nan Burgess, former Lecturer in Pastoral Theology, Knox College, Dunedin (private communication, 9 December 1997), the acceptance of biological accounts for natural disaster would require the clergy to think theologically rather than biblically. In my view it would also require them:

- to think scientifically and to be bold enough to discard redundant explanations
- to allow their findings to percolate through their scriptural teaching
- to admit that they should have expounded such aspects of their previous religious explanations more tentatively
- to work through the implications of value change with their congregations, and support them through the inevitable period of uncertainty that follows any recalibration of basic assertions and assumptions.

Were they to do this, the clergy might reflect on Sagan's (1997) thesis about the inevitable conflicts between irrationality and rationality that have arisen in the development of science. They might also take heart from Tenner's (1996) cautionary tale of the unintended consequences of so-called technological progress, and come to appreciate that the findings of science and technology, like those of scholarship, are not always beyond dispute!

The prospect

The proposition is not too preposterous, because moves have been made recently for bringing a concern for the environment within a framework of religion. Marsh (1991) has even mooted the formation of a 'Down to earth religion', and the influential World Council of Churches (WCC) has recommended that a specific concern for the environment be introduced into Christian theology (Eyles 1993).

Were the WCC to be successful, and go a little further with its authority to revise religious explanations for natural disasters, it might be easier for the Cook Island Churches and other congregations like them to follow suit. Then in times of adversity the clergy might with confidence place less emphasis on punishment and more on compassion. The change of emphasis would repair the apparent rifts in any community on the issue, promote the resilience of vulnerable populations that are obliged to remain in disaster-prone areas of the globe, and remove some of the dissonance between theology and science.

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