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## Tsunami Reflections Theological Lessons From the Sumatra Earthquake \*

By Shaykh Abdal Hakim Murad

06/01/2005

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, has recently said that it is appropriate that one's faith in God should be shaken by the natural disaster which engulfed thousands of people on December 26. And historically, one of the chief causes of atheism in the Christian world has been the sense that the Bible's God is unbelievable in a world filled with apparently arbitrary suffering. Should such a tension endanger Muslim faith as well?



An Acehese boy looks out of a window at a hospital in the tsunami-hit city of Banda Ach.

This gets to the heart of Muslim-Christian difference, because perhaps the most salient Christian interrogation of Islam lies in Islam's insistence on the divine transcendence. For Christians, it is axiomatic that God can only be fully engaged with by human beings when He is entirely a person like ourselves. The alternative is "Semitic legalism," a system in which, supposedly, an abstract transcendence is worshiped from afar, through laws and rituals.

The Qur'an's God is, of course, depicted in personal terms. The 99 names are all names which have some imaginable manifestation among human beings. We cannot be omnipotent, but we understand power, and hence can in some sense apprehend that God possesses power which can brook no opposition. And so on with the other qualities, of sight, hearing, knowledge, and the rest.

To say, on the basis of this language, that God is a "person" (which Muslims can in some careful sense do, although the term is absent from our classical theology), because He possesses qualities which we identify as analogous to those found in human life, such as consciousness, purpose, will, capacity, and perception, is, however,

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	not to affirm a Christian notion of "God among us," <i>immanuel</i> .
Fatwa Bank	Firstly, because for God, as a personal, localized presence, to be at one place inside His creation suggests that He is otherwise absent from it, which is a dualist notion. And secondly, because it concedes to the natural human desire to think that God is like ourselves, only without the imperfections. Keep adding to power, this logic seems to suggest, and eventually you arrive at omnipotence.
Hajj & Umrah	
Qur'an: The Reminder	This reasoning, however, is not accepted by our theology. The relationship between God's power and our power is not one of degree, but of category, just as the difference between the finite and the infinite is categoric. His power is ultimately quite unlike our power. Our power is what it is because of the reality or the possibility of its encountering an obstacle. If we had omnipotence, we would probably not immediately associate it with the power we used to have at all. The same may be said for the other divine names which appear to have human applications. Hence the Qur'an says, [there is nothing like unto Him] (Ash-Shura 42: 11). And in the hadith, "Whatever occurs to your mind, Allah is other than that."
Hadith & Its Sciences	
Muhammad: The Man & Message	Part of the brilliance of the Qur'an is that it makes no compromises over God's transcendence, as it battles against pagan and Christian attempts to "localize" God;
Islamic Audio	while at the same time it makes no compromises over the human requirement to worship Him. In the Qur'an, His transcendence is not in tension with His immanence.
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Prayer Times	This is because the transcendence is true in an absolute sense, because His nature is transcendent. The Qur'an's language about the immanent God (the God of <i>tashbih</i> ) is true contingently, because human beings are contingent. <i>Tawheed</i> was identical in all prophetic teachings since the beginning of time; but the ways in which He is worshiped and spoken of familiarly may validly change. It is thus a fundamental Muslim belief that [He is not asked about what He does] (Al-Anbiyaa' 21: 23). For to ask Him would be to impose upon Him purely human conceptions of the meaning of His names.
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E-Cards	The Divine Essence, the true God <i>an sich</i> is beyond imagining, and indeed, we are forbidden to ponder It. Instead, we ponder Its names, and it is the names which make worship possible. Yet insofar as they are intelligible to us, they are contingent. They are true insofar as they save us. He tells us that He is "Hearing," not because He possesses an organ which can physically intercept sound-waves, but because this is the truest way of conveying to our minds an aspect of His nature. And put together, His names of immanence do not yield a person truly analogous to other persons. Thus Islam does not say "God is love." God is loving ( <i>wadud</i> ), and mercy is ultimately His preponderant quality; but it is to limit His plenitude to deny that He is other things as well, some of them easier for our finite minds to make sense of than others. Christianity, because of its insistence that the immanent Christ was truly God, banished from Him the attributes of rigor, which are less intrinsic to immanence. Once "back in Heaven," this person-God could then be validly questioned about events we dislike in the world, just as Odysseus challenges Poseidon to explain a storm.
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which has no problem at all with the existence of evil in the world. We are [neither of the East nor of the West]; we are the [middle nation]. And part of this is that we recognize the provisional quality of our understanding of His names. He, the Glorious, cannot be accused; to do so is simply to announce our own ignorance and arrogance. Instead, we submit to Him, thanking Him for the unearned gift that is every breath we take, and confident that those who die in ways we cannot understand, will receive, in the justice and mercy of eternity, a reward besides which their earthly suffering seems slight indeed.

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*The works posted on this page reflect solely the opinions of the authors.*

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