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Going Beyond Religious Explanations for Indonesia's Natural Disasters

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A collapsed house in Cugenang, Cianjur, on 23 November 2022, following a 5.6-magnitude earthquake that hit the area on 21 November 2022. Photo: ADEK BERRY/AFP.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The Cianjur earthquake in November 2022 sparked a debate among religious elites in Indonesia regarding its cause. A similar process has occurred after almost every natural disaster in the country.
- This article examines sermons and writings by popular Islamic preachers widely available on social media, particularly YouTube, which provides a range of Islamic opinions on the causes of natural disasters in Indonesia.
- While one camp argues that disasters are divine punishments for the sins that Indonesian Muslims have committed, another refers to disasters as tests from the Almighty God, in which anyone—be they sinners or pious people—may be hit.
- Showcasing the views of preachers who have a wide following online and offline, such as Gus Baha and Buya Yahya, this article posits that there is a growing number of theologians who reject fatalistic explanations of natural disasters. They argue that explanations of natural disasters must go beyond blaming the community for their purported sins.
- In any case, both camps fall short of helping communities to prepare for disasters. They also fail to apply scientific explanations to assist communities to better understand the origins of disasters, or undertake measures to mitigate their impact.

INTRODUCTION

On 21 November 2022, an earthquake hit the town of Cianjur, claiming 334 lives, injuring about 1,000 citizens, and displacing 114,000 people. Soon after, a divisive religious question on disasters emerged online and offline: is this punishment from God? This is a question that has been raised previously after every major disaster occurring in various Indonesian regions, be these tsunamis, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions or landslides. In 2009, Tifatul Sembiring, an Islamist Justice and Prosperous Party (PKS) leader, linked the huge earthquake in Padang, West Sumatera (7.6 on the Richter scale), to an array of sinful acts committed by Indonesians. This included adultery, the production and distribution of home-made porn videos, intra-family killings, corruption, and the wide circulation of TV programmes that did not comply with Islamic teachings on covering parts of female bodies (Kompas, 27 November 2009). The Minister of Communication and Information Technology made a point about the nexus between “moral decadence” and “natural disasters” while delivering the Idul Adha sermon in the Office of the Governor of West Sumatera about a month after the earthquake. In the same vein, during the 2014 volcanic eruption of Mount Sinabung in North Sumatera and of Mount Kelud in East Java, the online Islamic paper, *Republika*, published an opinion piece by an Islamic teacher named Ahmad Dzaki on the same topic, the relationship between sins and natural disasters. He wrote that “we can see vices everywhere... It is not surprising if Allah sends multiple disasters in the forms of earthquakes, floods and volcanic eruptions” (Ustadz Ahmad Dzaki, 25 Feb 2014). As for the Cianjur earthquake, numerous preachers have already appeared to explicitly mention divine punishment as its cause.

The whole notion of “divine punishment” provokes rigorous debate among Muslim preachers about the causes of disasters. With references to popular Islamic preachers whose sermons are widely circulated and reproduced on YouTube, this paper discusses the nature of these divisions and their impact. I argue that missing from these debates are scientific explanations on the origins of natural disasters and solutions to mitigate the impact of these disasters. Islamic preachers should engage in a religious discourse aimed at improving disaster management in disaster-prone communities, which to this day, remains sorely wanting.

In Indonesia, religious preachers remain important opinion makers apart from being providers of religious guidance. This is because almost all Indonesians, Muslims or otherwise, see the importance of religious knowledge and education.¹ Lembaga Survei Indonesia (LSI) reports that 8 in 10 Indonesians are attracted to religious issues, and about the same proportion consider religious perspectives when making life decisions.² But who do they refer to on religious matters? Most Indonesians (71.8 percent) rely on clerics and preachers.³ Agreeing with this, LSI reveals that about three quarters of Muslims feel that they must follow religious advice from clerics and preachers.⁴

ARGUMENT I: SINS INVITE DISASTERS

There is a group of preachers who contend that the sins committed in society are the cause of natural disasters, including the recent earthquakes in Cianjur and Garut. A number of Muslim

preachers ride on incidences of disasters to launch attacks on immorality. Central to their message is that the ubiquity of immorality is the main cause of all disasters. “God is mad at us,” they suggest, “because we continue to commit sins and break His laws, by consuming alcohol, practising sexual promiscuity, and spending time in night clubs.” They cite verses from the sacred texts, Al-Qur’an dan Hadits, underscoring the correlation between vices and doom. They have urged fellow Muslims to take spiritual lessons from previous disasters and warned that unless the people repent or become religiously obedient, the disasters will keep on coming.

“In Al-Qur’an, Allah repeatedly reminds us”, said Ustadz Khalid Basalamah, a very famous salafi preacher, “that He will not send any disaster except when there are continuous violations of God’s rules!”⁵ One Quranic verse he quoted reads: “We would never destroy a society unless its people persisted in wrongdoing.”⁶ On earthquakes specifically, the preacher pointed out that Muslims had been warned about 1,400 years ago by Aishah, one of Prophet Muhammad’s wives. “If extramarital sex is so common, if many people get drunk, and if they are drawn to music instead of remembering God, Allah will be jealous and tell the Earth to shake [causing earthquake]. If the people repent and stop the transgressions, then peace will return. If not, God will destroy the land and the people will perish with it.”⁷

Habib Bahar bin Smith, a younger preacher connected to the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), delivered the same religious message linking sins to natural disasters. In a sermon, he said that earthquakes happen “because there are too many people committing sins.”⁸ He quoted a story about Prophet Muhammad asking people after an earthquake: ‘what sins have you committed?’ Therefore, the preacher said, when disasters hit, “ask not why Allah sends us earthquakes or tsunamis or floods. Ask ourselves what sins we have done.”⁹

More recently, the branch head of Dewan Dakwah Islamiyah Indonesia (DDII) in Malang, Ustaz Andri Kurniawan, blatantly connected the Cianjur earthquake with the wide occurrences of sexually-related sins. DDII is one of the most prominent Islamic proselytising organisations in Indonesia.¹⁰ From the pulpit, he said that “In Cianjur, the LGBT community has more than a thousand members. Men having sex with men. Women having sex with women. Then, Allah shook Cianjur up with an earthquake.”¹¹

In 2019, Ustaz Khalid deplored that people had not learned from previous disasters. They took cover during a disaster, he said, but when it was safe to return to their homes, “they come back to their old habits and sinful acts. Therefore, disasters will occur again.”¹² Seeing the relevance of this sermon to the more recent natural disasters in Java, a YouTube content provider republished it a fortnight after the Cianjur earthquake.¹³ The repost attracted 4.5 times more views than the original one posted on the preacher’s YouTube channel.

ARGUMENT II: ANY SOUL CAN BE A DISASTER VICTIM

The second religious view problematises the nexus between sins committed in society and disasters, and emphasises the “blessings” (or *hikmah*) behind every calamity. It proposes two other callings: the elevation of one’s spiritual rank whenever any disaster hits, and the returns

on the Day of Judgement and huge rewards in the Afterlife for victims. Proponents of this view assert that one must apply these alternative explanations to disaster victims—this approach is about having the “good faith” or *husnudzon*, to consider every plight in a positive light. This argument holds that humans have limited knowledge of Allah’s objectives underlying disasters and misfortunes.

The proponents of this second view do not reject “sins-disaster” causality totally; instead, they present the idea somewhat differently. It is not that God wants to destroy the people because of their sins, but that He wants to wipe out their sins through misfortunes.

Buya Yahya, the spiritual leader of Al-Bahjah boarding school and Islamic propagation institute in Cirebon, is one religious personality who promotes this perspective. He holds that anyone can be a disaster victim and experience misfortune, regardless of their religious commitment or piety. He explained that when Allah tests believers with calamities, there are three possibilities: “It could be that He wants to erase their sins, or He wants to put them in higher spiritual positions, or He wants to give them the huge reward of forbearance in the Hereafter.”¹⁴

Buya Yahya noticed that there exists a tinge of arrogance among some people when they comment on disasters, demonstrating a dangerous malady in their souls. “How arrogant a person is when saying that ‘Jogja had many immoral people, hence the earthquake; or that Aceh was full of vices, and hence the tsunami. And Cianjur and Lumajang were no different’. Doesn’t this person commit sins too in life?!”¹⁵ Buya Yahya advised that “if misfortunes or a tragedy befalls others, not ourselves, we must not say to them that this is because they had committed sins”. But if we are the one who experience the calamities, “we should humbly admit that we are sinful, that what we see, say and do are often in contrast to religious precepts.”¹⁶

The sermons of Gus Bahaiddin Nursalim, a charismatic and young Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) cleric, on disasters are even more nuanced. The widely acclaimed Quran expert posited that no one can know for sure if disasters that befall any society result from Allah’s chastisements, unless He himself indicated this clearly in the Holy Book. One example that Gus Baha mentioned was the disaster that Allah sent to the congregation of Prophet Lut, the people of Sodom and Gomoroh. Alternatively, he posited that if one is so bold as to link any calamity to God’s chastisement, the person must have access to the *Lauh al-Mahfuz*, the divine and spiritual tablet that records every episode from the past, present and future. In Islam, this source is inaccessible to most humans and most other creatures, unlike the Quran. Outside these parameters, Gus Baha regarded any speculations that apply the ‘theory’ of divine torment to disasters as a presumptuous attitude that must be counteracted.¹⁷

Gus Baha further proposed that one must be wise enough to refrain from labelling natural disasters as divine torments. He identified two crucial patterns in the Quran. First, when the Quran talks about God’s power to punish, the verses apply the terms “potential”, describing it as something that could happen but without any definite time. As an example, he quoted a verse from Al-Mulk: “Do you feel secure that He Who is in heaven will not cause you to be swallowed up by the earth when it shakes (as in an earthquake)?”¹⁸ Second, when the Holy Book talks about Allah’s grace and mercy, the verses demonstrate more certainty, a

phenomenon that has already happened and will continue to happen anytime and anywhere. To illustrate, Gus Baha quoted a verse from the Al-A'raf chapter in the Quran: "My punishment – I afflict with it whom I will, but My mercy encompasses all things."¹⁹

Gus Baha asserts that two interrelated lessons can be learned from these two perspectives. First, Muslims must keep in mind that Allah can destroy life anytime, but they also need to remember that in most instances, Allah shows mercy and compassion. Second, because torment is potential whereas mercy is certain, chances are that God hides mercy behind most calamities. Therefore, one should use mercy as the primary lens, and think that there are blessings everywhere including those disguised as misfortunes.²⁰

Gus Baha gave another example of God's compassion in calamitous events. He said that Islam honours the death of several groups of people, calling them *syahid*. Based on reports from Prophet Muhammad, *syahid* are not limited to the martyrs of holy wars. People who die from drowning or being struck by a collapsing roof or wall are also included in this category. Many victims of tsunamis, earthquakes and landslides also die in similar circumstances. Therefore, Gus Baha sees them as fitting well into the category of *syahid*, to whom Allah will give huge rewards in the Hereafter. As Muslims believe in the Afterlife, this is good news.

In the case of survivors, Buya Yahya also explained calamities as a form of 'spiritual levelling up'. "If a Muslim is decent enough not to commit many sins, but at the same time, the person does not do many good either, and Allah wants to bring him or her closer to Him", Buya Yahya illustrated, "Allah will give the person misfortunes. That way, his or her spiritual rank is elevated."²¹ Buya Yahya kept mentioning this message to the evacuees of Cianjur when he paid them a visit soon after the earthquake. He remarked: "Please, have good faith towards Allah. If you face this test from Allah with forbearance, everything will be beautiful in the end. He will open the door for a better life and replace the losses. We've been in school, right?! What's coming after exams? We go up to the next grade!"²²

Apparently, what these preachers have been trying to do is to ease the pain of fellow believers. In explaining disasters, they do not fill their sermons with threats of recurring calamities. Instead, they spread the hope of good outcomes, in spiritual terms, for the deceased and the survivors. Losses and misfortunes in life, they say, are not simply bad experiences that cause nothing but misery. All are tests from God. When faced with the right attitude, the tests will result in spiritual transformation and salvation. In so doing, the preachers teach people to be humble before God and empathetic with people. They cultivate positive thinking toward God and sow the seeds of solidarity among humans.

A DESIRABLE WAY TO GO

While appreciating these efforts, I argue that Islamic preachers need to go beyond divine and religious explanations. Furqan Aksa warns that religious perspectives, when misunderstood, increase "fatalistic attitudes toward disaster", whereby people "ignore measures to reduce disaster risk".²³ If the message is that "everything will be beautiful in the end", and if what Buya Yahya said is given too much emphasis, there is little religious incentive to anticipate

future disasters. But in fact, religion can enjoin believers to be prepared, without implying independence from God in any sense. Religious propagators can help raise awareness about the dangers of living in disaster-prone regions. During the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, Islamic teachings to protect faith, life and offspring were applied to support the health protocols and the vaccination process. The same discourse may be developed further for disaster risk reduction.

This notably entails an open mind on the part of religious propagators to the words of scientists. After all, while Islamic scholars identify many signs of God's greatness, scientists study many signs from nature. Together, they can engage in science-based and religiously acceptable discourse for improving disaster awareness and mitigation.

The Cianjur earthquake can provide impetus for the promotion of the study of science alongside the study of religion. In many Islamic schools, pupils are already taught astronomy, through which they learn to determine the direction of Ka'bah, prayer times, and important dates in the Islamic calendar. It has now become crucial to also teach them what it is that produces earthquakes and tsunamis. In fact, young students should be made aware of climate change that hugely influences the world that they and future generations will live in. More broadly, society must continue to develop interest in science and geography, and disaster management, without having to alienate religious beliefs and practices.

ENDNOTES

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- ¹⁹Al-Qur'an 7:156.
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