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Religion, Science and the Tsunami
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Since the beginning of the Enlightenment in the 17th century, there has been an ongoing struggle between religion and science. Over the decades and centuries, science has increasingly encroached upon territory previously occupied by religion.

Science has put forward its own views of nature, life and the organization of the universe. It has developed new practices of medicine and healing, of ecology and proper stewardship of the environment, and so on.

Today, these views and practices have largely replaced those belonging to Christianity (and other religions).

But there remains a realm of religion into which science will never make significant inroads, namely, that of "meaning." To explain what I mean, let me turn to the massive death and devastation caused by last month's tsunami.

Science has provided extensive explanations of the tsunami and its impact. Scientists appeared on all the major TV and radio new programs.

Magazines such as Newsweek and Time have published articles with colorful graphics explaining earthquakes, plate tectonics, underwater wave movements, and sensing mechanisms. University of Wyoming Economics Professor Edward Barbier has even indicated how the impact of the tsunami wave was probably heightened because of loss of protective coral reefs and mangrove swamps due to the economic development of recent decades.

These explanations are important, useful and informative, but they are simply that, namely, explanations.

Let us ask a different question: What does the occurrence of the tsunami mean? Why were some people killed, some people injured, while some people escaped unscathed? Why were so many children killed or left orphans?

The scientific answer is that dying, living or being injured was simply a matter of chance, of who happened to be in the way when the wave hit. In other words, there is no meaning to their deaths or survival; it was simply random. Thus, it was all meaningless.

The problem with this response is that few people think that life and death are meaningless.

This is where religions make their contribution. Religions can answer the question of meaning, the question of why this disaster here and now, the question of whether good can come of it or only bad. To be sure, different religions provide different meanings -- within different religions several meanings may be proposed, debated and accepted.

Difference and debate are only natural. They are part of both science and religion. For science, the purpose of debate is to arrive at a universal understanding of a general, repeatable phenomenon. For religion, however, the difference in assigned meanings is specific and limited. That is, meaning is limited to specific people in specific places at specific times who have specific experiences. In brief, meaning is individual.

To give an obvious example, the tsunami's meaning in the United States, which was not impacted by the wave, differs from the event's meaning for those in Thailand. Moreover, the meaning for those Thais who were actually in the wave and survived differs from Thais who were inland. At the next step, meaning for a boy who survived unscathed differs from that of his brother whose legs were broken.

To say that meaning is individual is not to say that individuals create it from nothing for themselves. Instead, people develop meaning from within their religion. Religions guide people to a range of possible interpretations of their particular situation. One might say that meaning results from applying a religion's cosmic truths (to use a fancy term for a religion's beliefs) to the events one experiences. The choice of which truths to apply and the mode of their application will result in different meanings. This application may be done by individuals on their own or guided by those more experienced in the religion, such as priests, rabbis, or mullahs.

Given this understanding of the different roles of science and religion in the aftermath of the tsunami's destruction, it is clear why I do not provide a superficial discussion of a god or of divine purpose in this event. Lived religions that can speak comfort to people's souls in such terrible times do not lend themselves to easy meanings that can be laid out in short essays.