

The New York Times

ON THE WEB

International

January 12, 2005

RELIGIONS

Faith Divides the Survivors and It Unites Them, Too

By AMY WALDMAN

HAMBANTOTA, Sri Lanka - Next door to four houses flattened by the tsunami, three rooms of Poorima Jayaratne's home still stood intact. She had a ready explanation for that anomaly, and her entire family's survival: she was a Buddhist, and her neighbors were not.

"Most of the people who lost relatives were Muslim," said Ms. Jayaratne, 30, adding for good measure that two Christians were also missing. As proof, she pointed to the poster of Lord Buddha that still clung to the standing portion of her house.



Chang W. Lee/The New York Times

Poorima Jayaratne, second from right, said part of her house, in Hambantota, Sri Lanka, and her family survived because of her Buddhist faith.

The earthquake and tsunami that killed at least 150,000 people reached from Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim majority nation, to India, the world's largest Hindu one. It hit Thailand's Buddhist majority and Muslim minority, and this tiny island country, which is mostly Buddhist but has sizable Hindu, Muslim and Christian populations.

Across nations and religions there has been a search for explanations of not only why the tsunami came but why it killed some and not others - and a vibrant, sometimes virulent cottage industry is supplying them. Some discern a lesson that humanity should unite, citing the bodies of people of all religions tumbling together into mass graves, while others see affirmations of the rightness of their own path. Amid sympathy, there is judgment; beneath public compassion, a private moralizing.

The tsunami may also deepen religious and ethnic divisions, perhaps dangerously. In Sri Lanka in recent years, dozens of churches have been attacked by militant Buddhists. It is the Christians, some Buddhists say, who are to blame for the tsunami. Din Syamsuddin, a cleric and deputy chief of Muhammadiyah, one of Indonesia's largest Muslim organizations, said the people of the Aceh region near the epicenter had calmly accepted the tragedy as a sign of God's disapproval and a divine examination to test their faith.

Natural disasters are an indication that man has strayed from the path of God, he said: "We believe it is an examination, and we face it with passion and submission." Because a physical tragedy is only a test, Acehese Muslims believe, the real punishment may come later, he said. According to Islamic doctrine, only after critical self-evaluation and positive deeds can people begin to repair their relationship with God. Rebuilding after the tsunami really means "returning to the center of life, which is God," Mr. Syamsuddin said.

In mostly Hindu India, some see a divine reaction to a society whose changing economy is feeding corruption and greed. Muthuvel, 55, a fisherman in Nagappattinam whose wife is missing, said, "Fishermen are becoming greedy and jealous of other richer colleagues." Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, a guru in India who has built a huge following among the country's growing and stressed middle class, said: "If you forget nature, this is the way nature reminds you. Crime and stress punish nature."

Here in Sri Lanka, four religions - Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity - coexist. Their

followers' explanations often exhibit a commonness of belief, reflecting the primal reasons the religions evolve and the ways they have influenced one another over time. Most of the population follows the Theravada school of Buddhism, in which understanding dukkha, or suffering, is a central concept, as is accepting the inability to control it. The Venerable Battapola Nanda, a priest near Galle whose temple has become a relief camp, said the tsunami reinforced a central Buddhist tenet: "If you think something will happen, it never will," he said. "If you think it never will happen, it will."

A similar sense of the limits of man and the greatness of God informed the words of Nasir Mohammad, a Muslim textile shop owner in Hambantota. It is not for humans to explain why so many children died, but to accept it, he said. "God makes the world," he said. "He can give, he can take. Sometimes he gives more. Sometimes he takes."

Always, there is a search for signs, as in the conviction of Rose Jayasuriya, 59, that her older sister Patricia, 74, still missing, died blessed because she had just taken communion when the sea invaded their church. Sri Lankan Buddhists believe that rebirth follows death, and that sin and good deeds determine one's future in this life and the next. Many Buddhists said they suspected that those who had lost children had done something wrong in a previous life.

M. Vilmot, 49, a baker whose 14 family members survived, was sure that those who had lost loved ones were being punished for some sin. "We earn money the correct way," he said. "That's why it didn't happen to us." His bakery, perhaps 30 feet from the sea, was damaged but not destroyed. He said he followed the five Theravada Buddhist precepts of not lying, stealing, drinking, philandering or killing animals, while others only gave money to temples and then misbehaved.

G. H. Bandusile, 44, a fisherman's wife in Koggala, was certain that punishment was being meted out to the survivors, not the dead. "The good people are gone," said Ms. Bandusile, who lost her mother. "The bad people must stay and suffer."

On a back road in the village of Nagurasa in the Galle district, T. G. David, a Buddhist farmer and strict vegetarian whose beard gave him the look of a prophet, said the fishermen devastated by the tsunami had paid the price for their work. "Fishermen are taking life," said Mr. David, who is 72. "Farmers have no problems."

Sri Lankans of all religions tried to link the ferocity of nature to the fallibility of man. At the Sri Kathiresan Temple in Galle, a Hindu temple, A. P. Sethuraman, the trustee, blamed activities like drinking and drug use by foreigners in particular. "Many bad things happen along the seaside," he said. It was a lesson sent by Lord Shiva, he said: "You must live the right way."

His proof was the local shrine to Vishnu and Kanda, two Hindu gods. It survived where the buildings all around it did not. Ramzy Mohammad, 32, a Muslim businessman, said many Sri Lankan Muslims believed God was angry about dissension in families, growing drug use and rape. "He got angry and washed up the water," said Mr. Mohammad, who lost 11 family members.

The Rev. Charles Hewawasam, a Roman Catholic priest who lost a nun and 18 members of his congregation in Matara, Sri Lanka, saw the tsunami as a reaction to ethnic and religious tensions. "Nature is saying: 'You may have your powers, your fighting. I can destroy within a second the whole thing,'" he said. The dead, he added, "have sacrificed their lives for us to teach a lesson: be together, treat one another as human beings."

But for some the kind of divisions he cited seem to have only been deepened by the disaster. At the Buddhist temple in Kalatura, Sri Lanka, Nimal Ranjit Perera blamed an apocryphal Christian who had made a cake in the shape of Lord Buddha and then cut it with a knife. Indonesia, he added as an aside, was struck because Indonesians had been manufacturing and wearing underwear with the image of Lord Buddha.

At the same temple, Thenahandy Asha, 26, blamed carnivorous Christians who had "killed many animals" on Christmas, the day before the tsunami. "God was angry," she said, so on the next day poya, or full moon day, holy in Buddhism, he delivered his punishment. Samantha Silva, 24, agreed: God was angry that so many people had eaten meat, and consumed alcohol, on Christmas.

But he could not explain why so many Buddhists had died, or so many children - his own girl and boy, ages 5 and 2, among them. His brain was too upset to puzzle that out, he said. All he could do was leave flowers and light lamps at the temple, and pray that his children's next lives would be good ones.

Copyright 2005 The New York Times Company