

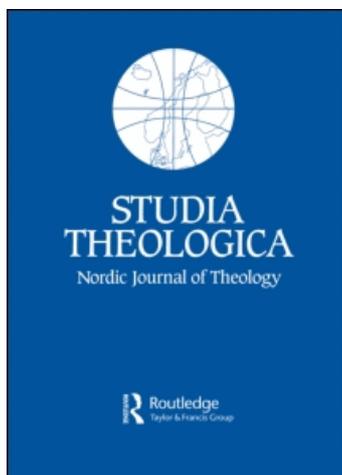
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Terje Stordalen

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# Tsunami and Theology

## *The Social Tsunami in Scandinavia and the Book of Job*<sup>1</sup>

Terje Stordalen

This essay attempts first to understand some aspects of public reactions in Norway and Scandinavia to the tsunami catastrophe in the Indian Ocean on December 26, 2004. Secondly, it takes this understanding as a hermeneutical resource for reading the Book of Job. As a biblical scholar, I can only hope that the cultural analysis in the first part is not too aberrant to be considered relevant, at least in its major line of reasoning. My hope for the second part would be that it makes a case for developing additional paradigms for doing biblical studies.

### *Two Tsunamis*

On December 26, perhaps the largest natural disaster in modern times hit nations around the Indian Ocean. Even Scandinavia lost several hundreds of people in the tsunami, and at an early stage authorities thought we had lost many thousands. Public reaction was tremendous, in Scandinavia as in other regions. Media reported extensively from the scene. Politicians, civil servants, royalty and clergy alike expressed corresponding views of the tragedy. Relief efforts were instigated on a grand scale. The tsunami *got to us* in an unprecedented way. An earthquake had generated a tsunami, which, in turn, triggered a wave of public sympathy and activity. It was this last wave – let us call it the social tsunami – that became the primary tsunami experience in Scandinavia.

The generosity of the public was laudable indeed, and the victims got no more than they needed. (In fact, in hindsight it may seem that they will not even get what they were initially promised.) Still, it is a fact that Scandinavian reactions to the tsunami were disproportionate (as were those of other nations): other simultaneous disasters were equally severe in terms of death and suffering without receiving corresponding response. Tragically, the amount of people affected by the tsunami was huge. Perhaps as many as five million were directly touched, between

one and two million in Sri Lanka alone.<sup>2</sup> Still, other catastrophes were in part much larger.<sup>3</sup> Yet, none of these incurred comparable public attention. The most characteristic feature of that wave I called a social tsunami, therefore, was its energy, its potential to transform passive TV viewers and newspaper readers into active social agents and to fill the media with their output. My interpretation of the phenomenon, therefore, asks: where did the astonishing amount of *energy* in the social tsunami originate?

### *A Media Perspective*

At this point, a media perspective must be taken into account.<sup>4</sup> Most Scandinavians had never heard of a tsunami before. To the public, the disaster was one unprecedented, simple, highly dramatic and graphic incident with horrific pictures and excessive casualties. The aftermath of the tsunami offered lots of human-interest stories, tragic as well as miraculous ones. As such, the tsunami was extremely cogent to the TV medium's propensity for simple, graphic and emotional news.

The incident occurred during Christmas, a season with comparably few news stories competing for attention. On top of that, the wave hit *i. a.* Thailand, where numerous mobile phones, digital cameras and camcorders recorded the incidents. These pictures made a major media impact. Because of the tourists, many national media were able to bring eyewitness reports, and many nations witnessed a second news storm on national disaster management following the one on the actual incidents in the Indian Ocean. This served to intensify and prolong the story.

As if that were not enough, there was an unusually 'slow' development of the main story, with new, shocking figures coming in day after day, and ever more regions reporting ever more horrific disasters. The news story started at an incredible peak only to grow *larger* – an untypical pattern. As a consequence, this disaster became over-exposed over against all other tragedies. "Reuters Alertnet found that the tsunami got more media attention in the first six weeks after it struck than all of the world's top ten emergencies received in the past year."<sup>5</sup>

The media perspective explains the TV rating numbers and the high count of newspaper columns. It does *not*, however, explain why TV viewers were converted from the habitually passive audience into active and responsive agents. The media perspective does not explain the *social energy* of the tsunami. (Rather, it must be the other way around: one additional reason why this story became so dominating is

linked to its potential to release such social energy.) Public reactions to the tsunami in Scandinavia (and elsewhere) were fuelled by *more* than media input and ordinary humanitarian reactions. What could this “more” have been?

It has been suggested that Scandinavia reacted intensely simply because many Scandinavians were among the tsunami victims. This aspect was instrumental in the media story (see above), but it does not alone give satisfactory account for the social energy. Two weeks into January 2005 Norwegian authorities released the figures for traffic death victims in 2004. The numbers were better than in many years: “only” 259 people had died.<sup>6</sup> Still, those 259 were substantially more than the count of Norwegian tsunami victims. Why would Norway as a nation relate so passively to the 259 traffic victims and so actively to the 85 national victims of the tsunami? Why would the South Indian tsunami have the potential to generate such social energy? One important difference between the traffic deaths and the tsunami loss was that the nation was prepared – however ludicrous and cynical that might sound – to pay the price of 259 traffic casualties. The tsunami, on the other hand, took us utterly by surprise. In so doing, it shook the foundations of our worldview, and I shall try to argue that this is the very reason for its generating such an amount of social energy.

### *Two Indications for Loss of Language*

Let us take recent Norwegian history as an example case, assuming that similar development occurred elsewhere in Scandinavia and other parts of the affluent world. The Norway which emerged after World War II went through dramatic changes. From having been a society characterised by traditional values and behaviour, Norway developed a public space dominated by social-democratic, technocratic and rationalistic values.<sup>7</sup> Two examples may indicate the effect of modernisation upon Norwegian ways to deal publicly with experiencing disaster.

The first has to do with the fact that modernisation led to a decline in traditional values and customs. Thus, Norway sustained a loss of public signals for mourning.<sup>8</sup> The traditional use of a black ribbon went out of fashion, and there emerged no commonly accepted or understood alternative signal. This was a more serious loss to society than to individuals. Presumably, individuals were able to communicate their grief by other (modern) means, while society lost a symbolic outlet of public grief.

In recent decades, however, Scandinavia has witnessed a remarkable development. A reorientation became visible in Sweden with the spontaneous offerings of candles and flowers at the spot where Prime Minister Olof Palme was murdered in 1986. Another example is the annual "marking" of the shopping mall where Foreign Minister Anna Lindh was stabbed to death in 2003. In Norway a similar development came with the death of King Olav in 1991. The plaza outside The Royal Palace in Oslo was literally filled with lit candles, flowers, and most remarkably: with thousands of postcards, letters and poems to the late "national father."<sup>9</sup> It is tempting to see this incident as a post-modern form of ancestor worship.<sup>10</sup> In any event, the death of King Olav opened a new space for public expression of grief. In cases of unexpected and brutal death, it is now possible for relatives, friends, and school classes to publicly indicate places and days by offering flowers, lighting candles, giving concerts, etc.<sup>11</sup>

The second example relates to a series of disastrous accidents Norway has witnessed during the last three decades. An early incident was a fire in a Jotun paint factory in 1976. Six people died in a catastrophe that should have been avoidable. Another incident was the oil platform *Alexander Kielland* that capsized in the North Sea in March 1980 after one of its legs broke off. 123 people died. Following this blow to the nationally significant oil industry and its technology, the nation was in shock and disbelief. In March 1986, 16 Norwegian soldiers died in an avalanche in Vassdalen during a NATO maneuver. Again, public estimation was that the incident could have been avoided. On April 7, 1990 the M/S *Scandinavian Star* caught fire at sea, with 160 total casualties. Accusations of bad seamanship and shady ownership fuelled a media storm in the aftermath of the tragedy. These and other incidents posed new public health challenges, resulting in the development of national disaster psychiatry and disaster intervention.<sup>12</sup> Such medical fields address victims of disaster events, relief and health personnel, and other helpers either operating in the disaster area or encountering the victims directly.

More relevant to our purpose is another dimension of these events that has not been equally focused on in disaster psychiatry, namely, their potential to generate public discomfort and upheaval.<sup>13</sup> Ever since the Jotun fire, the Norwegian public has reacted strongly to disasters that should either have been avoidable or that were simply incomprehensible. These disasters had the power to release some of the energy that was evident also in the 2004 social tsunami. So it is reasonable to assume that Norwegian public response to the tsunami was boosted by

forces intrinsic to society and not simply generated by media reports from the Indian Ocean.

Summing up, the development of rites for public grief was arguably propelled by the same forces that generated strong public reactions to disastrous events. Both phenomena occurred in situations where individuals had their fundamental assumptions about life called into question and the basis for their daily life disturbed. While the Scandinavian public managed to develop socially acceptable expressions for grieving the loss of friends and neighbours, no parallel expression developed for addressing momentary collapse of national faith in vital security procedures or technology. This is a hint that Scandinavian societies (and doubtlessly others) may be harbouring a social discomfort due to the lack of socially acceptable language or ritual for addressing collapse in the nation's worldview. My assumption is that the energy in the social tsunami is borne from this social discomfort.

### *The Social Tsunami as an Expression of Grief*

Trying to grasp the nature of social energy surfacing in January 2004, it is striking how aspects of the social tsunami came close to classical grief reactions.<sup>14</sup> Three examples will illustrate. First, take a woman receiving the unexpected news of her husband's death. The widow keeps talking, mostly repeating herself. Every pastor that has had to bring such news recognizes the reaction. I see a resemblance between the wordy widow and the repeated TV reports of tsunami victims' disbelief and horror, both in form and in function.

Years ago a colleague received the message that his son was seriously hurt in a car crash abroad. Having taken the blow, he shouted to us: "for heaven's sake *do something!*" I heard a response to such a cry when eleven-year-old children in Oslo went to sell their Game Boy equipment on the streets to raise money for tsunami victims. In the wake of the tsunami, we all resorted to *doing something*. Perhaps we felt that such activity helped us believe that the world would eventually go back to normal.

Finally, many a minister has experienced, after having delivered a death message, that she or he has gotten yelled at. Despair, anger, and disbelief may transfer into lashing out at the messenger. Such transference was fairly obvious among some of the Norwegian tsunami victims, it was predictably boosted by the media, and it was embraced by large parts of the Norwegian public.

If, indeed, the social tsunami expressed a sort of grief reaction, we must ask: what precisely were we grieving, we who did *not* lose relatives, friends, livelihood and infrastructure to the Indian Ocean?

### *Grief A and Grief B*

Victims from the shores of the Indian Ocean grieve their loss of family, health and property. Their loss was tremendous. From a theoretical point of view, their reactions are easily perceivable, both from the perspective of disaster psychiatry and as regular grief reactions. Focusing for now upon the last, let us call this Grief A. The general public in Scandinavia was not present in the disaster area and was not affected by direct loss. Still, they were apparently also grieving (see above). Let us call it Grief B. This grief must concern something other than loss of family, health and property. What was the loss? The opposition leader in Norway at the time, social democratic MP Jens Stoltenberg, said on a TV show: "The catastrophe is frightening because it reveals the violent forces of nature."<sup>15</sup> Taking this basically trivial statement as a clue, and holding it together with public reactions to earlier disastrous events (above), the nature of Grief B could be rephrased as a response to a surprising and momentous blow to presumptions upon which the nation is basing its daily life (in this case: that nature is "tamed"). Grief B would then be perceivable as a case of what Berger and Luckmann called crisis in the symbolic universe.<sup>16</sup>

I take it for granted that there is a fair amount of Grief B in any Grief A. Certainly, along the shores of the Indian Ocean, individuals are grieving not exclusively the loss of family, friends and property, but also the loss of faith and trust in life. However, when death strikes in a fairly well ordered society like Scandinavia, people are usually able to work through their Grief B by verbalising Grief A. People experiencing *only* a Grief B would not have the same option. Usually, of course, one would not suffer only a Grief B. This, however, was what happened in the media coverage of the tsunami. None of us could avoid being deeply affected by the massive display of suffering and tragedy. The view of fragile and vulnerable life was forced upon us again and again, and, on a national level, we were completely unable to make sense of the world. That is what created our social tsunami.

### *Grief B in Modern Scandinavia*

What was it that made Scandinavia (and other rich nations of the world) so vulnerable? Let us again take Norway as example. Coinciding with modernization and the development of social welfare, Norway experienced a decline in public discourse on religion and philosophy. (Religion in the private sphere is a different matter.<sup>17</sup>) In January 2005 Prime Minister Kjell Magne Bondevik, himself an ordained minister, could not give a public, religious interpretation of the tsunami. The bishop of Oslo offered several comments, mainly on the need to stand together in grief. Never, as far as I registered, did any authority attempt to interpret the actual earthquake or tsunami religiously.<sup>18</sup> It is plain that in Norway, religious language would lack public credibility to undertake such an interpretation.

The case was similar for philosophical discourse. As far as I know, not a single humanist philosopher in Norway rose to the task of publicly interpreting the tsunami.<sup>19</sup> Despite obvious affinities between the tsunami and traditional configurations of the problem of evil, there was no discourse on moral, existential, or ontological aspects of the event. The implication is that philosophy too does not have a publicly credible language for approaching the tsunami.

There is of course a connection between the two: enhanced trust in the welfare state and reduced need for religion and philosophy. In Scandinavian daily experience, the world is basically predictable enough and fair enough to become a tolerable place for everyone – provided it is managed in a rational, democratic, and humane way. This perception amounts to a worldview that I would dub ‘practical social materialism.’ It serves as a reference point for interpreting and reflecting over individual and societal life. It constitutes the symbolic universe for most individuals in Scandinavia. Most importantly, practical social materialism is the only ideology upon which the Scandinavian states may base their politics.

When this Scandinavian worldview fails, there is within its symbolic universe no effective grammar for handling the failure. No instance within or beyond the system could conceivably be addressed to take complaints or to act to improve upon the problem. There is no God to listen to lament and prayer, no divinely commissioned king to represent an ultimately benevolent world order, and also no superior rationality to explain things (since reason is already enrolled in the system). There is no belief in ‘destiny’ (which used to be a factor in ‘explaining’ the unavoidable in traditional Scandinavia<sup>20</sup>) nor is there a semi-personified ‘heaven’ (or nature) to warrant fatalism (as is found, for instance, in

Chinese religion<sup>21</sup>). In short, there is no effective outlet to handle momentary collapses in the Scandinavian worldview.

A prime symbolic condensation of Scandinavian values would be Christmas.<sup>22</sup> This feast points to what is left of Christian values. It has a perceivable connection to Old Norse solstice cult and a resolute linkage to thriving Scandinavian economy. Striking in the middle of the Christmas festival, the tsunami hit at the symbolically most sensitive point in the Nordic annual cycle.<sup>23</sup> On December 26, 2006, Scandinavia faced an incident that publicly brought into doubt fundamental assumptions in Scandinavian worldviews.

### *The Book of Job: A Dialogue on Making Sense*

The above reflections on Scandinavian culture could be developed into different reflections. Being a biblical scholar who thinks exegetical theology should reflect contemporary issues, I venture to take them as a hermeneutical frame for reading the Book of Job. Clearly, the social tsunami sharpens our view of aspects of this biblical text. Perhaps the biblical text could conversely be a dialogue partner as we wrestle with social and religious dimensions of the Scandinavian situation as described above.

The story of *Job* is that of the wise and pious man who loses everything: property, children, health, and (as we surmise) social standing and friends.<sup>24</sup> His dialogue with his friends is a dialogue on finding sense in the undeserved and apparently senseless experience he went through. This dialogue is literarily complicated. The characters see themselves as engaged in a sapiential contest speech.<sup>25</sup> The reader, however, simultaneously perceives the unfolding drama with reference to the frame story of the book (roughly chapters 1–2 and 42). That story records a hearing in heaven. *Hassatan*<sup>26</sup> has brought a case against Job, questioning Job's motivation for being pious. Letting the friends extensively use legal speech forms as rhetorical devices, the author underscores this pattern of a 'hidden' trial. The contestants mean to speak 'as if' they were in a trial – and, ironically, they are. *Hassatan* inflicts two ordeals upon the protagonist. But as things turn out, the most severe challenge for Job is to bear the dispute with his friends.

The book does not only contain a dialogue, its cast is dialogical as well.<sup>27</sup> It poses a number of questions concerning human suffering and its religious interpretation. For instance, did God perceive Job's harsh critique as blasphemous?<sup>28</sup> Why does Job have to suffer?<sup>29</sup> Is there justice or predictability in the world, or is it in chaos?<sup>30</sup> These and other

questions are answered in different ways by different characters in the book (including the narrator). Not infrequently, one and the same character may give several, internally conflicting answers to one and the same question. Thus, the book displays a literary mode that resembles what Mikhail Bakhtin identified as dialogic in the novels of Fyodor Dostoyevsky.<sup>31</sup>

An example might help to illustrate. Hassatan poses the topic of whether or not the haunted Job will continue to speak acceptably (1:11; 2:5). The narrator comments upon this issue (1:22; 2:10 and cf. 32:5; 42:7), and so does Mrs. Job (2:9). Each of the friends expresses disgust for Job's speech (8:2; 11:1; 15:5f). Elihu, the fourth friend, is critical towards the words of both the three first friends and of Job (32:11; 33:8f). Job first defends his speech (7:11; 10:1), but eventually opts to keep silent (40:3–4), apparently admitting that he should not have spoken in the first place. God is at first negative to Job's speech (38:2), but is later said to have found Job's speech better than that of the friends (42:7). So, it is difficult to calculate whether or not Job, according to the book, did indeed speak acceptably.

Likewise, Job claims that the world is in chaos (as in 9:22.24; 19:7–12, etc.). Paradoxically, that does not prevent him from expecting justice (13:15f; 19:25–27; 23:2–7; 24:3–7, etc.). All the friends subscribe to the idea that there *is* justice in the world. Initially, they allow that justice may be temporarily suspended (see 5:17–26). Later on, they portray a more immediate connection between action and reward (cf. 34:10–15). God is emphatically defending the view that the world is orderly (chs. 38–41).<sup>32</sup> Still, God avoids commenting upon the suffering of Job – that one piece of 'evidence' that would argue strongest against God's case. The narrator attempts to explain Job's suffering through the role of *Hassatan* in the heavenly court. Characteristically for the book, this attempt must be said to fail: it remains inconceivable why God, who never doubts the piety of Job,<sup>33</sup> would allow *Hassatan* to conduct such a test. Indeed, the explanation amounts to what Hermann Spieckermann calls 'the satanization of God'.<sup>34</sup> The impression is that in *Job*, as in Bakhtin's dialogism, the narrator has given up his privileges and becomes one among several conflicting voices.<sup>35</sup>

The effect of all this is a dialogue where the applicability of a given answer is tested by rubbing it against competing answers professed in the book. Apparently, the most extreme propositions are refuted within the composition. For instance, Job's statements that the entire world is utterly chaotic and that God is a criminal are laid waste by the speeches of God (chs. 38 – 41). Similarly, the combined voices of Job, God and

narrator undercut the friends' view that Job's suffering is an effect of his personal sin.

However, decisions on less radical propositions are left hovering after the dialogue has ended. Is, for instance Elihu correct when claiming that God decided to test or discipline Job (cf. 33:19–30, etc.)? Or is Job closer to the mark when claiming that the Holy God does whatever he pleases without having to account for it (see 12:17–25 *et passim*)? Both propositions seem defensible as interpretations of the book, and both could claim some support in the larger biblical Hebrew universe. In other words, the quest for an explanation for Job's suffering is met by presenting a number of conflicting answers without selecting any of them as the final one.

For this reason, the Book of Job develops a characteristic *distance* to suffering. Fredrik Lindström has argued that theodicy in the Psalms is an involved theodicy. The singers are fighting their way against identified evils and enemies. They blame God for not fighting for them, but there is little doubt that God would and should be on their side.<sup>36</sup> As compared to this, *Job* develops an almost 'academic' perspective. True enough, individual voices, in particular that of Job, express emotional and existential sentiments. But because of its dialogical mode, the readers of the book are invited not to react with compassion to Job's lament, but rather to evaluate its weight for answering the questions posed in the book. From this I conclude that the intended readers of the book would be in a situation closer to that of Job's friends than to that of Job himself. Unlike the readers of the Book of Psalms, the audience of *Job* seems to be struggling with *interpreting* suffering rather than *enduring* it.

This would imply that The Book of Job was designed to address a public in a situation not entirely different from that of the Scandinavian public during the social tsunami. Apparently, both were facing challenges to their worldview more than to their lives. For our purpose, this is a key point. It warrants asking whether perhaps strategies or positions developed in *Job* could be of value for our addressing the Scandinavian culture as it was revealed in the social tsunami?

### *The Inexplicable in Public Discourse*

The friends of Job are staged as teachers of traditional sapiential theology. Throughout the book they hold to an ever more one-sided view that Job brought his catastrophe upon himself. Within their symbolic universe, there is no other explanation. Job too, apparently,

started out as a sage of a similar conviction and inclination (cf. 4:3f; 12:3f). His is a struggle to find a new basis for interpreting his actual experience. Scholars therefore tend to see the book as critique of an ideologically inflexible wisdom theology.<sup>37</sup>

Surprisingly, perhaps, to those who see Scandinavia as a liberal culture, a considerable lack of flexibility in worldview contributed to generating the social tsunami. Practical social materialism, like the wisdom theology of Job's friends, was unable to adjust or augment its epistemic basis when encountering a phenomenon it found virtually inexplicable. The inflexibility of Job's friends was generated from the uncompromising belief that God would not do anything bad (34:12, etc.). What generated the inflexibility of Scandinavian materialism? Was it due to modernism being a rather absolutistic way of reasoning? It seems rather more likely that the inability of Scandinavians to interpret the tsunami was primarily due to their lack of publicly sustainable language and concepts for discussing their Grief B.

As a theologian, I would have a lot to say about the lack of a public philosophical, religious, and existential discourse in Scandinavia. But already as a member of society, I would point out that this lack could be dangerous. If the energy manifesting itself in the social tsunami were to be misguided, it could have disastrous consequences. The only way to tame these powers seems to be to respect the need for a language even for that which is inexplicable or irrelevant to the presently hegemonic discourse, namely to practical social materialism. The Book of Job institutes a dissident outlet by allowing its main protagonist to voice a host of positions that, in part, clearly remain unacceptable to the author of the book. A primary lesson for Scandinavian politicians and cultural workers alike, therefore, is that we need to redevelop a more generous public discourse that could be perceived as reflecting apparent irrational sentiments within the nation in a relevant and responsive manner.

### *The Horrific in Christian Theology*

Turning to theological reflection, we ask what did the author of the Book of Job do to overcome the aphasia of his theology? He seems to have pursued two basic strategies at the same time. Possibly he did not trust any of them to do the job sufficiently well. First, he moved to establish an amount of ambiguity in his worldview by subscribing to two mutually conflicting assertions. He affirms that (a) God is good and God's world reflects God's goodness,<sup>38</sup> and simultaneously that (b) a

godly man like Job may suffer.<sup>39</sup> If (a) was true, (b) should not be so, and vice versa. By maintaining both, the author creates the impression that while both propositions hold a measure of adequacy, neither could be taken to its extreme implications.

His second strategy is to explore alternative views of that which was unperceivable in his own theological universe. Gisela Fuchs has demonstrated that *Job* is full of mythological motives known from various surrounding cultures.<sup>40</sup> Many of these motives are employed where Job is struggling to describe God or where God is striving to explain himself to Job. Some of these motives would have been inconsistent with the theological propensities of the author of *Job* and his background. Nevertheless they are allowed into his dialogue, presumably because they had a potential to conceptualize the mystery of the horrific as experienced in Job's suffering. The strength of a symbolic universe depends i.a. upon its ability to adequately express and categorize individual everyday experience and intuitive perception.<sup>41</sup> This is what the mythical imagery of *Job* was doing. (The book does not simply surrender to mythology. It avoids doing so by holding a final decision in suspense.)

A first, perhaps trivial, insight from this could be that the theologian should resist the inclination of fellow believers to defend God (or is it their own faith?) by giving some logically consistent explanation for human suffering. Logical consistency in this matter is often achieved at the expense of disregarding human experience and intuition. The author of *Job* opted instead for exploring possible contributions from outside of his own epistemic foundation. Contemporary theology should learn from his example, especially when it comes to interpreting horrific events like the tsunami.

A second insight is less trivial. Having established ambiguity in its symbolic universe, the Book of *Job* achieves a tender equilibrium. It now becomes potentially possible to believe in YHWH's sovereignty without having to deny the existence of iconic suffering. It also becomes conceptually possible to experience such suffering without having to see oneself as forsaken by the deity. In other words, the reader of the Book of *Job* is able to affirm the reality of the horrific without surrendering her affirmation of the regularity and goodness of the world. This position has significant import also for theological interpretation of the tsunami and for addressing the social discomfort in Scandinavia revealed in its social tsunami. Logically, the horrific could be horrifying only insofar as the human encountering it has experience, expectation, or intuition that the horrific is challenging 'default' values of the world. Paradoxically, therefore, the horrific seems logically to

presuppose that world order which it is perceived to be challenging. Maintaining a view of the tsunami as truly horrific without surrendering one's view of the world as better than horrific, strikes me as an important theological point.

Do note that *Job's* way of connecting chaos to order is less akin to Western ways of thinking and more to Oriental thought. One might conveniently refer to Chinese "correlative cosmology" expressed in *yin* and *yang* as a pattern for interrelating opposites.<sup>42</sup> In this central move, the Book of Job reveals itself as an Oriental composition. I would hope that Western theology could learn to incorporate this way of thinking. Not only is it part of our biblical heritage. It might also turn out to be an advantageous strategy precisely for interpreting incidents like the tsunami, and hence also for naming that which generates social discomfort in Scandinavians' encounter with such incidents.

Still, as a Christian theologian, I would direct one critique back to the view of the horrific in *Job*. Its strategy is to render the disastrous tolerable by interpreting it as inexplicable, thus neutralizing its ability to make a negative argument. This is a weak solution. For a Christian reader, it is difficult to avoid a New Testament perspective at this point. Through the suffering of Christ, the horrific made its way into the centre of Christian religion, whose worship is focused on the cross. The horrific in Christian faith is perhaps not very present in the believers' daily life. But the idea of believers suffering like Christ, dying like Christ, and rising with Christ is a figure of major importance in the New Testament,<sup>43</sup> and *imitatio Christi* of course plays a major role in traditional theology and spirituality. Time and again the suffering of Christ has proven its symbolic potential when believers needed to wrestle with the horrific. In *Job*, the human sufferer is left to endure suffering without God, ensured only that the horrific does not nullify the normal. In Christ, God suffers before and along with the sufferer, rendering the horrific as something of a transitional experience. This locates the experience of the horrific in a setting coloured by eschatology. A Christian might opt to view the tsunami as a feature of the 'old world', which is about to give way to the 'new world' in Christ, and the experience of the tsunami or the social tsunami as an *imitatio Christi* transition to a better life. If taken with due regard also for the fact that Christians belong to and have a responsibility for the present world, such a perspective would warrant merit as one possible Christian model for enduring the horrific.

### *The Marginal and the Regular*

As noted above, the Book of Job confirms the reality of Job's marginal experiences and, at the same time, confirms a normal regularity of the world. The tension between regularity and marginality is worth elaboration. One of the fundamental questions being dialogued in the book is whether or not it would be reasonable for Job to re-establish his trust in life.<sup>44</sup> In view of his knowledge of the horrific, how could he bear to beget ten new children (cf. 42:12–15)? This question applies to us all. In view of, say, the tsunami, is it empirically and emotionally sustainable for humans to give their full efforts into living the best they can? Does it make sense to invest oneself in commitments, relationships and ties? These worries are likely to present themselves for any human being experiencing loss or pressure beyond the anticipated.

In a Buddhist framework of interpretation, these questions could be taken to verify the truth in Buddha's teaching on suffering. And in a given case, one might say that it is indeed better not to make human investments and commitments. Within Christian theology, it would be very difficult to endorse the view that a human being should avoid investing herself in the world. Therefore, Job's experience of the *marginal* does not supply an adequate perspective upon life as such. The marginal needs to be seen also in the perspective of the *regular*, lest Job loses all hope and faith in life and becomes suicidal.

On the other hand, construing a worldview exclusively from within the perspective of the regular is also insufficient. This was what the friends of Job were doing and the book thoroughly criticises them for not being able to embrace the fullness of human reality and experience. In life, the book says, there *is* an element of the marginal. Regular life needs also to be seen in the perspective of the marginal, lest we construe normality as an inhumane strait jacket. Therefore, a theological account of the regular should include the reality of the marginal, and vice versa.

Applied for our purpose, the theologian inspired by *Job* might consider the tsunami as a manifestation of marginality. In this light, the social tsunami too, being Scandinavia's response to the marginal, would be apprehended as something out of the regular. As such, it should simply be acknowledged and allowed to take expression. However, it should not be allowed to form a basis for action towards more regular aspects of life. It seems to me that when we allowed ourselves to disregard those 24 millions starving in Darfur on Christmas Eve 2004, or those 259 Norwegians deceased in traffic accidents in 2004, we did not honour this insight.

Finally, the interdependence of the regular and the marginal would imply that meaning in life is not something that could be logically deduced as a passive quality of life manifest in the totality of world experience. Rather, meaning in life must be something that a Christian human being will sometimes have to confess to, based on the deeds and witness of Christ as transmitted in the church and as perceived in her experience, expectation and intuition as a Christian human being. I find this to be vital for any attempt at theologically interpreting the tsunami. The object is not to find sense in either the tsunami or the social tsunami, but rather to establish perspectives and responses that have the potential to point towards hope and a basis for continued confidence in life.

Terje Stordalen  
Granliveien 39  
NO-3440 Røyken  
Norway

### *Notes*

1. Dedicated to the memory of Timo Veijola in whose decline a first version of this essay was read to the Second Annual Meeting of OTSEM, a Nordic-German network for Doctoral education in Old Testament Studies, in Göttingen, May 22, 2005. The essay was also offered at a faculty colloquium at Hong Kong Baptist University, Department for Philosophy and Religion, Monday, October 17, 2005.
2. The precise numbers will never be known. I refer to estimates by the Asian Development Bank (see: "Sri Lanka: Tsunami Summary," [cited 18 May 2005]. Online: [www.adb.org/media/Articles/2005/6619\\_tsunami\\_impact\\_Sri\\_Lanka](http://www.adb.org/media/Articles/2005/6619_tsunami_impact_Sri_Lanka).) and by Global Issues (see: Anup Shah, "Asian Earthquake and Tsunami Disaster," [cited 9 November 2005]. Online: [www.globalissues.org/envissues/disasters/tsunami.asp#Oneofthelargestearthquakesinrecordedhistory](http://www.globalissues.org/envissues/disasters/tsunami.asp#Oneofthelargestearthquakesinrecordedhistory).)
3. See the address by Mr. Jan Egeland, U.N. Undersecretary-General already on January 28, 2005, in William M. Reilly, "U.N.: Africans have needs like tsunami victims," [cited 11 November 2005]. Online: [www.washtimes.com/upi-breaking/20050127-044607-6642r.htm](http://www.washtimes.com/upi-breaking/20050127-044607-6642r.htm). See comments by Graham Wood, "Tsunami Media Coverage: Not a Fair Guiding Principle for Aid," [cited 24 January 2005]. Online: [www.commondreams.org/views05/0124-23.htm](http://www.commondreams.org/views05/0124-23.htm).
4. Much of the following is taken from Graham Wood's analysis, see "Ockenden Noted in Speech by Norwegian Development Minister," [cited 11 November 2005]. Online: <http://www.ockenden.org.uk/index.asp?id=1607>; from Erik Kjærgaard, "Tsunami Media Coverage and Global Humanitarian Ethics," [cited 11 November 2005]. Online: [www.adpc.net/infores/newsletter/2005/1-3/Theme3.html](http://www.adpc.net/infores/newsletter/2005/1-3/Theme3.html); and from Mark Jones, "How good was tsunami coverage in the media?" [cited 12 November 2005]. Online: [www.alertnet.org/thefacts/reliefresources/110667336256.htm](http://www.alertnet.org/thefacts/reliefresources/110667336256.htm).

5. Erik Kjærgaard, "Tsunami Media Coverage and Global Humanitarian Ethics," n.p. [cited 12 November 2005]. Online: [www.adpc.net/infores/newsletter/2005/1-3/01.pdf](http://www.adpc.net/infores/newsletter/2005/1-3/01.pdf) (2005/11/12).
6. "21 døde i Rogalandstrafikken i fjor," n.p. [cited 11 November 2005]. Online: [www.trafikksikkerhetshallen.no/visnyhet.asp?id=284](http://www.trafikksikkerhetshallen.no/visnyhet.asp?id=284).
7. See especially R. Slagstad, *De nasjonale strateger* (Oslo: Pax, 1998), and in particular pp. 277-335.
8. On death and mourning customs in Norway, see O. Agedal, ed., *Døden på norsk* (Oslo: Ad Notam Gyldendal, 1994); E. Hovdhaugen, *Vårt møte med døden* (Oslo: Samlaget, 1981).
9. See F. Bringager, "I lyset fra Slottsplassen: barns skapende utfoldelse i forbindelse med Kong Olavs død," *Norveg* 35 (1992): 89-102.
10. Cf. J. Salomonsen, "Dianas død og ritualenes betydning," *Kirke og kultur* 102 (1997): 509-518.
11. Cf. H. Westgaard, "*Som eit spor*": *Spontanalteret som moderne sorguttrykk i et kulturanalytisk perspektiv* (Bergen: Forlaget Folkekultur, 2001).
12. See in Norwegian setting T. Maurizen, "*å verne befolkningens liv og helse*": *En historie om helsemessig og sosial beredskap* (Oslo: Sosial- og helsedepartementet, 2001); and further for instance A. Dyregrov, *Katastrofepsykologi* (2d ed.; Oslo: Ad Notam Gyldendal, 2002); V. Soilikki, *De unge og katastrofelyheter* (Oslo: Abstrakt forlag, 2005). Cf. J.J. López-Ibor, ed., *Disasters and mental health* (Chichester: Wiley, 2005).
13. Only rarely does this aspect come into consideration in medical literature on disasters, but cf. B. Raphael, *When Disaster Strikes: How Individuals and Communities Cope with Catastrophe* (New York: Basic Books, 1986), 105 etc. See also aspects in M.S. Mortensen, *Public Relations in Crisis and Disaster* (Bærum: Atlantic Press, 1997).
14. For a general description of grief reactions, see E. Kübler-Ross, *On death and dying* (New York: Macmillan, 1969). My focus is less on the phenomenon and more on its popular form, hence my description of real life reactions.
15. Norwegian TV2 Saturday, January 8, 2005.
16. See P. Berger and T. Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (London: Penguin, 1967); P. Berger, *The Social Reality of Religion* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1973) [First published in 1967 as *The Sacred Canopy*].
17. This distinction is generally accepted. See for the Norwegian scene O. Krogseth, "Det hellige i det moderne – refleksjoner omkring religion, identitet og modernitet," in *Enhet i mangfold?* (ed. I. M. Ruud and S. Hjelde; Oslo: Tano Aschehoug, 1998), 197-219; O. Krogseth, "Nyreligiositeten – i spenningsfeltet mellom avsakralisering og resakralisering," in *Troen er løs* (ed. L. G. Engedal and A. T. Sveinall; Trondheim: Tapir, 2000), 29-40.
18. Tellingly, as of November 11, 2005, there is only one entry in the ATLA Religion Database attempting a religious interpretation of the tsunami: D. B. Hart, "Tsunami and Theodicy", *First Things* 151 (March 2005): 6-9. Even in the open Internet, there are surprisingly few attempts at explanation.
19. Again, the situation in Norway is mirrored in ATLA and in the open Internet (cf. previous note).
20. On the role of fate in traditional Scandinavian popular religion, see E. Schön, *Folketro om ödet och lyckan* (Stockholm: Natur och kultur, 2002).
21. On Heaven in Chinese religion, see D. Zhang, *Key Concepts in Chinese Philosophy* (Yale: University Press, 2000) 3-11. For popular fatalism coined to heaven, see D. MacInnis, *Religion im Heutiger China: Politik und Praxis* (Nettetal: Steyler Verlag, 1993) 235f, etc.

22. On Nordic Christmas traditions, see Ø. Hodne, *Jul i Norge: Gamle og nye tradisjoner* (Oslo: Cappelen, 1999); O. Bø, *Vår norske jul* (Oslo: Samlaget, 1984).
23. Cf. the royalty's use of the Christmas season for addressing the nation; B.M. Hovland, *Kongeleg symbolmakt: skandinaviske jule- og nyttårstaler som nasjonale ritual* (Oslo: Makt- og demokratiutredningen 1998-2003, 2000).
24. For easily readable introductions to the book, see J. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction* (Louisville, Kent.: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 89-115; R.E. Murphy, *The Tree of Life: An Exploration of the Biblical Wisdom Literature* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 2002), 33-48; and still T. Mettinger, *In Search of God* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Fortress Press, 1988), 175-200. For introductions to narrative and other important issues, see N.C. Habel, *The Book of Job* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1985); L.G. Perdue, *Wisdom in Revolt: Metaphorical Theology in the Book of Job* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991).
25. On genres in the book, see still C. Westermann, *Der Aufbau des Buches Hiob* (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1977), and note again Habel, *Book of Job*.
26. I prefer this transliteration of the Hebrew word instead of the traditional rendering 'Satan'. The figure in *Job* carries different connotations than those of Satan in later Jewish literature and in the New Testament. See P.L. Day, *An Adversary in Heaven: Satan in the Hebrew Bible* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1988).
27. For the following, see my SOTS lecture "Dialogue and Dialogism in the Book of Job", *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament*, forthcoming.
28. Cf. Job 1:11; 2:5. The Hebrew root *brk* (bless) here is usually seen as a euphemism. Note: chapter and verse references are made according to the Hebrew, which is slightly different from what is found in Western bibles.
29. See Job 10:2f; 13:23 and numerous other instances.
30. See for instance Job 21:4-21, etc.
31. See again my SOTS paper (above). The resemblance was identified and interpreted in C.A. Newsom, "Job and His Friends: A Conflict of Moral Imaginations", *Int* 53 (1999): 239-253; idem, "The Book of Job as Polyphonic Text", *JSOT* 97 (2002): 87-108; idem, *The Book of Job: A Contest of Moral Imaginations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).
32. For the speeches of God, see Mettinger, *In Search*, 189-98.
33. Cf. Job 1:8; 2:3; 42:7.
34. H. Spieckermann, "Die Satanisierung Gottes: Zur inneren Konkordanz von Novelle, Dialog und Gottesreden im Hiobbuch", in »Wer ist wie du, Herr, unter den Göttern?« *Studien zur Theologie und Religionsgeschichte Israels* (ed. I. Kottsieper et al.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1994), 431-444.
35. For further elaboration, see again my *SJOT* paper.
36. F. Lindström, "Theodicy in the Psalms", in *Theodicy in the World of the Bible* (ed. A. Laato and J.C. de Moor; Leiden: Brill, 2003), 256-303.
37. For such a view of *Job*, see for instance L. Schwienhorst-Schönberger, "Das Buch Hiob," in *Einleitung in das Alte Testament* (ed. E. Zenger et al.; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2004), 344 etc.; B.C. Birch et al. eds., *Theological Introduction to the Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999) 393, etc.
38. See again Mettinger *loc. cit.* for God's speech in *Job*.
39. Neither narrator nor God doubts that Job is pious, see esp. chs. 1-2 and 42. For Job himself, see *i. a.* 27:2-6.
40. G. Fuchs, *Mythos und Hiobdichtung* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1993).
41. A similar interpretation in a related complex is argued by B. Kapferer, *Legends of People, Myths of State: Violence, Intolerance, and Political Culture in Sri Lanka and Australia*

(Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1988), 15, cf. 19ff, 115, etc. Thanks to Prof. Kåre Berge, Bergen, for drawing my attention to this issue.

42. See R.T. Ames, "Yin and Yang", in *Encyclopedia of Chinese Philosophy* (ed. A.S. Cua; London: Routledge, 2003), 846-47.

43. See still E. Larsson, *Christus als Vorbild* (Uppsala: Gleerup, 1962).

44. For these dimensions in the book, see for instance chs. 21 and 31.