

---

# Earthquake: Misfortune, Injustice, or the Will of God?

From Bam to Lisbon

## Mansour Farhang

**O**N DECEMBER 26, 2003, a powerful earthquake struck southeastern Iran, killing more than forty-one thousand people, injuring sixteen thousand, leaving seventy thousand homeless, and destroying more than 60 percent of all structures in the city of Bam. The ancient quarter of Arg-e-Bam, including a two-thousand-year-old citadel, built entirely of mud bricks, clay, straw, and trunks of palm trees, was also severely damaged. Bam was founded during the Sassanian period (224-637 C.E.) and its attractions to visitors, in addition to the citadel, were a Zoroastrian fire temple and other remains of the time when the city was a commercial center on the famous Silk Road.

The day after the devastation, local people told reporters that on Friday, December 26, a light quake awakened them at 4:00 A.M. Some got frightened enough to go to the street, but they soon returned to their beds. Then at 5:27 A.M. an earthquake that registered 6.6 on the Richter scale caused the collapse of roofs and ceilings, made largely of bricks to keep the house cool in the summer, and buried the sleeping residents under tons of rubble. The location of the earthquake was in a region where major faults had been previously mapped, about sixty miles south of towns where two other earthquakes had occurred, on June 11 and July 28, 1981, causing forty-five hundred deaths.

Iranians at home and abroad responded to the news of the quake with an outpouring of sympathy and with efforts to raise funds for survivors and also for the reconstruction of the city. In the words of one observer, Ahmad Reza Shahri, the spontaneity of people's behavior

was reminiscent of their solidarity in the early days of the 1979 revolution or at the time of Iran's 1997 victory in the football match with Australia.

Three days after the quake, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic, visited Bam, expressed sympathy for the victims, and urged government officials to help the survivors and expedite reconstruction efforts. Then he added that "this disaster reveals *emtahan-e elahi* [God's testing]. It is in such hardships that we can grow and strengthen our faith."<sup>1</sup> Khamenei's use of the expression *emtahan-e elahi* was not original. His predecessor, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the founder of the Iranian theocracy, used the same phrase in a statement addressed to the general public following one of the 1981 quakes:

The devastating earthquake that caused so many deaths and so much destruction has made us all sorry and grieving. Yet, we must view the occurrence of such disasters as God's way of testing our resolve. All of us, including the survivors of the quake, need to prove that in the face of misfortune we can remain faithful to the edict of the Glorious Koran and consider ourselves as simply temporary trustees of God.<sup>2</sup>

A variety of public officials appearing on Iran's state-owned radio and television stations in the days following the quake referred to Ayatollah Khomeini's words to console their audiences.

The fund-raising initiatives, with impressive success, continue to this day, but the discussion of the tragic loss of life has shifted to the question of Iran's vulnerability to earthquakes and the dismal performance of government agencies in the rescue and recovery operations. Why is it, critics ask, that a country on the seismic line has failed to implement

building codes that can make structures earthquake-resistant? This ongoing dialogue is focused on the political causes of Iran's failure to learn from the impressive success of Japan and California in containing the consequences of earthquakes. In fact, many observers, including scientists, poets, journalists, historians, and social scientists, are using the Bam earthquake to discredit the idea that human beings are lost and helpless in the face of natural disasters. Instead, they argue that much of the devastation was due to the vulnerable housing of Bam's residents. They contend that existing technology, if applied, could enable towns and cities to survive major quakes. They provide examples of how caring and scientifically equipped governments have managed to reduce dramatically both casualties and material loss. To illustrate this point, observers compare the devastation in Bam with the 1989 earthquake in San Francisco. In Bam, the quake reached a magnitude of 6.6 and killed forty-one thousand, while in San Francisco the quake measured 7.1 and resulted in only sixty-three deaths.

**I**N THE DAYS following the calamity, Bahram Akkashe, a physics professor at Tehran University, explained Iran's vulnerability to earthquakes and criticized public officials for their negligence in applying available knowledge to minimize the quake's destructiveness. In an interview with Persian BBC, he complained that for four decades Iranian authorities have ignored his warnings about the necessity of city planning and building codes in the vulnerable regions of the country. Another Iranian observer, in a passionate article posted on a popular Web site, wrote that "we can blame the weak structure of the two-thousand-year-old Bam citadel on absence of technical knowledge or sturdier materials at the time it was built, but what is our excuse for the poor structure of the houses built in recent times? We live in the age of technology and information but have failed to do better than our ancestors in strengthening the resistance of our dwellings against natural disasters"<sup>3</sup> Ali Esfahani, an Iranian poet residing in Canada, expressed the sentiments of many Iranians in verse:

### Keep On Saying, "My God is Kind"

As the ceilings tumbled  
and dust filled the eyes and mouths  
struts and beams landed on heads and necks  
and hands and legs ready to stir  
stopped still under heaps of soil,  
as moans and shrieks ascended the sky,  
we were not there to see all this suffering  
and speak not a word of it,  
but God, after all, was there.

Did he not see babies sucking on their mothers' breasts?

Did he not see shy new brides climbing into their nuptial beds?

Did he not see flocks of faithful in nocturnal prayers?

Did he not see feverish bodies dreaming of good health?

Did he not see? Did he not? Did he?

Did he not know that no mother would be left to put balm on the wounds of thousands of bleeding children?

Did he not know that surviving mothers and fathers

having lost their children, would have no desire for life?

Did he not know that those who were away from home

would have no kinsmen left to cry on their shoulder?

Did he not know? Did he not?

Would you keep on saying, "my God is kind"?

Would you, for the sake of your kind God,  
define kindness for me!<sup>4</sup>

Web logs, radio interviews with people on the street, newspaper articles, and commentaries on numerous Web sites reveal that mocking the idea of *emtahan-e elahi* and blaming the government for failing to implement earthquake resistant measures are now common themes of Iranian national discourse. Numerous Iranians question the idea of God controlling the workings of nature or authorizing anyone to guide their lives—a veiled reference to the ruling clerics' claim, enshrined in the Islamic Republic's constitution, that they are "the viceroys of God on earth." In other words, Iranians are using the quake to criticize, not only the competence and priorities of government but, more pointedly, the regime's religious

claims to legitimacy.

In both the Bible and the Qur'an, the Day of Judgment begins with an earthquake. There are numerous references in the sacred texts of Jews, Christians, and Muslims to earthquakes as a manifestation of God's power.

And the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, with their households and all the men with Korah, with all their goods. So they and all those with them went down alive into the pit; the earth closed over them, and they perished from among the assembly. Then all Israel who were around them fled at their cry, for they said, "Lest the earth swallow us up also." (Num. 16:31-34)

So when the centurion and those with him, who were guarding Jesus, saw the earthquake and the things that had happened they feared greatly, saying, "Truly this was the son of God." (Matt. 27:54)

And there will be great earthquakes in various places, and famines and pestilences; and there will be fearful sights and great signs from heaven. (Luke 21:110)

When earth is rocked in her last convulsion; when Earth shakes off her burdens and man asks "What may this mean?"—on that day she will proclaim her tidings, for your Lord will have inspired her. On that day mankind will come in broken bands to be shown their labors. Whoever has done an atom's weight of good shall see it, and whoever Has done an atom's weight of evil shall see it also. (Qur'an 99:1-8)

On that day the heaven will shake and reel, and the mountains crumble away and cease to be. On that day woeful shall be the plight of the unbelievers, who now divert themselves with vain disputes. (Qur'an 52:9-12)

According to these texts, it is not only earthquakes that signal God's judgment. Wind, storm, rain, and hail are also included in God's armory for ruling the world in righteousness. Before the spread of scientific knowledge, theologians in the Judaic, Christian, and Islamic traditions (perhaps others as well) assumed that a wise God created nature and that any apparent imperfection in its working had to be judged in accordance with the absolute goodness of his overall plan. They portrayed the victims of earthquakes as God's intended targets who had to suffer for their sins or be tested for their faith.

FROM THE BEGINNING of recorded history to the middle of the seventeenth century, men and women belonging to diverse cultural traditions were convinced that all natural disasters had a divine purpose, however incomprehensible the purpose might appear to humans. The victims of nature's calamities had no one to blame for their plight. Not until the age that came to be known as the Enlightenment was there a reconsideration of common views about natural disasters. Some wondered, for example, what kind of sins could infants and children commit to deserve God's wrath? Why was it that when earthquakes struck, the inhabitants of mud houses always turned out to die or suffer in greater numbers than those who lived in stone structures? It was a time for rethinking the workings of nature, human personality, science, values, beliefs, religion, the role of the church in governance, the source of political legitimacy, and the purpose of political rule. Debates on these issues began the historic contest between modernity and tradition, which tested the capacity of reason to overcome habitual views and fatalistic beliefs about social and natural phenomena.

The Lisbon earthquake of November 1, 1755, provided a dramatic focus and a turning point in the ongoing political and philosophical arguments. The estimates of the number of people killed by the earthquake ranged from ten thousand to fifteen thousand; only three thousand of twenty thousand city dwellings remained habitable after the calamity. At the time, Lisbon was the fourth largest city in Europe, after London, Paris, and Naples, with a

population of 275,000. The city was a center of the Inquisition and more religious than London or Paris. Its destruction compelled observers throughout Europe to go beyond expressions of sympathy for the victims; they tried to understand the devastation and to draw political, economic, and moral lessons. The Jesuits (who had close ties to the aristocracy in Portugal) insisted on the correctness of the doctrine of supernatural causation. Many Protestants viewed the event as a punishment aimed at the perpetrators and supporters of the Inquisition. On the first anniversary of the earthquake, Gabriel Malagrida, an influential Jesuit missionary, issued a pamphlet arguing “that the people of Lisbon had continued on their sinful ways, including their love for theater, music, dance, and bull fighting and that their efforts to repent were shortsighted.” He urged people to wake up and make peace with God:

Learn, O Lisbon, that the destroyers of our houses, palaces, churches, and converts, the cause of the death of so many people and of the flames that devoured such vast treasures, are your abominable sins, and not comets, stars, vapors and exhalations, and similar natural phenomena.<sup>5</sup>

THE MOST REVEALING debate on the implications of the Lisbon earthquake was an exchange between Voltaire, the literary star of the Enlightenment, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the first conceptual analyst of natural disasters. They had corresponded with each other before the earthquake, but their public clash came after it. Voltaire’s first response to the disaster was his famous *Poem Upon the Lisbon Disaster: An Inquiry Into the Maxim Whatever Is, Is Right*. The poem was an attack on all those who believed that natural disasters were acts of God—the just but incomprehensible God:

Seeing these stacks of victims, will you state,  
Vengeance is God’s, they have deserved their  
fate?

He is unshackled, tractable, and just.  
How comes he, to violate our trust?

...

Say what advantage can result to all  
From Lisbon’s lamentable fall?

...

Leibnitz can tell me from what secret cause  
In a world governed by the wisest laws  
Lasting disorders, woes that never end  
With our vain pleasures, real sufferings blend.

...

Defects and sorrows, ignorance and woe  
Hope he omitted, man’s sole bliss below.<sup>6</sup>

Voltaire boldly opened a discussion but offered no resolution; he did not question the view of disaster as misfortune. He simply used the earthquake to undercut the dominant religious view of natural disasters. Rousseau, a deist, found Voltaire’s assault on traditional faith disturbing. He agreed with Voltaire that earthquakes are natural calamities, but he thought that quarreling with God could only deprive the victims of their hope in a benevolent deity. More significantly, however, Rousseau suggested a new way of thinking about the disaster:

Without departing from your subject of Lisbon, admit, for example, that nature did not construct twenty thousand houses of six or seven stories there, and that if the inhabitants of this great city had been more equally spread out and more lightly lodged, the damage would have been much less and perhaps of no account.<sup>7</sup>

This is a social scientific perspective, implying as it does that some of the dead were victims of negligence because certain measures could have been taken to reduce the earthquake’s destructiveness. Rousseau introduced the concept of vulnerability by pointing out that poor structures, weak building materials, the urban pattern, and the location of Lisbon made the residents of the city susceptible to damage. His clear conclusion was that the community needed to take steps to minimize the effects of natural disasters.

The Lisbon earthquake was the first modern disaster that compelled the state to oppose the notion of supernatural causation and accept responsibility for the reconstruction of the city. The late political theorist Judith Shklar noticed this and wrote that

the modern age has many birthdays. One of them, my favorite, is the Lisbon earthquake of 1755. What makes it such a memorable disaster is not the destruction of a wealthy and

splendid city, nor the death of some ten to fifteen thousand people who perished in its ruins, but the intellectual response it evoked throughout Europe. It was the last time that the ways of God to man were the subject of general public debate and discussed by the finest minds of the day.

Shklar uses the public response to the Lisbon earthquake to illustrate how people who once regarded certain kinds of suffering as misfortunes, “acts of God,” came to view them as injustices—caused by the action or inaction of the powerful. She argues that the border between misfortune and injustice is historically and culturally moveable:

Someone simply must be blamed to maintain the unquenchable belief in a rational world, but the exculpation of God has not made it easier to know whom to accuse. Nor has it helped us to decide which of our travails are due to injustice and which are misfortunes. When can we blame others and when is our pain a matter of natural necessity or just bad luck? . . . The very distinction between injustice and misfortune can sometimes be mischievous . . . On the border between misfortune and injustice we must deal with the victim as best we can, without asking on which side her case falls.<sup>8</sup>

THE CITY OF Bam in 2003 had little in common with Lisbon in 1755, but the two earthquakes produced similar conversations among Iranians and Portuguese, focusing on the negligence of public officials and the religious beliefs used to justify the dominant political order of eighteenth-century Portugal and Iran today. Ali Esfahani may not have read *Poem Upon the Lisbon Disaster*, but the spirit of his song is identical with that of Voltaire. The idea that God is behind natural disasters is still a respectable superstition in most Islamic societies, just as it was in pre-modern Christian communities. However, Muslim preachers, unlike their distant Christian counterparts, have never viewed the victims of natural disasters as sinners who deserved their misfortune. Instead, they propagated the idea of *emtahan-e elahi* or God’s testing in order to prove that God acts for a reason. With the spread of scientific knowledge

and secular ideas in eighteenth-century Europe and twentieth-century Islam, people of diverse cultural traditions, particularly the learned among them, began to view natural disasters in political, economic, and normative terms. They came to see the action or inaction of the state as a primary determinant of how destructive or deadly an earthquake can be. They gradually moved (are moving) to regard those dying under the rubble or left homeless in the aftermath of a natural disaster more as victims of injustice than misfortune.

Today, in advanced industrial societies, the assertion that God is behind “Mother Nature’s fury” is generally dismissed as atavistic. In the United States, however, some church leaders still see the hand of God in such disasters as the AIDS pandemic and the indiscriminate violence of men. For instance, following the 9/11 calamity, Jerry Falwell said, on a television program hosted by Pat Robertson, “I really believe that the pagans and the abortionists and the feminists and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People for the American Way, all of them who try to secularize America. . . . I point the finger in their face and say you helped this happen.” And Robertson replied, “I totally concur, and the problem is we’ve adopted that agenda at the highest levels of our government, and so we’re responsible as a free society for what the top people do, and the top people, of course, is the court system.”<sup>9</sup> The suggestion that God had assigned the task of punishing America for its sins to Osama bin Laden turned out to be so offensive to the general public that Falwell and Robertson felt compelled to retract their words. Yet, a review of religious right publications during the period reveals that various evangelical observers answered the question of how 9/11 could happen by referring their readers or listeners to the Bible. For example, Frederica Mathewes-Green wrote in *Christianity Today* (September 25, 2001), “this isn’t just an Old Testament phenomenon. When people told Jesus that Pilate had killed worshippers at the Temple, he responded, ‘unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.’ (Luke 13:3). There seems to be a biblical pattern here: national suffering should bring about repentance.”

In mature democracies, planning to minimize the harm of natural disasters or contain their consequences has become institutionalized.

Universities teach courses in the field and support research projects seeking to find more effective ways of responding to the needs of disaster stricken people. But no dictatorial regime has shown a serious inclination to move in this direction. The failure is not always due to lack of funds. Over the past half century, Iran has received nearly a trillion dollars in oil revenues. Much of this vast capital has been diverted to the kind of economic projects that enrich the politically dominant class. Expenditures on the army and on other instruments that serve to maintain the incumbent despotism also account for the waste of the nation's oil money. The Iranian state has de-

voted very little of its wealth to developing a comprehensive program of earthquake-resistant measures in the vulnerable regions of the country, including Tehran with its twelve million people. Concentration of wealth and income in Iran has become more skewed in the clerical theocracy than it was under the Pahlavi dictatorship. This trend is unlikely to change so long as despotism prevents the Iranian people from taking part in the political life of their country.

**MANSOUR FARHANG**, professor of politics at Bennington College, served as revolutionary Iran's first ambassador to the United Nations. He resigned his position in protest when his efforts to negotiate the release of the American hostages in Tehran failed.

1. [www.kayhannews.com/821009/other3.htm](http://www.kayhannews.com/821009/other3.htm)
2. Sahifeh-e Imam Khomeini, Vol. 14, pp. 422-3.
3. <http://khabarnameh.gooya.com/culture/archives/2004/01/004876print.php>
4. The Persian version of this poem was posted on: [http://farhang.iran-emrooz.de/print.php?id=2216\\_0\\_13\\_0](http://farhang.iran-emrooz.de/print.php?id=2216_0_13_0). I wish to express my gratitude to Professor Ahmad Karimi Hakkad for translating the poem into English.
5. T.D. Kendrick, *The Lisbon Earthquake* (London: Methuen and Co., 1956), p. 89.
6. Ben Ray Redman, *The Portable Voltaire* (New York: The Viking Press, 1949).
7. Roger D. Masters and Christopher Kelly, Eds. *The Collected Writings of Rousseau, Vol. 3* (Hanover, N.H.: The University Press of New England, 1992), p.110.
8. Judith N. Shklar, *The Faces Of Injustice* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), pp. 51, 55.
9. [www.pfaw.org/pfaw/general/default.aspx?oid=1817](http://www.pfaw.org/pfaw/general/default.aspx?oid=1817)

