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(Religious) Fatalism towards Disasters: Vulnerability or Resilience?

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Abstract

Fatalistic perceptions towards disaster are seen in diverging ways. On the one hand, fatalistic perception of disaster is viewed as leading to passivity, in turn, creating vulnerability. On the other hand, it is believed to strengthen the resilient capacities of people in the face of disaster. This paper seek to describe the debate about the diverging views in seeing fatalistic perceptions towards disaster, particularly in the light of vulnerability and resilience framework. A dynamic picture of how religious fatalism towards disaster is viewed in the light of vulnerability, and resilience framework is described here to further re-formulate a proper way of seeing such diverging views. In the end, this paper argues that a careful consideration in seeing fatalistic perception of disaster is crucial because it may bring about positive impacts on resilience rather than simply increase vulnerability.

Key words: disaster, fatalism, vulnerability, resilience

Introduction

This paper specifically seeks to elaborate the ways in which the dynamic of religious fatalism towards disaster occurrences is comprehended in the light of vulnerability and resilience framework. Throughout history, it has been admitted that an inextricable relationship between religion and disaster is manifest within almost all societies.[1] For people of faith, in search of meaning of disaster,

[1] J.T. Mitchel, "The Hazard of One's Faith: Hazard Perceptions of South Carolina Christian Clergy", in *Environmental Hazards* 2 (2000): 25-41.

religious context (instead of political, social, economic, etc.) is essential. Yet, the result of such religion-based meaning seeking is not without controversy. The controversy mainly arises from the belief that, in most cases, such religious framework of disaster comprehension is considered leading to fatalistic attitudes toward disaster occurrences, which is, in turn, seen as increasing vulnerability. However, the other accounts believe the other way around in that religious fatalism, in the end, is seen as in fact becoming a source of resilience for religious people to bounce back from adversities.

Indeed, on the one hand, in disaster studies, religious fatalism is viewed as eventually promoting vulnerability. Yet, on the other hand, religious fatalism is regarded as generating resilience in the face of disaster. I think the dynamic of the two are important to be further delineated here. By and large, I have seen that there has been a diverging view in regard to how religious fatalism, which often manifests as a consequence of religion-based comprehensions of disaster, is viewed in disaster studies.

In this paper, firstly, I review briefly the recent development of vulnerability and resilience (concept and approach) in disaster studies, particularly in terms of the issue of (a) the overlapping definition between the two concepts and the recent need to distinguish them, and (b) which approach should be best emphasized in dealing with disasters. Secondly, I will give an overview of the present accounts of ways and grounds in which religious narratives of disaster are formed and perpetuated. After that, I will elucidate the development of the issue of (a) how religious fatalism is regarded as contributing to disaster vulnerability as well as of (b) how religious fatalism is viewed as promoting disaster resilience. By doing so, I hope that I will end up with providing a dynamic picture of how religious fatalism towards disaster is viewed in relation to vulnerability and resilience framework. Subsequently, based on such

dynamic, I expect that a new way of looking at the dynamic of religious fatalism can be submitted.

Vulnerability and Resilience: The Concept and Approach Reviewed

It has been admitted that there has been no agreed definition of vulnerability.[2] According to Birkmann,[3] there are "more than 25 different definitions, concepts and methods to systematise vulnerability." That meansthat, as a scientific concept of disaster studies, what vulnerability stands for is still unclear. Therefore, Birkmann acknowledged that "we are still dealing with a paradox: we aim to measure vulnerability, yet we cannot define it precisely."[4]

The difference in defining and systematizing vulnerability to some extent are understandable in regard to the fact that 'vulnerability is a concept that has been used in different research traditions'.[5] Besides, vulnerability is initially "a concept that evolved out of the social sciences and was introduced as a response to the purely hazard-oriented perception of disaster risk in the 1970s."[6] Vulnerability has been commonly used in applied science and then 'adopted' in social science. It has also been used, for example, in environmental studies, engineering, geology, geography, and economics but understood more in terms of physical matters. Meanwhile, in social science (particularly in disaster studies), despite physical matters, vulnerability has been also developed in terms of social, economic and political matters. In disaster studies, therefore, the characteristics of vulnerability are basically defined as 'not simply by a lack of wealth, but rather by a complex range of physical,

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[2] J. Weichselgartner, "Disaster Mitigation: The Concept of Vulnerability Revisited," *Disaster Prevention and Management* 10 (2001): 85-94.
[3] J. Birkmann, *Measuring Vulnerability to Natural Hazards: Towards Disaster Resilient Societies* (USA:United Nations University Press, 2006), 11.
[4] *Ibid.*
[5] G.C. Gallopin "Linkages between Vulnerability, Resilience, and Adaptive Capacity," *Global Environmental Change* 16 (2006) 293-303.
[6] See Birkmann, *Measuring Vulnerability*, 11.

economic, political and social factors or the predisposition of a community to damage by a destabilising phenomena involving an interdependent natural hazard and anthropogenic pressures'.[7] At least, the last twenty years have shown us the development of such vulnerability approach, but, to some extent, it still faces a basic issue. There is, thus far, no common definition, systematization and measure of vulnerability.

In that regard, however, Manyena emphasized that "the multiplicity of definitions is important and potentially useful in the theoretical expansion of this domain as well as in examining the ramifications of understanding and theoretical development of the way we choose to comprehend and react to the critical issues that vulnerability studies represent."[8] That meansthat, to some extent, the diversity of definitions is seen fruitful in disaster discourses because it may contextually characterize the distinctive nature of vulnerability. Yet, by the rise of resilience, because there are some definitions of vulnerability which seems to overlap with the definition of resilience, there is now a call to distinguish between the definition of vulnerability and resilience. Indeed, the consideration that the vulnerability concept is overlapping with resilience concept has just appeared recently, particularly since the Hyogo Framework 2005.

Like vulnerability, the definition of resilience is still unsettled in disaster studies,. Similarly, it is often found that the resilience literature is "descriptive and tautologous and seems to lack both a unifying theoretical framework and a consistent or operational definition of resilience."[9] Moreover, the definition of resilience concept becomes more obscured when it is confronted with the definition of vulnerability concept. This tendency is something

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[7] S. B. Manyena, "The Concept of Resilience Revisited," *Disasters* 30(4) (2006): 433–450.
[8] *Ibid.*, 440.
[9] O.W. Lightsey Jr. "Resilience, Meaning and Well-Being," *The Counseling Psychologist* 34(1) (2006): 96-107.

common because 'the lack of general agreement on the concepts when considered one by one becomes more visible when they are taken together'.[10] In the case of vulnerability and resilience concept, the obscurity is particularly stemmed from the extent to which, in some definitions, vulnerability concept indicates a 'conceptual confusion' between vulnerability and resilience.[11] The form of conceptual confusion is consisted of whether (1) 'resilience and vulnerability are positive and negative poles on a continuum,' or (2) "vulnerability and resilience may not be related at all."[12]

The first form is, for example, reflected in Blaikie *et al.*'s definition of vulnerability, (by vulnerability we mean the characteristics of a person or a group in terms of their capacity to anticipate, *cope with*, *resist* and *recover from* the impact of a natural hazard. It involves a combination of factors that determine the degree to which someone's life and livelihood are put at risk by a discrete and identifiable event in nature or in society) (italics added).[13] By this definition, it clearly indicates that "vulnerability is related to the degree of capacity, then vulnerability is closely associated with the level of resilience" which can be particularly seen from the words *to cope with*, *resist* and *recover from*. This kind of relationship suggests that "the two concepts are opposites or two sides of the same equation on a continuum." Thus, "the definitions are dependent on the reference framework or the distance from the furthest negative and positive pole points." For example, "if one is situated more towards the positive pole of the continuum, one becomes more resilient than vulnerable, and vice versa."[14] In the end, thus, there will be no need to differentiate vulnerability from resilience because they are both interrelated concepts in that

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[10] See Gallopin, "Linkages between Vulnerability," 301.
[11] See Manyena, "The Concept of Resilience."
[12] *Ibid.*
[13] *Ibid.*, 441.
[14] *Ibid.*, 440.

resilience is only a factor of vulnerability concept or vice versa. Yet, this understanding is criticized by Manyena as follows:

> Resilience Alliance, a network of ecology scientists set up to inform policy on sustainable development through research (Klein, Nicholls and Thomalla, 2003), sees vulnerability of a system as resulting from reduced resilience. In other words, something very vulnerable is not very resilient and the other way around. In this case, resilience is a factor of vulnerability and vulnerability is a factor of resilience. But this kind of interpretation is rather simplistic and myopic and lends itself to what Klein, Nicholls and Thomalla (2003) term circular reasoning: a system is vulnerable because it is not resilient; it is not resilient because it is vulnerable.[15]

On the other hand, in the second form, vulnerability is specifically viewed as 'a reflection of the intrinsic physical, economic, social and political predisposition or susceptibility of a community to be affected by or suffer adverse effects when struck by a dangerous physical phenomenon of natural or anthropogenic origin' without encompassing the capacity *to cope with*, *resist* and *recover from* disasters.[16] Defined in that way, the meaning of vulnerability will be distinct from resilience because there will be another distinct definition for resilience. By this model, thus, vulnerability and resilience are seen as discrete entities and, as a consequence, (1) people are seen as having characteristics that can make them vulnerable and resilient at the same time, and (2) the absence of vulnerability does not necessarily make people automatically being resilient.[17]

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[15] *Ibid.*, 441.
[16] *Ibid.*, 442.
[17] *Ibid.*, 443.

Furthermore, literally speaking, resilience is derived from a Latin word '*resilio*,' meaning 'to jump back'.[18] The resilience concept was initially used in ecology, and, some said, in physics, but, many said, in the disciplines of psychology and psychiatry in the 1940s.[19] Meaning that, the concept of resilience was actually available and, even, has a rich history,[20] but little attention was spent on it in disaster discourses. In disaster studies, resilience concept has particularly drawn many attentions since the World Conference Disaster Reduction (WCDR) in Kobe 2005, or later well-known as Hyogo Framework 2005-2015, in which a goal for creating resilient societies was formulated. After this Hyogo Framework, a wakeup call to spend special attention on the resilience concept has appeared to disaster discourses and, thereby, a need to distinguish resilience concept from vulnerability becomes recently relevant. In this case, I think Manyena has made a wonderful critical review on how resilience is distinguished from vulnerability, in which, in the end, he then implicitly acknowledged certain characteristics that should be emphasized in resilience term.

Particularly after that conference, Manyena acknowledged that "the concept has gradually found more space in both theoretical and practical terms in a wide range of disaster risk reduction discourse areas and in some interventions."[21] In disaster studies, resilience is generally viewed as "the intrinsic capacity of a system, community or society predisposed to a shock or stress to adapt and survive by changing its nonessential attributes and rebuilding itself."[22] In this case, coping capacity is seen as a precursor of resilience.[23] By referring to United Nations International Strategy for

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[18] *Ibid.*, 443.
[19] *Ibid.*
[20] See Gallopin, "Linkages between Vulnerability."
[21] See Manyena, "The Concept of Resilience", 434.
[22] *Ibid.*, 443.
[23] Al Siebert, *The Resiliency Advantage* (USA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2005), 118.

Disaster Reduction, Paton and Johnston defined coping capacity as "the means by which people or organizations use available resources and abilities to face adverse consequences that could lead to a disaster." They also explicated that "strengthening coping capacities facilitates building resilience to withstand the effects of natural hazards." At the end, Paton and Johnston concluded that "resilience is a multifarious concept that can apply to (1) the capacity to withstand loss, (2) the capacity to prevent a loss occurring in the first place, and (3) the capacity to recover from a loss if it occurs" (numbering added).[24]

More than a matter of conceptual confusion between vulnerability and resilience, there has been also a varying view in regard to which one that should be emphasized in dealing with disaster; whether it is vulnerability or resilience approach. On the one hand, as explained by Furedi that, since 1980, numerous researchers claimed that 'community response to a disaster episode is far more likely to be defined by its vulnerability than its resilience'. Their reason is that the resilience-based approach or what is called 'optimistic account' is seen as resulting in 'long-term damage to the community' particularly because it could make the vulnerable aspects of community being underestimated, dismissed and left unaddressed.[25] Besides, according to the proponents of vulnerability, resilience is seen as something ordinary because 'research into society's response to disasters provides numerous examples of community resilience in face of adversity'.[26] In other words, it is better to address the vulnerable (weak) aspects of community, rather than investing on ordinary things and, thus, by realizing the vulnerable aspects of community, the formulation of contingency planning could be elicited.

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[24] D. Paton, and D. Johnston, *Disaster Resilience: An Integrated Approach* (USA: Thomas Books, 2006), 90-91.
[25] F. Furedi, "The Changing Meaning of Disaster," *Area* 39(4) (2007): 482.
[26] *Ibid.*, 482-483.

On the other hand, Manyena said that, since the Hyogo Framework for Action 2005–2015, "increasing attention is now paid to the capacity of disaster-affected communities to 'bounce back' or to recover with little or no external assistance following a disaster." He also described that there is now 'the need for a change in the disaster risk reduction work culture, with stronger emphasis being put on resilience rather than just need or vulnerability'.[27] In the same way, before the formulation of the Hyogo framework, Paton and Johnston acknowledged that the orientation of work in disaster issues has "progressively moved from a deficit or loss paradigm, to one emphasizing community resilience." They also emphasized that "it is important to examine factors that promote resilience and growth and, as far as possible, seek to intervene in ways that facilitate resilience and growth rather than dependence and loss." However, they underscored that "this shift, and the growing empirical evidence for positive outcomes, should not be used to infer the elimination of community loss and disruption from disaster."[28]

According to Manyena, "current thinking on resilience is a product of theoretical and practical constructs that have seen the refining and reshaping of the disaster paradigm over the past three decades."[29] In the current paradigm of disaster studies, the concept of vulnerability has been criticized for it "still encourages a sense of societies and peoples as weak, passive and pathetic."[30] Meanwhile, in dealing with disaster issues, the concept of resilience is perceived as giving more space to focusing on local strengths, assets, participation and independence. Besides, perhaps in the view of proponents of resilience, investing on efforts for addressing vulnerable aspects of

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[27] See Manyena, "The Concept of Resilience", 433.
[28] D. Paton, and D. Johnston, "Disasters and Communities: Vulnerability, Resilience and Preparedness," *Disaster Prevention and Management* 10(4) (2001): 272-273.
[29] See Manyena, "The Concept of Resilience", 433.
[30] G.Bankoff, G. Frerks, and D. Hilhorst, (trans) *Mapping Vulnerability: Disasters, Development, and People* (UK: Earthscan, 2004), 34.

society is perceived as limitless in the sense that the amount of efforts to which people can make sure that they are entirely safe from disaster risks is something unreachable. In this case, the belief that people can 'entirely' eliminate their vulnerability to disasters is regarded as no more than a modern myth. For that reason, whenever disasters occur, it is better to keep working on the strong point (asset) of society, so that people can always *cope with*, *resist* and *recover from* disasters without unnecessary external assistances.

> ...rather than simply preventing loss, resilience assumes the idea of factors that promote healthy communities that are able to sustain and rebound from the effects of a hazardous event.[31]

It is worth noting that the concept of vulnerability and resilience are basically based on different standpoint in which vulnerability is based on deficit/loss-based one, while resilience is based on asset/strength-based one. Therefore, differences in their results of analysis are common. Yet, if both are applied at the same time it might actually lead to comprehensiveness in spite of contradictoriness. Regarded as comprehensive because, by using both approaches, it could identify the negative (weak) and positive (strong) elements of community being observed. Regarded as contradictory because, in seeing the same issue, both approaches may end up with different results owing to their different viewpoint, for example, in the case of religious fatalism (as I will elucidate in the next chapter).

Similarly, in regard to phenomena of religious fatalism towards disaster, the development of human comprehension does not work on common ground and result. Until recently, I think that, despite the existence of few researches emphasizing the positive effects of religious fatalism on resilience capacities of the disaster-

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[31] K. R. Ronan and D. M Johnston, *Promoting Community Resilience in Disasters the Role for Schools, Youth, and Families* (USA: Springer, 2005), 9.

affected communities, other researches emphasizing that religious fatalism may bring about absolute passivism in the face of disaster (which, in turn, is regarded as increasing people's vulnerability) remains widely-found. Such difference is understandable because it depends on the underlying viewpoint that grounds the way by which every researcher observes the phenomena of religious fatalism.

Religious Narratives about Disasters Reviewed

Disaster has been perceived differently. The perception depends on the contexts within which disasters occur. Meanwhile, according to Mitchell, "religious belief is considered an important contextual factor in how people understand and respond to environmental hazards."[32] Among other contexts, in religious context, disaster is often perceived as essentially originated from the acts of God. Such perception is not something new because seeing disasters as signs of God's displeasure is 'one of the oldest ways of interpreting these events'.[33] Such perception is easily noticed until recently that, anytime disaster occurs, the role (acts) of God in disaster is always questioned and acknowledged, particularly by those people of faith.

> The question was asked early and often: Where was God? It was inevitable. Throughout history, the role of God or divine powers has been debated whenever humankind has encountered catastrophe. The greater the suffering, the more human beings have invoked God's name—sometimes for strength, sometimes in anger.[34]
>
> When one reflects on the array of human forces that conspired to cause disaster along the Mississippi in 1993...it may surprise some to learn that almost one in five Americans saw the deluge as an act of God. According to a Gallup poll, 18 percent of those surveyed

[32] See Mitchel, "The Hazard of One's Faith," 25.
[33] Ted Steinberg, *Acts of God: The Unnatural History of Natural Disaster in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), xxi.
[34] Gary Stern, *Can God Intervene? How Religion Explains Natural Disasters* (London: Praeger Publishers, 2007), 2.

> agreed with the following statement: "The recent floods in the Midwest are an indication of God's judgment on the people of the United States for their sinful ways.[35]

Until now, the perception about the role of God in disaster is still widely-shared and practically-found 'among followers of many religions around the world'.[36] In this case, according to Stern, the way the attribution of disaster to the role of God is 'predictable',[37] particularly in terms of its narratives being referred which are considerably based on or interpreted from religious texts. Such predictable 'divine' narratives are frequently forming the perception that disaster is viewed as God's warning, anger, punishment, retribution, plan, and message.[38] As a result of such perception or interpretation, for example, it was reported that it seems 'to have inspired those who had somehow lost their faith in God to return to the fold'.[39] The following is an example of how a divine narrative is usually formed:

> The narrative sequence usually went something like this: some wretch or group of wretches commits a sin; God sends a disaster to punish and test the individual or the community; people heed the warning and mend their ways; they rededicate themselves to God and ultimately earn salvation.[40]

Despite such "sinful wretches," the narratives for disaster cause are wide-ranging and they are usually linked to general evil phenomena (such as drinking, free sex city and prostitutions). For

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[35] See Steinberg, *Acts of God*, xxi.
[36] See Stern, *Can God Intervene*, 2.
[37] *Ibid.*, 39.
[38] See Mitchel, "The Hazard of One's Faith;" Stern, *Can God Intervene*; L. J. Vale and T. J. Campanella, *The Resilient City: How Modern Cities Recover from Disaster* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); and K. Rozario, "Making Progress: Disaster Narratives and the Art of Optimism in Modern America" in L. J. Vale and T. J. Campanella, *The Resilient City: How Modern Cities Recover from Disaster* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).
[39] See Steinberg, *Acts of God*, xxi.
[40] See Rozario, "Making Progress," 34.

example, in the wake of Katrina, "conservative religious figures began to suggest that Katrina, like Tsunami, was punishment from God" and "New Orleans, they pointed out, was a city of drinking and sex."[41] They are generally regarded as causes for God's displeasure and, thus, God finally sends disaster to punish the evil doers.

> On volcanic slopes where Islam is quite strong like in Dieng, some religious leaders claim that the eruptions are warnings from God about the evils of drinking strong liquor or other sins such as prostitution.[42]

On the other hand, such acts of God are also perceived in good way by conceding that God has an ultimate plan, a message and an order to the survivors to repent or 'change your ways.'[43] In this case, Stern exemplified of how the evangelist Franklin Graham 'made Katrina sound like a good thing for New Orleans' by saying that 'God is going to use that storm to bring a revival,' 'God has a plan' and 'God has a purpose'.[44]

The role of God in disaster has been ambiguously perceived as the angry God who sent punishment to sinners but, at the same time, it has been viewed that God always has (good) reason to do that. Such theodicy debate is a common result of religious people's efforts to comprehend and interpret disaster. In relation to that, this paper is specifically dedicated to further elaborate the impact of such theodicy-related matters, especially regarding how its fatalistic consequences are seen in disaster studies; whether it is increasing vulnerability or resilience of the disaster-affected communities. It is important because I think, so far, there has been a diverging view in comprehending the impacts of religious fatalism in disaster studies.

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[41] See Stern, *Can God Intervene*, 5.
[42] Lavigne, F. et al, "People's Behaviour in the face of Volcanic Hazards: Perspectives from Javanese Communities, Indonesia," *Journal of Volcanology and Gheotermal Research* 172 (2008): 282.
[43] Ibid., 2.
[44] Ibid., 6.

Moreover, the origin of religious people's perception cannot be separated from how their religious books describe the story of previous disasters. For example, the Ark of Noah story which is widely-shared among people of the book (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) is pointed out by Stern as the main story which has later inspired religious believers to interpret that 'God may actively punish those who sin'.[45] Even, according to Stern, this story has been absorbed in the conscious level of religious believers, so that whenever disasters occur, such perception (or interpretation) will automatically arise among them.

> The story is interpreted in many ways, of course. Many people may not even be aware that the story has touched their consciousness. But the great flood, in a sense, has washed over all of us.[46]

> In a sense, the great flood rushed on for centuries, refusing to subside. Its story continued to help define the way people reacted to natural disasters, to the unexplainable forces that could cause vast human suffering in an instant and leave survivors shattered. When the ground shook, it was punishment from God. What else could it be?[47]

In its development, despite in a broad form of natural disaster, the same perception and interpretation also appeared in respond to man-made disaster. In this regard, cause for man-made disaster is seen in a similar way as natural one in that there are basically evil grounds that finally make God angry so that God punishes the evil doers. For example, an evangelical named David Le Flore acknowledged that, similar to natural one, man-made disasters are also caused by sin as he stated below:

> Let's face it, if Adam and Eve hadn't eaten that fruit in the Garden of Eden, we wouldn't have sin. We were created in a perfect

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[45] See Stern, *Can God Intervene*, 29.
[46] *Ibid.*
[47] *Ibid.*, 39.

> likeness of God. Because man had the choice to sin, sin is what caused death and what causes these natural disasters and man-made disasters.[48]

According to Stern, such perception (or interpretation) remains widely found because of "a shared need across cultures for explanation in times of crises' and because 'different cultures needed context to explain their own local or regional floods."[49] Also, in fact, "there is a strong human tendency to search for and identify causes in such a way as to make the world more predictable and give at least a subjective impression of control over events."[50] In another explanation, according to Vale and Campanella, the reason for perpetuation of such religious interpretive framework is that, despite that "recovery entails real-time physical reconstruction of the built environment," recovery also requires "the construction of a suitable interpretive framework that enables psychological, emotional, and symbolic recoveries."[51] It is no wonder that such religious perceptions or interpretations are still commonly noticed today as, for example, in the case of Katrina as Grandjean et al. described below:

> Take the hurricane Katrina disaster in the southern United States in 2005. An Internet search for links between hurricane Katrina and divine punishment shows this kind of belief well represented in American society. Religious fundamentalists advance the hypothesis that this natural disaster was sent by God to indicate his displeasure to a sinful people, and to New Orleans in particular, because of its Mardi Gras and other heathen festivals. Another

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[48] *Ibid.*, 113.
[49] Ibid., 35.
[50] D. Grandjean, Rendu A.C., T.MacNamee, , and K. R. Scherer, "The Wrath of The Gods: Appraising The Meaning of Disaster," *Social Science Information* 47(2) (2008): 193.
[51] See Vale and Campanella, *The Resilient City*, 340.

> theory on the hurricane sees it as vengeance for Washington's support of the removal of Jewish colonists from the Gaza Strip.[52]

Thus, to be sure, in respond to disasters, the formation of such 'religious interpretive framework' is still expected to be found as long as the shared need for religious explanation, context and tendency is perpetuated, particularly by the 'existence' of people of faith. In another words, therefore, the attribution of disasters to acts of God will survive as long as religions remain in this world. As we know, the religious texts on which religious believers base their interpretation are generally emphasizing that disasters are basically acts of God (ex., as illustrated in the Ark of Noah story). Indeed, I think that the referring of disasters to be acts of God will remain a trending topic, particularly in regard to the fact that the recent world trade of disaster narratives is increasing as acknowledged by Vale and Campanella as below:

> Whatever the cause, the world trade in disaster narratives continues to increase, as each battered place attempts to extract lessons and parallels from the plight of distant others—and to telegraph its own significance and suffering to an empathic global audience. This has produced a kind of trans-historical metacommunity of victimized cities, places, and peoples.[53]

For that reason, as the acts of God framework in disaster events is expected to survive (or, even increase), it is important in disaster studies to understand the dynamics of religious interpretative framework (ex., religious fatalism), so that a proper understanding of them could be elicited.

Religious Fatalism towards Disaster in the Light of Vulnerability and Resilience Framework Reviewed

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[52] See Grandjean, "The Wrath of The Gods," 200.
[53] See Vale and Campanella, *The Resilient City*, 339.

Religious fatalism is often expressed by religious adherences in facing disasters by simply associating disasters with 'acts of God.' Mitchell akcnowledged that 'the issue of control over one's fate in many instances is tied to religion and the perception of the environment'.[54] More than that, he recognized that such 'belief (or worldview) in some way drives perceptions, then decision-making, and finally, action'.[55] It is therefore believed that 'how hazard is perceived may influence what one decides to do in the face of that threat'.[56] In disaster studies, this has then becomes the main basis for correlating the perception related-expressions of religious fatalism towards disasters to passivism (which is, in turn, seen as increasing vulnerability). The reason of this view is stemmed from the belief that the nature of fatalism is simply implicating passivity (not others) in general. Despite its controversy, perception has been regarded as central in disaster studies because it is convinced that "how people perceive hazards likely says something about what they might do about them."[57] Similarly, Ronan and Johnston also acknowledged that 'risk perceptions appear to be a factor that a number of studies have shown to be relatively accurate'.[58] For that reason, Kouabenan suggested that:

> ...an understanding of the beliefs people hold about risks and the causes of accidents, as well as their perceptions of risk targets and the need for safety, are important prerequisites for effectively managing risk and designing preventive measures.[59]

In the above way, it is eventually believed that when disaster is regarded as 'acts of God,' it implies a perception that disaster is something unavoidable. Because disaster is perceived as something

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[54] See Mitchel, "The Hazard of One's Faith," 27.
[55] *Ibid.*, 37.
[56] *Ibid.*, 27.
[57] *Ibid.*
[58] Ronan and Johnston, *Promoting Community Resilience*, 18.
[59] Kouabenan, R.D., "Role Of Beliefs in Accident and Risk Analysis and Prevention," *Safety Science* 47 (2009):6, 767.

unavoidable and nothing people can do about it, it is in turn perceived that people will do nothing in the face of disasters.

> It is thought that those who believe that they have no personal control, that external forces like God determine their outcome and that they can do nothing to reduce their susceptibility to harm, will likely take no action... Those who put their fate in the hands of external force such as God, however, were much more passive (e.g. they undertook no action or simply looked out their windows for subtle changes in weather conditions).[60]

> Unfortunately, this interpretation has favoured the belief that there is nothing to be done when faced with disasters since, given the fact that they are natural phenomena, they are considered unavoidable. Such an interpretation has also led to disasters being considered events of destiny or bad luck, or even the result of supernatural or divine causes.[61]

> Although awareness has increased enormously, communities and nations are still not focusing enough attention on the vulnerabilities that are at the origin of the disasters. Many still see these disasters as acts of god, something that we still need to overcome. Although we now understand that it is not the hurricane or the earthquake that kills people but the poorly built or poorly protected buildings, most people still regard disasters as somehow inevitable due mainly to their still current perception and denomination as "natural" disasters.[62]

Thus, it is acknowledged that fatalistic attitudes, perceptions and beliefs are often found to be connected with negative responses, particularly in terms of their vulnerability generating impacts, such as

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[60] See Mitchel, "The Hazard of One's Faith," 27.

[61] O. D. Cardona, "The Need for Rethinking the Concepts of Vulnerability and Risk from a Holistic Perspective: A Necessary Review and Criticism for Effective Risk Management," in G.Bankoff, G.Frerks, and D. Hillhorst, (trans) *Mapping Vulnerability: Disasters, Development, and People* (UK: Earthscan, 2004), 40.

[62] Sálvano Briceño, *Statement at the Opening Ceremony the 3rd Caribbean Conferenceon Comprehensive Disaster Management* (UNISDR, 2008) 2.

reluctance to take pre-disaster mitigation efforts and decreased readiness activities. In the same way, Birkmann maintained that "culturally influenced fatalism towards the occurrence of natural hazards may result in failure to implement any pre-event mitigation measures."[63] For this reason, Briceño argued above that fatalism-related perception is something that "we still need to overcome."In the other accounts, Ronan and Johnston also acknowledged that:

> ...the attribute "fatalism" suggests a state of resignation, or perhaps lack of control, about the future. Such negative attributions have been related to emotions such as depression and anxiety (Peterson, Maier, & Seligman, 1993). Fatalism itself has been assessed in terms of its relation to preparedness for earthquakes and has been found to relate to decreased readiness activities (e.g., Turner et al., 1986). Conversely, lower fatalism has been found to relate to increased adjustment adoption prior to, but not following, an earthquake prediction (Farley et al., 1993)...fatalism involves attributions for events emphasizing a lack of control. Specifically, the view assumed by McClure and associates is that if people attribute damage from earthquakes to causes that are uncontrollable, this attitude will lead people to prepare less often for a future earthquake. By contrast, if people see aspects of earthquake damage as controllable, they will be more likely to be in a position to be persuaded to prepare.[64]

In the end, because such forms of fatalism are regarded as leading to passivism which is consequently seen as increasing people's vulnerability, and, thereby, it is commonly assessed in terms of its vulnerability generating impacts, instead of its resilience generating impacts. However, it is worth nothing that Homan found that, in Egyptian context, the attribution of disaster to other worldly forces does not necessarily lead to 'a fatalistic attitude towards

[63] See Birkmann, *Measuring Vulnerability*, 95.
[64] See Ronan and Johnston, *Promoting Community Resilience*, 22.

disaster'.[65] Likewise, Lavigne et al. (2008) argued that, in Javanese context, 'the passive acceptance should not be interpreted as fatalism conveying the powerlessness of Humans in the face of Nature,' but it portrays 'a sign of Humans humility and their search of peace and harmony'.[66] Again, in the context of post Yogyakarta Earthquake, Ichwan (2009) also found that theological interpretation does not necessarily lead to responses which are supposed to be the required consequences of the interpretation.[67] In this case, he then classified the model of interpretation into 5 levels; (1) knowledge (*ilm*), (2) understanding (*fahm*); (3) will (*iradah*), (4) belief (*yaqin*), and (5) praxis (*amal*). The interpretation of disaster in the first level does not necessarily lead someone to practice the supposed consequences of his interpretation, while in the last level, someone's interpretation has full power to encourage him to practice the supposed consequences of his interpretation. Thus, the interpretative attribution of disasters to acts of God is something complex indeed.

Still, more than a matter of promoting passivity and increasing vulnerability, attributing disaster to acts of God is regarded by Steinberg as politically benefiting certain groups (such as politicians; federal, state, and city policymakers; and corporate leaders). The reason is that by attributing disaster to acts of God, those in power can easily manipulate the real issue of causal essence of disaster, so that they can simply 'evade moral responsibility for

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[65] J. Homan, "The Social Construction of Natural Disaster: Egypt and the UK," in M.Pelling, *Natural Disasters and Development in a Globalized World* (UK: Routledge, 2003), 147.

[66] F. Lavigne, et al, "People's Behaviour in the face of Volcanic Hazards: Perspectives from Javanese Communities," Indonesia. *Journal of Volcanology and Gheotermal Research* 172 (2008): 284.

[67] M. N. Ichwan, "Agama dan Bencana: Penafsiran dan Respons Agamawan serta Masyarakat Beragama," A Power Point Paper Format presented in the workshop entitled *Metodologi Penelitian Interpretasi dan Respons atas Bencana Alam: Kajian Integratif Ilmu, Agama, dan Budaya*, CRCS – UGM, 19 – 24 Januari 2009.

death and destruction'.[68] By affirming that disaster is acts of God, it means that no one should be blamed because it is naturally unavoidable God's will. As a result, disasters become normalized and people are expected to react as if there is nothing wrong with the occurrence of disasters. In this case, thus, the acts of God concept may become an advance tool for 'moral hand washing' for those in power and those who should be blamed for having something to do with causing disasters to take place.

> The concept of an act of God implied that something was wrong, that people had sinned and must now pay for their errors. But the idea of natural disaster may have implicitly suggested the reverse, that something was right, that the prevailing system of social and economic relations was functioning just fine. No elaborate morality tales need be proffered in the aftermath of such an event, as had long been the case in the past. Instead, people were to remain calm and disciplined as they restored things to normal—effectively legitimating the prevailing social system in the process. In this view, natural disasters were not worthy of any deep or considered thought. They simply happened from time to time.[69]

In contrast to the issue that attributing disaster to an act of God may end up with promoting passivity, increasing vulnerability and manipulating causal essence of disasters, there is another view in that fatalistic attitude is regarded as in fact generating resilience. For example, by resignation to the will of God in the aftermath of disaster, it is regarded that it can promote resilience by some researchers. In this regard, people often consider disaster as the will of God and, thereby, it promotes 'a unique set of cultural beliefs that are supportive during a crisis and that mutually align the will of gods and natural events'.[70] At the same way, Blumenfield and Ursano also

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[68] See Steinberg, *Acts of God*, 192.
[69] *Ibid.*, 19.
[70] Li-Ju Jang, and W.Lamendola, "The Hakka Spirit as A Predictor of Resilience," in D. Paton, and D. Johson, *Disaster Resilience: An Integrated Approach* (USA: Thomas Books, 2006) 174.

regarded the belief in benevolent God as promoting internal strength, hope and optimism in dealing with disaster adversities as they put it:

> Instilling hope has been identified as a crucial component of post-disaster intervention because those who are likely to have more favorable outcomes after experiencing mass trauma are those who maintain optimism (because they can retain hope for their future), have a positive expectancy, a feeling of confidence that life and self are predictable, or other hopeful beliefs (e.g., in God, that there is a high probability that things will work out as well as can reasonably be expected).[71]

Similarly, Rozario said that, in disasters, "a religious framework for understanding them was by and large consoling." For example, religious believers often believe that disasters will have happy endings because their benevolent God is in control of disasters. In this case, by believing that their God has benevolent purposes in disasters, it is then believed that they will end well (a happy ending belief).[72] It is admitted that a belief in happy ending has an instant and therapeutic effect for those affected by disasters.[73] In this case, Pargament and Brant (1998) acknowledged that 'attributions of the negative life events to the will of God or to a loving God are generally tied to better outcome'.[74] More than that, Rozario acknowledged that this belief may serve as "self-fulfilling prophecies, inspiring a faith in betterment and generating the energy, will, and capital commitment that made material

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[71] M. Blumenfield and R. J. Ursano, (trans) *Intervention and Resilience after Mass Trauma* (USA: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 76.
[72] See Rozario, "Making Progress," 34-36.
[73] *Ibid.*, 37.
[74] K.I. Pargament, and C.R. Brant, "Religion and Coping" in H.R. Koenig, (trans) *Handbook of Religion and Mental Health* (USA: Academic Press, 1998), 119.

reconstruction viable—ultimately turning calamities into opportunities and thereby.....making progress."[75]

In mental health studies, it is admitted that religious beliefs do have 'positive impact on the coping process' and 'significant numbers of people still mention that religion was helpful to them in coping, although the percentages are generally lower'.[76] According to Pargament and Brant, "religious coping is multipurpose' in that 'it may provide comfort, stimulate personal growth, enhance a sense of intimacy with God, facilitate closeness with others, or offer meaning and purpose in life."[77] Besides, "religious coping is also multiform and, inter alia, it may be in the form of 'passive (waiting for God to resolve the crisis)'"[78] and this is what they called as 'the deferring style'.[79] The deferring style puts "the responsibility of problem solving on God" in which "rather than actively solve problems themselves, people wait for solutions to emerge through the active efforts of God."[80]

In some studies, Pargament and Brant acknowledged that the deferring approach may end up with positive outcomes. They stated that, particularly, 'in situations in which the individual does indeed have very little control, the most appropriate thing to do may be to defer control to God'.[81] In this case, as disaster is identical with stressful situation, the deferring approach towards disasters is regarded as bringing about positive outcomes, such as eliminating stress. In several studies, it is admitted that religious beliefs do have "the capacity to moderate the effects of stress."[82] Rozario described

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[75] *Ibid.*, 34.
[76] See Pargament, and Brant, "Religion and Coping," 113.
[77] *Ibid.*, 118.
[78] *Ibid.*
[79] *Ibid.*, 121.
[80] *Ibid.*
[81] See Pargament, and Brant, "Religion and Coping," 121.
[82] *Ibid.*, 124.

that the framework of religious narratives or beliefs therapeutically works through encouraging 'the expectation that good would come of calamity' and, thereby, it helps people to "work through abiding and socially specific anxieties about the disorderly and dangerous times in which they lived."[83]

In more specific context, Koenig acknowledged that, in coping with disaster, there are at least ten positive impacts that religious beliefs and practices may bring about to people. They are regarded as bringing about (1) positive worldview; (2) meaning and purpose; (3) psychological integration; (4) hope and motivation; (5) personal empowerment; (6) sense of control; (7) role models for suffering; (8) guidance for decision making; (9) answers to ultimate questions; and (10) social support (p. 39-42). For example, in the case of 'sense of control,' Koenig described it as follows:

> Religion beliefs give the disaster victim a sense of control that he or she would otherwise not have...The perceived ability to relate to and influence God helps the religious person regain a degree of control. In that case, it is important to believe that God is indeed in control. Even the belief that god is punishing the person for past sins by allowing traumatic events to occur may still be better than believing that no one is in control. The belief that no one is in control in a situation where one's life or a loved one's life is being threatened can be a source of tremendous anxiety. The religious person feels in control through his or her relationship with God and, in fact, may not need to feel in control because he or she is more able to give up control by "putting it in God's hands." When there is nothing that can be done by the individual to change a situation, then turning things over to God may reduce anxiety and make the person more functional. For this to work, the person must

[83] See Rozario, "Making Progress," 38.

> be able to trust that God will take care of things and that God has his or her ultimate best interest at stake.[84]

Meaning that, in disaster events, expressing that God is in control of disasters are in fact regarded by Koenig as having positive impact as it may promote a degree of control at personal level. For this reason, a feeling of lacking control over situation or a state of resignation that God is in control is regarded as not related to depression and anxiety. On the contrary, Koenig argued that it may become a way to reduce anxiety and maintain personal functioning. By religious person, according to Koenig, lack of control feeling is in fact transformed into a degree of personal control, which is particularly regained through believing and trusting that God is indeed in control. In this case, Perez-Sales et al. (2005) admitted that 'fatalism may not be necessarily dysfunctional, as under certain circumstances it could favor adjustment to chronically adverse conditions where it may be more adaptive to live focused in the present than in an uncertain and unpredictable future'.[85]

Religious Fatalism: A Need for Careful Consideration

As above reviewed, there has been a diverging view in regard to the forms of religious fatalism towards disasters. On the one hand, it is to be expected that religious fatalism would lead to promoting passivity and, in turn, increasing vulnerability. On the other hand, at the personal level, fatalistic beliefs (such as deferring style and perception that God is in control) are beneficial as they are regarded as leading to reducing stress and anxiety as well as maintaining personal functioning, especially in situation where there is nothing

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[84] H.G. Koenig, *In the Wake of Disaster: Religious Responses to Terrorism and Catastrophe* (Philadelphia: Templeton Foundation Press, 2006), 40.
[85] Pérez-Sales, P., Priscilla Cervellón, Carmelo Vázquez, Diana Vidales and Mauricio Gaborit, "Post-Traumatic Factors and Resilience: The Role of Shelter Management and Survivours' Attitudes after the Earthquakes in El Salvador," *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology* 15(5) (2001): 378.

(or very little) people can do.[86] As a result of the absence of stress and anxiety as well as the maintenance of personal functioning, it will obviously become a condition that will promote, facilitate, and strengthen the resilience capacity of people in coping with disasters.

Meanwhile, in political sphere, on the one hand, according to Steinberg, fatalism generating activities (particularly, attributing disaster to acts of God) have become an advance tool for those in power or those who should be blamed (or responsible) to manipulate the causal essence of disaster, so that they are not held responsible. In this regard, attributing disasters to acts of God is regarded as politically deceiving, particularly in terms of their causal essence. As a result, those who should be deemed to be blamed can easily escape from their responsibility for death and destruction. Yet, in contrast, Al Siebert (2005) argued that, to some extent, blaming others may become dysfunctional too because it may keep someone in 'non-resilient victim state' and, thereby, it blocks someone to take resiliency actions[87] as he put it:

> Blaming others for ruining the life you had will block you from bouncing back. Blaming an organization's executives, "the government," self-serving politicians, administrators who lack emotional intelligence, cheap foreign labor, stock market managers, taxpayers, or any person or group for ruining your life keeps you in a non-resilient victim state in which you do not take resiliency actions.[88]

Though the context to which Al Siebert's 'resiliency guidelines' are intended is workplace setting, he emphasized that 'they apply broadly to all aspects of life,' particularly in difficult situation.[89] Meanwhile, in disaster context, Al Siebert's statement

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[86] See Pargament, and Brant, "Religion and Coping" and Koenig, *In the Wake of Disaster*.
[87] Al Siebert, The Resiliency Advantage, 32.
[88] *Ibid.*, 3.
[89] *Ibid.*, 8.

above means that by attributing the blame for causing disasters to others it may end up with the dysfunction of resilient capacities. The reason is that, by blaming others, it means that the ones who are blamed are perceived as those who should be responsible and pay for their actions. As a result, the affected-people will tend to feel and just react like victims in that they are just waiting 'others' to fix them and they will not take action themselves. In the end, to some degree, it may bring about passivism.

In relation to that, though attributing disasters to acts of God can be understood as blaming God and it may end up with promoting passivism, but, in some cases, it does not necessarily do so as it has a unique way of blaming. That is, despite the fact that it may end up with promoting passivism (deferring style), it may serve as a way of reducing stress and anxiety as well as maintaining personal functioning, which is very fruitful in disastrous context, particularly for allowing the development of appropriate responses to disaster. In religious style of fatalism, the form of resignation to God's control is transformed into a way to regain a degree of personal control, particularly in situation where there is nothing (or very little) people can do. For that reason, it is important to mention here that, despite the fact that religious fatalism may result in promoting passivism, increasing vulnerability and can be regarded as politically deceiving, the religious forms of fatalism toward disasters can be recognized as having a unique way of coping with disasters which, in the end, it can be regarded as in fact increasing the resilient capacities of disaster-affected people. For example, Grandjean *et al.* illustrated how the work of attribution of disaster to supernatural causes may become a crucial help in disaster context:

> ...human cognition needs to understand and give meaning to events in life ...so it will look for explanations in an effort to retain at least some feeling of control over the situation. This need to attribute cause and intention to an overwhelming event gives rise to

> supernatural explanations and beliefs, which allow meaning to be given to disasters and thus some control regained.[90]
>
> ...such supernatural attributions do not just help human beings to infer representations explaining why the disaster happened; they also give a feeling of control, allowing the development of appropriate reaction to the disaster, in order to counter it or at least limit its impact.[91]

More than that, it is worth noting here that the risk perception studies are not free from criticisms. Jasanoff said that risk perception studies are particularly influenced by psychometric paradigm which is greatly related to cognitive and social psychology research.[92] In that paradigm, it is assumed that 'factors affecting lay perceptions deserve closer inspection than factors affecting expert judgments, which are considered less likely to be tainted by subjective bias' and, to make it worse, 'there has been a tendency to treat risk perception as a topic in the sociology of error -- that is, as a study whose main goal is to expose how people formulate and hold onto false beliefs'.[93] Besides, 'the psychometric paradigm's primary functions are to enable policymakers to diagnose the causes of lay misperceptions, to communicate more effectively with the public, and to inculcate true or rational beliefs about risk in place of false or irrational ones.' For these reasons, Jasanoff acknowledged that the results of risk perception analysis are inevitably value-laden and subject to conflict.[94] Thus, the belief that fatalistic perceptions of religious people towards disaster are tied to passivism, increasing vulnerability and politically deceiving is open to debate.

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[90] See Grandjean, "The Wrath of The Gods," 198.
[91] Ibid., 194.
[92] S. Jasanoff, "The Political Science of Risk Perception. Reliability Engineering and System Safer," 59 (1998): 91.
[93] *Ibid.*, 92.
[94] *Ibid.*, 91.

Above all, it is not the intention of this paper to make a judgment (on the experts' negative perception) on the issue of religious fatalism towards disasters. Yet, it is worth to be carefully considered that 'many actual and potential victims of hazards continue to explain losses in theistic terms; even in societies where individuals are aware of alternative scientific and social explanations.' Therefore, in relation to the efforts of disaster management, it is important that they are 'not simply dismissed as a symptom of ignorance, superstition and backwardness'.[95] On the other way around, it is important to rethink on the words of Mitchell that 'religious beliefs inform what we consider to be valuable and should be investigated further to understand how it inspires our decisions to protect our valuables and ourselves'.[96]

Finally, it is my submission that, adding to the previous statement of Manyena (2005) in explaining the second form of conceptual confusion in that when vulnerability and resilience are seen as discrete event and, thereby, people are seen as having characteristics that can make them vulnerable and resilient at the same time, I want to make it more specific here that *by having certain characteristics, it is enough to make people to be considered vulnerable and resilient at the same time*. By certain characteristics, I mean here is fatalistic attributes, in which by having them people can be considered vulnerable and resilient at the same time. Nevertheless, in this case, the grounds and ways we use to evaluate are having crucial role in determining the results of our analysis about whether religious fatalism is in fact linked to vulnerability or resilience.

Moreover, based on my submission about the fact that by having a fatalistic characteristic it can be simultaneously regarded as

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[95] D.K. Chester, "Theology and Disaster Studies: The Need for Dialogue," *Journal of Volcanology and Geothermal Research* 146 (2005): 319.
[96] See Mitchel, "The Hazard of One's Faith," 39.

a factor increasing vulnerability and resilience, it then leads me to acknowledge that (1) 'resilience may not always be a good thing,' and (2) 'vulnerability is not always a negative property'.[97] Based on these two statements and the dynamic way of seeing the facts about religious fatalism towards disasters above, I want to underscore that (1) the thing (fatalism) that we regard as having a good impact on resilience may not always be a good thing because it may in fact result in increasing vulnerability, and (2) the thing (fatalism) that we regard as generating vulnerability is not always a negative thing because it may in fact have a positive impact on resilience. Thus, in disaster management, we have to be very careful in considering the facts about religious fatalism in the light of vulnerability and resilience framework indeed. Meanwhile, if I have to take a position in this case, I tend to agree with the second statement in which I think that religious fatalism has a unique way of dealing with disasters which can increase resilience, but, unfortunately, it is often dismissed. However, particularly in disaster studies, I admitted that there are still few researches that showed that religious fatalism tends to bring about positive impacts on resilience rather than simply increased vulnerability.

Conclusion

In short, the above dynamic way of seeing the issue of religious fatalism towards disasters illustrated that there has been a diverging view on seeing whether fatalism may actually lead to increasing vulnerability or resilience. On the one hand, religious fatalism towards disasters has been (or could be) assessed in terms of its vulnerability generating impacts and, on the other hand, its resilience generating impacts. The difference in the results of analysis of the issue is debatable in which every researcher has their own grounds and ways for legitimating their findings. For that reason, it is

[97] See Gallopin, "Linkages between Vulnerability," 295.

important to consider the grounds and ways in which a research is formulated. Above all, thus, at the end, I think we have to be extraordinarily careful in considering the phenomena about religious fatalism, particularly if they are to be viewed in the light of vulnerability and resilience framework.

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CONTENTS