

Research paper

The importance of religion in shaping volcanic risk perception in Italy, with special reference to Vesuvius and Etna

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Abstract

With the exception of societies that are relatively untouched by modernism, the academic consensus holds that since the Eighteenth Century *Enlightenment* popular perception of divine responsibility for disasters has been progressively replaced by a perspective that views losses as resulting from the effects of extreme natural events upon vulnerable human populations. Nature is considered to be de-moralised. By means of examples of volcanic eruptions that have occurred over the past one hundred and fifty years and which transcend place, culture and faith tradition, the present authors have maintained a contrasting position, by arguing that religious perspectives are still important features of the ways in which people in many societies perceive volcanic eruptions. In the present paper it is argued that religious terms of reference have been and remain vital elements in the perceptions held by a significant proportion of the population in southern Italy when confronted by volcanic eruptions, particularly those that have occurred on Vesuvius and Etna. Within the context of what is termed *popular Catholicism*, the development of distinctive religious responses in *pre-industrial* times is first described. Next, through bibliographic research and social surveys, it is argued that the idiosyncratic religious character of disaster responses has been maintained following eruptions that have occurred during the past one hundred years, including the small number of eruptions of Etna that have taken place in the early years of the twenty-first century. The implications of these religious perceptions and behaviours are discussed within the context of emergency planning and the suggestion is made that they form part of a ‘parallel practice’ in response to volcanic threat, where actions to encourage the miraculous take place at the same time as more ‘rationally’ grounded protective measures such as evacuation.

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1. Introduction

The decade of the 1990s – designated by the United Nations the *International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction (IDNDR)* – was characterised by a singular lack of dialogue between applied volcanologists and hazard analysts on the one hand and, on the other, theologians, sociologists and psychologists who were interested in the ways in which people affected

by eruptions attempted to make sense of their losses within the context of religious belief (Chester, 2005a). As a consequence of the spread of modernist thought from the time of the Eighteenth Century *Enlightenment* (Pailin, 1983), a view of disasters as malign ‘Acts of God’ has been progressively replaced by one grounded in notions of human vulnerability and a de-moralised nature (Alexander, 2000, pp. 186–7; Steinberg, 2000; Chester, 2005b). It is maintained that when religious frames of reference are employed by those affected by eruptions then examples are archaeological, historical or apply to societies relatively untouched by modernism, where they represent the last redoubts of superstition and backwardness (Chester, 2005a). These *pre-industrial* societies (White, 1973) are to be found across a range of religious traditions and cultures, and an

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extensive literature has developed on what is termed ‘geomythology’ (Harris, 2000). In the context of an often rudimentary knowledge of natural processes, geomythology studies the ways in which religious explanations and actions are used, not only to make sense of the phenomena that give rise to disasters, but also as means of coping with undeserved and apparently inexplicable human suffering (Blong, 1984, pp. 175–179; Fisher et al., 1997, pp. 179–198).

In contrast to this academic consensus, it has recently been argued (Chester and Duncan, *in press*) that explanations of losses within religious frameworks are not confined to *pre-industrial* societies and are more widespread than is commonly assumed. Using a detailed bibliographic study of 49 major eruptions that occurred between 1850 and 2002, we contend that the reactions of faith communities are frequently omitted both from articles in learned journals and from eruption reports produced by government agencies. A ‘hidden history’ of religious responses is to be found in diverse sources, which include newspapers of record and the findings of anthropologically and ethnographically based research. Examples include studies of: Javanese eruptions of various dates (Schlehe, 1996); the 1991 Pinatubo eruption in the Philippines (Leone and Gaillard, 1999) and Montserrat in the Caribbean, which erupted from 1997 (Possekel, 1999, pp. 161–3; Barnes, 2002). Frequently cited reviews of the Mount St. Helens eruption (USA) in 1980 (e.g. Perry and Greene, 1983; Anderson, 1987; Saarinen and Sell, 1987), for instance, fail to mention the importance of religion in conditioning some of the responses to the emergency, even though these were discussed in newspapers at the time and in other readily accessible sources (Anon, 1980, 1983; Blong, 1984, pp. 176; Tiedemann, 1992, pp. 338). A lack of academic interest in matters spiritual, even though responses are couched in religious terms, has characterised the reporting of many recent eruptions within societies having differing religious traditions. These include: Agung 1963 (Bali, Indonesia); Arenal 1968 (Costa Rica); Heimaey 1973 (Iceland); Nevado del Ruiz 1985 (Colombia); Pinatubo 1991 (Philippines); Popocatepetl 1997 (Mexico) and Nyiragongo 2002 (Democratic Republic of Congo) (Chester and Duncan, *in press*). Non-Christian religious traditions are more varied in their approaches to disasters than is often acknowledged by ‘western’ trained scientists and social scientists. For example, the island of Java in Indonesia has frequent eruptions, and losses are often interpreted syncretically using an amalgam of Islamic, Christian, Hindu and animist spiritual understandings (Schlehe, 1996). Many western commentators have emphasised that Islam is strongly ‘instrumentalist’ in its view of suffering; with God making use of disasters in order to bring adherents back to the prophet’s teaching (e.g. Bowker, 1970, pp. 113; Bemporad, 1987; Anon, 1997, pp. 968). Islam is in fact much more theologically varied, and there is no typical response which is independent of the culture in which the disaster occurs (Dhaoudi, 1992, pp. 41; Halliday, 1994, pp. 96; Al-Azmeh, 1996, pp. 44; Degg and Homan, 2005).

Examination of the 49 eruptions contained in our survey showed that there were only 16 instances where no religious responses were evident. Our study was based on internationally available bibliographic sources and it is possible that if local

archives were examined then a religious element would be found in at least some of these 16 cases. In fact it was only when we began research on the perception of risk on Vesuvius and Etna that we became fully aware of the range of religious responses carried out by those living in the vicinities of these volcanoes, both in the past and at the present time.

In the present paper the historical development of distinctive religious reactions to eruptions of Vesuvius and Etna is first described and this is followed by a discussion of the ways in which, during the twentieth and the early years of the twenty-first centuries, hazard perceptions have continued to be coloured by theistic belief. Finally we consider the implications of these distinctive hazard perceptions for the exercise of disaster planning.

2. The development of distinctive religious responses to eruptions on Vesuvius and Etna during *pre-industrial* times

In the classical era the peoples of Vesuvius and Etna (Fig. 1) attempted to blame and appease deities when confronted with natural disasters, including volcanic eruptions. Lucilius Junior (first century AD) notes that on Etna people offered incense to propitiate the gods who were thought to control the mountain and its eruptions (Hyde, 1916), and extensive accounts of legends connected to such figures as the Greek divine smith Hephaestus – or his Latin equivalent Vulcan – are summarised in accounts by Chester et al. (2000), Johnston (2005) and Smolenaars (2005). In terms of religious-based responses that are important today, the distinctive theologies of southern Italian Catholicism which developed in the *pre-industrial* era (i.e. from the late Classical Period to around 1900 AD) are particularly germane (Table 1).

Certain features in Table 1 require further discussion, the first being the theologies lying behind the responses. The word theodicy was originally confined to Christian theology, but is now more widely applied to other world faiths (Bowker, 1970) and is used to describe attempts to reconcile theistic belief with the presence of human suffering. Although first coined in 1710 by the philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (Leibniz, 1712, 1952), theodicy has a much longer history which transcends time, place, culture and religious tradition (Bowker, 1970). In Christian theology a number of models of theodicy have been proposed (Chester, 1998, 2005a), but in the *popular Catholicism* (Carroll, 1996) of the Italian south a conflation of two of these – the *Augustinian* and the *retributive* – has been particularly important. *Augustinianism* holds that suffering relates to the freedom granted by God to human beings. Freedom holds the potential for misuse and suffering reflects human sinfulness, because a person or a society may choose to act against God’s will (Lewis, 1944; Plantinga, 1974; Davis, 1981). The *retributive* model is strongly supported by many passages from the Bible especially from the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible, and under this theodicy a disaster is an expression of divine wrath visited on a sinful people. In Italy, clerical writers have often used the term *flegelli* (i.e. scourges of God), to describe all manner of disasters that are supposedly visited on sinful people (Logan, 2002, pp. 99). God’s wrath may, however, be appeased

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