

Father Paneloux's Understanding on Plague in Camus' *The Plague*: Philosophy of Religion Issue

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Abstract

This article attempts to analyze Father Paneloux's Understanding on Plague in Camus' *The Plague*: Philosophy of Religion Issue. This article uses philosophy of religion concept of meaning of being a believer in understanding the plague condition. The article reveals that during the plague the religious character in the story, Father Paneloux gives different meanings of the plague based on his development understanding. At the first stage, he believes that the plague is because the God sends this for the sinners. The second stage, he believes that this plague cannot be justified because it happens to a child. At the third stage, he reconciles his faith with God. He also reconciles with himself, and he dies.

Keywords: Philosophy of religion, suffering

A. Introduction

At the beginning part of the Covid-19 pandemic, the reactions of people around the world were various. While many people had suspicions that this pandemic was caused by a conspiracy, the clergymen around the world reacted by stating that this pandemic was a shield from God for believers and as a punishment for the wrongdoers and the unbelievers. A muslim imam, Abdul Somad, stated that corona virus was the soldier of God that was sent to attack Chinese who treated Uyghur muslims badly. An Israeli rabbi, Meir Mazuz stated that the virus happened

as a punishment for the gay people who just made a parade in Israel. The two incidents show that when a pandemic takes place, clergy men or theologians try to give an answer or answers for their people.

The covid-19 pandemic is widely informed virus so far, so that people around the world know and realize the existence of it, in which it is different from the previous virus known only for certain people. The information about this virus is widely spread by the help of internet technology which make it worldwide. The pandemic or a plague is also portrayed in literary works for literary

works mirror the life of people (Abrams, 1971). One of the literary works that portrays the plague as happens in a society is entitled *The Plague* which was written by Albert Camus in 1947. The story, as known by its title reflects how a disease that spreads quickly to the people of Oran (Algeria) at the time under the French administration, quietly kills many people. The inhabitants who do not only consist of Arab and Berber muslims but also French Catholics feel shocked and try to answer the phenomenon. The plague is thought by the characters in the story, especially dr. Bernard Rieux and Father Paneloux. This article tries to see the world from the point of view of Father Paneloux, as he is the catholic priest than can be considered as a respectful person and educated man in the society of the colonial people. As, a well -educated and faithful person, Father Paneloux is a central figure in responding to this plague for his congregation as it can be a lesson in Indonesia lately, dealing with how an Indonesian person should respond to this phenomenon.

In answering this problem, this article uses philosophy of religion issue. Through Father Paneloux, it can be seen that the problem of philosophy of religion takes place. As philosophy is about how to understand this world, a pious man tries to connect with his religion doctrine. Then the issue becomes a philosophy of religion. David Trueblood (1990) says that the philosophy of religion is to answer the problem of being faithful person with all possible ways of philosophical thoughts. David Trueblood gives detail about issues in philosophy of religion such as the existence of God, religion and mind, religious experience, free willism and determinism, life after death, and the difficulties on the issues of philosophy of religion. Trueblood says that the main difficult issue on the philosophy of religion is the problem of evil.

Trueblood shows that many theologians try to explain how and why evil come to people's life. The commoners mainly try to understand an evil or suffering as the punishment from God for the wrongdoers or

sinners. As it happens in the beginning of HIV/AIDS appeared, many priests or imams condemn the gay or same-sex marriage as the cause of the disease, or the users of narcotics. But then, the statement is challenged because there are cases in which the people who do not do the sins also suffer the HIV/AIDS. For example, how someone who is born sinless, but he is born as blind baby or when he is born, he gets a HIV-AIDS from his parents. Trueblood says that it is the most difficult thing to answer because there are some schools that contradict each other. The first group emphasizes that God is the Almighty, so that everything depends on Him, but then the second school will say that if God is the Almighty, how God can let the evil and suffering come. So if he lets them come, that means God is not good, but he is the Almighty. Trueblood suggests that this world is material so that it must be understood as the world of flesh which has no perfection. The world after life is the world of perfection. God is the most just in the sense, that it will happen in the world after life.

The explanation of course, does

not satisfy many other thinkers. They try to find out behind the idea of how evil and suffering come. Robert Solomon (2002) the problem of understanding evil and suffering become a difficult thing in Judeo-Christian and Islamic world as they consider God is good as well. They do not have the idea of God's representation in making the "bad things" in this world. Solomon say that in the Indian sub-continental religions, they do not have the problem as they have the concept of the God who create destruction.

B. Research Method

Qualitative research design was applied in analyzing the research topic. It is stated in Neuman's book entitled *Social Research Methods* (2007:89) that

Qualitative researchers use a language of cases and contexts, examine social processes and case in their social context, and look at interpretations or the creations of meaning in specific settings. Qualitative data are empirical. They involve documenting real events, recording what people say

(with words, gestures, and tones), observing specific behavior, studying written documents, or examining visual images.

Based on Neumann's explanation, the researchers made up their mind to choose qualitative research design because the analysis of the topic did not concentrate on numbers.

The researchers followed some procedures to conduct close reading in order to collect the data for the research. Patricia (1998) has explained the procedures of close reading as follows:

When you close read, you observe facts and details about the text. You may focus on a particular passage, or on the text as a whole. Your aim may be to notice all striking features of the text, including rhetorical features, structural elements, and cultural references; or, your aim may be to notice only *selected* features of the text—for instance, oppositions and correspondences, or particular historical references. Either way, making these observations constitutes the first step in the process of close reading. The second step is

interpreting your observations. What we're basically talking about here is inductive reasoning: moving from the observation of particular facts and details to a conclusion, or interpretation, based on those observations. And, as with inductive reasoning, close reading requires careful gathering of data (your observations) and careful thinking about what these data add up to.

The researchers pointed the procedures of doing close reading as follows:

- a. Reading and observing the fact and detail about the text.
- b. Noticing all striking features of the text, including rhetorical features, structural elements, and cultural references based on the topic of the research
- c. Collecting the intended data related to the research topic while observing and noticing.
- d. Interpreting the data using either deductive or inductive reasonings.

The researchers decided to use content analysis as the technique of data analysis because this is one of the most common methods to analyze qualitative data. It is used to analyze

documented information in the form of texts, media, or even physical items. Krippendorff (2004: 18) proposed the definition of content analysis by saying that stating, "Content analysis is a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use". In that definition, content analysis is indeed considered as a technique and as a technique, the thesis writer believes that it must have procedures.

The use of the word 'text' in the above definition shows that the concern of content analysis is the data in the form of document or text but the phrase "or other meaningful matter" indicates that in content analysis works of images, maps, sounds, signs, symbols, and even numerical records may be included as data that is, they may be considered as texts-provided they speak to someone about phenomena outside of what can be sensed or observed.

C. Results and Discussion

As an educated and a faithful

man, at the beginning, Father Paneloux tries to understand the plague as a commoner or a common people. The quotation below shows his early view:

"If today the plague is in your midst, that is because the hour has struck for taking thought. The just man need have no fear, but the evildoer has good cause to tremble. For *plague is the flail of God* and the world His threshing-floor, and implacably He will thresh out His harvest until the wheat is separated from the chaff" (Camus, 2004).

The quotation shows that at the early strike of the plague that is caused by the rats in Oran, Father Paneloux at his sermon at the church of St. Catherine, states that the plague does not come to the good people or the believers. The disease will only strike the wrongdoers or sinners. He stresses that the plague is a way from God to cleanse the world from the sinner by giving punishment for the sinners. Father Paneloux gives a metaphor of wheat and the chaff. The disease will separate the wheat (the believers) and the chaff (the unbelievers and sinners). On his

sermon Father Paneloux uses “you” instead of “we” that makes a barrier between him and others, the possible sinners that can get infection from the disease. The use of “we” and “you” that marks barrier is criticized by the narrator of the story, Dr. Rieux who states that Father Paneloux is blind about the condition.

The quotation reflects the idea of David Trueblood that the commoners will say that a disaster is caused by sinners and unbelievers as a [punishment from God. It based on the idea that God is the almighty and God is good, God will never let His people suffer the suffering and experience evil.

Then, when the plague becomes worse and becomes daily basis. This condition makes Father Paneloux lives in an abstract world. He must confront the reality. It becomes worse when he sees how the disease infects Jacques, a child who is dying in a very agony condition, people call Dr. Rieux and also Father Paneloux. At the beginning, father Paneloux is very sure that the disease does not infect children, but now he faces the real condition, that the disease also infects

a child who does not commit a sin. The following quotation shows how Father Paneloux is present at the poor family of Jacques:

Paneloux helps Rieux attend to his patients. He is present for the death of Jacques Othon and cries out, "My God, spare this child!" as they all watch the poor boy suffer. (Camus, 2004)

From the above quotation, it can be seen that father Paneloux prays to God for the safety of the child. All people wait for his prayer is materialized but in fact there is no answer from God. The child is staggering to death, and this is a miserable suffering both for Othon family and the boy himself who experience the agony. The following quotation shows how Father Paneloux finally leaves the room when the child dies:

He finally expires “in a grotesque parody of crucifixion” as the men watch in horror. Paneloux cries out to God to save the child, but in vain. (Camus, 2004)

The quotation above shows that at the beginning Father Paneloux is

very sure with his faith in God that God will not let the disease strike the child, and even so, God will heal him. But when the plague still strikes the child, and make him lose his life, Father Paneloux gets confused about the things he is taught by years and believes. He prays in deep faith in the name of God in order to save the child. He really believes in God, that He will conquer the disease but the prayer does not work. He cannot understand it. His feeling is full of anger, but he cannot explain to whom.

This incident also reflects the philosophy of religion about on how the faithful people interpret the death of sinless child that suffers agony that he is not associated with the occurrences. It also raises the question on how God let this agony happen to the sinless people?

After the traumatic incident that takes in the house of Othon, he has to adjust his previous idea on how someone is interpreting that suffering and evil only occur to the sinners and unbelievers, but in fact is the on the contradiction The long suffering and, agonizing death of a child, Jacques Othon, makes Father Paneloux

reassesses his faith and preaches another sermon. Now then, he does not speak of punishment as it found in the following quotation:

"I understand," Paneloux said in a low voice. "That sort of thing is revolting because it passes our human understanding. But perhaps we should love what we cannot understand" (Camus, 2004).

The quotation shows on how he develops his faith. As Trueblood and Solomon say that the idea of the existences of evil and suffering are the hardest topic on philosophy of religion, especially when in Judeo-Christian and Islamic traditions that God is portrayed as the most Good being. Father Paneloux tries to the plague with the faith he confesses. While previously, he believes that the plague is a blessing sign to purify the world from sinners, but in fact it strikes the sinless child as well, so he needs an explanation.

Father Paneloux does not blame the sinners anymore and he also uses the word "we", so that means he includes himself as "good man" and sinners together to face the reality of

disease as a common enemy. Now he realizes that it is possible to everybody to get infected. Now, he also stresses that the plague is beyond the understanding of human beings as it is striking the very basic faith, that the sinners will get the payment of sin, that is death. However, it does not mean that Father Paneloux loses his faith, in senses that it is a fulfillment of God's will, as he interprets God as the source of love. He does not deny the idea of God is the source of mercy, but what he cannot understand how the evil and suffering should be explained.

This quotation reflects the idea that suffering and evil are the hardest topic in the three Abrahamic religions, but however must be discussed by the faithful people around the world as Father paneloux, himself faces the agony in Oran.

The audience give responses of his sermon differently. Dr. Rieux who is very skeptic about religion and faith, who never really thinks deeply about religion says:

... Rieux straightened up slowly...
"No, Father. I've a very different idea of love. And

until my dying day I shall refuse to love a scheme of things in which children are put to torture."(Camus, 2004)

The quotation above shows that Dr. Rieux who is a lapsed Christian cannot understand Father Payenoux's statement. He argues that how someone believes in death of a child as a manifestation for love.

Another opinion is from Jean Tarrou who says that:

"Paneloux is right," Tarrou continued. "When an innocent youth can have his eyes destroyed, a Christian should either lose his faith or consent to having his eyes destroyed. Paneloux declines to lose his faith, and he will go through with it to end. That's what he meant to say."(Camus, 2004)

The above quotation shows that Tarrou gives a view about Father Paneloux's sermon that Father Paneloux has developed his view on religion dealing with the suffering as he does not want to lose his faith in God but as a learned man, Father Paneloux still cannot accept the idea of a child dies in agony because the terrible disease.

Short after the sermon, Father Paneloux himself gets ill, but for unknown disease, and he does not want to see a doctor, and he trusts in God alone, and dies.

D. Conclusion

The story of *The Plague* reflects the idea of the dynamics of thoughts of Father Paneloux on how he tries to understand the tragedy of the plague that happens surrounding himself. Father Paneloux has developed his idea dealing with the evil and suffering accordingly to the idea of philosophy of religion as theorized by David Trueblood and Robert Solomon. Father Paneloux gives different meanings of the plague based on his interpretation. At the first stage, he believes that the plague

is because the God sends this for the sinners. The second stage, he believes that this plague cannot be justified because it happens to a child. At the third stage, he reconciles his faith with God. He also reconciles with himself, and he dies.

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