

CAN GOD INTERVENE?

HOW RELIGION EXPLAINS NATURAL DISASTERS

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INTRODUCTION

It's safe to say that most Americans knew nothing about tsunamis before December 26, 2004.

Earthquakes we know. A 1989 San Francisco quake collapsed bridges and freeways and delayed the World Series. We've heard about how the great San Francisco quake of 1906 unleashed fires throughout the city. Most of us have a vague understanding of the Richter scale—at least that a quake that measures 7 or 7.5 is something serious. Every now and then, news of a small quake, a tremor, gets our attention, and the TV news shows pull out their old files on the “Big One.” We all know about the Big One. It's the quake that will someday change the course of history by sinking the West Coast. The Big One is part of the American consciousness, part of the vernacular. Predictions of when it will strike arise whenever there is “seismic activity” out west. East Coasters who are jealous of or bemused by Californians like to joke about it. But anyone who is remotely aware of the science behind earthquakes (or has seen a movie about one) has to wonder now and then when the Big One will strike. If an *Act of God* is going to take out the Land of Hope and Dreams, you have to hope that neither you nor anyone you love will be there to see it.

But who knew anything about tsunamis before December 26, 2004? The worst tsunami ever to hit the American mainland slammed into scenic Crescent City, California, in 1964. It was born of a major earthquake in Alaska and took the lives of eleven residents of Crescent City. Four decades later, this event was mostly lost to history. The worst tsunami on record took place in 1883, when a volcanic eruption on Krakatoa, an island in Southeast Asia, blew the island to bits. The eruption set off tsunamis that washed away more than 36,000 people. How many have heard of Krakatoa?

Today, we know something about tsunamis. We know that they are caused by earthquakes, that they come without warning, and that they can produce towering waves that wipe out the boundary between land and sea. Anyone who has seen some of the herky, jerky video shot by handheld cameras on December 26, 2004, will remember images of people holding onto trees and floating debris as the ocean tugged at their bodies and the threat of death rose all around them. Most shocking of all were scenes of parents clutching their children while fighting to stay above the tide. There is one scene that I can't get out of my mind: Two adults and seven or eight children were huddled together by a large object that I couldn't identify. The picture went black for some time, maybe a few seconds, maybe a couple of minutes. When it came back on, there was one adult left. He was holding onto the object, too far away to see his eyes.

The tsunami that hit southern Asia on the second day of Christmas stunned the whole world. It wasn't just the death count. Some 230,000 people would die, at least a third of them children, making the tsunami one of the worst natural disasters in recorded history. It was the way the victims died. People were going about their business, villagers and tourists alike, when the sea rose up to wash away entire communities. Just like that. To read the descriptions of what took place was to get the impression that the whole thing was somehow planned, a vicious sneak attack designed to take as many lives as possible.

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. For centuries, millennia really, God was seen as the *deliverer* of violence, a cosmic grim reaper. He was believed to be delivering his will in the form of earthquakes or floods or armies (which armies he favored, of course, was open to debate). He did so to punish the wicked or to deliver a message to humankind, in all or part. The perceived message was usually the same: Change your ways. This view became less universal after the Enlightenment, but it is still widely shared among followers of many religions around the world.

Whether or not one believes in divine punishment, people of faith face some of the most difficult, anguishing questions that can be asked about their God whenever innocent people suffer and die. Even if you believe that God is not responsible for a natural disaster, that he did not consciously make it happen, a believer has to wonder whether God could have stopped it. If God is all-powerful, shouldn't he be able to still an earthquake or calm a

tsunami? If he can, then why doesn't he? Theodicy is the philosophy of trying to explain the existence of evil in a world that is overseen by an all-loving, all-powerful God. Nothing awakens ancient questions of theodicy like a history-changing *Act of God*.

For a period of about one month after the tsunami, the United States, Europe, and much of the world engaged in a sometimes sober, sometimes hysterical dialogue about the religious meaning of the tsunami. Leaders of many faiths spoke out in the media, some making controversial statements that provoked further debate. It is this period of public dialogue and confrontation—which quietly fizzled like a candle splashed with water as the media lost interest—that I aim to reopen with this book. Unfortunately, the subject of natural disasters would only become more prominent as I worked on this project. Every few months, as if on cue, an *Act of God* would strike and raise new questions about the relationship between humankind and the divine. Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast in August 2005, drowning an American city and provoking an emotional national debate that swayed between theology and politics and back again. Two months later, an earthquake in northern Pakistan took 80,000 lives and left more than 3 million homeless. This disaster received scant attention in the United States, perhaps because there was little video of the quake itself and perhaps because of what I'll call “disaster fatigue.” Four months after that, in February 2006, mudslides in the eastern Philippines buried a village and killed at least 1,800 people. Over the next two months, several rounds of tornadoes touched down in the American Midwest, killing about 50 people and tearing homes and churches from the ground. Only weeks later, in June 2006, Indonesia got hit again. A 6.3-magnitude earthquake on Java island took about 7,000 lives and injured more than 30,000. Each of these disasters touched this project in ways I will get to later.

Dialogue is probably too formal a word for what took place in January 2005, in the wake of the tsunami. What happened is that a variety of people—some religious, some not; some famous, some not—felt compelled to speak or write about God's role, or lack of one, in the horror that the world had just witnessed. Much of what came out was passionate and heated and inspired equally passionate responses. I would guess that many, many people read or heard bits of what was written and said. Some probably found themselves wondering, however briefly, about God's presence in this world.

As details first emerged on the scope of the tsunami's devastation, the initial, raw reactions from many religious leaders were dripping with emotion—anger, guilt, despair. Azizan Abdul Razak, a Muslim cleric in Malaysia, said the tsunami was God's message that “he created the world and can destroy

the world.”¹ Israel’s Sephardic Chief Rabbi Shlomo Amar called the tsunami “an expression of God’s great ire with the world.”² Pandit Harikrishna Shastri, a Hindu priest in New Delhi, said it was caused by “a huge amount of pent-up man-made evil on earth.”³ Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury and leader of the worldwide Anglican Church, drew international attention by writing honestly in a British newspaper about the theological difficulties posed by any attempt to paint the tsunami as part of God’s plan. “If some religious genius did come up with an explanation of exactly why all these deaths made sense, would we feel happier or safer or more confident in God?” he wrote. “Wouldn’t we feel something of a chill at the prospect of a God who deliberately plans a programme that involves a certain level of casualties?”⁴ Such reflection did not sit well with all of William’s fellow Christians. The Reverend Albert Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, for instance, said that Williams’ essay was “how not to give a Christian answer.”⁵ Mohler preferred to see the tsunami as a warning of God’s judgment.

Several striking reactions came from Muslims in regions that were affected by the tsunami. Mohamed Faizeen, manager of the Centre for Islamic Studies in Colombo, Sri Lanka, insisted that a satellite picture taken as the tsunami hit Sri Lanka’s west coast showed that the shape of the waves spelled out “Allah” in Arabic. “Allah signed his name,” Faizeen said. “He sent it as punishment. This comes from ignoring his laws.”⁶ Faizeen compared the tsunami to the great flood of the Old Testament, even though the Quran describes only a regional flood. Another story that received worldwide attention was about the 75,000 villagers living on the Indonesian island of Simeulue. The islanders had heard stories from their ancestors about great waves that followed earthquakes, so they ran to the hills after the quake, only 40 miles away, shook their island. Thirty-foot waves soon crashed down on the island, but only seven people died. “We were just thinking that God was doing this,” said Suhardin, 33, an islander who uses one name and was told by his grandmother about the tsunami of 1907. “This is because God is angry.”⁷

Through the weeks that followed, most religious figures in America preached about the need to provide relief for the survivors. It became not only the practical priority of most religious denominations but also a mission of faith. Raising money and awareness was framed as the correct theological response to the catastrophe. More and more, religious leaders could be heard saying that God was inspiring donations and that God was with the international relief workers who flocked to Indonesia and Sri Lanka. God’s presence *during* the tsunami may have been unclear, but his presence in the relief camps was largely unquestioned. Sure enough, an unprecedented

international relief effort raised several billion dollars during the first year after the tsunami.

As religious denominations promoted God's role in building temporary housing, several American commentators offered deeper reflections on the theological challenges posed by the tsunami. John Garvey, an Orthodox Christian priest who writes a sober, intelligent column for the Catholic magazine *Commonweal*, probably captured the feelings of many speechless people of faith when he offered that there is simply no explanation for the suffering in this world, which goes far beyond that caused by natural disasters. "God is finally unknowable, and, because of his infinite otherness we can only approach—but never fully arrive at—God," Garvey wrote.⁸ The formidable and often cantankerous Leon Wieseltier, who writes for the *New Republic*, spoke for many angry skeptics when he railed against everyone who fell into line defending their benevolent God. "They should more candidly admit that they choose not to reflect upon the spiritual implications of natural destruction, because they wish to protect what they believe," Wieseltier sneered.⁹ Then there was David Bentley Hart, an Orthodox Christian theologian who wrote a column for the *Wall Street Journal* about the tsunami, which provoked so much reaction that he expanded it into a 109-page book. In this book, he melded Garvey's impatience with simple explanations to Wieseltier's anger, slapping aside most rationalizations for the tsunami as "odious banalities and blasphemous flippancies." He concluded that this fallen, sinful world offers glimpses of both God's grace and the darkness of evil, and that Christians can look forward to salvation without having to explain the unexplainable suffering that people endure. "Our faith," he wrote, "is in a God who has come to rescue his creation from the absurdity of sin, the emptiness and waste of death, the forces—whether calculating malevolence or imbecile chance—that shatter living souls; and so we are permitted to hate these things with a perfect hatred."¹⁰

The reaction to Hurricane Katrina was something very different. Once the levees failed, New Orleans began to flood and it became apparent that many poor, black people were stranded in their own homes, the hurricane became a national *political* scandal. The debate was over which clueless politicians to blame. FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) became an instant punch line. Commentators began asking why the preparation for Katrina was so poor at a time when the country could spend billions in Iraq. Theodicy did not disappear. But the raising of theological questions became itself a political statement. Conservative religious figures began to suggest that Katrina, like the tsunami, was punishment from God. New Orleans, they pointed out, was a city of drinking and sex. Liberal religious leaders belittled

such arguments, placing the blame on President Bush and his cronies and hardly mentioning God's role at all.

Several weeks after Katrina, Franklin Graham, the evangelist son of Billy Graham, made Katrina sound like a good thing for New Orleans. "God is going to use that storm to bring a revival," he said. "God has a plan. God has a purpose."¹¹ Televangelist Pat Robertson suggested that Katrina and the tsunami could be signs that Jesus would soon be returning. "And before that good time comes there will be some difficult days," he said on CNN.¹² Around the same time, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, one of Israeli's most prominent religious leaders, suggested that Katrina was "God's retribution" for America's support of the Israeli pullout from the Gaza Strip.¹³ Still, the vast majority of American religious leaders had little to say about God's role in the hurricane, preferring to blame political ineptitude, societal racism, the destruction of the Gulf Coast by developers, and other man-made environmental mistakes. The lack of fingers pointed at God led Edward Rothstein, a *New York Times* critic-at-large, to cite a new theodicy that expects science and political power to control nature and blames public officials for moral failings when they don't get the job done. "Nature becomes something to be managed or mis-managed," he wrote. "It lies within the political order, not outside it."¹⁴

It's important that I explain what I was trying to do through the course of writing this book. I am not a theologian. Nor am I an expert on any individual religious tradition that I deal with here, although I am quite familiar with most of them. I am a journalist who specializes in religion. I believe I was well suited to take on this project as a journalistic enterprise. My goal was to pin down some of the country's leading religious thinkers and draw out their true feelings about God's role in natural disasters and, ultimately, about God's connection to human suffering. Academic culture grew more and more specialized through the second half of the twentieth century, forcing historians, philosophers, theologians, and others to focus on increasingly narrow specialties encased in their own jargon. This outlook has created an intellectual culture, I think, in which the big questions about life and death and God are often treated as unsophisticated, naive, and Old World, politically incorrect in an academic sense. Additionally, my experience has taught me that many within the religious world are adept at dancing around difficult questions by citing Scripture, quoting their own theological heroes, and inferring that people who pose such questions have antireligious motives. So my goal in conducting the interviews that make up the heart of this book was to ask clear, direct questions about God's presence, intentions, and influence when the tsunami and other disasters changed the world.

This is not to say that I pressured anyone to defend or accuse God. That would be a pointless exercise and would have backed each person into one of several predictable corners: *Have faith. We don't know. Don't ask.* Instead, I wanted each person I spoke with to focus on what was important to them. Of course, some went off on tangents, some became quickly repetitive, and some sounded as if they had been in this game of explaining the unexplainable for too long. But most rose to the challenge and tried to truly engage my questions (after two decades in journalism, I have a pretty sensitive radar for obfuscation). Some, I think, genuinely enjoyed the opportunity to address the big questions that they know ordinary people ask or wonder about. Many interviews started slowly, crawling along under weighty generalizations, before something sparked my interviewees to toss aside pat answers and just go with it. Some sounded relieved to reject even responsible answers as inadequate and to simply admit that they did not know.

I also have to say something about the format of this book. First off, the people who are interviewed and briefly profiled are not meant to represent their religious tradition in any kind of complete and thorough way. No five people could stand in for, say, mainline Protestantism, especially when it comes to the sweeping subject this book addresses. If there is anything I've learned covering religion, it is that the most emotional and heated disagreements take place within traditions, not between them. No one speaks for an entire tradition, with a few possible exceptions like the president of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and—some would say—the pope. The people I have grouped together in each chapter are meant to give the reader *a sense* of the range of responses that one might find within that religious tradition. This is not to say that I have covered the entire range within each tradition or that I haven't left out important viewpoints. I have tried to include the broadest, most interesting range of credible ideas within each tradition, which five people or so can offer. It is the most I could do within this framework.

How did I choose the religions and religious traditions that are part of this book? The answer is obvious. I had to include the five primary world religions—Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism. Because I am writing for an American audience, it simply made sense to break down Christianity into several traditions—Roman Catholicism, mainline Protestantism, evangelical Protestantism, and African American Protestantism (I figured that African Americans know enough about suffering to warrant their own chapter). Are other traditions, say Orthodox Christianity, Sikhism, or Bahá'ism, somehow not worthy of being included? Of course not. But I had to draw the line where I did.

How did I choose the people who make up the heart of this book? I had no formula. Some are people I had interviewed before. Some are people I had read or heard about over the years. Others were people I discovered as I did my research. I suppose that what they had in common was a demonstrated interest in the big questions. Some had written books about suffering. Some had weighed in about the tsunami or Hurricane Katrina or other *Acts of God*. Others were people who I had an inkling would be willing to tackle my questions with relish. Honestly, I did not have the time to interview people who were not likely to have something to say (although I did speak with a few, who are not included in this book). And, yes, I realize that there must be other deep thinkers out there who would have been perfect for this book, who have dedicated their lives to studying some of the questions I raise. If only I would have known about them.

A point about gender: Most of the people I interviewed were men. The fact is that most religious authorities in this country are men. Make that the world. I saw this clearly when I covered a gathering of the world's religious leaders at the United Nations several years ago. All ethnicities, all races, all colors. All manners and styles of religious garb. Virtually all men. I considered seeking out more women for this book, but decided that the imbalance of men and women in religious communities (which is changing ever so slowly) was not something I could or should address here.

A point about politics: All journalists know that whatever you write in America today will be seen through a political lens. On what side of the culture war are you? Each religious tradition I write about here has its own battlegrounds, where conservatives and liberals, the orthodox and progressives, wage theological war over revelation, belief, and how followers should live and act. Some of these battles are more prominent or familiar than others. But they are always there. I tried to keep these differences in mind when choosing people to interview for each chapter. I did not want to include only people who promote one type of thinking within a diverse tradition. At the same time, I did not want to get caught up in a numbers game: "I have two conservatives, one liberal and one moderate, so I better find someone who isn't right of moderate-liberal." Again, I tried to represent each tradition as fairly as I could, although I'm sure that some will say that I portrayed their tradition as being too *something* or not enough *something else*.

I chose to open this book with two self-contained chapters that I hope will add context and meaning to what follows. The first is about the tsunami itself. It is important for the reader to have a good handle on what took place that day—the science involved and the suffering that resulted—before

encountering the explanations and anxieties of religious thinkers. So I do my best to explain what causes earthquakes and how, when particular forces align, quakes can set off tsunamis. And I describe the tsunami that rolled out of the Indian Ocean in 2004—how it came together, where it hit, and the damage that it wrought.

In Chapter 2, I take a look at how disasters were interpreted in the past—usually as God’s will in a physical form. I spend most of the chapter examining the vast, if overlooked legacy of Noah’s flood, the great flood of the Old Testament and the Quran. I contend that this story of God sending a flood to punish sinners, wipe out a stained human race, and give himself a fresh start still colors the way we interpret natural disasters today. To be a Jew or a Christian or a Muslim is to come from a tradition that says that, long before the tsunami, God was willing to drown the guilty. Also in this chapter, I’ll explore the significance of the Lisbon earthquake and tsunami of 1755, which is widely considered the turning point for how humankind explains disasters. After that disaster (and some famous responses from Voltaire), God evolved from being the great executioner to having a more nuanced and unclear role in natural disasters. I conclude Chapter 2 with a look at the story of poor, old Job, who came up in many of my interviews. For people whose roots are in the three great monotheistic faiths, at least, his story is always relevant and perhaps the final word on the subject of this book.

The remainder of the book surveys the perspectives of religious thinkers—scholars, theologians, clergy—from different traditions on the question of natural disasters, focusing on the tsunami. I believe that a reading of all the musings, explanations, stories, and silences to come will give the reader the strongest possible sense of how our religions see and understand the cracking of God’s earth, the rising of God’s seas, the fury of God’s storms and twisters.

Of course, my subjects—the interviewees—do not speak only of natural disasters. I learned early on that to talk about a tsunami or hurricane leads inevitably to larger questions: Why does God allow innocent people to suffer at all? What is the nature of evil in this world and why doesn’t God overcome it? How involved is God in our day-to-day life? When you think about it, it’s impossible to consider God’s role in an earthquake without delving into God’s role in other events and circumstances. Like when a loved one becomes ill. Or someone from your old neighborhood is hit by a drunk driver. Or when you read about peasants killed in some distant civil war. Even if one believes that God gives us free will—a gift that gives meaning to our lives—it’s hard not to wonder why he didn’t do something to prevent the Holocaust, the slaughter in Rwanda, and other genocides.

There have been no shortage of great minds wrestling with the meaning of suffering. After his wife died from cancer, C. S. Lewis wrote in his classic *A Grief Observed* that “If God’s goodness is inconsistent with hurting us, then either God is not good or there is no God; for in the only life we know He hurts us beyond our worst fears and beyond all we can imagine.”¹⁵ In a 2005 interview, the Holocaust survivor and Nobel Peace Prize winner Elie Wiesel spoke of his enduring but wounded faith: “I would be within my rights to give up faith in God, and I could invoke 6 million reasons to justify such a decision. But I am incapable of straying from the path charted by my forefathers, who felt duty-bound to live for God.”¹⁶ In a PBS documentary about how faith was affected by the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the Reverend Joseph Griesedieck, an Episcopal priest, said that staring into buckets of body parts at Ground Zero changed his understanding of God: “After Sept. 11, the face of God was a blank slate for me. God couldn’t be counted on in the way that I thought God could be counted on.”¹⁷

Terrible suffering is caused every day by illness, violence, accidents of every sort. But I don’t know that any form of suffering in this world raises questions about God’s presence, involvement, power, and goodness like that created by a natural disaster. Life is going on as expected one moment, and in the next, everything is different. The tsunami swept away everyone within striking distance—young and adult, good and bad, faithful and doubting. In a world filled with suffering that forces us to ask over and over the most difficult question of all—*Why?*—a natural disaster produces concentrated suffering. The laws of nature unleashed a tsunami that committed random mass murder. If God or some divine power set up those laws, how can he not be implicated?

As I worked on this book, many relatives, colleagues, and acquaintances asked me the same questions, tongue in cheek: Had I learned the truth? Did I have the answer? Did God command the tsunami forth, like a god of Greek mythology might? Well, now I’m finished, and I can confidently say it will be up to the reader to determine whether any answers—any truth—are contained in the pages to come. What I have concluded myself is that this book offers a tremendous amount of wisdom from many of the top religious minds in the United States. I appreciate their willingness to tell me what they believe, what they cannot believe, and what they can never know.

A final note: It is believed that the term *Act of God* was first used as a legal term during the mid-1800s to describe an unanticipated and uncontrollable event. It is normally used in contracts to protect a party from responsibility for some event they could not foresee. The courts have recognized many *Acts of God*, apparently without drawing the wrath of those who promote a strict

separation of church and state (although can such protests be far off?). It just goes to show that when certain things happen in this world without explanation, even the courts will throw down their books and point their fingers at God. An organization called the Global Language Monitor, which tracks language trends, cited *Act of God* as the most significant label for 2005.