

VITAL Theology

Helping People Think Theologically

Katrina Highlights Plight of Impoverished Exposes Unwillingness to Deal with Class Issues

The sight of impoverished, mostly black citizens begging to be rescued from the filth and violence inside the Superdome will forever remain the dominant image of Hurricane Katrina.

But the iconic shot that represents the broader story of contemporary America occurred during the two days before the hurricane made landfall.

That is when car after car edged onto the freeways, slowly making their way out of New Orleans—often with only one or two occupants, most of whom were secure in the knowledge they would find shelter, food, water and fresh clothing only a few miles down the road.

Seeing some people drive off in their SUVs while others were left behind reminded him of the biblical story of Lazarus and the rich man, said Albert J. Raboteau, professor of religion at Princeton University. People of means aren't aware of the problems the poor face, he said.

Laurie Zoloth, an ethicist and religion professor at Northwestern University's Feinberg School of Medicine, said there would have been less suffering if each block had formed a social organization to look after residents in the immediate area.

"The metaphor of our society is, 'We're all in this alone.' That's the tragedy," said Zoloth. The hurricane evacuation, she said, drove home the point that people do not believe that their actions—or inaction—will dramatically affect others.

An ideology of self-reliance makes it difficult for people to accept help, even

in the face of a Category 4 hurricane, said Gerald M. Boodoo, a systematic theologian from Xavier University of Louisiana. The same ethos made it difficult for people to grieve properly when they suffered losses in the hurricane.

All three theologians said that outrage over the suffering endured by the victims of Katrina will bring new focus to the problem of domestic poverty. But they expressed little confidence that substantial, systemic changes will occur.

Raboteau: Poor Remain Unseen

"You think there's such abundance in this society," said Princeton's Raboteau. "There's such a superfluity of wealth and of consumerism that we become blinded to the very existence of the poor. Our eyes have become clouded over by the possessions that we have. ... We don't even see those that are in need."

In the story from Luke, Lazarus is a sickly beggar covered with sores who lies outside the gate of a house owned by a wealthy man. The biblical account says the rich man wore fine clothing and "feasted sumptuously every day."

Lazarus hopes to receive scraps of food from the rich man's table. But the rich man simply walks by Lazarus without offering assistance of any kind.

The prophetic strand within Christianity and Judaism needs to be



Associated Press

Thousands of people leave New Orleans ahead of the storm. Others were left behind.

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Dana Robert, of Boston University, was the first theologian to respond to our request for comment on the two questions we raised about Hurricane Katrina (see pp.7-12). For Robert, any discussion of hurricanes, poverty and the Gulf Coast is personal. In her own words, this is why:

"This situation is especially tough for me because I am from southeastern Louisiana. A number of people in my extended family in New Orleans and on the Mississippi Gulf Coast have lost their homes. My parents in Baton Rouge have taken in a family of four, and my home church has over 1,000 Red Cross workers staying in the education building and gym.

"My grandfather (long deceased) was a fisherman on the coast, and so my homeland has been destroyed. Quite frankly, I have been less than functional, for we were always waiting for the 'big one.' People rolled the dice and this time they lost.

"I well remember after Hurricane Betsy that bodies were found in flooded attics for weeks afterward. I remember how Hurricane Camille ruined the beautiful coast in Biloxi/Gulfport where we used to visit family.

"I heard stories as a child of the horrors of Hurricane Audrey, of how family members nearly starved during the Depression, of my great-grandmother's horrible death from smallpox, of how my grandfather had to quit school

in third grade because his house burned down and his father died shortly afterward."



All three of the theologians interviewed for our cover story also spoke of their personal connection with New Orleans.

Albert J. Raboteau, of Princeton University, was still waiting for word on many members of his extended family in Bay St. Louis, La., where the storm surge reached 29 feet. It has been 26 years since he lived in the area and taught at Xavier University of Louisiana.

One cousin had evacuated to Jackson, Miss., and the other had stayed and lost the roof of his house. There had been no contact from the others.

"We can only wait, so that's extremely hard," he said.



Gerald Boodoo told us he was writing a book about Caribbean American Catholics and editing another on theology in the Caribbean. But he no longer knows when they might be published. All of his research material was left in New Orleans and he was not quite sure where it might be after the flooding.

We have no photo of Boodoo to go with our interview because the two most logical sources were affected by the hurricane. The university where he teaches, Xavier University, remained closed, and Boodoo had temporarily relocated to Atlanta, leaving most of his possessions behind.

Students from Xavier, the nation's only university that is both historically black and Catholic, were evacuated to Southern University in Baton Rouge La., and Grambling University in Grambling, La.



Laurie Zoloth, of Northwestern University's Feinberg School of Medicine, was wondering what had become of a group of terminal patients and the nurses who cared for them in New Orleans.

As an expert in bioethics, Zoloth had been asked a few years ago to help determine which organizations would receive health-care grants from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. One organization that she and others selected was an AIDS clinic that, as she recalls, was affiliated with Charity Hospital.

The clinic provided end-of-life care for men who had either lived on the margins of society or who had been drawn to New Orleans by the sexual freedom of the early 1980s. Most of them had become resistant to multiple-drug treatments.

"It was like a miracle in this city," she said. "It was on the second floor of a really run-down clinic. And yet, when you walked in, it was this joyful place with everyone laughing and being cared for. It was pretty extraordinary what they did for the sickest of the sick, the poorest of the poor."

reasserted in public life, said Raboteau, Henry W. Putnam Professor of Religion at Princeton, who has focused on American Catholic history and African-American religious movements.

"There was so much talk of real religious values in the press around the last national election," he said. "But the most basic of those values—caring for the poor, the most vulnerable and those in need—do not seem to come across in terms of personal moral responsibility. There are all kinds of excuses but it doesn't have the moral imperative that you see in the biblical texts."

Raboteau said that in his recent preparations to teach a class called "Religious Radicals" he reviewed texts from the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament that deal with issues of oppression, poverty and injustice.

"I'm just stunned by the number of verses in both the Old Testament prophets and, of course, in the New Testament gospels that focus on this issue of the widow, the orphan and the poor," he said.



Albert J. Raboteau

One reason those biblical stories don't have the moral salience they should, said Raboteau, is that they imply living a simpler life, a life based less on consumerism.

That kind of change is one that none of us is eager to make, he said.

A church historian, Raboteau said that the displaced people seen at the Superdome, the Morial Convention Center and on highway overpasses were put in that position because of "a structural problem that's connected with the history of our country."

The long shadow of slavery has resulted in large numbers of poor African Americans who are concentrated in large cities, he said. These are the people for whom no evacuation plan existed.

Officials knew there were people who would not have money or cars

or any way of evacuating themselves, he said. While there had been conversation about providing transportation, this had not been deemed urgent enough to be put into action.

Television images and newspaper photographs offer visible proof that residential segregation continues, he said.

"This is a window on a problem that we don't like to talk about," said Raboteau. "It is unfinished business that we would prefer to think has been finished."

The fact that elderly and needy people were left in overheated hospitals and nursing homes without water and food does not indicate that individual people are thoughtless or mean, said Raboteau. What it does demonstrate, he said, is that the playing field is not level for everyone and that society has a moral obligation to be attentive to the neediest and those most at risk.

The catastrophe has moved people to donate money and clothing to those in need along the Gulf Coast. But Raboteau is less optimistic that people will see the disparities in their own communities that are based on race and class.

"If we look around us at our cities, especially, and look at the inequality in terms of schools—look at the disparity in the amount of money spent on children in predominantly white schools

that seeks to address what those pictures represented to us that we saw on television," he said.

Zoloth: Theology of Interruption

The core theology suggested by Hurricane Katrina is a theology of interruption, said Northwestern University's Zoloth.



Laurie Zoloth

"We live in a world in which we need a theology of interruption," she said. Hurricanes, tornadoes, tsunamis and other natural disasters are reminders that life does not and should

not always go on as usual.

"Something about the way we have all been thinking and the way we have all been working and pursuing our own lives needs to be interrupted," said Zoloth. "We need to be deeply shaken. We need to be horrified by the condition of the poor in this country and we forget. We live in conditions of goodness and we forget what daily life is like if you are poor. We read the Torah and are taught to always remember, but it seems quite theoretical."

But for several weeks in September the reality of poor people, of women

"The metaphor of our society is, 'We're all in this alone.' That is the tragedy."

and children and disabled people was right in front of the nation on 24-hour cable news stations.

compared to predominantly black and Hispanic schools—the disparity is clear," said Raboteau.

With national attention swiftly moving toward reconstruction, New Orleans faces challenges to build housing that will not duplicate old patterns and to somehow reconfigure schools to avoid segregation, said Raboteau.

"These are all issues that one hopes would not be simply dictated by the market but will be dictated by careful and humane planning and a social role

and children and disabled people was right in front of the nation on 24-hour cable news stations.

"Really, it is quite astonishing," said Zoloth, professor of medical ethics and humanities, and of religion at Northwestern University's Feinberg School of Medicine. "These are not the bodies we see on television. Therefore we can (usually) ignore their embodied lives, their embodied realities. And now we can't."

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"We forget that our neglect or disinterest or our pursuit of other things is at stake in the death of the other," she said. "We act as if that is not the case, as if it is not a life-and-death matter.

"There's such a superfluity of wealth and of consumerism that we become blinded to the very existence of the poor. Our eyes have become clouded over by the possessions that we have."

But, of course, faith and health care are about life and death."

Zoloth said that as the relief effort unfolded she was moved by the outpouring of support from thousands of ordinary people, and the sense that justice needed to be pursued and the vulnerable cared for. And there was much to celebrate in the fact that 80 percent of the people of New Orleans were evacuated safely, a much higher percentage than anticipated.

"I think that Katrina has been a centrally important event for our country, but how long we will live in light of its lessons is not yet certain," she said. "The Torah teaches that we have to be interrupted by the radical intrusion of the difficult other. We have to personally come up with the goods to care for that person, and if we do not, they will die."

Many biblical texts deal with the catastrophic effects of living on the margin, she noted. One story talks about the neighbor in straits who has only one coat and must give that coat to his employer to guarantee his work. But at the end of the day, the Torah insists that the coat be returned to the person in need.

The Torah, she said, is not the world of iPods and TiVos. Rather, it is a world of extraordinary despair, and what stands between desperation and chaos is the covenant to share your lamp with your neighbor.

Her recent study of Emmanuel

Levinas, the 20th century Jewish philosopher, led the ethicist to think about her own response to Katrina.

"I've spent a lot of time being angry at this person and that person

in leadership," she said. But Levinas would ask the question: "What does Laurie do?"

She has responded in three ways.

First, she joined with others on her block in Evanston, Ill., to organize a clothing drive. Neighbors gave away many of the things they did not need and purchased new items for hurricane evacuees.

"People have to think: I have too much," she said.

A second response was to make her home available to evacuees. Her family signed up through their religious community, but they have not been called on so far.

A third action was to volunteer to work with evacuees as a nurse, a move encouraged by the medical school where she teaches. Despite years away from the nursing profes-

sion, she has maintained her license and is on call if needed.

"What speech do I have to give that is more important than that?" she wondered.

The scene at the Superdome, she said, is the result of personal choices.

"We've been forced to see visually what the sum of our choices and poli-

cies mean. And I want to be clear," she said, "it's not just the choices of government, but my choices. My choice to live my life in the way I live it has been a part of that. Have I failed, as well? Of course, the answer is yes."

In some profound way, she suggested, the levees that protect New Orleans failed because members of society failed.

Yet many people avoid any thought of such a conclusion.

"I've been somewhat horrified by how people, even in my workplace, are very eager not to have to deal with it now," said Zoloth. Some have been deeply shaken by it, and some still think their speech cannot be interrupted.

Boodoo: Trapped Even before Storm

Many of the people trapped in New Orleans by Katrina were already trapped in a life that provided few opportunities, said Boodoo, Drexel Society Professor for Theology at Xavier University in New Orleans. Although the vast majority of them were employed, their work as cooks, waiters and other service positions provided only subsistence wages.

"Why do we have a system that says one thing but does not allow for what it says, such as a good family life, a better standard of life," said Boodoo. "You can only wonder why that is the case."

"We forget that our neglect or disinterest or our pursuit of other things is at stake in the death of the other."

New Orleans was already undergoing gentrification, in which new residents move to the inner city, often displacing poorer residents. Long before the storm, powerful developers and community leaders were already mapping out a plan for a new New Orleans, said Boodoo.

"A large part of that plan is gentrifi-

cation—getting rid of public housing—which they have done,” he said. “A lot of public housing in New Orleans, so-called projects, has already been destroyed by this.”

“If I were very cynical, I would say Katrina has done for developers in New Orleans what they couldn’t do for 30 years.”

The hurricane simply advanced the timetable for a process that has not been fair to the poor people of the city, he said.

“If I were very cynical, I would say Katrina has done for developers in New Orleans what they couldn’t do for 30 years,” he said.

Whether that process is better or worse for the city is beside the point, he said. The people being displaced never had a voice. They have always been the scapegoat of society and are viewed as a drag on the whole of society.

That accusation is true in some ways, Boodoo conceded. “But,” he said, “what opportunities do they have to show other aspects of themselves?”

Boodoo, a native of Trinidad, and his family were forced to flee New Orleans and were living with relatives in Atlanta in the weeks immediately after the hurricane.

Boodoo had been out of town when the evacuation started. His wife and child left New Orleans with friends and brought along one family that had no financial means to stay in a hotel, even for a few nights.

The impoverished family refused many of their offers of help. Relying on others is often viewed disparagingly and thought to diminish a person’s integrity, he said

“I think theologically the issue here is ... a sort of ideological position that has created a situation where even in ‘need’ relationships, we don’t seem to be able to accept help well. We are not able to be vulnerable well and to grieve well.”

But Boodoo believes that the ability to give and receive care in such circumstances is good for all involved.

The father of one of Boodoo’s friends died two days before the evac-

uation. Rather than grieve their loss, the family focused on what might be happening to the body as it lay in a New Orleans morgue, he said. The

funeral took place when they returned to the city, but the family then turned its attention to the destruction of their house.

“The whole grieving process that we have is just woefully inadequate because of this sense of self-interest and self-reliance,” he said. “We have to bear up, you know.

“Some are crying, but nobody’s expressing that suffering in the sense of deep hurt,” said Boodoo. “They are too busy finding their child a school and their next job.”

The subject of dislocated people drew Boodoo’s scholarly interest well before Hurricane Katrina.

In the Caribbean, theology has long been synonymous with Roman Catholic catechism, he said, and serious theological reflection has occurred there only since the 1970s.

The societies that were formed in the Caribbean region are the result of dislocated people—slaves—being thrown together in new situations, said Boodoo. Having been shaped by fiat, such societies are often fragmented.

Differences of languages and culture only make it more difficult to develop a cohesive society.

While the conditions that shaped the Caribbean had many negative effects on people, such “creative chaos” also allows new things to come into being, he said.

“How, out of that, do you find this deep sense of the presence of God that can foster love and care and create so much wonderful music, food and people of talent?” he said. “I am trying to see how that’s going to happen now to all these people from New Orleans who will find themselves in those situations.”

“The whole grieving process that we have is just woefully inadequate because of this sense of self-interest and self-reliance.”

The dislocated people of New Orleans will form new communities when they return to the Crescent City, said Boodoo. But whether they will form something better than the ghettos of the past is not at all clear. ◀

An updated 25th anniversary edition was recently released of Albert J. Raboteau’s *Slave Religion, the “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South*.

Laurie Zoloth wrote about the need for a strong sense of social relationship and personal responsibility in *Health Care and the Ethics of Encounter: A Jewish Discussion of Social Justice*.

Gerald M. Boodoo is a contributor to the book, *Many Faces, One Church: Cultural Diversity and the American Catholic Experience*, edited by Peter C. Phan and Diana Hayes.

Hart Tries to Separate God from Evil Divine Seen Overcoming Evil, Not Employing It

Eastern Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart has little patience for what he calls the arch-Calvinist habit of ascribing everything to the will of God—including Hurricane Katrina.

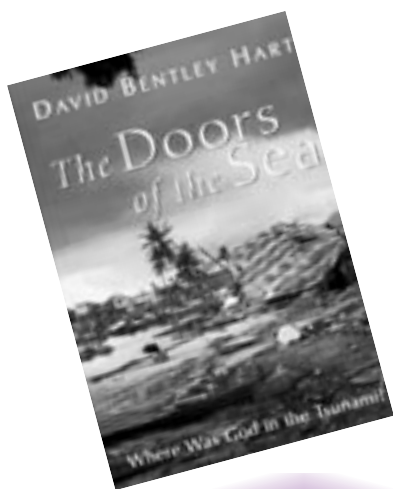
What does a major disaster teach us about the world we live in or the nature of finitude that we did not already know? Hart says the answer is “absolutely nothing.”

In the days following the tsunami that devastated Southeast Asia last December, Hart wrote a piece for the *Wall Street Journal* that attempted to refute notions that the tsunami either proved God’s power or disproved the existence of God.

When he was attacked from both sides, Hart expanded his article into a small book, *The Doors of the Sea: Where Was God in the Tsunami?*

Hart, who lives in the Baltimore area, first dispenses with the arguments of atheists who used the occasion to declare that no God could allow a catastrophe of such proportion to occur.

He paints a picture of a secular materialist who encounters an instance of unjust suffering, such as death caused by a tsunami or a hurricane, and concludes that because there is no immediately visible moral order, nothing in the universe transcends his or her concept of materiality.



Such a conclusion, said Hart, is similar to the way in which “our more remote, primitive ancestors might have seen a flash of lightning in the sky and concluded that some god must have flung it from on high.

“In neither case does the conclusion follow from the evidence,” he writes, “and in neither case is the god at issue much more than an affective myth.”

But it is not fair to dismiss the atheist’s argument without acknowledging that it is an authentic expression of moral outrage at the world’s horrors, a moral outrage that Christians share, he said. Ironically, he writes, atheists would never make such arguments had they not been shaped by the moral universe of Christian culture.

More exasperating to Hart are the arguments of well-intentioned Christians that inadvertently succeed at making the arguments of atheists seem more germane and more profound.

In an interview with *Vital Theology*, Hart said he takes issue with rigid Calvinists “who could not imagine that the very movement of every molecule was not part of this eternal design that God inaugurated at creation.”

It is a mistake to assume that everything that happens is a direct expression of God’s desire for his creatures or an essential part of the divine plan for history, he said. In Hart’s interpretation of traditional Christian belief, God has no need for evil. Hart describes evil as the absence of good and believes that it is has no substance in itself.

In *The Doors to the Sea*, Hart writes, “Evil can have no proper role to play in God’s determination of himself or



David Bentley Hart

purpose for his creatures, even if by economy God can bring good from evil; it can in no way supply any imagined deficiency in God’s or creation’s goodness; it has no ‘contribution’ to make.”

Hart told *Vital Theology*, “My chief argument in the book is not actually against people

who wrote about these phenomena as yet another proof of the nonexistence of God, but it was directed mostly at the Christian apologists who sprang up arguing that here we see the hidden hand of God working his inscrutable counsel.

“I find that language rather revolting,” he said.

“In fact, what one should see is creation in bondage to powers, to principalities, to corruption, to death—to all the things that have been conquered decisively by Christ,” said Hart. “It is in that conquest and in that victory alone that Christians are supposed to have faith and to understand that by providence God will rescue his creation. God will bring good from evil, not because he needed evil for the sake of the good, but because he will not suffer defeat.”

The proper Christian attitude “is one of hatred of death and suffering,” said Hart, “not that God will show us the meaning of evils that beset us, but that God will destroy them.

“In the case of Katrina, it appears to be sufficient to say that death and chaos has corrupted all,” he said, but death and chaos have been defeated by Christ and will be decisively overthrown in the kingdom of God. ◀

David Bentley Hart’s major work is *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth*.

Questions about Katrina:

What Do You Hope We Learn? ♦ Did Hurricane Raise New Questions?

Vital Theology asked a group of theologians to respond to two questions related to Hurricane Katrina:

- ♦ **What do you hope we learn from Hurricane Katrina?**
- ♦ **Did Katrina raise questions that are different from those that arose, for example, in relationship to 9/11 or the December 2004 tsunami?**

Grasp Mortality

There is nothing new to learn from this disaster that numerous disasters before might not have taught us. The Lisbon earthquake of 1755 was the classic catastrophe that challenged overconfident humanity. If 250 years later we still imagine ourselves to be immune to the effects of natural extremity, how likely is it that we “learn” this time?

At present, Americans in particular devote tremendous resources to denying mortality. Americans flood the entertainment world with images of death that they vigorously conceal in their actual daily round—thus signifying that death belongs to the unreal domain of movies and television, where Bad Guys or expendable extras die without being mourned, but where Stars are preserved from harm (or die tragically). The disasters that crowd theater screens involve massive casualties of faceless multitudes, but heroic survival of the recognizable characters. In the imaginary world of American entertainment media, death happens to other people.

I annually entreat my students to begin coming to terms with mortality,

and to begin teaching their congregations about the significance of mortality, now—when times are good, when most people are healthy, when one encounters fewer pastoral stumbling-blocks. Do your good, strong teaching about death when the sky is sunny, and when twilight comes you'll have established a solid theological bulwark to sustain grief-stricken sisters and brothers. ◀

A.K.M. Adam
Professor of New Testament
Seabury-Western Theological Seminary
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Abysmal Priorities



Gregory A. Boyd

We are not close to competent in responding to disasters of this scale. There's a tremendous socioeconomic gap between whites and blacks in this country and, in a related matter, a tremendous divide in how whites and blacks interpret things. Our spending priorities are abysmal. We knew the levee had to be fortified and funds were requested to do it, but they were denied—at the same time millions of dollars were given a rock 'n' roll hall of fame complex, a needless bridge in Alaska, etc.

The hurricane does not raise different theological questions, but it uniquely brought to light the statistical disparity between whites and blacks in the U.S. that raises questions about ongoing structural racism in our country. ◀

Gregory A. Boyd
Senior Pastor
Woodland Hills Church, St. Paul, Minn.
Former professor of theology,
Bethel College

Understand Connections



Philip W. Butin

We appear to be recovering, on some level, a more profound sense of connectedness between American people, our mutual need for one another, and our interdependence. It is unfortunate

that such things often emerge only out of extreme suffering and sacrifice. However, to whatever extent these interconnections can be re-established, our culture will better reflect God's intentions for human community.

Perhaps because no human being can ultimately be blamed for a “natural disaster,” the issues become a bit more layered and complex with Katrina. Blaming has been rampant anyway, though it has been less clear whom to blame than in the case of 9/11. It is hard for many to admit to anger at God, or life, or the transcendent. Thus we seek other human beings to blame. This, however, may significantly confuse the real issues. In the case of 9/11, it was perhaps more possible to explain the “experienced evil” of the situation more exclusively in human, horizontal terms, and thus to settle upon horizontal, human analyses and putative solutions. ◀

Philip W. Butin
President and professor of theology
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Where Were We?

Where was God when the hurricane hit? Where is God for the exhausted, homeless hurricane survivors who once made their homes Mississippi, New Orleans, and other areas trampled by this storm? Where will God meet those who grieve loved ones, and all

who lament for a beloved city they will never see again? These are very old questions. Questions we cannot *not* ask. And when we ask them, we have trouble suppressing a tone of accusation. "If there is a God, and if God really cares, then why did this happen?"

This is the question of theodicy. It seeks to understand and justify the ways of God in relation to our human experience of random suffering. But there is something we need to learn from Hurricane Katrina: for a people "steeped in history," as we are, a people who must bear responsibility for the ways the damage was facilitated by our neglect, the question of theodicy must be encountered in terms of our own historical responsibility. Even more importantly, if we would encounter God in the wake of the hurricane, the God of the suffering victims of history, we must risk asking the questions of "anthropodicy." Where were we when the data about the levees and the river, about global warming and superstorms, about the ozone layer and carbon emissions began becoming public knowledge decades ago? Where do we stand now in relation to those who are "other" than ourselves—people of other races, other socioeconomic classes, other human capabilities? Where will we choose to place ourselves so as to encounter the reality of our world?

Like the events of September 11, 2001, and the tsunami of December 26, 2004, Hurricane Katrina interrogates us about our knowledge of, our responsibility for, and our commitment to reality: reality as it is, not as we would prefer to magically have it be. To be sure, Katrina raises unique questions, for we in the United States have not experienced this kind of devastation before. Nevertheless, the basic lessons taught by the hurricane run along the same lines as those offered by all tsunamis, earthquakes, famines, plagues and wars. In every instance, the question arises: will we meet God where God is to be found, in the midst

of the poor and as the friend of the victim? Will we have the honesty to face God in view of our failures to know, to take responsibility for, and to be committed to this real history—our history, God's history? It is the reality of our historical world that poses "the God question" to us: "Where were you when the levees broke?" ◀

Kevin Burke, SJ
Associate professor of systematic theology
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Crime and Heroics



Stephen Chavez

Hurricane Katrina reminds us that the forces of nature are not all society has to fear. The destruction of life and property is made worse by the descent from law and order into crime and chaos.

Unscrupulous people, sensing an opportunity to profit from a disaster, plunder more than is necessary for survival. At the same time, Coast Guard rescue crews, police officers, firefighters, doctors, nurses, and other medical and rescue professionals make tremendous sacrifices to rescue survivors of the disaster.

A natural disaster is fundamentally different from a human disaster, insofar as the cause is different. But the results are often the same: stories of unselfish heroism trump tales of selfish greed; kind of like Paul's statement: "Where sin increased, grace increased all the more" (Romans 5:20, NIV). The countless hours of donated labor for recovery and reconstruction, as well as the billions of dollars in relief donated by private individuals, are the real stories of today's natural and human-made disasters. ◀

Stephen Chavez
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Gulf between People



James L. Crenshaw

Hurricane Katrina reminds us that the long tradition of linking sin with disaster is perverse in that it reflects a simplistic view of both God and humans. Instead of placing blame,

perhaps we can begin to recognize the risk inherent to finitude, a risk that also affects God, for when humans suffer, so does their creator.

Katrina's selective destruction in New Orleans and to some extent in Mississippi and Alabama reminds us of the vast gulf between poor people and those with means. Perhaps that shameful reality is what best distinguishes Katrina from 9/11. ◀

James L. Crenshaw
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Hope Shines Through

The faces of our nation's poor are no longer simply statistics but the people we saw night after night on our television screens in scenes reminiscent of poverty in the Third World. Throughout his 26-year papacy, Pope John Paul II stressed the growing disparity between rich and poor in our world and the pressing need to address this issue of justice. The church's social teaching is rooted in the dignity of the human person and the responsibility of all of us to address the issues of inequity in our world and in our nation. The generous and overwhelming response on behalf of the hurricane victims was the shining light of hope. We need to bring a similar dedication of time, energy and resources to address the social inequities that plague our society and that left a

significant number of people without the means of escaping harm's way.

Katrina raised questions of priorities and social commitment on the part of our nation to make sure those most in need among us have recourse to safety and the basic necessities of life. What all three situations had in common was the enormous and, at times, heroic response. We are left both inspired and challenged by the heroic efforts of police and firefighters and so many who went to the rescue on 9/11 at the risk of their own lives. Similarly, the overwhelming response of a good and generous people remains one of the greatest signs of God's presence in the midst of the human tragedy wrought by the tsunami and Katrina. ◀

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Common Ground Revealed



James A. Donahue

It is hard to find good in such a natural disaster that wipes out homes and lives. But one thing we are forced to face after such an event is our own mortality, the fact that we are not

God. We are drawn to each other, to those we love, reminded that the strangers who suffer in the Gulf Coast could be us as well. At the GTU we believe that whatever God you believe in, it is simply inconceivable that his or her purpose was, is, or ever shall be to divide humanity. This tragedy offers us a common ground, literally stripped bare by powerful wind and waves, to begin again as a country, regardless of moral and political divisions.

There is no longer an Other. There is no faraway terrorist for us to shake our fist at, or in the case of the tsunami, for Americans to feel a pang of sadness at the devastation and then turn away, confident that in our technology and wealth we will never face such

destruction. This is a more personal tragedy because it destroyed the homes and lives of American citizens, and there is no quick response that will satisfy our human desire for control.

We confront Cain's answer to God, "Am I my brother's keeper?" in regard to the value we put on human life—especially the lives of those who had less than we do before the hurricane hit and now have next to nothing. How do we integrate the passage from Matthew 25:35-40 into our daily lives?

Leaders made mistakes at all levels in dealing with this crisis. Have we developed a place in public discourse that values humility? How can we find common ground, keeping our focus on teamwork and compassion for those who are suffering? ◀

James A. Donahue

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Transcend Selfishness



Leah Gaskin Fitchue

I hope we learn the value of being connected and that the fullness of our humanity is intricately interwoven with our ability to be empathetic in response to the needs of others.

Katrina highlighted questions about race and class in a unique way that did not occur in discussions about 9/11 or the tsunami. It provided us with an opportunity to transcend selfishness. It showed us ourselves in ways that shamed us and moved us beyond the narrowness of our own existence to be more fully available to others. ◀

Leah Gaskin Fitchue

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Seeing through Suffering

The grace of these tragic events comes in three lessons: the innocent suffer, too; faith can shape our attitude

and response; and God is, in our suffering, making something new. When we see suffering through the eyes of faith, then we see more than meets the eye. We see through the suffering to the ongoing creation of God bringing light out of darkness, life out of death and order out of chaos. The grace of these tragedies is to know that God is not separate from the world but continues to be involved in the work of ongoing creation, using what goes on in the world to bring all things to completion. ◀

Richard Gula

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Disrupted by Christ



Elizabeth Newman

Soon after the hurricane hit, I received an e-mail from some of our former students at BTSR who have moved to Charlotte, N.C., and are living together in Christian community. They

had met Paulette at the Charlotte Coliseum. Paulette is an evacuee from New Orleans who lost everything in the hurricane. She grew up in foster care and has no family anywhere. Paulette is now living in the guest bedroom of my students' home. In their note about this, they wrote, "When we moved here, we proclaimed our intentions to be a house of hospitality, to welcome strangers, to have our lives disrupted by the Christ who comes to us as the poor, the sick, the homeless. We said this in response to the call that we believe that God has placed on our lives." This story is a beautiful illustration of what I hope we can learn from events like Hurricane Katrina: a willingness to have our lives interrupted by Christ in the presence of the weak, the vulnerable and the suffering.

The tsunami and the hurricane are natural evils, whereas 9/11 was brought about by human initiative.

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This difference generates some different kinds of questions. For example, is natural evil really an “act of God”? I think hurricanes and other natural disasters are better understood as the fall of creation itself. The natural order, like human nature, is fallen and not the way God intends it to be in this time before the fullness of God’s kingdom is realized. In the meantime, we are called to witness to God’s kingdom, to be the cruciform body of Christ for the world.

9/11 raises questions about how we are to respond to terrible acts of violence that destroy our neighbors or even our family members. In responding to this, I think it is crucial that we do so as persons whose first allegiance is to Christ and his body, rather than to our nation. This means that faithfulness to Christ, the Prince of Peace, rather than national security ought to shape our response. Such faithfulness entails refusing to kill other members of Christ’s body or even strangers, created in the image of God. This is not to say that the perpetrators ought not to be punished. ◀

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Promote Healthy Options



Anthony B. Pinn

We, in the United States, tend to believe that the socioeconomic “playing field” is even, with all who are interested in progress having mechanisms at their disposal to achieve their take on the “American Dream.” It is my hope that Hurricane Katrina and the government’s questionable response will point out the great need

still present in the United States for transformative practices and structures that promote healthy life options for all. In addition, I believe Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath should serve as an opportunity for religious communities to reevaluate their theological platforms and the modalities of praxis (or inactivity) they promote.

It seems to me Hurricane Katrina raised theodical questions in a radically different way from those generated by 9/11 in that the latter presented an easily identifiable enemy, one that posed a direct challenge to the religious and theological sensibilities of many Americans. 9/11 also allowed for a rather superficial self-inventory on the part of the U.S. in that the distinctions between Christianity and Islam (a rather warped depiction of it) were presented in a rather hyperbolic manner, and without critical analysis. It also generated a different set of praxis-related questions from those raised by the tsunami in that Hurricane Katrina could not be addressed as a matter of U.S. dominance as a world power providing support to others. Many in the United States addressed the tsunami with their sense of U.S. “special-ness” or “chosen-ness” intact. Hurricane Katrina pointed out the fragile (and in some ways illusionary) strength of the United States, and punched holes in the dominant paradigm of national identity and self-understanding as a secure and unshakable power. In short, the meta-narrative of uncontested U.S. progress, “special” status, and security was shaken; and, religious and political leadership has been unable to provide an adequate response—one that affirms the mythology of U.S. resiliency. ◀

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Learning from Victims



Dana L. Robert

People from the Louisiana and Mississippi coastal areas have suffered from poverty for a long time. The “New South” largely bypassed the fishermen, folks on subsistence-level farms,

manual laborers and residents of innercity New Orleans. What I hope we remember from Hurricane Katrina is that the rich Americans normally seen on television, the decadent United States beamed around the world in soap operas and movies, has never represented most people in this country. This hurricane should remind all those millionaires in Congress that they are not God, and they are also not representative of the average American. As someone from the Louisiana Gulf Coast area, I have been shocked at how surprised the media seems to be that there are poor people in the Deep South, and that many of them are African Americans.

Another thing people should remember is that the people of New Orleans, of Cajun country and of the Mississippi coastal areas, have tremendous spiritual and cultural resources. They have their faith in God, their commitment to extended family, their celebratory attitude toward life and their southern hospitality. We can learn lessons about faith and family and resilience as we walk alongside them toward recovery. Solidarity with them will involve sharing their pain and their joys as fellow human beings for whom Christ died. I expect this country to be deepened spiritually by both the profundity of the losses and the generous responses to them.

Hurricane Katrina differs from 9/11 in that it will not be possible to externalize the concept of evil and blame the events on others. When we look

within ourselves as Americans, we will be reminded that all sin and fall short. We will also be reminded that we are all children of God, worthy of love and respect. ◀

Dana L. Robert
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Practical Discipleship



Robert Sherman

In the face of Hurricane Katrina's destruction, Christians should remember the need for theological humility and practical discipleship. Our question should not be, "Why did

this happen?" but rather, "What can we do to help those afflicted?" Quick conclusions that we somehow deserved or caused this devastating storm betray an arrogance akin to that of Job's friends. Creation can be both benign and malevolent, yet discerning the particular hand of God's providence at work in it usually requires prayerful listening and time, not instantaneous pronouncements. Meanwhile, a ready willingness to surrender treasure and time in order to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and give shelter to the homeless—this is what Christians should be about in the days and months ahead. ◀

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Race Still Matters



Linda E. Thomas

I hope that we learn about the interconnections between race and class in the United States. Hurricane Katrina revealed the face of poverty in a

country that has the most resources in the world. Most of the faces of people structurally trapped in poverty are the descendents of enslaved Africans. It's interesting that Louisiana was the port of entry for many Africans who involuntarily came to this country. The descendents of those Africans have lived through another "middle passage" of sorts.

The slow response of the federal government, particularly the office of the president, gives a clear message that those living in poverty do not matter. In many ways it's like Rwanda—these people, who are made in God's image, did not and do not have the class status (and race diminishes class in this case) or "a bargaining chip" to get attention. Even those who lived in Southeast Asia seemed to get more support and empathy during the tsunami. I hope that we learn that race matters and that black people still are very oppressed in this country—especially those who are black and poor.

There are different questions because, in the case of Katrina, there was a warning that a major hurricane was coming. In other words there was ample time to have staged appropriate responses. The head of FEMA was a political appointee who had no qualifications for dealing with disasters. For me, to compare Katrina to 9/11 is like comparing apples and oranges.

One of the ethical issues for me is how could the levees not have been cared for in a city that sits below sea level? That is, how could government on the local and national levels not respond to a tragedy waiting to happen? ◀

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Loyalty to Humankind



Fredrick L. Ware

From Hurricane Katrina, we may learn three things: (1) the virtue of terseness, (2) the urgency to act, and (3) the value of community. A reflection on suffer-

ing yields only a more intimate sense of the victim's pain and rarely results in immediate and decisive action that alters the situation in question. The death toll, the number of homes and businesses destroyed, the number of persons displaced is irrelevant for determination of a proper moral and ethical response. The Good Samaritan engages in no unnecessary conversation, constructs no theodicy, and levies no blame; he sees only another human who is wounded and does what he can to help (Luke 10:33-34). Interpreting what it means to love humanity, Jesus commends us to follow the example of the Good Samaritan. Genuine community is characterized by open mindedness, acceptance of diversity, a vision of the common good, being moral and respectful toward one another, and demonstrating a loyalty to humankind that supersedes loyalty to one's own tribe, nation, political party, ethnic group or region of the world.

Hurricane Katrina, as any disaster that will follow, calls upon us to be less wordy, to act quickly, and to unite. The worst of disasters must be countered by the best acts of friendships that we are capable of doing. Our most meaningful encounter with God is not in the tumultuous winds, torrential rain and tidal waters of the hurricane but in the context of human relationships where we perceive and respond to the humanity shared by us all. When our relationships achieve this quality, we experience grace, healing and wholeness.

One issue raised by Hurricane Katrina is the problem of inequality in America. Seldom has there been open and honest discussion about race, ethnicity and class in America. The hurricane exposed the plight of the poor, those who, because of their race, ethnicity and class, are most vulnerable to environmental disasters. Several of these persons lived in the flood zone. Several lacked transportation and were without the means and finances to escape the hurricane.

Another issue that has to be addressed is the design of American cities and construction standards for

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those cities located in areas where there is the likelihood of severe weather, earthquake, mudslides and so on. There are other issues as well. How prepared is the nation in responding to crisis? Should not there be already an existing cooperation between various institutions and organizations in order for communities to be prepared for emergencies? Is it reasonable to depend always or solely on government? Are there needs that government cannot fulfill? Are

there some losses for which we may never be compensated fully? The theological dimension of these issues and questions centers on matters of justice, community, human frailty and the locus of (in whom or what is) our trust. ◀

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Because of the extraordinary interest in Hurricane Katrina, this special issue of *Vital Theology* has been posted on our home page at www.vitaltheology.com as a service to the wider community.

Katrina raised many theological questions for Americans to grapple with, and we are please to be able to provide this issue to anyone who is interested in acknowledging their importance.

For subscribers, this is a rare opportunity to share a full issue of the newsletter with others by simply directing them to our site on the World Wide Web.

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