

Did God Bring Smith, Murder Suspect Together?

Theologians Offer Views of God's Role in Hostage Drama

There is no disputing the heroic actions of Ashley Smith, who calmed escaped murder suspect Brian Nichols and enabled police to capture him peacefully after he held her hostage in a suburban Atlanta apartment for nine hours.

Smith's bravery and demonstration of faith helped end an ordeal that police say started with two shooting deaths in a courthouse, resulted in two additional shooting deaths and terrified the entire region for two days last March. Nichols, who had been awaiting retrial on a rape charge, has been charged in all four deaths.

Two Christian theologians interviewed by *Vital Theology* said they have no doubt that God was deeply involved in the interactions between Smith and Nichols. But both sharply disagreed with Smith's interpretation of how God acts in the world.

In a heartfelt, televised recounting of her story, Smith said she told Nichols that God had a purpose in bringing the two of them together and that Nichols's purpose in life—as willed by God—might well be “to share the word of God” with other prisoners.

“You're here in my apartment for some reason,” Smith said she told Nichols. “You got out of that courthouse with police everywhere and you don't think that's a miracle? You don't think you're supposed to be sitting here right in front of me listening to me tell you, you know, your reason here?”

Said Smith, “We pretty much talked about God.” She read aloud from the Bible and from *The Purpose-Driven Life*, the best-selling book by Pastor Rick Warren.

Smith was expressing a “risk-free” model of the doctrine of providence, said John Sanders, research professor of philosophy and religion at Huntington University, in Huntington, Ind.



John Sanders

“In the risk-free model, God does not allow anything to happen except what he has ordained to happen,” said Sanders. “That means the world is exactly as God wants it, which means that God wanted Brian Nichols to murder those other people so that, as she said, he could minister to people in prison later on.”

“God didn't want those people murdered by Nichols. It's not what he intended for Nichols' life.”

But if we didn't have people committing crimes, we wouldn't need somebody to minister to them in prison, said Sanders.

So why is God having people commit crimes in the first place? he asked. Surely God did not guide Nichols to take the life of a U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agent so Nichols could obtain another firearm.

The other model of providence, which Sanders calls “risk taking,” holds that God created humans with free will. They may respond to God's love with their own love or they may reject God's love.

“In doing that, God takes the risk that we will do things that God doesn't want us to do,” said Sanders. “I think that's the case here. God didn't want those people murdered by Nichols. It's not what he intended for Nichols' life. It's not what he intended for

(the victims') lives.”

This interpretation, however, does allow for the idea that God was able to work through Smith.

“I think she did a marvelous job in allowing the Holy Spirit to utilize her at that point,” said Sanders. “I don't want to diminish that at all. I think God was deeply involved in that situation, but not in the way that she has theologically stated.”

Some people find comfort in the “risk-free” concept. They feel better, said Sanders, believing that God has a reason for ending the life of a child, starting a war or allowing a crime to be committed.

“(Eighteenth-century religious leader) John Wesley said, ‘I'm sorry, but that's not God. That's the devil,’” Sanders noted. “I'm on Wesley's side on this. I don't believe that God is

ordaining all these events as some great blueprint through which we are living out our lives.”

People who take the risk-free view of providence hold that whatever happens is God's plan, said Sanders, but they betray their trust in this notion when, for example, they visit a doctor or wear a seatbelt.

“But I think God has given human beings tremendous responsibility,” said Sanders. “God delegated tremendous responsibility to us for helping each other and taking care of the earth. We can let God down by not doing that.”

Theologian Joe R. Jones said that the problem with trying to find a divine purpose in everything is the predicament one faces when confronted with evil.

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He uses the example of a person whose daughter was one of 125 people to die in a plane crash and decides that this was God's way of telling the mother to give up drinking alcohol and follow Jesus.

"There's something implicit in that about who God is, as though God brought about the death of her daughter and others in the airplane in order that she find Jesus and give up drink," said Jones.

A better understanding is that God is continually at work trying to bring good out of evil, he said.

In the case of Ashley Smith, he said, her Christian orientation and obedience allowed new possibilities

"At stake in all of this is who you understand God to be. Who is the God that is being talked about here?"

to emerge for bringing good out of a bad situation.

Jones, who describes himself as an incarnationalist, said that Jesus is the model through which Christians understand how God works and the



Joe Jones

Spirit is that paradigm working itself out in the world and in the church.

Jones is professor emeritus of theology and ethics at Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis. He is an

ordained minister in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

Grasping a proper understanding of providence is not merely a fine point of theology, said Jones.

"At stake in all of this is who you

understand God to be. Who is the God that is being talked about here?" said Jones.

"The common assumption that we all know who God is and that we just disagree" about minor differences is "one of the great obfuscations of contemporary discourse," said Jones.

"In fact, we use the word 'God' with extreme differences that should not be obscured," he said. "That's why Christians have to be very careful about how they use the word 'God' and careful about how it maintains a certain coherence, and what's decisively important about how we identify who God is. That's why, for me, identifying God primarily through Jesus Christ and Israel and the rise of the church is absolutely essential." ◀

John Sanders is the author of *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence*.

Joe R. Jones is the author of the two-volume systematic theology, *A Grammar of Christian Faith: Systematic Explorations in Christian Life and Doctrine*.

Sanders Dismissed Because of Book Controversy

John Sanders has taught his last class at Huntington University. The university has granted him a paid, one-year sabbatical to find a new job.

In January the school's board of trustees terminated Sanders because of "the controversy around open theism as promoted by Professor Dr. John Sanders."

Open theology has to do with God's knowledge of the future and the controversy involves a charge brought against Sanders, but eventually dismissed, by a member of the Evangelical Theological Society.

The board's statement said that it is "committed to maintaining the College's earned reputation and historic identity, rather than being identified by theological controversy or

becoming known as a center for a theological position inconsistent with our past."

Huntington President G. Blair Dowden has said there's no rule against open theism and that other faculty members hold the same views as Sanders but are not teaching theology.

"You can be an open theist," Sanders told *Christianity Today* magazine. "You just can't be a well-known one."

In 2002, a member of the Evangelical Theological Society charged that Sanders violated the society's belief in biblical inerrancy in his book *The God Who Risks*. Sanders retained his membership when less than the required two-thirds of the members voted against him. ◀

Ex-Hostage Weir Praises Ashley Smith

Ashley Smith was a hostage for nine hours. Benjamin M. Weir was held captive for 16 months. Yet Weir, a Presbyterian missionary who was kidnapped by Shiite Muslim extremists, speaks with enormous respect for the success that Smith had in effectively communicating with her captor—murder suspect Brian Nichols.

Now living in retirement in Oakland, Calif., Weir was one of a small group of Americans taken hostage in 1984 in Beirut, Lebanon.

"I think she found a way to somehow not only converse but reach and understand something of the man who held her captive that allowed her to be herself and him to be able to reveal his softer, more tender, more personal side," said Weir.

Although 14 of his 16 months were spent in solitary confinement, Weir did recall an attempt to speak about religion when one of his captors asked him about the meaning of the Christian Gospel. The episode, however, resulted in no breakthroughs.

"I said to him, it's really the message of God's love. That God loves every one. That God has gone to great lengths to make himself known ... and on that basis you love other people."

The captor's response, said Weir, was that love is a human characteristic.

"He said God does not love. God is not fickle. God does not change. No, God is transcendent and we must obey, and that's what the life of faith is, a life of obedience."

Weir said that while he had lived in peace with Shiite

Muslims for many years, he was saddened when he realized that his captors were young men who had chosen to be martyrs. Early on, he decided to pray for them.

"I prayed for them because they were real men, real persons and, under different circumstances, they would be very different and much like Shiite Muslims and young men I had known over the years.

On one occasion a guard asked Weir what he would do if he were released and met his captor on the street. Would he throw him in jail, call for help or try to shoot him?

"I said to him I'd really like to sit down and have a cup of Turkish coffee with you because I don't really know you and you don't really know me."

As did Smith, Weir recalled feeling that he had been set apart for a reason.

Weir said his long time in captivity allowed him to develop a deeper appreciation for the suffering that people go through and the importance of Christian community in providing encouragement and help for people to see that God does not let them down in difficult times.

Weir said that during his time as a hostage there were daily reminders "that God had not given up on me. That somehow God was aware of what was going on, though I saw no evidence of it." ◀

Benjamin M. Weir and his wife, Carol, are authors of *Hostage Bound. Hostage Freed.*

Providence Doctrine Discarded after Holocaust

Langdon Gilkey, the retired University of Chicago theologian who died last fall, was one of the first to note that the doctrine of providence has all but disappeared from contemporary theology.

The Holocaust had a lot to do with the demise of the doctrine of providence and theologians have become widely divided by trying to understand providence, according to John Sanders, of Huntington University, in Huntington, Ind.

On one hand, post-Holocaust theologians found it impossible to cope with the idea that God could have allowed the Holocaust. Their response, said Sanders, is that the Holocaust is simply inexplicable.

On the other hand, those who believe that God is in tight control of

everything are put in the difficult position of explaining why God allowed this tragic event. Their suggestion that someday we will discover that the Holocaust occurred for good reasons is too bitter a pill for most people to swallow.

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"But I think there is room for a doctrine of providence," said Sanders. "Some careful thinking has to be done about the nature of God, the way we talk about God and the way we talk about God's control."

God does not exercise control in the way we think about micromanagement, said Sanders, but God does set boundaries within which all humans live.

"I can't decide I'm going to fly up to

the top of a tree," he said. "So there are definitely limitations placed upon us. But within those boundaries or limitations we have quite a degree of freedom."

People in the pews of mainline Protestant churches often hold contradictory theologies about the mysterious ways of God, said Sanders, but many clergy simply drop the subject and declare that the only work that God can do in the world is to try to encourage people to love one another through the Gospel.

Sanders thinks God can do more, but he acknowledges that such belief raises other contradictions.

"I don't know of any theology of providence that is problem-free," he said. "The question is which problems are you willing to live with?" ◀

Is All of Life Purpose-Driven? Warren Sees God's Action in Every Detail

John Sanders, of Huntington University, says that his understanding from having read *The Purpose-Driven Life* is that author Rick Warren is a theological determinist.

Theological determinists see all events as being directly caused by God. This is the concept of providence expressed by Ashley Smith in recounting her encounter with murder suspect Brian Nichols.

Chapter 9 of Warren's book is titled, "You Are Not an Accident." Here are some excerpts from that chapter:

◆ "God prescribed every single detail of your body. He deliberately chose your race, the color of your skin, your hair, and every other feature. He custom made your body just the way he wanted it. He also determined the natural talents you would possess and the uniqueness of your personality."

◆ "Because God made you for a reason, he also decided when you would be born and how long you would live. He planned the days of your life in advance, choosing the exact time of your birth and death."

◆ "God also planned where you'd be born and where you'd live for his purpose. Your race and nationality are no accident. God left no detail to chance. He planned it all for his purpose."

The practical consequences of believing that every detail of a person's life is planned by God can be harsh, said Sanders, when, for example, a child is born into an abusive family, is tortured and dies at an early age.

"He's saying God chose that for that person," said Sanders. ◀

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