

# Religion, Rhetoric, and Social Change After Hurricane Katrina

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*In August 2005, Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans and the Mississippi Gulf Coast, and in its aftermath, Americans were left asking why it had happened. This paper explores the discussions that occurred in newspaper articles, editorials, websites, and blogs in an attempt to distill the multiple interpretations people had of such a major natural disaster. Three major meanings emerge: that the hurricane was a type of divine retribution, that the hurricane was caused or its consequences exacerbated by human failings, and that the hurricane could serve as a catalyst for social change.*

Traumatic events cause people to look towards God for answers, and many people find comfort in their faith. Asking why a horrific event, like the destruction of the Gulf Coast and New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina, happened is a very natural reaction. How could the good and merciful God of most Americans' spiritual beliefs cause or allow such a tragedy to happen? The problem of theodicy, or in the words of John Milton, "the problem of justifying the ways of God to men," is an issue that emerges after nearly every terrible event, and Hurricane Katrina has been no different.<sup>1</sup> There have been two major strains of rhetoric that have dominated the public discussion about how to explain Hurricane Katrina. The first has had to do with the idea of God's divine retribution for the sins of New Orleanians and Americans more broadly. The second has been that Katrina was a singularly unnatural natural disaster, and that humans, not God, are responsible for it.

These two conflicting ideas reveal a lot about American society. For one, they reveal the uneasy tension that exists in the political life of this country between the deeply conservative and religious and the deeply secular. The combination of the two sentiments also reveals a great deal about how the country has responded to the disaster and the underlying poverty that made the consequences of the disaster so terrible. In this paper, I examine the rhetoric of the search for meaning that occurred after Katrina by looking at newspaper articles and websites. I find that, as is often the case in the United States—a great borderland of conflicting and intermingling ideas, cultures, races, genders, classes, and religions—multiple meanings of Hurricane Katrina have emerged. These meanings are numerous, but for the sake of organization, I identify three major meanings: divine retribution, manmade disaster, and a call for social change.

*Vanderbilt Undergraduate Research Journal*, Volume 2, Number 1, Spring 2006

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## **Divine Retribution**

One highly controversial meaning of the hurricane that emerged fairly quickly after it hit the Gulf Coast is that Katrina was sent by God as a punishment. The target of the punishment differed depending upon the particular beliefs of the person declaring divine retribution, but the general theme has been the same. Some, such as Rev. Dwight McKissic, senior pastor at Cornerstone Baptist Church in Arlington, Texas, saw the hurricane as God's response to the sinful residents of New Orleans:

New Orleans flaunts sin in a way that no other places do. They call it the Big Easy. There are 10 abortion clinics in Louisiana, five of those are in New Orleans. They have a Southern Decadence parade every year and they call it gay pride. When you study Scripture, it's not out of the boundaries of God to punish a nation for sin and because of sin...They openly practice voodoo and devil worship in New Orleans. You can't shake your fist in God's face 364 days a year and then ask, 'Where was God when Katrina struck?'

Others agreed with Reverend McKissic. Alabama State Senator Hank Erwin wrote that "New Orleans and the Mississippi Gulf Coast have always been known for gambling, sin, and wickedness. It is the kind of behavior that ultimately brings the judgment of God."<sup>3</sup> New Orleans City Council President Oliver Thomas commented soon after the hurricane, "Maybe God's going to cleanse us."<sup>4</sup> Reverend Franklin Graham, son of the famous evangelist Billy Graham, also made comments tying the image of New Orleans as a city of sin to the reason for the storm: "There's been Satanic worship in New Orleans. There's been sexual perversion. God is going to use that storm to bring a revival. God has a plan. God has a purpose."<sup>5</sup> Charles Upshur commented that, "New Orleans was preparing for its Annual Day of Decadence. In a few months over 100,000 homosexuals would have converged on the streets of this city. During these festivities gross sexual acts take place in public. Now tell me was that hurricane and tidal wave a coincidence or was it God allowing nature to rebel against such wicked behavior of human nature?"<sup>6</sup> The conservative group Columbia Christians for Life reportedly sent an email out to its members claiming that satellite photos of the storm looked like a six week old fetus, and that this was evidence that God was punishing New Orleans for its five abortion clinics, saying that "the city of New Orleans has sown innocent bloodshed and violence in the womb for years and years and has now reaped bloodshed and violence on her streets... may New Orleans be delivered from her many sins!"<sup>7</sup>

Others have focused on more national instances of sin that God was trying to punish with the hurricane. Pat Robertson linked Katrina and terrorist attacks on the United States to the legal status of abortion in America through the Book of Leviticus on the September 12, 2005, broadcast of his radio show "The 700 Club."<sup>8</sup> Hal Lindsey felt that Katrina signaled the beginning of "the prophetic times" he has been expecting. Lindsey said, "the judgment of America has begun. I warn continuously that the last days' lineup of world powers does not include anything resembling the United States of America."<sup>9</sup> In response to the question of whether God had anything to do with Katrina, radio com-

mentator Charles Colson said that “Katrina gave us a preview of what America would look like if we fail to fight the war on terror...[God] allowed it and perhaps he allowed it to get our attention so that we don’t delude ourselves into thinking that all we have to do is put things back the way they were and life will be normal again.”<sup>10</sup> It has not only been Christians who have seen the hurricane as a form of divine retribution. Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, a Shas leader and the former Chief Sephardic Rabbi, claimed that God sent the hurricane because of President Bush’s support for the recent Israeli withdrawals from the Gaza Strip and because the people of New Orleans “have no God.”<sup>11</sup> North Carolina pastor Jesse Steins agreed: “If we continue on with this Road Map not to peace, but to hell Hurricane Katrina is only the beginning of disasters that will hit this nation.”<sup>12</sup> Also, several Muslims interpreted the hurricane as punishment for the U.S. invasion of Iraq.<sup>13</sup>

What do such extreme religious interpretations of the hurricane say about America? First it is important to recognize that such interpretations do not constitute the mainstream opinion about the hurricane. Indeed, according to an ABC News/*Washington Post* poll, only 23% of American adults thought Hurricane Katrina and the other hurricanes shortly afterwards were “a deliberate act of God.”<sup>14</sup> There was also a slew of editorials, letters to the editor, and responses on blogs criticizing the interpretation of the hurricane as divine retribution. Nevertheless, the fact these figures and these sentiments constitute a loud voice within the public discourse about the hurricane is important. Perhaps the appeal of these kinds of biblical interpretations and rhetoric is indicative of a deep spirit of individualism in this country. We like to think that people sink or swim on their own, that the United States is a meritocracy, and that the American Dream is not a myth but a reality. It is very difficult to see natural disasters in this light, unless we can link the actions of the victims to the disaster itself. In this way, public explanations of divine retribution are a way of disavowing collective responsibility.

### **Manmade Disaster**

A second meaning, and perhaps a more mainstream one, that has emerged is almost exactly opposite of the idea that the hurricane was divine retribution. Instead, there has been a great deal of discourse about how Hurricane Katrina was an “unnatural natural disaster.” In contrast to the overtly religious nature of the explanations noted above, several commentators have noticed that God has been absent from the more mainstream public discourse about the hurricane. Robert McClory of the *Chicago Tribune* notes that after Hurricane Katrina, the question of “why?” was less about why God would have let such a tragedy happen and more about “why there was inadequate preparation for the storm and why the response to the tragedy was so slow and initially so ineffectual. Attention was diverted from the ultimate cause of destruction to the humans who should have done something before, during and after but didn’t. So God got a virtual pass for almost two weeks.”<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Peter Steinfels observes the American people have been focused on humans to blame in the tragedy. In his words:

One might logically step back from asking how God could allow the brimming, turbulent Lake Pontchartrain to break the levees to asking how God could allow self-interested or shortsighted politicians to put off reinforcing the levees or allow enterprising engineers and developers to decrease the capacity of the environment to buffer storms. How could God allow the negligence, racism, indifference, or hard-heartedness that long gnawed at the social fabric of New Orleans – or the blindness or incompetence of officials who should have understood the brewing human storm, as well as the meteorological one? That such questions about divine providence have been so little pressed in this way testifies to a tremendous modern – and American – belief in human freedom and responsibility. On the Gulf Coast, humans fell short, not God; humans and human institutions should be called to account, not God.<sup>16</sup>

Steinfels' insightful editorial identifies one of the key attributes of the mainstream discourse after Hurricane Katrina: the incredible willingness to blame human institutions for the tragedy. This feeling is evidenced by the fact that the big news stories following the hurricane were about whether people knew the levee system was insufficient to handle a storm as powerful as Katrina and about the poor relief efforts of the Bush administration and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). Editorial after editorial asked where the government was in the aftermath of the storm. For example, an editorial in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* said “the rest of America can't fathom why a country with our resources can't be at least as effective in this emergency as it was when past disaster struck Third World nations. Someone needs to explain why well-know emergency aid lessons aren't being applied here.”<sup>17</sup> Editorials in the *New York Daily News* and the *Dallas Morning News* both asked, “Who is in charge?” and identified a need for strong leadership and the restoration of order in the city.<sup>18</sup>

The degree of culpability assigned to humans ranged from actually causing the hurricane through global warming to failing to prevent the flooding that occurred to a lack of preparation for the aftermath. Probably the most widely publicized global warming connection came from Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. with this post on the *Huffington Post* blog:

Now we are all learning what it's like to reap the whirlwind of fossil fuel dependence which [Mississippi Governor Haley] Barbour and his cronies have encouraged. Our destructive addiction has given us a catastrophic war in the Middle East and – now – Katrina is giving our nation a glimpse of the climate chaos we are bequeathing our children. In 1998, Republican icon Pat Robertson warned that hurricanes were likely to hit communities that offended God. Perhaps it was Barbour's memo that caused Katrina, at the last moment, to spare New Orleans and save its worst flailings for the Mississippi coast.<sup>19</sup>

Kennedy's post generated a great deal of controversy, and the idea that Governor Barbour really caused the hurricane's devastation in his state, which was probably intended to be tongue in cheek in the first place, was widely decried. However, the idea that human actions have changed the climate is relatively well-supported by the American public. In the same ABC News/*Washington Post* poll cited

above, a majority of respondents believed that global warming is taking place, and 39% believed that the recent hurricanes are a result of global warming.<sup>20</sup> While neither view can really be considered a collective belief, that fact that more people would rather blame the actual cause of the hurricane on human action rather than an act of God is indeed telling.

The desire to hold humans accountable for forces of nature says something important about modernity, for as we become ever more reliant on wonder drugs, speedy microprocessors, and instant communications, we have become blinded to the true power of nature. We are deluded into the idea that we can control nature, and certainly some of the anger that Americans felt after Katrina's wake was tied to feeling so helpless in the face of something that we could not control. We are not used to feeling helpless, and so we latched on to a blame game that created the impression that the devastation of the hurricane was the fault of inept human leadership. As Edward Rothstein said, "it is remarkable how this natural disaster has almost imperceptibly come to be seen as the result of human agency, as if failures in planning were almost evidence of cause, as if forces of nature were subject to human oversight. The hurricane has been humanized."<sup>21</sup> Humanizing the hurricane places it in the realm of what we can control. While Steinfels sees this tendency to blame people rather than God as evidence of "the culture's resistance to genuine self-scrutiny," I think that, when not taken to the extreme, recognition of the human role in Hurricane Katrina could actually be a healthy dialogue. It is important to recognize that as humans we made some collective choices that very much shaped the consequences of the storm. Rather than blame the victims of the storm for bringing on the wrath of God, as those who have seen Katrina as some form of divine retribution, the meaning of the hurricane that emerges from the idea of a manmade natural disaster is that there was a human element shaping the disaster that occurred.

### **Rhetoric of Relief Turning into a Call for Social Change?**

Hurricane Katrina opened the nation's eyes to the bitterness of the poverty of many of our citizens. Certainly, the media covered issues of poverty following the hurricane with a depth and breadth not often seen in this country. A recent sociological study by David Grusky and Emily Ryo (in press) found that on the whole, Hurricane Katrina did not change Americans' attitudes towards poverty too greatly, but it did increase awareness.<sup>22</sup> Grusky and Ryo compared surveys from October 2004 and October 2005 and find that while 11% of respondents were classified as uninformed in 2004, almost none of the respondents were uninformed in 2005 about the issue. They argue that while attitudes had not changed greatly yet, the intense coverage of poverty and inequality issues means Katrina "could be a turning point," if leadership that people can rally around emerges on the issue.<sup>23</sup> Certainly, there have been some calls for social change to fix the disparities revealed by the storm.

A major tenet of the social change rhetoric is that religion and morality must fill in where the government has failed, and the rhetoric of relief efforts is largely dominated by this. The growing accep-

tance of the premise that God must be a part of rebuilding the devastated areas is evidenced by an increasing willingness to let our spirituality, or at least the spirituality of our leaders, guide collective action. A great example of this phenomenon is the response to the public discourse of New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin. At a November 2005 town-hall meeting in New Orleans, James Varney of the *Times-Picayune* reported that Nagin was not well-received, “but when he invoked God the crowd of hundreds was solidly behind him.”<sup>24</sup> In an email, Nagin wrote, “The churches, synagogues, mosques and other religious institutions are the foundation for many people’s lives here. I do not make decisions for my city based on my faith. Rather, my faith gives me the capacity to continue hoping, striving, and working to rebuild New Orleans.”<sup>25</sup> Another example is Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco, who called for a state-wide day of prayer following the storm, saying, “As we face the devastation wrought by Katrina, as we search for those in need, as we comfort those in pain and as we begin the long task of rebuilding, we turn to God for strength, hope and comfort.”<sup>26</sup> President Bush also sounded the religious drums after Katrina. In his September 15, 2005, speech from New Orleans’ Jackson Square, Bush’s biggest address after the hurricane, the president used a great deal of religious rhetoric, saying that the ordeals of Katrina “remind us of a hope beyond all pain and death, a God who welcomes the lost to a house not made with his hands.”<sup>27</sup>

Some see these instances of leaders using religious imagery as calculated political moves. For example, Jim VandeHei and Peter Baker of the *Washington Post* noted that, “biblical citations and imagery are common touchstones for the president when he tries to connect to African Americans,” who polls had shown to be especially upset by the slow federal response.<sup>28</sup> But there is also evidence of a sentiment that a little mixing of religion and politics is exactly what is needed during times of crisis in America. According to Reverend William Maestri, spokesman for the Archdiocese of New Orleans, “When you look at the great leaders of this country, they have repeatedly called on religion in times of crisis, and religion and religious purposes have helped unite us for great national purposes.”<sup>29</sup> When faced with a tragedy that Americans by and large perceived to be if not caused by, then at least exacerbated by, human actions, and a recovery that has been perceived as slow, unorganized, and unhelpful, it does make some sense that we should see a turn towards religiosity for answers. Acceptance of the use of religious rhetoric is evidenced by the fact that groups that usually get upset by any intermingling of church and state are uncannily silent. Director of Louisiana’s ACLU chapter, Joe Cook, says “freedom of religion simply isn’t an issue right now” when there are more pressing concerns.<sup>30</sup>

Indeed, following the hurricane, there were countless stories of religious organizations doing relief work, people praying for their fallen countrymen and women, and the private generosity for which Americans are so well-known. Far from the fire and brimstone rhetoric of those interpreting the hurricane as divine retribution, there has also been an outpouring of support for the victims of the hurricane from religious sources. Jennifer Moses notes that it has been the “‘good’ Jesus—the Jesus of the Sermon on the Mount, the one who, through his people, clothes the naked and feeds the hungry...who’s been making the rounds,” after Hurricane Katrina.<sup>31</sup> Religious based charities have been a major

part of the funding for both short-term relief and for long-term recovery. Of the *Washington Post's* list of the top ten private charities involved in Katrina relief, six are faith-based, with the Salvation Army raising \$336.0 million, Catholic Charities USA \$142.2 million, United Methodist Committee on Relief \$69.6 million, International Aid \$50.5 million, Feed the Children \$47.1 million, and Habitat for Humanity \$82.0 million.<sup>32</sup> Churches across the country have welcomed evacuees, and in the weeks following the hurricane, southern churches even sent buses to Louisiana to transport evacuees to their congregations, promising them a “new start in a new city.”<sup>33</sup>

In addition to the relief efforts, there has also been a great deal of discourse about the underlying problems of poverty and racial segregation that were exposed by the coverage of the storm. Religious leaders, politicians, and journalists have all called for efforts solve problems of poverty based upon moral grounds. Their rhetoric is distinctly religious in its overtones. A letter to Congress from leaders of five mainstream Protestant congregations on September 13, 2005, asked for changes to the fiscal year 2006 budget that would undo the cuts to anti-poverty programs that were in the original bill. In the letter, the church leaders reaffirmed their commitment to “working for economic policies infused with the spirit of the One who began his public ministry almost 2,000 years ago by proclaiming that God had anointed him ‘to bring good news to the poor.’”<sup>34</sup>

Religious institutions lobbying on behalf of the poor is not a new phenomenon, but perhaps the acceptance of the idea of having a moral imperative to think more broadly about the common good and those less fortunate is, if not new, then at least something new in its degree. Religion has long been a tenet of the message of the conservative right, but only recently have politicians on the left considered using religious arguments to further their causes. Several commentators have pointed to Hurricane Katrina and the underlying problems of poverty and racism as an opportunity for leadership with an ideology from the left to emerge, and the use of religion and morality is a major element of this new ideology. In a sense, this appeal to religious dialogue in secular politics is an indication of the feelings of helplessness Americans experienced post-Katrina, as well as our tendency to blame the government and government officials for the problems both created and exposed by Katrina. Jennifer Moses put it this way, “If one common mistake liberals make is assuming that the great majority of Bible-thumping (or tapping) comes from the right, a second...is equating this style of religiosity with something as simple as narrow-minded ignorance. Rather, bringing God and his word as expressed in the Bible into the debate points to a profound lack of meaning and vision in our public discourse, and a searing pessimism that anyone, or any institution, in public life might put things right.”<sup>35</sup>

Now it seems that politicians on the left are beginning to recognize this pessimism and respond to it by changing their rhetoric. Reverend Jim Wallis, author of *God's Politics* and editor of the progressive Christian magazine *Sojourners*, is a key example of someone infusing politics with religion in order to make a call for social change. Wallis sees the post-Katrina moment as “an opportunity to provide leadership. If the Democrats don't start talking about poverty now, the party will die, and it will de-

serve to. This is a moment of transformation.”<sup>36</sup> Wallis sees the hurricane as having “washed away our national denial of the shockingly high number of American living in poverty and our reluctance to admit the still-persistent connection of race and poverty in America, and perhaps even eroded the political power of a conservative anti-social services ideology that, for decades now, has weakened the idea of the common good.”<sup>37</sup> Whether the Democratic party steps up to provide the leadership Wallis sees as lacking is an open question, but certainly some prominent Democrats are talking about it. Former Senator John Edwards is a good example. Poverty issues were a part of his presidential bid in 2004, and now his message might find new resonance with Americans post-Katrina, especially since he is framing the issue as one of morals. In a recent speech at Vanderbilt University, Senator Edwards spoke about Katrina at length and identified “a void of moral leadership” on issues of poverty.<sup>38</sup>

### Contexts and Conclusions

Hurricane Katrina revealed a great deal about America and Americans, and it continues to do so as we continue to struggle with how to rebuild. One of the major things that Hurricane Katrina showed us about ourselves is that we are a deeply religious people and that the conflicting religious and humanist interpretations that played out in the press following the storm do reveal a borderland within American society, a place where “two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different cultures occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle, and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy” (Anzaldúa 1987, preface). On one hand, there are those who passionately attribute Katrina to an act of God, while others (possibly the majority) see human beings and human actions as the cause. That the most widely covered divine retribution theories came from the conservative Christian right shows the power of this group in our national debate, and that these theories drew the most controversy shows how contentious and how polarizing this debate over “morality” really is. Katrina also revealed how the use of religious rhetoric in political life is important in this country. From the mayor to the president, political leaders consistently called upon God for strength and used religious imagery in their public remarks following the hurricane. For a country where “separation of church and state” is a phrase that nearly every middle school social studies student knows, this mixing of faith and politics is one of the deepest contradictions of American culture.

The process of creating multiple meanings of the disaster is not unique to Katrina, but perhaps the degree of emphasis on the human culpability in the consequences is. Historically, there have been segments of the population who view disasters as sent by God as either warning signs or punishment and, at least since the late 1800s, these interpretations have been voiced outside the mainstream. Ted Steinberg, author of *Acts of God* (2000), notes that after the major earthquake in Charleston in 1886, the blacks in the city saw the earthquake as God’s judgment and responded with incredible panic, while the white ruling elite insisted upon viewing the earthquake as a “natural disaster” (10-13). In doing so, Steinberg (2000, 19) argues they “may have implicitly suggested the reverse [of a morality

tale], that something was right, that the prevailing system of social and economic relations was functioning just fine...ultimately, a view of the seismic shock as only a natural disaster amounted to little more than a thinly veiled attempt to return the poor back to the city's economic treadmill." Steinberg essentially argues that throughout the course of the twentieth century, interpreting natural disasters as beyond the control of humans, but not as deliberate acts of God, has allowed developers and government officials to radically change the landscape of the country. People have filled in and built on marshes, destroyed barrier islands, and built in earthquake zones and on floodplains, without any degree of culpability for the increasing property damage that has resulted from storms, floods, and other "natural" disasters. Seeing hurricanes and the like as acts of God implies divine displeasure at something that humans have done, but a simple "natural" disaster allows us to go about the business of maintaining the prevailing social and economic order.

The public discourse after Hurricane Katrina, in contrast, emphasized the human causes of the storm and the human failures to control it. What is perhaps different about Katrina, compared to other U.S. disasters, is that there has been more of a focus in the public discourse on the inequality of relief and the social and economic conditions in place in New Orleans before the hurricane. In the past, the business elite in cities hit by "natural" disasters worked hard to minimize the devastation in order to protect property values and business interests. According to Steinberg (2000), this boosterism "amounted to a form of class warfare waged against South Florida's working poor," in the case of the 1926 hurricane that struck Miami because it effectively stopped the flow of relief funds into the region (58). The post-Katrina discourse is in stark contrast to this type of treatment. Instead of being cut out of the national press coverage of disasters, the poor were a major element of the Katrina story, and this has led to a call for social change following the storm.

This tendency to blame human institutions for the disaster is not only a thoroughly modern spirit, it is at least somewhat unique to American disasters. Following the Asian tsunami of December 2004, there were many calls for relief and aid for the region, but there were few, if any, real calls for social change. This is because God was very present in the theodicy discourse that followed the tsunami. McClory notes that "when the public began to realize the extent of the tsunami's death and damage, an overwhelming question was raised: Why would God allow such a tragedy? The responses were many, though none totally satisfying. However, when the full extent of the New Orleans disaster began to be displayed on television twenty four hours a day, God received scant attention."<sup>39</sup> Because most people blamed God for the tsunami tragedy, there was no need to call for change of human institutions and practices.

In contrast, the discourse of a humanized hurricane that emerged following Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath brought the problems of poverty and racial inequality into mainstream discourse in a way that they have not been talked about in a long time, and certainly religion and morality are a part of, if not dominant in, the rhetoric that frames the discussion. How this discussion might ultimately result

in social change is up in the air, but there does seem to be some recognition that the much touted American spirit of individualism causes us to ignore serious inequalities and social problems. Joe Klein of *Time* sees Katrina as having the power to “spark a reconsideration of what has become a casual disdain for the essentials of governance and our common public life,” and to take to heart the sentiment expressed in President John F. Kennedy’s 1961 Inaugural Address, “Here on earth God’s work must truly be our own.”<sup>40</sup> Will Hurricane Katrina become a catalyst for social change in this country? Will this sentiment of doing God’s work, of doing the “moral” thing, become a rallying point for the Democratic party? Will religion become ever more interwoven into the fabric of our political culture as we search for ways to address the social good? Will religion replace secular debates and secular policies as we continue to feel abandoned by an inefficient and uncaring government? Time will tell, but certainly Hurricane Katrina has shown us the underbelly of the American Dream, and if nothing else, we can no longer sit back in denial of the poverty and inequality in this country.

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