

## THE GOOD LORD JUST DONE GAVE US A WHUPPIN'! KATRINA AS THE WRATH OF GOD?

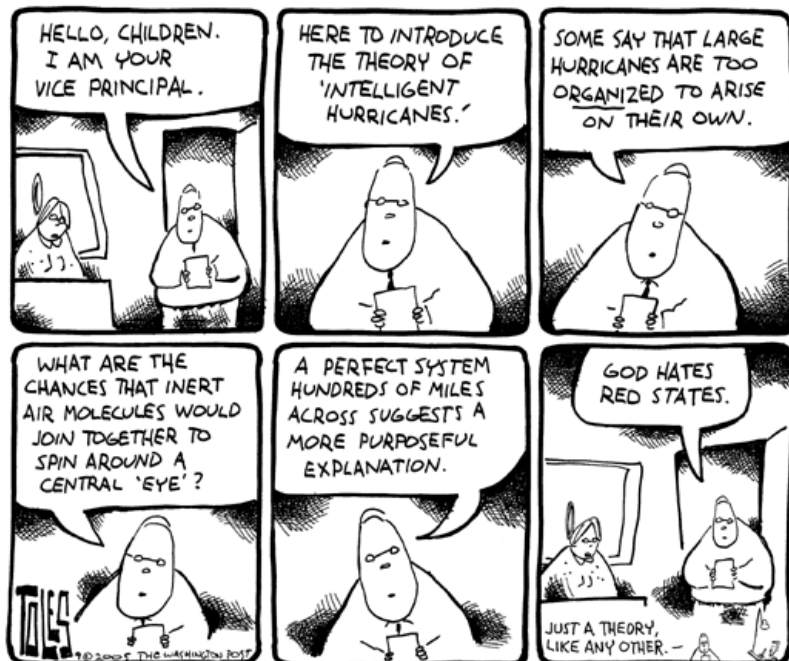
Protestors outside the national headquarters of the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgendered Alliance held signs such as “Thank God for Katrina” and “New Orleans: City of Sinners and Sodomites.”

A Mississippian interviewed on NPR just after Katrina hit exclaimed that “The Good Lord just done gave us a whuppin’,” but the Governor of Texas declared that “By the grace of God we were saved.” What, for God’s sake, is going on here?

Why do bad things happen to good people? Why do the wicked get away with murder and the innocent die in disasters such as Katrina, September 11, and a recent landslide in Indonesia where people cried out “God is Great” as they were being buried alive?

Following Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, the protestors above claim to have a pat answer: all of us are being punished for the sins of a few. Most of us, however, are repulsed by such an outrageous and poisonous diagnosis.

My first philosophy of religion textbook contained a footnote that showed a long term study of tornado damage in the Bible Belt. Far more churches were hit than bars and houses of prostitution. If these are “acts of God,” what on earth is God trying to tell us?



The problem of evil has bedeviled philosophers and theologians for at least three millennia. It is most cited reason by those who do not believe in God. But even most believers are not willing to admit that God judges us with such horrendous violence. This makes God a moral monster.

In Agatha Christie’s *Then There Were None*, one

of the characters opines that those who had been murdered were “struck down of the wrath of God.” Justice Wargrave was not convinced: “Providence leaves the work of conviction and chastisement to us mortals.” Ironically, it was Wargrave who planned all the murders!

Let us see if we can actually reconcile belief in God with the existence of unmitigated evils. The first thing to note is that Justice Wargrave is a good Confucian or Stoic in holding a doctrine of General Providence. In this view God presides over a world that operates by natural laws and in which humans govern their own affairs. Most people don't realize that this is the view that Darwin held in the first edition of the *Origin of Species*. On the other hand, the Abrahamic religions--Judaism, Christianity, and Islam-- believe in Special Providence. This means that God chooses particular prophets or saviors that embody divine authority, and then God intervenes in history as an expression of divine will and judgment.

Philosophers make a distinction between moral evils and natural evils. The first is the result of humans choosing to do good or evil. For orthodox Christians the prototypical moral evil was Adam and Eve's choice to disobey God in the Garden of Eden. All the other evil in the world started with this fatal decision. Natural or physical evil is defined as that which is not the result of any human will: disease (both physical and mental) and natural disasters. In a theology in which God is all powerful, it can only be God who wills these conditions and events to happen. Even though some Christian legislators in Oklahoma tried to change the language of their insurance law, calling natural disasters “acts of God” is correct Christian theology. The Oklahoma law makers, however, recognized the logical implication of such a view: it made God responsible for what all of us would call evil acts.

I suspect that the Oklahoma legislators really wanted to say that Satan causes all the evil in the world. But this is the heresy of Manicheism, a view that compromises God's power by holding that there is another cosmic power that is the source of evil. Following the Book of Job, where it is clear that Satan operates only with the permission and delegated power of God, Christian theologians have consistently declared that even Satan is empowered by God. Martin Luther expressed the point most clearly: “Since God moves and does all, we must take it that he moves and acts even in Satan and the godless; . . . evil things are done with God himself setting them in motion.” Following some key Old Testament passages, Luther believed that Satan was the dark side of God, the wrath of God.

How do Christian theologians justify God doing evil? Here is the rationale: God cannot abide the moral evils committed by humans, so God must show that justice must prevail. Causing natural disasters are simply dramatic previews of the Last Judgment, when divine justice will finally be done. If God is performing justice, then God is doing good not evil. We would call a judge who let all criminals off the hook a bad judge, wouldn't we?

Let's take a closer look at this solution to the problem of evil. Something important that has been forgotten. When the theologian Augustine discussed the Fall of Adam and Eve, he made a very interesting concession: "our first parents fell into disobedience because they were already secretly corrupted." Adam and Eve were already corrupted because they had "deficient wills." But who was responsible for their deficient wills? They could be only if they had created themselves. The only answer is that God created them finite, fragile, and corruptible.

An engineer friend of mine was once hired by an auto insurance company to analyze the steel in a broken drive shaft. He discovered that it was some of the cheapest steel that Chrysler could have bought for this crucial part of the chassis. Now it would have been absurd for Chrysler's attorneys to state that the company was responsible for the positive elements of the steel but not its deficiencies. At the same time it would be unfair to demand that the steel manufacturer make sure that there were no deficiencies at all. This we could demand solely of an omnipotent Creator. As the exclusive manufacturer of all natural things, the orthodox God is fully responsible for the deficiencies in his products.

I submit that General Providence is a much more coherent view if people are going to continue their belief in God. (Or Christians could revise the concept of divine power as explained [here](#).) The Confucians and Stoics also believed that God is not a Creator. Rather, God is coeternal with a universe that operates according to natural laws and contains rational beings that freely choose their own destinies. Following Justice Wargrave, we are solely responsible for our own "convictions and chastisements." Instead of blaming God, we can focus on a president who refuses to admit to global warming, who appoints unqualified people to important offices, and who gives tax cuts to people who don't need them.

Blame must also be laid at the feet of a Congress that has for years refused to fund necessary infrastructure repairs and maintenance. Finally, Louisiana and New Orleans government officials are responsible for not being prepared for the big storm they knew was coming. And God had nothing to do with it.

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