

Was Harvey God's Punishment?

When Superstorm Sandy hit the New York metropolitan area in 2012, the floodwaters in Lower Manhattan were still rising when some pastors pointed out what, to them, was obvious.

"God is systematically destroying America," the Rev. John McTernan, a conservative Christian pastor who runs a ministry called USA Prophecy, said in a post-Sandy blog entry that has since been removed. The reason God was so peeved, he claimed, was "the homosexual agenda."

McTernan belongs to a subset of religious conservatives—including some well-known names—who see wrath and retribution in natural disasters.

Usually, their logic revolves around LGBT themes—Buster Wilson of the American Family Association claimed God sent Hurricane Isaac to stop an annual LGBT festival; the Rev. Franklin Graham blamed Hurricane Katrina on New Orleans' "orgies"; and Catholic priest Gerhard Wagner called Katrina "divine retribution" for New Orleans' tolerance of homosexuality.

Other times, the scapegoat is gay marriage, abortion rights or foreign policies seen as harmful to Israel.

Yet as Harvey, now a tropical storm, continues to turn its Super Soakers on Houston, those quick to see God's angry handiwork in earlier storms have so far focused their efforts on praising Houston's first responders and citizen volunteers.

"The 'Cajun Navy' is at it again!," Graham shared on Facebook, referring to a band of Louisiana boaters involved in the rescue effort. "Out there with their boats rescuing people stranded by #HurricaneHarvey flood waters. I thank God for people willing to step up and help others—real Good Samaritans!"

And Focus on the Family founder James Dobson, who once blamed the Sandy Hook school shooting on America's acceptance of gay marriage and abortion, commended "the heroic efforts of emergency personnel and the National Guard as they work to rescue and comfort those stranded and displaced by the flooding."

Certainly, the vast majority of religious groups and leaders respond to all kinds of natural disasters with concern, prayer and warm outreach—as many are doing now. News stories from the flood zones note churches opening as shelters and pastors and others coming to people's aid. Christian, Jewish and Muslim groups all have relief efforts aimed at Texas.

But the idea of a vengeful God is nothing new in America. It came here with the Puritans and was firmly established here with the Rev. Jonathan Edwards' 1741 sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," which is still studied by seminarians and history and English students alike.

And by no means is the idea limited to Christians. Muslim imams in Egypt blamed Sandy on an anti-Islamic film, and at least one Jewish rabbi blamed Katrina on the U.S. support of the Israeli pullout of Gaza.

But where conservative Christian leaders have sometimes apportioned blame for natural disasters, some are now publicly cautioning against it.

"(H)ad we been living in biblical times, we would have recognized a hurricane like this as a sign of divine judgment, repenting of our sins and asking for mercy," Michael Brown, an evangelical Christian broadcaster and a member of President Trump's evangelical advisory board, wrote two days after Harvey hit the Gulf Coast. "We must be very careful before we make divine pronouncements about hurricanes and other natural disasters, as if they were specific acts of divine judgment against specific sets of sinners."

Stephen T. Davis, a professor of philosophy at Claremont McKenna College who has written about Christian theodicy—the problem of why bad things happen to good people—said the idea of God’s punishment gets “very little traction” outside conservative religious circles.

He said in an email that “the secular world finds explanations like ‘God wanted to punish Houston’ ridiculous.”

But Peter Montgomery, a senior fellow at People for the American Way, which monitors the religious right, said the reaction from the usual finger-waggers “is different this time around.”

“I checked with my colleagues and we have a couple of theories.”

One theory is that Texas, with a few exceptions like the famously liberal Austin, is a religious right stronghold. Gov. Greg Abbott is very popular with conservative Christians, so perhaps they are less willing to suggest God is unhappy with him. Abbott supports tougher abortion access laws and signed the “Pastor Protection Act,” which allows pastors to refuse to marry same-sex couples.

Another theory is that Christian conservatives don’t want to suggest Houston deserves divine retribution. In 2015, city voters soundly struck down an anti-discrimination bathroom law with support from many conservative Christian groups and leaders. They had a simple slogan: “No men in women’s bathrooms.”

“I think that makes it hard for the religious right to say there is some kind of collective sin in Houston that God wants to punish,” Montgomery said. “But if Harvey had hit New Orleans, you still would have had people dredging up decadence in that city, or if an earthquake had hit San Francisco, you would have had people saying it was because of homosexuality.”

Brown noted as much in his cautionary remarks, saying: "Houston is one of the few cities that has stood bravely against the rising tide of LGBT activism. Why would God single out Houston for judgment?"

Another theory is that the religious right voted overwhelmingly for Donald Trump. Texas, a red state, voted for Trump. And while Houston's Harris County went blue, all but one of its surrounding counties—the majority of the flooded areas outside Harris County—went red.

"They think the election of Trump was one of their greatest accomplishments and has put the country back into the good graces of God," Montgomery said. "If Obama was still president it might be deemed punishment for electing him."

Dobson may have alluded to this in his Harvey statement. "Finally, my prayer is that we as a nation would not politicize this crisis in any way," he said. "That will not help those who are suffering. Unity is our greatest strength in times of trial so let us come together to support and serve the people of Texas." {eoa}

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