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Hurricane Theology
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A friend of mine who left New Orleans before Hurricane Katrina hit stayed with friends in northern Mississippi. There he still experienced the fury of the storm, although in a depleted form. He wrote me about the large, old trees torn down by the storm, many falling through the roofs and walls of houses. Five large trees fell around the house where he stayed, although none damaged the building. He wrote, "I would say that it was divine intervention, but that would suggest that the divine choose not to intervene elsewhere." His cautious statement illustrates the pitfalls of seeing God's hand in a disaster such as a hurricane.

Night after night, as I watched the TV coverage of Katrina's aftermath, I frequently heard people exclaim to their rescuers sentiments such as, "It's a miracle you came!" and "Thank God for sending you!" and "God was watching over me and brought you here." One man said, "God has saved me for a purpose."

I do not wish to belittle such expressions of thanks and gratitude, but their implications carry further than the event of rescue. If we think through them carefully, we can identify a "hurricane theology" with implications that lead to perhaps uncomfortable conclusions.

To begin with, the statements themselves directly posit that the speakers believe God chose to rescue them, and that the people who saved them did so as God's agents.

If this is correct, then the opposite is also true. If God chose to rescue these people, then he chose NOT to save others. The people who drowned in their attics, the nursing home residents who died because they could not climb to the roof of their building, the people who died of exposure and lack of water waiting at the Convention Center or in the airport during evacuation, all died because of God's decisions. Perhaps God decided to have them die, or maybe he just did not pay attention to their fates. Neither possibility fits with the belief in a compassionate and universal God.

But some believers' faith in God's justice allows them to accept this, even as they claim not to understand it. This brings us to a second level of consideration. The government response to the disaster

was slow, to say the least. Did God cause FEMA to be incompetent? Did God purposefully guide recent Louisiana events (including elections) so that local and state government officials would not be able to react quickly?

There is still another level of implication here. Did God cause the hurricane? If he wanted to be merciful, surely he could have stopped it from forming, or at least sent it harmlessly back out to sea. A scene from the movie "Saved" illustrates the problem precisely. A paraplegic boy (Macaulay Culkin) explains his injury by saying he fell out of tree and his sister found him before he died. The sister now calls him "God's little miracle." The girl listening responds, "The miracle would have been if you hadn't fallen out of the tree in the first place."

If one believes that God acts in the small rescues, then one must also believe that God acts in the bigger events from which rescue is needed. Not to do so is to hold that God is not omnipotent, but is actually rather limited in his power. People who credit God with their rescue from the hurricane's destruction must also credit God with causing the hurricane.

This analysis of the theological implications of thanking God for rescue indicates that such statements are not merely small expressions of gratitude, but point to an entire theology of divine power and its use.

Although the speaker may not realize it at the time, such expressions reveal a belief in the divine control not only of events in the lives of individuals, but of nature itself, even though they may be uncomfortable with the way God chose to exercise that control.