

HYMN INTERPRETATION

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What will the preachers say? What will the people sing?

“What will the preachers say?” So Voltaire asked in a letter written on November 24, 1755, three weeks after an earthquake in Lisbon, Portugal, had killed thousands of people in a matter of minutes, demolishing the homes and businesses of thousands more. His tone was at least partially sardonic. After all, one building swallowed up in the city’s rubble was the Palace of the Inquisition—a bastion of orthodoxy to some, but to Voltaire, the very epitome of religious intolerance. “That ought to teach us not to persecute one another,” he continued; “for, while a few sanctimonious humbugs are burning a few fanatics, the earth opens and swallows up all alike.”¹

We need not be as critical of Christianity as Voltaire to repeat his question in the aftermath of natural disasters in our own day. What will the preachers say? Or more pointedly for those of us who “believe that congregational song is an integral component of worship,” what will the people sing?

Recent history has brought its share of disastrous natural phenomena: tsunamis, hurricanes, tornados, earthquakes. If we believe in a providential God—as Voltaire assuredly did *not*—we face a far greater challenge than he in responding to the resultant devastation. Issues of what theologians call *theodicy* invariably arise: how can an all-powerful and all-loving deity have permitted (or worse: promoted) the ensuing pain of innocent victims? Concerned for “what the people will sing,” hymnwriters have taken on this theological challenge in varying ways. A sampling of three texts opens an instructive window onto understandings of theodicy from Voltaire’s day to our own.

In Voltaire’s day, Charles Wesley was prompted by violent tremors in London in 1750 to pen a famous sermon on “The Cause and Cure of Earthquakes.” He further wrote two small collections of *Hymns Occasioned by the Earthquake* that were reprinted after the Lisbon tragedy five years later. In what Wesley the preacher said as well as what Wesley the hymnwriter would have had the people to sing, the perspective on theodicy remained firmly Deuteronomic. That is to say, along with the author of the biblical book of Deuteronomy, Wesley interpreted suffering as God’s

punishment for human disobedience. “Sin is the cause, earthquakes the effect, of [God’s] anger,” he declared.² Or, put metrically:

The pillars of the earth are thine,
And thou hast set the world thereon;
They at thy sovereign word incline,
The center trembles at thy frown,
The everlasting mountains bow,
And God is in the earthquake *now*!

Now, Lord, to shake our guilty land,
Thou dost in indignation rise,
We see, we see thy lifted hand,
Made bare a nation to chastise,
Whom neither plagues nor mercies move
To fear thy wrath or court thy love.³

While earthquakes admittedly manifest “God’s strange works of judgment,” Wesley insisted that the sovereign Lord of heaven and earth was the chief “Author” of any such upheaval, “whatever the natural cause may be.”⁴

According to an opinion poll conducted by ABC News and the *Washington Post* in the aftermath of hurricanes Katrina and Rita in the fall of 2005, few people in the United States today would concur with Wesley’s theodicy of natural disasters. Just under a quarter of those surveyed saw the hurricanes as deliberate acts of God. The number rose to roughly a third of evangelical Protestants, but even so, a mere eight per cent understood the furies of nature to embody divine punishment.⁵ Among this eight per cent, however, stood a few prominent religious and political figures (Michael Marcavage of Repent America; Alabama state senator Hank Erwin, to name two) who did not scruple to suggest that the ravages of Katrina constituted God’s vengeance upon New Orleans for sins ranging from gambling to abortion clinics to Gay Pride celebrations. To a Voltairean rejoinder that the flood waters along the Gulf Coast swallowed up the guilty and innocent alike, such pundits merely admonished a rough equivalent of, “There is none righteous, no, not one.”

Contemporary hymnwriters—at least those posting their texts at the Hymn Society website in the aftermath of the severe weather tragedies—have shown greater reticence about presuming to know the intentions of God. For example, while still holding to divine sovereignty as Charles Wesley had done, Baptist minister Eric Schumacher takes a perspective less like the book of Deuteronomy and more like the book of Job, in which the theodicy of suffering-as-punishment-for-sin is implicitly critiqued. Schumacher’s text, written after a week spent in Biloxi ministering to the victims

of Katrina, begins by attesting to the unfathomable majesty of God ("O, who can understand?"), and thereafter renders in miniature the encounter between Job and the Almighty who speaks to him—fittingly enough—out of a whirlwind: "Shall man find fault with God?" (Job 40:2); "Tell me, if you know, who made the earth and sea" (Job 38:4, 8). As many theologians have noted, this type of Joban theodicy never specifically answers the Why question of God's role in human suffering. Rather, it reawakens us to the need to relinquish our pride (including that pride which

thinks it can so readily discern divine motives), to trust in a holy power far beyond our understanding, and to "cast [ourselves] on grace."

British hymnwriter Andrew Pratt offers yet a third take on theodicy. A Methodist minister and tutor in contextual theology at Hartley Victoria College in Manchester, England, Pratt is regularly among the most immediate and thoughtful hymnic respondents to tragic events, wherever they may happen around our world. "In Every Face We See the Pain," a text written after the tsunami in the Indian Ocean in December 2004 and subsequently revised for broader applicability, provides a poignant example of his approach. He begins with empathy for the victims—a response which he feels comes more readily to him since the loss of his only son in an accident in 1999. He continues, like Schumacher, with an outcry lamenting our inability to understand tragedies of such magnitude. But from this point forward, the two theodicies diverge.

Where both Deuteronomy and Job affirm that God is the direct and purposive author of all that happens in the natural world—whether for reasons of punishment, or reasons of majesty beyond our discerning—Pratt's perspective does not press to such an affirmation. Tragedies like tsunamis, earthquakes, and hurricanes show us "earth's shifting, changing ways," but do they show us the hand of God? Is God, in fact, "midwife at the birth" of such phenomena? (Note that even here, midwifery is a step removed from parentage.) One explanatory option, practiced by many of Voltaire's deistic colleagues, is simply to put God "outside the frame," as one who created the world, but does not subsequently intervene. This is not, however, Pratt's approach. For him, God remains present and active, involved by what theologians call "*acquiescent*" rather than purposive will: God "*lets* such evils rise." However, the resultant mixing of love with *awe*—Job's "answer" to the problem of evil—remains with Pratt not an answer at all, but an ongoing challenge.

What, then, is Pratt's answer? It seems to me close to what physicist and Anglican priest John Polkinghorne has termed a *free process defense*. For generations, theologians have accounted for the suffering that human beings inflict upon one another in terms of a *free will* defense: God is taken off the purposive hook for evil (while still remaining on the *acquiescent* one), because God granted us the freedom which results in such abuses. A *free process* defense acknowledges that God extends analogous independence to the rest of creation to act in accordance with its given nature; hence, sometimes tectonic plates will shift, resulting in earthquakes and tsunamis. Not coincidentally, another of Pratt's hymns written after the tsunami begins with the lines: "We understand tectonic plates / that move beneath our feet." It is perhaps significant to note that Pratt's own training, prior to his degree in theology, was as a natural scientist.

The Fury of the Wind, The Raging of the Sea

SMD (c.g. LEOMINSTER)

The fury of the wind,
the raging of the sea,
how small a whisper do we hear
of our God's majesty!
The thunder of His pow'r,
O, who can understand?
Before the fullness of His wrath
O, who of us could stand?

"Shall man find fault with God?"
He asks of man below.
"Now, gird yourself to answer Me.
And tell Me, if you know:
Who made the earth and sea?
Who speaks and stars obey?
Who plays with creatures of the deep?
Who gives the beast its prey?"

You, Lord, can do all things,
and none can stay Your hand.
I uttered what I did not know
and could not understand.
Before Your greatness, Lord,
I fall upon my face.
And, by such glory stripped of pride,
I cast myself on grace.

The raging wind and sea
cause me to flee to Christ,
who bore the tempest of God's wrath
to be my sacrifice.
Though in the storm I'm blind,
I trust my Sovereign's plan.
I know that my Redeemer lives
And with Him I shall stand.

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In Every Face We See the Pain

CMD (c.g. SHEPHERD'S PIPES, KINGSFOLD)

In every face we see the pain
of grief and human loss;
the hell we cannot understand,
we cannot count the cost.
In each disaster we recount
earth's shifting, changing ways.
Creation brings its agony,
a challenge to our praise.

And was God mid-wife at the birth
confounding our belief?
Or is our God outside the frame,
removed from human grief?
For ages we have tried and failed
to understand this flaw,
that God should let such evil rise,
while mixing love and awe.

If God is here where bodies rise
in piles along the shore,
where is the mercy, grace and love
of which we should be sure?
We plead for love, we long for grace,
to help, where many fell,
to grasp the reason for this pain,
this cavalcade of hell.

Then give us strength to rise again,
enlivened by your hope,
and for the present show your love
and give us grace to cope.
God come and join your people in
the centre of their loss.
If you are real then show yourself
upon this present cross.

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Such an affirmation of "free process" does not in deistic fashion disengage God from interactions with nature altogether. Rather, in a type of "open theism," God continues to work within the flexible process of the natural world, operating through those openings in the system newly discerned by the unpredictabilities of quantum physics and chaos theory, analogous to the fashion in which God continues to influence human behavior without destroying our freedom.

Theologizing about "free process" and "open theism," however, may seem cold comfort when we confront the visceral images of bodies piled along the shores of the Indian Ocean or the Gulf Coast or any other shoreline in the world. God for the most part lets nature follow its independent course, and this is the costly result? Polkinghorne's best reply is to acknowledge not the awe of Job, but the mystery of Emmanuel. In all the ravages of nature, God "is not a spectator but a fellow-sufferer, who has himself absorbed the full force of evil. In the lonely figure hanging in the darkness and dereliction of Calvary, [Christians believe that we see] God opening his arms to embrace the bitterness of the strange world he has made."⁶ Or, as Pratt concludes his powerful hymn, God joins us in the very center of our agonies, giving us the strength to rise again and again when we had felt too weary to go on, showing the mysterious grace of God-with-us "upon [each] present cross." 

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Notes

¹"On the Earthquake of Lisbon," to M. Tronchin of Lyons, <http://humanities.uchicago.edu/homes/VS/letters/24.11.1755.html> (accessed 12/22/2005).

²"On the Cause and Cure of Earthquakes" (Sermon 129), Section I, point 1, ed. George Lyons, <http://gbgm.umc.org/umhistory/wesley/sermons/serm-129.stm> (accessed 12/13/2005).

³"Dire Portents," from *Hymns Occasioned by the Earthquake*, 8th March 1750, in *Representative Verse of Charles Wesley*, ed. Frank Baker (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), 243.

⁴"On the Cause and Cure," Section I, point 2.

⁵Richard Morin, "Beliefs about Climate Change Hold Steady," *Washington Post*, October 2, 2005, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/10/01/AR2005100101191> (accessed December 22, 2005).

⁶*Science and Providence* (Philadelphia: Templeton Foundation Press, 1989), 79.