

God, Culture and Adaptation—Social cause and responsibility for un-natural disasters

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James Wood (*New York Times*, January 23, 2010) reminds us that “Terrible catastrophes inevitably encourage appeals to God,” and that such appeals are ultimately uncharitable. The deep horror of these appeals, beyond blaming the victim, is that they obscure the causes of crisis while protecting the many responsible (human) parties. Pat Robertson (The associated press, January 13, 2010) had no compunction when he told Haitians that they were victims of their own “pact with the devil” made in 1791 through “voodoo” (properly *Vodou*) rituals prior to the slave rebellion against French colonists. He blames the victims so as to push survivors to look to God—his God and his church—for answers. His preoccupation obscures the effects of the French domination of Haiti, the pain of slavery, or France’s imposition of an indemnity of 150 million francs in 1823 (about 27 billion in today’s dollars) to compensate former slave owners. It took Haiti until 1947 to repay this economy-breaking debt.

After the quake, Obama compassionately stated “we stand in solidarity with our neighbors to the south, knowing that but for the grace of God, there we go.” He too was, perhaps just by idiom, evoking God, a blameless entity and a moral judge, as the cause for a disaster that can quite easily be explained as a human-produced nightmare (see Wood, *New York Times*, January 23, 2010). Presumably God judged some good and others worthy of punishment. Obama does not ask why the buildings were so poorly constructed and probably never inspected. He does not mention the enduring effects of forced labor and violent repression of political descent by the US occupation 1915 to 1934 and continued economic control through 1947, nor the succession of oppressive kleptocartic regimes that followed.

Haiti arrived at the day of reckoning in a shambles. The quake shook a rotten infrastructure to the ground. The 7.0 San Francisco quake in 1989 killed 63 people. Forty one of them perished in the collapse of the cypress structure double-decker highway known for decades by engineers to be a death trap—but neglected by the politicians they informed. The same magnitude quake in Haiti is already counting over 150,000 victims in the capital alone (Damien Cave, *New York Times*, January 23, 2010). Clearly the difference between these events is not located in the shock waves. The disaster was not ‘natural’. Rather, it stems from poverty and bad governance produced by a long history of exploitation and abuse of Haiti establishing an economy of cheap labor to manufacture export goods. The partner forces of repression and exploitation produced the pre-quake state of vulnerability.

But, rather than analyzing why people were vulnerable, there are many good reasons to blame God. Government is not responsible for “acts of God,” so any aid they give is gracious benevolent voluntary kindness. The victim just has to make due with charity—and, indeed,

deeply needed charity. Their misfortune is implicitly meant for them and the aid they get too is what God allows. But we live in a society that has pummeled Haiti over two centuries, although many of us do not know this history of oppression, exploitation, and the production of poverty.

Many who do not blame God blame the victim in other ways. David Brooks (NYT, 14 Jan 2010) ignores history by attributing Haiti's problem to "progress-resistant cultural influences." This explanation, older than as Walter Rostow's modernization theory, has long been used to justify western domination of non-western societies. From the 'civilizing mission' of colonialism, the West has viewed the 'other' as in need of our guidance to correct their backward ways. History shows these to be no better than Pat Robertson-style justifications to cover patronizing intervention. To dismiss these arguments as bigotry is not 'cultural relativism' as Brooks claims. Two hundred years of subordination of Haiti for economic gain was surely also justified by similar 'civilizing' and 'cultural' arguments. The 'locally led paternalism' Brooks abhors was informed by our patronizing domination. Of course, paternalism can never be condoned—not in the family, not in the state, not in international relations.

As the climate warms, the world is scaling up and institutionalizing a new weather-related victim blaming. In the years leading up to the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen (December 2009), the global consortium climate-change analysts settled on the term 'adaptation' to describe actions that people will have to take to protect themselves from the effects of change (e.g. IPCC 4th assessment report). 'Adaptation' would appear a welcomed non-theological term—quite well chosen for the bi-centennial of Darwin's birth. But, ironically 'adaptation' parallels the theocratic victim blaming while averting attention from causes of vulnerability.

'Adaptation' implies a kind of 'survival of the fittest' social Darwinist ethic—where only those good enough shall survive. It does not blame anyone, it just focuses attention on the individual's qualities needed to sustain in a difficult world. The term 'adaptation' implies that the unit at risk must adjust, rather than implying that society must ensure the basic infrastructure of dignified life. It places the burden on the affected unit offering only to help them to adapt—rather training attention on the problems push these individuals and communities to the brink of disaster. Like evoking God, most people who use the term 'adaptation' feel it is a noble and dignified point of intervention. They are evoking and working for good. But the term reflects a myopic gaze on response rather than cause.

'Vulnerability reduction' has been the commonly used term for what is more-recently being called 'adaptation'. Practitioners could engage in 'vulnerability reduction' after analysts identified the vulnerable populations and the causes of their vulnerability. But a focus on 'adaptation' diverts attention from the causes of vulnerability by focusing on remedial action. In doing so, like 'God', it obscures the reasons people need to adjust in the first place, avoiding inspection of the responsible processes (such as economic exploitation), structures (laws, institutions, inequalities) or, even worse, responsible parties (governments or corporations). Adaptation analysts should ask why people even need to adapt—that is, why they are

vulnerable in the first place. This should be their primary focus—despite the blameless term that the international community has chosen to guide their interventions.

In a world as wealthy as ours, how can we continue to blame the most vulnerable for their suffering while covering its causes? We need to apply multi-scale political and historical analysis to the causes of unacceptable vulnerability if we are to avoid unfathomable suffering. We also need to use that knowledge in policy making and implementation. Earthquakes do not kill people. Neglect and failure to prepare are to blame—especially since we know where risk resides. Vulnerability analysis and reduction measures must start with the many populations we already know to be at all-too-great risk. It is time to fully explore the social and political-economic origins of vulnerability in the face of natural events so that society can attribute responsibility. Then those – individuals, institutions, or nations – responsible can take appropriate and effective action.