Religious Responses to the Katrina Disaster in New Orleans and the American Gulf Coast

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Abstract: The Hurricane Katrina disaster that struck New Orleans and the states of Louisiana and Mississippi on the Gulf of Mexico coast on August 29, 2005 stimulated numerous types of religious responses. Some were individualized spiritual responses, and others were congruent with the outlooks of specific religious congregations. Some responses were expressions of negative religious coping, in that the disaster was seen as God’s punishment for sins. This punitive theodicy (explanation of why God allows people to suffer) did not prevent many people and congregations from organizing relief efforts. However, punitive theodicies articulated by outsiders who had no intention of helping were actually means to promote particular political and theological agendas. Most of the religious responses to the Katrina disaster were expressions of positive religious coping, in which people took comfort in a higher power, sought to help others, and adopted thoughtful theological explanations that did not blame the victims. A compassionate and empathetic listening presence was a great help to Katrina victims, whether or not it was motivated by religious views.

Keywords: Katrina, disaster, religious responses, New Orleans, Gulf Coast

The disaster in 2005 caused by Hurricane Katrina on the Gulf of Mexico coast in the United States, especially in the southern portions of the states of Louisiana and Mississippi, provide an opportunity to examine the types and functions of religious responses to disaster.¹ A disaster is defined by Dr. Harold G. Koenig, M.D., as a “physical traumatic event that causes major loss of life (ten persons or more), serious injuries of many more, and/or extensive property damage.”² Humans are thinking animals who are able to imagine a world without suffering and disasters, so the human mind rebels at the thought and experience of suffering and death. Therefore religious responses are to be expected in reaction to disastrous events.

My survey of religious responses to Katrina in New Orleans and the Gulf of Mexico coast indicates that there will be personal religious responses to disaster on the part of individuals who are not affiliated with religious organizations; religious responses on the part of people who are loosely affiliated with religious organizations; and religious responses on the part of individuals who are closely affiliated with religious organizations. There will be religious responses on the part of organized congregations and larger denominations. Religious responses to disasters also take expression in what has been termed civil religion,³ the blending of religious themes and allegiance to a city, region, or nation. Additionally, there are quasi-religious responses to a disaster,
consisting of events or expressions that are similar to religious responses, although they are not explicitly religious.

There have been numerous and varied religious responses to the Katrina disaster in New Orleans and the American Gulf Coast. There are examples of negative religious coping in assigning blame to the disaster victims, often by believers outside the disaster zone, but also by victims themselves. However, those who expressed a blaming theology often made great efforts to extend assistance to victims. It appears that there were and still are many more expressions of positive religious coping, in terms of taking comfort that a higher power or God is in control; congregations and religious organizations setting up relief programs initially, and later carrying out extensive rebuilding programs; individuals seeking and being open to sophisticated theological explanations of the disaster; and congregations providing social support for individuals. Despite the on-going efforts of faith-based organizations, there is continued stress and mental illness in the region. A problem that seldom receives attention is the mental health and burnout of the spiritual caregivers.

My sources for this brief qualitative survey of religious responses to disaster are books and articles published after the Katrina disaster, oral histories collected by my students and others, interviews that I conducted, and newspaper accounts. Since I reside in New Orleans, Louisiana, my focus in this article will be on Katrina’s effects in that city. I will also discuss responses in Mississippi reported to me by Deborah Halter, a Lutheran minister who served in a disaster ministry there for two years. Despite the dominance of Christianity in the region, members of other religions are present, so the religious responses of Jews, Muslims, and a representative of Voodoo will be discussed.

Louisiana and Mississippi are among the most religious states in the United States, with Mississippi ranking first and Louisiana ranking fifth in a 2009 Gallup poll. Southern Louisiana and New Orleans are predominantly Catholic areas, while southern Mississippi is more Protestant. Jews are a significant minority, and there are also Eastern Orthodox Christians, Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists. Catholics are usually Caucasian, African American, and Vietnamese. Protestants are typically Caucasian and African American. Buddhists are either Vietnamese or Western converts. There is a small number of South Asians. The number of Hispanics, who are usually Catholic or Protestant, increased in the region after Katrina due to the influx of workers.

The Katrina experience demonstrates that religious responses are functional means of coping with disasters. The Katrina disaster brought out the worst in some people, but it brought out the best in many others in expressions of selfless compassion, courage, and resilience on the part of victims as they attempted to save children, parents, and strangers. Additionally many thousands of people across the United States have responded to the Katrina victims in many compassionate ways. The altruism and service of many appears to be a natural human response not necessarily related to religious responses. But various religious worldviews are directly related to the religious responses of countless others. While a religious studies perspective anticipates that people will interpret their experiences in light of the worldview they possessed prior to the disaster, this is
abundantly confirmed in oral accounts of Katrina victims. An important truth that emerges from this data is the healing power of compassionate presence and empathy for disaster victims, regardless of whether or not it has an explicitly religious motivation.

THE HURRICANE KATRINA EVENT

Although New Orleans is located 105 miles from the mouth of the Mississippi River, it is vulnerable to flooding because 51 percent of its land exists at or below sea level and it is surrounded by water. Lake Pontchartrain is to the north, Lake Borgne is to the east, swamps are to the west, wetlands are to the south, and the Mississippi River cuts through the center of the city. The wetlands, which have protected the city for three centuries from hurricanes, have been eroding due the Mississippi River not being permitted by levees to deposit silt that replenishes wetlands, and also due to shipping and pipeline channels cut through the freshwater wetlands by the Corps of Engineers and the oil industry, which permits the incursion of saltwater that destroys the cypress trees and marsh grasses holding the soil in place. Since the 1930s, Louisiana has lost about 1,900 square miles of wetlands and barrier islands, which formerly protected New Orleans from storm surges from hurricanes and which also acted to diminish the strength of hurricanes as they approached land.

On Sunday, August 28, 2005, Katrina was a category 5 hurricane, reaching one thousand miles across the Gulf of Mexico, with winds up to 175 m.p.h. An order to evacuate New Orleans was issued, but many people remained due to poverty and lack of transportation, age and/or illness and corresponding inability to leave, and also by choice.

By the time Katrina hit the Gulf Coast and New Orleans it had weakened to a category 3 hurricane with winds up to 127 m.p.h. The east side of the storm with the strongest winds and rain pounded the state of Mississippi coast, where a storm surge up to 23 feet and winds up to 100 m.p.h. obliterated homes, buildings, and boats in the coastal cities and towns.

In New Orleans the storm surge raised the water levels in canals, waterways, and industrial canals that run through the city. The levees protecting Orleans Parish gave way in multiple places, flooding 80 percent of the city with water ranging from a few inches to over ten feet.

The New Orleans neighborhoods, including the famous French Quarter, that did not flood were on the higher ground along the river. The neighborhoods next to Lake Pontchartrain and to the east of New Orleans got the worst flooding, with the water reaching eight to ten feet. More central areas of the city received flooding from a few inches to eight feet. To the east of New Orleans in St. Bernard Parish, homes and businesses were covered by water that reached over ten feet in the worst areas. In all cases of flooding, the home or building was subsequently ruined by mold, which grows rapidly in the region’s hot and humid climate.
People living on the Gulf Coast died in the huge tidal surge when their homes were washed out to sea. In the New Orleans area people drowned in their homes, attics, and in a couple of nursing homes for the elderly. People drowned when they slipped off the roofs of their houses into the water, or when a house demolished by the wind and water dumped water on them or threw them into the floodwater. Other people died while attempting to walk to safety when they stepped on sharp debris, or when they were sucked into open drainage holes that they could not see because of the floodwater. The water was contaminated with sewage, oil and caustic chemicals from chemical plants, causing numerous injuries and death. Vulnerable patients died in hospitals that became hot and unsanitary because they were without electricity and water.

People in New Orleans were left on their rooftops, in the Superdome, and at the Convention Center for four to six days without food, water, toilet facilities, and medical care before they were evacuated. People were also stranded in their flooded homes and apartment buildings. Surviving residents on the Gulf Coast were left to fend for themselves for days. Federal assistance was very slow to arrive. While the people waited, babies and adults died from dehydration, sun exposure, lack of prescription medications, and infections.

The death toll in Mississippi was 236 with 67 people missing, and 65,380 houses destroyed. In New Orleans, the final death toll was 1,836 dead, with 705 missing. About 500,000 families were displaced, about 200,000 homes destroyed, and, ultimately, 220,000 jobs were lost.

In New Orleans law and order broke down. People desperate for food, water, and medicine began breaking into stores and pharmacies to get items they needed to survive and feed their children. However, others resorted to looting for valuables. Homeowners and business owners armed themselves to protect their property.

Unfortunately, armed white vigilantes patrolling their neighborhoods threatened and shot African Americans as they attempted to walk to locations where they could be evacuated. Police officers similarly carried out unnecessary shootings and killings. The most egregious case occurred on September 4, 2005, on the Danziger Bridge, where police (white, black, and Hispanic) opened fire on unarmed African Americans crossing the bridge. Two men were killed, and five other persons were severely wounded and maimed. Order and safety were not returned to the city until National Guard troops arrived.

**RELIGIOUS RESPONSES TO DISASTER AS FUNCTIONAL COPING**

Koenig cites a number of studies that have demonstrated that religious faith and the support of religious groups can facilitate coping with disaster. Religious faith can help promote stress-related growth on the part of the individual, so the person will be more resilient in the face of future difficulties and even disasters. According to Koenig, religious faith can promote a comforting locus of control belief, either in the person’s ability to control events affecting him or her, or in attributing control to a benevolent
higher power. According to Koenig: “Even the belief that God is punishing the person for past sins by allowing traumatic events to occur may still be better than believing that no one is in control.”

Koenig describes negative religious coping as when a disaster victim feels punished by God or the gods, is angry at God, or feels abandoned by God. Koenig states that negative religious coping is less common than positive religious coping, and he cites a study concluding that negative religious coping is a “robust predictor of worse mental health” over time. However, Koenig asserts that negative religious coping will be more helpful to an individual’s coping with disaster than no religious coping.

In his discussion of negative religious coping, Koenig does not take into consideration that negative religious coping can be influenced by scriptures such as the Bible. The Hebrew Bible or Christian Old Testament contains a strong theological rationale for expecting God to send disastrous punishments if commandments are not obeyed. Bible scholars call this the deuteronomistic view of history. Deuteronomy 28:15 reads:

But if you will not obey the Lord your God by diligently observing all his commandments and decrees, which I am commanding you today, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you….

Nor does Koenig examine the phenomenon of loss of faith. Deborah Halter has concluded that loss of faith can be an expression of negative religious coping; the individual is in effect saying to God, “You did not look after me or my loved ones, so I won’t acknowledge you.” Thus, loss of faith can be an extension of being angry at God.

I note also that Koenig does not discuss violent religious responses to disaster. I consider violent responses to disaster to be expressions of negative religious coping, since they cause further destruction to the victims as well as the perpetrators.

Positive religious coping is described by Koenig as resorting to an individualistic faith or a faith tradition to find meaning in the disaster’s events, having faith in a benevolent higher power, feeling empathy for and helping others, and also finding comfort and support in a religious congregation. Koenig describes positive religious coping as having a strong relation to stress-related growth.

HOW DOES A CARING GOD OR A HIGHER POWER RELATE TO DISASTER?

Michael Eric Dyson, an African American Christian theologian, has written about the types of theodicies—explanations addressing the question of God’s justice in tragic events—that can be applied to disasters. A punitive theodicy will state that a disaster is divine punishment for sins. A punitive theodicy can be found in the deuteronomistic view of history in the Hebrew Bible (also Christian Old Testament). An attributive theodicy says that the actions of humans caused the suffering and disaster. I believe that we can add the workings of natural phenomena to attributive theodicy.
A number of commentators outside the New Orleans and Gulf Coast area drew on punitive explanations for the Katrina disaster. Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, the former Sephardic chief rabbi of Israel, said that Katrina was “God’s retribution” for President George W. Bush’s support for the removal of Jewish settlers from the Gaza Strip by Israel earlier in August 2005. A statement from al-Qaida in Iraq said, “God attacked Americans and the prayers of the oppressed were answered.” Minister Louis Farrakhan of the Nation of Islam headquartered in Chicago, Illinois, said that Katrina was God’s punishment for the United States’ warmongering and racism.23

These punitive interpretations of the Katrina disaster are similar to Koenig’s negative religious coping, but these people were not the individuals who were affected by Katrina. Jeff Hebb, a white man who undertook a post-Katrina street ministry in New Orleans, told me that punitive interpretations were common among black New Orleanians in poor neighborhoods.24 Deborah Halter also reported that among people of lower socio-economic status in Mississippi she often found a belief that God sent Katrina to punish “us” for “our sins,” and that we have to “clean up ‘our’ act.” Halter says that this perspective has the following logic: If God was not behind the disaster and the suffering it caused, then God must be an uncaring or absent God. According to Halter, “An angry god is at least an interested god.”25

The punitive theodicy was also articulated by conservative black and white ministers in New Orleans, who gathered on the steps of City Hall on February 17, 2006, to pray and sing for a “spiritual rebirth” for a once-corrupted New Orleans that several speakers said suffered God’s judgment in Hurricane Katrina.26

Despite the punitive theodicy adopted by some conservative Christian churches and their ministers, these same churches were very active in alleviating the suffering caused by Katrina. For instance, the non-denominational charismatic (Pentecostal) Celebration Church, with mostly white members, in Metairie, Louisiana, a suburb to the west of New Orleans, set up a relief center providing food and clothing that served thousands, despite the fact that its main church facility was damaged by five feet of flood water and its members were scattered across the nation. Celebration Church provided a free house- gutting service to flood victims. The church brought in grief counselors. Church volunteers, while providing food, water and clothing, also listened to victims and prayed with them. A church member said that their relief ministry was motivated by the example of Jesus Christ.27

Countless other examples indicate that a punitive theodicy as an expression of a literalistic reading of the Bible contains scope for compassionate action based on Christ’s example. But a punitive theodicy as applied by judgmental outsiders is an easy explanation that blames the victim, promotes a political and/or theological agenda, and makes those not suffering the catastrophe feel self-righteous.

In New Orleans, explanations of the disaster quickly moved to attributive explanations. Numerous human failures were seen as the cause: the human-caused diminishment of the wetlands that formerly protected New Orleans from hurricanes;
human contributions to global warming that is causing more numerous and stronger hurricanes; and especially the failure of the United States Corps of Engineers to construct levees that met the Corps’ own standards.

Rabbi Harold S. Kushner, author of the famous book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, 28 gave a talk in Temple Sinai, a Reform Jewish congregation in New Orleans, in October 2006. The packed audience included Christians as well as Jews. Kushner said that *Why?* is the wrong question to ask after a disaster. Instead, the real question posed by a disaster is: *Now that this has happened, what do I do about it?*29 Kushner said that it is all right to turn one’s anger outward toward God. He said that God is not threatened by anger, and honors the honest feelings of those who suffer. But Kushner recommended that ultimately one should not let one’s anger cut one off from God’s restorative power.

Kushner sees hurricanes as being the products of natural forces, and the other sufferings of Katrina as caused by human failings. He told New Orleanians, “God was not in the hurricane.” Instead God is in the “still small voice” (1 Kings 19:12) that gives persons the courage to overcome losses and rebuild, and the compassion to help others.30

The perspective on disasters taught by Rabbi Kushner is prevalent in the Reform Jewish community in New Orleans and among mainstream Christians familiar with his book. “Suffering is not something that signifies God’s anger or punishment; it is something that solidifies faith in God’s goodness and the goodness of people,”31 and it motivates believers to act to alleviate suffering.

**INDIVIDUAL RELIGIOUS RESPONSES**

The oral accounts collected by my students and myself, as well as those reported in other sources, indicate a variety of individual religious responses to Katrina. Persons who were not actively affiliated with a religious organization reported responses that reflected their individual spirituality. Persons, who at the time of Katrina were affiliated with a religious community, reported responses that reflected their appropriation of the worldview of that tradition. The majority of people reporting religious responses found comfort and strength in their religious outlooks.

**Responses Influenced by Specific Religious Worldviews**

Interviews conducted by my students with members of congregations in and around New Orleans in Spring 2006 and Spring 2007 revealed diverse responses colored by the theologies of the congregations to which they belonged. The majority of the interviewees reported positive religious coping. None reported feeling punished or neglected by God, or feeling angry at God. Only one person interviewed, due to repeated traumas, reported a negative response of losing faith in God.

The Christians and Jews interviewed felt that God looked out for them and their loved ones during the disaster. Many felt that God called them to alleviate suffering and did so
in numerous ways: feeding and counseling displaced people; collecting and distributing water and food; providing shelter and services to people who had lost their homes; and helping to gut ruined houses. Jews undertook these activities out of a commitment to social justice rooted in the Hebrew Bible’s teachings that God expects right relationships and justice. Christians had the same commitment, but based on the Christian Bible, with the additional motivation of emulating Jesus Christ. Christians who did not interpret the Bible in a literalistic manner did not interpret the disaster as God’s punishment.

An interesting case was the First Seventh-day Adventist Church in Metairie, Louisiana, which is part of a denomination that emphasizes the imminent fulfillment of apocalyptic predictions in the book of Revelation and other books in the Bible. The members of this church are predominantly white and middle-class. The pastor and the members interpreted the Katrina disaster and other natural disasters as part of the cataclysmic events leading to the Second Coming of Christ. The pastor reported that very few of the church’s members were despondent about their material losses, because they could place those losses within the context of expected Endtime events. Members looked beyond the Katrina disaster to the violent, but ultimately glorious, Second Coming and establishment of God’s Kingdom. Therefore, Katrina strengthened the members’ faith in the Bible’s prophecies and their Adventist worldview. Because they believed the Endtime was near, they saw no point in working to reform and improve society. However, the Endtime had not yet arrived, so members set to work repairing their church and homes after Katrina.32

In contrast, members of the Unitarian-Universalist Association are rationalists, social activists, and often non-Christian. Individuals with a variety of religious orientations, including Buddhism and Neopaganism, liberal political and social orientations, as well as gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender individuals have found a home in the UUA. Unitarian-Universalists took an immediate activist and political stance toward the Katrina disaster, despite the fact that the two UUA churches in New Orleans—First Unitarian Universalist Church on Claiborne Avenue, and Community Church Unitarian Universalist in the Lakeview neighborhood—experienced severe flooding. While the members of the two churches and their ministers focused on reconnecting with members scattered across the nation, rebuilding or restoring the church buildings, and doing likewise with their homes and businesses, they also concentrated on raising awareness of a variety of social and political issues, including the environmental issues that contributed to the disaster, social reforms and services needed for people impacted by Katrina, the economic drain of the war in Iraq on the United States at a time when funding was needed to rebuild and protect New Orleans and the Gulf Coast.33

Imam Abdur Rahman Bashir, a Pakistani American who was 26-years-old in 2005 and the imam of Maṣjīd Abu-Bakr al Siddiq, an Islamic mosque in Metairie, Louisiana, coordinated Muslim relief work. Muslims in general believe that nothing happens unless God wills it. Imam Abdur Rahman Bashir viewed Katrina primarily as a test to see if the faithful would respond with compassion to help others. After returning to the New Orleans area, he organized his congregation to operate a soup kitchen and distribute food and cleaning supplies received from the World Food Bank.34
Catholics in the New Orleans area have prayed to Our Lady of Prompt Succor, an expression of the Virgin Mary, for protection since January 7, 1815, when prayers to her corresponded with the American defeat of British troops attempting to invade the city. Catholic Masses regularly include prayers to Our Lady of Prompt Succor for protection from hurricanes. The annual Mass honoring Our Lady of Prompt Succor is celebrated by the Archbishop on January 8 at the National Shrine of Our Lady of Prompt Succor on the campus of the Ursuline Academy, a girl’s elementary and high school in New Orleans founded by the Ursuline nuns. At the 2007 Mass, Helen Eshleman, a graduate of Ursuline Academy, said worshippers were there to give thanks for their return to the city. When asked if Our Lady of Prompt Succor had protected the city from the hurricane, Eshleman answered, “She spared the city from natural disaster. The levees weren’t her domain,” thus placing responsibility for the disaster on the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Catholics continue to pray to Our Lady of Prompt Succor for protection from hurricanes. Sallie Ann Glassman is a Jewish woman who is an initiated Haitian Voodoo manbo, or priestess, in New Orleans, who performs an annual public ritual to honor Erzulie Dantor, whom she identifies with Our Lady of Prompt Succor, for the protection of New Orleans from hurricanes. When asked why the ritual in the summer of 2005 did not appear to work, Glassman pointed out that Katrina had in fact not hit New Orleans directly, but had turned toward the east. The massive destruction in New Orleans was caused by the failure of the levees, which was due to human error and incompetence. Thus Glassman’s rationale is similar to that of Helen Eshleman. Glassman continues to perform an annual Voodoo ceremony to protect the city from hurricanes.

During the Katrina disaster, employees of Catholic Charities were providing the food, water, and medical care that they could muster in the Superdome, although they knew that their own homes were probably being destroyed by the wind and water. At first they did not know that the city had flooded since the electricity was out and there was no access to news, but the water stains on the clothing of the people who were coming to the Superdome told them how deep the water was. Sister Judith Bright reported, “It helped to be helping others.” According to Sister Judith, “We have a responsibility to those people to help them in any way we can. So that really the hand of God is us.”

After Katrina, Deborah Halter, a former Roman Catholic, attended seminary and became an ordained minister in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). She worked from 2007 to 2009 with Lutheran Disaster Response based at Camp Victor in Ocean Springs, Mississippi, to provide material and spiritual relief to residents of the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Halter points out that helping others during and after a disaster helps to take one’s focus off oneself.

Halter found that certain spiritual practices assist people in coping with disaster conditions. She asks, “What happens when a 20-foot wall of water chases away your God and leaves you with unanswerable spiritual questions?” As the stress of rebuilding, coping with relatives and government red tape, and employment issues accumulated, Halter noticed a “delayed-onset crisis of faith” among many people. She instructed...
Lutherans and some interested Baptists in “centering prayer” she had learned as a Catholic with some experience with Buddhism. According to Halter,

Simply being still and resting in God becomes enough to fill the void that remains after the disaster, after the demolition, and after the rebuilding. For people who have lost so much, the relief of discovering that they have not lost God is second only to the consolation of knowing that God has not lost them.⁴¹

**CONGREGATIONAL AND DENOMINATIONAL RESPONSES**

There are many stories to be told of congregational responses to the Katrina disaster. All congregations lost members due to the evacuation and destruction, and some of the congregations have recovered while many others have not. Congregations that did not suffer much physical damage provided space for other congregations to hold services. Many congregations initiated programs to provide physical assistance to victims, even while the congregations and their ministers and members were also struggling to cope with losses. Some congregations have merged their resources and members to make up for the losses.

A great success story for United Methodists in New Orleans is the merger of two congregations. The African American congregation of Grace United Methodist Church lost its church in the flood and had little money, and the predominantly white First United Methodist Church on Canal Street had a large building but few members. After members of the two congregations were introduced to each other by Rev. Shawn Anglim through a series of shared meals, discussions, and worship services, they decided to merge to form First Grace United Methodist Church. The new congregation has been enriched also by new post-Katrina members, many of whom are Hispanic. The congregation has developed vibrant music and worship services that reflect New Orleans’ unique cultural heritage.⁴²

The post-Katrina experience of the Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Cathedral located next to Bayou St. John in New Orleans, one mile from Lake Pontchartrain, illustrates the healing power of reviving annual festivals, as well as the community pride and faith that can be stimulated by the visit of a benevolent spiritual leader. When members returned from the evacuation they started working right away to clean up the damaged cathedral. The fast pace of their work was stimulated by a desire to celebrate Christmas in the cathedral on December 25, 2005, and also by the anticipated visit of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I on January 7-8, 2006. The Patriarch wished to show support for New Orleans and for Holy Trinity, which is the first Greek Orthodox church founded in the Western Hemisphere. After four months of work, the cathedral was perfectly restored and the grounds landscaped in time for these events. When he visited, the Patriarch said, “Your pain was and is our pain. It was felt by all humanity.”⁴³ Then the members of Holy Trinity set about renovating their community center, so they could hold the annual Greek Festival in May 2006.⁴⁴ The Center was ready and the event involving Greek food, music, and dancing was a celebratory moment for New Orleanians seeking to return to normalcy.
Numerous congregations and denominations have sent members to gut and repair houses and to build new houses. The amount of volunteer time and money spent in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast by faith-based groups cannot be counted, but it has been crucial to the recovery of individuals and communities.

CIVIL RELIGIOUS RESPONSES

Carolyn Marvin and David Ingle have written of the American flag as a totem, a sacred symbol representing the sacred nation and its ancestors.\(^45\) During the Katrina disaster, American flags were used by victims to assert their citizenship in a nation that for five days abandoned them in a ruined city. News photographs show an old woman waiting to be evacuated draped in an American flag blanket for protection against the hot sun; a corpse lying in the grass covered with an American flag; and people stranded on a rooftop waving American flags. In Mississippi, people planted American flags where their homes had been washed away by the storm surge.

The flag of New Orleans contains three fleur-de-lis, symbolic lilies or irises representing New Orleans’ historic connection to France. Before Katrina, the fleur-de-lis was primarily visible in south Louisiana as the logo of the New Orleans Saints, the city’s football team. After Katrina, suddenly everyone in southern Louisiana was wearing and displaying the fleur-de-lis as an expression of regional pride, a commitment to rebuilding and recovery, and a sign of being members of what Howard Fineman has called a “voluntary tribe.”\(^46\) People are still wearing fleur-de-lis pins, earrings, necklaces, and tattoos. The fleur-de-lis is seen as decorations on shirts, scarves, banners, Christmas ornaments, emblems on cars and trucks, and in household decorations and works of art. Thus, after Katrina the fleur-de-lis emerged as the major totem of Louisiana civil religion. In response, on January 9, 2008, Governor Bobby Jindal signed a bill that had been passed by the Louisiana legislature making the fleur-de-lis the state symbol.

The fleur-de-lis as the symbol of the New Orleans Saints and the pride and unity of New Orleanians was given greater strength in 2009 when the team won, for the first time, the National Football Conference championship. Citizens’ identification with the Saints, which had previously been a perpetually losing football team, is pervasive in New Orleans. On the day of a game, many people wear the black and gold jerseys of the team. New Orleanians in the city or living elsewhere who do not attend the game, watch it avidly on television. For New Orleanians the Saints symbolize how a flawed and damaged city can overcome its problems and trauma. The post-Katrina dedication to the New Orleans Saints is a quasi-religious response to disaster.

QUASI-RELIGIOUS RESPONSES

There are several significant quasi-religious responses to the Katrina disaster that are noteworthy in New Orleans, and two of these relate to the joy and pride that citizens took in the revival of their annual festivals. One of these, of course, is Mardi Gras, and the other is the annual New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival. I will focus here on Mardi Gras.
Mardi Gras can be seen as a secular celebration with religious roots. It is the party before the penitence of the Lent religious season leading to Easter, which celebrates the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Mardi Gras in New Orleans is multifaceted and often manifested in parades by costumed members of organizations called “krewes.” The parades begin three weekends before Mardi Gras, “Fat Tuesday” in French, which is the day before Ash Wednesday, the first day of the Lent season. In 2006 many of the parades and costumes expressed New Orleanians’ satirical comments on their Katrina experiences.

Mardi Gras on February 28, 2006, was a beautiful spring day. As people wishing to parade with the Krewe of Saint Anne gathered in the Bywater neighborhood and waited for the parade to begin, I was struck by the sign carried aloft proclaiming, “New Orleans is eternal.” Since New Orleanians were so accustomed at that time to seeing “blue tarps” on the damaged rooftops, there were many blue tarp costumes, including a woman dressed as Our Lady of the Breach, a satirical reference to the breaching of the levees and the flooding of the city. A couple dressed in costumes depicting crawfish, a favorite in local cuisine, to celebrate their love for New Orleans and Louisiana. My favorite costume was worn by a woman dressed as Glenda the Good Witch in the Wizard of Oz movie. She waved her magic wand over the crowd recently returned to the city from a long evacuation, and handed out her card reading, “There’s no place like home.” This was a day of celebration that we all needed.

CONCLUSION

The Katrina disaster has produced numerous religious responses in the New Orleans and south Louisiana and Mississippi Gulf Coast regions. In 2011 religious responses to this disaster show no sign of abating.

A punitive theodicy based on scriptural literalism has a logic that postulates that a punishing God is a God interested in humanity, and therefore that human beings can take steps to get back into right relationship with God. Therefore, negative religious coping can involve a positive locus of control belief: Someone is in control of events. Negative religious coping involving a punitive theodicy has been reported as predominating among people with lower socio-economic status, and is also expressed by ministers in religions that emphasize a biblical literalism that emphasizes the deuteronomistic view of history. Deborah Halter points out that this is a theological perspective held by people who are not comfortable with ambiguity concerning God’s activity in the world. These individuals would rather believe that God is sending punishments than live with the ambiguity of finding no divine agency in disastrous events.

A punitive theodicy does not preclude people from taking compassionate actions to alleviate suffering, and these individuals and congregations often undertake heroic relief efforts. On the other hand, fundamentalist individuals not directly affected by the disaster, and not caring to help, may be so certain that they have the “Truth” that they use
the disaster as an opportunity to promote their particular ideology and assert that the victims were punished because they fell short of the truth.

The persons interviewed by my students, myself, and others have in general demonstrated forms of positive religious coping. The accounts collected by my students indicate that individuals strongly identified with a religious tradition are likely to have religious responses to disaster congruent with the outlook of that tradition. Persons who are not strongly identified with a particular religious tradition often also describe spiritual responses to disaster that help them cope.

These accounts support Koenig’s observation about the importance of a positive locus of control belief, involving confidence in either oneself or a higher power to affect events. Muslims and Christians reported finding strength in belief that God is in control, even in disasters. Dr. Lemuel A. Moyé, M.D., who treated New Orleans evacuees as they arrived at the Astrodome in Houston, Texas, found some individuals in shock, because they had been helpless to prevent the sudden dramatic and gruesome deaths of loved ones; their locus of control belief had been shattered.50

People in New Orleans and Mississippi report an array of spiritual practices that assist them in coping with disaster, including continuing prayer to Our Lady of Prompt Succor, and rituals for Erzulie Dantor and other Voodoo deities. Faith has not been shaken on the part of Catholics and Voodoo practitioners respectively that these beings protect New Orleans. Other people report finding strength in meditation or centering prayer. All of these types of beliefs and practices promote a positive locus of control belief, either in oneself, or in higher powers, or in one’s connection to a higher power.

The traumas caused by Katrina continue to be addressed in memorial services, in collective civil religious expressions such as the fleur-de-lis as a symbol of Louisiana pride, and in quasi-religious expressions, such as Mardi Gras parades, annual festivals such as the Greek Festival and the Jazz Fest, in movies and documentaries, in works of art and music, and in the incredible devotion to the New Orleans Saints football team.

The number of people continuing to come from all over the United States and the world to help rebuild this area is dramatic. They may come out of a sense of secular altruism, but many come out of a sense of religious commitment and they work through faith-based agencies. Most of the volunteers are middle- to upper-middle-class persons with the time and money to come and help. Deborah Halter reports:

Most of these people have never seen anything like the destruction and desperation they’ve found here. They go home with a new sense of the fragility of life, which of course requires revisiting their concept of who God is for the world.51

There continues to be a high level of stress and mental illness in the region, accompanied by a dearth of medical and social facilities to treat these. Spiritual caregivers are uniquely positioned to offer support to traumatized populations, but they, like other responders to disaster, are subject to stress.
When the disaster is huge and there are not enough resources to provide spiritual and emotional relief, the listening presence of any compassionate individual can make a big difference. Dr. Moyé in Houston found this to be the case when he realized that he was helping the evacuees immensely by listening compassionately to their stories. Halter says that her work with disaster victims consists of a “ministry of presence.” “Listen, listen, and listen some more.”

Religious responses to disaster that promote empathy and care for others and oneself constitute functional religious coping, as opposed to self-righteous and sometimes violent religious responses that can be associated with negative religious coping.

Individuals keenly feel the effects of disasters. From a larger perspective, disasters are relative in scale. The Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami on March 11, 2011 was much greater in its effects than the Katrina disaster. I send my best wishes for recovery to Japanese people and the nation of Japan. Our experiences in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast teach us that it takes many years, probably decades, to recover from a major and complex disaster with multiple sources of destruction and trauma. The memory is not forgotten, but it is possible to grow through the difficult experiences, especially if one is concerned for the welfare of others. The people of Japan have demonstrated to the world the positive effects of acting to assist others after the Tōhoku disaster.

_A version of this paper was presented at the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture in a symposium on “Rescue, Recovery, and Religion: Humanitarian Aid and Spiritual Care in a Time of Crisis,” in February 2009. I am grateful to the Nanzan Institute for the opportunity to write and present the paper, which was an important part of my own recovery process, and to Dr. Watanabe Manabu for inviting me to prepare this paper for the Journal of the Japanese Association for Religious Studies._

**ENDNOTES**

1 This article does not attempt to discuss religious responses to hurricanes Gustav and Ike, which battered the more western stretch of the Gulf of Mexico coast from southern Louisiana through Texas in August-September 2008.
2 Harold G. Koenig, M.D., _In the Wake of Disaster: Religious Responses to Terrorism and Catastrophe_ (Philadelphia: Templeton Foundation, 2006), 139.
4 The most polished of my students’ papers have been uploaded to my Religious Responses to Katrina and Rita: An Oral History Project website, at <http://www.loyno.edu/~rrkr>.
8 CNN Reports, _Katrina_, 21, 120.
Reflecting the state’s historical connection to Catholicism, counties in Louisiana are called “parishes.” Orleans Parish consists of the city of New Orleans. Other Louisiana parishes contain towns and cities of various sizes.


On August 5, 2011, five police officers involved in the Danziger Bridge incident were convicted of depriving the victims of their civil rights and engaging in a conspiracy to cover up police wrongdoing.

Koenig, In the Wake of Disaster, 30-38.

Koenig, In the Wake of Disaster, 11.

Koenig, In the Wake of Disaster, 40-41.

Koenig, In the Wake of Disaster, 31-32, quote on 32.

Personal communication from Deborah Halter.

Michael Eric Dyson, Come Hell or High Water: Hurricane Katrina and the Color of Disaster (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2006), 178-201.

Dyson, Come Hell or High Water, 180.

Interview with Jeff Hebb, January 11, 2009.

Email from Deborah Halter, February 5, 2009.


Harold S. Kushner, lecture in October 2006, Temple Sinai, New Orleans, DVD.


Untitled paper by Wesley Samms, written for Honors World Religions, Spring 2006.

36 In New Orleans and Haiti, the religion blends West African deities and modes of worship with Catholic saints. Vodun is the religion of the Fon people in Africa.
37 Jeremy Campbell, dir., Hexing a Hurricane, ten18films, 2006, DVD.
39 Deborah Halter, guest lecture to Religious Responses to Disaster course, Spring 2008.
41 Halter, “Relief for the Shattered Spirit.”
49 Email from Deborah Halter, February 5, 2009.
50 Moyé, Face to Face with Katrina Survivors.
51 Email from Deborah Halter, January 16, 2009.
52 Moyé, Face to Face with Katrina Survivors.
53 Email from Deborah Halter, January 16, 2009.