

Why God Hates Haiti

The frustrating theology of suffering.

BY LISA MILLER



HAITI IS SURELY A Job among nations. It is the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere: half its population lives on less than a dollar a day. With 98 percent of its forests felled and burned for firewood, Haiti is uniquely vulnerable to flooding from hurricanes. In 2008 four storms in as many weeks left a million homeless. Haiti has an infant-mortality rate worse than that of many African nations, and its people are plagued by disease: diarrhea, hepatitis, typhoid fever, dengue fever, malaria, and leptospirosis are rampant there. This litany doesn't even touch on Haiti's disastrous political history, most notably the reign of François (Papa Doc) Duvalier, who assassinated and tortured more than 30,000 in the 1960s.

Now, with as many as 100,000 dead in last week's earthquake, a sensible person of faith has to grapple with the problem of what scholars call theodicy. If God is good and intervenes in the world, then why does he make innocents suffer? Why, as Job might have said, would God "crush an impoverished people with a tempest and multiply their wounds without cause? He will not let them get their breath."

For Pat Robertson, the TV evangelist, the answer is simple: it's the Haitians' own fault, presumably for practicing voodoo. On the Christian Broadcasting Network last week, Robertson alluded to events leading up to the Haitian Revolution of 1791, history's rare successful slave revolt. On the eve of the revolt, insurgents gathered in a forest called the Bois Caiman to swear a blood oath. "The

wind was wailing," reads a passage from *Revolutionary Freedoms*, a history of the Haitian people. "Heavy drops of rain were falling from a dark and cloudy sky on the ragged leaves of the trees, on the group of men dancing slowly to the sounds of Vodou drum beats." Haitians cherish the story of the Bois Caiman as part of their liberation. Today, nearly all Haitians are Christian; about half also practice voodoo, an adaptation of their African ancestors' native religion.

In his narrow, malicious way, Robertson is making a First Commandment argument: when the God of Israel thunders from his mountaintop that "you shall have no other gods before me," he means it. This God rains down disaster—floods and so forth—on those who disobey.

But Robertson's is a fundamentalist view. It's so unkind and self-righteous—and deaf, dumb, and blind to centuries of theological discourse on suffering by thinkers from Augustine to Elie Wiesel—that one might easily call it backward. Every Western religious tradition teaches that mortals have no way of counting or weighing another's sin. "If that happened to the Haitians because they're so sinful, then why hasn't it happened to him?" retorts Bart Ehrman, a Bible scholar at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

"I think," adds Rabbi Harold Kushner, author of *Why Bad Things Happen to Good People*, "that it's supreme hubris to think you can read God's mind."

Over the next weeks, sensible clerics will struggle with what to say. "The

really smart ones," says Ehrman, "will be saying that God is mysterious and we can't explain everything." Others will teach that the earthquake is the work of the Devil or that believers can find blessings in the calamity, for in heaven the dead will finally find tran-

quillity and repose. As a Roman Catholic blogger wrote last week, "This world is not all there is."

Rabbi Kushner teaches that natural disasters are somehow outside the purview of a loving God. In the face of unjust and inexplicable suffering, then, the responsibility of the faithful is to

remain faithful—and to help relieve suffering. "The will of God," says Kushner, "is not to send us the disaster, but to send us the disaster to overcome." This, incidentally, is where the majority of scholars end up on Job. "There is a resolution to be found in the depth of a pious life lived before a mysterious God," reads the commentary in the New Oxford Annotated Bible.

Theodicy remains the most powerful tool in the atheist's kit, however, and many a believer has turned away from God over the suffering of innocents. Ehrman did. After a lifetime as a Christian, "I just got to a point where I couldn't explain how something like this could happen if there's a powerful and loving God in charge of the world. It's a very old problem, and there are a lot of answers, but I don't think any of them work." Even so, we will continue to do *tzedakah*—and to pray.

With JOHANNAH CORNBLOTT

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