

IN ALL THINGS

Pat Robertson, Haiti, and the Devil: Got a Better Explanation?

Francis X. Clooney, S.J.January 23, 2010

Cambridge, MA. I have never had great sympathy for Pat Robertson and his evangelical slant on the Gospel and Christian life. In part, it is a matter of cultural differences — I am a Jesuit, in Cambridge, at Harvard, after all — and also a matter of what seems to be a rather different experience of what Christianity and the Gospel mean. For the most part, I share everyone's disappointment, even offense, at his more controversial statements — about the Holocaust, about assassinating Hugo Chavez of Venezuela, and about how 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina were punishments for the sins of Americans — in retribution for homosexuality, abortion, and a host of other sins. As readers know, he was recently in the news again, commenting on the terrible earthquake in Haiti:

"Something happened a long time ago in Haiti, and people might not want to talk about it. They were under the heel of the French. You know, Napoleon III, or whatever. And they got together and swore a pact to the Devil. They said, we will serve you if you'll get us free from the French. True story. And so, the Devil said, okay it's a deal."

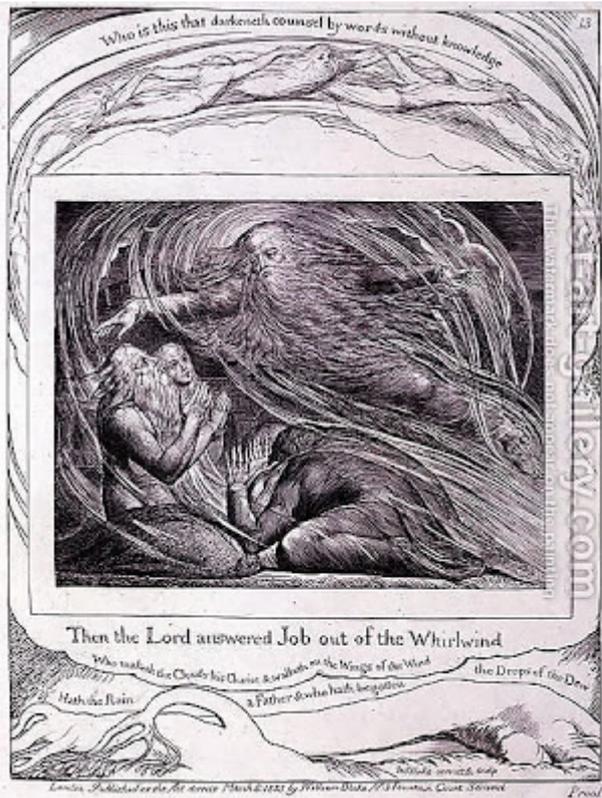
On one level, it is easy to dismiss Mr. Robertson entirely, as a bad historian, as talking way too much without sufficient reflection, as tone deaf and insensitive to the sufferings of large numbers of people, and as self-serving in conveniently discovering that immense tragedies are God at work punishing behavior he finds sinful. Most of us disapprove of such sweeping explanations, and indeed, cannot imagine that God would cause an earthquake or hurricane to punish behavior we find distasteful or wrong, particularly when the victims are most often those who have already been suffering systemic injustice, including our neglect, for a very

long time. We do not share either his opinions about America or those of the 9/11 hijackers. Certainly, Mr. Robertson has once again suffered wide, proper disapproval due to his Haiti remarks.

I raise all this here, however, because on one level at least he is quite right, in throwing a direct challenge in the face of any of us who call ourselves Christians. Does the world make sense from a Christian perspective, or not? For he is attempting to explain why God allows such catastrophes to take place. God allows: the question — that of theodicy — is the age-old one: if God is all-good and all-powerful, *why* the hurricane? the earthquake? the slaughter of innocents? History is full of failed answers, of course, and most of us simply step around the issue of *why*, and express, rightly, our solidarity with victims, the need for action to help those in need, and our speechlessness at the mystery of such evils. We cannot explain *why* God would allow any place to be hit by such an earthquake, or in particular *why* Haitians, who have suffered so much for so long, could possibly be singled out by God for such punishment, while the rest of us look on. Mr. Robertson is clearly trying to come up with reasons for *why* such things take place — to preserve his conviction that the world is in God's hands, that nothing happens except by divine decree.

We can, rightly, insist that asking, “*Why* do these tragedies happen?” is the wrong question to ask, it is a question to which there will never be a good answer — certainly not one of moral retribution, as if this or that group of thousands of people deserves to die, or serves merely as the tool of a strict master's lesson, or as if God has somehow stepped back and let the devil have his way. But we have to be careful not to abandon the idea that the world can still be seen in light of what we know of God. We have to believe that in some way, such events are still

“in the hands — mind, heart — of God,” lest we simply be admitting a chasm between our faith and the events of the real world.



Better to ask, I suggest, “*Where* is God when such events take place? *Where* is God when Haitians — none of them deserving this calamity — are suffering?” God is present in that suffering, calling to us from the midst of it, in a way that should deeply shake our ordinary way of viewing the world. Our everyday values and measurements are pushed aside, our normal list of complaints made to seem trivial. Death, the possibility of the sudden end to life as we know it, is suddenly before us, in our face. And God, ever present among the hungry, the outcaste, the oppressed, asks us to find God in the face of those who suffer, yet again.

It is not just a matter of thinking, “God wants us to help those in trouble,” though that is very true. Nor is it to say, “God causes disasters so as to communicate with us more dramatically,” as if to educate North Americans by suffering that happens somewhere else — another trivial, cruel notion. Rather, we do well to see God not as the cause of disasters, nor as somehow failing to stop them, but as a God who dwells in that extreme suffering — as in extreme bliss — in the evil as in the good. Not quite God speaking out of whirlwind, as in the Book of Job, but something rather like that. We need to not turn away, not justify, not excuse, the sufferings of 9/11, Katrina, the 2005 tsunami, this recent

earthquake, but rather, in the face of such events, to encounter God there too, in such places. This is what it means to say that Christ was crucified not only 2000 years ago, but in every moment of unspeakable suffering, loss, cruelty, large and small, in 2010 too. What is God telling, showing us, if Haiti is where God has now shown up?

This approach — sketched very briefly, perhaps a bit inarticulately here (30 minutes of writing is not enough on such a topic!) — is not likely to satisfy a preacher who wants to reassure his flock, in detail and with certitude, that everything happens according to God's intention to punish sin. But what I am suggesting (as have numerous thinkers through the ages) moves toward a specifically religious and Christian — though with some adjustments, it could be Hindu as well — alternative to Mr. Robertson's grasp at meaning. He has, therefore, pushed us to deepen and yes, darken our Christian view of the world. Christ is there, under that collapsed building.

What do you think?