Introduction

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Terror, trauma, and tragedy erupted—and safety vanished. Since September 11, 2001, when aircraft loaded with high-octane fuel-turned-suicide-bombs rammed the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York City, the Pentagon in our nation's capital, and the countryside of Pennsylvania, followed by the catastrophic impact of hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005, we citizens of the United States can no longer fantasize or have delusions of grandeur that we are secure or beyond the realms of violent assault—via humanity or nature. The notion that our geographic borders framed by great oceans and two other countries that comprise North America, our collective intellect, our financial coffers, and our weapons of mass destruction can keep us safe evaporated on 9/11, and again in the aftermath of August 29, 2005, when Lady Katrina—a tramp, not a lady at all, certainly minus the usual aplomb of Southern gentility, including those affable Georgia peaches—pummeled the shores on the southern Gulf Coast. Lady Katrina[1] played hide-and-seek for a while, vacillating up and down with the size of her visits. When Katrina did hit, she stole lives, hopes, dreams, and possessions. Katrina changed and rearranged the landscape and swallowed up plants, animals, buildings, businesses, churches, schools, and life as we had come to know it. From the coast of Florida to Texas, Katrina was devastating to the states of Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana, in between. While those in New Orleans breathed a sigh of relief after Katrina passed over, no one in that city was ready when the next day three levees broke, placing 80 percent of the city under water.

A few weeks later, Katrina's cousin Rita came through the Gulf and packed an equally powerful wallop, particularly to southwest Louisiana

and Texas. She came through with a vengeance—destroying lives, property, dreams, and hopes; uprooting trees and downing power lines. The destruction of Katrina and Rita combined has been horrific. Even at this writing, in the first few days of January 2006, many survivors remain displaced. They cannot return home. For some, where their homes once stood only a concrete slab remains. For those whose homes may still be standing, the mold, bacteria, and standing oil-polluted water poisons their mosquito-infested land with a cesspool of the unintended consequences of inaction and a failure of leadership on the federal, state, and local governments.

This collection of commentary, *The Sky Is Crying: Race, Class, and Natural Disaster,* is a response of reflections, critical essays, and sermons by activists, scholars, and clergy to this cacophony of bad news, of tremendous loss in the wake of natural disaster and human incompetence. Moved by the Spirit a few days after Katrina hit, I contacted John Kutsko, the director of academic and professional publishing at Abingdon Press, to float my idea of doing this volume and received an overwhelming Yes! from John and his editorial team. I then began the process of sharing this dream with others across the country, inviting them to engage in scholarly, pastoral, activist, and communal response to such tragedy. In the pages that follow you will hear their voices and mine. This introduction reflects on the lens of theological ethics for reckoning with the event of natural disaster. A review of a litany of previous disasters moves toward a discussion of the sociocultural milieu in the United States that is framed by an attitude of arrogance and denial that makes us think we are exempt from catastrophe. The analysis continues by examining systemic, domestic problems unearthed and exposed by recent natural disasters. I conclude by naming the contributors who have so graciously given their time and creative gifts to write reflections, essays, and sermons for *The Sky Is Crying*; royalties will go to support the rebuilding of Dillard and Xavier Universities in New Orleans.

Peering through to See and Name

There were many ways we could begin to organize this project to wrestle with the problems surrounding natural disasters and how human beings think about such phenomena, particularly from a religious, theological, and ethical perspective. When we think about religion or reli-

gious matters we think of concepts of faith and systems of belief; about one's sense of the divine, the sacred, and related institutions such as churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples. Religions are closely related to the particular contexts or cultures, traditions, and rituals. Theology, from the Greek *theos* for *God* and *ology* for *study*, pertains to the study of how people think about, experience, and talk about the divine, or experience of God. Some like to expand this term to include the practice or discipline a person engages in as the primary discipline or rule that governs one's life and how one relates to others. Ethics is the discipline or study of morals; that is, thinking about how people behave, which translates as what they value and whether they act out of a sense of virtue, duty, and rights or a sense of "ends justify the means." Nine questions helped spark the thinking of the participants for this volume as we began to wrestle with the enormity of the loss and devastation.

1. What are the theological and ethical implications of historic, natural disasters? For example, Pompeii volcano (79 CE); Lisbon earthquake (1755); New Madrid, Missouri, earthquake (1811); Chicago/Peshtigo Fires (1871); Galveston, Texas, hurricane and flood (1900); San Francisco Fire (earthquake) (1906); Tokyo earthquake (1923); Tangshan, China, earthquake (1976); Kobe, Japan, earthquake (1995); Southeast Asia tsunami (2004); Hurricane Katrina (2005)?

2. What are the theological and ethical issues of intentional human-induced disaster, and how do these relate to environmental racism and classism? For example, Guernica, Spain, firebombings (1937); Coventry, England, bombing (1940); Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan, atomic bomb attacks (1945); Tokyo, Japan, firebombing (1945); Dresden, Germany, firebombing (1945); Three Mile Island nuclear power plant accident, Middletown, Pennsylvania (1979); Chernobyl nuclear explosion (1986); the Holocaust (1933–45); the Rwanda massacre/genocide (1994); Darfur, Sudan, massacre/genocide (2005)?

3. What are the theological dangers of framing these as questions of theodicy? In other words, how does theodicy let humans off the hook, as it were?

4. What are the dimensions of so-called civilized behavior (cloaked in a thin veneer of respectability) when threats to life reduce supposed

utopias to violence and chaos? For example, Plato's *Republic*; Augustine's *City of God*; Thomas More's *Utopia*; Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan*; George Orwell's *1984*; and William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*?

5. How do we name, expose, and ultimately transform systemic, human evil that contributes to disaster, when race, class, and poverty result in those deemed "other" being scapegoated, often at the cost of their lives?

6. What are the issues concerning a disregard for ecology in the light of the theological notion of dominion versus stewardship, when the earth becomes a killing field or a cancer alley?

7. What is the role of faith communities before disaster strikes regarding the understanding of what it means to be human versus an objectified, commodified other?

8. How can sacred texts inform our understanding of divine providence and human responsibilities in the wake of natural or human-induced disasters?

9. In the aftermath of a tragedy, what is the role of the media and popular press, given "the people have a right to know," when that knowledge is presented subjectively? Specifically, what is the media's role when people with observable differences are portrayed as courageous, self-preserving, and resourceful while the same behavior by those deemed other is seen as criminal, stereotypical, and at fault?

And the Beat Goes On: Disasters and Theodicy

What are the theological and ethical implications of historic, natural disasters? Although we had Hurricanes Rita and Katrina, and the Southeast Asia tsunami at the end of 2004 and throughout 2005, natural disasters are not new phenomena. Here is a thumbnail sketch of some infamous natural disasters: Pompeii volcano (79 CE); Lisbon earthquake (1755); New Madrid, Missouri, earthquake (1811); Chicago/Peshtigo Fires (1871); Galveston, Texas, hurricane and flood (1900); San Francisco Fire (earthquake) (1906); Tokyo earthquake (1923); Tangshan, China, earthquake (1976); Kobe, Japan, earthquake (1995).

Not all of the damage that occurs is the direct result of the meteorological event, but may have more to do with human behavior in the wake of the event. Thus, we ask: What are the theological and ethical issues of intentional human-induced disaster, and how do these relate to environmental racism and classism? Many human-induced disasters connect with war. For example, the first time a decision was made to intentionally bomb a civilian population occurred in the Guernica, Spain, firebombings (1937), an event immortalized in the artistry of Pablo Picasso. Additional war-related disasters during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries include: the Coventry, England, bombing (1940); the Tokyo, Japan, firebombing (1945); the Dresden, Germany, firebombing (1945); and the Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan, atomic bomb attacks (1945). Some human-induced disasters include accidents around nuclear power where explosions and leaks resulted in the death of innocent people and the extreme pollution of the environment: Three Mile Island nuclear power plant accident, Middletown, Pennsylvania (1979); and Chernobyl nuclear explosion (1986). Some human-induced disaster is the calculated, intentional genocide of a particular group of people by another group who determine that they can objectify and therefore dispose of people because of what they look like, believe, or possess. The objectified persons, on some level, are viewed as a threat and then scapegoated. The objectified ones are blamed for the circumstances of those who dominate; millions of innocent people have been gassed, slaughtered, annihilated, raped as acts of war, and destroyed: the Holocaust (1933–45); the Rwanda massacre/genocide (1994); Darfur, Sudan, massacre/genocide (2005).

When these kinds of bad things happen to innocent people, we often wonder why. How do we make sense out of such nonsense? One survivor of the Indonesian earthquake of May 2006 wondered, "I do not know what we did. But we must have sinned for God to be angry like this."[2] We may want to theologize and look for symbols of divine judgment in various geological and meteorological phenomena that cause great loss and devastation. We must remember, however, that geologists state that we live on unstable ground—six to thirty-six slow-moving plates of rock that are powered by 4.5-billion-year-old, boiling, radioactive residue from earth's formation. These plates bump up against, slide, or plunge below one another in a kind of friction that freezes them for a time. When energy builds up in a sudden manner, the plates shift and energy gets discharged that may cause spasms around the world in the form of earthquakes, volcanoes, or tsunamis.[3] Sometimes scholars approach this question with the issue of theodicy: *theos* (God) and *dike* (justice).

Placing the matter of God in dialogue with the question of justice—the question of why bad things happen to good people—scholars examine the issue of theodicy. Traditionally, the focus ends up being since God is good, just, and powerful, and bad things happen, there is a contradiction. Thus, the question shifts to proving the existence of God. There are two traditional answers to the theodicy question: (1) the Augustinian or free-will argument, where human beings make bad choices; and (2) the Irenean argument, where people are born in God's image and likeness, and, by imposing difficult times, the Holy Spirit perfects one to embrace the image of God (moral freedom and responsibility) and God's likeness (capacity to reflect the Creator's essence). Contemporary Christian philosopher and theologian Kenneth Surin argues against the way most scholars study and analyze evil and suffering. He says that one should not impose a single standard, some "timeless reality," upon a particular event that happens at a stated sociocultural and historically conditioned time.[4]

In seeking to answer the question Why? with regard to natural disasters, philosophers have pressed the question of theodicy. In dealing with the theodicy question after the 1755 Lisbon earthquake, not only did philosophers attempt to sort out moral evil from natural evil or disaster, but they also began to explore history as opposed to theology for answers, beginning with G. W. F. Hegel. With recent tragedies answers to theodicy have become more human focused as the fault of human agency: incompetence, poor planning, negligence, and incompetence. People look more to politics and science to discern the machinations of nature. Where the response was once divine retribution, now the answer seems to fall into the arena of political retribution for human ineptitude.[5]

Peter Steinfels catalogs the accepted reasons for the costs of recent hurricane tragedies: complacency about the consequences of disaster; sluggish, maladroit governmental response; harsh economic disparities; dire need for material resources; racial differences; and callous dislocations. Today, few blame God and instead see the answer within human agency, which telegraphs the belief in human responsibility and human freedom. In short, the can-do spirit of U.S. citizens seems to ignore the intricacy and catastrophe in exchange for "just suck it up" and move ahead with recovery and rebuilding. Thick denial does not admit that some things cannot be restored; some communities cannot come back again; some will not recover; and some will not be made stronger. Further, technology, resources, and organizational strategies may not solve all our problems. Steinfels suggests that we might pause and ponder how such disasters

came to happen, which might "lead to a more profound understanding of the human condition and the untidiness of reality generally."[6] Often when asking why things of such magnitude happen, we desire a simple answer for a complex scenario.

The theological danger of simple answers is that we may scapegoat and make someone or something other without fully grasping the entire situation. Sometimes in blaming God, karma, or bad luck we seek to let humans off the hook. At the end of the day, the reality is that if one lives on a fault, one will experience an earthquake; if one lives near a river, it will flood; if one lives near the Gulf, one will experience a hurricane and/or tsunami. For some situations and challenges in life, there are no satisfactory answers, though this does not mean we do not continue to ponder the parameters of the inevitable.

Katrina, A Perfect Storm Revisited: A Case Study

Because "tragedy has no walls," Katrina redrew the Gulf Coast shoreline, remapped its populations, and destroyed more than ninety thousand square miles from Florida to Louisiana, piling water as high as twenty-nine feet in some areas. Eighty percent of New Orleans, some parts that rest eight feet below sea level, ended up under billions of gallons of water and oil from ruptured storage facilities. Amid relentless heat, humidity, and apocalyptic squalor, more than twenty thousand people at one point were housed in the Superdome. Deaths there were because of poor sanitation. Houston's Astrodome housed more than eleven thousand weary evacuees.[7]

The destruction left in the aftermath of Katrina was inevitable, particularly for New Orleans. In analyzing why we build cities in dangerous, precarious places and live amid such impending jeopardy, Adam Kushner suggests that it is our "dysfunctional raison d'etre, [our] Pompeii redux." He writes that the draining of the backswamp "has meant a Sisyphean, 300-year death match between engineers and the elements. . . . The levee and flood-control systems . . . built in fits and starts since 1724 . . . were still not done when Katrina struck. The cost has been immeasurable, and the failures innumerable."[8]