

IS GOD THE GREATEST TERRORIST OF ALL? “Back Talk,” Lebanon, New Hampshire *Valley News*, January 9, 2005

On Tuesday, December 28, a picture on the front page of the New York Times showed an Indian woman weeping over prostrate infants—some of them her own—struck down by a tsunami that is now believed to have killed some 150,000 people. Evoking as it does the Herodic slaughter of the holy innocents, the picture raises a disturbing question. If the tsunami is an act of God, does it not remind us that God is the greatest terrorist of all?

History as well as Scripture seems to say yes. Whether or not we believe that God once flooded the whole earth, as the Book of Genesis tells us, it is a matter of historical fact that nearly seven million people were killed by floods in the twentieth century, most of them in China. Ever since 9/11, we have been told that the whole world has been changed by the sudden death of just under three thousand people on a single day. What then shall we say about the sudden death of some fifty times that number?

At least two pundits have answered this question in the bleakest of terms. Bob Herbert (NYT December 28) quotes the despairing words of the suicidal Gloucester in Shakespeare’s King Lear: “As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; they kill us for their sport.” Likewise, David Brooks declares: “Nature this week seems amoral and viciously cruel” (NYT January 1).

That of course presupposes that nature is capable of both morality and kindness, which are precisely the qualities we traditionally impute to the Supreme Being. But once again, the destructiveness of a natural event threatens to shatter the faith of those who believe in the benevolence of God—the very being in whose name our president presumes to wage his crusade against terrorism.

Let us then try to imagine what kind of wisdom might lurk behind this appalling slaughter of innocents. Let us try to imagine if anything less than this disaster could have halted the civil wars in Sri Lanka and Indonesia’s Aceh province, where the tsunami

did its worst, or moved the President of the United States to give 350 million dollars in purely humanitarian aid to Asia—nearly twice what we spend in a single day on the war in Iraq. Could anything less than this disaster have shaken his obsession with 9/11, his determination to wreak vengeance for it? According to the Report of the 9/11 Commission, his very first response to the news of the attacks on the World Trade Towers was to think, “Somebody’s going to pay for this.”

Many thousands now *have* paid—including nearly ten thousand American soldiers slain or mutilated in Iraq. But within a week of this latest disaster, the president has said in effect, “We’re going to pay for this”—or at least for a great part of it. We’re even using military helicopters to send supplies to refugees in Indonesia—a nation of Moslems. That single act may do more for America’s reputation in Asia than anything we have done to “liberate” Iraq by force of arms.

If the tsunami is an act of God, I believe that its message may be couched not in the despairing words of Shakespeare’s Gloucester but in the resolute words of John F. Kennedy, who declared in his inauguration—forty-five years ago this month-- that “here on earth God’s work must truly be our own.” Well before the tsunami struck, we had the technological means to deploy throughout the Indian ocean sensors that would have given several hours warning of its advent and thus saved virtually all of the lives it has taken. We could have installed those sensors for a small fraction of what we spend a single day on the war in Iraq. Now, one hopes, they will be installed at last.

Recent history teaches us that even as they cleave the earth, earthquakes can bridge the gulf between enemies. When an earthquake in Turkey killed 17,000 people in 1999, the first country to send in aid was Turkey’s oldest enemy, Greece; and when Greece suffered an earthquake of its own three weeks later, the Turks reciprocated. Both nations thus discovered that their common humanity might just be strong enough to overcome their ancient hatreds.

If we can learn from their example, and if we can truly learn the lessons so painfully taught by this latest disaster, then we may begin to envision a world in which hatred, violence, and murderous aggression are ultimately overwhelmed by a tidal wave of peace and a renaissance of hope.

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