

# Pre-Modern Theology in Public Life

by John Shelby Spong

When the hurricane named 'Dennis' placed weary Floridians under water in the first major Caribbean disaster of 2005, their Governor Jeb Bush, reflecting on the recent pounding his state has taken, made an interesting, an almost stream of consciousness, observation. "I think there is a legitimate feeling," he said, "Why me? What did I do wrong?"

Governor Bush was giving expression to a major tenet in a pre-Copernican God theology that finds ample space in the pages of the Bible. In the Noah story, for example, the weather is sent by God to punish people for their sins. Consistent with this biblical lesson, natural disasters like floods, earthquakes, tornadoes, Tsunami waves and droughts have throughout history been interpreted as a divine response to a real or imagined human failure. People prayed for weather changes and accompanied those prayers with promises of repentance and a pledge to future actions more pleasing to God. General George Patton in his diary attributed the fair weather that accompanied his military successes in France in 1944 and 1945 as a sign from God, who, he believed favored the Allies and hated the Germans. Since God was assumed to live just above the sky, divine direction of the weather was easy to imagine. This childlike religious rhetoric is thus not the sole possession of a sitting governor. Indeed it permeates our culture on many levels. It is reflected by the fact that many people still view sickness as punishment. 'What have I done to deserve this?' is a familiar refrain falling from the lips of the ill. Most significant of all this is, as I shall try to demonstrate, the view of God upon which religious leaders and institutions have always leaned to build their power.

We see this mentality being employed today by the Vatican, among television evangelists and in the words of many people in public life. Modern athletes seem to believe the God above the sky directs their fortunes. One sees an athlete making the sign of the cross before stepping into the batter's box, or up to the free throw line. Others point to the sky in gratitude to the God who helped them strike out an opponent, hit a home run, or kick a winning field goal.

This theology also penetrates the way tragedies are interpreted. Survivors, who climb out of an airliner crash or escape a subway bombing, seem almost invariably to assume that God has spared their lives. The unspoken implication is that those who died deserved it or that God had no special plan for them beyond premature death.

What is it that gives such power to these primitive ideas that both athletes and presumably well-educated people in public life still think and talk this way? Is some basic human need met by this primitive theology? Does pious rhetoric blunt our thinking processes? Or does this tenacious idea simply reflect an ever present but seldom faced part of our humanity?

It is part of what it means to be human to yearn for some assurance that we are not alone in this vast and empty-feeling world. We are the only creatures whose minds are sufficiently developed to embrace the vastness of the universe. We alone live inside the meaning of time. This means that we can both anticipate impending disasters and embrace the fact that we will die. It is, therefore, the nature of human life to be chronically anxious. Both are the byproducts of self-consciousness. This anxiety and fear seems to compel us to create a divine supernatural God figure, powerful enough to be our protector. This deity must not be limited as we are, since that would not give us security. Human beings never escape that childhood memory of having an apparently all-powerful parent figure taking care of us. Finding ourselves alone in adulthood we place a divine parent figure called God into the sky where, unseen but ever watchful, this God can look after us. Then we ascribe to this God the qualities we lack. God's immortality counters our mortality. God's power counters our impotence. Once that definition is set, we begin to relate to this God exactly the way children relate to parents. We bargain with God, make our requests known to God, manipulate God, flatter God into getting our way, seek to win favor by keeping God's rules, confess to God when we fail and always remember to say 'thank you' so that God will reward us for being a grateful child. This supernatural theistic religion is still very much alive in our churches. Claiming the ability to interpret how God will act and what will please the Holy One is both the source of ecclesiastical authority and the cause of our own spiritual immaturity. From this perspective we view sickness and tragedy as signs of divine anger, reflecting

the world we have created with ourselves living at the center of it and God, understood as a heavenly “Father,” keeping things fair like a good parent should.

The result of this religious mentality might well be temporarily soothing but ultimately it turns destructive. In the disaster that fell upon Western Europe in the 14th century, known as the Bubonic Plague, between 20-35% of the adult population of Europe died. What caused the wrath of God to fall so heavily upon their world, they wondered? The first answer was that their own sinfulness was responsible, so a movement known as the “Flagellants” developed in which thousands of men marched through the streets of European cities lashing their own bare backs with whips. Their hope was that if they punished themselves sufficiently, God would withdraw the punishing ‘black death.’ The second answer they heard was that God was angry because Europe’s Christians had tolerated infidels. Responding to that premise they proceeded to persecute Jews in a frenzy of killing anti-Semitism. When unexplained mysteries baffled the citizens of Salem, Massachusetts, in the late 17th century, they responded by executing women they deemed to be the agents of Satan, who, they concluded, had caused their distress.

Why do we find this capricious God comforting? Do we really want a Deity we can manipulate with the flattery of regular worship and from whom we can win brownie points with good behavior? Do human beings really desire a God who is so unstable that the divine mind will change to accommodate fervent prayers? What is the value we find in a God who keeps us in a state of perpetual dependency? Why can we not let this pathetic God die? Is it that we are not able yet to accept responsibility for our role in the determination of the destiny of this planet?

Ironically enough, there does appear to be a far deeper connection between human behavior and natural disaster than our popular rhetoric imagines. Some natural disasters, like the collision of tectonic plates that create Tsunami waves are just that, natural disasters. They are not a response to anyone’s behavior. Other disasters, however, are connected with our behavior but not in the old moralistic sense. We are, for example, experiencing today changing weather patterns that reflect impending environmental disasters. They result not from an angry deity but from such things as irresponsible human breeding habits that have led to overpopulation and the resulting exhaustion of many of the earth’s resources. We have cut down the rain forests, polluted the air we breathe and the water we drink. Our behavior has led to global warming, acid rain, the melting of the polar icecaps and the resulting dramatic changes in the weather patterns of our world. These present and pending disasters are nature’s way of saying that our rape of mother earth has dire consequences. They are the result of a humanity that has not yet embraced the fact that the world is not an enemy that we must conquer and subdue as if we are not a part of it. They are the result of our conceptualizing God as separated from this world, isolated in the sky, then endowing this God with symbols of parenthood that allow us to remain irresponsible children who cannot see beyond the level of our own self-centered need for comfort and security.

Let me say boldly what religious leaders are loathe to say. There is no God in the sky who will send out a divine vacuum to gobble up the human waste that now warms our atmosphere. There is no heavenly filtering system through which we can recycle the water of our river, lakes and oceans. In today’s world there is no scapegoat other than ourselves upon whom we can heap the blame for our rapid environmental degradation. That is why the number and intensity of hurricanes seems to rise every year. That is why the American Midwest has seen a tenfold increase in the number of tornadoes in the last fifty years. That is why killing heat waves have become regular features of both Europe’s climate and ours. These things are not the result of a wrathful God punishing us for some supposed misdeeds; they are the direct result of human beings continuing to act with childlike irresponsibility because we have not yet embraced the idea that there is no supernatural God in the sky who will protect us even from ourselves.

Has not the time come for our understanding of God to mature, to embrace reality? Our ‘heavenly parent’ definition of God acts to relieve us of responsibility. Our great religious fear is that if God is not this Supernatural Being in the sky, then there is no God. Atheism is, we think, the only alternative to theism. That is the boundary over which religious people fear to walk.

Suppose, however, that God is defined as the Source of Life, so that our worship demands that we cooperate with all of nature rather than trying to conquer it for our own benefit. Suppose God is defined as the Source of Love, so that our worship enables us to journey beyond the limits of our fear to embrace all that is. Suppose God is defined as the Ground of Being so that our worship relates us to a holiness that permeates all that is. That is what we need to understand before we human beings can grow up and accept responsibility for our world.

The next time you see or hear a Governor or any other person act as if God is responsible for the weather, sickness, or our victories and defeats, recognize it for what it is: the juvenile whimpering of an immature human being who above all else needs to mature spiritually.