

Religion, science and Hurricane Katrina

Joseph Kay
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In his address to the nation from New Orleans last Thursday, Bush repeatedly invoked religion and religious organizations. The maudlin appeals to God went beyond even the president's stock-in-trade sermonizing.

Speaking of those who had welcomed in evacuees, he emphasized the role of "religious congregations." He spoke of the "armies of compassion," a term that has been used with increasing frequency by the administration as a pseudonym for Christian fundamentalist organizations. These armies, Bush said, "give our reconstruction effort its humanity." He asked people to donate "to the Salvation Army, the Red Cross, and other good charities and religious congregations," deliberately putting an organization associated with religious ideology before the secular Red Cross.

Bush declared that the devastated region would be rebuilt because of "a core of strength that survives all hurt, a faith in God no storm can take away..." He concluded with the declaration that the country would rebuild as it did after earlier natural disasters. "These trials have also reminded us that we are often stronger than we know, with the help of grace and one another," he said. "They remind us of a hope beyond all pain and death, a God who welcomes the lost to a house not made with hands."

Bush declared Friday to be a National Day of Prayer and Remembrance. During much of the day, the television airwaves were saturated with coverage of religious services and vigils. This was followed by Bush's weekly radio address on Saturday, which was punctuated with references to "God's grace," "God's comfort," and the "strength of the Almighty."

Significantly, the official day of prayer came on the same day as a new report in the journal *Science* documenting the correspondence between an increase in the number of severe hurricanes and global warming.

Researchers at Georgia Tech and the National Center for Atmospheric Research found that the number of category four or five hurricanes has nearly doubled over the past three decades. Since 1990, the world has

averaged 18 such hurricanes per year, up from 11 a year during the 1970s. When it struck Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama, Hurricane Katrina was a category four storm.

The scientists pointed to rising surface sea temperatures as a factor in the increased incidence of severe hurricanes, with one co-author noting that the study provides "increasing confidence" that there is a connection between global warming and the greater number of intense storms.

Bush's efforts to chloroform public opinion with superstition and fatalism are meant to distract attention from the actual scientific understanding of events such as Hurricane Katrina. The administration has repeatedly sought to deny, or at least call into question, the existence of global warming, in the face of overwhelming scientific evidence. It has scuttled even the most limited international agreements to reduce CO2 emissions, which cause global warming and are produced mainly through the combustion of fossil fuels.

In doing so, the US government has acted as an agent of the American energy industry and other corporate interests. As with many of the environmental problems the country and the world now face, the findings and warnings of scientists on global warming cut across the profit interests of dominant sections of the American ruling elite.

The denial of environmental problems has disarmed the population in the face of real dangers. A serious attempt to deal with global warming would require not only a major shift in the sources and methods of energy production, but a massive investment in social infrastructure to guard against disasters such as Hurricane Katrina, something the American ruling elite is unwilling to carry out.

There is, of course, a more immediate and sordid aspect of the appeal to religion. It is used to justify the funneling of federal monies to religious groups, in particular to right-wing Christian fundamentalist outfits that are close to the Republican Party and serve as a principal base of the

Bush administration. Bush announced in his speech that part of the money that is being raised by former presidents George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton will go to religious organizations.

Increasingly, the Republican Party has sought to use religious organizations to drum up support on the basis of “moral issues” such as abortion and homosexuality. This has not been limited to the traditional churches of the Republican right. In the most recent election, the Bush campaign sought to appeal to clergymen of predominantly black congregations in an effort to increase the Republican vote among African-Americans.

Earlier in the month, it was revealed that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) included prominently among its list of recommended charities Operation Blessing, an organization with links to Pat Robertson, the right-wing evangelist who recently called for the assassination of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez. Of the dozens of organizations that FEMA recommended, the vast majority were religious outfits of one form or another.

The administration sees the devastation of Hurricane Katrina as an opportunity to push its efforts to integrate church and state and to promote government financing of “faith-based” groups in place of social programs for those most severely crushed by the workings of the capitalist system.

Aside from these more immediate political calculations, the administration’s relentless promotion of religion serves the long-range goal of undermining science and polluting the public consciousness with superstition and backwardness. To the extent that mystification of both natural and social processes gains the upper hand, the masses of people who are victimized by the policies of the government and the financial elite are ideologically and politically disarmed.

Invocations of God serve to impede a serious examination of the causes of the Katrina disaster—above all, those which arise not from nature, but from the dysfunctional and socially destructive workings of the capitalist system, and the role of the parties, media organs, and government institutions that uphold that system.

Where did this disaster that has befallen the people of Louisiana and Mississippi come from? It was not primarily the product of blind natural forces, an “act of God.” It not only could have been foreseen, it was foreseen.

Engineers, scientists and others had warned for decades

that the city of New Orleans, lying below sea level and protected from the surrounding water by an inadequate levee system, was not safeguarded from a category four or five hurricane. With global warming increasing the number of such hurricanes, it was inevitable that the region would eventually be struck, and there have been several close calls over the past decade.

But no preparations were made. None of the measures required to protect the city and the entire region were implemented, even though doing so would have cost a fraction of the outlays required to address, even in the most rudimentary way, the devastation caused by Katrina and the government’s failure to respond.

Nothing was done because over the past several decades the American ruling class, under administrations of both political parties, has sought to systematically cut all social spending, including spending on public infrastructure. Bound up with deregulation, privatization and the dismantling of social programs, this policy was designed to enrich a tiny minority of the population at the expense of the American people as a whole. In this, it has succeeded to the point where the United States is the most socially polarized of all the major industrialized countries.

Hurricane Katrina has laid bare the ugly face of American capitalist society—the enormous social inequality, the impoverishment of broad sections of the population, and the looting of society by a financial oligarchy. These are the realities that the sanctimonious invocations of God and religion are meant to obscure.

In championing religion, Bush is speaking not merely to his own right-wing constituency. To the hundreds of thousands of people who have been affected by the hurricane, and the millions more who have looked on with shock and horror, he is saying: Do not look to society and politics for the cause, or the solution, to your problems. Do not look to me and the interests I represent for an explanation or accounting, let alone restitution. Look to God.

In the guise of providing conciliation to those who are suffering, this shameless purveyor of lies and wars is pointing to the heavens to defend the most earthly and material of social interests.



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