

"Where was God?"

Tsunami '04 continues to be **under-thought**.

Before venturing any thought that secularists might consider theological, public media personalities commonly protect themselves by some disavowal such as that of Ellen Goodman in today's BOSTON GLOBE: "I am not a theologian. [We journalists] prefer to avoid questions without answers....We set aside the sort of wondering that sets us wandering." But, self-permission-given, she opines thusly: "people need tragedy to remind us of our humanity. [But why do we] manufacture disaster when nature provides quite enough of its own?....Where on Earth is the early warning system for manmade disasters?" And efforts to justify avoiding facing the ultimate questions, so one may continue in "pagan pride" (Wm.James), are themselves disasters--failures of mind & nerve.

1 As biblical scholar, I'm particularly attentive as to how the **Bible** is getting used in Tsunami '04 talk. Today being the Church Year's Baptism of Jesus, my preacher said our sinless Lord's (therefore) unnecessary baptism (I conflated with God's unnecessary creation) was in solidarity with all sinning-suffering humanity (baptism as [Luther] "death by drowning"). Mystery: The slaves escaping Egypt did not drown in the Red Sea [Sea of Reeds], but "Pharaoh's host" did; & Jonah didn't drown even when in the "whale" belly! But because God is good as well as powerful, disasters are not the last word: "And the Sea Was No More" (the sermon title, from Rev.21.1).

And of course Jesus' commanding the sea-storm to "be still!" (M.4.39 & parallels). "In the name of Jesus Christ," the head of a Christian orphanage in Sri Lanka commanded the Tsunami not to destroy his staff & children (all of whom he'd quickly loaded into a boat, which he then had driven directly into the wave--which lifted the boat & deposited it (everybody safe!) far inland.

2 For 70 years I've been convinced that the Bible's first main clause is a speech, a command, from heaven (Gn.1.3): "**God said, 'Let there be light'.**" Here's TANAKH: "When God began to create heaven and earth--the earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water--**God said....**" I purpose, to help our post-Tsunami thinking, that we take a fresh look at what's between those dashes (which function to assign tertiary force to what's between them, the sentence's first [time-note] clause having secondary force).

(1) The Bible begins by defeating all challenges to **monotheism**: God made/rules everything (Gn.1.1), therefore including (vs.2) what would seem to be an accumulation of unmanageables (tohu/bohu/hoshek/tehom/mayim [formlessness/emptiness/darkness/abyss/water]). This *creatio prima* (first-made primeval stuff) was as clay to be given form (note that "form-less" is its first word of description) by the Creator-Shaper (Ger. for Creator, "Schöpfer"). Over it, God sends a wind (as if to declare it his!), & its force we may see, within the divine-name metaphor, as the movement of the potter's wheel, the product of which is (Gn.1.3-) *creatio secunda* (not by the Potter's hands but [that metaphor being abandoned for the Word] by his mouth), viz., the finished geocentrically-pictured earth-&-heaven.

In his now already much reprinted "Asking God questions after the tsunami" (including in today's CAPE COD TIMES), Brit.Commonwealth chief rabbi Jon.Sacks elegantly states monotheism & its meaning. In Babylon the Jews rejected the Babylonian doctrine of a primordial ditheistic war between chaos (the goddess Tiamat) & cosmos (the god Marduk): "Essential to monotheism is that conflict is not written into the fabric of the universe. That is what redeems tragedy and creates hope." When I read that, I heard singing within me a hymn that has comforted me since my teens: "There is a place of quiet rest, Near to the heart of God, / A place where sin cannot molest, NtthoC. //....comfort sweet,...Savior meet....//...full release,..joy and peace[Refrain] O Jesus, blest Redeemer, Sent from the heart of God, / Hold us, who wait before Thee, Near to the heart of God." (1901, but in THE PRESBYTERIAN HYMNAL [1990]) In his THE BEAUTY OF THE INFINITE, D.B.Hart develops the Greek-Christian doctrine of the divine "apatheia" to exclude all "eris" (strife, conflict) from the divine nature--but in commenting on Tsunami '04, he does allow for the random alongside the directive, the operation of impersonal alongside personal forces, even chance with providence: "the imbecile forces of chance...[can] shatter living souls" (quoted in Jeff Jacoby's 1.6.05 BOSTON GLOBE "Angry with God"). Chance/fate/ran-

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domness/chaos are illusory, said Einstein ("I am not an atheist"), an opinion that chaos theory subsequently presupposed. And Geo.Will (1.5.05 WASH.POST) quotes Rabbi Kushner's frequent exoneration of God from responsibility for natural disorders/disasters: God is orderly, "chaos is evil," & "randomness is another name for chaos."

(2) From the push of poverty & the pull of creativity, long ago I made our children's major toys--cutting & trimming **down** the pieces of each to fit. During that same stage of my life, I was doing the same to my sermons--cutting & trimming **down** (so the delivery would never exceed an hour). So it is when constructing/critiquing a world-picture (Ger., "Weltbild"): God/nature/man must be **defined down** so the three "pieces" will fit, or two must be defined down to accommodate the dominant one, or one must be defined down so as to give greater weight to the relationship between the other two. As a drama publicity photographer arranges the three principals so as to suggest their roles, a world-picture (philosophy or theology) suggests the world-story you will see-hear if the still succeeds in drawing you into the movie/drama.

9/11 & Tsunami '04 were major challenges to world-stories. This Thinksheet's title points up my present question to each world-picture-story: What size is God, & why? The max position is the four omnis: God is everywhere (omnipresent), knows everything (omniscient), has unlimited (only self-limiting) power, & is unfailingly (unconditionally) loving. The very small child may say "My Father/Mother can do anything," & the very naive (unanalytical) believer can give "the full measure of devotion" to every one of the omnis. But every mature, critical world-picture must define one or more of the omnis down so as to (1) make room for **humanity**, (2) make sense of **nature**, & (3) honor (be faithful to) the best in one's heritage's **God**-picture. Geometrically, every world-picture could be represented by its own particular triangle (each angle sized relative to the size of the other angles). And if you put a world-picture into a "folder," your computer will ask to to give it a name: every world-picture has its own shorthand (long-word!) name.

(3) When J.B.Phillips wrote YOUR GOD IS TOO SMALL (1952), his primary concern was that the traditional Christian God-idea was underextended for the exigencies of modernity. The opposite was the opinion of my pub.sch.science teacher 22 years earlier: she thought my "Sunday school God" should stay out of natural science. Today, many are saying he should stay out of disasters so he'll not get blamed for them (otherwise, "your god is too large!").

(4) Of the three dramatis personae in a world-picture, only God is forgettable: humanity & nature are daily in everybody's face. When God intrudes on people's God-amnesia, they know they are being **defined down**, cut down to size, to make room for God, whom they had "defied," "grieved," "tested," "set a [narrow] limit to" (Ps. 78.41, which I happened upon in Hebrew today; the root of the last verb means to cut off, (in Jer.18.5) to prune, to limit [as in the margin of TANAKH, the text being "they tested God, vexed the Holy One of Israel"])).

3 This Thinksheet's title is the title of Wm.Safire's 1.10.05 NYT col. (on Job, whom God's permissive will afflicted not as punishment but as test of faith): "The sufferer who believes is never alone....Questioning God's **inscrutable** ways...need not undermine faith." I've emphasized "inscrutable" because I want to look at the Bible's use of the concept. A strophe in Is.55 (viz., 6-9) says that while by repentance sinners can "find" God, by thought we cannot reach God--any more than our hands can reach heaven, which is "higher" (emphatic chiasmus): "thoughts/ways," "ways/thoughts"). For this apophatic concept of mystery, the NT has two words--one occurring once (Ro.11.33b, meaning "unsearchable, unexplorable, uninvestigable" [Lat.] "incomprehensibilia") & the second occurring twice (first in section c of this Ro. verse, meaning "untraceable, untrackable" [from the noun for "footprint"], "inscrutable" [from Lat. "to search"], incomprehensible"; second, in Eph.3.8, for Christ's "unfathomable" riches). The concept is necessary to monotheism's "God Almighty," who on this is absent from 4 of the 5 Tsunami views in the beliefnet pol (Thinksheet 3230.5)--appearing only in Opinion 3 (with 30% of the polled): God sent the Tsunami, "but we don't know what the purpose was." We must sacrifice either our potential omniscience or God's actual omnipotence (Lat. "Dominus omnipotens," 2Cor.2.18; Gk. "Pantocrator," as also 9 times in the Bible's last book, wherein omnipotence is the control-attribute of deity. The Bible refuses to define God down, cut him to fit our understanding.