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<http://onfaith.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/panelists/willis_e_elliott/2010/01/haiti_and_god_searching_for_meaning_and_making_sense.html>

**Haiti and God: searching for meaning and making sense**

*Many have criticized Pat Robertson's suggestion that the catastrophic earthquake in Haiti was the work of the devil or a form of divine punishment. But if one believes God is good and intervenes in the world, why does God allow innocents to suffer? Why does God allow Haiti to  
suffer so much? What is the best scriptural text or explanation of that problem you've ever read?*

"Haiti and God" is what I typed into Google, and my expectation was confirmed. On the quake, the usual suspects have made their usual speeches, only louder. No perceptible changes of opinion. Everybody can say, "I told you so...." In whatever direction one is leaning, catastrophe increases the lean.

1....."Religion and the Meaning of Human Existence" was the title of a course the University of Hawaii asked me to teach. The title assumes reciprocal linkage: sense-making is a function of religion, and ultimate human concerns (the primary domain of religion) challenge our human power to find meaning and make sense. Here was my final question on the final examination: "What would you say to somebody for whom the walls just fell in, the ceiling just collapsed, and the bottom just fell out - i.e., somebody whose meaning-in-life had just disappeared? What would you suggest, in addition, that he/she DO?"

2.....Well, collapse happened to more than a million Haitians. Did their meaning-in-life disappear? Doubtless it did in some cases, leaving at least a temporary vacuum. More commonly, tragedy deepens one's meaning-in-life. I have no doubt that in worships the Sunday after the great quake, Christian leaders spoke not only to but also for the people's faith. Standing in the rubble of the Catholic cathedral, the priest said, "Why give thanks to God? Because we are here. What happened is the will of God. We are in the hands of God now." And the sermon of the Episcopal bishop of Port-au-Prince had these words of encouragement: "We must keep the faith, knowing that God is with us, in the good as well as in the bad days."

3.....Aristotle was right: we are the language animal. With the gift of language comes the *urge to use words for seeking meaning and making-sense* of what we perceive, experience, suffer, sing about, long for, hope for. When we say "That makes sense!" or "That makes no sense!" we are speaking from within our particular way of seeing and living in the world (that is, our "religion" whether or not we use that word for it).

4.....When things go *right*, we are unaware of our sense-making. ("God is good.") But when things go*wrong*, our usual way of making sense becomes conscious and is challenged. ("How can God be good if...?") The parentheses represent the theist, the believer in God as personal, deity as assumed in our present On Faith question. But notice the same reversal can occur in the case of an atheist:

5.....When things were going right for atheist physician Viktor Frankl, he was unaware of his sense-making ("There is no god."), and believed that life's only meanings are those we impose on it. But when the Nazis threw him into a death camp, he became conscious both of the utter inadequacy of his atheism and (in his fellow-prisoner patients) of the power of faith in God to heal and provide hope. ("How can there be no God if...?") In 1952 I taped his lectures, which became first "From Death Camp to Existentialism" and then "Man's Search for Meaning."

6.....Frankl's "logotherapy" (Greek for "healing by meaning") teaches that human life's *central motivation* is meaning-finding and sense-making in all of life. Not just "Why is there suffering?" but also "Why is there love?" And it opposes "nothing-but" reductionism - for example, "love is nothing but biology's way of continuing a species," and "a human being is nothing but an organism," and "God is nothing but an idea."

7.....Was the Haitian quake "nothing but" a "natural" catastrophe caused by a sudden slippage of tectonic plates? Note that this use of "natural" is a thought stopper, and "nothing but" is an unprovable assumption. Reality is too complex for such cognitive strictures. But the biblical doctrine of God as powerful and good *matches the complexity and mystery of reality*.

8.....Catastrophes get people to talking more about God/god, and some even to thinking more. While from this I do not infer that catastrophes are a divine attention-getting device, I do infer that religion and catastrophe, separately and in their interaction, stir human beings to *widen their attention* from the everyday to ultimate concerns. And I do believe that human life is enriched and even ennobled by the *increase of appreciative and critical awareness*. Further: I know, partly from having been a pastor, that this increase often occurs when life tumbles in and cries Stop! Look! Listen!

9.....We Christians believe in God as ultimate and intimate. Jesus says, "God sends rain on the just and the unjust," and "Every hair of your head is numbered." We believe that God came among us as Jesus, who suffered with and for us. For us, his execution was history's central catastrophe, and his resurrection was and is *God's triumph* over evil and*our hope* for the world and beyond.

**BY WILLIS E. ELLIOTT  |  JANUARY 21, 2010; 11:40 PM ETSAVE & SHARE:  [Send E-mail](http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/emailalink?sent=no&link=http://onfaith.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/panelists/willis_e_elliott/2010/01/haiti_and_god_searching_for_meaning_and_making_sense.html&title=Haiti%20and%20God:%20searching%20for%20meaning%20and%20making%20sense)   [Facebook](http://www.facebook.com/sharer.php?u=http://onfaith.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/panelists/willis_e_elliott/2010/01/haiti_and_god_searching_for_meaning_and_making_sense.html&t=Haiti%20and%20God:%20searching%20for%20meaning%20and%20making%20sense)   [Twitter](http://twitter.com/home?status=Haiti%20and%20God:%20searching%20for%20meaning%20and%20making%20sense%20-%20http://onfaith.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/panelists/willis_e_elliott/2010/01/haiti_and_god_searching_for_meaning_and_making_sense.html)   [Digg](http://digg.com/submit?phase=2&url=http://onfaith.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/panelists/willis_e_elliott/2010/01/haiti_and_god_searching_for_meaning_and_making_sense.html&title=Haiti%20and%20God:%20searching%20for%20meaning%20and%20making%20sense)   [Yahoo Buzz](http://buzz.yahoo.com/buzz?publisherurn=washington_po284&guid=washington_po284:http://onfaith.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/panelists/willis_e_elliott/2010/01/haiti_and_god_searching_for_meaning_and_making_sense.html)   [Del.icio.us](http://del.icio.us/post?url=http://onfaith.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/panelists/willis_e_elliott/2010/01/haiti_and_god_searching_for_meaning_and_making_sense.html;&title=Haiti%20and%20God:%20searching%20for%20meaning%20and%20making%20sense%20-%20On%20Faith%20Panelists%20Blog;)   [StumbleUpon](http://www.stumbleupon.com/submit?url=http://onfaith.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/panelists/willis_e_elliott/2010/01/haiti_and_god_searching_for_meaning_and_making_sense.html)   [Technorati](http://technorati.com/search/http:/onfaith.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/panelists/willis_e_elliott/2010/01/haiti_and_god_searching_for_meaning_and_making_sense.html)    
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**Comments**

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All of Mr Elliots arguments can be categorized under one heading. Proof of Gods existence through mans ignorance. I prefer to keep an open mind until something more substantial then conjecture based on wishful thinking and ancient superstitions is offered. Better an unresolved question and an open mind then one closed by superstition and intolerance.

**POSTED BY: TRYREASON | FEBRUARY 2, 2010 9:42 AM**[**REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**](mailto:blogs@washingtonpost.com?subject=On%20Faith%20Panelists%20Blog%20%20|%20%20tryreason%20%20|%20%20Haiti%20and%20God:%20searching%20for%20meaning%20and%20making%20sense%20%20|%20%204815100&body=%0D%0D%0D%0D%0D================%0D?__mode=view%26_type=comment%26id=4815100%26blog_id=618)

Well, I noticed that both rambled about, but didn't really mean much. I must admit though, using numbers certainly did give your post some sense of order.

"More commonly, tragedy deepens one's meaning-in-life." So for the thousands of orphans, how many will have their meaning-in-life deepened (which you assume to be a good thing, right)?

"When we say 'That makes sense!' or 'That makes no sense!' " we are using our rational judgment. If your religion is strictly rational, then fine, it's religious. Otherwise, not so much.

"The parentheses represent the theist, the believer in God as personal, deity as assumed in our present On Faith question." Okay, can you answer that question instead of jumping to a case of one atheist converting?

"The biblical doctrine of God as powerful and good matches the complexity and mystery of reality." Explain.

"And I do believe that human life is enriched and even ennobled by the increase of appreciative and critical awareness." Well, then meditate! Don't claim a tragedy is somehow better than it is because people will be more appreciative and aware.

"We Christians believe in God as ultimate and intimate. Jesus says, 'God sends rain on the just and the unjust'." If God is ultimate, then why does he send rain (suffering) on the just? That's the question here.

"His execution was history's central catastrophe." Either Jesus was a guy, and it wasn't even catastrophic, much less history's central one, or Jesus was God, and he wasn't executed in the end, so again not catastrophic. Oh, you say he was both? Drat! Rationality foiled again!

However, all this being said, I do appreciate your willingness to respond in comments. I hope you do so again.

**POSTED BY: NORWEGIANSHOOTER | JANUARY 27, 2010 12:58 AM**[**REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**](mailto:blogs@washingtonpost.com?subject=On%20Faith%20Panelists%20Blog%20%20|%20%20NorwegianShooter%20%20|%20%20Haiti%20and%20God:%20searching%20for%20meaning%20and%20making%20sense%20%20|%20%204795696&body=%0D%0D%0D%0D%0D================%0D?__mode=view%26_type=comment%26id=4795696%26blog_id=618)

TO JACKDANCED

In your post, I recognize nothing in my entry. For example, do you think I was preaching "ignorance and helplessness" to my University of Hawaii students?

**POSTED BY: ELLIOTTWL | JANUARY 24, 2010 9:36 PM**[**REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**](mailto:blogs@washingtonpost.com?subject=On%20Faith%20Panelists%20Blog%20%20|%20%20elliottwl%20%20|%20%20Haiti%20and%20God:%20searching%20for%20meaning%20and%20making%20sense%20%20|%20%204794690&body=%0D%0D%0D%0D%0D================%0D?__mode=view%26_type=comment%26id=4794690%26blog_id=618)

Yes, it is difficult to explain an all powerful, all knowing personal, intervening, god that 'miraculously' saved a hundred but killed one hundred thousand. Just as a vengeful biblical god that brought about the genocide of a nation but ‘miraculously’ saved Noah, his family and some but not all animals. In Haiti 10,000 died for each miracle of life recovered.

Far easier to follow the Genesis story of the God that created a complex world, full of opportunity and risk, and gave mankind the precious gifts of autonomy, free will and the ability to learn to make the best of the world God created. Those who learn from their mistakes, and the mistakes of their elders, will live a long and comfortable life. Perhaps Haitians will now learn that a building improperly constructed of weak concrete will crumble.

Perhaps the world society will now learn to intervene before natural disasters and help people to help themselves construct a safer world, and intervene before another Saddam Hussein goes to war on his neighbours or commits genocide.

That learning will never come from ignorance and helplessness preached by Willis Elliot and his kind. We don't need a new God, we need a new church. One that fulfills the dream our generation were born to expect– A United Nations.

**POSTED BY: JACKDANCE | JANUARY 24, 2010 9:43 AM**[**REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**](mailto:blogs@washingtonpost.com?subject=On%20Faith%20Panelists%20Blog%20%20|%20%20JackDance%20%20|%20%20Haiti%20and%20God:%20searching%20for%20meaning%20and%20making%20sense%20%20|%20%204794608&body=%0D%0D%0D%0D%0D================%0D?__mode=view%26_type=comment%26id=4794608%26blog_id=618)

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