[*The following appeared in the Opinion section of the Wall Street Journal on April 7, 2010*.]

Natural Disasters and the Wrath of God

When the Rev. Pat Robertson suggested that the January earthquake in Haiti was God's punishment for a 200-year-old secret pact with the devil, he faced outrage and scorn, including some from fellow religious leaders. But for all its absurdity (was the 1751 Haiti earthquake a divine warning shot over the bow?), Mr. Robertson's claim isn't very remarkable. There's nothing novel about a preacher correlating a natural disaster with a divine punishment. What is new is that many religious believers now dismiss such a theory out of hand, a relatively recent development.

When, for example, a massive earthquake and tsunami devastated Lisbon in 1755, local clergy whipped the mostly Catholic public into a fervor of apocalyptic terror, penance and even sacrifice (in the form of a gruesome auto-da-fé) seemingly to placate the divine anger. Others, namely Protestants, pointed to that very fervor as perhaps the real cause of divine punishment-cum-earthrattling in Lisbon. Many echoed Methodist founder John Wesley's reaction: "Is there indeed a God that judges the world? And is he now making an inquisition for blood? If so, is it not surprising, he should begin [in Lisbon], where so much blood has been poured on the ground like water. . . ?"

Contemporary Christians may hesitate to assign a direct connection between particular natural disasters and sins. Yet many still believe that the reason for the existence of natural disasters in general is punitive and a direct consequence of early human disobedience in the Garden.

As harsh as that may sound to some, the alternative seems bleaker from a religious perspective. If natural disasters are not anyone's fault, human or divine, wouldn't that mean these catastrophes are also without purpose, just another tragic event reflecting the fragility of our lives? If God isn't using natural disasters to punish disobedient creatures, why does He allow them at all?

One historically significant answer finds divine purpose in natural horrors—without those horrors signifying punishment. This year marks the 300th anniversary of Gottfried Leibniz's "Theodicy," which remains one of the grandest attempts to prove the goodness and justice of a God who created an evil-soaked cosmos like ours. Most affecting was his claim that our world is, in fact, the best world that God could have made (so don't complain!), which sounds either crudely optimistic or despairingly pessimistic.

Half a century later, however, the Lisbon earthquake seemed to many to constitute clear proof that Leibniz was dead wrong. "Candide," Voltaire's lampooning reply to Leibnizianism, seemed especially compelling after the quake: "Candide, stunned, stupefied, despairing, bleeding, trembling, said to himself—If this is the best of all possible worlds, what are the others like?" A century later, Schopenhauer suggested that provoking Voltaire's derision was Leibniz's greatest

contribution to European culture, adding: "In this way, of course, Leibniz's oft-repeated and lame excuse for the evil of the world, namely that the bad sometimes produces the good, obtained proof that for him was unexpected."

As international scholars gather to debate the significance and impact of Leibniz's theodicy during this anniversary year, I hope none will agree with Schopenhauer's glum assessment of Leibniz's relevance. For Leibniz also broke with earlier Christian tradition and claimed that natural evils like earthquakes are not intended to be punishments. Nonetheless, Leibniz insists, God had a justified and discernible reason for creating a universe with life-sustaining, but tectonically unstable planets. Leibniz argues that a world with simple, regular natural laws that yielded a rich diversity of effects—including rational creatures—was better than alternative worlds with different laws and creatures, even if the alternatives were free from natural disasters.

If Leibniz is right, then natural disasters aren't the result of divine punishment for sin. They are the foreseen but unintended consequences of a well-regulated and overall good system of natural laws. So religious believers can explain the causes of earthquakes in purely natural terms (Leibniz was an avid scientist himself), while still maintaining belief in a divine, nonpunitive purpose for allowing such events. The harmonization of natural and theological explanations, reason and faith, is Leibniz's true legacy.

One unsettling consequence of Leibniz's view is that God's plans and purposes aren't as human-centered as we might have believed. It is oddly wonderful to think that the whole cosmos, even natural disasters, revolves around us. But that belief may already be hard enough to sustain given what we know about the history and size of the universe, never mind how myopic it would make God. The overall goodness of our world with its well-regulated natural events does not guarantee the earthly happiness of each individual person, as some of the latest victims in Haiti and Chile remind us. Yet if Leibniz concedes that some people suffer for the sake of making the world as a whole better, then perhaps we ought to challenge him further, not so much about God's blamelessness and retributive justice in the face of natural disasters, but about the focus and extent of His love.

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