In storms, seeing the hand of God

Phillip Bailey helpe salvage belongings from a friend's devastated house in Joplin, Mo., in May 2011, after an EF-5 tornado tore through the city. More than 1,000 Americans believe that God controls everything that occurs in the natural world, including destructive weather.

RELIGION

REVIEW BY RANDALL J. STEPHENS

On May 22, 2011, a supercell thunderstorm from northeast Kansas developed into an EF-5 tornado, with violent winds reaching 200 miles per hour. When the tornado reached Joplin, Mo., a city of roughly 50,000, it obliterated everything in its path, destroying homes, churches and downtown districts, leaving 161 people dead and about 85,000 homeless.

President Barack Obama addressed the search for meaning and the debilitating pain of grief in Joplin a week after the tornado struck. Assuming the role of consoler in chief, he asked those assembled: "Why our town? Why our home? Why my son, or husband, or wife, or sister, or friend? Why? Why? We do not have the capacity to answer."

Peter J. Tholen, a psychologist and author, has closely researched "Tornado God: American Religion and Violent Weather." He examines the ways in which severe weather has prompted theological and moral reflection as well as action. Tholen, a professor of religious studies at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, explores the relationship between natural disasters and human responsibility, and the ethical questions posed by climate change.

His focus on extreme weather and the sublime is particularly interesting given that Americans are far more religious than their counterparts in other wealthy nations. Tornadoes do occur much more frequently in the United States than in other parts of the world, and they occur more frequently in the Bible Belt, the focus of American evangelicalism and Pentecostalism. The headquarters of one of America's largest denominations, the Pentecostal Assemblies of God, for instance, is just a few hours' drive east of Joplin. For Americans, observes Tholen, "a whole new realm of religious questions comes together in the whirlwind."

From the days of the earliest English settlements, Puritan divines recorded the frightening wonders of the natural world and speculated about whether violent thunderstorms, floods and hurricanes were God's judgment. They could be surprisingly nuanced, Tholen explains, describing New England's eminent Puritan theologian, Miller, and author, who was preaching when word arrived that his home had been badly damaged by the hurricane. He later wrote, "I have been more frightened than any other person."

Others assumed it was no wonder that lightning commonly struck lofty homes and surrounding trees, symbols of human pride. Benjamin Franklin came under suspicion, wrote Tholen, for having the temerity to redirect thunderbolts from heaven with his invention the lightning rod. Franklin's contemporary Benjamin Franklin almost killed himself in 1752 by touching the metal rod of a kite during a thunderstorm to capture "electricity" from the air. As a marriage of practicality and power, Franklin made his rod a salesman's dream.

In the 19th century, as Americans pushed farther west, settlers experienced the consciousness of weather in new and powerful ways. The two deadliest tornadoes of the century -- the Great Tannehill Tornado of 1864 and the St. Louis Tornado of 1926 -- killed Americans in a wide variety of locations and situations. In the 1926 tornado, several children wrote, "The Lord seems to have been speaking to our country, and rebuking our sins of late in the most solemn manner."

For certain theologians an all-powerful divine judge was reasoning. In the 1860 Princeton Seminary's Charles Hodge defended the biblical doctrine of predestination. Hodge elaborated on the "secular conviction that a sparrows fall not, nor a hair grow of men, more than the heavens." The tornadoes that leveled houses and killed entire families put such convictions to the test.

Cathartic visions of judgment and doom later gave way to a wider array of religious and metaphysical interpretations. Late-19th-century theologian of the cloth hoped that humankind would eventually learn from behind primitive theologians of a God of thunder and thunder.

Protestant ministers like Henry Ward Beecher preached a popular brand of evangelicalism. In his telling, God reigned with benevolent, loving, rather than force and fear. Other optimistic of the Genesis 1 account, which some call "the Book of the New Testament, but it was certainly in step with an age of empire building and confidence."

The Great Galveston hurricane of 1900, which killed more than 6,000 and wrecked a city, tested a confidence faith like little before. As with other storms in the century ahead, it proved that local, state and regional governments could do much more to prepare. "God never sent that awful storm," a Methodist minister remarked, "natural conditions produced it."

In the aftermath, the city construct- ed a 10-mile seawall along the banks of the Mississippi River to protect its residents from future storms. Other precautions had already been taken. The U.S. Army Signal Corps was founded to issue daily weather maps in 1870. An American meteorologist and officer in the service, John F. Plato, worked to educate the public about the dangers of tornadoes and the significance of their coming, even encouraging the construction of shelters in homes. The religious faith of Americans, Plato believed, was especially troublesome. The work of public educators and meteorologists like Plato, along with progressive ministers, proved remarkably dif-

ficult. The government even banned the use of the word "tornado" in forecasts from 1880 to 1938, because it was thought to produce panic.

There was one truth about severe weather that was impossible to deflect or hide. Each devastating storm revealed the profound inequalities that plagued the nation. The poor and minorities suffered disproportionately, a fact that could be seen clear and stark in the aftermath of tornadoes in rural towns on the plains, floods along the banks of the Mississippi or hurricanes along the Gulf Coast.

Even in the modern era, tornadoes and other natural disasters often reveal deep fault lines in the United States. A 2001 poll by the Public Religion Research Institute and the Religion News Service showed that 64 percent of white evangelicals believed that God controlled all that happened in the natural world. Only 52 percent of Catholics and 55 percent of mainline Protestants thought the same. In the same poll, 50 percent of white evangelicals also viewed natural disasters as signs from God. Not surprisingly, a 2015 Pew Research Center survey found that only 38 percent of white evangelicals thought that "the Earth is getting warmer because of human activity." President Trump's former EPA chief, the evangelical Scott Pruitt, was one of those doubters. When he resigned under a cloud of scandal in 2018, he wrote to the president, "I believe you are serving as President today because of God's provisions."

Millions of American evangelicals think the same.

Fittingly, Tholen concludes that storms have "exposed American" moral failings: indifference to racial and economic in-

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equalities in disaster response, and, more recently, refusal to acknowledge human-in-

duced climate change as a contributing factor in severe weather." In the coming decades, disruptive, violent weather is likely to become more frequent and more severe. How many Americans of millions of believers respond and act will be a matter of national conscience.