

## BOOKS

## Whirlwinds, Old and New



## POLITICS

BARTON  
SWAIM

A unique work of theology, meteorology and American history explores believers' responses to extreme weather and natural disasters.

**THE CONCEPT OF** natural evil continues to befuddle mankind. Moral evil we can explain, with varying levels of cogency—murder, arson, theft. But what are we to make of a tornado that demolishes a school with teachers and children in it? A flood that wipes out a neighborhood? A virus that targets the elderly? Up to the latter part of the 18th century, a substantial part of the population in Western nations would have attributed natural calamities in some sense to God. We in the secular West now deal with the problem by collapsing the two categories so that even natural disasters are the result of human evil.

Destructive floods are now the fault of lax engineers or corrupt local officials or the U.S. president, depending on your politics. Hurricanes and tornadoes are the fault of carbon-emitting factories and the powerbrokers who abet them.

Peter J. Thuesen's "**Tornado God: American Religion and Violent Weather**" (Oxford, 293 pages, \$29.95) chronicles the ways in which American Christians have interpreted the evils wrought by floods, hurricanes and tornadoes. The book is a superb work of scholarship, distilling a vast array of work on meteorology, theology and American history. Mr. Thuesen, a professor of religious studies at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, has a special interest in violent storms, especially tornadoes, and writes about them with narrative skill.

New England Puritans, adherents of premodern Calvinist teachings on providence, were aware that the weather operated by natural laws—"accidents" was a common term—but they interpreted natural events as manifestations of God's sovereignty. In September 1694, Cotton Mather had a premonition. After the service began but before Mather started preaching, evidently as a thunderstorm was brewing, he switched his text to Psalm 29:3: "The voice of the Lord is upon the waters: the God of glory thundereth." Lightning and thunderclaps accompanied the sermon. As he discoursed, someone informed the preacher that his house had been struck by lightning. "No one was hurt, but the house was badly damaged," Mr. Thuesen tells us. Mather didn't "miss a beat. He explained to his parishioners that he would proceed with his lecture in order to model a godly unconcern for the things of this life."

The Calvinist view persisted, if in less bracing forms, into the 19th century. In 1882 a tornado destroyed Iowa College (now Grinnell College). "Witnesses looked on in horror," Mr. Thuesen writes, "as the approaching funnel carried away parts of houses, barns, and human bodies." George Magoun, the college president and a Congregational minister, preached afterward on Psalm 148:8: "Fire, and hail; snow, and vapours; stormy wind fulfilling his word." Magoun viewed the

destruction as a test of faith, not as a manifestation of divine wrath, but he still saw (adapting William Cowper's line) God riding upon the storm.

A kind of watered down Calvinism, or "providentialism," as Mr. Thuesen calls it, persists among ordinary evangelicals today. "Evidence suggests that most evangelicals would agree that Christians cannot know why one person dies and another lives," Mr. Thuesen writes, "but

## THIS WEEK

**Tornado God**

By Peter J. Thuesen

**Unholy**

By Sarah Posner

they assume that God is involved nonetheless."

This habit of probing divine intentions in natural disasters may sound naive or anachronistic to readers of a more secular disposition, but the need to discern agency and significance in natural evils is, perhaps, intrinsic to the human psyche. Who, witnessing the sheer destructive power of an F4 or F5 tornado, can help but wonder what such a dreadful thing means? The religious see the inscrutable design of God; adherents of more up-to-date philosophies see the designs of carbon-emitting industries and congressional Republicans. Mr. Thuesen all but says this explicitly: "Americans today"—

he means those worried about climate change—"are haunted by the distinct possibility that they have sown the wind and shall reap the whirlwind, to recall the words of Hosea 8:7."

Mr. Thuesen ends his book with a lengthy discussion of religious responses to climate change, and as an account of recent history it's accurate and helpful. In this context, though, I can't help noticing how similar the left-liberal consensus on climate policy is to premodern religious responses to natural disasters. In the olden time, God was behind it all. Now, having substituted scientific postulates for revelation and determined that violent storms are getting worse as the planet grows hotter, the fault lies with evangelical Christians like Oklahoma Sen. James Inhofe, whom Mr. Thuesen singles out as a leader of the "climate change denial movement."

The habit of attributing special inimical powers to white evangelicals is an intermittent favorite among liberal authors. It was popular during George W. Bush's first term and has returned with gusto since the election of Donald Trump. I don't know how many books have landed on my desk over the past two years blaming white evangelicals for, as these authors see it, the unqualified cataclysm of the Trump presidency. The latest is "**Unholy: Why White Evangelicals Worship at the Altar of Donald Trump**" (Random House, 345 pages, \$28) by the progres-

sive journalist Sarah Posner.

Ms. Posner is quite right, by this reviewer's reckoning, to subject Robert Jeffress, Jerry Falwell Jr. and other high-flying Trump votaries—"Republican insider evangelicals," as the historian Thomas Kidd terms them—to the opprobrium they deserve. But, like other books blaming evangelicals for Mr. Trump's victory, "Unholy" exhibits no awareness of the fact that the 81% of self-described white "evangelicals" who voted for Mr. Trump included many who didn't comport with any ordinary definition of the word, which has long since become an almost meaningless cultural buzzword. Nor does the book distinguish between those who voted for Mr. Trump enthusiastically and those who did so mainly because the alternative was even less acceptable.

And what about the fact, constantly noted after the election of Barack Obama in 2008, that evangelical numbers are dwindling? How does such an embattled group exercise so much power? Ms. Posner has an answer. "Because white evangelicals are uniquely politicized and highly mobilized to vote, they can exert an outsized influence on our elections and political culture if they unify around a candidate or cause." Note the pronouns. "They" are evangelicals, but it's "our" political culture. In the progressive mind, evangelicals appear as some mysterious alien force apt to inflict terrible damage at any time—especially during an election year.