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Phillip Bailey helps 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 half of Americans believe that God controls everything that occurs in the natural world, including destructive weather.

RELIGION REVIEW BY RANDALL J. STEPHENS

In storms, seeing the hand of God

On May 22, 2011, a supercell thunderstorm from southeast Kansas developed into an EF-5 tornado, with violent winds rushing at 200 miles per hour. When the mile-wide storm reached Joplin, Mo., a city of roughly 50,000, it obliterated almost everything in its path, demolishing homes and churches, downing power lines, turning trees into deadly missiles, and piling crushed cars on top of each other. The death toll was about 160.

Among the thousands left homeless was my cousin. Her belongings were scattered and mixed with debris. Many of Joplin's residents asked themselves why there was so little warning, what had made the storm so violent and whether there was any meaning to such utter destruction. Even with all the advances in radar technology and forecasting, this storm was the fourth-deadliest tornado in U.S. history. Some wondered if God still spoke out of the whirlwind, as in the Old Testament Book of Job. And, if so, what kind of God was that?

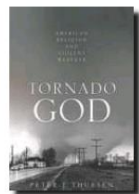
President Barack Obama addressed the search for meaning and the debilitating pain of grief at a memorial service in Joplin a week after the tornado struck. Assuming the role of consoler in chief, he asked those assembled: "Why our town? Why our home? Why my son, or husband, or wife, or sister, or friend?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

Peter J. Thuesen's insightful and deeply researched "Tornado God: American Religion and Violent Weather" reveals the many ways severe weather has prompted theological and moral reflection as well as action. Thuesen, 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 are also much more common in the United States than in other parts of the world, and they occur more frequently in the Bible Belt, the locus of American evangelicalism and Pentecostalism. (The headquarters of one of America's largest denominations, the Pentecostal Assemblies of God, for instance, is just an hour's drive east of Joplin.) For Americans, observes Thuesen, a "whole nexus 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 portended God's judgment. They could be surprisingly nuanced, Thuesen explains. In 1694 Cotton Mather, America's eminent Puritan theologian, minister and author, was preaching when word arrived that his house had been badly damaged by lightning. Though such phenomena were accidents, they were still, in his words, "under the Conduct of God, the High Thunder-

er." Others assumed it was no wonder that lightning commonly struck lofty homes and towering spires, symbols of human pride. Benjamin Franklin came under suspicion, writes Thuesen, for having the temerity to redirect thunderbolts from heaven with his invention, the lightning rod. Franklin's contemporaries began to question old certitudes. Scottish philosopher David Hume developed his naturalistic critique of religion, which he explained away "as a projection arising from human ignorance and fear." That line of thought would later be advanced in the systematic atheism of Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud.



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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 reassuring. In the 1850s Princeton Seminary's Charles Hodge defended the biblical doctrine of providence. Hodge elaborated on the "secure conviction that a sparrow cannot fall, nor a sinner move a finger, but as God permits and ordains." The tornadoes that leveled houses and killed entire families put such convictions to the test.

Calvinistic visions of judgment and doom later gave way to a wider array of religious and nonreligious interpretations. Late-19th-century men of the cloth hoped that humankind would eventually leave behind primitive theologies of a God of thunder and retribution. Popular ministers like Henry Ward Beecher preached a softer brand of evangelicalism. In his telling, God reigned with hope and love, rather than force and fear. Other optimistic Protestants even looked on destructive tornadoes as a positive force. After all, so went the logic, God could use such calamities to turn hearts heavenward. It was a kind of careless cheerfulness that would make Pollyanna blush, 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 confident faith like little before. As with other storms in the century ahead, it proved that local, state and regional govern-

ments 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 constructed a 10-mile-long, 17-foot-high sea wall.

Other precautions had already been taken. The U.S. Army Signal Service started to issue daily weather maps in 1870. An American meteorologist and officer in the service, John Park Finley, worked to educate the public about the dangers of tornadoes and the signs of their coming, even encouraging the construction of shelters in homes. The religious fatalism of Americans, Finley believed, was especially troublesome. The work of public educators and meteorologists like Finley, along with progressive ministers, proved remarkably difficult. The government even banned the use of the word "tornado" in forecasts from 1885 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 cold fact that was abundantly clear 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 2011 poll by the Public Religion Research Institute and the Religion News Service showed that 84 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, 59 percent of white evangelicals also viewed natural disasters as signs from God. Not surprisingly, a 2015 Pew Research Center survey found that only 28 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 providence." Millions of American evangelicals think the same.

Fittingly, Thuesen concludes that storms have "exposed Americans' chronic moral failings: indifference to racial and economic inequalities in disaster response, and, more recently, refusal to acknowledge human-induced 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 America's millions of believers respond and act will be more important than ever.

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