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God in the Hands of Modern Theologians

Monday, January 30, 2006

According to *The Los Angeles Times*, a “softer” view of God is more popular among many today, especially when it comes to beliefs about God’s wrath. This is hardly news, of course, as modern theology could be described as one long project intended to remake God in our image. Still, the fact that *The Los Angeles Times* thinks it’s news makes it news.

The paper’s article confuses some issues, since it deals mainly with the issue of identifying a punitive divine purpose behind natural events such as earthquakes and weather. Yet, the larger issue of God’s character — and the modern denial of God’s wrath — plays a part also.

From the article:

In 1920, some Western religious figures blamed the rise of Communism for an earthquake in China that killed 200,000. After a devastating quake in Pakistan last fall, some Muslim leaders there said President Pervez Musharraf had provoked God’s anger by allowing into the country Western indulgences, such as cable TV, or by aligning himself too closely with the United States. But the view of a vengeful god has softened over time. God is less interested, many scholars and religious figures say, in creating catastrophes than in seeing how humans react to them. Humans are still held accountable for their actions, they say. The question is whether punishment occurs in this life or in the next.

Here is the most interesting part:

In any case, Melton said, “the Old Testament God who shows his pleasure in dribs and drabs by sending rain or drought is not alive and well. Within evangelical Christianity it is still spoken about, but everywhere else it is almost gone. What knocked it out was the Holocaust, which had a tremendous influence on liberal Protestants and Roman Catholics.”

Orthodox Rabbi Yosef Kanefsky, of B’nai David-Judea Congregation in West Los Angeles, agrees. Carrying the old way of thinking to its logical conclusion, the Holocaust happened because God was angry — something “not many people are prepared to say,” Kanefsky said. “Especially in the post-Holocaust era, we stand before events that occur with utmost humility,” he said. “Those who think they know the answer are just not thinking about the wider implications of their thesis that things can be explained.” When people attribute suffering to God’s anger, it may say less about the ways of God than about the believers.

“To have a God who rejoices over pain is to have a more negative concept of God than I think we should have,” said the Rev. Cecil “Chip” Murray, former pastor of L.A.’s First AME Church. “People play the blame game with God, and it tells you more about the people playing the game than about the God they are gaming.” Whether studying the Old Testament or the New, a reader should recognize that humanity’s understanding of God is not static, said Murray, a lecturer at the USC School of Religion. God has allowed humankind’s understanding to deepen. God stays the same, he said, but what people believe about God changes — and should.

“I think that we fail to see the word of God as an open-ended revelation,” he said. “Thus there are portions of Scripture that condone slavery, but as we mature in our understanding of God, we see that slavery is not justifiable. Women are subjugated in Scripture to second-class positions, but as we grow in God, our understanding grows.”

This is a quintessential example of the modern mind at work. First, confuse the reality of God’s wrath with human

attempts to understand it. Second, dismiss the Bible as antiquated, oppressive, and outdated. Third, suggest that liberation from the Bible's oppressive text now frees us to "grow in God," and to replace the God of the Bible with a vision of deity more in keeping with the spirit of the age.

SEE: "Traditional View of an Angry God Has Softened," *The Los Angeles Times*, January 28, 2006.

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