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Making sense of hell on Earth

David Schmidt | Feb. 4, 2011

A woman pushes a wheelbarrow of trash she collected Jan. 6 at a camp in Petionville at the edge of Port-au-Prince, Haiti. (CNS/Bob Roller)

VIEWPOINT

?[The Haitians] got together and swore a pact to the devil ... ever since, they have been cursed by one thing after the other.?

When I heard Pat Robertson quoted in the news immediately following Haiti?s Jan. 12, 2010, earthquake, I imagined his theology to be an extreme anomaly, akin to Fred Phelps? Westboro Baptist Church and its ?God hates fags? campaign. Little did I suspect that I would be in Haiti three months later, working side by side with an American missionary who shared Robertson?s perspective.

I caught word of a California church group heading to Haiti in May and, through a series of communication snafus, mistakenly assumed that they would be working with earthquake survivors. The trip was, after all, coordinated by an evangelical organization that said it worked in disaster relief. With hopes high, I volunteered my services as translator. As it turned out, humanitarian relief of any sort would prove to be glaringly absent during this ?mission trip? -- largely because of the theological peculiarities of its organizers.

Once in Port-au-Prince, I discovered that the missioners believed that Haiti had been slated for divine punishment, Gomorrah-style. Apparently, the fact that some of Haiti?s citizens continued to practice the syncretistic religion of vodoun merited cruel retribution. ?Haiti is a country that has said, ?We choose Satan and reject God,? ? the group?s leader obtusely explained. ?The Enemy has a stronghold in this spiritually dark land, unlike America, which has historically been a Christian nation. This earthquake is a wake-up call for Haiti.?

Absent from this discourse was any mention of the economic embargo that the slaveholding United States imposed on the black republic shortly following Haitian independence in 1804.

It goes without saying that, in order to maintain such a perspective, a certain amount of separation is required. Although the organization has undertaken several trips to Haiti, missioners have sidestepped the suffering thousands living in tent camps, opting for doing maintenance work on the luxurious church and home of a

Haitian Pentecostal pastor.

For those directly affected by the earthquake, of course, such obnoxious theology is not an option. A more watered-down version of the ?blame the victim? mentality is present among many Haitian Pentecostals, however, in the form of the ?health and wealth? philosophy -- the belief that illness and poverty result from a lack of faith. I accompanied the Haitian pastor one day to visit a parishioner who was bedridden with some mysterious illness. We knelt by her ragged mattress in an overcrowded cinder-block house, and the pastor blessed her for the umpteenth time. When she explained that she could not afford a doctor, the pastor assured her, ?Jezi se pi dokte? (?Jesus is the best doctor there is?), and she needed to have faith. She was left without medication, wondering what she had done to deserve such an affliction.

Psychologists have long studied the human tendency to feign control over our suffering by blaming ourselves for it. Rape victims and battered spouses often wonder how they might have provoked their attackers; children assume that they are at fault for their parents? divorce. A permutation of this defense mechanism is to be found in the belief that those who are poor, sick or suffering have brought this suffering upon themselves through their own sinfulness.

Still, even the Haitian pastor?s prosperity gospel remained incomprehensible to me until I witnessed the full extent of what many Haitians endure on a daily basis. After the church group left, I began volunteering with a human rights organization that worked directly with earthquake survivors. I was plucked from the sheltered compound of the pastor?s church and dropped into a maelstrom of human suffering, confronted with the brutal reality of the displaced person camps.

Camp residents were dying of diarrhea and malnutrition; mothers and fathers watched as their children?s bellies became distended with parasites and their skin discolored with fungi and infections. I would meet toddlers whose only playthings were tin cans picked from refuse heaps. One naked 3-year-old walked around compulsively chewing on a discarded condom. Sexual assault is a chronic problem in these ?tent cities? -- in the absence of a reliable police force, groups of criminals regularly attack single women at night. I heard countless firsthand accounts of gang rape; some of the victims were as young as 12.

On a broader level in Haiti, political repression has flared up in recent months. As I photographed one antigovernment march in downtown Port-au-Prince, I witnessed police firing on demonstrators; a man was shot down in the street a few yards from me. My experience was, in fact, mild. I interviewed several people who had experienced the unbridled chaos following the coups d?état in 1991 and 2004, as military thugs systematically raped and pillaged the citizenry.

What is one to do with such horror? Confronted with violence, rape, pestilence and starvation firsthand, I came to understand the appeal of blaming the victims: Some explanation, any explanation, was surely easier to fathom than the thought of meaningless, unpredictable and uncontrollable suffering. To those who endure these conditions and to outsiders who witness them, psychological defense mechanisms suddenly become very attractive.

Thankfully, however, the Haitian people themselves offer us an alternative to both a cruel, vengeful god and a cold, indifferent universe.

Jean-Bertrand Aristide, the former Catholic priest who was twice elected president of Haiti, preached of a creator who identifies intimately with the poor and oppressed. A constant proponent of the ?preferential option for the poor,? he is the pastor who taught: ?A Christian who wishes to grow in holiness must ask that the land be

redistributed. He must ask that the big landholders give land to the poor.? Long before the term liberation theology was coined, this divinely inspired philosophy was already common among by much of the Haitian peasantry. According to the Creole proverb, ?Bondye kan bay men li pa kan separe? -- God can give to humans, but it is up to us to justly distribute what he has given us.

Aristide?s Christianity also tells us that Christ crucified is to be found among the poor and oppressed. This is the Christ who lies in the rubble alongside those who were crushed by falling buildings, who weeps alongside the man who lost his entire family, who aches alongside the women who endure the threat of rape every waking second of their existence. It is the Christ who commended the woman who anointed his feet as the first true believer, for she recognized the messiah in this peasant who was to be executed by the earthly powers that be.

The sacred mystery of a God who suffers alongside the oppressed and calls for their deliverance offers no easy answers. It invites us, however, to encounter God in the midst of inexplicably hellish conditions -- and belies the callous image of a detached, sadistic deity that weak-minded men like Robertson preach in the name of Christianity.

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