

Adonis Mirror



9/5/2005

Wrath of God, Wrath of Men

By Richard Leader

A week has passed since Hurricane Katrina devoured New Orleans. Over the course of seven long days displaced residents have endured a variety of horrors: from the quiet dread facing those who had the means to escape, the meager comforts afforded by the sullen white walls of hotel rooms only serving as a constant reminder of the question mark of tomorrow, to the pandemonium endured by those trapped within the confines of the city limits, whether on rooftops or piled into the Superdome. Death was omnipresent; sometimes its work was wrought by the hands of men alone. Many of us standing safely outside the chaos (whether or not we participated in relief efforts of various sorts) found ourselves trying to make sense of it all.

Some looked to God for answers. Those believing in a God whose existence is equally wrought by the hands of men and their violence—from the bullets exchanged between survivors, looters, or figures of authority, to the accounts of men raping girls and women that have been reported—found a way to rationalize the destruction in terms understandable to mere mortals. Groups such as the Columbia Christians for Life circulated mailings (dated August 29) blaming the inhabitants of the city for incurring God's wrath. They fancifully used satellite imagery of Katrina and compared it to the photos of unborn children their movement uses in its attempts to legislate motherhood on male-terms. In their own words:

Louisiana has 10 child-murder-by-abortion centers -
FIVE are in New Orleans
www.lds.org ('Find an Abortion Clinic [sic]')

Baby-murder state # 1 — California (125 abortion centers) — land of earthquakes, forest fires, and mudslides

Baby-murder state # 2 — New York (78 abortion centers) — 9-11 Ground Zero

Baby-murder state # 3 — Florida (73 abortion centers) — Hurricanes Bonnie, Charley, Frances, Ivan, Jeanne in 2004; and now, Hurricane Katrina in 2005

God's message: REPENT AMERICA !

Columbia's message circulated widely, as it went out not only to their highly conservative base but also to a number of liberal writers. Rather than sitting on this calculated invective and perhaps sparing those who lost loved ones or livelihoods in the hurricane from the callous words, those of us on the Left also found ourselves also needing to find people to blame: this went beyond just criticism of President Bush, FEMA funding, and the racialization of poverty—all viable complaints deserving popular consideration and redress—to something more primal. We needed to find our own Sodomites to sodomize in a game of hierarchy, a people richly deserving of calamity, whether at the hands of God or our own.

Thus it was no accident that liberal men especially seemed to be moved—perhaps more so than their female counterparts—by the special brand of offensiveness perpetrated by the Columbia Christians for Life, not because they themselves have a legitimate first-party interest in the reproductive choices being blocked by the Right, but because they have a keen investment in such games of hierarchy. While female writers on the internet are commonly ignored by their male peers, the story of Katrina-as-an-Angry-Fetus moved rapidly from Eve's Apple to Pandagon.net to Kevin Drum (a man who has received more flack than anyone for refusing to acknowledge women's words) and his Political Animal column at the *Washington Monthly*.

Prior to the emergence of Columbia's plum—at least when it comes to engendering agonistic male bonding—Drum had previously written “At the risk of sounding overly righteous every time

disaster strikes, can I please suggest that Katrina is really not an appropriate subject for partisan jabbing right now? That goes for both left and right.” One reader later accused Drum himself of violating that criterion with his posting of the Columbia story (as reported, rather jovially, by Amanda Marcotte at her Pandagon.net), even though Drum's dictum itself was rather naïve, or at least wanted to be interpreted as such, given that there are certainly important political issues at stake here; desperate ones. Yet profound pronouncements (too dreadfully deep and laboriously momentous to ever capture the Pulitzer prizes they seem to hungry for) and low-brow ribbing (a fight broke out at Political Animal where several readers made accusations of Southern “inbreeding”) seem to be the only ways in which men can express their political differences, while women—people with actual uterus at stake—seemed to take the “Angry Fetus” hypothesis more in stride.

A great deal of the purported offensiveness displayed by the Columbia mailing depended upon the belief that such callousness in the face of human suffering is a unique calling card of Christian fundamentalism and the Far Right: the highlighting of its egregiousness in this case was more designed to serve as a reminder that progressive Liberals would never engage in such behavior or stoop to such levels than it was to highlight the legitimately offensive aspects of its content. (Thus privileging the subjectivities of those outside the scope of its primary invective, placing the male Left's ego above and beyond both the women targeted by the “Life” movement and the citizens of New Orleans.) One of Kevin Drum's readers shamelessly advertised an article at a Perrspectives.com (presumably both linked to and written by its owner, Jon Perr) arguing exactly that, compiling a list of fundamentalist occasions for claiming the wrath of God, citing the words of Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson.

Yet the male Left has engaged in such behavior. Shortly before the presidential election of 2004 an image was circulated that ostensibly tracked the paths of three hurricanes (Charley, Frances, Ivan; the same three the Columbia Christians for Life cited in their

own propaganda) across Florida, the narrow black lines representing the storms flowing from one “red” or Republican county to the next, carefully avoiding the blue demographics on the map. As the text of the image concluded:

I thought it was an interesting coincidence that a state with questionable election results would be pummeled by hurricanes just before the next election. Then I thought it was an interesting coincidence that the storms spared Miami, who voted for Gore in 2000. Just out of curiosity, I overlaid two maps: one of the tracks of the hurricanes of 2004, and one of the election results of 2000.

This is no longer an interesting coincidence. It is an unmistakable message by God. I hope everyone is listening.

While the map itself is fictitious and is now found mostly on various internet “joke” sites, its verisimilar presentation was enough to foster credibility for those of a disposition to find some amusement in the pondering of its plausibility. The seriousness of the joke’s appearance was bolstered by the fact that much of its text was an extended copyright notice, a strange inclusion as the Bob Morris to which the image is accredited seems to be largely anonymous; across the internet a variety of eponymous writers have declared that they had no involvement whatsoever.

The image was posted with a chat-smiley grinning at a forum hosted by Nonviolence.org to much amusement, was controversially “locked down” at another at TheDemocraticUnderground.com, and even received a scientific debunking by writers at Snopes.com. The image was circulated even as Hurricane Ivan traveled northward across the United States and as many were still reeling from its effects. Jason Kucsma, founder and co-editor of *Clamor* magazine, had the following to say in a September 23, 2004 entry in the publication’s blog (the same entry was republished by a Milwaukee Indymedia list):

While the hurricane disasters in Florida were undeniably horrible, we couldn’t help think that they might be an election season message from god that she wasn’t going to put up with an election tampering this time around. Then we received this from a fellow who took the time to overlay the election results from 2000 with the hurricane paths of 2004. Who’s on god’s side now?

The words are an exercise in the management of contradictions. At once Kucsma takes personal credit for the “God vs. Bush” concept at the same time that he works to distance himself from it, using both the fact that the image was authored by a conveniently functionally anonymous third-party (in opposition to his own use of the royal-we) and through his disclaimer of “undeniable horror.” Similarly, one Bob Morris of Polizeros.com insists that while he did not come up with the idea, he thinks “the map is great,” although his praise is also tempered by an apologetic:

As one who has been through hurricanes, I wouldn’t wish them on anyone, not even Jeb Bush.

However since Bob Woodward reported that Dubya believes Jesus told him to invade Iraq, it’s only fair that lefties can believe God is smiting Florida for its sins in the 2000 election. Well, those lefties who still believe in God and sin, that is...

Jason Kucsma took this mitigation a step further at *Clamor* in his attempt at mock-feminism—citing a female pronoun for the divine—to disguise the fact that his use of the image and the legacies it entails is a purely patriarchal one. If it is wrong for Christian Fundamentalists who genuinely believe as a religious conviction the rhetoric they employ to promulgate that world view when it results in psychological harm (or often material and even mortal harm) to others, how much more wrong is it when the same thing is done

with no conviction at all, with utter insincerity as a mere joke to be temporarily paraded as truth? Even as the “God vs. Bush” trope was likely created as a direct response to similar conservative efforts, the cynicism it employs is not earnest on a political level, but mired in male-centric competition: the message is we can dish it out too; we have penises. Though the masculinities worshiped by the Columbia Christians for Life and that of the male Left are antagonistic, they are also complementary and mutually reinforcing.

Humor is the stock response to every conceivable bad situation these days. We are invited to laugh at one catastrophe after the next; it is only human, we are constantly reminded. Those without such good humor are traditionally called—radical feminists, no matter if many of them are quite funny indeed. Our culture’s total investment in irony, particularly so on the Left, has less to do with genuine humor and more to do with its utility in disguising men’s agonistic behavior toward each other: while the saber-rattling on the Left and the Right may appear political, it is ultimately in favor of the status quo and is hence apolitical unless the notion of patriarchy is considered.

Even so, given the short memory of contemporary society, “God vs. Bush” was conveniently all but forgotten barely a year later, allowing men on the Left to pretend that Katrina-as-an-Angry-Fetus was beyond the pale: that it existed outside the prescribed limits of acceptable agonistic displays as determined by male culture. Such liminal flexing is itself part of the agonistic process. Clearly, there was no such violation; nor is any such violation even possible: only the dour admonitions of allegedly humorless feminists are seen as an authentic threat to the current regime, one that is highly punishable. Today many feminists themselves are even quick to jump upon their more “uptight” sisters in order to rein them back in line.

Dealing with religious fundamentalism often proves impossible; there is seldom an adequate response to those who believe a hurricane is directed towards individuals in a certain city or even a nation as a whole. Becoming a scriptural expert oneself would not

prove sufficient: though Jesus states in Luke 13:4 that the victims of a particular disaster were no more sinful than those who were spared, the “wake-up call” response to tragedy that more moderate believers accept can sometimes be just as dangerous politically as the Old Testament vendettas of Fred Phelps (of God Hates Fags) and his kin. This is complicated further by the fact that the Right does have substantial influence and wealth (and thus aid to victims of Katrina has been purposefully limited by the power structure to cash donations whenever possible), and most conservatives are equally sincere in their humanitarian efforts, even when they also believe that the sin of New Orleans was its undoing.

Dishonesty, however, is never an effective counter to such rhetoric: in this case, the forgetfulness of male liberals when it comes to their own participation in the “God vs. Bush” nonsense, as well as the contradiction involved in claiming the particularly heinous nature of Columbia’s mailing when segments of the Left had their own selfish reasons for ensuring the circulation of the offensive and hurtful material. As much as some people out there need a reminder that Jesus is God and not a strap-on, it is not a valid complaint if your only argument is that theirs is bigger than yours.