



What does our faith mean when faced with a disaster? An exploratory investigation into how those affected by Hurricane Katrina used their faith and the differences by denomination.

Alison Marie Simons

Texas Wesleyan University Sociology Department, 1201 Wesleyan St Fort Worth, TX 76105

asimons@txwes.edu

Abstract

Disasters are a prominent feature of our lives as they appear to become more devastating and more frequent. Though we understand the scientific nature of natural disasters there remains an element that maintains that natural disasters are under God's control and sent for a reason. This study undertaken following Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans seeks to understand how people used their faith prior to, during in, and after the storm. Subsequently, the study finds that different denominations exhibit different behaviors and practices prior to, during and after the storm. These practices are consistent with differences in social class and race: those with fewer resources relying more on their faith, believing in a more direct link to God, and maintaining that God sent the storm as part of His plan to re-direct their life.

Keywords: Faith, religion, hurricane Katrina, sociology

Subject Classification: Social Science, Sociology, Religion

Type (Method/Approach): Qualitative research using face-to-face interviews

Language: English

Date of Publication: 14.08.2018

DOI: 10.24297/jssr.v12i2.7535

ISSN: 2321-1091

Volume: 12 Issue: 2

Journal: Journal of Social Science Research

Publisher: CIRWORLD

Website: <https://cirworld.com>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.



Introduction

A terrible storm came into a town and local officials sent out an emergency warning that the riverbanks would soon overflow and flood the nearby homes. They ordered everyone in the town to evacuate immediately.

A faithful Christian man heard the warning and decided to stay, saying to himself, "I will trust God and if I am in danger, then God will send a divine miracle to save me."

The neighbors came by his house and said to him, "We're leaving and there is room for you in our car, please come with us!" But the man declined, "I have faith that God will save me."

As the man stood on his porch watching the waters rise up the steps, a man in a canoe paddled by and called to him, "Hurry and come into my canoe, the waters are rising quickly!" But the man again said, "No thanks, God will save me."

The floodwaters rose higher pouring into his living room and the man had to retreat to the second floor. A police motorboat came by and saw him at the window. "We will come up and rescue you!" they shouted. But the man refused, waving them off saying, "Use your time to save someone else! I have faith that God will save me!"

The flood waters rose higher and higher and the man had to climb to his rooftop.

A helicopter spotted him and dropped a rope ladder. A rescue officer came down the ladder and pleaded with the man, "Grab my hand and I will pull you up!" But the man STILL refused, folding his arms tightly to his body. "No thank you! God will save me!"

Shortly after, the house broke up and the floodwaters swept the man away and he drowned.

When in Heaven, the man stood before God and asked, "I put all my faith in you. Why didn't you come and save me?"

And God said, "Son, I sent you a warning, I sent you a car, I sent you a canoe. I sent you a motorboat. I sent you a helicopter. What more were you looking for?" [1]

Our history is replete with stories of disasters that have become mythologized in our culture while the actual accounts of the event have been lost in time. The Bible abounds with stories of disasters such as the Great Flood and Sodom and Gomorrah [2] while other devastating disasters have left their mark in our historical records, such as, the volcanic explosion of Mount Vesuvius that buried Pompeii in 79 A.D. [3]. Disasters are becoming more frequent with more devastating consequences [4].

Each disaster is a "social drama;" an event sated with stories and interpretations contingent upon predominant worldviews. According to Turner [5] religion is a world view that people use to make sense of these social dramas and the disruption of their normal everyday life. Religion is partly belief and partly practices and customs that are ingrained into cultural aspects of societies [6, 7]. Indeed, regardless of the amount of scientific knowledge and explanations of natural phenomena that we currently embrace in modern society, religion was once used to explain these exact same phenomena and the notion that disasters are somehow under God's control still prevails [8, 9, 10, 11]. A person's interpretation of a natural hazard as being under God's control may strongly influence their belief of survival from the event [12, 13]. This predisposition to believe that God holds one's fate and that the individual can do nothing to prevent the consequences is



regarded as a "fatalistic" characteristic and may have dire consequences in the face of a disaster by preventing the individual from investigating a way out of harm's way [14, 15].

Framing natural disasters as under God's control has presented two ways of looking at the disaster, both of which have alternate courses of action for an individual's behavior. One way, is that the disaster is an "act of God" and that consequently there is nothing that can be done by the individual to prepare for the eventuality of the disaster. Acts of God are usually viewed as infrequent and haphazard [8], and victims are assumed to be in the wrong place at the wrong time [16]. As the devastation is apparent and victims can be easily identified natural disasters are thought of as having legitimate victims [8]. Consequently, there is an expectation that the federal government will respond appropriately and provide support in the aftermath. Recovery from an act of God is of a shorter duration than for man-made disasters because without anyone to blame people try to resume their lives as quickly as possible after the event [2, 8, 10, 11, 17, 18, 19]. Research has focused on natural disasters as being acts of God presupposing this approach considered the majority of religious beliefs that could affect behavior in the event [20].

In contrast, the event may be interpreted as "God's wrath." Here the victims are viewed as somehow having earned their punishment [18]. The concept of God's wrath has been growing over the past several decades framed by prominent Christian leaders like Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, and John Hagee who claim that those affected by disasters are being punished for their adverse lifestyles [10]. This kind of belief has a profound effect on disaster victimization allowing us to blame the victim for their fate by implying that they must have done something wrong or sinful to attract God's wrath [2]. This may have profound impacts on the recovery of the victims not only in terms of psychological well-being of the individual, but also in terms of aid from other members of society who will be reluctant to send resources if they buy into the notion that the victim was in some way responsible for their own fate.

Our highly industrialized society tends to view religion as a fall back for some people to explain the unexplainable [21]. As humans we appreciate order, religion helps provide us with a sense of control in our lives [13]. For some people the belief that a disaster is an act of God is a coping mechanism used to make sense of the event [11, 13, 14, 15]. For others, who struggle with the pressing needs of everyday life, putting off preparing for a devastating future event that may never happen by placing it in the "hands of God" allows God to dictate their future [9, 22]. These beliefs adopt the idea that someone is in control of the natural systems on earth and we are not just subject to a system we have no control over [11, 13].

Man-made disasters in contrast to natural disasters, always have someone to blame. Here the assumption is that someone allowed something to go wrong to cause the disaster to happen and blame can, therefore, be apportioned when the culprit is found; many people have been used as scapegoats to fulfill this need [15, 17]. One of the reasons for the slow recovery from man-made disasters is that the event is often dragged out through courts and the victims do not have access to any other recourse to help them recover resulting in more mental, social, and physical problems for those affected [17, 19].

Religion then offers a way of providing ourselves with an order to the chaos and a way of alleviating the future problem to somewhere else so that we do not have to worry about it in our daily lives [13]. In this context then people willingly place their fate in the hands of God and do not deal with the possibility of a disaster. This appears to place them in a vulnerable position when the inevitable disaster strikes.

There is significant research now on different populations that may be more vulnerable in disaster situations; race, age, gender, social class, education, and disability [23]. Each population demonstrates a marked propensity to take the brunt of a disaster in some way, naturally some people may fall into several vulnerable categories at the same time. This study is an investigative study looking at the possibility that religiosity may place people with strong beliefs in God into a vulnerable position in the event of a disaster.



New Orleans was selected as the desirable site to undertake this study on religiosity and behavior during hurricane Katrina. New Orleans has a long history of natural disasters; having experienced 38 hurricanes since 1559 [24] and 30 storms since 1900 [25]. The location, urban and suburban development and demographic characteristics of New Orleans have made it a unique city within the United States, which attracts a large number of tourists each year to experience its rich culture. Though considered to be one of the most multicultural and integrated cities in the United States [26] it is also one of the most impoverished and ghettoized cities in the nation [27]. Part of the unique culture of New Orleans extends to its deeply religious population and can be observed in the proliferation of churches within the region.

In August 2005 New Orleans was hit by a Category 4 hurricane, Katrina. The devastation left in the wake of Hurricane Katrina is not directly the result of the storm itself, but rather a series of geographical, social, economic and political decisions that led up to that date [26]. It is debatable whether the disaster is a natural disaster or a man-made disaster.

It is estimated that between 100,000 residents [28, 29, 30] and 250,000 residents were unable to leave the city as the storm approached. Some headed for the "refuge of last resort" that included the Superdome [25, 31, 32], which only expected to accommodate 15,000 people. After the failure of the levee system, a day after the storm had traversed the city, an estimated 18,000 people were forced to leave their homes and headed for the Superdome while another 20,000 headed for the Convention Center [33]. The Superdome itself became surrounded by water as the levee system continued to flood the region a week after the storm [31]. It is estimated that 300,000 people were evacuated from the metropolitan area and moved to safety [34]. Black females made up the largest contingent of those displaced by the storm [34]. For many residents of New Orleans, the forced evacuation out of the city marked the first time that they had left the city, having had no resources to be able to travel and no relatives outside of the area to go to prior to the storm[33].

Estimates claim that 75% of the flooded areas were in neighborhoods where most of the population was African-American [35]. As in the last major storm to hit New Orleans, Hurricane Betsy in 1965, the lower Ninth Ward was the hardest hit area in the metropolis and the last to see utilities, municipal services and residents return [26].

Analyzing and understanding the pattern of casualties in Hurricane Katrina also helps illustrate the context in which survivors made and continued to make decisions related to the storm. Death toll estimates initially released by the state government were that 10,000 people had been killed by the hurricane and the subsequent flooding. The actual estimate of those that died is closer to 10 percent of that figure, probably 1,846 [36]. Although this figure varies, the Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals (LDHH) declared in June 2006, that 1,577 victims had been killed as a direct result of Hurricane Katrina [37]. Other estimates suggest that the figure could be over 1,800 victims [28, 36, 38], and there was an estimated 700 people still listed as missing two years after the event [39]. Of the total number of deaths in New Orleans 200 occurred in hospitals and nursing homes [40]. Since the hurricane, one in 20 survivors of Hurricane Katrina report having had a family member killed in the storm, while one in four reports having a friend killed in the storm [38]. Regardless of the actual figure these death toll estimates have only been surpassed by two previous disaster events in the United States; a hurricane in Florida in 1928 that killed an estimated 3,000 people and the Galveston hurricane in 1900 that killed 8,000 [24, 28, 32, 41].

Analysis of death toll statistics shows that being elderly was the single most important factor in falling victim to the storm. The elderly, those over 65 years of age, accounted for 67% of the deaths but only represented 12% of the population in the 2000 Census [37, 42] while those over 75 years of age accounted for 75% of the deaths [42]. The mean age of victims was 69 years of age. Those under 45 years of age accounted for only 10% of the victims [43]. Though the majority of the elderly population in New Orleans is white (19% of the population is elderly white compared to only 9% of the population being elderly black) deaths were more likely to be amongst the black population. In fact, at all age levels, death rates for blacks were double that for whites. Of the nonelderly victims, blacks accounted for 82% of the victims while they represent 70% of the



population, in comparison the white nonelderly victims accounted for 17% of the victims while representing 27% of the population [37]. Deaths were also more likely to be male, since this was the predominant population that had stayed in the city to wait out the storm [43].

Overall, 1.5 million people were displaced from their homes throughout the entire region of the hurricane's devastation and 60,000 homes destroyed, possibly resulting in a negative impact on the United States economy for years to come [31].

Materials and Methods

Due to the nature of the study a qualitative approach was designed. A list of the churches in the greater New Orleans area was compiled using a google map search and the websites USA Church (http://www.usachurch.com/louisiana/new_orleans/churches.htm) which netted 883 churches of which Baptist churches represented the majority at 458 (about 52%) of places of worship, followed by the Church of God (62 or about 7%) Methodist (60 or about 7%) and Catholics (45 or about 5%). The Super pages (<http://www.superpages.com/yellowpages/C-Churches/S-LA/T-New+Orleans/>) netted a list of 729 congregations in the area also representing a variety of denominations and faiths, including, Baptist, Catholic, Episcopal, Lutheran, and Jewish. While both the USA Church and the Super pages websites state that the Baptist religion represents most of churches in the area, the latter source states the Baptists account for only 240 (about 33%) of the religious institutions, much less than the 52% representation in the USA Church sample. Overall, Baptists represent somewhere between one-third and one-half of the religious institutions in the city. The Super pages website states that the Baptists are followed by Catholics in New Orleans who accounted for 59 (about 8%) of the formal religious institutions.

The list of congregations does not correspond with the percentage of the population who claim affiliation to religious organizations. According to city-data.com (<http://www.city-data.com/>) the percentage of people claiming affiliation with the Catholic church is 64%, while 13% claim affiliation with Southern Baptists, 18% other and 5% United Methodists. The Catholic church accounts for 69 congregations within New Orleans which is only 28% of the religious institutions but they have 136,377 adherents which amount to 64% of the religious population within the New Orleans area. The Southern Baptists account for 29 congregations which is 11.5% of the religious institutions while maintaining 27,793 adherents or 13% of the religious population within the area. The United Methodist church has 34 congregations or 13.4% of the religious institutions and 11,193 adherents or 5.2% of the religious population. The Episcopal church with 12 congregations or 4.37% of the religious institutions has 6,138 adherents or 2.9% of the religious adherents. There are 33 different religious organizations represented in New Orleans of which Catholic, Southern Baptist, United Methodist and Episcopal are the main four.

An alphabetical list of the institutions along with their address and phone numbers was compiled. Beginning with the first institution on the list, interval random sampling was used to identify every tenth institution. A multi-pronged strategy, using phone calls and email, was then employed to recruit church leaders for the study. If a phone number was out-of-service or had been reassigned to a citizen and no email address could be found for the institution, then the next institution on the list was used instead of the original selection which was then removed from the sample frame. There were an inordinate number of out-of-service phone numbers. A subsequent visit to the area showed that the majority of churches in the lower Ninth Ward were abandoned.

The participants in this study are members of religious institutions within the City of New Orleans and its immediate surrounding areas. Participants are those approached either via phone calls or emails and willingly consented to take part in the study. Participants were selected from two groups; clergy and congregation members. The religious leaders were picked from a list of religious institutions within the area as being the primary contact for their organization or a designated representative. Leaders acted as gatekeepers to their congregations and provided access to members, subsequently only one leader refused access to his



congregation. Members of the congregation who were approached were helpful in providing other names of people they felt would be willing to participate.

Church leaders were informed about the study and asked whether they would be willing to participate. Participation would require them to take part in a face-to-face interview of approximately one-hour duration and provide an introduction for the researcher to some members of their congregation. The majority of religious leaders were amenable to the interview and agreed to set appointment times. Phone calls did not result in any direct "no" though a few leaders did later ask to change the time of the interview and did not reschedule despite repeated attempts to contact them. Approaches through email did receive some interest though did not yield any interviews.

Three church leaders readily agreed to provide access to their congregation members after the interview, while several others agreed to place fliers about the study in their sanctuary for members of their congregation. One church leader provided names and phone numbers for several members of his congregation whom he believed would be willing to participate. This did in fact result in three interviews from congregation members. Two leaders furnished an invitation to attend their Wednesday evening services where they made announcements about the study and asked for volunteers to help in the study. These efforts helped tremendously in acquiring interviews. Additional participants were recruited using the snowballing technique. A few leaders provided names of other leaders that they believed would be willing to take part in the study, and several members of the congregation provided names of other members and people outside of their church they thought would be useful to the study. Only one leader refused access to his congregation.

Six field trips were made to New Orleans during the months of August, September and October 2010. Each visit took place during the week arriving very early Wednesday morning and leaving Saturday evening. On average three interviews a day were conducted during each visit, which allowed for travel time between the interviews.

In all 36 people were interviewed yielding 35 useable interviews. In terms of demographic composition, the sample consisted of 17 females and 19 males of which there were 14 African Americans and 22 Caucasians. The age range extended from 35 years to 65 years of age with an average age of 53 years. The sample was diverse in terms of represented denominations and faith consisting of 11 Episcopal (2 claim to be Anglo-Catholic, a breakaway from the Episcopal faith), 12 Baptists, 5 Methodists, 4 Catholics, 2 multid denominational, and 2 people of the Jewish faith. Eight participants who declared their religion also stated that they had been raised in a different denomination and had converted. The sample consisted of 14 church leaders and 22 congregation members. At least one church leader was interviewed from each of the denominations represented. The church leaders were overrepresented by males (12 males to 2 females) and by Caucasians (11 Caucasians to 3 African Americans).

Twenty-five of the 36 participants had been born and raised in New Orleans, with the majority of these having never left the city. Two participants had left New Orleans to pursue careers elsewhere for a time, but both had returned after Hurricane Katrina with the purpose of helping with the recovery. Of those participants who were not born in New Orleans, two had been brought to New Orleans as children while the others had come later in life to work. This group is overrepresented by church leaders (7 of the 11 non-natives). Only one member of this group had come in after Hurricane Katrina and would be celebrating one year at his church. For other members the time of their arrival extended from 8 years to 23 years. The member who had lived in New Orleans for 23 years considered herself native, though the member who had been there only 17 years believed that the natives did not consider him native.

Twenty-six participants lived in Orleans Parish while the remaining participants lived in Jefferson Parish. Though both parishes had experienced severe flooding the makeup of each parish is quite different in terms of social characteristics. Jefferson Parish was 80% white in 1980 but in 2010 presented as 56% white, 26% African American and 26% Hispanic. Orleans Parish on the other hand had a 67% African American population



prior to Hurricane Katrina that has now been reduced to 60%, Whites account for 30% and Hispanics 5% of the population. Orleans Parish lost 29% of its population after Hurricane Katrina while Jefferson parish only lost 5% of its population. Orleans and Jefferson parishes are the most populous of the seven parishes in the greater New Orleans metropolitan area. Prior to Hurricane Katrina Orleans Parish accounted for 37% of the population while Jefferson Parish accounted for 35% of the population. After Hurricane Katrina Jefferson Parish is now the most populous in the area accounting for 37% of the population while Orleans Parish now only accounts for 29% of the population (Plyer, 2011).

Once all the interviews were complete, they were transcribed by the researcher, analyzed and coded into themes.

Results and Discussion

Several themes emerged from the interviews which are discussed here. Initial questions asking about the formation of hurricanes yielded answers that were very similar in context and tried to provide the meteorological elements that form hurricanes "Some conglomeration of weather events, I think, gather the – something that happens off the coast of Africa, and the combination of the heat of the water and things that are going on in the atmosphere, can lead to hurricanes". I later discovered that since hurricane Katrina the local government and media had done a remarkable job of providing information about hurricanes in the form of commercials on TV and pamphlets that could be "pick[ed] up at any Wendy's". Participants, especially the Episcopalian and Methodists, were well educated about hurricanes and their formation [44, 45]. Only two participants stated firmly that hurricanes were made by God. Both interviewees were African American Baptist, though not of the same congregation, and both had been born and grown up in the lower Ninth Ward. Both were well educated.

Even though participants could state how hurricanes were formed, an underlying theme prevailed that God still played a role in the natural order of things "I don't think they come from God if that's the hidden question. I think God made the laws of nature and lets them run", "They are a result of atmospheric pressure and water and wind. I consider it a natural act of God", "I just believe that God has a way of getting our attention, and that was one of the things that did get our attention", "I think God allows it", "I believe that God allowed Katrina to happen to New Orleans. I believe he took his hand off the situation, I believe he allowed it to happen because he wanted to see what Christians were gonna do". All denominations showed some aspect that God had a place in the hurricane and Christian ideology does promote the premise that God is in control of the universe [46].

Only one participant (Episcopalian female) stated that the hurricane was sent to wipe out sin in New Orleans. This may be understood as the wrath of God, though she did not consider herself a part of the sinful culture:

I must tell you, when I sat Monday and Tuesday, after Katrina looking at what was happening, it did keep playing in my mind, that what I'm looking at is the fall of Sodom and Gomorra, between the gambling and the what happens on the coast. Because, they fancy themselves a mini Las Vegas and what New Orleans reputation has always been, and the great pride that both areas take in that sinful, evil reputation. I truly thought, you know, God's going to wipe all this out. Give us a chance to start it over. And, sure enough we did, went back to exactly the same thing.

The other participants did not believe that God had sent the hurricane as punishment for their sins:

But I don't believe as some preacher in Houston that it was God's invention to punish the wicked city of New Orleans. That was so funny, that somebody was actually preaching that, that this was New Orleans' punishment for Bourbon Street and – So, either God is a very bad shot, or maybe there's more good to that than we realize.



However, some of the participants, particularly the African American Baptists, talked about God operating in their daily lives and being responsible for the “karma” that affected other people that slighted them, for instance:

I said "Be not deceived. God is not mocked, whatsoever man soweth that shall be reaped." And he says, "Dan, you don't think they're gonna take your word over mine" I said, "Sir, did you understand what I said to you?" Very calm like that. And he looked at me, and I looked at him, and so less than a week later, he was outta here, and I said, "Ooh, God, I know you're fast, but wow."

This belief that God would not send the hurricane to punish them for their sins, yet that he would in their normal daily lives affect other people for their sins against them is a marked contradiction. It is inline with other Christians unaffected by the hurricane believing that the storm was sent to punish those affected for their sins.

For all the participants God played a significant role in their everyday lives and they attributed much of what happened in their lives to God, believing that God was a causal agent in their lives[7, 47]. For African American participants God was accessible to them all the time. Not only was He a major part of their lives, in their routines, helping them personally through the trials and tribulations of their daily lives[46, 47], but they believed that their lives and everything they accomplished within them was directly attributable to God and his purpose for them, “Because God’s gonna use you for a purpose and a lotta people wonder why I praise God because I know who he is to me. I know what he’s done for me and what he’s doing for me”, “So I'm just excited about it, and I know my steps are ordered by the Lord, and I'm just thankful to God to have called me and positioned me to be placed by such an anointed man of God to serve”.

Signs of God were everywhere, especially for the African American Baptists[13, 32, 48]. Many people believe that God was present during the storm helping people survive throughout. There are numerous survival stories that are attributed to God's work [49,50, 51].While African Americans were more inclined to believe that God had allowed the storm to happen, they also believed that God was with them throughout the storm and told stories about how He had saved them:

He said by the time he got in the house he said his mother had her Bible on the bed. She was praying. She says, “I know this is the end of my life.” She says, “But I’m glad to see two of my boys.” She says, “This is the end of my life.” He says “Don’t lie here and say that.” He sent us here for a reason. We’re here for a reason.” So he looked outside. His uncle lived across the street. His uncle had an old boat. He was able to get his brother, they waded and they waded out with the boat and they finally were able to get in and they got to the Coast Guard or whatever and they were able to take his mother and sisters out and they got them to evacuate.

One participant shared the story of returning home after the hurricane and finding that her house had flooded to about four feet. However, on top of one of the speakers was a Bible. It did not get wet, even having spent a month in the humid conditions in the aftermath of the hurricane. She marveled at how this Bible could stay dry when everything else in the house was soaking and she interpreted this as a message from God saying that He was still with her and that she should not give up hope, that she must carry on. For the African American Baptists, a part of their belief was that they could speak to God daily, and he would bless them in some way with skills to get them through the event and provide what they needed as they needed it, i.e. being given money, or patience, a chance to see how people could help each other. God was a part of their daily lives and inseparable from what they did. As one participant succinctly stated, “just as when we go through catastrophes like Katrina, it is never about us. It is about allowing the will of God to be done in our lives”.

God not only played a role in their daily lives, but he has a plan for them and it was upto them to interpret the message that God was sending specifically with the storm, “It’s a test of our faith” [46, 47]. Baptists were adamant that the storm had been sent to show them something about how they needed to change their lives, how God was working through them:



My patience was tested because I am a hurry up let's get it done type of person, and when I couldn't do that I felt helpless. And so I found myself more often asking God "ok God what do you want me to see in this? I know that patience and perseverance, I know I need that, but hurry up and give it to me. And since you're not hurrying up, ok, what I am I supposed to get out of this? And I'm supposed to be still and still know that you are God. Ok I get that.".... So I learned patience and that in the midst of everything God has equipped me with skills and to love people.

And I learned not to complain. That's why the monies they gave me to help me and I heard about other people getting three times that much money I got. I was like 'I'm not going to complain, some people don't have a house, some people don't have nothing.' So I didn't complain, I didn't complain. I was just grateful you know. Yeah, I know it increased my faith, I know it did, mmmm-hmmm.

God's plans for his followers were just as marked in Episcopalian members, though more abstract, "But that's part of faith... I don't understand why Katrina happened. I just know that He had a reason for it, and I just know in my own life that it's made some changes for the better," "And just being able to trust the Lord more and just not fret over minor things as much, just its gonna work out you know, just keep plowing ahead".

Episcopalian members view God at a greater distance from themselves, he is not so prominent in their everyday routines. They believe in him just as strongly, but there was a distinct difference between the way African Americans converse with God on personal terms and the way in which Episcopalians express their belief. Significantly, Episcopalian members did not even mention God until later in the interview when questions specifically asked about His role in disasters. They spoke more in terms of their faith getting them through the event and their ability to reconnect with their church and their social support group. It was more abstract. Methodists spoke more about trusting in God, and their faith now being stronger because they had learned to trust him more deeply than before. For both, God's role in disasters was external to them and their survival, "God's role in disaster is to send his Holy Spirit, as he did, to comfort, to strengthen, to protect, and I believe that it trickles down to God being our creator and calling those that he have chose to spread the gospel".

For Episcopalian members God was with them during the disaster, but as a comfort. They did not express any sign that God could provide a way out of the situation for them, or that God was anything other than faith that carried them through the event, "holding our hands while we cower in the closet waiting for the tornado to pass and inspiring people who come to rescue those who are trapped."

In the aftermath of the hurricane Church leaders used Katrina as a vehicle to teach their congregation about the loving nature of God, a way to promote faith and solidarity and caring. As is a characteristic after most disasters, altruism was apparent throughout the community. The community not only pulled together, but many denominations from outside of the area came into New Orleans to help with the clean-up and to help rebuild the city. Baptists needed outside help to be able to rebuild. Their congregations were more scattered and their resources few. Episcopalians, on the other hand, relied on their own strong networks to help each other. The Church leaders had contact information on each of its members that had not only aided evacuation, but now meant that a member's contact with a construction company could aid the other members. Church leaders also formed a group amongst themselves for much needed psychological help.

All participants interviewed when asked whether their faith had changed in any way stated that their faith was stronger since Hurricane Katrina. However, hurricane Katrina may not have been the cause of their faith becoming stronger, but that a general maturity of their faith allowed them to get through Katrina. Some participants explained that hurricane Katrina provided blessings which they otherwise would not have experienced:

I think New Orleans has been very fortunate over decades, and I think what we did was take a whole lot of things in life for granted before Hurricane Katrina because it never really affected us in such a way. So the things that we once had, we learned to appreciate 'em even more after we didn't have 'em



– you know, to realize how much it really, really meant to us to have what we have. So I believe New Orleans is a blessed city, a city that's rich in culture. We've taken a lot for granted, and I think Hurricane Katrina was just eye-opening to bring us all back into perspective, to know what we should put first, which to me – and I've always believed it to be – was God was always first and is and will always be first.

Other participants saw the need to trust God to get you through the worst:

And I learned to live in the present much more fully than I ever had, and I had a deeper more visceral and physical understanding of God. But the only way that I can explain it is this, and maybe this isn't a good way. But I once heard a sermon about baptism and he said that when we were baptized we are imprinted with Christ. And he compared it to a watermark on paper. And that a watermark cannot be removed from that paper. It is part of the paper and that is the way in which we are imprinted with Christ. And I became more aware of that. And I became more comfortable with just having God in my pores.

If anything I would say where my faith was on a 22 hour notice, now it's on a 24 hour notice. It's at the 24 hours now. Where I used to have gaps in my faith I don't anymore, because I know. And in a moment, in an instant, it can all be taken away from you.

Participants also expressed their faith in God was stronger partly because they had seen their faith in humanity increase. For many of the participants their homes would not be in the condition that they are in now without the volunteer aid of people from all over the country. For one pastor her faith in God became stronger as she helped rebuild her community during the day and slept on the floor of her church at night but was too exhausted to pray throughout.

One aspect that emerged from the interviews was the Church's role in disaster. As expected the participants did believe that the Church's role in the event of a disaster is to provide spiritual and emotional aid, such as "I think it needs to be a beacon of hope for people. It needs to be a place where people can come together and know that they are safe and valued and will be cared for no matter what the circumstances." None of the participants believed that that role was in the form of monetary compensation or aid in rebuilding. Participants stated that the Church should "inform the people in faith," to provide "comfort and to help as they can". However, Episcopalians also believed that the Church needed to connect the community, not only of the congregation but of the larger community, "I think one of the principal roles is reconnecting community." Beyond this, they believed that the Church should reach out and aid more than their congregation, "following that, that they are going to engage in partnering for real outreach activities.: In fact, Churches can benefit the community:

It becomes a community focal point. I think that's an extremely important role and then I think churches, just by the nature of the beast, churches are usually anything from a small to very large buildings with a lot of space that are way underused and one of the critiques I have of churches is we need to start using our spaces wisely for the benefit of community and humanity.

Many of the congregation members expressed how important it was for services to resume at their church as soon as possible after the storm. In fact, many who returned to New Orleans the first week after Hurricane Katrina actively sought out their church and if that was damaged then sought out the church leader. Several members of one Episcopalian Church turned up on the doorstep of their leader, and they proceeded to hold a service in his driveway, joined by a raccoon in that first service.

The need to reconnect for congregation members was apparent. People wanted to know where other members of their family and congregation were, and to talk about the damage they had suffered. This turned out to be easier for the Episcopalians than for the Baptists. Resources within the Episcopalian churches were significantly more than resources within the Baptist churches, even though they had fewer numbers. Prior to



the storm, the Episcopalian and Methodists had established a database of contact information for their members which included emergency contact information, and which was used to link up with members after the storm. The Baptists had no resources to accomplish this and subsequently lost over two thirds of their congregations.

For the Church leaders their mission is to tend to the community, and several of the Episcopalian leaders are now finding that mission directly conflicts with the wishes of their congregation. It has been expressed to them that they now need to stop aiding the outside community and come back to concentrate on their own congregation.

Conclusions

Significantly, the devastation from the hurricane was not blamed on God but on man and failures within the system. All of the participants saw the storm as being somehow part of God's plan in the universe, though only one (Episcopalian) felt that the storm was a punishment for sins (and not their own). This is in direct contradiction to how people outside of New Orleans viewed the storm, and subsequently results in blaming the victim.

For Baptists (African Americans) it was a way of God showing them that he was there and directing their life on a path. Their losses served as a reminder that material possessions were not to be idolized, and that their life was under God's control. For the Episcopalians (whites) God was with them helping them through the storm holding their hand, but he did not speak to them as he did the Baptists. Their connection was not directly with Him, but with other members in their congregations. Their losses were marginal and rectified by their social connections[6,30]. This is consistent with the theodicy of these denominations which promote abstract ideologies in Baptists and wealth as a blessing in Episcopalian.

Nearly all the participants had evacuated for the storm, though for nearly half of the participants this was the first time they had ever evacuated the city in the face of a hurricane. It was evident that Episcopalians had evacuated earlier than the Baptists, having the resources and the connections outside of the city. Some of the Baptists made pilgrimages to their local church to pray as the storm approached, and churches changed their regular services to accommodate the need to pray and the presence of the coming storm. This supports Weigart's[13] assertion that people who are barely making it through life tend to place much faith in God and believe that giving their time in prayer and service to God will ensure their ultimate survival in an event which is too enormous in its devastation to consider daily. Baptists left to their own devices to evacuate and survive the storm and the aftermath with few resources and connections, then used their only available option, to pray.

It is evident that there is a marked difference between how Baptists and Episcopalians viewed and used their faith, prior to, during and after the storm. What is evident is that their faith is highly integrated into their culture which promotes certain behaviors and practices [6, 7]. Religion serves different functions for different social groups [29]. These practices cannot be separated from the social inequalities within the social structures that permeate their culture and the position that they maintain in society [52]. Religion must, therefore, be viewed as an intersection of social class and race [53].

Data Availability

Data from these interviews may be accessed by contacting the author, Alison Simons at asimons@txwes.edu, or by mail at Texas Wesleyan University, Sociology Department, 1201 Wesleyan Street, Fort Worth, TX. 76105.

Conflicts of Interest

There are no conflicts of interest that can be seen at this time.



Funding Statement

This research was self-funded.

Acknowledgments

I wish to acknowledge the support of Dr. Niki Dash, Dr. David McEntire and Gentry Hubbard for their help in this endeavor.

References

1. Epistle, The (2011). Retrieved from <http://epistle.us/>.
2. Dynes, R. R. (1998). Noah and disaster planning: The cultural significance of the Flood story. Newark, DE: Disaster Research Center, University of Delaware.
3. Lusnia, S. S. (2008). Pompeii on the Mississippi: The view from New Orleans. *Traumatology*, 14, 67-74.
4. Quarantelli, E.L. (1992). The environmental disasters of the future will be more and worse, but the future is not hopeless. *Disaster Prevention and Management*, 2(1), 67-78.
5. Turner, V. (1974). *Dramas, fields, and metaphors: Symbolic action in human society*. Ithica: Cornell University Press.
6. Bourdieu, P. (2005). *Outline of a theory of practice*. (R. Nice, Trans.) Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. (Original work published 1972).
7. Geertz, C. (1983). *Local knowledge: Further essays in interpretive Anthropology*. New York: Basic Books.
8. Gillard, M., & Patton, D. (1999). Disaster stress following a Hurricane: The role of religious differences in the Fijian Islands. *The Australian Journal of Disaster and Trauma Studies*, 2.
9. Koenig, H. G. (2006). *In the wake of disaster: Religious responses to terrorism and catastrophe*. West Conshocken, PA: Templeton Foundation Press.
10. Mitchell, J. T. (2000). The hazards of one's faith: Hazard perceptions of South Carolina Christian clergy. *Environmental Hazards*, 2, 25-41.
11. Stern, G. (2007). *Can God Intervene? How religion explains natural disasters*. Westport: Praeger.
12. Lenski, G. E. (1984). *Power and privilege: A theory of social stratification*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina. (Original published 1966).
13. Weigart, A. J. (1988). Joyful disaster: An ambivalence-religion hypothesis. *Sociological Analysis*, 50(1), 73-88.
14. Auf der Heide, E. (1987). *Disaster response: Principles of preparation and coordination*. Retrieved from http://aresalaska.org/docs/Disaster_Reponse_Principals.pdf.
15. Perrow, C. (2007). *The next catastrophe: Reducing our vulnerabilities to natural, industrial, and terrorist disasters*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.



16. Phillips, B. D., & Fordham, M. (2010). Introduction. In B. D. Phillips, D. S. K. Thomas, A. Fothergill and L. Blinn-Pike (Eds.), *Social vulnerability to disasters*, (pp. 1-23). Boca Raton, FL: CRC.
17. Bolin, R., & Bolton, P. (1983). Recovery in Nicaragua and the USA. *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters*, 1, 124-144.
18. Bradfield, C., Wylie, M. L., & Echterling, L. G. (1989). After the flood: The response of ministers to a natural disaster. *Sociological Analysis*, 49(4), 397-407.
19. Picou, J. S., & Marshall, B. K. (2007). Introduction: Katrina as paradigm shift: Reflections on disaster research in the 21st century. In D. L. Brunson, D. Overfelt and J. S. Picou (Eds.) *The sociology of Katrina* (pp. 1-22). Lanham: Rowan & Littlefield.
20. Bankoff, G. (2004). In the eye of the storm: The social construction of the forces of nature and the climatic and seismic construction of God in the Philippines. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 35(1), 91-111.
21. Stark, R., & Finke, R. (2000). *Acts of faith: Explaining the human side of religion*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
22. Kunreuther, H. (2006). Reducing losses from catastrophic risks through long-term insurance and mitigation. *Social Research*, 75(3), 905-930.
23. Phillips, B. D., Thomas, D. S. K., Fothergill, A., & Blinn-Pike, L. (Eds.) (2010). *Social vulnerability to disasters*. Boca Raton, FL: CRC.
24. Freudenburg, W. R., Gramling, R., Laska, S., & Erikson, K. T. (2009). *Catastrophe in the making: The engineering of Katrina and the disasters of tomorrow*. Washington, D.C.: Island.
25. Kapucu, N., & Van Wart, M. (2008). Making matters worse: An anatomy of leadership failures in managing catastrophic events. *Administration & Society*, 40(7), 710-740. DOI: 10.1177/0095399708323143.
26. Campanella, R. (2008). *Bienville's dilemma: A historical geography of New Orleans*. Lafayette, LA: University of Louisiana at Lafayette.
27. Dreier, P. (2006). Katrina and power in America. *Urban Affairs Review*, 41(4), 528-549. DOI: 10.1177/1078087405284886.
28. Bullard, R. D. (2008). Differential vulnerabilities: Environmental and economic inequality and government response to unnatural disasters. *Social Research*, 75(3), 753-784.
29. Johnson, G. S. (2008). Environmental justice and Katrina: A senseless environmental disaster. *The Western Journal of Black Studies*, 32(1), 42-52.
30. Laska, S. (2004). What if Hurricane Katrina had not missed New Orleans? *Natural Hazards Observer*, 39(2), 5-6.
31. Comfort, L. K. (2006). Cities at risk: Hurricane Katrina and the drowning of New Orleans. *Urban Affairs Review*, 41(4), 501-516. DOI: 10.1177/1078087405284881.
32. Litt, J. (2008). Getting out or staying put: An African American women's network in evacuation from Katrina. *NWSA Journal*, 20(3), 32-48.



33. Branshaw, J., & Trainor, J. (2007). Race, class, and capital amidst the Hurricane Katrina diaspora. In D. L. Brunnsma, D. Overfelt & J. S. Picou (Eds.), *The sociology of Katrina* (pp. 91-105). Lanham: Rowan & Littlefield.
34. Murakami-Ramalho, E., & Durodoye, B. A. (2008). Looking back to move forward: Katrina's Black women survivors speak. *NWSA Journal*, 20(3), 115-137.
35. Miller, D. S., & Rivera, J. D. (2006). Landscapes of disaster and place orientation in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. In D. L. Brunnsma, D. Overfelt and J. S. Picou (Eds.), *The sociology of Katrina* (pp. 141-154). Lanham: Rowan & Littlefield.
36. Dynes, R. R., & Rodríguez, H. (2007). Finding and framing Katrina: The social construction of disaster. In D. L. Brunnsma, D. Overfelt and J. S. Picou (Eds.), *The sociology of Katrina* (pp. 23-33). Lanham: Rowan & Littlefield.
37. Sharkey, P. (2007). Survival and death in New Orleans: An empirical look at the human impact of Katrina. *Journal of Black Studies*, 37, 482-501.
38. Lee, E-K. O., Shen, C., & Tran, T. V. (2009). Coping with Hurricane Katrina: psychological distress and resilience among African American evacuees. *Journal of Black Psychology*, 35(1), 5-23. DOI: 10.1177/0095798408323354.
39. Freudenburg, W. R., Gramling, R., Laska, S., & Erikson, K. T. (2009). Disproportionality and disaster: Hurricane Katrina and the Mississippi River-Gulf Outlet. *Social Science Quarterly*, 90(3), 497-515.
40. Kutner, N. G. (2006). Health needs, health care, and Katrina. In D. L. Brunnsma, D. Overfelt and J. S. Picou (Eds.), *The sociology of Katrina* (pp. 203-215). Lanham: Rowan & Littlefield.
41. Harrald, J. R. (2006). Agility and discipline: Critical success factors for disaster response. *ANNALS, AAPSS*, 604, 256-272. DOI: 10.1177/0002716205285404.
42. Laska, S. (2008). The 'Mother of all Rorschach's': Katrina recovery in New Orleans. *Sociological Inquiry*, 78(4), 580-591. DOI: 10.1111/j.1475-682X.2008.00262.x.
43. Brunkard, J., Namulanda, G., & Ratard, R. (2008). Hurricane Katrina deaths, Louisiana, 2005. *Disaster Medicine and Public Health Preparedness*, 1, 1-9.
44. Elliot, J. R., & Pais, J. (2006). Race, class, and Hurricane Katrina: Social differences in human responses to disaster. *Social Science Research*, 35, 295-321. DOI: 10.1016/j.ssresearch.2006.02.003.
45. Haney, T. J., Eliot, J. R., & Fussell, E. (2007). Families and hurricane response: Evacuation, separation, and the emotional toll of Hurricane Katrina. In D. L. Brunnsma, D. Overfelt and J. S. Picou (Eds.), *The sociology of Katrina* (pp. 71-90). Lanham: Rowan & Littlefield.
46. Stark, R., & Glock, C. Y. (1968). *American piety: The nature of religious commitment*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
47. Schieman, S., Pudrovska, T., & Milkie, M. (2005). The sense of divine control and the self-concept: A study of race relations in late-life. *Research on Aging*, 27, 165-196.
48. Gaillard, J. C., & Texier, P. (2010). Religions, natural hazards, and disasters: An introduction. *Religion*, 40, 81-84. DOI: 10.1016/j.religion.2009.12.001.



49. Brister, Darryl, S. (2006). *Against all odds: Turning obstacles into opportunities*. Denver, CO: Legacy.
50. Horne, J. (2006). *Breach of faith: Hurricane Katrina and the near death of a great American city*. New York: Random House.
51. Kuzma, K., & Walsh, B. (2006). *Between Hell and high water [God was there]: Survival stories from Hurricane Katrina*. Oshawa, Ontario, Canada: Pacific Press Publishing.
52. Marx, K., & Engels, F. (1975). *On religion*. Moscow: Progress Publishers.
53. Bolin, R., & Bolton, P. (1986). *Race, religion, and ethnicity in disaster recovery*. University of Colorado: Institute of Behavioral Science. Program on Environment and Behavior; Monograph #42.

Funding Statement

This project was self-funded as part of a dissertation requirement at the University of North Texas.