

Sunday June 30, 2013

Don't call them "acts of God"

By Jim Taylor

I'm surprised that no one has gone on YouTube, claiming to have heard a voice from heaven commanding, "Noah, build me an Ark!"

First it was floods in Australia. Then in Europe. Rivers that sweep down from the Alps overflowed through towns and cities in Austria and Germany.

Then Alberta got it. Canmore and Banff, totally cut off by highway washouts. The Calgary Zoo emptied. The fabled Stampede grounds under water; the SaddleDome filled like a toilet bowl.

A video of a young man and his cat swimming through flood waters went viral.

News reporters stood up to their knees in water, drenched hair clinging to their faces, pretending to be rugged outdoorsy types.

Four people lost their lives.

Six died when floods hit Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Then, almost as an afterthought, the news mentioned monsoons in northern India, in the mountains where I spent my childhood. Where 800, maybe over 1000 when all the missing are accounted for, perished in raging waters. The smoke of mass cremations sifts up the narrow valleys.

The force of falling water

Writers commonly describe monsoon rains as torrential. That's an understatement. A monsoon cloudburst feels like the blast of a fire hose or water cannon. The force of falling water can literally take your breath away.

During regular monsoons, the streams surging down into the Ganges are dangerous enough. But this year, the monsoons raced across India almost a month earlier than usual. Rampaging streams trapped hundreds of thousands of pilgrims visiting Hindu shrines at the various sources of the Ganges. Government officials estimated that up to 96,000 pilgrims were plucked from the tortuous routes that writhe across precipitous slopes.

Uttarakhand's Agriculture Minister described the floods as the "worst tragedy of the millennium."

Maybe that's an exaggeration. Maybe not.

The floods in Germany were called "once in a century."

The floods in Alberta were "one in a hundred years." Archival photos suggest that the last time the Bow River rose this high on its path through Calgary was 1932.

Mind you, similar descriptions were applied to unusually heavy rainfalls in Alberta in 2005. And in 2002 in Germany.

Extremes become normal

With two "hundred-year" events already in this century, you might anticipate that the worst the 21st century can dish up has been used up.

Wanna bet?

I didn't think so.

The people who study climate say we're going to get more of these "exceptional" events. Some areas will get flooding. Others will get droughts. Or heat waves.

Australia's Commissioner for Climate Change, Professor Tim Flannery, expects "a dramatic reorganization of earth's climate system."

Now, religious wingnuts may tell you that these floods are divine judgement on sinful humanity – like Noah's original flood.

And climate-change deniers will insist that these are just variations in vast cycles that oscillate between ice ages and tropical jungles.

Personally, I have no doubt that these floods -- and the related droughts and heat waves -- confirm the weather extremes that meteorologists predicted would accompany global warming. I also believe that human industrialization is the primary cause of that warming.

Making it worse

But setting aside debates about the causes of global warming, it's abundantly clear that human action has made these floods worse.

In India, an obvious cause is deforestation. When I went to school there, forests covered the hillsides. Root networks retained the soil. Monsoon rains soaked into the soil and seeped out gradually.

Today, many slopes are bare. A mushrooming population has stripped them for firewood. Rains sluice away soil, rip out footpaths. Rivers rout bridges.

Federal parks have protected many of Alberta's forests. But the grasslands that soaked up rain have been built over. Soil retains water; roads, roofs, and parking lots do not. Municipalities add ditches and storm sewers to get rid of excess water as quickly as possible.

Once upon a time, streams themselves had ways of slowing runoff. Pools. Rock falls. Log jams. Even beaver dams.

Today, municipalities blow up log jams and dismantle beaver dams. They use excavators to channel stream beds. The whole idea is to get floodwaters through your territory before they can back up and cost tax dollars.

Is it any wonder that there's more water rushing downstream?

One step further back, all these factors are directly related to population growth. In southern Alberta, paved subdivisions spread like ink on blotting paper. India's population has tripled since I was a child.

I gather that about 5,000 pilgrims a day make it over the mountain paths – North Americans would have trouble calling them roads -- to the shrine at Kedernath alone. Most come from south India. With a smaller population, and without today's road, rail, and air transportation, only a fraction would have needed rescuing a century ago.

I don't want to minimize the trauma of flood victims. But I do want to challenge assumptions that we humans bear no responsibility for these human tragedies. They are not simply "acts of God." We helped them happen.

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YOUR TURN

The volume of correspondence about last week's column (on anti-native prejudices in Canada) prevents me from printing all of the letters, or, indeed, anything more than excerpts from the longer letters. Nevertheless, thank you all for those letters. Even when I don't fully agree, I learn from your viewpoints and insights.

Mary-Margaret Boone held a service last Sunday “in honour of National Aboriginal Day.” The service emphasized some of the same points I had made in my column.

She continued, “To their credit, the smaller congregation that I serve organized an informational gathering at Curve Lake Reserve north of Peterborough. We began with worship in the local community church, had an informative and educational talk from the cultural archivist at the Curve Lake Cultural Centre and then visited the local art gallery. We learned about the history of the Mississauga nation, their experiences with residential schools, their political struggles over treaties, a brief overview of traditional spirituality and much more.”

Mary-Margaret challenged two things I had said: “You spoke about eliminating the aboriginal people without war except for a brief skirmish at Batoche -- but there were the Beothuks in Newfoundland who were hunted down and completely wiped out, similar to the Arawak nation in the Caribbean.

“Also the label of hunter/gatherer ... I grew up in a community adjacent to an Iroquoian First Nations community. Their history is not hunter/gatherer. They had settled communities, raised corn (maize) and other crops, built permanent buildings. You have created a stereotype when you have encouraged us to avoid doing that very thing.

“Part of the problem is that we try to paint all First Nations with the same brush....”

Joa Lazarus also objected to my comments about Canadians not having espoused slavery: “I suggest you might want to look a little into the history of slavery in Canada and Nova Scotia in particular. Also, a large part of our railway system was built with both virtual and literal slave labour.

“I also would like to point out that aboriginal children are still being taken away from their families by the social Service system in far greater numbers than their non-aboriginal counterparts. Due to the tragic under funding of the social service system even those Social workers who would like to follow the official policy of maintaining family ties don't have either the time, energy, or budget to do more than pay lip service to this policy. The result is young people with no family or community bonds to support them as they try to start to parent the next generation. I am reminded of the old saying ‘they shoot your legs out from under you and ask why you can't stand on your own two feet’.

“The good news is that every year we are getting stronger, more of our children are graduating, more are standing up with pride in their ancestry and relearning their traditions.”

Eileen Uttewaal had concerns about implied stereotypes: “When you characterized assimilation as the means to change stone-age people into industrial-age people, the implication was to change a savage, primitive people into sophisticated, civilized people. However most aboriginal groups had their own sophisticated cultures and they questioned what being civilized meant, when they saw how the non-native people acted towards to each other as well as towards them. Guns instead of bows and arrows increase the ability to kill, but do they make one more civilized?

“I believe First Nations as well as many non-First Nations folks continue to question those who still believe that the only truly civilized are white, English and Christian.”

Steve Roney challenged my logic: “I think it's unjust to refer to the integrationist policy followed by Duncan Campbell Scott and the residential schools as ‘cultural genocide.’ After all, it is the same policy demanded for blacks by Martin Luther King Jr. and the civil rights movement. And since you also condemn the alternative of segregation (‘banishing them to remote reserves’) it seems you leave the poor white man damned no matter what he does. Do you have some third possibility in mind?”

Fran Ota noted, “Coincidentally I did a paper on this subject for a conference a couple of years back, and used that research in a sermon yesterday. This is a difficult and tricky subject, as there were also schools where no abuses took place, and where the teachers were not prejudiced in the way others were. I've heard some aboriginal peoples speak of their horrendous experiences, and some (see below) express surprise, and I've heard from teachers in those schools who have also been deeply hurt by accusations of actions to which they had no part.

“Yes, there's lots of prejudice still, and yes it must be addressed, and yes it came out of deliberate government policies of extinguishment. BUT:

“A long time ago I heard Rev. Grafton Antone from the Six Nations reserve, say that he had no idea about abuses in residential schools until he went to the west of Canada ... He attended a residential school in Brantford....

"I grew up in northern Saskatchewan -- in Prince Albert where there was the last residential school in Canada to close.

"Our history as a United Church is one of hand-in-hand support of repressive and racist government policies -- we saw it as a way of converting and expanding. We did know, because there were those who told us, that immense harm was being done. It is estimated that 150,000 children were forcibly removed from their homes and not allowed to return; of those, 50,000 were presumed dead. Many committed suicide, many tried to run away. The numbers cannot be confirmed. The damage done to many generations -- not just those children but their families as well -- cannot be removed [just] with words of an apology."

Isabel Gibson summed things up: "The history is depressingly clear. My question is, whither now? Most reserves will never offer inhabitants meaningful work, nor access to same -- that's not their fault, but it's the economic and geographic truth. I wouldn't so much mind paying in perpetuity to support on-reserve Aboriginals, if that's what they chose, except for one thing -- it's killing them, as surely as if we lined them up and shot them, but just more slowly. Their rates of alcoholism and suicide speak more to meaninglessness, I believe, than to poverty. So more money alone -- the usual cry from the left -- won't do it.

"We need a generational plan to get those folks off most reserves (Northern Ontario and Quebec, for sure; some in Alberta and BC are working) -- and assimilated enough to make it in our world, yet with enough of their culture left that they survive as a people.

"I see no one advocating for that. What will it take? Land set aside for reserves near economically feasible communities? Funding at five times the current rate for a generation or more? I don't know. Does anyone?"

TECHNICAL STUFF

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I write a second column each Wednesday, called Soft Edges, which deals somewhat more gently with issues of life and faith. To sign up for Soft Edges, write to me directly, at the address above, or send a note to softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca

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For other sources worth pursuing, try

- Ralph Milton's HymnSight webpage, <http://www.hymnsight.ca>, with a vast gallery of photos you can use to enhance the appearance of the visual images you project for liturgical use (prayers, responses, hymn verses, etc.)
- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, www.seemslkegod.org;
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, www.traditionaliconoclast.com
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.
