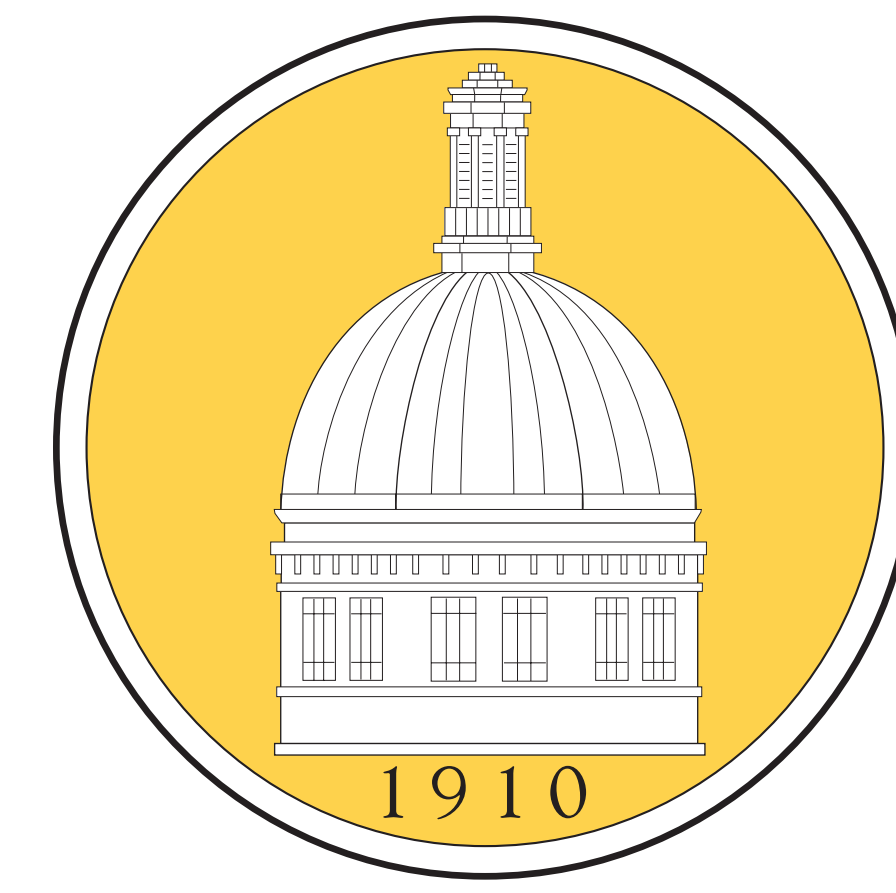




# Effects of Hurricane Katrina on God Images: An Exploratory Study

Jamie D. Aten, Ph.D., Ryan Denney, M.A., Michael Moore, B.S., Tania Bayne, B.A., Amy Staggs, M.S., Stacy Owens, M.S., Jason Adams, M.S., Samantha Daniel, M.S., Stefanie Boswell, M.S., Jane Schenck, M.Div., & Charissa Jones, M.S.



## The University of Southern Mississippi

### Introduction

- Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast region on August 29, 2005 as a level 5 hurricane.
- "...natural disasters are among the most universally threatening of life stressors" (Thompson, Norris, & Hanacek, 1993, p. 606).
- Religion mediates the effects of disasters (Pargament, 1997).
- People with a positive view of God (i.e., supporting) fare better than those with a negative view (i.e., punishing) (Nooney & Woodrum, 2002; Pargament, Smith, Koenig, & Perez, 1999).

### Purpose Statement

- The purpose of this qualitative investigation is to explore God images of Hurricane Katrina survivors.

### Research Question

- How do individuals directly affected by Hurricane Katrina view or conceptualize God?

### Participants

- 18 participants (12 Females and 9 Males) were interviewed.
- Participants were from the Mississippi Gulf Coast region (Biloxi, Gulfport, Ocean Springs, & Waveland).
- All participants experienced resource loss related to the hurricane (i.e., housing, income, death of family member).
- Sample consisted of 14 Caucasian and 7 African-American participants.
- Participants ages ranged from 26-73 (Mean=48.22) years.
- Religious Affiliation: 1 Spiritual, 1 Episcopalian, 1 Evangelical, 1 Lutheran, 2 Catholic, 2 Non-denominational, 2 Methodist, 2 None, and 6 Baptist.

### Procedures

- Snowball sampling procedures were used.
- Semi-structured face-to-face one-on-one interviews were conducted.
- Interviews took place 2 months after Hurricane Katrina.
- A Consensual Qualitative Research (Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997) approach was utilized.
- Rigor enhancing strategies used included: outside auditor, reflexivity practices, memos and field journal, and multiple researchers.

### Theme 1: Omnipresent God

- Participants reported they believed God had a universal presence.
- A supernatural presence was described, that God could be in all places at all times.
- Participants said Hurricane Katrina made God's presence known and more tangible; God was found within oneself, others, nature, or emotions.
  - "God is all loving, life giving force, something that's all around us and with us..."
  - "God is everywhere, you can see him in nature, in the people driving the vans full of first-aid materials down here, and in the people serving soup in the shelters."

### Theme 2: Omnipotent God

- Participants viewed God as a divine being with unlimited power and authority.
- The force and power of Hurricane Katrina were evidence of God's infinite power.
- Destruction resulting from the hurricane further supported participants view of an all-powerful being.
  - "...God is in control and He is just letting us know that He is still in control. He can do anything, what He feels like doing."

### Theme 3: Distant God

- Though participants described an omnipresent view of God, they also described times when God felt distant.
- Participants described intense periods of questioning, marked by attempts to understand or make meaning of their hurricane experience.
- During these periods many participants felt as though God had temporarily withdrawn from them.
  - "I don't feel like I hear Him [God] much lately."
  - "I don't see [God] as being that personal...I pray and have life-changing experiences...but I still feel a big difference between God and myself. I do feel distant from Him."

### Theme 4: Personal Relational God

- Despite periods when God felt distant to participants most discussed having a connection or bond with God.
- Participants stated they believed God was accessible to them and provided them with the strength they needed to endure both the onset and aftermath of the hurricane.
- Participants reported various rituals (i.e., prayer, yoga, and quoting sacred readings) allowed them to interact with God.
  - "God is in here (pointing to the chest), he isn't out there somewhere, he's right in here."
  - "When I think of God...Is it the guy with the beard, the woman with red hair? That doesn't matter. It is the knowing, feeling that he or she is always there."

### Theme 5: God as Judge

- Some participants viewed God as a supreme authority figure who conditionally rewards or reprimands individuals' actions.
- Hurricane Katrina was thought to have been a vehicle for demonstrating either God's approval or disapproval.
- Even though many of these participants suffered significant loss (i.e., loss of a loved one or resource loss) from Hurricane Katrina, none viewed themselves as being reprimanded.
- God's "punishment" was always reserved for people or establishments (i.e., the casinos) who participants thought were "immoral."
  - "Everybody says, 'We want to get back to normal.' But if God was satisfied with normal, all of this would never have happened. God wants a change in his people. He doesn't want you to go back to your old ways."

### Theme 6: God of Lessons

- Participants believed that God had a purpose for Hurricane Katrina, that there was knowledge to be gained.
- Participants viewed God as a masterful planner who sought to use Hurricane Katrina to communicate profound "truths."
- Participants thought God had used the hurricane to help people reevaluate priorities, "...be thankful for what is really important in life" (i.e., relationships) or as a "wake-up call."
  - "It was God and his plan, so you just have to take it like it is...It's quite all right. He won't let nothing happen to you. Sometimes it's his plan and it happens for a reason."
  - "God didn't discriminate when he came through here. He just wiped everybody out; the little churches the big churches all of them. That means that we all have to tighten up a little bit."

### Theme 7: God as Loving Father Figure

- Participants viewed God as a caring paternal figure.
- Participants believed God showed great compassion and love to them throughout their Hurricane Katrina experience.
- Participants felt God had protected them from more severe loss and continues to care for them.
- Participants also stated that God has and continues to provide for their physical and spiritual needs.
  - "Hurricane Katrina has strengthened my faith, my spirituality, it's really solidified my belief that God takes care of me, that through tragedy something beautiful can arise..."

### Conclusion

- Hurricane Katrina caused participants to explore or reexamine the way they view God.
- Participants reported a multifaceted view of God following Hurricane Katrina.
- Participants' used their God images to help explain and make meaning of their hurricane experience.
- Future disaster research is needed to explore religious and spiritual topics.

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