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Review of In the Wake of Disaster: Religious Responses to Terrorism and Catastrophe

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Review of *In the Wake of Disaster: Religious Responses to Terrorism and Catastrophe*

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Abstract

A well-respected author has created an overview of faith-based responses to disaster and the role of clergy in providing mental health and spiritual care to victims. The text surveys a range of issues, including the effects of traumatic events on psychological and spiritual health and the roles of disaster response agencies, both state-sponsored and faith-based organizations, and offers practical guidance in how to prepare for a disaster. He includes a reference section that directs readers to additional resources on the mental health aspects of disaster and disaster response. The author also develops a strategy to overcome barriers to the incorporation of clergy and faith communities into disaster response and strongly encourages collaboration and the building of cross-disciplinary relationships. Overall, the book serves as a good primer on disaster response for persons within faith communities who wish to provide effective disaster relief.

KEYWORDS: disaster, religious aspects, psychological aspects, disaster relief

In the Wake of Disaster: Religious Responses to Terrorism and Catastrophe

By Harold G. Koenig, M.D.

Philadelphia: Templeton Foundation Press, 2006

xx + 162pp, bibliography, index

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Faith-based organizations have assisted on the front lines in disaster response for centuries as leaders and congregational memberships have reached out to those in need. In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, local faith-based responders stepped forward to help evacuate, shelter, feed, and clothe victims of the catastrophe. National disaster relief organizations provided support and coordination while recruiting volunteers and supplies for the various recovery tasks ahead. While there is an implicit awareness that faith-based organizations have a role to play in disaster response, few texts have been devoted to the purpose of identifying the key organizations, their responsibilities, and their relationships to one another; *In the Wake of Disaster* fills this gap.

Written by a medical doctor with significant research experience in the field of health and spirituality, *In the Wake of Disaster* covers a range of topics that will be important for “any person of faith who is interested in learning more about disaster preparedness and response, for public policy makers who seek to better prepare their communities for disasters, for emergency response personnel and mental health professionals wanting to know how the faith community can assist them, and for social and behavioral scientists studying the role that religious faith plays in coping with natural disasters and acts of terrorism” (Koenig, ix). The author draws from scientific literature, a review of the Department of Health and Human Services Mental Health All-Hazards Disaster Planning Guide, and discussions with secular and religious professionals involved in mental health responses to local and national disasters.

The contents of this book can be divided in to five parts: 1) the psychological and spiritual consequences of disasters and the ways in which religion has served as a coping mechanism for those under stress; 2) the organization of disaster response at the national, state, regional, and local level; 3) the role of faith-based groups in disaster response; 4) preparing local faith

communities for disaster; and 5) overcoming obstacles to collaboration with public partners.

In Chapters 1 and 3, the author draws from the literature in psychiatry and mental health to describe potential psychological and spiritual reactions to disaster, terrorism, and acts of war and to show how religion serves as a coping mechanism for stressful life events. Based upon the author's research, disasters are understood to be traumatic events in the lives of many who experience them; therefore, it is important to understand the various dimensions of mental and spiritual health and how victims may be affected by traumatic events. Potential effects include psychopathology, such as post-traumatic stress disorder and acute stress disorder, and even a loss of faith and trust accompanied by a sense of abandonment.

Because religious beliefs and practices have been identified as one source to alleviate stress, in Chapter 4 the author explores the faith community's role during disaster, with a specific focus on the role of clergy in providing mental health care. Here, the reader learns of the various services that have been commonly provided by clergy and faith communities in disaster. The activities described range from allocating funds to those requesting assistance to utilizing church buildings as shelters, feeding sites, and places to receive clothing. They also include clergy serving as interpreters of the meaning of disaster to clergy working alongside trauma therapists when offering death notifications.

Chapter 2 describes national, state, and local disaster planning and response, with attention on the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the American Red Cross (ARC), and the National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (NVOAD). This is followed in Chapter 5 by descriptions of various faith-based organizations, their involvement in disaster response, and the links between national and local coordination.

Chapters 6 and 7 provide practical guidance on coordinating faith-based disaster response. In Chapter 6, the author suggests ways to organize congregations at the local level and includes details about efforts that will be necessary in locales based upon varying population sizes. Chapter 7 includes suggestions for preparing faith communities for disaster, including how to develop a disaster plan and how to serve as a spiritual caregiver following a traumatic incident.

The final two chapters describe barriers and obstacles to the integration of the faith community in a local disaster response. Most notable is the lack of education and awareness by clergy and faith communities about how to participate and collaborate in disaster response. The author provides suggestions on ways to overcome such barriers, such as: encouraging research on the prevalence of spiritual needs and how they are met during each phase of a disaster; encouraging teamwork, partnership, and collaboration between faith-

based responders and mental health practitioners; and recognizing the role that faith and faith based organizations can play.

The author also provides a series of resources on disaster-related organizations, disaster-related periodicals on mental health, funding sources for disaster mental health care, and resources for faith communities that focus on mental health and coping. A comprehensive health plan for faith communities and a list of research studies on the role of faith and faith communities are also provided.

While this book offers a range of information and serves as a primer on faith-based organizations for disaster response, it is surprising that the author draws narrowly from the field of mental health and relies little on other disciplines. For instance, there is little reference to any research conducted on hazards and disasters from the social and behavioral sciences and emphasis is placed on mental health resources for disaster victims. This neglect may lead the reader to believe that the basic research on post-disaster behaviors and responses has been centrally located in the field of mental health with a focus on psychopathology and an equating of disaster with trauma. A quick perusal of disaster research will show that there is a great deal known about the resiliency of populations and their ability to form therapeutic communities in the aftermath of disaster.

Perhaps the greater surprise is that the author is a medical doctor and not a clergyperson or practitioner/researcher from the field of faith-based responders. While this serves to provide some objectivity about the various denominational responses, it also leads to an emphasis on fulfilling mental health objectives. Because the author relies on interviews with persons who assist with *mental health responses* to local and national disaster, there is a sense that spiritual caregivers better serve as second tier counselors rather than front line pastors.

There are, however, few books or guides published on the roles and responsibilities of faith based organizations in disaster. (Readers interested in a very practical orientation to providing spiritual care in disasters might turn to a recent publication by the NVOAD entitled *Light Our Way*.) Indeed, until recently, few academic theological organizations addressed the subject of catastrophic disaster and response (Society for Pastoral Theology, 2006). Therefore, this work is a substantial contribution and leads the way to future publications from other disciplinary leaders.

Works Referenced

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