

# Quakes, politics, and religion

Thursday 1 April 2010, by [SULEHRIA Farooq](#) (Date first published: 28 January 2007).

The death toll from the 7.0-magnitude earthquake that flattened the Haitian capital of Port-au-Prince on Jan 12 exceeded 20,000. On Feb 27, an even stronger earthquake, magnitude 8.8, struck Chile. The revised death toll of 279 was down from the initial 802, because a number of missing persons considered dead were found alive. There are many ways to explain this phenomenal difference.

"The reasons are simple," an AP correspondent said. "Chile is wealthier and infinitely better prepared, with strict building codes, robust emergency response and a long history of handling seismic catastrophes. No living Haitian had experienced a quake at home when the Jan 12 disaster crumbled their poorly constructed buildings." In Haiti, many people "grabbed cement pillars only to watch them crumble in their hands. Haitians were not schooled in how to react - by sheltering under tables and door frames, and away from glass windows."

Chileans, on the other hand, "have homes and offices built to ride out quakes, their steel skeletons designed to sway with seismic waves rather than resist them."

Giving this analogy a neo-liberal twist, *Wall Street Journal* columnist Bret Stephens pays homage to Milton Friedman whose neo-liberal "spirit was surely hovering protectively over Chile." Because, "thanks largely to him, the country has endured a tragedy that elsewhere would have been an apocalypse... It's not by chance that Chileans were living in houses of brick—and Haitians in houses of straw—when the wolf arrived to try to blow them down."

According to Stephens, the radical free-market policies prescribed to Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet by Milton Friedman and his infamous "Chicago Boys" are the reason Chile is a prosperous nation with "some of the world's strictest building codes."

Having informed his readers how "in 1973, the year the proto-Chavista government of Salvador Allende was overthrown by Gen Augusto Pinochet, Chile was an economic shambles." Stephens discreetly points out: "In left-wing mythology—notably Naomi Klein's tedious 2007 screed *The Shock Doctrine*—the Chicago Boys weren't just strange bedfellows to Pinochet's dictatorship."

In a stinging rebuttal, Klein sets the record straight. It was Nixon, she reminds, who growled after Allende's 1970 election victory: "Make the [Chilean] economy scream." "Chile's modern seismic building code, drafted to resist earthquakes, was adopted in 1972. That year is enormously significant because it was one year before Pinochet seized power in a bloody US-backed coup. That means that, if one person deserves credit for the law, it is not Friedman, or Pinochet, but Salvador Allende, Chile's democratically elected socialist president." According to Klein, "Friedman was ambivalent about building codes, seeing them as yet another infringement on capitalist freedom."

She asserts: "Pinochet's Friedman-prescribed policies had caused rapid de-industrialisation, a ten-fold increase in unemployment and an explosion of distinctly unstable shantytowns. They also led to a crisis of corruption and debt so severe that, in 1982, Pinochet was forced to fire his key Chicago Boy advisors and nationalise several of the large deregulated financial institutions." (Sounds familiar?)

Before a section of the US media embroiled itself in the Haitian-Chilean analogy, infamous American televangelist Pat Robertson dominated the debate on the Haitian earthquake for a while. He told his viewers on Christian Broadcasting Network a day after the tragedy that he knew the real reason for the Haitian quake: the country's long-standing pact with Satan.

"Something happened a long time ago in Haiti... They were under the heel of the French, uh, you know, Napoleon the Third, and whatever ... and they got together and swore a pact to the Devil. They said, We will serve you, if you get us free from the Prince. True story," he told his audience.

The pact he was talking about is attributed to Haitian revolution mythology. It is said that one of the revolution's leaders sacrificed a pig in Bois Caïmin in a voodoo ceremony and made a contract with Petwo, Haitian voodoo spirits. It may or may not be true.

Voodoo and Satan, by the way, are not the same thing. However, by invoking Satanism, Robertson offered an explanation that easily gains currency in religious societies like that in the USA.

This is neither new nor unique. Writer James Wood, in an essay in the *New York Times*, wrote on Jan 25: "Two small shocks in London, in 1750, sent the preachers to their pulpits and pamphlets. The bishop of London blamed Londoners' lewd behaviour; the bishop of Oxford argued that God had woven into his grand design certain incidents to alarm us and shake us out of our sin." Five years later, "when Lisbon was all but demolished by an enormous earthquake, the unholy refrain was heard again — one preacher even argued that the people of Lisbon had been relatively fortunate, for God had spared more people than he had killed."

Hence, no wonder when the earthquake struck Kashmir and the Frontier province on Oct 8, 2005, a host of Pakistani mullahs were quick to attribute the death of 80,000 innocent men, women and children to the wrath of Allah.

Fundamentalist leaders and rightwing columnists made nauseating statements. Neo-televangelist Hamid Mir made fun of "secular fundamentalists" who refused to attribute natural catastrophes to God's wrath.

The leadership of the now-defunct MMA described the earthquake as a punishment for people's sins (*gunahon ki saza*). Advising people to seek God's forgiveness, they pinpointed the actual reason for the catastrophe: the un-Islamic ways of Pakistanis and obscenity in the media. Apparently, the only sin the earthquake victims had committed, thereby inviting God's wrath, was to vote the MMA to power in the province.

Satan was incensed when Pat Robertson blamed him for the Haitian catastrophe. In a letter to him, via Lily Coyle, editor of the *Star-Tribune* of Minneapolis-St Paul, Satan harshly reprimanded Robertson in the following words:

*Dear Pat Robertson,*

I know that you know that all press is good press, so I appreciate the shout-out. [Including that blaming the divine for catastrophes happening to] people when they are down, so I'm all over that action. But when you say that Haiti has made a pact with me, it is totally humiliating. I may be evil incarnate, but I'm no welcher. The way you put it, making a deal with me leaves folks desperate and impoverished. Sure, in the afterlife. But when I strike bargains with people, they first get something here on earth — glamour, beauty, talent, wealth, fame, glory, a golden fiddle. Those Haitians have nothing, and I mean nothing. And that was before the earthquake. Haven't you seen "Crossroads"? Or "Damn Yankees"? If I had a thing going with Haiti, there'd be lots of banks, skyscrapers, SUVs, exclusive night clubs, Botox — that kind of thing. An 80-per-cent poverty rate is so not my style.

Nothing against it — I'm just saying: Not how I roll. You're doing great work, Pat, and I don't want to clip your wings – just, come on, you're making me look bad. And not the good kind of bad. Keep blaming God. That's working. But leave me out of it, please. Or we may need to renegotiate your own contract.

Best,

Satan

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**P.S.**

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[http://thenews.jang.com.pk/daily\\_detail.asp?id=231917](http://thenews.jang.com.pk/daily_detail.asp?id=231917)

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