



Fire and Brimstone

The Victorian Bushfires of February 2009 have been labelled one of the worst disasters in Australian history. During the course of the fires, several towns were completely destroyed, over 2000 homes burnt to the ground, and almost 200 people died.

In the midst of this crisis, various organisations and individuals offered practical relief in the form of appeals for financial support, or donations of food and clothing. Others offered spiritual support, such as prayer meetings for the victims. In an attempt to exert control over the chaos, some petitioned God for rain to quell the fires (as they also do in times of drought). But not all religious groups offered comfort; instead, one offered condemnation.

In Dandenong, Victoria, close to the scene of the events, an extremist group called Catch the Fire Ministries (CTFM) published a press release claiming that the bushfires were an Act of God, literally. CTFM leader, Pastor Danny Nalliah, alleged that he had predicted the bushfires in a spiritual vision he had experienced in October 2008 (not that he warned anyone though). In this dream, he prophesied that the fires would occur as divine retribution for an abortion decriminalisation bill that had passed recently in

Victoria. The Ministry believes that abortion is a legal, spiritual and moral crime, and Nalliah calls Victoria the “baby killing state of Australia”. This is a state slogan we won’t see on numberplates.

The CTFM website (<http://catchthefire.com.au>) implored “Australian Bible-believing God-fearing Christians to repent and call upon the Lord Jesus Christ for His mercy and protection over Australia once again.” The Ministry’s answer was to ask God for forgiveness and mercy. Nalliah stated: “In our prayer and fasting campaign, we are particularly repenting for the passing of the ‘Decriminalisation of Abortion Laws of Victoria’ in addition to other unrighteous, ungodly and unjust laws and practices which have seen a holocaust of some of the most helpless members of the human race, the unborn.”

The Ministry believed this intercessory prayer would end the fires. “Can we stop the fires? Yes we can! But it will take God’s children to rally together and repent and cry unto Him as in 2 Chronicles 7:14 (The Holy Bible). We at CTFM have seen this happen several times in the past in Australia.”

In the following days the congregation duly fasted and prayed. Subsequently (but not consequently) the bushfires were brought under control. But the Ministry attributed this desired outcome to their prayers. In their minds this was “evidence” for their theory, and “proof” that their remedy “worked”.

This phenomenon is known as confirmation bias, when information or events are interpreted to confirm one’s preconceptions. As skeptics say, correlation does not equal causation, especially when the connection is fallacious.

The Ministry’s uncritical thinking is at best unhelpful, and at worst wrong. In accusing the Victorian government, the Ministry ignored the real causes of the fires – the evidence for arson combined with climate conditions conducive to bushfire. In taking credit for the end of

the fires, the Ministry ignored the real solutions. Like the surgeon’s skills that are credited to a god, the firefighters’ skills and bravery were credited to prayer. Now there’s a moral crime.

The images of the ruined towns in Victoria remind me of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. In the city’s Lower Ninth Ward, even today, there are concrete foundations where houses were blown or washed away, and piles of dusty rubble. In Victoria’s Marysville and Kinglake, all that is left are piles of ashes.

Similarly, when New Orleans was struck by the hurricane, followed by flooding, religious extremists claimed this was God’s punishment for the city’s infamous reputation for sin. Some construed this as divine intervention because the disaster occurred only days before Southern Decadence, an annual celebration of same-sex relationships. Pastor Michael Marcavage of the evangelist group Repent America remarked: “Although the loss of lives is deeply saddening, this act of God destroyed a wicked city.”

In 2004 there were similar judgements when the “Boxing Day” tsunami hit “godless” countries in South-East Asia.

In the bitter aftermath of a disaster there is a tendency for people to look for someone to blame rather than look for the cause. Science is often shunned in favour of superstition. Superstitious belief sees patterns and makes connections where none exist.

In contrast, science seeks natural causes and effects. Science, not dreams, warns us that bushfires are common in Victoria during summer, and that New Orleans is subject to an ever-lengthening hurricane season. These are the risks associated with living in these areas.

To overcome, explain and one day prevent these natural disasters we need to live in a world of scientific predictions, not superstitious ones.

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