

JANUARY 08

Acts of God, acts of media

The new year has scarcely begun, but Americans watching television have already heard a lot about God. When Larry King interviewed George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton the other night, CNN presented ample split-screen evidence that the Lord transcends political parties and backgrounds. The former presidents — blue-blooded Yankee and hardscrabble Arkansan — spoke eloquently about faith. By now, perhaps no subject has achieved more agreement in the USA's news media. Faith in God is a televised no-brainer.

“My faith is never shaken by a personal tragedy,” said ex-President Bush, “or even a tragedy of this enormity.” Clinton said: “It reminds us that we're not in control, that our faith is constantly tested by circumstances, but it should be deepened when we see the courageous response people are having, and the determination to endure.” Both men praised the incumbent in the White House, presumptively a God-loving guy.

But, writing in the London-based Guardian four days into the new year, George Monbiot did the unholy math: “The U.S. government has so far pledged \$350 million to the victims of the tsunami” and has spent \$148 billion on the war in Iraq. “The war has been running for 656 days. This means that the money pledged for the tsunami disaster by the United States is the equivalent of one and a half day's spending in Iraq.” (The British government's killing-to-helping ratio, while not quite so extreme, is also overwhelmingly for death.)

In the media frame, it doesn't seem to matter that almost all the notable Americans invited on the networks to talk about their faith in God are supportive of bankrolling the carnage in Iraq. This is nothing new. For a long time, high-profile talk about belief in God has been a useful fog for agendas that enrich weapons manufacturers while helping the wealthy get wealthier and further impoverishing the already poor.

In autumn 1994, just weeks before the mid-term election when the GOP won the upper hand on Capitol Hill, the executive director of the conservative funda-

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mentalist Christian Coalition spoke at the National Press Club. “Faith in God isn’t what’s wrong with America,” Ralph Reed declared, “it’s what is right with America.” A decade later, Reed is one of the nation’s top Republican operatives, and such rhetoric is routine. No doubt many Americans like the profuse media talk about faith in God. If that’s the case, they should say so — and, judging from the steady media cacophony, a large number of them do. But what about the Americans who find that talk to be cloying, simplistic and manipulative? Where’s the media space for them?

One of the great media taboos is to sincerely question “faith in God” or to suggest that the superficial renditions of faith popularized in mass media are apt to paralyze more than empower. With all the God talk, big media outlets create ongoing pressure for conformity. That may seem to be an affirmation of shared beliefs or, at worst, inconsequential. But banishing doubt runs the very real risk of banishing — or at least ostracizing — thought.

“I don’t know if God exists and I don’t care,” Chicago Tribune columnist Eric Zorn wrote a few days ago, bucking the media tide. “God’s will and design for this temporal and spatial vastness, if any, is so patently, deliberately impenetrable that I doubt any mortal has a grasp on it. The very inexplicability of sad events like the tsunami, like the AIDS crisis or even like the cancer death of the father of one of my daughter’s 2nd-grade classmates last week are, to me, reminders to focus on our obligations to one another, not to the infinite; to honor the creator, if any, by honoring creation itself and hoping that’s good enough.”

But the media market is bullish on piety — and very fond of the facile reverence that far-flung TV correspondents are now exuding from picturesque beaches struck by Acts of God. We don’t need to impugn the sincerity of any individual to note that such reportage is good for the U.S. news business. And, in the political economy of corporate media compassion, it would be bad for the U.S. news business to devote anywhere near such extensive coverage to the children being destroyed by Pentagon firepower and wartime malnutrition in Iraq.

We’re often told that God works in mysterious ways. But Washington’s priorities are appreciably more intelligible. While the prospects for clearly deciphering life’s unfathomable riddles remain dim, we ought to figure out how to stop the wholesale killers who’ve gained so much unholy power close to home.

Norman Solomon’s next book, “War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death,” will be published in early summer by Wiley.