

# “Where There Is No Vision, The People Perish”: Comparative Religious Responses to Hurricane Katrina and Love Canal

By Richard Newman

In February 1979, several months after Love Canal citizens mobilized for justice at a leaking toxic waste dump in their midst, an ecumenical official named Joann Brietsman challenged religious communities to enter the struggle for environmental reform. “The churches have to do something,” she declared after dealing with angry and frightened citizens worried about their future in a hazardous landscape. Over a quarter century later and in a completely different disaster context, Hurricane Katrina prompted a similar declaration from a parishioner at St. Gabriel the Archangel Church in New Orleans. Local churches, Kermit Mogilles elegantly stated, must be “beacons of hope to the revitalization of communities” throughout the Gulf Coast.<sup>1</sup>

As these quotes indicate, religion continues to frame responses to modern American disasters. Interestingly, while scholars have paid increasing attention to the religious foundations of environmentalism, few studies examine the religious dimensions of specific environmental catastrophes.<sup>2</sup> How do people of faith respond to a disaster that defies easy categorization? What roles do region, race, and class play in framing the religious rhetoric people of faith utilize in the face of chaos and uncertainty? How does faith inform and enable post-disaster social and political mobilization? Hurricane Katrina and Love Canal offer an exceptional comparative perspective on these and other questions. Perhaps the signature natural and “man-made” disasters of the last fifty years, these two events have become metaphors of environmental ruin. While various media commentators have already made Katrina the standard against which all other hurricanes will be measured, reporters and cultural critics throughout North America have long since used Love Canal as the face of hazardous waste and/or chemical disaster—one reads constantly about the potential for “another Katrina” and “another Love Canal.”<sup>3</sup> In addition, both disasters have generated sustained media attention as well as political, legal, and social scrutiny. Finally, there is an increasing

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<sup>1</sup> Joann Brietsman, February 1979, quoted in “Progress Report of the Ecumenical Task Force of the Niagara Frontier, March 20, 1979 - August 1, 1980” (Niagara Falls, 1980), 4; Kermit Mogilles quoted in Donald E. DeVore, “Water in Sacred Places: Rebuilding New Orleans Black Churches as Sites of Community Empowerment,” *Journal of American History*, 94 (Dec. 2007), 762–69, quote at 768–9.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Rodrick Nash’s seminal treatment, “The Greening of Religion,” in Nash, *The Rights of Nature: A History of Environmental Ethics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989) and Thomas R. Dunlap, *Faith in Nature: Environmentalism as Religious Quest* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> See *The New York Times*, March 18, 2004, for parallels between Love Canal and the toxic threat posed by the World Trade Center cleanup. Interestingly, the Global Community Monitor, a nonprofit environmental justice group, reported on one New Orleans resident’s fears that a leaking oil refinery in the wake of Hurricane Katrina could become like “a Love Canal down here” (September 5, 2005).

amount of literature dedicated to religious outreach on both events.<sup>4</sup> In short, there is much that ties them together.

Yet in studying religious responses to these famed disasters, differences remain nearly as striking as similarities. Indeed, region, race and class created particular geographies of faith in New Orleans and Niagara Falls – geographies of faith that framed the very style and meaning of post-disaster religious activism in each locale. Only by understanding the historical roots of these interfaith responses can we best appreciate religion's continuing role in disaster recovery and activism.

## I.

Although not a well-known part of the Love Canal story, interfaith response figured prominently in local and national disaster relief efforts in this community of roughly one thousand families situated in Niagara Falls, N.Y. The story began in the mid-1970s when a former hazardous waste dump in the center of what was known as the “Love Canal” neighborhood (so named for an industrial developer’s abandoned nineteenth-century waterway) began leaching toxic material into yards, sewer systems, and basements. The size of ten contiguous football fields, the old Canal had been used by Hooker Chemical Corporation to dispose of 100,000 barrels of chemical waste between 1942 and 1953. After that site had been filled and sold to the Niagara Falls School Board, an elementary school was built on the dump. The school board then sold the property to developers and a neighborhood took shape: streets were graded, sewers put in, playgrounds built. Once the ten-block neighborhood became established, residents’ complaints about hazardous fumes, chemical leachate in sump pumps, exposed and corroded barrels, and a maze of ailments from asthma to miscarriages prompted investigation by state and federal officials. On August 2, 1978, the New York State Health Department issued its first formal evacuation notice to pregnant women and children under two living adjacent to the former dump. A few days later, President Jimmy Carter issued an emergency declaration for Love Canal—the first time any “man-made” disaster in American history acquired the designation—evacuating 239 families residing on streets lining the old canal. On May 21, 1980, President Carter followed with a second emergency disaster declaration, facilitating the removal of remaining citizens (comprising over 700 families).

In the public mind and in some scholarly accounts the Love Canal story begins and ends with efficient government action: citizens complained and the government promptly responded.<sup>5</sup> The truth remains decidedly more complex. Without persistent grassroots organizing among Love Canal families and activists, mass evacuation may never have occurred. It took two years of steady struggle, and many confrontations with governing officials thereafter, to achieve any measure of environmental justice.

Religious activism and outreach formed a critical foundation for Love Canal protesters. Although the most famous grassroots organization remains the Love Canal Homeowners Association (formed in August of 1978 and headed by Lois Gibbs), the Ecumenical Task Force of the Niagara Frontier (ETF) also became a leading advocate of environmental justice. “The

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth D. Blum’s *Love Canal Revisited: Race, Class, and Gender in Environmental Activism* (Lawrence: The University of Kansas Press, 2008) is the most recent study of the famous hazardous waste dump while David Brunsma’s *The Sociology of Katrina: Perspectives on a Modern Catastrophe* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007) offers new scholarly insights on Hurricane Katrina.

<sup>5</sup> On citizen protest at Love Canal generally, see Michael Brown’s seminal book, *Laying Waste: The Poisoning of America by Toxic Chemicals* (New York: Random House, 1981), and Adeline Godron Levine, *Love Canal: Science, Politics and People* (Lexington, Mass: Lexington Books, 1982). On the other hand, major texts can skip over citizen protest at Love Canal, including, for instance, Carolyn Merchant’s otherwise excellent text, *Major Problems in Environmental History* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1993, 2006).

Ecumenical Task Force,” a website dedicated to the group’s archives informs contemporary readers, “was founded on March 13, 1979, by the interfaith community of western New York in response to the hazardous waste crisis of the Love Canal. Its initial objectives were to provide direct aid to Love Canal residents, to provide an advocacy voice for the religious community on behalf of the residents, to inform religious communities of the issues, and to work toward long-range solutions to the chemical waste problems locally and throughout the country.”<sup>6</sup> From its inception, the ETF worked with a variety of government officials, legal allies, and environmentalists to obtain relief for Love Canal residents. The group did not stop with local objectives. Using its multiyear struggles at Love Canal as a guide, the ETF sought to raise awareness about the dangers of hazardous waste disposal sites throughout North America and provide insight into the intersection of faith and environmental politics.

At the moment of its creation, the ETF assembled over two dozen religious leaders from Niagara Falls and western New York—Baptists, Methodists, Catholics, Jews—to provide theological guidance to reeling residents. A few ETF leaders had training in community organization. The group’s Executive Director, Sister Margeen Hoffman, hailed from the Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi and had a master’s degree in social planning and community organization. (Sister Hoffman had already coordinated disaster relief efforts in other parts of the country). Others had experience in civil rights organizations, labor reform movements, and health and safety initiatives.

What differentiated ETF activism from other movements then taking shape at Love Canal? Religious rhetoric for one thing, which ETF members consistently utilized to demonstrate their commitment to the twin principles of faith and political mobilization. No sooner had it been formed than the ETF addressed the theological meaning of inadequate government response to the Love Canal crisis. “The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants” (Isaiah 24:5) became the ETF’s mantra, serving as an epigram for essays, position papers, and annual reports. With this one phrase, the group used biblical language to underscore its belief that those in power had not only violated their mandate to protect the environment but failed to envision distressed citizens as members of the commonweal. “Where There Is No Vision, The People Perish,” from Proverbs 29:18, similarly framed the group’s first annual “Progress Report” in 1980. Pointing out that government inaction had left hundreds of families stranded in Love Canal homes nearly two years after the President’s initial emergency declaration, it presented a “theological rationale” for continued interfaith action. According to this statement, the ETF would dedicate itself to three main goals, each steeped in a biblical understanding of environmental “stewardship”: calling out “inadequate government response to human needs” in disaster settings; seeking guarantees of “the rights of each citizen” without regard to race, class, or creed; and, looking beyond Love Canal itself, providing “caring stewardship of the earth” so that hazardous waste catastrophes would not occur again.<sup>7</sup>

To realize its ambitious agenda, the ETF created several committees in the years following its inception, including those dedicated to “direct aid,” “funding,” “public policy,” and “educational response.” To help ETF officers and Love Canal citizens better understand the lab and medical science behind public health testing, the group assembled a “Technical/Scientific advisory board” of over twenty doctors, chemists and lab scientists. “But maybe our biggest accomplishment,” Terri Mudd, a member of St. Peter’s Roman Catholic Church in nearby Lewiston, N.Y., and part of ETF’s Executive Board, explained in a second “progress report,” “is that the Love Canal situation is called

<sup>6</sup> This description heads the Love Canal collection description in the SUNY Buffalo archives. It essentially repeats information in many ETF publications. It is available online at the following web address:  
<http://ublib.buffalo.edu/libraries/projects/Lovecanal/guide.html>

<sup>7</sup> “Progress Report of the Ecumenical Task Force of the Niagara Frontier, March 20, 1979 - August 1, 1980.” [Progress Report II of the Ecumenical Task Force of the Niagara Frontier, August 1, 1980 - Sept. 15, 1981 .

a *disaster* by the world now.”<sup>8</sup> Working sometimes alongside, sometimes in opposition to, the Love Canal Homeowners Association, the ETF helped spread the word that local, state, and federal governments were dragging their feet and that many Love Canal residents lived in a disaster zone that made them susceptible to increased risk of certain diseases and illnesses ranging from asthma to a variety of cancers.

The emerging Love Canal protest agenda flowed from the experiences of Love Canal citizens themselves, some of whom joined the ETF. As they recounted in interviews and testimony, they felt abandoned by the political system and threatened by the very landscape they inhabited. Patricia Brown lived in Love Canal for over a decade before being evacuated. She returned to become a “volunteer advocate” before joining the ETF’s executive board in 1981; she also served as “resource manager” thereafter, distributing literature on Love Canal mobilization and speaking before churches, schools and universities. Joann Hale had also lived in Love Canal before becoming a member of the ETF executive board. Both Brown and Hale used membership in local churches as a springboard into the Ecumenical Task Force. Other residents worked closely with members of ETF, providing chilling descriptions of life in a hazardous community. Anne Hillis, a stay-at-home mother who became one of the most expressive Love Canal writers, left testimony, poetry, and a brief autobiography in ETF archives, hoping that these documents would conjure images of a life threatened by toxic chemicals.

Hillis’s words made a palpable impression in Washington, where her testimony (like that of several other Love Canal residents) before a Joint Senate Subcommittee on environmental pollution and hazardous waste in March 1979 galvanized congressional support for what became the federal Superfund law. After describing a terrifying life in Love Canal—with sickness and poison pervading their every move and where she had already lost one son—Hillis conveyed a heart-rending scene with her young son. Finding him awake and crouched under a chair late one night, she asked him what was wrong. “I want to die, I don’t want to live here anymore—I know you will be sick again and I will be sick again!” How could people be asked to live in such an environment, she asked?<sup>9</sup> Senator Edmund Muskie of Maine eventually cited Hillis’s testimony as evidence that American industry and government must respond more swiftly to the challenges of hazardous waste disposal.<sup>10</sup>

While state and federal health data consistently indicated elevated risks for residents living beyond the Canal proper—particularly expectant mothers, children under two, and those with certain illnesses—government officials would not issue a final evacuation order. Thus, no matter how strenuously state officials issued assurances that the leaking dump had been contained, Love Canal protesters refused to leave the public stage. They held press conferences, traveled to the state capital of Albany and the federal capital of Washington, and planned angry public marches. In a celebrated incident, Love Canal citizens traveled to the Democratic national convention in New York City in 1980 to pressure Jimmy Carter into helping broker a buyout agreement for local residents. “President Carter, hear our plea. Set the Love Canal people free!,” they shouted. “2-4-6-8-Help us now before it’s too late!”<sup>11</sup> The ETF indirectly testified to this heated environment by explicitly stating that members must remain dedicated to nonviolent protest.

Residents’ ire was often directed at officials who minimized health threats, spoke in arcane scientific language, or offered mixed messages about the hazardous environment they lived in. “You

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 3, (emphasis in original quotation).

<sup>9</sup> See “Testimony of Anne Hillis and Jim Clark [before the] Joint Senate Subcommittee on environmental pollution and hazardous waste in March 28-29, 1979,” in SUNY- Buffalo’s “Love Canal Collection – Online Documents.”

<sup>10</sup> Muskie cited Hillis’ words in a speech before the American society of civil engineers in Boston, April 2, 1979.

See “Testimony of Anne Hillis before the Senate standing committee on conservation and recreation . . . May 1979,” in *ibid*.

<sup>11</sup> See Lois Gibbs, *Love Canal, My Story* (Albany, NY, 1982), 164.

tell us the air tests clean,” Lois Gibbs remembered, “but you also tell us we can’t eat the vegetables [in our own gardens.]” If children get chemical burns from playing on the grass, she continued, health officials replied, “have the children walk on the sidewalk.” Rumors that state officials would not sanction a buyout of contaminated homes for fear of setting a bad precedent produced deeper anxieties among residents.<sup>12</sup>

ETF officials provided spiritual outlets for frazzled residents as well as a sense of higher direction and purpose. To some politicians and business leaders, Love Canal protesters were viewed as self-interested.<sup>13</sup> With home values plummeting around the former dump, critics sneered, greedy citizens pushed for a government buyout. By joining the ETF, activists became linked in a sacred chain of meaning sanctified by God. As “creature[s] made in the image of God and charged with responsibility for the protection of the earth,” the group reported in 1980, ETF activists pledged “not to pollute its water,” “not to defile the land,” and on witnessing “others corrupting our common environment,” to “challenge the injustice of such cruel, irresponsible and arrogant behavior.”<sup>14</sup>

Using theological insight to legitimize citizen protest helped satisfy another concern facing Love Canal residents: that the lack of physical destruction neutralized their claim of living in a disaster area. One of the key differences between Katrina and Love Canal was the latter’s lack of a visual narrative of catastrophe to contextualize citizen mobilization. For all intents and appearances, the Love Canal neighborhood seemed to be the epitome of American suburbia: neat homes next to tree-lined streets, with schools and park space close by. And with Niagara Falls just down the road, Love Canal residents seemed to have the American dream. How could this be Ground Zero of a leaking hazardous-waste dump? Indeed, for over two decades a counter-narrative haunting Love Canal residents has been the claim that there was no disaster at all; rather, this line of thinking goes, hysterical residents created a media circus that compelled wary government officials to act.<sup>15</sup>

For obvious reasons, then, the ETF’s religious rhetoric sacralized residents’ protest. ETF literature pointed out that hazardous-waste dumps were a growing part of the American landscape. Love Canal, activists argued, was the proverbial canary in the coal mine—the first community to mobilize against the toxic threat hidden beneath them. This was the dark underside of American industrial growth, they continued: a toxic tomb of nearly 22,000 tons of chemical waste, including 200 different compounds, from benzene to Dioxin. This is what leached into residents’ sewer systems and basements and caused all sorts of worry about the physical and psychological impact of living near a previously unknown chemical dump. The most recent research has borne out Love Canal activists’ initial claims. In the Great Lakes region alone, there are nearly 500 hazardous waste disposal sites, many of which are situated in economically struggling and racially marginalized communities.<sup>16</sup>

The Love Canal Jeremiad thus came to focus on a much broader problem in American culture than the buyout of damaged homes in a single neighborhood. It became part and parcel of a growing environmental justice movement that focused on the disproportionate hazardous-waste burden facing marginalized communities in America. Many Love Canal residents purchased their homes in the late-1960s and early-1970s before de-industrialization intensified the Niagara region’s

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>13</sup> Allan Mazur’s *A Hazardous Inquiry: The Rashomon Effect at Love Canal* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998) offers a critical scholarly perspective on citizen activism, going so far as to claim that health officials and not local activists were the real heroes of the crisis.

<sup>14</sup> Progress Report of the Ecumenical Task Force of the Niagara Frontier, March 20, 197- August 1, 1980.”

<sup>15</sup> See Mazur, *A Hazardous Inquiry*, Introduction.

<sup>16</sup> See especially Thomas H. Fletcher, *From Love Canal to Environmental Justice: The Politics of Hazardous Waste on the Canadian-U.S. Border* (Toronto: Broadview Press, 2003).

economic (and as it turned out, environmental) woes. Living outside the urban core, in moderately-priced homes near good schools, they felt lucky. As citizens mobilized in the late 1970s and early 1980s, however, they realized that they had little political standing. While hoping to build on the consciousness-raising efforts of American environmentalism writ large, these environmental justice advocates also sought to transcend some of the limitations of the broader movement. Love Canal protesters discovered that the national headquarters of some major environmental groups, composed of scientists, philosophers, and academicians, were initially unhelpful to local residents. Love Canal, they argued, was not as marketable as saving the whales! Environmental justice reformers spoke of a more gritty movement based in former mining towns, urban-industrial centers, and among communities of color. In all these places, environmental justice advocates claimed, people had—or should have—the same environmental rights as every other American: the right to clean air, clean water, and clean living space, as well as the right to know what chemical companies and other industries incinerated and dumped in their neighborhoods.

The ETF's creation and theological grounding speak to the relevance of other historical factors too, particularly religious reform traditions in western New York. A seedbed of religious upheaval since the Second Great Awakening in the early nineteenth century, western New York had been known as the “burned-over district” for its pervasive revivals. Charles Grandison Finney, Theodore Dwight Weld, Lyman Beecher and other famous northern evangelicals became familiar names to generations of believers.<sup>17</sup> (By the twentieth century, waves of Catholic immigrants had made Buffalo and Niagara Falls a center of Catholic reform too.) Melding religiosity with concepts of civic virtue, nineteenth-century evangelical reformers wanted to restore order and justice—to prevent the “cosmos from crumbling,” in historian Robert Abzug’s marvelous phrase. According to Abzug, the reform waves emanating from northeastern revival culture were “at odds with the world in its ‘natural’ state and [reformers remained] bent upon sacralizing all the world in accordance with their vision of God’s plan.” This religious reform vision flowed from a belief that “the most personal and most cosmic issues [were] interconnected.”<sup>18</sup>

The reform culture that flowered during the nineteenth-century was a bold attempt at sacralizing the social and political world—not creating a theocracy, but rather imbuing American reform with a sacred purpose. As the forces of market culture and democratic politics collided, religious reformers extended their critique of politics and social relations, hoping to perfect the human condition as never before. The Lord had given his message to the faithful, Northern revivalists believed, and it was their job to reinvigorate the gospel of freedom and justice for all. Abolitionism, temperance, peace initiatives—all would stem from this same post-millennialist philosophy.

The concept of *kairos* is critical to understanding this historical backdrop and the ETF's revelatory frame of mind. Initially defined by theologian Paul Tillich as a historical period when the Kingdom of God intervenes in human affairs, a *kairos* also marks a moment in time when religious reformers make “an eschatological leap . . . [over] the limits of previous political, racial, and economic history.” The constantly changing conditions of modernity often impel religious activists

<sup>17</sup> On religious revivalism generally, see Daniel Walker Howe’s *What Hath God Wrought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). For a masterful treatment of northern evangelical culture and religious reform in early America, see particularly Robert Abzug, *Cosmos Crumbling: American Reform and the Religious Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). The classic treatment of Protestant revivalism in western New York remains Whitney Cross, *The Burned-Over District - The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800-1850* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1965), although Paul Johnson’s *A Shopkeeper’s Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837* (revised paperback edition, New York: Hill and Wang, 2004) is the best microhistory of revivalism in New York.

<sup>18</sup> Abzug, *Cosmos Crumbling*, vii, 4-5.

to look at their world anew—to become seekers, reformers, and healers who bring the Kingdom of God closer to the secular realm. In the nineteenth century, a succession of events prompted religious insight and mobilization: the advent of the Erie Canal, early industrialization, religious pluralism, and immigration.<sup>19</sup>

For Love Canal's faithful, the 1970s and 1980s represented a potential break from history and therefore a moment of revelation—a *kairos*. De-industrialization had already stripped western New York of thousands of blue-collar jobs; Cold War politics and domestic gender roles remained unstable in the post-Vietnam era (suicide took the lives of several men in Love Canal who believed that they did not adequately provide for their family); and environmental pollution emerged as a global concern in the wake of Love Canal, Three Mile Island, and other near-disasters. Anne Hillis spoke to the relevance of this last point in her March 1979 congressional speech, noting that “the day we testified was the same day the 3 mile Island nuclear disaster occurred.” As their own story made headlines, residents like Hillis began corresponding with citizens in other parts of the country who faced toxic threats. In no small sense, they felt as Hillis did, that they were living in an apocalyptic time. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* offered the keynote to this new era. “In the future,” Hillis wrote in an unpublished autobiography she began keeping to deal with her anxieties, “will we the people of the Love Canal . . . know what a silent spring sounds like? God help us.”<sup>20</sup>

Like other Love Canal protesters, the ETF hoped that citizen mobilization would spur a national environmental movement centered on the hazards of chemical waste disposal. “Let us go forward on the road which has brought us where we are today,” the group reported only a year after forming, using language from Acts 4:20. In fact, the enduring lesson of grassroots mobilization by religious itinerants at Love Canal was that local people could reclaim a political voice through protest. “We cannot possibly give up speaking of the things we have seen and heard,” it declared in 1981, after the state and federal governments agreed to purchase all contaminated homes. “The government did take action”—but only because of the “combined force from all of us.”

In this sense, one enduring narrative of Love Canal protest would not be siege, but optimism: a belief that grassroots campaigning could challenge government and reclaim citizens' rights. Like previous generations of northern reformers, western New York's faithful believed not only that a new day was coming but that they would create it. Indeed, this was the only way the faithful could reconcile sincere belief with the vicissitudes of post-Love Canal life.

Turning plowshares into political swords became a metaphor of ETF activity well after the majority of Love Canal citizens were finally evacuated during the early 1980s. The ETF remained operational into the following decade precisely because it offered a voice still lacking in public discourse. “We believe that the religious community has a unique role to play in coping with the hazardous waste problem, its causes and resolutions,” the group declared in a 1987 booklet entitled “Earthcare: Lessons From Love Canal, A Resource Guide and Response.” “Biblical wisdom, born of centuries of experience in a clarification of values, is the gift of the church which will speak truth.” And now the ETF would respond to what it termed “other ‘Love Canals’” around the country. Some group officers referred to this mission as part of a “maturity” among evangelical environmentalists. No longer concerned simply with protest but with spreading the gospel of environmental stewardship to citizens, politicians, and business leaders, ETF officials became

<sup>19</sup> Paul Tillich, *Protestant Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948); Abzug (quoting David Brion Davis), *Cosmos Crumbling*, 5.

<sup>20</sup> Anne Hillis, “Love Canal's Contamination: The Poisoning of an American Family,” unpublished ms. in the Love Canal Collection, SUNY Buffalo archives.

environmental correspondents with activists around the country and around the world; they spoke in high school classrooms and universities; and they maintained a watchful eye over Love Canal.<sup>21</sup>

This last point is critical. ETF officials registered concern about what would happen to Love Canal far into the future, both as a potential living space and a monument to hazardous waste disposal gone wrong. As remediation of the former dump proceeded during the 1980s, state officials discussed the possibility of re-habiting portions of the evacuated neighborhood. Local and state leaders' hopes of returning at least some portion of the area to the tax rolls and proving that Love Canal was only a temporary blip in industrial recovery framed governmental discussions of the area's future. Former residents joined with allies in the environmental community to challenge once again this narrative of economic progress. ETF officers vigorously opposed Love Canal rehabilitation. In their eyes, Love Canal should stand as a monument to failed hazardous waste policies – and a beacon of hope to those fighting for environmental justice. "When the religious community responds to a [new] 'Love Canal,'" the group noted years later, "it must call for justice, stewardship and accountability."<sup>22</sup> Like the Sermon on the Mount, "Love Canal" must symbolize something transcendent to anyone who heard the very words.

## II.

While Hurricane Katrina activists share many of these theological concerns, they come to them through a different hermeneutic lens. Linking Katrina experiences to black struggles for justice throughout American history, they speak of communalism, surviving in the face of long-standing governmental neglect, and protesting against racial injustice at both the local and national levels. "Theology," James Cone famously argued in his 1982 memoir *My Soul Looks Back*, "cannot be separated from the community which it represents. It assumes that truth has been given to the community at the moment of its birth. Its task is to analyze the implications of that truth in order to make sure that the community remains committed to that which defines its existence."<sup>23</sup>

The truth defining the lives of post-Katrina residents still revolves around massive physical destruction, economic displacement, and physical separation of families, churches, and entire sectors of the local population. Ironically, even as Katrina's visual narrative of catastrophe remains more striking than that of Love Canal (more deaths, more property loss), the hurricane's comprehensive destructiveness may have dulled the impact of the disaster on marginalized communities. The New Orleans death toll from Katrina—now figured at roughly 1800 persons, down from an initial estimate of several thousand—includes a disproportionate number of African-Americans in the urban core, among them people who were "forgotten" long before the storm: the ill, the elderly, those without personal transportation or the money to leave for extended periods of time. In addition, the staggering number of displaced citizens remains hard to comprehend beyond the Gulf Coast. The 1.2 million evacuees from Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama constitute the equivalent of a mid-sized metropolitan area, a reality that many Americans simply find impossible to fathom in the world's wealthiest country. Add to these inducements to collective amnesia the apathy and outright neglect of government (something Love Canal citizens knew all too well) and the point

<sup>21</sup> Sister Margeen Hoffman, ed., *Earthcare: Lessons From Love Canal, A Resource Guide and Response* (Niagara Falls, 1987).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* 16.

<sup>23</sup> Cone, *My Soul Looks Back* (Nashville: Orbis Books, 1982, 1985), 1-11. On Katrina and race, see of course Michael Eric Dyson's *Come Hell or High Water* (New York: Basic Books, 2006). On prophetic traditions and black theology generally, see Cain Hope Felder, ed., *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1991). See also David L. Chappell, *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Allen Dwight Callahan, *The Talking Book: African Americans and the Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

becomes clear: Katrina protesters shared with Love Canal’s activist community a sense that they had to organize both to protect their interests and publicize their ongoing struggle for justice.

A multitude of churches, community groups, and activist associations have contributed to post-Katrina recovery efforts and citizen mobilization. Even more so than at Love Canal, the lines between these groups are porous; faithful and secular activists co-mingle in various organizations. For example, the Holy Cross Neighborhood Association (HCNA), originally formed in 1981 in the Lower Ninth Ward, but reinvigorated by the storm, is based at the Greater Little Zion Missionary Baptist Church (GLMC). It produces a monthly newsletter in both print and electronic formats and organizes communitywide restoration efforts. One of the group's signal initiatives, called “Rebuilding Together,” funds home maintenance and repair projects for low income and elderly residents who might otherwise have to leave the already depleted area. “Together,” the HCNA’s August 2007 newsletter declares, “we can save the Nine.”<sup>24</sup>

Whatever the specific affiliations of its members—whether secular or sacred—the HCNA’s “Rebuilding Together” program offers a glimpse of a much broader phenomenon among post-Katrina activists: the theologically inspired struggle to keep the black community intact. As the group's literature phrases it, “Rebuilding Together” is the grassroots response to “The Flood.” While this word refers specifically to the massive wall of water accompanying the Katrina storm surge, it also signifies a near-mythic event that places the black community in the realm of sacred history. No illusory refuge from troubles in the secular realm, this sacred history connects marginalized people to one another through time and space. It also emphasizes the unique role that black people are called to play in their own liberation—a prophetic role assigned to them by a just God. As long as they remain faithful to the Lord and connected to one another in the face of oppression, African-Americans would redeem themselves and the world around them.

According to literary scholar John Ernest, eighteenth-century black leaders originally conceived of sacred history—the realm of absolute justice and divine prophecy—as “a dynamic and complex presence in the [secular] world.” Black protesters and theologians “spoke powerfully . . . of moral violations and of the abandonment of the principles that dominated white public discourse.”<sup>25</sup> The realm of sacred history, in other words, focused the black community's attention on its historical self-consciousness and historic struggle for justice. When the HCNA, like other organizations, declares that it is “time to honor our dead” killed in the storm and “time to fight for the return of all,” it draws on these elements of sacred history to mobilize the black community.<sup>26</sup>

Indeed, as the language of the Holy Cross Neighborhood Association indicates, sacred and secular histories operate together in post-Katrina reform efforts. One of the icons of Katrina protest further emphasizes the relevance of sacred history among the faithful: the “all-knowing, all seeing third eye of God.” The image—a piercing eye gazing out of a sacred triangle—first appeared on a stained-glass window at St. Augustine’s Catholic Church, a black parish in the Treme district. It has since been used by one of the most important black-led ecumenical groups in the country, the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference (or SDPC, which, though based in Chicago, has been galvanized by Katrina). According to the SDPC, which has organized commemorations of Katrina victims and mobilized clergy in New Orleans to press local, state, and national leaders for better aid programs, the eye symbolizes humans’ “capacity to look beyond our earthly boundaries and ‘see’ the realities of

<sup>24</sup> See Holy Cross Neighborhood Association Newsletter, August, 2007; see also the New Orleans *Times-Picayune*, July 7, 2007, and letter to the editor July 14, 2007.

<sup>25</sup> John Ernest, *Liberation Historiography: African-American Writers and the Challenge of History, 1794-1861* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 11.

<sup>26</sup> Holy Cross Neighborhood Association Newsletter, August, 2007

the world.”<sup>27</sup> With similar thoughts in mind, many Katrina activists view themselves as keepers of a moral vision of the universe. “You Shall Know the Truth, and the Truth Shall Make You Free,” St. Augustine Church informs visitors, referring to John 8:32. The powerful Gulf Coast hurricanes of August 2005 revivified black sacred history, with threatened residents deploying it to inspire new social justice initiatives for marginalized communities.

The saliency of sacred history brings us back to James Cone’s understanding of the dialectic between community self-consciousness and the development of a broader theology—in this case, the existence of a “black theology” that could be called in to being during disaster situations such as Katrina. Whether operating within the framework of local churches and ecumenical organizations, or speaking more broadly on behalf of the thousands of African-Americans displaced by Katrina, New Orleans’ grassroots activists have consistently invoked elements of a black theology that can be traced all the way back to the beginnings of Afro-Christianity in the Atlantic world.<sup>28</sup> Even handwritten signs in the Lower Ninth Ward declaring that “we’re keeping our neighborhood” (in the face of urban developers who have marginalized the voices of local citizens) reconnect the black community to its sacred struggles for justice. For generations of black leaders, families, and extended kinship networks, the first step on the road to carrying out African-Americans’ divinely inspired mission has been to cohere in the face of oppressive forces. “From the beginning of African slavery in mainland North America,” scholars Ira Berlin and Leslie Rowland assert at the outset of *Families and Freedom*, their invaluable documentary history of black kinship rituals and networks in the Civil War era, “Black people understood their society in the idiom of kinship.” Communalism offered the most reliable protection against racial violence and injustice. Right up until the twentieth century, Berlin and Rowland conclude in words that could be cut and pasted into the age of Katrina, “familial and communal relations were one.”<sup>29</sup>

In the Deep South, African-Americans’ emphasis on solidarity and communalism remains particularly resonant. Perhaps more than any single institution, the black church has symbolized black solidarity. According to historian Donald Devore, post-Katrina parishioners “understand the importance of religiously informed group solidarity in preventing the kind of psychological fragmentation that leads to defeat and despair.” Rebuilding churches was not simply a way to fill the void left by governmental apathy but a sacred endeavor to restore the soul of black community life. “Few individuals,” Devore has insightfully concluded, want “to imagine a post-Katrina ‘new’ New Orleans without the churches.”<sup>30</sup>

Even in northern communities with traditionally small black population bases, communalism has historically been a vital part of black freedom movements. Free black church founders Richard Allen and Absalom Jones offered one of the earliest and most powerful articulations of communalism’s sacred nature in their 1794 pamphlet, “A Narrative of the Black People during the Late Awful Calamity in Philadelphia.” The first copyrighted document by African-Americans in the new nation, the pamphlet challenged racial injustice flowing from Philadelphia’s terrible yellow fever

<sup>27</sup> For public use of the “third eye” icon, see for example the SDPC’s announcement of its “Pastors and Lay Leadership Conference,” scheduled for February 11-14 in New Orleans at <http://www.sdpconference.info>.

<sup>28</sup> On the historical roots of African American environmentalism, and its modern deviation from mainstream environmentalism, see, respectively, Mart A. Stewart, “Slavery and the Origins of African American Environmentalism,” and Mark Stoll, “Religion and Environmental Activism,” in Dianne D. Glave and Mark Stoll, eds., *To Love the Wind and the Rain: African Americans and Environmental History* (Pittsburgh: The University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006).

<sup>29</sup> Berlin and Rowland, *Families and Freedom: A Documentary History Of African American Kinship in the Civil War Era* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 3.

<sup>30</sup> See DeVore, “Water in Sacred Places: Rebuilding New Orleans Black Churches as Sites of Community Empowerment,” *Journal of American History*, 762-69.

epidemic during the previous year. The calamity claimed the lives of nearly 5000 Philadelphians, including as many as 400 people of color—roughly 10% of the population bases of white and black citizens, respectively. Because Philadelphia was the temporary home of the federal government at the time, the yellow fever crisis also became a national cause célèbre. Would the national capital crumble?<sup>31</sup>

African-Americans were mistakenly thought to be immune from the fever (which merely took longer to reach the scattered black population). Abolitionist physician Dr. Benjamin Rush believed that God had visited fever upon whites so that blacks could render aid and display their readiness for national emancipation. For free blacks like Allen and Jones, the yellow fever epidemic offered a more practical opportunity to illustrate their understanding of public virtue, deemed an essential quality of American citizenship in the late eighteenth century. Through the efforts of dozens of Afro-Philadelphians, black citizens mobilized and helped save the city.

Glad tidings did not last long, however, as a racial backlash soon pierced the black community. African-Americans were accused of theft, graft, and usury, and generally labeled as plunderers who took advantage of civic illness to “pilfer” white homes and businesses. Allen and Jones, former slaves who had already exited a segregationist white church to create independent black churches, were outraged, even though their actions as black elites had been celebrated. When they issued their pamphlet decrying racial stereotyping, Allen and Jones defended the black community as a whole, not individual leaders or families. Allen extended his critique of white injustice by affixing an antislavery appeal to the pamphlet, for he believed that bondage was the root cause of racial stereotyping. In doing this, the black preacher likened African-Americans’ position to that of the ancient Israelites trapped under Egyptian masters. Allen reminded white citizens that a just God ultimately liberated the enslaved. That same God would render divine judgment on recalcitrant American masters who did not embrace black freedom.<sup>32</sup>

By responding to white injustice via the power of communalism and biblical prophecy, Allen, Jones, and a host of other black commentators helped redefine African-Americans’ place in national culture. Far from marginal actors, they had been charged by God to speak truth to power. This vision allowed black people to see themselves as redeeming agents—the moral conscience of the nation. It also called into being standards of eternal justice that allowed black thinkers and activists to transcend the limits of secular racism. Without early black reformers’ sacredly inspired activism, the better known radical abolitionism of William Lloyd Garrison may not have come into being in the years preceding the Civil War.

With black protest foundations steeped in sacred history, it is no wonder that the biblical story of Exodus has figured so prominently in African-American struggles for justice from Allen's time right up to Katrina (a recent African-American history text is subtitled, “From Timbuktu to Katrina”).<sup>33</sup> Following the Civil War (and particularly in southern locales), African-Americans used Exodus language to signify the meaning of liberation and the ongoing struggle to reconnect with family members scattered by slavery. Martin Luther King saw Exodus typology at work again in the modern civil rights movement. For King, Exodus “explained . . . nothing less than God’s repeating

<sup>31</sup> On Allen, prophetic justice and the yellow fever, see Richard S. Newman, *Freedom’s Prophet: Bishop Richard Allen, the AME Church, and the Black Founding Fathers* (New York: NYU Press, 2008).

<sup>32</sup> See Richard Allen, “An Address to Those Who Keep Slaves and Approve the Practice,” reprinted in Newman et al, *Pamphlets of Protest: African-American Protest Writing, 1790-1860* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 39-41.

<sup>33</sup> Quintard Taylor, Jr, ed., *From Timbuktu to Katrina: Readings in African American History*, Vol II. (Boston: Wadsworth, 2008). On Exodus, see Eddie S. Glaude, *Exodus: Religion, Race and Nation in Early Nineteenth Century America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000).

liberatory act, an archetypal event spiraling through history.”<sup>34</sup> The key for black activists was to recognize moments in time when sacred and secular history—God’s eternal vision and real-time events—converged, allowing reformers to push the struggle for justice forward. Put another way, the sacred story of Exodus has served for African-descended people as a *kairos*: a pathway to salvation.

Looking at the rhetoric of many post-Katrina reformers, it is clear that Exodus typology has once again ascended in public discourse. Survivors have seen families, neighborhoods, and regions fragment into waves of homeless citizens, displaced persons, and disconnected souls. Given the etymology of *Exodus* in the Greek for “going out,” it is little wonder that survivors who have had to travel to Texas, Colorado, Georgia, and beyond to find temporary housing and work have envisioned themselves as part of a “Katrina Exodus” and “Katrina diaspora.” As one might suspect, religious leaders have alluded to the appropriateness of the analogy. The Rev. Lance Eden, Pastor at the First Street United Methodist Church in New Orleans, has stated that post-Katrina reformers must create a communication “network” among “persons in the diaspora.” In New Orleans alone, he continues, there are roughly “17,000 homeless [persons]” who need shelter, food and information about their future in the Crescent city.<sup>35</sup> Only by keeping the diasporic community together could Katrina reformers build and maintain a social movement capable of reaching the promised land.

But the story of Exodus registers in the minds of Katrina’s faithful community because it also conjures a powerful sense of political and social estrangement—the discovery, in a legendary phrase from Exodus itself, that one was “a stranger in a strange land” (Exodus 2: 21-22). Katrina survivors and their allies were outraged when media commentators described those evacuated from flooded neighborhoods as “refugees” and not citizens. “Refugee” implies that the displaced victims of the storm, many of whom are black, are second-class citizens—or not even Americans,” MSNBC reported in September 2005.<sup>36</sup> Was this not like ancient Israelites’ discovery that they had been banished by the Egyptian pharaoh?

Exodus has thus shaped the very style of post-Katrina political appeals. When the SDPC declared that “we are demanding an audience with President George Bush and White House officials because they hold the lives of children, women and men in [their] hands,” they recalled God’s injunction to Moses: “Then the LORD said unto Moses, Go in unto Pharaoh, and tell him, ‘Thus saith the LORD God of the Hebrews, Let my people go, that they may serve me.’” (Exodus 9:1). Versions of this confrontational scene—of going to people in power to demand restitution—frequently recur in descriptions of post-Katrina activism. “We are very concerned about how long it is taking our governmental leaders to respond to the needs of the people,” the Reverend Tom Watson, a member of both the SDPC and the Greater New Orleans Clergy for Restorative Justice (GNOCRJ), stated. “That is why we went to Washington[,] to tell members of the U.S. Congress we need their help . . . to ensure the restoration of all communities in New Orleans.”<sup>37</sup>

Of course, Exodus typology merely points the faithful towards the promised land; it does not set a timetable for achieving justice. That makes communal cohesiveness and collective struggle a constant concern. Katrina activists recognize the fact that they live not in the fulfillment of divine prophecy but somewhere in the middle of that sacred journey between slavery and ultimate freedom.

<sup>34</sup> On King’s theological understanding of Exodus, see Keith D. Miller, *Voice of Deliverance: The Language of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Its Sources* (New York: Free Press, 1992), 158.

<sup>35</sup> New York Solidarity Coalition with Katrina/Rita Survivors Video interview with Rev. Lance Eden, Dec 26, 2007, posted on YouTube. See also Eden’s comments on Religion and Ethics News Weekly, April 14, 2006.

<sup>36</sup> See MSNBC archives for September 7, 2005; see also the Christian Science Monitor, September 12, 2005.

<sup>37</sup> Rev. Tom Watson quoted in a June 29, 2007 press release issued by the SDPC with the headline: “The Greater New Orleans clergy for restorative justice are mobilizing: rebuilding communities and advocating for change in public policy in Washington, D.C.,

“Two years later and still fighting,” the Holy Cross Neighborhood Association announced in August 2007, using language that characterized a whole range of ongoing protest movement at the grassroots level.<sup>38</sup>

As with Love Canal activists, ecumenical organizations have become conduits of political activism. Both the SDPC and the GNOCRJ have galvanized religious activists, locally as well as nationally. In fact, because the SDPC helped facilitate the advent of the Greater New Orleans Clergy in 2006, members of the two groups often operate in tandem. In February 2007, for example, these two organizations “mobilized [clergy] and traveled to Washington . . . to fight for the financial resources to support . . . churches and communities” on the Gulf Coast.<sup>39</sup> The GNOCRJ and the SDPC combined forces again to sponsor a second anniversary commemoration of “the lost children of Katrina.” “We’ve lost countless children and they’ve never been officially acknowledged,” said Reverend Leona Fisher of Morris Brown African Methodist Episcopal Church in New Orleans and a member of the GNOCRJ. By honoring these victims of Katrina, both the GNOCRJ and the SDPC hoped to shed light on the plight of “the many children of New Orleans and along the Gulf Coast region who survived hurricanes Katrina and Rita” and still don’t have “adequate health care” or educational facilities.<sup>40</sup>

The SDPC also created the National Katrina Justice Commission and Hearings in Washington, D.C., New Orleans, and Houston—the only national commission to examine governmental response and citizens’ ongoing concerns about revitalization efforts. Its findings were published as *The Breach: Bearing Witness* (2006), a book documenting the testimonies of people affected by the disaster, including victims, government agencies, local churches, and community organizers. The stories have become the basis of renewed calls for governmental support of building initiatives in the hardest hit areas of New Orleans. As one SDPC news release announced at the beginning of 2007, “we are calling on the United States government to create a trust that would ensure the complete restoration of the Lower Ninth Ward and the rest of New Orleans East.”<sup>41</sup>

If ecumenical organization and protest offered one route to political mobilization, spontaneous direct action has offered another, less formal road. The potential closing of St. Augustine Church, located in New Orleans’s Treme neighborhood, offers a powerful example of the way that local churches have served as rallying points for Katrina activists. Known as “the oldest African-American parish in United States,” St. Augustine was founded in 1841 with support of both free and enslaved people. Congregants learned of this community’s sacred nature at the earliest possible moment when free people of color purchased pews for enslaved people. Over the next century, the church became a bulwark of local black freedom struggles. Homer Plessy, the famed plaintiff in the 1896 desegregation Supreme Court case bearing his name, belonged to the congregation. Although the church suffered minimal physical damage, Hurricane Katrina still threatened to do what slavery and racial segregation could not: shut its doors. In March 2006, the archdiocese announced that budgetary constraints had forced its hands; St. Augustine Church would be no more.<sup>42</sup>

Though struggling with their own issues at work and home, black congregants galvanized community support, holding protest rallies that culminated in a 19-day rectory sit-in. “Save our parish, we will not be moved,” parishioners shouted in a self-conscious nod to the civil rights

<sup>38</sup> See the Holy Cross Neighborhood Association Newsletter, August, 2007.

<sup>39</sup> See SDPC news release from June 29, 2007 on GNOCRJ protest initiatives entitled, “the greater New Orleans clergy for restorative justice are mobilizing for change.”

<sup>40</sup> SDPC news release from August 16, 2007 entitled “Honoring the Lost Children of Katrina.”

<sup>41</sup> Dr. Ida Carruthers quoted in SDPC news release from February 7, 2007 entitled “Time is Running Out for Katrina Victims.”

<sup>42</sup> *Washington Post*, March 19, 2006.

struggle. As Suncere Ali Shakur, leader of the Common Ground Collective, explained, “[Martin Luther] King says when negotiations fail, direct action is automatically the next step.” By April, congregants’ had compelled the archdiocese to relent.<sup>43</sup>

Far from an isolated battle, the struggle to save St. Augustine was part of a larger effort to achieve justice for marginalized people. With a sense of political powerlessness about so many other issues hovering over them, post-Katrina community leaders attempted to take control of this one critical part of their lives. Perhaps as important, the struggle put parishioners in touch with the sacred history of enslaved people. Only the year before Katrina hit New Orleans, St. Augustine had established “The Tomb of the Unknown Slave.” Centered on a 1500-pound anchor that had formerly been attached to a buoy in the Mississippi River, “The Tomb of the Unknown Slave” is “analogous to the tomb of the unknown soldier in Arlington, Virginia . . . [though] the big difference is that it’s slaves [being honored],” according to Pastor Jerome Ledoux. “[A]ll over this country, there are many slaves buried, and nobody knows who they are or where they are, and especially in this part of the country, here in Treme, where there was a really high concentration of slaves.”<sup>44</sup> The memorial, the church informs visitors, has been “consecrated by many slaves’ inglorious deaths bereft of any acknowledgement, dignity or respect, but ultimately glorious by their blood, sweat, tears, faith, prayers and deep worship of our Creator.”

For many members of St. Augustine, the attempt to shut church doors was part of a long history of neglect. Indeed, although church officials subsequently apologized, they displayed a lack of sensitivity when dealing with black congregants. When the archbishop arrived to announce the final closing of the church in March 2006, he did so in the presence of armed guards. Moreover, the beloved pastor Jerome Ledoux was excused from services, outraging some congregants. Pastor Ledoux spoke for many of his parishioners when he referred to the armed men as evidence of “racial profiling” among white church leaders. Although St. Augustine’s protesters publicly dedicated themselves to nonviolent activity, church elders feared marauding bands of blacks, in Pastor Ledoux’s words. “These folks are not dangerous. They’re just upset. But if you’re not acculturated, you don’t understand that, so you come in with armed guards.”<sup>45</sup>

The re-consecration of St. Augustine Church as a holy space was nothing less than a metaphor of resurrection. “Well, I always have said that this has been a very heavy cross for the members of St. Augustine’s to carry,” Sandra Gordon, the president of St. Augustine’s parish council, told national reporters after the event. “[This] was like the cross that Jesus carried on Good Friday, but what happened on Easter Sunday? Resurrection. And that’s what happened with our parish. Our parish has been resurrected.” That has been good news for the surrounding community. “The church is currently playing a pivotal role in Hurricane Katrina relief,” St. Augustine’s web site proudly notes, “joining with Second Harvest and other organizations to offer food, clothing and shelter to the dispossessed. [We are] also matching those in need with available legal, medical, and FEMA assistance and with volunteer workman and cleanup crews.”<sup>46</sup>

Like so much else in post-Katrina New Orleans, the picture remains cloudy even for St. Augustine. The archdiocese has only agreed to keep it open temporarily. And yet, it is also clear that congregants will continue to draw on traditions of sacred history, scripture, and community struggle to keep a beloved institution open.

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<sup>43</sup> *Democracy Now*, April 10, 2006.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid

If the experiences of Love Canal and Katrina’s faithful tell us anything, it is that religion remains a capacious vehicle for those dealing with modern environmental disasters. In both instances, the chaos of disaster—not just physical death but the loss of home and savings, the separation of family and loved ones, the likelihood of long and uncertain struggles for restitution—compelled congregants, churches, and entire religious networks to rededicate themselves to the basic principles of faith: a belief in a just God who enters history at critical moments to inspire social justice. For this reason, it is little wonder that many Love Canal citizens turned to an ecumenical group to voice their concerns about toxic waste locally and nationally—their marginalized political and economic status compelled them to find transcendent models that sacralized grassroots mobilization for environmental justice. Similarly, Katrina survivors have sought both to strengthen existing networks of religious reformers and to retain sacred church space precisely because it puts them in touch with the spiritual traditions that have strengthened oppressed communities. In disaster situations, according to Professor Vanessa Ochs, Director of Jewish Studies at the University of Virginia, “we’re looking for miracles. We’re desperately looking for miracles, not just acts of kindness, but objects that we find that suggest to us that we will go on.” That is why a church, a family Bible, or a piece of scripture signifies so much. These sacred items “serve as spiritual agents that give us our sense of religious identity, that move us to act in holy and ethical ways, that tell us who we are as people of faith communities.”<sup>47</sup>

For the ETF, traditions of post-millennialist protest in western New York pointed toward the environment itself as a sacred space that might be destroyed. The lesson of history was that the citizens themselves—and not governing officials or business leaders—must mobilize for environmental justice. Becoming religious “virtuosos”<sup>48</sup>—activists who can move skillfully between the sacred realm and secular reform movements—they used scripture to inform and ennoble environmental activism, bringing a theological focus to the disaster looming not only at Love Canal proper but at the thousands of toxic waste sites throughout North America.

Utilizing the lessons of a different sacred tradition, many Katrina activists have similarly come to understand themselves as playing a vital role in the modern social justice movement—including the attainment of environmental justice for communities of color. Indeed, though clearly linked to liberation struggles among African-descended people going back centuries, post-Katrina reform has also updated its communalist struggles to include environmental concerns. As part of its broader effort to help people recover from the hurricane, the Holy Cross Neighborhood Association has announced the creation of sustainability initiatives for area residents. All Congregations Together (ACT), yet another ecumenical group that predated Hurricane Katrina but has been emboldened by it, has used Katrina’s notoriety to mobilize support for several environmental justice initiatives. For example, the group has called for a “collaborative decision-making” process in the redevelopment of several New Orleans-area “brownfields,” abandoned or underused industrial sites whose future is compromised by environmental contamination. (With nearly 300 brownfields in or near their city, many New Orleans’ residents are particularly fearful about the toxic stew that a hurricane can create). “ACT’s [environmental] issues come from the people,” a brochure informs readers. Like other ecumenical organizations, it has folded environmental justice concerns into a broader movement for social justice among traditionally marginalized people of color.

There is a final lesson that may link Love Canal and Katrina activists. For history suggests that Katrina victims, like their Love Canal counterparts, will be struggling to keep alive their own specific memories of disaster decades into the future. “Love Canal is not over, it will never be over,”

<sup>47</sup> *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly*, September 23, 2005.

<sup>48</sup> The term comes from Max Weber, though Abzug updates its utility nicely in *Cosmos Crumbling*, 4.

Lois Gibbs proclaimed nearly 20 years after she departed her toxic neighborhood.<sup>49</sup> The resettlement of nearly 250 homes across the street from a massive chain-link fence without signage prompts her continued outrage. Though not a part of the ETF, Gibbs gives voice to the countless Love Canal residents who still speak to school children and political officials about the hazards of toxic dumping. Likewise, Katrina activists have wasted little time in merging their memories of struggle with long-standing movements for social justice. In February 2006, the SDPC held its Fourth Annual Meeting in New Orleans under the banner, “In the Wake of Katrina: Lest We Forget . . . Call To Renewal.” As a press release noted, the hundreds of ministers from around the country were meeting “to examine public policies, emergency preparedness, healthcare and other issues affecting the African-American church and community” that may be fresh in people's minds after Katrina.<sup>50</sup> Now a part of sacred history, Katrina activism will itself become an emblem of black theology and environmental justice for generations to come.

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<sup>49</sup> Lois Gibbs quoted on Chris Matthew *Hardball*, December 7, 2000.

<sup>50</sup> SDPC news release, Feb 5, 2006 (mislabeled 2005 on the original), entitled, “African American Ministers Focus on Katrina while Bush Aids War in Iraq.”