

# From Paris to Phuket



I spent Christmas and the New Year in Gstaad, high up in the Swiss Alps among the *nouveaux riches*, the vulgar, and—worst of all—Paris Hilton.

Gstaad used to be known as the Mecca of the rich and elegant, where young people with old money and old-fashioned manners hung out, as opposed to its chief Alpine rival, St. Moritz, where old people with new money were the rage.

This was back in the fifties, when I first discovered Gstaad. The place was full of dethroned royals, American ex-OSS men who had discovered its beauty while operating out of Geneva during World War II, and lots of European aristocrats fleeing the rich and vulgar who had invaded postwar St. Moritz. Oh yes, and lots of ex-Rosey students—Rosey being the world's most expensive prep school, once upon a time known as the School of Kings, now full of sons and daughters of Russian billionaire gangsters and Arab billionaire camel drivers. Our celebrities back then were Bill Buckley, Ken Galbraith, David Niven, Roger Moore, Yehudi Menuhin, Nathan Milstein, and others of their ilk. They've now been replaced by Miss Hilton—a bit like an ape taking over the great Menuhin's fiddle.

As bad luck would have it, it was a Greek who brought la Hilton along, the two of them accompanied by bodyguards and other slobs, arriving just about the time the mind-numbing devastation hit the Indian Ocean. Not that the horror prevented anyone from partying. This is not how the so-called beautiful people operate. What's 150,000 dead and five million homeless when one can make a very public beeline to the bathroom in full view of a packed nightclub, which la Hilton did time and again? (I got this info from friends, as I abstained from partying for a while.)

But I am being unfair. Is it Miss Hilton's fault that the ocean erupted? Was it something she did that caused cities to be demolished, landscapes to be ravished, and hundreds of thousands to die? The answer is obvious. Was she wrong to party while so many were suffering unspeakable pain? The answer to that one is, who am I to judge her? Thousands of years of theological speculation by the wisest of scholars has failed to offer any convincing reason for such an indiscriminate human tragedy. As Boris Johnson wrote, "There is one thing the whole planet wants, and that we cannot supply. We all want someone to blame."

Alas, there is no human factor in the disaster, certainly not the bad taste exhibited by Paris Hilton. Mind you, some will try. By ascribing some fault to human beings, we give God a pass, a psychologically satisfying feeling.

History teaches us that men used to blame other men for natural calamities. The ancient Greeks viewed catastrophes as divine punishment for bad human behavior. Then came the 18th century and the godless intellectuals. Anti-clerical philosophers like Voltaire used the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 to claim there was no God. In this they were successful. The secular rot and the French Revolution both incubated in the Lisbon disaster that killed 50,000 people. One could safely claim that that earthquake helped change European culture. If only it were that simple.

If God does not exist, we have no duties or obligations whatsoever, except to ourselves. In a godless world, there is no such thing as altruism of any kind,

only moral anarchy. Yet because God does exist in all of us, we have a choice. We can choose to do what is right rather than what is wrong. The reason the whole civilized world is helping is that all of us, Christians, Jews, Muslims, and Buddhists, have been conditioned by our belief in God not to look the other way. Because of our great dependence on science, we assume that humanity should have the means to deal with any catastrophe. But God shows us that isn't necessarily so. God is not a great ringmaster in the sky who decides who lives or who dies. God has nothing to do with tectonic plates moving suddenly. He shares our joys and sorrows, and when events like the tsunami challenge our Christian faith, it actually deepens our belief in Him. This is why Jesus suffered the fate He did: to prove to us once and for all not to be content with a lazy faith. When things are going well, we are all happy believers in God. The moment something goes wrong, we challenge His existence.

If one reads history, one knows that those Christians who did the most for the present world were those who thought most of the next—the Apostles, the English evangelicals who abolished the slave trade, even the men who split the atom. Nonbelievers who repudiate the idea of God corrode our culture and detach us from a profound understanding of life and its meaning.

When King Xerxes had his minions whip the sea after he failed to bridge the Hellespont, he was admitting the existence of God. His power was beyond the scope of kings.

Poor Paris Hilton. She appears to value nothing except publicity, to think of nothing beyond momentary pleasure. But God is within her as sure as he is in all of us. ■

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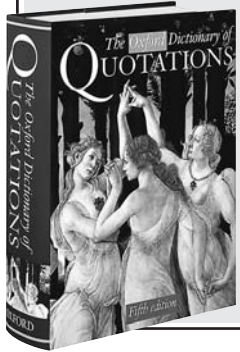
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