

## The Lisbon Earthquake of 1755

*The great earthquake of All Saint's Day 1755 reduced one of the richest and most opulent cities of the epoch to ashes and provoked an extraordinary philosophical debate about optimism, God, and natural phenomena.<sup>1</sup>*

Humans have a long history of attempts to interpret unexplainable events. While explanations for some occurrences could be found, other events such as large natural disasters had no satisfactory explanation. People today usually turn to research science and advanced technology to investigate the cause of these natural occurrences. However, even as little as a few hundred years ago, educated people did not possess the information or tools necessary to determine what brought about natural disasters. Consequently, ordinary people were forced to turn away from science and toward other "answers" for these occurrences.

The earthquake of 1755 in Lisbon, Portugal, is an interesting case study of the interaction between many different schools of thought regarding the cause of natural disasters. The man who was essentially the dictator of Portugal, the Marques de Pombal (Figure 1) believed that the earthquake was a natural occurrence. However, religious orders, such as the Society of Jesuits, believed that the earthquake was a result of God's wrath on the people of Lisbon for their sins. Philosophers looked at the earthquake in an entirely different light, however. Voltaire and Rousseau centered an entire debate around the cause of the earthquake that ultimately questioned optimism, the popular philosophy of the time that "all is good."

On November 1<sup>st</sup>, 1755, between nine and ten in the morning an earthquake shook Lisbon. The first set of quakes lasted, according to the research done by Thomas Kendrick, for ten minutes (Kendrick 24). However, his research was based on primary sources of the event, and it is most likely that the people who experienced the earthquake did not have an accurate reference of time for the quake. In fact, different researchers have quoted many different numbers of shocks and their duration. Kendrick believed that there were three distant shocks in the ten minute interval. The first, in essence, was a warning signal that was followed by a pause. The second shock was the most severe, as it was responsible for most of the physical damage. A third shock followed that was also quite damaging. After this initial group of three earthquakes, several aftershocks followed throughout the day. While they were not a significant contributor to the physical destruction of Lisbon, they were a key element in damaging the psyche of the city's inhabitants. Between the earthquake and the fires and tsunami that followed (which were probably more damaging than the actual earthquake) approximately 10,000-15,000 people died. The population of Lisbon in 1755 was approximately 275,000 (Kendrick 34). (Figure 2 and 3)

Destruction this monumental could have had the potential to cripple a city for decades to come. However, Lisbon was rebuilt rather quickly, due in part to Pombal. While Portugal during the eighteenth century was a monarchy, Pombal was essentially the dictator of Portugal during the reign of King Jose, from five years before the earthquake to 1777. Pombal was a very practical ruler, whose philosophy about ruling can be summed up with the following statement in response to King Jose's distress about

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<sup>1</sup> Maxwell, 21.

what must be done in the aftermath of the earthquake: "bury the dead and feed the living" (Boxer 732). Pombal's attitude would be referred to in modern times as "no nonsense." This sentiment is one of the many reasons that put him at odds with the Jesuits. Pombal's response was similar to many other rulers throughout history who wanted society to find nature, not the wrath of God, at fault for the earthquake. Such examples extend back to ancient Ninevah in 2000 BCE, the Greeks, and Herod in 31 BCE (class lectures).

Similar to many countries in Europe during the time period, Portugal was very religious. The Jesuits had a very large presence in Portugal, and Pombal was not happy with the influence that their organization had on the Portuguese government. For Pombal, the actions of the Jesuits in the aftermath of the earthquake was the final straw. November first was All Saints Day, and the fact that the earthquake happened in the morning while people were at church, and that thirty-five of the forty churches in Lisbon were destroyed, led many to question the cause of the earthquake (Maxwell 24). Pombal only wanted to attribute the earthquake to natural causes. However, the Jesuits did not agree with him. They believed that the earthquakes were a sign that God was not pleased with the actions of Lisboners, and that consequently they were being punished for their sins.

In the following weeks, Pombal did all that he could to undermine the preaching of the Jesuits. The Jesuit's response to the earthquake was not the only reason that Pombal disliked them. In the Portuguese colony of Brazil, the Jesuits were opposed to the Portuguese policy of promoting Amerindian assimilation into European culture, as well as other economic and territorial treaties Portugal had made with Spain and England (Maxwell 71-2). As a result of all of these factors, Pombal made life in Portugal extremely difficult for the Jesuits. An incident with an Italian Jesuit living in Portugal named Gabriel Malagrida is a perfect example. Malagrida made an extraordinary effort to preach to the Portuguese about how their many sins brought about the punishment of the earthquake. By this point Pombal wanted Lisboners to focus their time, energy, effort, and money on rebuilding (and in the process reforming) Portugal, rather than spending all of their time repenting for their sins. Malagrida only made matters worse by publishing his sermons in a pamphlet entitled *Juzio da verdadeira causa do terremoto* (*An opinion on the true case of the earthquake*). He was eventually banished to Setubal, but it did not scare him from preaching his beliefs. (Kendrick 90-1). Pombal solved this problem by convincing King Jose that the Malagrida and other Jesuits were behind the plot to assassinate him in September 1758. Their supposed assassination attempt (there was an actual attempt, although it is unlikely that Malagrida or the Jesuits were directly involved) that almost succeeded. When the Jesuits were exiled in 1759 Malagrida did not have the fortune of joining them. Rather, Pombal had him publicly executed as a heretic in January 1761. The execution was quite brutal and gruesome, and sent a very clear message to others about Pombal's tolerance of religious zealots (Boxer 736).

Pombal had many other problems with the Jesuits. He believed that they were constantly undermining his authority. He attempted to have the Pope suppress them, but that did not work either. Eventually Pombal decided to banish the Jesuits to the Papal States. The Papal States were chosen, as opposed to the more traditional Angola, because Pombal wanted to have the Pope live with the Jesuits on a daily bases, in an attempt to get the Pope to suppress the Order. By this point Pombal's goal was to see an end to the organization. On September 3, 1759, a Royal Edict was issued that ordered the expulsion

of the Jesuits (Cheke 139). The expulsion of the Jesuits initially created a hole in Portuguese society as many educational institutions were left unmanned. However, this was desired by Pombal, as it gave him the power to rebuild the educational institution. This, combined with other factors, finally allowed Pombal to secularize Portugal and remove the power of the church. While this move was initially unpopular in Europe, other leaders who wanted to make changes used Portugal's model to rid their governments of religious influence. As Maxwell writes, "The Portuguese were the first to begin a movement which would bring about the expulsion of the Jesuits from all of Catholic Europe..." (84). Thus it appears that Pombal used the earthquake as a catalyst for promoting reforms (although they were *his* reforms) and setting a precedent for other countries to follow.

The battle over the cause of the Lisbon Earthquake was not just restricted to those living Portugal. The debate also interested philosophers. Shortly after the earthquake, Voltaire wrote a poem entitled *Poeme sur le desastre de Lisbonne* which was a turning point about his philosophy about good and evil in the world. (Figure 4). Until Voltaire wrote this poem, his philosophy, and the philosophy of others in the time period was that "all was good." This notion was simply that everything happens for the best. However, the destruction caused by the earthquake led Voltaire to believe that all was not well in the world. He began to question the "comfortable notion of a watchmaker God" that led the world work smoothly, and essentially stopped being an optimist (Goldberg 4). If the earthquake that caused such suffering and damage could have been prevented, then the world could never be "comfortable" again, because evil must exist. One line from the poem especially emphasizes this point, as he writes, "Lisbon has been destroyed and they are dancing in Paris"(Goldberg 5). If things happen because they must (all is for the best) then humans actions in response to the earthquake have no true meaning, since they were supposed to happen. Additionally, if all things were meant for the best, then no sympathy should be felt toward Lisboners (Goldberg 4). Voltaire was aware that his poem was very dramatic, and made an effort to edit to the poem to the point where he was "inclined to think that respectable folk will share my view" (Kendrick 126). He did not want to be known as a pessimist.

Despite Voltaire's attempt not to be viewed as a pessimist, Rousseau disagreed with his change in philosophy and wrote a response that defended the "all is well" theory. (Figure 5). Rousseau believed that that Voltaire concentrated too much on misery. In one letter to Voltaire he wrote that, "You appear to think that you can soothe me greatly by proving to me that all is evil" (Goldberg 11) Rousseau thought that the earthquake just happened, and that the damage and destruction was not due to an evil force of God. After all, "it wasn't Nature that collected twenty thousand houses on the site.. . if the inhabitants of this big city had been more equally dispersed and more lightly housed, the damage would have been much less" (Goldberg 12) People were a source of evil in the world and therefore the cause of physical destruction. While this initially agrees with Voltaire, Rousseau believed still maintained the "all is well" philosophy. Earthquakes are bound to happen in places, and therefore their destruction is peoples fault for building a city on top of them, not an unmerciful god (Kendrick 129-30) People could live a comfortable life because their actions, not the actions of an unmerciful god, brought about consequences.

While Pombal would probably not want to be associated with either philosopher, his beliefs centered more around Rousseau, as he believed earthquake resulted from natural occurrences, as opposed to evil. In fact, he would most likely agree with Immanuel Kant, whose philosophy is often left untouched in this debate. He argued that while the "subterranean fire" that leads to earthquakes is harmful, they also were the source of hot springs, baths, minerals, and the heat that warms the world and makes life livable (Kendrick 132). In this regard, for Pombal, the earthquake contributed to his rise of power, his ability to carry out the reforms he wanted in Portugal, and the events that led to the expulsion of the Jesuits.

So what one can gather from the fate of the Jesuits in Portugal is that there is never one event in history that can be labeled as *the* event that brought about a chain reaction. However it is possible to view one event, such as the earthquake, as a catalyst of change. The grip of the church on various countries was weakening as people became more enlightened about the differentiation between religion and science. Pombal was on his way to making drastic changes in Portugal that were designed to end the influence of the church on the operations of the secular government. However it was the rise of Pombal and the decline of the Jesuits, combined with the catastrophic earthquake, that ultimately caused Portugal to be the first European country to undermine the role of religion in government. This, in turn, set a precedent for other nations to follow.

As this class and field trip has shown, this was not the first time in history that an earthquake has led to radical changes in political/social/economic structure. With the teamwork of geologists, archaeologists, and historians, it may be possible to get a much clearer idea of the role that nature has played on the development of society. The model that an earthquake or the maneuvering of certain nations was *the* cause for an event cannot be the method used to uncover the past. Rather, all of these schools of thought must be combined to fill in the gaps of time. Only then will we truly understand our past, and have any idea how to predict the outcome of events in the future.

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**Figure 4****An excerpt from Voltaire's Poem: "The Lisbon Disaster"**

Oh, miserable mortals! Oh wretched earth!  
 Oh, dreadful assembly of all mankind!  
 Eternal sermon of useless sufferings!  
 Deluded philosophers who cry, "All is well,"  
 Hasten, contemplate these frightful ruins,  
 This wreck, these shreds, these wretched ashes of the dead;  
 These women and children heaped on one another,  
 These scattered members under broken marble;

One-hundred thousand unfortunates devoured by the earth  
 Who, bleeding, lacerated, and still alive,  
 Buried under their roofs without aid in their anguish,  
 End their sad days!  
 In answer to the half-formed cries of their dying voices,  
 At the frightful sight of their smoking ashes,  
 Will you say: "This is result of eternal laws  
 Directing the acts of a free and good God!"  
 Will you say, in seeing this mass of victims:  
 "God is revenged, their death is the price for their crimes?"  
 What crime, what error did these children,  
 Crushed and bloody on their mothers' breasts, commit?  
 Did Lisbon, which is no more, have more vices  
 Than London and Paris immersed in their pleasures?  
 Lisbon is destroyed, and they dance in Paris!  
 ("*Readings for the Enlightenment*")

**Figure 5****An excerpt from Rousseau's letter regarding the poem on the Lisbon earthquake written on August 18, 1756**

All my complaints are . . . against your poem on the Lisbon disaster, because I expected from it evidence more worthy of the humanity which apparently inspired you to write it. You reproach Alexander Pope and Leibnitz with belittling our misfortunes by affirming that all is well, but you so burden the list of our miseries that you further disparage our condition. Instead of the consolations that I expected, you only vex me. It might be said that you fear that I don't feel my unhappiness enough, and that you are trying to soothe me by proving that all is bad.

Do not be mistaken, Monsieur, it happens that everything is contrary to what you propose. This optimism which you find so cruel consoles me still in the same woes that you force on me as unbearable. Pope's poem alleviates my difficulties and inclines me to patience; yours makes my afflictions worse, prompts me to grumble, and, leading me beyond a shattered hope, reduces me to despair....

"Have patience, man," Pope and Leibnitz tell me, "your woes are a necessary effect of your nature and of the constitution of the universe. The eternal and beneficent Being who governs the universe wished to protect you. Of all the possible plans, he chose that combining the minimum evil and the maximum good. If it is necessary to say the same thing more bluntly, God has done no better for mankind because (He) can do no better."

Now what does your poem tell me? "Suffer forever unfortunate one. If a God created you, He is doubtlessly all powerful and could have prevented all your woes. Don't ever hope that your woes will end, because you would never know why you exist, if it is not to suffer and die...."

I do not see how one can search for the source of moral evil anywhere but in man.... Moreover ... the majority of our physical misfortunes are also our work. Without leaving your Lisbon subject, concede, for example, that it was hardly nature that there brought together twenty-thousand houses of six or seven stories. If the residents of this large city had been more evenly dispersed and less densely housed, the losses would have been fewer or perhaps none at all. Everyone would have fled at the first shock. But many obstinately remained . . . to expose themselves to additional earth tremors because what they would have had to leave behind was worth more than what they could carry away. How many unfortunates perished in this disaster through the desire to fetch their clothing, papers, or money? . . .

There are often events that afflict us . . . that lose a lot of their horror when we examine them closely. I learned in *Zadig*, and nature daily confirms my lesson, that a rapid death is not always a true misfortune, and that it can sometimes be considered a relative blessing. Of the many persons crushed under Lisbon's ruins, some without doubt escaped greater misfortunes, and . . . it is not certain that a single one of these unfortunates suffered more than if, in the normal course of events, he had awaited [a more normal] death to overtake him after long agonies. Was death [in the ruins] a sadder end than that of a dying person overburdened with useless treatments, whose notary and heirs do not allow him a respite, whom the doctors kill in his own bed at their leisure, and whom the barbarous priests artfully try to make relish death? For me, I see everywhere that the misfortunes nature imposes upon us are less cruel than those which we add to them....

I cannot prevent myself, Monsieur, from noting . . . a strange contrast between you and me as regards the subject of this letter. Satiated with glory . . . you live free in the midst of affluence. Certain of your immortality, you peacefully philosophize on the nature of the soul, and, if your body or heart suffer, you have Tronchin as doctor and friend. You however find only evil on earth. And I, an obscure and poor man tormented with an incurable illness, meditate with pleasure in my seclusion and find that all is well. What is the source of this apparent contradiction? You explained it yourself: you revel but I hope, and hope beautifies everything.

. . . I have suffered too much in this life not to look forward to another. No metaphysical subtleties cause me to doubt a time of immortality for the soul and a beneficent

providence. I sense it, I believe it, I wish it, I hope for it, I will uphold it until my last gasp....

I am, with respect, Monsieur,  
Jean-Jacques Rousseau

*("Readings for the Enlightenment")*