

Religion Today
October 7-13, 2001

Were the Terror Attacks on New York and Washington Evil?

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The terrorist attacks in New York, Washington, D.C., and Pennsylvania are among those defining moments in the personal life and psyche of everyone affected. The media emphasize the historical aspect: everyone will remember where we were and what we were doing when we first heard the news--just as members of earlier generations recall where they were when they heard about the bombing of Pearl Harbor or the shooting of President Kennedy. But for each of us there will also be an ethical aspect, for the destruction will affect our understanding of evil, and with it our view of human morality and interaction. It may take longer to sink in, but it will affect many of us much more profoundly.

Let me ask a simple question, was the destruction of the planes, the buildings and all the people they contained an evil act? Yes, it was terrible, horrifying, despicable, appalling, and many other things, but was it evil? When I asked my students this question, they immediately redefined it. Evil to whom? they asked. Evil to us? Absolutely! Evil to the perpetrators? Probably not.

This approach to the question of evil is called relativism; it is the idea that different societies and social groups have different systems of morality. This is empirically correct. Anyone who spends time in different countries or with members of different religions will discover, amidst the shared moral beliefs and practices, key differences, whether about marriage, theft, responsibility for one's fellow human beings, social hierarchies, murder and so on.

The point is that relativism makes morality dependent upon groups of humans. Christian

morality is found among Christians, for example, Jewish morality among Jews, and Hindu morality among Hindus. The groups can also be identified in national terms: American morality and Russian morality, Israeli morality and Palestinian morality. In time of conflict, this approach leads to an "us versus them" mentality: "what we do is good, what they do is evil."

So what is the alternative? Ethicists term it absolutism. This is the idea that there are absolute standards of good and evil that apply to all situations and all human beings everywhere, rules that transcend national, religious and ethnic boundaries. They do not change from culture to culture, religion to religion, or nation to nation. They may not be recognized by everyone or by every country or religious tradition, but they apply nonetheless.

Absolute moral standards must have a foundation, a base upon which they can stand. This foundation must include all human beings and not be limited to just a few societies. There are, in general terms, three possible foundations, which can be used by themselves or combined in different ways.

A first possible basis is our common human nature. This approach plays an important role in international law, especially with regard to agreements such as the International Human Rights Treaty.

A second possible basis could be characterized as the environment. The physical character of nature, whether local, global or cosmic, imposes certain restrictions upon human activity. Destroy too much farm land and not enough food can be grown, for example, or release too many toxic fumes into the air and

people will not be able to breathe. The practices of recycling our waste, putting limits on car emissions, and so on, are forms of response to this absolute foundation of morality.

A third possible foundation for an absolute morality that transcends humanity is that of one or more divine beings. These beings establish codes of moral behavior for their followers. This often happens through prophets, such as Moses for Judaism and Mohammed for Islam. But it can also come directly from divine beings, such as Jesus for Christianity and Krishna for Hinduism.

So, were the terrorist attacks evil in an absolute sense? Did they violate our common humanity, the natural world, or the transcendent truth of a divine being? The answer each of us gives to that question reveals much about ourselves. It provides the basis upon which each of us can respond to this catastrophe, incorporate it into our understanding, and move on toward improving our world.

Flesher is director of UW's Religious Studies program. More information about the program can be found on the Web at www.uwyo.edu/relstds/index.htm.

UW PROFESSOR CO-AUTHOR OF CAMPUS RELIGION BOOK

Oct. 3, 2001 -- The practice and study of religion is thriving on college campuses nationwide, according to a new book co-written by Amanda Porterfield, professor of religious studies at the University of Wyoming.

"Religion On Campus," published by the University of North Carolina Press, was written by Porterfield, Conrad Cherry, Indiana University distinguished professor of religious studies, and Betty DeBerg, professor and head of the Department of Philosophy and Religion at the University of Northern Iowa.

The authors sat in on classes, talked with student leaders, participated in worship ceremonies, and observed student-led prayer and Bible-study groups at four different college campuses. The project provided first-hand knowledge about the lives of today's college students.

The authors suggest that the current campus atmosphere of religious diversity, tolerance and choice accounts for the vitality of religion at America's colleges and universities. They acknowledge that such diversity creates its own conflicts and tensions, and that differences in religious perspectives exist among faculty and students.

Porterfield, who joined the Religious Studies Program in 1999, received UW's College of Arts and Sciences Outstanding Research Award in 2001. The author of five previous books, she serves as president of the American Society of Church History. Her current research focuses on healing in the history of Christianity.