

Religion Today
July 6-12, 2003
Who is the Enemy?
Paul V.M. Flesher

Have you ever wondered how countries define who is the enemy and how that enemy poses a threat? What about the role religion plays in describing the "bad guys?"

The United States' recent war in Iraq provides an intriguing insight into these questions. President George Bush, perhaps the most actively pro-Christian president the past 50 years, identified the enemy in secular terms. It was Saddam Hussein and his regime, not the Iraqi people. The enemy was a bad government, but Hussein, an avowed secularist if there ever was one, described his enemy in religious terms.

The United States and its allies were infidels, unbelievers, being led by satanic powers to attack a Muslim nation. His enemy was a bad religion, and although Hussein himself may not have believed his propaganda, many Iraqis and other Muslims did because it made sense in their understanding of the world and God's role in it.

What accounts for this difference in how the two nations defined their opponents? A first guess might be that of Christianity vs. Islam. Christians do not define their opponents in religious terms, but a moment's consideration indicates that this cannot be the case because Christians have often pursued religious wars. For example, think of the Crusades, the wars of the Reformation and even the English Civil War. In all of these, the Christian protagonists identified the enemy as members of a religion.

The explanation lies not in the religion themselves, but in the character of the civil culture in which the religions reside. In the United States and many other western countries, we have developed a civil society that is largely secular. Its formation began in the

Enlightenment, that important intellectual movement of the 17th and 18th centuries which made human reason, rather than divine revelation, the dominant arbiter of society and of intellectual investigation. It was enshrined in our founding documents when they stated that the goal of humanity was "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," rather than the practice of religion.