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The Question of Faith

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Is religion the cause of the horrific events that have engulfed our nation, or is it the solution?

Following last week's terrorist attacks, there was an immediate inclination to blame what happened on "fanatical Islam" -- even when we know nothing about the hijackers' religious commitments. Only true believers filled with hope that God would reward them with immediate entry into paradise could be inspired to destroy their own lives and those of so many others.

Yet if many Americans saw this tragedy as rooted in a perverse religious impulse, our own response was religious as well. We poured into churches, synagogues and mosques to ask God's consolation and help. President Bush's most inspiring address of the terrible week was not a speech but a sermon.

"God's signs are not always the ones we look for," the president said at the National Cathedral on Friday. "We learn in tragedy that his purposes are not always our own."

Are we talking about different gods or different illusions? We can begin by dispensing with the obvious: Every government and every political cause will invoke the divine whenever doing so is convenient. This, you might say, is not God's fault but our own. To assume that religious opportunism invalidates faith is the same as assuming that political opportunism invalidates democracy, or that cheaters invalidate all market transactions.

As so many have rightly pointed out -- Mayor Rudy Giuliani of New York has been particularly powerful about this -- it is also wrong to assume that loyalty to the Muslim faith automatically ties someone to terrorism.

In her book "God Has Ninety-Nine Names," the journalist Judith Miller quotes Hassan Alfi, Egypt's interior minister in the 1990s, on the subject of terrorism in his own country. The public, Alfi said, should be "made aware that the killers who conduct violence against officials and innocent tourists are not Muslims; they do not practice any religion. There is nothing in the Koran that justifies such murder. These men are using Islam as a cover for their political goals."

This statement is interesting in at least two ways. First, Alfi is entirely right that the use of Islam for political purposes by some should not discredit the faith of all believers. Those of us who are Christian or Jewish would readily acknowledge that our own faiths have also been used in political ways. Yet Alfi's statement is *itself* political: The Egyptian government has every interest in discrediting the religious claims of its enemies.

If faith is reduced to its uses and misuses, a profound skepticism is inevitable. But does this discredit faith?

I posed the question to Monsignor Martin Geraghty, the pastor of St. Francis de Sales Church in Rockaway, Queens, a church I attend when I visit my wife's family. Father Geraghty will be conducting four funerals this week for victims of the attack on the World Trade Center. He fears he will preside over more in a parish that includes a lot of firefighters.

When I asked him if religious commitment can lead to fanatical and irrational acts, he replied candidly: "It does happen. It has happened. It's not what faith and religious commitment and an understanding of God in the world is all about. But the relationship between religion and psychology is too close. We can end up with fanatics. What do we say about fanaticism in anything? It's even been known to happen in sports once in a while."

The conundrum, he says, is that "religion is so close to life that it's always there. It's close to the life of people and groups and the power of nations and nation states. But it isn't the midwife of violence."

Religious faith cannot be supported just because it brings comfort in moments of anguish. Neither can it be discredited by the horrid acts committed in its name. Faith is suspect when God is harnessed to immediate human ends and identified entirely with a personal, political or national cause. Faith is brought down by a pridefulness that expresses an unwavering conviction that our own desires and interests coincide perfectly with those of the divine.

Faith is more credible when it stands as a challenge, when it insists on aspirations beyond those of our own political movements, communities or nations. The prayers of this faith do not express certainty that God is on our side, only the hope that this might prove to be true.

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