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Terrorism through the Eyes of Faith

by Dennis Hollinger, Ph.D.

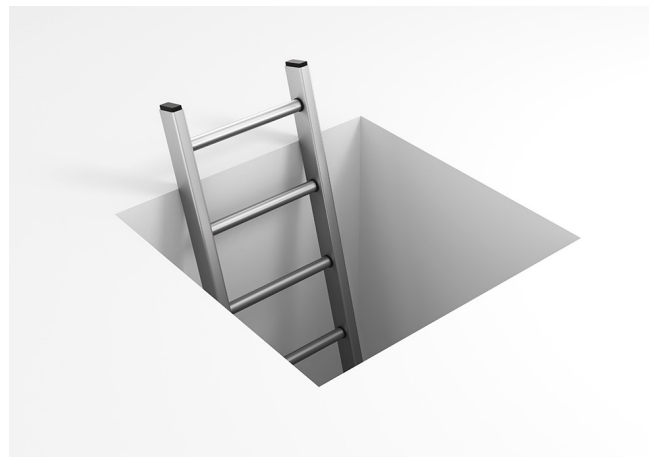
President, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary

Editor's Note: This article, originally published in the Winter 2001 issue of Knowing & Doing, was written in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States. In the article, Dennis Hollinger addressed how we should understand and respond to the new threat of terrorism through the eyes of faith. Now, nearly 15 years later, we continue to live under a threat of terrorism in the United States and abroad. We decided to republish this article, slightly edited, because, while the context may be slightly different today, Hollinger's article provides excellent guidance in understanding, from a Christian perspective, the ongoing problem of terrorism.

The events of September 11, 2001, have produced a broad array of conflicting emotions within all of us. We have struggled to know how to think, feel, and respond to the attacks. Of course as followers of Christ, it should not have come as a total surprise, for we know the world is not the way it's supposed to be. The words of C.S. Lewis at the outbreak of World War II are applicable to our own situation: "War [attack] creates no absolutely new situation; it simply aggravates the permanent human situation so that we can no longer ignore it. Human life has always been lived on the edge of a precipice ... We are mistaken when we compare war with 'normal life.' Life has never been normal."¹

But, despite a worldview that predisposes us to understand such evil, we are still left reeling within ourselves.

As we think about our responses to the new threat of terrorism, it is helpful to recall that our emotions and cognitive processes are ultimately good gifts of God to help us navigate our way in the face of danger, evil and uncertainty within the world. But of course there's a problem. We are fallen creatures, and thus our emotions and cognitive responses aren't as God intended. While they are still fundamentally good gifts of God, they are twisted, distorted, and miss the mark of their original intention. As those redeemed by God's grace in Jesus Christ, we need to allow our emotions and thinking to be transformed. Thus terrorism through the eyes of faith needs a clear understanding of our natural emotions and thinking, in contrast to the redeemed perspective.



Righteous Indignation, Not Unbridled Anger

Likely one of our first responses to the terrorist acts was anger. Whenever we are attacked physically or psychologically, resentment and belligerence arise within us. Anger is a good gift, for it enables us to deal emotionally with violations, injustices, and evil that threaten our life and integrity. But anger is also fallen, and so it easily turns to unbridled anger that comes to control us. In its fallen state unbridled anger tends to build a history that won't let go and thus perpetuates disgust, disrespect, and eventually violence, as the blood boils within us. As Horace, the Roman poet, put it, "Anger is a short madness."

It's because of the brutal impact of anger upon both the victim and the offender that the Bible has wise direction, "Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger" (Eph. 4:26, ESV). Our natural unbridled anger needs to be transformed into righteous indignation, a holy wrath with strong feelings directed toward the evil, sin, and injustice perpetrated. Righteous indignation moves us beyond the uncontrollable outrage directed against individuals to a more principled anger focusing on the evil done. Such redeemed anger is perhaps akin to God's own holy wrath, "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the ungodliness and wickedness of the people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness" (Rom. 1:18, NIV). Such anger arises from God's holiness, for sin and evil are direct contradictions to God's own nature and actions.

If we are not angered by the events of September 11, we likely have little sense of either goodness or evil. But if we live in unbridled anger, we may succumb to the very evil that outrages us in the first place. Thus righteous indignation, not unbridled anger.

Hope, Not Fear

September 11 was fear. And, as we hear more of the potential terrorist strategies, fear proliferates. After all, what is terrorism but the attempt to overthrow or control others by engendering intense fear or terror in the hearts and minds of a given people? Fear is a natural emotion and one of God's good gifts to us. It's an emotion of distress in response to impending danger, pain, or evil, and it enables us to become aware of and respond to these realities.

But fear has great dangers—most visibly its sinister ability to immobilize and cause paralysis of action. It prevents us from performing responsibilities and engaging new opportunities in life. So fear needs to be redeemed. We might think that the antidote to fear is courage, since it is one of the classical cardinal virtues. But the biblical response to fear is hope. Courage tends to reside within our own natural proclivities and self-discipline, while hope is supernatural in its source and nature. Our hope in perilous times is not ultimately in nation, military power, or our own ability to cope; our hope is in a God who is ultimately in control. Christians have hope because we believe that in the midst of terror and evil God is nonetheless there, turning human desecration into good, for "we know that in all things God is working for the good of those who love him and who are called according to his purposes" (Rom. 8:28). There is hope because there is One beyond the finite, sinful realities of this world, and it is that ultimate hope that motivates and sustains us in a troubled, dangerous world.

If we look at the world from a natural lens, there is reason to fear. But when we look at the world through a supernatural lens, there is hope, for

*The Lord is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear?
The Lord is the stronghold of my life—of whom shall I be afraid? . . .
Though an army besiege me, my heart will not fear;
though war break out against me, even then will I be confident. (Ps. 27:1, 3 NIV)*

Thus hope, not fear.

Justice, Not Revenge

After anger and fear, terrorism tends to breed an emotional response of revenge. This is a natural retort wanting to hit back, get even, and take out vengeance on the evil doers. Revenge has roots in our created being, for it is the innate desire to make right the wrong.

But, as fallen creatures, in us that deep impulse becomes twisted, excessive, and misguided. Revenge wants to strike back without principle or limitation on the basis of emotional outrage. Since September 11, we've heard the language of revenge, as people pour out contempt toward Muslims, Arabs, and people of Middle Eastern descent. Even Arab Christians in this country have had to fear for their lives.

But in place of revenge, we need justice. Life in a fallen world calls for justice, even as believers are called to a spirit of forgiveness that ultimately seeks restoration. A voice for justice in a world that seeks unrestrained vengeance is a voice for fairness, not just emotional outrage. Justice seeks to limit our passions and feelings and to respond from principle not internal sentiments. It is never in personal hands but develops mechanisms to effect it. Justice is not arbitrary but is supported by evidence. It has often been symbolized by the blindfold on "lady justice" to ensure that justice, not revenge, is our response to evil.

Without justice, revenge builds a history of injustice, perpetuates more acts of violence, and the spiral begins—generation after generation—a reality we know all too well throughout the world. The ultimate goal of justice is restoration and peace, for "the effect of righteousness will be peace" (Isa. 32:17, ESV). Thus justice, not revenge.



Mortality, Not Invincibility

Until September 11 we thought that as a nation we were invincible. Thus one of our first responses was "How can this happen to us?" We are accustomed to thinking of ourselves as in control; since the Industrial Revolution the Western modern world has mastered nature, natural resources, reproduction, the human genome, life, death, and much in between. As moderns, we have assumed that we could solve all problems, set things right, and determine good outcomes according to desired ends.

Then came September 11. Amazingly, the terrorists used our own instruments of control, our technology, back against us. With a handful of people and a few hundred thousand dollars, the terrorists were able to do what no other nation or army on Earth could do. And now we have come to realize that we are not invincible.

If there is anything we learn from the attacks on our nation, it is our own mortality. That is the biblical perspective, for God is Creator; we are creatures. God is infinite; we are finite. God is eternal; we are temporal. As C.S. Lewis noted, events such as war or terror in the past made death real to humans,

for they thought it good for us to be always aware of our mortality. I am inclined to think they were right. All the animal life in us, all schemes of happiness that centered in this world, were always doomed to a final frustration. In ordinary times only a wise man can realize it. Now the stupidest of us knows... If we had foolish un-Christian hopes about human culture, they are now shattered. If we thought we were building up a heaven on earth, if we looked for something that would turn the present world from a place of pilgrimage into a permanent city satisfying the soul of man, we are disillusioned, and not a moment too soon.²

A sense of mortality in the face of terrorism leads us to humility, not triumphalism; to realism, not utopianism. It evokes wisdom, not arrogance. It is in mortality that we seek dependence upon God and find salvation in Christ. Thus mortality, not invincibility.

Global, Not Parochial

By nature we seek to preserve ourselves, our own group, and our own nation. Particularly in time of crisis, when our very existence is threatened, we turn to that which is safe and familiar. Our natural proclivities are in one sense

good, for the familiar eases our discord. Thus our natural response to September 11 was to be parochial, and to think of ourselves. And certainly we can with good warrant argue that moral responsibility always begins at home.

But as we know too well, parochialism (the restriction of concerns to the narrow and limited—to those like me) leads to prejudice, ethnocentrism, and racism. Parochialism is able to see only “my group” and “my nation” as the center of reality and the bearer of good. All else is deemed to be evil.

In contrast, God calls us to be global Christians. Global Christians know that while national, racial, and ethnic identities are important, they are not the defining marks of a Christian. They are always to be secondary to both our humanness and our identity as members of the universal church, the body of Christ. As world Christians, we recognize that we have brothers and sisters in Christ in almost every nation and tribe. We must never look out just for us. Being a global Christian reminds us that we must be concerned for terrorist threats not only on our own turf, but all over the world—some of which have threatened for years. Global faith always keeps Christ’s Great Commission central, recognizing that some national responses can have dire consequences upon our attempts to invite men and women across the globe to experience God’s grace in Jesus Christ.

The more we know of terrorism, the more we realize that it is a world issue, not just an American issue. Parochialism will cut us off from this reality and from the responsibilities we share in our world. It will blind us to the work that God is doing around the world. Thus global, not parochial.

Mystery, Not Certainty

In the aftermath of September 11, many have yearned for certainty regarding God’s actions on that day. Where was God, and what was God up to? It’s only natural to seek certainty in the divine realm, for it brings consolation in the face of threat and evil in our world. As a result, some believers have felt the need to make pronouncements regarding God’s involvement in this terrorist act; with certitude they assert judgment, causality, or other kinds of divine action.

There are many things about God’s actions and character that we know with confidence. For example, we know that God is personal, triune, and simultaneously transcendent and immanent. We know that He is a God of mercy who wants to redeem us and who has taken the initiative to reveal Himself to us in the written Word, the Bible, and the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ.

But there are some things about divine actions that we just do not know, and this is especially true of the ways of God in human history—His judgments, actions, and permissions within the world. As Isaiah the prophet put it, “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isa. 55:9 ESV). Thus we need to affirm some degree of divine mystery that we will never fully comprehend and capture within the limits of finitude. Three such mysteries are pertinent for our times.

First, there is mystery regarding human suffering and evil. If God is good and all powerful, then why are there terrorist acts within the world? All humans have wrestled in some fashion with that question, and a whole book of the Bible is devoted to it—Job. Interestingly, in the biblical drama, after all of Job’s loss, suffering, and anguish from his “friends,” he never gets an answer to his question. God never answers the philosophical, theological, or practical life questions surrounding suffering and evil. What Job receives is a new vision of God: “I had heard of you . . . but now my eye sees you” (Job 42:5 ESV). The reality of evil, suffering, and terrorism in our world cannot be attributed to God, but clearly God has the power to intervene. Thus the whys and wherefores of God’s action in the face of the evil of September 11 remain a mystery.

Second, there is mystery in God’s judgments in history. Some were, of course, quite certain that the terrorist acts were divine judgment against America and thought they knew the reason for them. It is quite clear that God’s judgment comes in history; it is less clear how it comes. For one thing, the judgment of God is always at work against human sin and injustice, as there are continual reverberations from actions and character that fly in the face of God. And likely the list of why God is judging us is more extensive and closer to home than we think. Moreover, it is hard for us to comprehend what is clear in the biblical story: that judgment and redemption are sometimes mingled in ways that defy human imagination.

Third, there is mystery to God’s work of redemption in the midst of evil situations. God’s ways of awakening, of vindicating justice and righteousness, and of drawing humans to Himself are always beyond our limited percep-

tions. If redemption were limited to our preconceived notions of how God can or must work, such redemption would hardly be worth the time.

A sense of mystery in our understanding of and relationship to God is significant for deep spirituality. After all, would we really want to entrust our lives to one whom we'd figured out? We would be trusting in the finite. Would we really seek to glorify one we fully understood?

G.K. Chesterton, with great insight, once wrote:

*We are perhaps permitted tragedy as a sort of merciful comedy: because the frantic energy of divine things would knock us down like a drunken farce. We can take our own tears more lightly than we could take the tremendous levities of the angels. So we sit perhaps in a starry chamber of silence, while the laughter of the heavens is too loud for us to hear.*³

And so, as we seek to understand God's presence and ways on September 11, 2001, we see mystery, not certitude. But in that mystery we find the hope of the world that binds our wounds, evokes our trust, ensures our freedom, and guides our paths for a journey in a very precarious world. ■■

If we thought we were building up a heaven on earth, if we looked for something that would turn the present world from a place of pilgrimage into a permanent city satisfying the soul of man, we are disillusioned, and not a moment too soon.

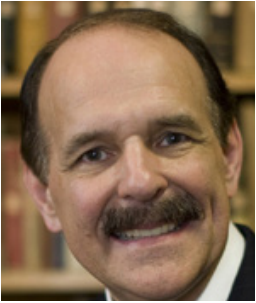
C.S. Lewis

Notes

¹ C.S. Lewis, "Learning in War-Time," in *The Weight of Glory* (1949; repr., New York: Simon & Schuster, 1980), 42–43.

² *Ibid.*, 51–52.

³ G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (West Valley City, UT: Waking Lion Press, 1908), 160.

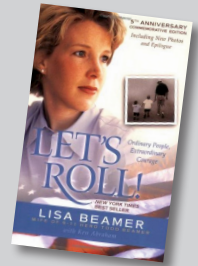


Dennis Hollinger is President and the Colman M. Mockler Distinguished Professor of Christian Ethics at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in South Hamilton, MA. He has served in a number of administrative, pastoral and seminary teaching ministries, and has been an adjunct or visiting professor at several seminaries internationally. Dennis is also a visiting professor of Christian Ethics at Trinity International University in Bioethics, and a Distinguished Fellow with the Center for Bioethics and Human Dignity in Bannockburn, IL. He is a frequent speaker in churches, pastors' conferences, seminaries, colleges and academic forums. Dennis is the author of four books and nearly seventy articles. He received a B.A. from Elizabethtown College, the M.Div. from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, the M.Phil. and a Ph.D. from Drew University, and did post-doctoral studies at Oxford University. He and his wife, Mary Ann, live in Beverly, MA, and have two adult daughters and three grandchildren.

RECOMMENDED READING

Lisa Beamer and Ken Abraham, *Let's Roll: Ordinary People, Extraordinary Courage* (Living Books online publishing, 2006)

Lisa Beamer, wife of September 11 hero Todd Beamer, reveals what really happened on the ill-fated United Flight 93, and shares poignant glimpses of a genuine American hero.



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