

Religious leaders react to death of bin Laden

by [Kevin Eckstrom](#) and RNS reporters in the [May 31, 2011](#) issue

After President Obama announced that al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden had been shot dead in Pakistan, ebullient crowds gathered outside the White House and at Ground Zero to cheer the demise of the world's most wanted terrorist, smoking cigars and breaking into chest-thumping chants of "USA! USA!"

Watching from her home in suburban Virginia, Christian ethicist Diana Butler Bass felt a growing sense of unease. "What if we responded in reverent prayer and quiet introspection instead of patriotic frenzy?" she posted on Facebook. "That would be truly American exceptionalism."

At the Vatican too, where church leaders had just wrapped up celebrations elevating the late Pope John Paul II to one step below sainthood, officials urged caution. "A Christian never rejoices" in the death of any man, no matter how evil, Vatican spokesman Federico Lombardi said, but instead "reflects on the serious responsibility of each and every one of us has before God and before man."

For many Americans, bin Laden's death on May 1 was quite literally an answer to prayer. Muslims who saw bin Laden as an apostate breathed a quiet sigh of relief. Ethicists and pastors searched for the appropriate space between vindication and vengeance.

"As Christians, we believe that there can be no celebrating, no dancing in the streets, no joy, in relation to the death of Osama bin Laden," Christian ethicist David Gushee said. "In obedience to scripture, there can be no rejoicing when our enemies fall." Indeed, the Hebrew prophet

Ezekiel warned that our enemies are not necessarily God's, who takes "no pleasure in the death of wicked people," preferring only that they "turn from their wicked ways so they can live."

For many, what set bin Laden apart was his defiance, unrepentant violence and coldly calculating designs to rain destruction upon Americans, innocent civilians and even fellow Muslims. "While vengeance is not a responsibility of us mortals, the pursuit of justice is," said a statement from Agudath Israel, an Orthodox umbrella group. "As believing Jews, we see in bin Laden's demise the clear hand of God."

"It is a sad truth that one man's death can represent a step forward in the progress of human relations," said Zainab Al-Suwaij, president of the Washington-based American Islamic Congress.

For many people, bin Laden's guilt or innocence never needed to be adjudicated in a court of law, and an American bullet to his head was judgment enough. Scholars cautioned, however, that there's a difference between judging a man's actions and judging his soul.

John Langan, a Jesuit professor of Christian ethics at Georgetown University, said killing bin Laden to prevent future attacks is morally valid, but cautioned that vengeance is ultimately a divine, not human, right. "I knew people who died in 9/11," Langan said. "I feel deeply the evil of that action. But I am part of a religious tradition that says that we don't make final, independent judgments about the souls of other men. That rests with God."

Which all leads back to Americans' response to the death of a madman. "You have to have compassion, even for your enemies," said A. Rashied Omar, a research scholar at the University of Notre Dame's Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies. "The Qur'an teaches that you never should allow enmity to swerve you away from compassion, because without compassion, the pursuit of justice risks becoming a

cycle of revenge."

Others said there is a difference between rejoicing in bin Laden's death and finding a certain degree of satisfaction—a "subtle but important difference," said Jay Emerson Johnson, an Episcopal priest who teaches at the Pacific School of Religion. "I'm not sorry bin Laden is dead," Johnson posted on Twitter. "That's not the same thing as celebrating his death."

And that, perhaps, is where Americans will live in the coming weeks, caught in the gray space between satisfaction and celebration, glad that bin Laden is finally gone but not wanting to dance on anyone's grave.

"Without apology, we all sleep better in our beds knowing that Osama bin Laden is no longer a threat," said R. Albert Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. "But celebration in the streets is something that falls short of the sobriety that I think Christians should have in our hearts in reflecting on this event."

—RNS