

What does God intend? In an unimaginable crisis: In an unimaginable crisis

From the Editors in the [September 26, 2001](#) issue

We want a word from God. When, before our eyes, hijacked airplanes crash into buildings, and the towers of the World Trade Center plunge to the ground snuffing out thousands of lives, when evil suddenly and irrevocably transcends the limits of what we have assumed is possible, we desperately seek to know what God intends for us.

We know where not to listen for a divine word. Not in the places where a twisted version of Islam proclaims that it is a holy duty for Muslims to kill Americans and their allies whenever and wherever possible. Official Islamic spokesmen around the world have rejected such views as an offense against the teachings of the Qur'an.

Nor is it to be found in Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson's declaration that the terror came because of God's displeasure with the "secularists" among us. It is they "who helped this happen," Falwell said with the full support of Robertson. After defending their remarks unambiguously, Falwell and Robertson eventually said they regretted the timing of the statement.

Nor is the divine word to be found in the calls for vengeance, retaliation and war that have emanated from the U.S. capital, accompanied by the strains of "God Bless America." In the days following the attacks, the line was often crossed between petitioning God in a time of need and enlisting God in an increasingly bellicose national cause. President Bush, for example, inserted an implicit declaration of war in the midst of the service dedicated to prayer and remembrance in the National Cathedral. Martial rhetoric seeking religious legitimation at a time of crisis is understandable, but nevertheless deeply regrettable.

Rather than conforming their minds, hearts and wills to God's purposes, humans are adept at manipulating the name of God to serve their own agendas. Some do so with

diabolical purpose; for most, it's simply hard not to assume that God sees things as we do.

What is a genuine word from God in our distress and outrage? With pastors and congregations across the country, we turn to scripture to listen and hear—to try to understand what God requires of us in the events that overwhelm us. We turn especially to the self-identification of God found in the Book of Jeremiah: “I am the Lord, I exercise steadfast love, justice and integrity on earth—these are what please me.”

We are angry beyond words, and justifiably so. Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr remarked that “the proper attitude toward evil is anger.” But we must avoid what Niebuhr saw as anger's two temptations, hatred and vengeance, and instead allow love, justice and integrity to shape our response to evil.

Love we have already seen in abundance in the sacrifice of rescuers, in the generosity of citizens who have given blood and material assistance, and in the work of religious leaders who have sought to comfort those who mourn, shelter the weak and frightened, and show solidarity with Americans of Middle East and Asian descent who have become the targets of anger-driven hate in this country. The work of Christians who have persisted over the years in ecumenical and interreligious work, often in the face of dismissive ridicule, has proven its value in the aftermath of the bombings.

As for justice and integrity: justice demands that the perpetrators of the atrocities in New York, Pennsylvania and Washington be brought to account for their appalling crimes. Moreover, the September 11 attacks vividly showed what many have warned of for some time: terrorism's reach is broad, its resources deep and its intentions barbarously lethal. All nations that would count themselves among the civilized must act multilaterally to rid the globe of what is an unmistakably common threat. Integrity, however, requires the U.S. and its allies to act in a manner that honors the lives and goods of those who are innocent. Accomplishing both goals will be difficult indeed.

The U.S. is in an extremely precarious position. It seeks to check and apprehend a loosely organized network of radical groups that have gained popular support within Islamic countries. (Though official Islam repudiates terrorism, many ordinary Muslims in the Middle East and Asia have lionized terrorist leaders.) Just locating

these persons will be enormously difficult—more difficult than finding the secret agents who for years worked undetected in the very heart of the U.S.'s security apparatus. And any application of military force that can be interpreted even remotely as an attack on Islam will likely lead to a dangerous destabilization in many Muslim countries and feed the terrorist bodies that would attack the U.S.

An answer to this dilemma may lie in pursuing the broader requirements of justice. The hatred of the U.S. which is common in some Islamic countries, and which makes heroes out of terrorists, has a long and complex history. The kind of free society that Americans celebrate tends to be frowned on by the portion of the Islamic world that has not anathematized it. Can there be two more different societies than the Taliban's prohibitionist Afghanistan and the culturally laissez-faire U.S.? It's hard to see how progress can be made on this point. Yet toleration was a value in Islamic societies before it took hold in the Enlightenment West.

Animosity toward the U.S. also has its source in what is perceived as U.S. indifference to aspirations to self-rule within the Muslim world, an indifference connected to a self-indulgent appetite for oil, as well as to the U.S.'s lopsided support of Israel over Palestinians in that ongoing conflict.

In this web of pain, folly, hatred and terror that enmeshes the U.S. and much of the Islamic world, a constructive action that is most in keeping with God's requirements of justice, and one that coincides with the interests of the U.S., is to move forcefully and rapidly to forge a peace settlement between Israel and the Palestinians that will secure Palestinian statehood. The timing may be more propitious than many believe. The two sides have already agreed to a de facto cessation of hostilities, and with the right inducements might be eager to talk peace with renewed seriousness.

The creation of a viable Palestinian state won't end U.S. troubles with radical Islam, but it would significantly counter popular support for terror networks, and would represent a decisive defeat for extremists on all sides.

At a time when emotions are inflamed, the U.S. must be patient in its pursuit of the criminals who attacked New York and Washington, and prudent in its efforts to end the scourge of terrorism. In working to bring criminals to justice, the U.S. must also work to create the conditions in which that justice can be achieved.