

Faith and doubt at Ground Zero: Interfaith conversation

by [Carol Zaleski](#) in the [December 18, 2002](#) issue

On the morning of All Saints Day 1755, while the faithful citizens of Lisbon were attending mass, the city of 250,000 was crushed by a catastrophic earthquake, fire and flood. Voltaire, who wrote a poem about the earthquake (“Poème sur le Désastre de Lisbonne”), saw in its ruins the shattering of Leibniz’s theory that we live in the “best of all possible worlds” and the collapse of Alexander Pope’s cosmic optimism. No conception of providential design or prearranged harmony could be squared with such wanton horror. It was the defining experience for the Enlightenment’s religion of reason.

On September 11, 2001, 3,000 citizens of all faiths were crushed under the crystalline twin towers against a clear blue heaven by religious votaries of death claiming heaven as their prerogative and reward. As Voltaire said of the Lisbon earthquake, it made us realize anew that an omni-tolerant religious optimism does not suffice; for truly there is evil in the world.

September 11 is our Lisbon earthquake; the intellectual strife of Voltaire and Rousseau, Jesuits and Jansenists, Deists and Pietists suddenly seems relevant again as we realize how clumsy we are when it comes to justifying God’s ways to man, discerning the saint from the fanatic or explaining the reasons for our hope.

These three questions—the crisis of theodicy, the need for discernment, and the endurance of faith in the face of 9/11—are the subject of a PBS Frontline documentary, *Faith and Doubt at Ground Zero*, produced by Helen Whitney. It aired originally on September 3, 2002, but is now being sold on videotape, and transcripts are available at the PBS Web site. To the accompaniment of Samuel Barber’s “Adagio for Strings” and Schubert’s “Quintet in C major,” the film orchestrates a profound conversation about God, faith and evil; this is “American civil religion” at its best.

Whitney and her collaborators preinterviewed 350 people, then selected a much smaller group for the final filming. Among the survivors interviewed are loan officer Stanley Prainmath, who was trapped in his office with an airplane wing stuck in the doorway, but managed to break through the wall with his bare fist; and Brian Clark, who pulled Stanley to safety (“We introduced ourselves. He said, “Oh! Hallelujah! I’m Stanley!” And I said, “My name’s Brian. We might be friends for life!”). Both see the hand of God in their deliverance, yet cannot fathom why so many were left behind. Among the mourners, some say they feel betrayed by God while others hold fast to their faith, whether out of devout resignation or a Job-like sense of awe. A Bangladesh-born Muslim woman declares, “I cannot protest to Allah or ask why he took my daughter. It is all his will.” A Catholic retired firefighter from Rockaway, who lost his son as well as many friends and neighbors, affirms that “[God] had nothing to do with this. There were a lot more people that could have been killed. He was fighting the evil that day, like he does every day.” Among firefighters, he points out, fire is called the devil; “That day we fought the devil, and we saved a lot of people . . . But the devil’s the devil.”

A sense of the reality of evil characterizes many of the conversations with scholars and religious intellectuals as well. UCLA professor of Islamic law Khaled Abou El-Fadl, a devout Muslim thinker in the Mutazila tradition, contends that demons do exist, though they cannot act without our permission. Iraqi dissident Kanan Makiya, an atheist, senses an almost metaphysical power of evil at work in acts of suicide terrorism and in Saddam’s “republic of fear.” Jungian theologian Ann Ulanov and literary critic Andrew Delbanco both affirm that evil is a mysterious force that defies explanation by politics, psychology or sociology. Monsignor Lorenzo Alabacete, whose Christian humanism subtly colors the whole film, sees in the terrorist acts of 9/11 an expression of sheer “hatred of humanity” and “antirelationship.” That this evil was fostered by religion does not surprise him:

From the first moment I looked into that horror on Sept. 11, into that fireball, into that explosion of horror, I knew it. . . I recognized an old companion. I recognized religion. . . The same passion that motivates religious people to do great things is the same one that that day brought all that destruction.

Having recognized that religious absolutism has the power to unleash dehumanizing horrors, we may be tempted to make religion safe by dampening passionate conviction and renouncing exclusive claims. For the sake of a religion of tolerance,

we may be tempted to renounce petitionary and intercessory prayer, belief in miracles, doctrines of divine election and other scandalously particularistic ideas. A few of those interviewed in the film propose that we do just that: keep praying, but give up on the idea of a God “out there” who answers prayers. Yet this experiment in religious rationalism has already been tried and failed; it failed to settle the matter of the Lisbon earthquake, and fails again to offer any but the coldest comfort to the survivors and mourners of September 11. For Christians, the way forward is to see Christ crucified on the cross-shaped steel beam discovered by rescue workers at Ground Zero, and to affirm that he is risen indeed; to pray for the living and the dead; and, with our Muslim and Jewish neighbors, to continue the conversation begun by *Faith and Doubt at Ground Zero*.