

A Christian Student of Islam Responds to the Sept. 11 Attacks

The events of Sept. 11 have left the nation stunned, and horrified. We all can empathize with Mayor Giuliani when he said, "I can't believe they would do this to our city!" The events have also left us with many questions. Following is a brief response to a couple of the most obvious questions most of us are asking.

1) Do acts like those perpetrated on Sept. 11 find any justification in Muslim theology?

This is an important question, and one which would probably be answered in different ways by different muslim groups and leaders. First, there is no question that there are passages in the Qur'an and in the Hadith (sayings traditionally attributed to Muhammad) which endorse the concept of "jihad." I am not going to quote them here. But any reader can look up the following references in the Koran (2:244; 3:195; 4:95; 9:5; 47:4), or passages in the Hadith collected by Al-Bukhari. It is no secret that the early spread of Islam was due in great measure to the carrying out of these injunctions by muslim forces. And today, extremist groups within the muslim world appeal to such passages as justification for their violent actions.

Jihad basically means "struggle" or "exertion," and refers to efforts aimed at defending or advancing the cause of Islam in the world. Many muslims consider jihad to be a sixth basic obligation, in addition to the traditional five pillars of Islam. Jihad, however, is not limited to the popular concept of "holy war." One muslim writer describes four types of jihad: that waged by the heart (the individual muslim's

internal spiritual and moral struggle against evil, often called the “greater jihad”), that waged by the tongue (speaking in behalf of Islam), by the hand (setting forth a good example for Islam), and by the sword (armed conflict with the enemies of Islam, the “lesser jihad”). (See the book entitled *Jihad: A Commitment to Universal Peace*, by Michael A. Boisard, p. 24.)

It must be noted, however, that the Koran itself places some limits on the practice of jihad: “Fight in the cause of Allah those who fight you, but do not transgress limits; for Allah loveth not transgressors And fight them on until there is no more tumult or oppression, and there prevail justice and faith in Allah; but if they cease, let there be no hostility except to those who practice oppression” (2:190-193). Theoretically, then, “holy war” must be seen as justified by the “oppression” and “injustice” of the “enemies of Islam.” While many, perhaps most, muslims may condemn the actions carried out on Sept. 11, the extremists who do not can be expected to justify them on the grounds that in their eyes they were retribution for “injustice and oppression” against Islam.

2) What should our response be, as Christians, to these events?

This is not an easy or simple matter, for as Christians we find ourselves to be citizens of two kingdoms—one temporal and political, and the other spiritual and eternal. We must keep this in mind, as we prayerfully shape our response. Here are one Christian’s thoughts.

First, we must pray. Pray for the more moderate leaders in the muslim world. Pray that they will see the folly of endorsing these acts of terror. Pray that their voice will be heard, and that they will find the courage to distance themselves from the extremist groups. We must pray also for those who are committed to violence, that God will frustrate their plans.

“There is no wisdom, no insight, no plan, that can succeed against the Lord” (Prov. 21:30).

We must pray for the leaders of our country, and of other countries that join with us (I Tim. 2:1-3). God has entrusted to government the responsibility of rewarding righteousness and punishing evil, and this includes the right to “bear the sword” or use military power in defense against evil (Rom. 13:1-5). We must pray for wisdom and courage on the part of our leaders, and that any military response will be shaped by the principles of the “just war” theory that has guided Christian thought since the time of St. Augustine. Any response must be “proportionate” and aimed at crippling the aggressor’s ability to wage war, not at inflicting needless suffering on the innocent. As Christian citizens we should not only be prepared to pray for and support our government’s response, but if called upon to serve in her defense.

Second, as Christian disciples, we must individually and personally turn to God at this time of great need. We must follow the example of the psalmist who said, “When I am afraid, I will trust in you. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I will not be afraid. What can mortal man do to me?” (Ps. 56:3-4) It is only human to experience fear at a time such as this. But we must bring our fears to God, and rest on his almighty arm. Remember God’s great and precious promises: “So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand” (Isa. 41:10)! We must draw near to God in personal repentance and faith, turning away from trust in any false “gods,” for He alone is “our refuge and strength,” our “ever-present help in trouble” (Ps. 46:1). We must be alert as well to opportunities to help others who are in search of a spiritual anchor in times of crisis. We can help by listening to people’s concerns, by offering to pray for them or help in some practical way. We should not pretend that we are unaffected by

the events that are unfolding; but we can let it be known that we are finding hope and peace as we lean on our faithful God.

As followers of Christ, we must remember that at the level of our personal attitude and of our personal relationships, we are called not to hate but to love our enemies (Luke 6:27-28), not to return evil for evil, but to overcome evil with good (Rom. 12:17, 21). Many will allow these awful events to justify their own hatred and bigotry. We must not. While supporting the righteous actions of our government and of our military, we can at the same time ask God to lead us in showing love toward those in our personal circle of influence, whom others may be tempted to hate.

May God be gracious to us in protecting our land and our people. May He give wisdom and courage to our leaders, and to people of good will in every country. May He frustrate the plans of those who would spread terror. As He did in the days of Joseph, may He take that which is meant for evil and use it for good. May his goodness, justice, and faithfulness be magnified in all his works, and in us as his people. Amen.

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