

COLUMNISTS

Religion provides base for fundamentalism

In the attempt to sort out the meaning and consequences of the terrorist raids on Sept. 11, one topic remained always at the center of the mix, namely, the role of religion as a motivating factor.

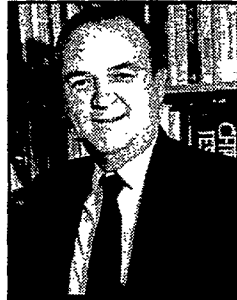
Some have tried valiantly to forestall the temptation to blame Islam itself for these horrific events. We were regularly assured, by Christian and Muslim commentators alike, that the fundamentalist terrorists totally mis-read and mis-used the Koran and that their murderous actions were in no sense approved, much less encouraged, by Islam itself.

A leading expert on fundamentalism, Martin Marty, emeritus professor of church history at the University of Chicago, made that very point in *The New York Times Magazine* (10/30/01): "I cannot say it emphatically enough: this is not Islam. This takes Islamic texts — it takes elements in its tradition — and skews them."

In the same paper, a respected Islamic scholar at Harvard suggested that there is no more of a connection between the terrorists' religious fanaticism and Islam than there is between IRA extremists and Roman Catholicism.

Almost exactly one month after the attacks, however, a more critical interpretation began to emerge in the press.

Mark Lilla, professor of social thought



essays in theology

BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

at the University of Chicago, argued in *The New York Times* (10/7/01) that fundamentalisms do not spring up through a process of spontaneous generation. However extreme they might be in relation to the parent religion's mainstream, the two are on the same continuum.

Thus, the Catholic Church cannot be considered completely blameless for the often violent anti-Semitic behavior that many church members inflicted on European Jews in the Middle Ages and at the time of the Holocaust. Indeed, popes themselves were at times directly involved.

"It is all very well for Catholics today to insist that their faith, properly interpreted, does not condone anti-Semitism," Professor Lilla wrote. "But that does not get us closer to understanding how millions of Catholics over a millennium

could have thought that it did."

Judaism, too, must bear some responsibility for the attitudes and behavior of the more radical branches of the Israeli settlers movement, "which is fired by the ... belief that reclaiming the land will hasten the coming of the Messiah."

"That Islamic fundamentalism and its militant offshoots appeal to the Koran is therefore not an incidental matter," Lilla continued. "It means that they have found a way to breed in the religious space opened up by the revelation Islam presupposes."

Recent efforts to promote tolerance and understanding toward Islam may be well-intentioned, "but they mark an abdication of intellectual responsibility among Muslims and non-Muslims alike." Serious, critical reflection "must begin with the uncomfortable fact that in religion, as in nature, there is no such thing as spontaneous generation."

Andrew Sullivan's piece in *The New York Times Magazine*, "This Is a Religious War" (10/7/01), made a similar point: Osama bin Laden's form of Islam is not restricted to bin Laden alone.

"Most interpreters of the Koran find no arguments in it for the murder of innocents," he continued. "But it would be naive to ignore in Islam a deep thread of

intolerance toward unbelievers, especially if those unbelievers are believed to be a threat to the Islamic world."

Sullivan, a Catholic, cited the Crusades, the Inquisition and the bloody religious wars of the 16th and 17th centuries. "It seems almost as if there is something inherent in religious monotheism that lends itself to this kind of terrorist temptation," he wrote. "And our bland attempts to ignore this — to speak of this violence as if it did not have religious roots — is some kind of denial."

Sullivan calls the struggle, just beginning, an epic one. "What is at stake is yet another battle against a religion that is succumbing to the temptation Jesus refused in the desert — to rule by force."

One reason the United States poses such a menacing threat to the Islamists is the success of our constitutional arrangement. In spite of complete separation of religion from the state and the official toleration of every kind of religious belief (and unbelief), this remains one of the world's most religious and internally peaceful nations. According to the Islamists, that should not be the case.

Here again, reality trumps ideology.

Father McBrien is a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame.

Deeds, not words, testify to a changed life

31st Sunday of the Year (November 4): (R3) Luke 19:1-10; (R1) Wisdom 11:22-12:2; (R2) 2 Thessalonians 1:11-2:2.

There are three stages in the story of Zacchaeus who had reached the top of his profession as a tax collector.

First, Zacchaeus was wealthy, but he was not happy. He was lonely, for he had chosen a way of life that made him an outcast. Well-informed as Zacchaeus was, he had heard of Jesus and his kindness to tax collectors and sinners. Despised and hated by his fellow citizens, Zacchaeus was reaching out to the love of God. The goods of this world had left him unhappy.

Secondly, Zacchaeus was determined to see Jesus. To mingle with the crowd was a courageous thing for Zacchaeus to do. We can well imagine how many a man welcomed the opportunity to kick, push and prevent this head tax collector from seeing Jesus. Zacchaeus was very short and the crowd took ill delight in making sure he could not see Jesus.

But Zacchaeus was a clever man. He ran ahead of the crowd and climbed a sycamore tree along Jesus' route. The sycamore is a very easy tree to climb with its short trunk and wide lateral branch-



a word for sunday

BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

es forking out in all directions. Things were not easy for Zacchaeus but the little man had courage and was desperate to see Jesus.

Thirdly, Zacchaeus took steps to show all the community that he was a changed man after meeting Jesus. When Jesus announced he would stay at his house that day and when Zacchaeus discovered he had found a new friend in Jesus, Zacchaeus immediately made a decision. He decided to give half of his goods to the poor. The other half he didn't intend to keep for himself but to make restitution for the frauds of which he had been guilty. And in doing this, he was determined to go beyond the Law by making fourfold restitution. By his deeds, Zacchaeus showed he was a changed man.

Once at a church meeting, several women gave testimony. One woman, asked to testify, refused. "Four of these women who have just given their testimony owe me money, and I and my family are half-starved because we cannot buy food." A testimony is utterly worthless unless it is backed by deeds which guarantee its sincerity. It is not a mere change of words which Jesus demands, but a change of life.

The story of Zacchaeus ends with the wonderful words: "The Son of Man has come to search out and save what was lost." The lost here does not mean the damned or doomed. A man is lost when he has wandered away from God; and he is found when once again he takes his rightful place as an obedient child in the household and the family of his Father.

Just by his presence, Jesus inspired Zacchaeus to do what is right. Zacchaeus eagerly announced that he would not only right any wrongs he had committed, but also intended to provide for the poor. Jesus declared that Zacchaeus, was saved.

Do we reach out to sinners or do we try to avoid them? Do we seek them out lovingly, as Jesus did, without compromising our ideals? Jesus did not simply

tolerate the "scum" of society, he eagerly embraced them. In so doing he won them to God and goodness. We, too, can overcome evil by good, by loving the unlovable and reaching out to them.

Father Shamon is administrator of St. Isaac Jogues Chapel, Fleming.

Daily Readings

Monday, November 5

Romans 11:29-36; Psalms 69:30-31, 33-34; Luke 14:12-14

Tuesday, November 6

Romans 12:5-16A; Psalms 131:1-3; Luke 14:15-24

Wednesday, November 7

Romans 13:8-10; Psalms 112:1-2, 4-5, 9; Luke 14:25-33

Thursday, November 8

Romans 14:7-12; Psalms 27:1, 4, 13-14; Luke 15:1-10

Friday, November 9

Ezekiel 47:1-2, 8-9, 12; Psalms 84:3-6, 8, 11; 1 Corinthians 3:9C-11, 16-17; John 2:13-22

Saturday, November 10

Romans 16:3-9, 16, 22-27; Psalms 145:2-5, 10-11; Luke 16:9-15

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Kids' Chronicle

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1. Genesis, 2. Joshua,

3. Ruth, 4. Isaiah,

5. John, 6. Job,

7. Revelation