

JUST FAITH AND ACTION:
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WASHINGTON OFFICE ON AFRICA

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*Doing justice in the face of evil:
Reflections after the World Trade Center*

Evil was done last week. The death and massive destruction mark a tragedy that has caused suffering and pain far beyond the confines of New York and Washington. My heart goes out to all who have been touched directly by this act of violence, and to all of us, here in the United States and around the world, who grieve the losses – the loss of human life, and more – that this violence created.

But to say that evil triumphed is to ignore other images of the past week, of compassion, generosity, bravery and courage. My heart goes out too to those who have found the strength to celebrate the human spirit and to affirm hope, by action, and by that pervasive feeling that we are bonded to one another in support and care.

Both of these emotions – of grieving and, yes, of celebration of the human spirit in the face of evil and crisis and grief – our world faiths well understand. What we have seen this past week profoundly captures God's revelation about the human experience of good and evil, and God's sustaining love for us as we struggle with living out humanity's journey.

The experience of last week confronts us with a grave challenge as we seek to live, and respond, faithfully, and I want to reflect upon two aspects of that challenge that have repeatedly spoken to me in these recent days. The first has to do with evil. The second has to do with unity in the face of evil.



To say that evil was done last week is true. To explain the evil by saying that it was done by evil people is simplistic and ultimately unhelpful. To take the next step, by saying that since "they" are evil, we are righteous, is similarly unproductive and, ultimately, wrong. The issue here is not accountability; those who undertook to cause such harm and pain to so many are rightly to be held responsible for their actions. Nor is the intent to transfer responsibility to the victims, to us; it is not the fault of the United States that the terrorists did what they did. I strongly affirm these shared understandings about accountability and responsibility. But I know, too, that in times of crisis and, especially, in times of anger, alternative voices – including those from faith communities – are often condemned on the grounds that we are saying just that.

Evil is most often done, I believe, by people whose own circumstances, or whose causes they care about deeply, have left them with a sense of alienation and despair, where remedies seem hopeless and non-existent, where those with the power to bring change seem to be unbearing and hostile. This does not justify terrorism. What it does mean is that if we convince ourselves that it is sufficient for us to attack "evil people," then whatever success we have with that narrow agenda, we will not have moved toward addressing the context of alienation and hopelessness in the world, a context that promises more terrorism in the future.

We are not innocent. Yes, I will say again that we are not to blame for the tragedy of last week. Terrorists did that, and terrorists alone are responsible. My point is that there is a context in which both good and evil happen in our world, and when we react to last week by wondering why anyone would want to attack us, or by claiming that we were attacked because we stand for

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freedom and democracy, we are naively isolating ourselves from the realities of much of the rest of the world, and from the impact – sometimes good, sometimes evil – that our national policies and actions have upon the rest of the world.

We have been, and are, a nation of wonderful generosity and compassion. We have shown openness to those who sought, and seek, new opportunities. We have offered a vision of freedom that has inspired many throughout the world. But we have also, in the name of national self-interest, undermined legitimate governments and bolstered up corrupt dictators. We look the other way when our allies oppress people, pour billions into their government coffers without hesitation, dismiss the cries of oppression, then lash out at the oppressed when they react in anger. We undermine international efforts to confront environmental disaster, racism and intolerance, small arms that sustain so many regional conflicts, and nuclear holocaust. In the name of “free” trade we seek to impose our economic policies upon the Global South, then restrict access of their most competitive products into our markets. Even this week, almost alone, we are fighting in Geneva to protect the interests of pharmaceutical companies against the cry for affordable AIDS medicines for Africa, where some 6,000 African men, women and children die every day from AIDS-related causes – a number likely to reach 13,000 deaths per day by 2010. As for development aid – funds that help to address the struggles of a world where nearly a fourth of the world’s population live on less than a dollar a day, and another one billion people on less than two dollars per day – we have become the least generous donor nation in the world.

If we are to find peace – a peace that is more than the absence of war and violence and terrorism, but a peace that provides us with a sense of security and confidence and hope – then we need first to do justice. This is an old saying, but our leadership has rarely given it priority. It deserves priority now, for it offers a future far more promising than one secured by the elimination of “evil people.”



There has been much talk, in recent days, about unity in the face of evil. If we are speaking of a sense of being community together, unified both in our grief and in our compassion, then our talk about unity is well-justified. But here too we need to be cautious.

The press has repeatedly reported on a new bipartisan spirit in Congress, and an end to “bickering” and “petty partisanship.” I readily acknowledge that bickering and pettiness often characterize congressional debate. And yet, partisanship is not in itself evil. It reflects a reality that people hold strikingly differing visions of the place of our nation in the world. It reflects a reality that there are genuine, often major, differences about where our priorities lie. To suggest that we should set aside these differences – that we should accede to an expensive and dubious missile defense shield, or to environmental destruction in the interest of domestic oil, or to another tax cut for the wealthiest 2%, or that we should set aside our financial commitments to confront the global AIDS pandemic or development aid or debt reduction in the interest of military spending – is an unjust response to the call for unity. These are matters of grave substance, not petty bickering, and if we value democracy and the possibilities for thoughtful debate that democracy provides, then in sensitive and humane ways, these debates must continue.

We should not, then, yield to the suggestion that debates over vision and priorities undermine our unity. They are debates that celebrate our unity. To be united, to be true community together, we need to stand behind our government in a time of crisis, yes, but our standing is not a mindless act. It is instead a prayerful act that our government will seek to do justice, and it is a prophetic act when it does not. Times of crisis are dangerous times for both liberty and justice. If at this time we seek true unity, I believe it will be found when we show solidarity with our leadership, solidarity expressed through encouragement and caring, and expressed too by holding them accountable to our visions of what is right and just for our nation as it lives out its powerful place in our world.

*Yours faithfully,
Leon Spencer*

(This series is published bi-monthly, and issue no. 5 was due in October. Given the events of last week, however, we decided to prepare this reflection now. The next issue will return to our schedule and appear in December.)