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If September 11 Was a Message, Then What Did It Mean?

Our thinking about September 11 now must begin where it did that day—with the enormous loss of individual human lives. We must never lose sight of them, these human beings created in God's image, each having immeasurable worth. Nearly three thousand people were killed that day, at the World Trade Center, at the Pentagon and in that field in Pennsylvania.¹ For weeks, the *New York Times* ran profiles of the dead, describing their individual careers, families and personalities. Millions of Americans grieved with their loved ones, and mourning is certainly the first and fundamental response to September 11.

Some say that our thinking about September 11 should stop here, that we should not attempt to find meaning, that enormous calamities like the Holocaust and September 11—the list could be expanded—render obscene any notion that history has a meaning.² Let the victims' suffering stand alone. A search for meaning trivializes their suffering. This view unintentionally grants to Hitler, Osama bin Laden and Mohammed Atta the power to render history meaningless. It cannot undo the damage, bring back a single victim or grant more honor to a single victim. In fact, the press was full of thoughts about September 11, very few political or social perspectives were silent on it, and a Christian assessment of all these comments is not out of order. We must go beyond these pragmatic, realist reasons for rejecting the call to silence. It is erroneous. Scripture teaches that God directs the course of events so as to give meaning to history, however difficult it often is for us to discern that meaning. No terrorist or tyrant

¹According to one website (www.september11victims.com), there were 2,996 deaths as of August 8, 2004: 24 persons were reported dead, 24 were reported missing, and the remaining 2,948 were confirmed dead.

²William Stacy Johnson expresses a version of this view in "Probing the 'Meaning' of September 11, 2001," *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 23, no. 1 (new series: 2002): 41.





can render history meaningless by committing so great a criminal, abhorrent act that the course of events henceforth is so tainted by it as to lose all possibility of meaning.

A Brief Sampling of Opinions Expressed in Mass-Circulation Magazines

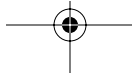
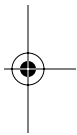
Writing in *Newsweek* days after the disaster, columnist Anna Quindlen focused on one family of victims, the Hansons of Massachusetts. "Anything can happen when human beings allow ideology to trump their humanity, when they elevate an idea above the lives of individuals." Nineteen hijackers committed their evil act of sending "those planes like fiery torpedoes into public buildings" because they were willing "to see themselves, as well as their passengers, as merely incidental cargo in the service of some heinous greater good."³ True, individuals cannot morally be used as combustible cargo to be rammed into tall buildings. Yet we might balk at the conclusion that no idea whatsoever can be "elevate[d] . . . above the lives of individuals," for that might deny to the Hansons any higher meaning to their lives: nothing to live or die for. That might demean the heroic actions of police and firefighters who raced toward flames and climbed up stairwells that survivors were descending. They elevated duty and a love for the victims above their individual lives. We commend them for it. "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13).

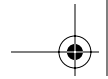
To be fair, we note that Quindlen specified that ideology should not trump individual lives. No impersonal, grandiose, abstract Cause justifies taking innocent life. True enough. Yet exalting the individual leaves one prone to consumerism, apt to sink into the sofa of self-indulgence, if nothing is worth the sacrifice of one's life. A month after the catastrophe, columnist David Brooks critiqued our "individualistic society" and our "building little private paradises for ourselves. We've renovated our kitchens, refurbished our home entertainment systems," but we have "withdr[awn] from public life, often not even bothering to vote."⁴ Observers like Brooks saw September 11 as a chance for Americans "to think like a nation" again, to repeat our ancestors' self-sacrificing courage after Pearl Harbor.

Fareed Zakaria and others argued that September 11 disproved Francis Fukuyama's thesis that the end of a Cold War of rival ideologies signaled the "End of History." Fukuyama claimed that free-market democracy won because this individual-friendly ideology did not "trump" individual humanity but best satisfied individuals' desires for equality, comfort and recognition. No ideology was

³Anna Quindlen, "Imagining the Hanson Family," *Newsweek*, September 24, 2001, p. 96.

⁴David Brooks, "Facing Up to Our Fears," *Newsweek*, October 22, 2001, p. 69.





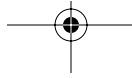
left to compete against it. No more Pearl Harbors would occur. History—the battle of ideologies—had ended. Not so, Zakaria asserted. “This is surely the End of the End of History.” Radical Islam ended history’s end; it did not offer individuals more, but it was angry that Western capitalism did. “It turns out that it takes only one side to restart History.” For his part, Fukuyama insisted that radical Islam could only delay the triumph of democratic capitalism; September 11 only postponed the End of History.⁵

Fukuyama miscast democratic capitalism in the starring role as the Omega point of history, a role belonging to Christ alone. We will examine that issue later. For now, we note that not everyone agrees with his definition of history as a struggle of ideologies. Other commentators defined September 11 as history, a public event coming from the outside to invade the consumer cocoon in which we felt secure and able to ignore foreign affairs. Brooks noted, “A country that has basically ignored foreign affairs since the cold war ended has discovered that foreign affairs has not ignored it.” By 2001, television coverage of foreign news had dropped to one-third of the 1989 coverage. Yet bedrock reality cannot be turned off by the remote or by postmodernists’ talk of socially constructed signifiers. “The planes that plowed into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon were real,” essayist Roger Rosenblatt intoned in *Time*. “The flames, smoke, sirens—real. The chalky landscape, the silence of the streets—real.”⁶

History as reality invaded the United States against our democratic wishes, despite a majority denying that it could happen here. Democracies are not immune to tragic history. They can grant rights to individuals but sometimes cannot defend individuals. In *Casey v. Planned Parenthood*, the Supreme Court ruled, “At the heart of liberty is the right to define one’s own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life.” We can define our concept of existence but sometimes cannot defend our very existence. History is bigger than democracy. Yet, as the saying goes, to a hammer every problem is a nail. In a democracy, every problem tends to be seen as a cause and a call for greater citizen involvement in public affairs. But even a 100-percent voter turnout in the 2000 election would have contributed nothing toward preventing September 11. Commentators observed that, after a decade when we focused on the private entrepreneur, the attacks highlighted anew the

⁵Fareed Zakaria, “The End of the End of History,” *Newsweek*, September 24, 2001, p. 70; Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Avon, 1993). For a summary of Fukuyama’s post-September 11 statements, see Stanley Kurtz, “The Future of ‘History,’” *Policy Review* June and July 2002, p. 47.

⁶David Gates, “Living a New Normal,” *Newsweek*, October 8, 2001, p. 59; Brooks, “Facing Up,” p. 67; Roger Rosenblatt, “The Age of Irony Comes to an End,” *Time*, September 24, 2001, p. 79.





indispensable role of government, which alone can screen travelers and baggage, send firefighters into burning buildings, and dispatch F-16s to patrol the skies.⁷ True, and we have no choice but to rely on government, but September 11 dramatically showed its limitations. The world's most powerful government could not protect its own citizens on its own soil.

Deep-seated individualism almost insured that the hopes of political scientist Robert Putnam (*Bowling Alone*) for revived "community involvement" would be dashed. We Americans had the right to define or deny the tragedy as we saw fit. At first, we threw ourselves into the national disaster and its foreign causes. "We are all intelligence officers now," *Time* noted. "Two hundred people showed up for 'Middle East 101' at Christ Community Church in Idaho Falls, Idaho. Books on biological warfare, the Taliban and terrorism are selling out; so is the Koran, and maps of Afghanistan." It did not last. By Thanksgiving 2001, observers noted a renewed retreat into the consumer cocoon; fear of public places and travel increased our "nesting instinct"; we spent more to pad private paradises as refuges from public dangers.⁸

Nesting after the fact did not erase the trauma from television images of people jumping from the Twin Towers. We needed psychologists' advice: fear, unlike grief, does not come in stages; reactions to terrorism vary from person to person; a "daylight, rational part of the brain is full of reassurance, but the deeper, instinctual part is not so sure"; Israelis' use of regular rules to reduce randomness makes sense in combating fear.⁹ Clergy gave reassurances. The archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, imagined God saying to troubled souls, "Don't be afraid, nothing will stop me welcoming you"; "Be afraid only of your own deep longing to control me."¹⁰ The next Sunday, a pastor north of New York gave "a nuanced argument for moving away from rage" only to realize people wanted reassurance, not closely reasoned arguments. "This Sunday," *Time* reported, "he will ask people sitting in the pews to split into small groups of three or four and share with one another small signs of God's goodness."¹¹

Understandable in the days following a catastrophe, these responses will not

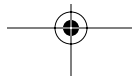
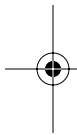
⁷See, for example, Bill Moyers, "This Isn't the Speech I Expected . . .," in *NewYorkSeptember-ElevenTwoThousandOne*, ed. Giorgio Baravalle and Cari Modine (New York: Design Method of Operation, 2001).

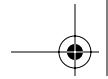
⁸Geoffrey Cowley, "Sowing Seeds of Redemption," *Newsweek*, November 26, 2001, p. 74; *Time*, October 8, 2001, 24; Cathleen McGuigan, "Nesting Instincts," *Newsweek*, November 26, 2001, p. 72.

⁹Brooks, "Facing Up," pp. 67-68.

¹⁰Rowan Williams, "End of War," 28, in *Dissent from the Homeland: Essays After September 11*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas and Frank Lentricchia (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003).

¹¹"A Crisis of Faith," *Time*, October 1, 2001, p. 97.





prove sufficient for the years following it, when we may be ready for and may require more searching answers. Commending President George W. Bush's immediate call for military action against the "evil" of terrorism as necessary, George Will recognized that it was insufficient in the long run: "There will be time enough to reflect on the deeper meanings of September 11, including the resilience, indeed the permanence, of evil."¹² That time has come.

A Brief Survey of Opinion in Leftist, Centrist and Right-Wing Journals

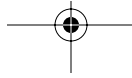
Intellectual, specialized journals often display an elitist disdain for popular culture. Why pay more to subscribe to *The Nation* if *Newsweek* contains all the important ideas? The definite article "the" proclaims a definite sense of superiority. Left-wing journals disdain right-wing ones, and centrist ones may disdain both. All sides tended to think September 11 proved they had been right all along. We sample the debate in a broad spectrum of the intellectual press, where commentators made more hard-hitting arguments and critiqued each other more harshly. Mass-circulation magazines may moderate opinions to maximize sales, and we do not want our search to be thus limited. Our sample starts with the leftists.

An oft-cited, oft-criticized piece dismissive of the government's messages to its popular audience was Susan Sontag's statement in *The New Yorker*. "The disconnect between last Tuesday's monstrous dose of reality and the self-righteous drivel and outright deceptions being peddled by public figures and TV commentators is startling, depressing." Public figures "seem to have joined together in a campaign to infantilize the public" with simplistic kindergarten stories that cowardly bad men had attacked an innocent "free world." No, she insisted, the hijackers might be evil, but they were not cowards. Nor was a U.S. government that bombed Iraqi civilians innocent. Officials substituted "psychotherapy" for policy debates essential to democracy. "Let's by all means grieve together. But let's not be stupid together."¹³

Leftist writers condemned the attack but argued it was a predictable consequence of—almost a judgment for—American misdeeds they had long opposed: the superpower's economic dominance overseas, its support for Israel's oppression of the Palestinians, its sanctions that hurt Iraqi civilians, its funding of bin Laden and the war of the *mujabideen* against Soviet troops in Afghanistan, and its hubris in ahistorically portraying itself in 2001 as the Pearl Harbor-

¹²George F. Will, "On the Health of the State," *Newsweek*, October 1, 2001, p. 70.

¹³Susan Sontag, "The Disconnect . . .," in "The Talk of the Town" section, *The New Yorker*, September 24, 2001, p. 32.





era, innocent victim going out to save the world.¹⁴ Leftists charged that the U.S. government had committed immoral and unjust acts; September 11 somehow resulted from those acts; this terrible payback was not totally unjust or surprising, even if it was marred by its own immoralities. They did not cite God as a personal agent bringing justice on an arrogant superpower. Impersonal mechanisms did. “Our broken promises . . . led inevitably to this tragedy” (Robert Fisk); the attacks “might be the consequence of the recent Israeli rampages in the occupied territories” (Alexander Cockburn); they were “blowback” from American foreign policy (Noam Chomsky); “the singularities (species, individuals and cultures)” ended by a globalization “governed by a single power are taking their revenge today” (Jean Baudrillard). They did not excuse terrorists, but impersonal mechanisms enabled them to suggest the payback was understandable and reasonable even if the hijackers were not.¹⁵

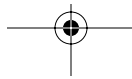
Taken from Chalmers Johnson’s book by that name, “blowback” was a new word for unintended, deserved consequences that sounded like a term from physics or chemistry. “Blowback,” Louis Menand explained in *The New Yorker*, “as the term is used in the literature on September 11th, is intended to carry moral weight: if you insist on tramping through other people’s flower gardens, you can’t complain when you get stung is the general idea.”¹⁶

Centrists were angered by leftists blaming the victim. In *The Atlantic Monthly*, Christopher Hitchens criticized Sontag’s “disdainful geopolitical analysis” and Chomsky’s view “that the September 11 crime is a mere bagatelle when set beside the offenses of the [U.S.] Empire.” Such views he likened to those of “the religious dogmatists [Falwell and Robertson?] who regard September 11 in the light of a divine judgment on a sinful society.” To equate U.S. foreign policy actions with a terrorist network’s plots was to take “shelter in half-baked moral equivalence” and to join all critics of the U.S. government. “If the enemy of your enemy is your friend,” concluded Jonathan Rauch, in the centrist *Atlantic Monthly*, “then it is not so surprising that postmodern

¹⁴This summary is based on the following pieces: Liza Featherstone, “A Peaceful Justice?” *The Nation*, October 22, 2001, p. 18; Alexander Cockburn, “Faceless Cowards?” *The Nation*, October 1, 2001, p. 8; Robert Fisk, “Terror in America,” *The Nation*, October 1, 2001, p. 7; Lewis H. Lapham, “Drums Along the Potomac: New War, Old Music,” *Harper’s Magazine*, November 2001, pp. 35-41; and Louis Menand, “Faith, Hope and Clarity: September 11th and the American Soul,” *The New Yorker*, September 16, 2002, pp. 98-104. Menand summarizes and critiques leftist views.

¹⁵Fisk, “Terror,” p. 7; Cockburn, “Cowards?” p. 8; Menand, “Clarity,” pp. 100, 101 (quoting Baudrillard).

¹⁶Menand, “Clarity,” p. 100; Chalmers A. Johnson, *Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire* (New York: Henry Holt, 2000).





Marxists should make common cause with radical mullahs.”¹⁷

Centrists offered hard-headed pragmatism, not leftist talk about justice. Richard A. Posner charged leftist academics with “writing precipitately about matters outside their area of professional specialization.” September 11 raised issues of “policing, intelligence, military strategy and tactics, and foreign affairs,” of which leftist intellectuals knew little. *The New Republic* rebutted Fisk’s charges in *The Nation* by arguing that the United States had pressured Israel to give Palestinians a state; that Saddam Hussein’s military expenses, not sanctions, caused civilian deaths; and that bin Laden supported ethnic or religious cleansing.¹⁸

Centrists focused on what to do next and denied broader themes (e.g., divine judgment). The attack came because the nation had neglected to do what was on centrists’ “to-do” list. *The New Republic* categorized calamities as impersonal acts of nature to be accepted or enemies’ personal acts of aggression to be fought. September 11 was the latter. “What happened in New York and Washington was not a tragedy that should leave us feeling philosophical; it was an aggression that should leave us feeling historical”—not feeling vulnerable to events but duty-bound to be actors in history, not helpless mourners. “The only solace is strategy. . . . We must throw ourselves into the world in a storm of engagement.” Yet actors can be partly helpless. This false choice excluded a divine Actor whose doings had to be pondered eventually, even if defeating aggression was the immediate, practical, necessary response.¹⁹

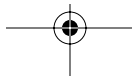
Conservatives agreed on decisive military action and on the error of leftists’ talk of U.S. misdeeds and of terrorists as criminals best left to international courts. Talk-show host Sean Hannity saw a war between “Judeo-Christian values” and “the violent nihilism of radical Islam.” In Pearl-Harbor-era terms, he accused liberals of being “ideologically inclined toward appeasement.” Liberals’ response to the attacks proved conservatives’ charge that they were “moral relativists” who aided the enemy by “engag[ing] in a dangerous and destructive effort to morally disarm our children.”²⁰ The Clinton gloves should be taken off, Islamic terrorists annihilated and the United States returned to its World War II

¹⁷Christopher Hitchens, “Stranger in a Strange Land,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, December 2001, pp. 32-34; Jonathan Rauch, “The Mullahs and Postmodernists,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, January 2002, pp. 21-22.

¹⁸Richard A. Posner, “The Professors Profess,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, February 2002, p. 28; Peter Beinart, “Fault Lines,” *The New Republic*, October 1, 2001, p. 8.

¹⁹“Mourning and Strategy,” *The New Republic*, October 1, 2001, p. 9.

²⁰Sean Hannity, *Let Freedom Ring: Winning the War of Liberty over Liberalism* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), pp. 6, 8; see pp. 6-8, 11, 115-16, and *Deliver Us from Evil: Defeating Terrorism, Despotism and Liberalism* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), pp. 2-3, 4-5; see also pp. 7-9, 15, 25-53, 166.





policy of unconditional surrender. What the left saw as U.S. misdeeds the right saw as virtues. *The National Review's* columnists rejected the left's "tendency to self-blame and [its] taste for complex causal explanations . . . made still more complex by social science jargon." Falwell and Robertson were "[e]arly entrants in the creep sweepstakes" for claiming divine judgment.²¹

In "Why West Is Best," Paul Johnson praised Western civilization for its Greco-Roman law, constitutionalism and capitalism, not its Christian faith. God's judgment on the West was unnecessary: "capitalism is based on human nature, not dogma," and "is self-correcting." It was "the protean ability of Western civilization to be self-critical and self-correcting—not only in producing wealth but over the whole range of human activities—that constitutes its most decisive superiority over any of its rivals."²² Divine judgment was superfluous, it seemed: God would be unjust to correct a self-correcting civilization. In *The National Review*, Richard Brookhiser quoted at length from Revelation 18, the account of Babylon's fall. New York, like Babylon, "drew the envy and excited the resentment of rubes and poets everywhere." The archaic words from the King James Version were mere literary adornments for him. Babylon's trade might be wicked; New York merchants' trade was mainly "just, cleansed by their honest effort." The apostle John had "a vision of the human heart in eternity"; immigrants to New York had "a vision of tomorrow, a little better than the day before."²³ The ancient text could not possibly apply to New York.



Nonmoral Social Scientific Analysis and a Moral, Initial Hunch

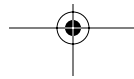
Some academics wrote for ideological journals, but others approached September 11 with an attempt to be nonideological. Social scientists attempted a scientific analysis; some had a political bias or a postmodern view that one's "analytic perspective" depended on "the position one occupies in the world"; all shared secular assumptions.²⁴ Social sciences analyze humans and their societies using assumptions and methods of the natural sciences, as much as possible, partly to

²¹Paul Johnson, "Relentlessly and Thoroughly," *National Review*, October 15, 2001, pp. 20-21; David Gelernter, "Eight Thoughts on Mass Murder," *National Review*, October 1, 2001, p. 10; Daniel Pipes, "War, Not 'Crimes,'" *National Review*, October 1, 2001, p. 12; Victor Davis Hanson, "What Are We Made Of?" *National Review*, October 1, 2001, p. 14; John O'Sullivan, "Their Amerika," *National Review*, October 15, 2001, p. 28; "Hall of Shame," *National Review*, October 15, 2001, p. 15.

²²Paul Johnson, "Why West Is Best," *National Review*, December 3, 2001, pp. 18, 20.

²³Richard Brookhiser, "Our Day of Infamy," *National Review*, October 1, 2001, p. 17.

²⁴Craig Calhoun, Paul Price and Ashley Timmers, eds., *Understanding September 11* (New York: The New Press, 2002); Eric Hershberg and Kevin W. Moore, eds., *Critical Views of September 11: Analyses from Around the World* (New York: The New Press, 2002). The quote is from Hershberg and Moore, "Introduction," p. 4.





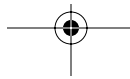
develop expertise that a democracy's citizens and leaders can use to formulate policies.²⁵ Common sense alerts us that such an "analytic perspective" is not as neutral or objective as it might appear and that a nonmoral perspective will find it very difficult to analyze accurately such an explosion of evil as September 11.

The first puzzle was how to define terrorism. Suspicious of its "negative connotations," political scientist Robert Keohane defined it as "deliberately targeted surprise attacks on arbitrarily chosen civilians, designed to frighten other people." None of those words had to mean something immoral. To avoid moral terms further, he employed a geometrical one: asymmetrical (power is "*asymmetrical interdependence*"). Achin Vanaik, a scholar from India, also sought "a morally neutral definition," in which civilians were not innocent per se nor terrorists guilty: the targets were "physically defenseless," and the actors had a duty to use means proportional to their ends. Thus, a government's disproportionate use of violence could be terrorism. Focusing on Islamic terrorism, political scientists James Der Derian and Seyla Benhabib described it in philosophical terms as "apocalyptic nihilism."²⁶

That description is very inadequate. Radical Islamists are hardly nihilists who deny that humans can know what is true or what is moral or what is life's meaning. They are all too confident that they know all these things, which social scientists think they cannot know. Social scientists leave us with impossible questions: what is morally equivalent, what is proportional, how many civilian victims constitute an atrocity, how are rights and wrongs on two competing sides to be balanced or weighed. As limited human beings, we cannot answer these questions. Social scientists' exclusion of the supernatural and their treatment of religion as a human invention rob us of clarifying ideas: government's God-given sword (Romans 13:1-7); civilians' lack of a legitimate equal sword but (thus) their right to freedom from attacks by other civilians; governments' provisional right to judge individuals but lack of ultimate rights to annihilate a people or end history; God's right to hold governments accountable. Absent these ideas, any "evaluatively neutral way" of thinking

²⁵Dorothy Ross, "Social Science," in *A Companion to American Thought*, ed. Richard Wightman Fox and James T. Kloppenberg (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), pp. 634-36.

²⁶Robert O. Keohane, "The Globalization of Informal Violence, Theories of World Politics and the 'Liberalism of Fear,'" in *Understanding September 11*, ed. Craig Calhoun, Paul Price and Ashley Timmers (New York: The New Press, 2002), pp. 77-78, 81, 82; Achin Vanaik, "The Ethics and Efficacy of Political Terrorism," in *Critical Views of September 11: Analyses from Around the World*, ed. Eric Hershberg and Kevin W. Moore (New York: The New Press, 2002), pp. 24, 26-28, 32; James Der Derian, "9/11: Before, After and In Between," in *Understanding September 11*, ed. Craig Calhoun, Paul Price and Ashley Timmers (New York: The New Press, 2002), p. 178; Seyla Benhabib, "Unholy War: Reclaiming Democratic Virtues After September 11," in *Understanding September 11*, ed. Craig Calhoun, Paul Price and Ashley Timmers (New York: The New Press, 2002), p. 245 ("The new jihad is not only apocalyptic; it is nihilistic").





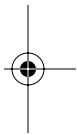
about the act of flying passenger aircraft into buildings will prove inadequate, even immoral itself, in the end.²⁷

Partly, social scientists avoid moralizing, religious talk lest such ideas divide a democracy. That may leave democratic politics as the highest value. Political sociologist Peter Alexander Meyers “argue[d] that the acts of September 11 were an assault on politics itself and that a citizen’s most important response . . . is to defend politics”²⁸ or to attend Middle East 101 and pore over the map of Afghanistan—worthwhile and necessary acts but hardly sufficient ones for us who are creatures facing our Creator as well as citizens writing our senator. The focus on what the United States should do next revealed a proud assumption that we were the actors, when, in fact, we may have been mostly acted on at that point in history.

Social scientists admit that their failure to take religion seriously hinders their analysis. They developed the theory of secularization (as societies modernize, they are secularized). No wonder they were surprised when the first major war of the twenty-first century involves “of all things, religion—secularism’s old, long-banished foe.” Sociologist Mark Juergensmeyer used “religionization” as a now-necessary opposite of secularization.²⁹ He took religion more seriously; his was perhaps the most helpful analysis. He saw al-Qaeda as a “religious assault on the secular state” that tries to limit and perhaps destroy religion. In retaliation, Al Qaeda and other Islamic terrorists put themselves “on a par with the leaders of governments that they target” by staging “a public performance of violence” replayed on television sets and computer screens around the world, in order to bring “the rest of the world into their world view” of a global religious war.³⁰

Revising his view by taking the Christian faith seriously, we arrive at an initial hunch about September 11. Vigilantes acting on an unimaginable scale, religious zealots took for themselves God’s right to judge (ultimately) and governments’ right to wield the sword (presently), in their apocalyptic-style, highly visible attack on their unsuspecting foe. Given their limited power, they chose targets of high symbolic value, lacked any capacity to institute a new governmental order, produced a temporary chaos and anarchy instead and dared not

²⁷The phrase “evaluatively neutral way” is Vanaik’s, in “Ethics and Efficacy,” p. 24.
²⁸Peter Alexander Meyer, “Terrorism and the Assault on Politics,” in *Understanding September 11*, ed. Craig Calhoun, Paul Price and Ashley Timmers (New York: The New Press, 2002), p. 255.
²⁹Mark Juergensmeyer, “Religious Terror and Global War,” in *Understanding September 11*, ed. Craig Calhoun, Paul Price and Ashley Timmers (New York: The New Press, 2002), pp. 28-29.
³⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 27-28, 30-31, 33.





attack military forces (the Pentagon was an office building, not a fort) but killed civilians. They thought they enacted justice on guilty foes. This is no morally neutral hunch; theirs was a monstrous act of iniquity. They took what was God's: the civilians bore his image; the government that sought to protect civilians did so by his sanction; the judgment they thought they enacted was his alone to determine; the course of events they sought decisively to change was fundamentally his to continue or change.

That is only a preliminary conclusion. Before we turn to religious reflections, we can summarize using Menand's piece in *The New Yorker*, a survey of writings on the tragedy. Writing not from left or right but from far above, as if from a lofty peak, Menand wittily skewered the ideas of left, right and center. "The most surprising thing about most of the published reflections on September 11th is how devoid of surprise they are." Leftists, centrists and conservatives saw the attack as confirmation: "It just proves what I've always said." The cataclysm changed no one's mind. Menand dismissed the idea it might have been a "wake-up call" that might change one's beliefs: after car accidents, survivors "sometimes react by reassessing their entire lives—as though the accident were a judgment. It wasn't; it was an accident. . . . The meaning of their whole way of life was not at stake."³¹ That is too flippant. An event can be both an accident and a judgment. What is sound advice for an individual after a car accident might not be for a nation after an attack. "Entire lives" exaggerates: perhaps only the recent past needs to be reassessed.



A Brief Sampling of Opinions Expressed in Religious (Christian) Books and Journals

Religious thinking was not isolated from the political thinking. Mainline journals such as *The Christian Century* reflect left or center arguments; evangelical journals like *Christianity Today*, center or right ones. We examine religious opinion, starting from the left again.

The Christian Century confessed, "We want a word from God." Not a word from Falwell and Robertson, or radical Islam, or patriots' "calls for vengeance" on terrorists, or Jeremiah's prophecies of judgment, but his positive statement (Jeremiah 9:24): "I am the LORD, who exercises kindness, / justice and righteousness on earth." The editors did not condone the atrocity—"We are angry beyond words, and justifiably so"—but they hoped it would lead to love, justice and integrity, not to "hatred and vengeance." It should lead to an international effort "to bring criminals to justice" and to negotiate an end to the Israeli-Palestin-

³¹Menand, "Clarity," pp. 98, 100, 101, 103.





ian conflict.³² They reprinted Jon Gunnerman's sermon (September 13); the lectionary text for the coming Sunday (Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28) was Jeremiah's prophecy that God would judge a foolish people. "Dare we use this text for our circumstances?" he asked. "The roar of the wind of jets putting cities to ruin, laying waste fields in Pennsylvania—dare we call this the angry spirit of God?" No, Gunnerman said, "It's bad exegesis, isn't it, the way televangelists use biblical texts? . . . Doesn't it imply a callous disregard for the deaths and suffering of innocents? And surely it is sacrilegious to suggest that God in some way willed this as punishment." His question marks did not eliminate such a view. "No, we cannot use the text this way, but we also cannot put it aside," he hesitated. "Let us concede that Jeremiah was more confident in his reading of God's acts in history than we are, or at least than I am." To call September 11 "the judgment or will of God commits us to similar judgments about all human misfortune," thus "trivializing human suffering and rendering God capricious."³³ Yet, if some events were judgments, that did not mean all were. Did accountability to God trivialize suffering more than did a sheer randomness in tragic events?

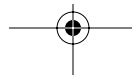
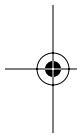
In *Word & World*, a Lutheran professor, Walter Sundberg, was less sure that judgment could be excluded. A theology of judgment is today "often neglected, rejected, dismissed, and derided all across the church. Why should this be? Because this theology has been misused? It certainly has! But every theology across the centuries has been misused. Why single out this one?" In his second inaugural address, Lincoln interpreted the Civil War as God's judgment on the nation for slavery. Today a therapeutic mindset rules our culture. "It is in the air we breathe. It runs the show. And so we accommodate it. Under its spell, the theological ideas that inspired Lincoln are alien to us, impossible for us to employ." Sundberg seemingly left them there, as impossibilities.³⁴

Christian thinkers on the left did not hesitate to point out "criminal facts of American history" (Frank Lentricchia's words) that might anger God, even if he did not judge them directly. Christian pacifist Stanley Hauerwas and Lentricchia edited a book of essays sharply accusing the U.S. government of acts of injustice. Hauerwas warned, "God's blessing incurs God's judgment" but did not cite September 11. For Lentricchia, "the largest obscenity of all is the howl of American self-pity in the wake of September 11." He could hardly have made himself more controversial by saying it was God's judgment. Yet the Muslim, Jewish,

³²*The Christian Century* 118, no. 26 (September 26-October 3, 2001): 3-4.

³³Jon Gunnerman, "Naming the Terror," *Christian Century* 118, no. 26 (September 26-October 3, 2001): 4-5.

³⁴Walter Sundberg, "'Evil' After 9/11: The Alien Work of God," *Word & World* (spring 2004): 204-7.





Catholic and Protestant contributors could not have agreed on the exact identity of the God who might be doing the judging.³⁵

The editors of *First Things*, a center-right journal, argued that a government must “protect its citizens,” but it was subject to just war theory as it did so. *First Things* disdained leftists as a “morally debilitated professoriat” and “inveterate complexifiers, offering detailed analyses of the seven sides of four-sided questions while declaring their achingly superior sensitivities that make them too sensitive for decent company.” Social scientists’ secular focus and leftists’ stress on religious tolerance were inadequate. This was “inescapably a war of religion,” for the terrorists “hate us because we are the infidel who has . . . humiliated the chosen people of God.” *First Things* writer J. Bottum thought the Chomsky versus Hitchens debate somewhat empty, for both used “the categories of contemporary political discourse”—not religion—and so could not explain “both the blood spilled and the essential wrongness of its spilling.” *First Things* offered pragmatic advice to policymakers, whom it did not offend by printing talk of divine judgment.³⁶

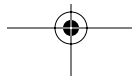
Christianity Today took a cautious center-right approach, applauding patriotism but warning against “God-and-country Christianity,” gently reproving Falwell but balancing that with criticism of Oprah Winfrey’s view “that each victim of the terror strikes instantly became an angel” (*CT*’s words), running stories on Todd Beamer, on President Bush’s September 20 meeting with religious leaders and on overseas Christians’ experiences with Islamic militants. Its managing editor’s piece cited social scientists’ analyses of Islamic terrorism to advise leaders and citizens on what to do next. Here, Christians were ordinary citizens, not believers in a faith that had a view of history every bit as eschatological as Islam’s. Social science and history were cited more than Scripture. Apart from a different audience, the piece resembled *Newsweek*’s.³⁷

For evangelicals, a key text was Luke 13:1-5, Jesus’ comment on the fallen

³⁵Stanley Hauerwas and Frank Lentricchia, “Introductory Notes from the Editors,” *Dissent from the Homeland: Essays After September 11*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas and Frank Lentricchia (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 5, 8.

³⁶“In a Time of War,” *First Things*, December 2001, pp. 11, 12-13, 16; Stanley Hauerwas’s letter to the editors, *First Things*, February 2002, p. 3 (the editors’ response is on pp. 14-15); J. Bottum, “What Violence Is For,” *First Things*, December 2001, p. 33; James Neuchterlein, “Hard Thoughts in Wartime,” *First Things*, January 2002, pp. 13-14.

³⁷“Todd Beamer: Sunday-School Teacher, Hero of Fatal Flight,” *Christianity Today [CT]*, October 22, 2001, p. 18; Tony Carnes, “Day of Terror, Day of Grace,” *CT*, October 22, 2001, pp. 16-22; “The Hard-Won Lessons of Terror and Persecution,” *CT*, October 22, 2001, pp. 20-21; Mark Galli, “Now What?” *CT*, October 22, 2001, pp. 24-27; “Rally Round the Flag” and “Blame Game,” *CT*, November 12, 2001, pp. 36-37; Tony Carnes, “Bush’s Defining Moment,” *CT*, November 12, 2001, pp. 38-42.





tower in Siloam. *CT* saw such “reminders of our mortality” as “ideal times” to turn to God in repentance for our sins, not to point at others. The pressing task of comforting the bereaved and helping the shell-shocked fully on him, Tim Keller of Manhattan’s Redeemer Presbyterian Church understandably softened the text’s message. “Jesus was asked if a massacre and (ironically) a falling tower were signs of God’s judgment on those killed. His answer was an unequivocal ‘no,’ but he added cryptically ‘you yourselves should repent.’” In *CT*, Charles Colson was less comforting: “Jesus gave no soothing explanations. Instead, he reminded them of others killed by a falling tower and said, ‘Repent or you, too, will perish.’”³⁸ (What did that ominous “too” mean? Had the victims died because they had not repented?)

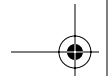
Colson’s “Wake-up Call” suggested September 11 might be God’s judgment. “For years, many of us have only half-jokingly said that if God doesn’t bring judgment on America soon, he’ll have to apologize to Sodom and Gomorrah.” And yet, he trod “gingerly”: “this is not a time for angry finger-pointing” at others. “Judgment always begins with God’s people.” The church must repent of its idolatry. That was scripturally sound and diverted talk of judgment from the nation’s foreign policy and global economic dominance (the left’s target) and from evangelicals’ secularist enemies in the culture wars (Falwell’s and Robertson’s targets) and aimed it at the church.³⁹ However, the particulars of September 11 did not fit his idea, for the terrorists’ targets were not linked to the church but to the nation’s financial and military institutions.

More direct was Frederica Mathewes-Green, writing in the broadly orthodox *Touchstone*. On September 12, she had attended her church near Washington, D.C. Her pastor asked her, “Why do you think that happened yesterday?” She pled ignorance. “It was the punishment of God.” She had “just finished an intensive study of the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70” but had not applied that to her own nation. She cited Jesus’ words in Luke 13:5 but now applied them to the nation. “National suffering should bring about repentance.” Repent of abortion, “sexual promiscuity and materialism, the contempt of God, the spreading infection of American culture.” Don’t “spray on some superficial piety” by singing “God Bless America.” Don’t ask God to bless the sinful status quo. “A friend of mine says the local strip club has changed its sign to read ‘God Bless America,’ which just about sums up the problem.” She feared Americans would be too

³⁸“Blame Game,” *CT*; November 12, 2001, p. 37; Pastor Tim Keller, “Questions on Everyone’s Mind,” posted September 14, 2001, on <www.redeemer2.com/news/index> (accessed on May 8, 2002); Charles Colson, “Wake-up Call,” *CT*, November 12, 2001, p. 112.

³⁹Colson, “Wake-up Call,” p. 112.





proud to repent but would only “focus on how much we have been wronged, and smite our adversaries by our own considerable earthly power.”⁴⁰

A reader demanded that she apologize: judgment was an Old Testament idea for theocratic Israel, not a New Testament idea for a pluralistic, free, open society. Mathewes-Green admitted the United States is not ancient Israel, but God “punished and blessed other nations as well” and could still intervene in history even though “a single event will affect a wide range of people, believers and non-believers, ‘guilty’ and ‘innocent,’ as the rain falls on the just and unjust alike.” She did not apologize. Warnings of judgment were meant for good, and those who warned were not misanthropic. “If history is any guide, a nation that doesn’t get the message the first time is given another opportunity to learn it, and I think we’d all rather avoid that.”⁴¹



⁴⁰Frederica Mathewes-Green, “Why Did This Happen?” *Touchstone: A Journal of Mere Christianity* 14, no. 9 (November 2001): 13-14.

⁴¹*Touchstone*, January-February 2002, p. 9.

