

Advent mysteries: The hard job of discernment

by [Carol Zaleski](#) in the [December 5, 2001](#) issue

It's going to be a long Advent. We stepped into the deep violet darkness and have been on the alert ever since, not only for the coming of our Savior, but also for further assaults from our largely unseen enemies. Two mysterious objects thus appear on the same radar screen: the mystery of redemption and the mystery of evil, both pushing our powers of analysis beyond their limits. As I sat down to write this, American Airlines flight 587 crashed into Queens. Was it terrorism? With calm firmness, White House spokesman Ari Fleischer reminded us that "first facts . . . are the facts that are subject to the greatest change."

This is where we get into trouble. When pressed by massively significant first facts, we feel we can't wait until all the evidence is in; we reach for explanations from whatever kit bag lies closest to hand. If you've been reading the *Left Behind* books, you may imagine that Nicolae Carpathia—the Antichrist—has been at work. But there are other kit bags holding other ready-made explanations. Occasionally I hear Buddhist friends laying the blame for terrorism on our propensity to get stuck in unreal conceptualizations, as if there would be no terrorism if we did not go around labeling people terrorists. Occasionally I hear psychologist friends say that the need to project our fears onto an external enemy means that even this formidable enemy is in some sense our own creation. They find this analysis confirmed every time George Bush speaks of "the evil one."

And occasionally I hear Christian friends laying the blame for terrorism on the religious mind-set itself, on that vast Protean complex they refer to as fundamentalism or the Religious Right, the breeding ground for totalistic thinking and consequently for fanaticism and violence. From this standpoint, religion is a good thing as long as it embraces pluralism and tolerates moral ambiguity, but intense and exclusive forms of religion are a menace to the free society.

In a lecture on “The Intellectual’s Responsibility and the Ambiguity of the Religions of the Book” (published in the October 24 issue of the electronic journal *Sightings*), University of Chicago Divinity School professor William Schweiker offered this analysis of fanaticism within Judaism, Christianity and Islam:

There are those in each tradition who argue that human reason is so distorted or so feeble or so impotent that we cannot, ever, make valid moral judgments about how to live rightly. Given that, we must utterly submit all thinking to those who can claim rightly to interpret the decisive revelation of God’s will. . . .

Within Islam, this means, as I understand it, that Imams and Mullahs have the sole power legally in the interpretation of the text and tradition. Within ultra-orthodox Judaism . . . certain rabbis or rabbinic councils must make virtually all determinations about the legality of moral decisions. Within ultraconservative Roman Catholicism . . . one must submit to the infallible teaching of the papacy and magisterium. Within fundamentalist Protestantism . . . this means an attack on all human inquiry and the demand for complete submission to a literal reading of the Bible. These kinds of “revelationalism” . . . are the backbone of fanatical and authoritarian movements around the world and within each of these traditions.

One hears echoes of the Enlightenment when intellectuals, weary of the wars and social catastrophes brought on by religious differences, propose a rational religion without dogma, without mystery, without dangerous “enthusiasm,” without authority save that of one’s own conscience. There’s a lot to be said for this ideal. On the whole the Enlightenment was, as Kant proclaimed it to be, liberation from centuries of “self-incurred tutelage.” But the Enlightenment awakened us only in part, leaving us vulnerable to being blind-sided by forces we fail to understand.

And we will go on failing to understand as long as we lump together all forms of religious traditionalism. There is, for example, a world of difference between biblical fundamentalism and the Roman Catholic understanding of hierarchical authority within the church. Submission to the teaching of the papacy and magisterium, as I understand it, is simply mainstream Catholicism, as is the Catholic Church’s sturdy defense of the rights of conscience and the dignity of all human beings. One wishes

that Islam possessed such a centralized authority, and could condemn in one voice the atrocities committed in the name of the faith. Terrorism is a disease of unbridled reason, far more terrible than an excess of faith.

A new world is emerging, and one can only hope that it will combine the best gains of the Enlightenment with the recognition that religion has specific demands to make: demands on our belief, our behavior and our time. It will not be a world of “religion within the limits of reason alone,” but a world of committed religious people capable of making common cause on moral issues such as the condemnation of terrorism and the defense of innocent life. The hard job of discernment will always be with us. We need the guidance of revelation and the light of reason, the authority of tradition and the voice of conscience to keep us from going off the straight path.

These are the first facts as I see them. Like all first facts they are subject to change. But our best hope is to remain open to that change, keeping our lamps trimmed in anticipation of the One who brings light.