

Do you believe? The God question: The God question

by [Garret Keizer](#) in the [June 2, 1999](#) issue

It was posed at gunpoint to at least two of the victims in the Littleton, Colorado, school massacre. "Do you believe in God?" the killer asked. When a girl said yes, he shot her dead.

Another boy might have asked her the same question on a date. The sky might have been clear and full of stars, and he might have asked if she believed in God—or extraterrestrials, ESP or ghosts. She might have found the question in a teen magazine survey, several lines down from a query about her favorite color or if she would ever pose (*à la Titanic*) in the nude. Her dire predicament in the school-turned-death-chamber seems all the more poignant for all the mundane contexts in which she might otherwise have met the question.

Until recently, I had always thought of the question itself as rather mundane. I disagreed with those who seemed to regard it as the *sine qua non* of religious faith. I was more inclined to greet the question with that sarcastic verse from the epistle of St. James: "You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder." Even Ku Klux Klansmen believe, though perhaps they do not shudder. Belief in God meant next to nothing as far as I was concerned. A living, active faith was what mattered. Of course, no one ever asked me "Do you believe in God?" with a gun pointed to my head.

More and more, however, I wonder if the question "Do you believe in God?" will emerge as the single greatest moral and political distinction of the next century. More and more I suspect that our common destiny, as well as our individual identities, will greatly depend on whether we answer yes or no.

Do you believe in God? Do you believe that the world was created and that therefore it has the integrity of a creation and implies the approval of its Creator? Or do you believe that the scientific manipulation of genetic codes is sanctioned by the relative superiority of human whim over cosmic accident? Do you believe we are custodians

of a world in which the Creator is always Lord, or consumers of a world in which the customer is always right?

Do you believe in God? Do you believe there is an absolute Good that makes possible the existence of good, and therefore of evil, in human affairs? Or is your only answer to a scrupulous Why? a brazen Why not? Is racism evil or merely "incorrect"? Was the Holocaust wrong for all time, or simply wrong for those who *think* it wrong at any given time? If white Americans should ever decide that they ought to apologize for slavery, will they say "We're sorry our ancestors oppressed your ancestors," or "We're sorry your ancestors felt oppressed"? We're sorry they "had a problem" with it.

Do you believe in God? Do you believe that in order to believe you must have something of God within yourself, and that all those made like you have the same divinity? Or are human beings themselves the source of their own worth, conferring it on one another when convenient and revoking it when not? Does worth exist in all of us, or only among the members of a given group: the American group, the "saved" group, the straight group, the gay group-the Hutu group, the Serbian group or the Goth group?

Dostoevsky said that without God anything is permissible. Our pundits and politicians assure us that with the right know-how and a bit of gumption, anything is possible. Are these lines of thought merely analogous, merely parallel, or is there some point at which the permissible and the possible converge as the same thought? I fear we may be closer to that point of convergence than we think. Blowing up the school and killing everyone inside is now both morally and technically "feasible," perhaps the former for no better reason than the latter. For all its dangers, the maxim "If it feels good, do it" at least has the guiding principle of pleasure. What guiding principle has the maxim "If you *can* do it, do it"?

Do you believe in God? I doubt that if the girl in Colorado had answered no, she would have lived. A sincere atheist or agnostic would likely have met the same fate as she. And I do not know if her answer was sincere. A skeptic may wonder if she answered as she did in the vain hope of saving her life. A cynic may wonder if, had she been a seminarian instead of a high school student, she could have succeeded in making her answer complicated enough to mesmerize her inquisitor, or long-winded enough to stall for time. Perhaps she'd still be answering; perhaps she'd still be defining her terms. "It all depends on what you mean by *God*." Poor child, she

could only answer yes or no.

She said yes.

In the midst of such carnage and madness the word comes out as barely more than a peep. It is one heartbreaking detail among 10,000, like one crown of thorns in a vast empire built on rapine and bloodlust.

Nevertheless, there may come a time when we look back on that girl's death as the first significant martyrdom in the New World Order. We may come to regard her grave as both shrine and sign on the all-presuming "Bridge to the 21st Century." In that case, may she pray for us. In any case, may God bless her.