

Fear and relief

By [Miroslav Volf](#)

May 3, 2011



As I listened to President Obama's [calmly triumphant announcement](#) that Osama bin Laden had been killed and "justice has been served"--and to the reports of celebrations in American streets--I tried to sort out my own responses to the surprising news. Throughout the morning, my inbox filled with e-mails from friends near and far. These reactions, unlike those of the U.S. government and most Americans, were more ambivalent.

A friend at Yale reminded me of [Proverbs 24:17](#), [Ezekiel 33:11](#) and [Matthew 5:44](#), adding this:

After 9/11 I found it very hard to bring myself to pray for Usama bin Laden. But by God's grace I did because Jesus said I must. And though I am tempted to rejoice today, I will not because Jesus said I must not.

A young Christian leader from the Middle East offered a view forged in a majority-Muslim country:

A huge opportunity now--after the death of bin Laden--is for Americans to intentionally free themselves fully from the domain of fear and those who

manipulate it for their own agendas. Politicians will be looking for the next "enemy" to continue to distract you from being truly the "land of the free." You are not free until you eliminate all your fear. Love drives out fear.

A church leader and scholar from the U.K. wrote this:

Multiple ironies. How is God's justice advanced by foreign troops acting as vigilantes in someone else's sovereign territory? Whose justice? Which rationality? All my instincts were, and are, to sigh with relief; even, in a measure, to celebrate. But my mind warns that this is a dangerous precedent in principle and an extremely dangerous action in terms of possible unintended consequences.

My friends' responses and my own memories of the horror of 9/11 and its aftermath nudged me to the following considerations:

- Osama bin Laden was the most infamous voice of hatred and the most dangerous purveyor of terror in today's world. Clearly, a significant measure of good has been achieved in that an evildoer of such magnitude is no longer scheming about how to harm and kill innocent people-- as well as seriously disrupt the lives of just about all of us (airport scanners!).
- For the followers of Jesus Christ, no one's death is a cause for rejoicing. This applies to Osama bin Laden no less than to any other evildoer, large or small. Jesus Christ died for all; there are no irredeemable people. The path of repentance is open to anyone willing to walk on it, and no human being has the right to permanently close that path for anyone.
- We are right to feel a sense of relief that a major source of evil has been removed. But we should reflect also on the flip side of that relief: the nature of our fears. As the [King hearings](#) and [state-level anti-Sharia bills](#) indicate, many people in our nation find themselves under a spell of a "green scare" analogous to the red scare of the

1950s. But fear is a foolish counselor, and our war in Iraq--unnecessary, unjust and counterproductive--is evidence of this.

- Osama bin Laden was killed through an action that instantiates American exceptionalism. We will never consent to grant other nations (China, as an emerging superpower?) the right to intervene in other sovereign states the way we just intervened in Pakistan. As believers in the one God, Christians are universalists. We should not ourselves exercise rights we are unwilling to grant to others. This basic principle of morality should apply to international relations as well.

The death of Osama bin

Laden has not left Muslim terrorists in utter defeat, but it has significantly weakened them. They are losing ground in other ways as well. As the Arab Spring from Tunisia to Yemen indicates, among Muslim communities--especially the urbane young--democratic revolution is more attractive than the terrorist solution. The doors are open to pursue anti-extremism strategies more in line with the Christian faith than the "war on terror" has been. By doing this we can build on fundamental values that unite Muslims with many Christian (as well as Jewish and humanist) citizens of Western nations.