

Combatting terrorism can begin at home

Christian evangelists Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson said the god they worship is angry with U.S. America and this has led to terrorist attacks in New York and Washington. They blamed civil liberties groups, feminists, homosexuals and abortion rights supporters who, they said, turned Jehovah's anger against their country.

"God continues to lift the curtain and allow the enemies of America to give us probably what we deserve", said Falwell (Washington Post, September 14/01)

Similarly, Moslem fundamentalist Osama bin Ladin, described the attacks on the U.S. as "divine retribution from Allah". People like Falwell and Robertson are, apparently, on Allah's hit list but not on Jehovah's.

U.S. authorities have named bin Ladin as the mastermind behind the terrorist attack. They have reason to fear his organization which they initially trained and financed. President George W. Bush's father called bin Ladin a "freedom fighter" when he used his talents against the Soviet-backed government of Afghanistan. But after bin Ladin declared a "holy war" to drive the U.S. out of Saudi Arabia the U.S. decided to kill their former ally. In recent years bin Ladin has survived attacks by U.S. Cruise missiles and helicopter gunships.

The mindset of these three, Falwell, Robertson and bin Ladin are similar: they want a rigidly religious society that does not allow for major differences in thinking and behavior. Granted, the religions are different but the mindset is the same. Psychologist Eric Hoffer described this type of individual, and their followers, as "true believers".

The "true believer" believes he or she has significance only because he is part of a larger movement or religion. He comes to feel that his life, and the lives of others, are less important than the religion. Those that do not agree with the cause are either deluded or evil and must be eliminated.

When a Moslem Mullah declares the United States to be the "Nation of Satan", he is inciting his "true believer" followers to action. Some of these will not stop at murder. When Jerry Falwell declares that doctors performing abortions are "murdering forty million babies a year", he is inciting his "true believer" followers to action. Some doctors will be murdered.

At the time of this writing Bush has ordered the Moslem fundamentalist government of Afghanistan to turn over bin Ladin or risk invasion. But the highjackers did not give up their lives for bin Ladin. They gave up their lives for a "higher power", for a cause. The real enemy is not human. It is inhumane belief systems that take over the minds of their followers turning them into fanatics for a cause.

We have a choice - to be in control of our belief systems or to be controlled by them. If we are in control, we are free to change our beliefs when new evidence surfaces. We do not feel threatened if others have different beliefs and values.

We are controlled if we cannot, or are afraid to, imagine ourselves being different from the way we are right now. We are controlled if we find the opinions of others, if they differ from our own, threatening. We are controlled if we see others whose belief or moral code differs from ours as "evil".

We can inoculate ourselves from the "mind virus" of fanaticism by recognizing that no one, including ourselves, has absolute knowledge of "the truth". We can, however, respect truth and seek to have a clearer understanding for ourselves. We should be willing to modify our own beliefs to meet new evidence. We should regularly seek out people with different viewpoints. Only in this way can we increase our own knowledge.

If you feel threatened by another's viewpoint, it may be a sign that you are exposed to the "true believer" mind virus. You should take immediate action to resist this feeling and recognize your own value regardless of what is right or wrong. View it as an opportunity to grow. By focusing on human commonalities you may discover we all share more similarities than differences. Remember the pleasures of interacting with others and the awe of new discovery.

By taking small actions to build mutual respect and toleration locally, we will be doing a small but important part to resist international fanaticism globally.