

THE PROBLEM WITH “ROOT CAUSE” ANALYSIS

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No sooner had the World Trade Center been bombed than the public was treated to two types of “root cause” analyses of what had happened. One type was psychologistic; the other political. From a Catholic perspective, both were flawed.

Catholicism places a premium on individual accountability. When we go to Confession, we say, “Bless me Father for I have sinned.” We don’t say, “Bless my significant others for they have corrupted me.” While it is true that all of us were brought into the world without a choice of parents or environment, and while it is true that nature and nurture have obviously played a role in shaping us, it is also true that we are not automatons compelled to act in a predetermined way. At the end of the day, we choose our behavior.

The terrorists who attacked the U.S. had free will. They chose to kill themselves and as many innocent people as they could. As we have seen, many pundits rushed to explain what the “root cause” of their behavior was. On one level, this is as unexceptional as it is acceptable. If the goal is to shed light on human behavior by examining antecedent events, then that’s fine. The problem comes when we slide from explanation to justification. Unfortunately, this happens all the time.

For example, it was said that to understand Osama bin Laden we need to know that he was a victim of child abuse. Much the same was said of Hitler. Indeed, we know that while Hitler was leading the Holocaust, he suffered nightmares about being beaten by his father. In fact, he would wake with convulsive shrieks, shouting for help and shaking with fear.

All of this is very interesting. But so what? What exactly are

we to do with such information? Give Hitler a pass? Invite bin Laden to sit down with Rosie O'Donnell?

There is a faulty equation at work when explanation devolves to exculpation. To take a different example, we know that there are more car accidents on badly designed roads than on safely made ones. And that is why it makes sense to change the root cause (the rotten road) so that there will be less accidents in the future. But since most people who drive on badly designed roads don't cause accidents, it also makes sense to hold those who do so culpable for their actions. Simultaneously, we can fix the road. What we shouldn't do is exculpate those who cause accidents by blaming the rotten road.

The other form of root cause analysis is political. For example, Richard Berthold, a history professor at the University of New Mexico, told his class, "Anyone who can blow up the Pentagon has my vote." Colman McCarthy of Georgetown Law School said we should ask the terrorists "to forgive us for all of our violence" (he cited as an example the size of our military budget). Perennial Leftist Susan Sontag told the *New Yorker* that the attack was caused by "American alliances and actions." At Columbia University students and their professors put the blame on "globalization." Robert Jensen of the University of Texas said what happened "was no more despicable than the massive acts of terrorism...that the U.S. government has committed during my lifetime." Professor Samad-Matias at CUNY blamed American imperialism. And so on.

If the problem with the psychologistic form of root cause analysis is its intellectual sloppiness—not holding individuals accountable for their actions—the problem with the political school is intellectual dishonesty. Quite simply, the "Hate America First" professors are liars. They know that no nation in history has delivered more affluence and liberty than America. This explains why they don't move to North Korea: it is so much easier to be a termite in America,

indulging on organic vegetables and sipping latte. (Perhaps this explains why they look so sickly.)

America is not responsible for the Taliban's practice of punishing women accused of adultery by burying them up to their neck and then stoning them to death. America is not responsible for the Taliban's practice of throwing homosexuals off the top of buildings. Nor are we responsible for arresting those who play music in their homes. It is the fascist Taliban who are responsible for all of this. Similarly, it is the fascist terrorists who are responsible for what they did on September 11.

There is no root cause analysis that can justify driving a plane into a building and killing thousands of innocent people. Catholic teaching acknowledges mitigating circumstances, but it also understands *mens rea*. *Mens rea* means criminal intent. It is a concept broached by 12th century Catholic theologians; it first found its way into canon law and later into the civil law. Now if *mens rea* ever applied, it applies here: the terrorists who struck on September 11 knew exactly what they were doing. Which is why they have to be taken out.