

At the writing of this assignment (April 12, 2002), Secretary Of State Colin Powell is in Jerusalem attempting to broker a peace agreement with Israel and the Palestinians. Two hours after meeting with Prime Minister Sharon of Israel, another suicide bomber, a young woman, blew herself at a bus stop in a busy section of central Jerusalem, just two miles from where Sharon and Powell had met. Six Israelis and the suicide bomber were killed and dozens of bystanders wounded. In the article, which follows, Elie Wiesel discusses the concept of fanaticism. As you read the article try to think of examples, which we have studied about Hitler, and the Nazis, which validate Wiesel's comments. There are several questions, which you will be asked to answer.

A Nobel Peace Prize-winner explores the mind of the fanatic:

How Can We Understand Their Hatred?

By Elie Wiesel

Last October, we asked Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel to reflect on the tragic events of Sept. 11 and on our response as a nation. His essay in PARADE inspired letters from hundreds of readers who found comfort in his message of unity, honor and hope.

Among those letters were several that asked the same troubling question: What type of man would crash a plane into a building, killing himself and hundreds of innocent people to attain his goal?"

At a time when extremist groups and individuals are increasingly active both at home and abroad, we turn once again to Wiesel for perspective. The author of more than 40 books, Wiesel is one of the world's foremost authorities on the nature of hatred and the perils of fanaticism. He has gained his expertise through prodigious research but also through his own personal experience. A native of Transylvania, Wiesel was captured by the Nazis at age 15 and imprisoned in the Auschwitz and Buchenwald concentration camps. It is against this background that he writes, in this essay, about fanaticism's continuing and disturbing appeal.

FANATICISM TODAY IS NOT A NICE word; it carries an unpleasant connotation. But in ancient times, fanatics enjoyed a more favorable reaction from the public. They were linked to religion and, more specifically, to religious experience. In the Bible, Pinhas was praised for slaying a sinner. The Prophet Elijah was admired as an extreme opponent of the wicked Queen Jezebel. Later, in Islam, *fana* (meaning the annihilation of the will) described the Sufi's desire to attain ecstasy in his union with the divine.

Today, in our modern language, fanaticism refers to excessive behavior, uncritical political opinions, ethnic zeal and religious bigotry. How did this come to be?

Previous centuries suffered from tribal and religious wars and from national extremism, but our last century was ravaged mainly by ideological and secular hatred.

Nazism and communism moved fanaticism to unprecedented dimensions—dimensions future historians may term as absolute. Stalin used Terror just as Hitler used Death to oppress tens of millions of people: Never had man-made ideologies introduced so much evil into society; never have they given Death so much power.

Early in my own life, I experienced the consequences of fanaticism. On Sept. 11, like so many others throughout the world, I saw its terrible consequences again. Glued for days to the television, I witnessed unthinkable acts of terror. How, I asked myself, after the last century's horrors, could fanaticism still hold sway?



On reflection, I believe that fanaticism appeals to people for a variety of reasons. But on the deepest level, fanaticism is seductive because it makes the fanatic feel less alone.

The fanatic fails to understand that the tragedy of man is that, in essential matters, we are each condemned to be alone—we can never break out of the “self.” How does one cease being one’s own jailer? --by becoming each other’s prisoner. The fanatic thinks he can tear down the wall of his cell by joining other fanatics. No need to think—the Party does the thinking for him, and the deciding for him.

The fanatic is stubborn, obstinate, dogmatic: Everything for him is black or White, curse or blessing, friend or foe—and nothing in between. He has no taste for or interest in nuances. Does he seek clarity? Driven by irrational impulses, he wants everything to be visible and necessarily clear.

The fanatic simplifies matters: He is immune to doubt and to hesitation. Intellectual exercise is distasteful, and the art and beauty of dialogue alien to him. Other people’s ideas or theories are of no use to him. He is never bothered by difficult problems: A decree or a bullet solves them...immediately. The fanatic feels nothing but disdain toward intellectuals who spend precious time analyzing, dissecting, debating philosophical notions and hypotheses. What matters to the fanatic is the outcome—not the way leading there.

And more: The fanatic derides and hates tolerance, which he perceives as weakness, resignation or submission. That is why he despises women: Their tenderness is to him a sign of passivity. The fanatic’s only interest is domination by fear and terror. Violence is his favorite language—a vulgar language filled with obscenities: He doesn’t speak, he shouts; he doesn’t listen, he is too busy yelling; he doesn’t think, he doesn’t want *anyone* to think.

In other words, the fanatic, intoxicated with hatred, tries to reduce everybody to his own size.

He has a goal and is ready to pay any price to achieve it. Or more precisely: He is ready to make *others* pay any price in order to achieve it.

The fanatic feels important, for he presumes being capable of altering—and dominating—the course of history. Using the obscure power of hatred, he feels he can—and must—take charge of man’s fate. Working in the dark, forever involved in plots and counterplots, he thinks his mission is to abolish the present state of affairs and replace it with his own system. No wonder that he, the human failure, now feels proud and superior.

The fanatic who kills in God’s name makes his God a murderer.

Let me conclude with this thought:

Of all the “isms” produced by the past centuries, fanaticism alone survives. We have witnessed the downfall of Nazism, the defeat of fascism and the abdication of communism. But fanaticism is still alive. And it is spreading fast. As horrible as it may sound, racial hatred, anti-Semitism and bin Laden terrorism are popular and still glorified in certain communities.

How can the fanatics be brought back to moral sanity? How can the killers and suicide warriors be disarmed?

If there is a simple answer, I do not know it. All I know is that, as we embark on this newest century, we cannot continue to live with fanaticism—and only we ourselves can stem it.

How are we to do this?

We must first fight indifference.

Indifference to evil is the enemy of god, for indifference is the enemy of everything that exalts the honor of man. We fight indifference through education; we diminish it through compassion. The most efficient remedy? Memory.

To remember means to recognize a time other than the present; to remember means to acknowledge the possibility of a dialogue. In recalling an event, I provoke its rebirth in me. In evoking a face, I place myself in relationship to it. In remembering a landscape, I oppose it to the walls that imprison me. The memory of an ancient joy or defeat is proof that nothing is definitive, nor is it irrevocable. To live through a catastrophe is bad; to forget it is worse.

And so, as we move forward from Sept. 11, let us continue to remember. For memory may be our most powerful weapon against fanaticism.

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1. As Elie Wiesel explains, the word *fanaticism* once was a positive term. Read the excerpt below from Hitler’s comments on the subject of the masses, and then write a sentence, which explains why Hitler interpreted fanaticism in positive terms.

The great mass of people consists neither of professors nor of diplomats. The small abstract knowledge it possesses directs its sentiments rather to the world of feeling. In this is rooted wither its negative or positive attitude. It is open only to the expression of force in one of these directions, and never to a half measure swaying between them. Their sentimental attitude, however, is caused by their exceeding stability. It is more difficult to undermine faith than knowledge, love succumbs to change less than to respect, hatred is more durable than aversion, and at all times the driving force of the most important changes in this world has been found less in a scientific knowledge animating the masses, but rather in a fanaticism dominating them and in a hysteria which drove them forward.

He who would win the great masses must know the key, which opens the door to their hearts. Its name is not objectivity—that is, weakness—but will power and strength.

(quoted from “How Hitler Viewed the Masses,” in Mosse Nazi Culture)

2. How does Wiesel define the fanatic? Note that in his definition, there are parallels to Hitler’s view? Can you find the parallels? There are several!
3. Comment on the following quote from the article: “...fanaticism is seductive because it makes the fanatic feel less alone.”
Note: in *Mein Kampf*, Hitler makes reference to the lonely shopkeeper who finds relief from his isolation by joining the masses who are united in their dedication to the Nazis.
4. According to Wiesel, we must fight fanaticism by fighting indifference. What large role does the author give to memory in combating man’s indifference to fanaticism? Why is this particularly important in studying the Holocaust?