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Religious leaders offer condolences in wake of campus tragedy

Staff and wire report

Why did God let this happen?"

Why do "bad things happen to good people"?

In the wake of the deadliest mass shooting in U.S. history this week at Virginia Tech University in Blacksburg, Va., the most repeated word in schools, workplaces, coffee lines or in the minds of most people was "why?"

And the question has crossed the lines of every faith -- within all branches of Christianity, though various Jewish sects, and within Islam, Buddhism and even atheism -- for as long as tragedy has struck.

"God is here. He loves this campus. He loves these students," the Rev. Franklin Graham told a multitude in orange and maroon that gathered Wednesday on the grassy drill field at Virginia Tech. "We saw evil here. But look at the good you see today on this campus."

On the drill field, Graham -- son of evangelist Billy Graham -- visited a semi-circle of 32 "Hokie stones" laid out in memory of the fallen students. Each had a flower and Virginia Tech pennant.

Asked about the victims' parents, Graham lowered his head in sadness.

"I cannot imagine the hurt that they are going through," he said. "I pray for them."

Religious leaders, almost in unison, were quick to offer prayers and condolences this week.

Calling it a "senseless tragedy," Pope Benedict XVI said he asks God "to console all those who mourn."

And some went directly for the "why."

Desmond Tutu, archbishop emeritus of the Anglican Church in South Africa and 1984 Nobel Peace Prize winner, said on Wednesday, ". . . we human creatures have a precious gift -- the freedom to choose. . . and some of our choices lead to incidents such as this tragedy.

"God could not intervene without nullifying the freedom of the perpetrator."

Rod Parsley, a senior pastor of World Harvest Church and author of more than 75 books, echoed Tutu:

"After more than 30 years of ministry, I've learned that understanding situations like these is unfathomable without the knowledge that God created each of us with . . . the freedom to opt for our own path.

"What we saw Monday morning is nothing less and nothing more than the result of one young man's sin -- his determination to do what he wanted to do, rather than what his Creator would have him do."

C. Welton Gaddy, who leads The Interfaith Alliance and hosts a weekly radio show, took that a step further.

"Tragedies occur because people make bad decisions or act out of illness.

"To affirm that every person is created in the image of God is to acknowledge every person's right to make decisions -- bad ones and good ones.

"I find no more personal consolation or theological credibility in blaming tragedies on the devil as on God. . . Of course, mental illness or emotional sickness can skew reasoning."

R. Albert Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, said, "The Bible never flinches from assigning responsibility for moral evil," and cites Jeremiah 17:9: "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?"

In elaborating on "responsibility," Mohler added, "As C.S. Lewis so powerfully reminded us, we must trust that God's perfect justice will . . . reset the equilibrium of the universe."

Charles W. "Chuck" Colson, founder of Prison Fellowship and host of a weekly radio talk-show, said, "Explaining this evil is . . . difficult. The Christian answer is that God. . . gave us free will -- God did not desire humans to be mere automatons."

Jane Dixon, former Episcopal bishop of Washington, D.C., said on Wednesday, "I went to seminary, in large part, to seek an answer to both human and natural evil -- why do such horrific acts occur? I received no help from theologians.

"The Book of Job in the Hebrew Scriptures gave me the only answer I could accept: Job, a godly man who had lost his family and all of his possessions, and had been told by friends that he was being punished for some evil deeds, shakes his fist at God and demands an answer.

"Then God speaks to Job out of the whirlwind and says -- I'm paraphrasing -- 'Job, I do not give you answers; I do promise to let you know me.' "

In a Tuesday interview on ABC News, President Bush -- responding to a mention by anchor Charles Gibson of the book "When Bad Things Happen to Good People" by Rabbi Harold S. Kushner -- said, "That's life in many ways. I wish it were an easy, straight-line progression from birth to death, but that's not the way it works."

In the book, Kushner writes: "The painful things that happen to us are not punishments . . . nor are they in any way part of some grand design on God's part. Because the tragedy is not God's will, we need not feel betrayed by God."

He adds, "The question we should be asking is not 'Why did this happen? What did I do to deserve this?' . . . A better question would be, 'Now that this has happened to me, what am I going to do about it?' "

-- SOURCES: catholicnews.com; floridabaptistwitness.com; newsweek.washingtonpost.com; myjewishlearning.com; abc.com; Cox News Service.