

## **The Religion of Columbia**

Jina Kim, 2/11/2003

\*Unless noted otherwise, all articles are from the *New York Times*.

“[I]n times of turmoil and times of tragedy, our presidents and our people have turned to faith as a source of strength.” -- Karen Hughes, in an interview

The Columbia disaster troubled and confused our American public. Why did this tragedy occur? What was the technical problem? Is it a sign? As science fails to answer these questions, the public turns to religion for answers and comfort.

Unlike other shuttle crews, the Columbia group was openly religious, and I believe that this element provoked an international, religious response from people in the aftermath of the disaster. The Columbia crew included Ilan Ramon, a Jew, who ate Kosher foods during the flight and brought a palm-sized Torah scroll from the Holocaust into space. Dr. Kalpana Chawla was an India-born Hindu woman, inspiring females in her native country to strive for something greater in life. The five American astronauts were from different denominations of the Christian faith. Commander Rick D. Husband often described his inspiration in space from a religious perspective: “There is no way that you can look at the stars, at the Earth, at the moon, and not come to realize that there is a God here who has a plan and who laid out the universe and the heavens” (2/9/2003, A15, Alan Cooperman, “Columbia Crew United in Faith; Astronauts Described Their Experience in Space in Spiritual Terms”).

We may never discover the exact cause of the Columbia disaster. While NASA searches for clues, the public searches for its own explanations from other sources. Many look to religion. When Mrs. Nancy Young, 55, realized that pieces of debris from the

Columbia were in her backyard, “she believed God worked in his own ways” (2/6/2003, A35, Edward Wong, “Object, Caught in a Tree, Prompts Thoughts of God”). For her, it was ironic that the parts of the Columbia were found in the backyards of those who helped with the launch. She believed God was giving all humanity a wake-up call.

Due to the presence of Ilan Ramon, an Israeli, the disaster provoked dark reactions from religious groups as well. Abu Hamza al-Masri claimed that the Columbia crew consisting of five Americans, a Hindu, and an Israeli was a “trinity of evil” punished by God. According to Masri, British Muslims would understand it as a “sign from God” that the first Israeli astronaut was killed over a town in Texas named Palestine (2/5/2003, A12, Don Van Natta Jr., “London Imam is Removed as Leader of Mosque”). The Charity Commission for England and Wales has banned Masri from preaching at the north London mosque.

In days after the Columbia disaster, religious services were held for the seven lost astronauts. At Grace Community Church, attended by astronauts Col. Rick D. Husband and Lt. Col. Michael P. Anderson, three thousand people solaced each other at the memorial service (2/6/2003, A36, “Church Two Astronauts Attended Remembers Their Faith”). Over 350 mourners congregated at a memorial service at Adas Israel Congregation in Northwest Washington to hear Hebrew prayers for the dead. Memorial services of every religion reflected the diverse nature of the Columbia crew, and they provided many ways for individuals to mourn as a community (2/6/2003, B01, Clarence Williams, “‘Our Heroes Are No Longer With Us’; At Jewish Service, Astronauts’ Diversity and Courage Remembered”).

In this time of crisis, political leaders are also looking to religion. President George W. Bush's address to the American public was heavily religious. His aides explained that the spiritual undertones of the speech gave hope that our nation will last, united and stronger, through this painful time. According to the *Washington Post's* Mike Allen, Bush invoked the heavens with these words: "The same Creator who names the stars also knows the names of the seven souls we mourn today...The crew of the shuttle Columbia did not return safely to Earth; yet we can pray that all are safely home" (2/3/2003, A06, "Comforting Words as a Matter of Faith; Bush Turned to Bible to Soothe Nation").

Religion separates society into groups, but it also brings the community together in its times of need. Religion explains the inexplicable and provides comfort. The international community mourns the loss of seven dedicated astronauts, and despite religious preferences, all of our prayers are raised to the heavens.