

What's changed? Reflections on September 11

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Missed opportunity

On the night after September 11, talk-show host Larry King intoned, “Our world has changed forever.” In many ways, I hoped that King was right. Many areas of American life seemed to demand change—the attachment to the myth of American exceptionalism, the administration’s isolationism, the corporate feeding frenzy of the Clinton years, and the political apathy of college students. September 11 gave us a taste of what it is like to live in many other parts of the world; perhaps that experience would promote a new sense of solidarity with sisters and brothers who have always known we live in a world at war.

As far as I can see, we missed the opportunity. Our world changed—for about three weeks. At the university, student concern turned out to be another form of self-concern. President Bush urged us to get back to business. We brushed ourselves off, went on with our shopping, got distracted from the war, gradually put away the faded flags, and that was that.

As for the church, in the time of our great distress, it reached out for comfort and laid hold not of the cross, but the flag, finding consolation not in the words of Jesus or but rather in a tune belted out by Bette Midler. I cannot think of a single fundamental change in our foreign policy or our self-understanding as a result of September 11.

There was, Christians keep trying to believe, only one day that changed our world forever and that day was a Friday, not a Tuesday. On that day suffering love was revealed to be stronger than death, and God, not nations, the ruler of the world. That news, especially after September 11, continues to be the only news that’s good.

—*William H. Willimon*

Muslim-Christian dialogue

For me, the events of September 11 ushered in a new stage in Muslim-Christian relations. In the aftermath of the attacks, the planners of three dialogues in which I have been involved, the New Jersey Christian-Muslim Project, the Midwest Catholic-Muslim Dialogue and the Mid-Atlantic Catholic-Muslim Dialogue, decided to discuss violence in our two traditions. Many Christians in recent years have acknowledged and denounced the long history of violence done by Christians, often in the name of God; Christians have also acknowledged passages in the Bible that are problematic, such as the holy-war texts of the Old Testament or anti-Jewish passages in the New.

Some Muslims can be quite critical of violence in their own tradition. One Muslim representative denounced the terrorists' interpretations of Islam and declared "a jihad against jihad." Some others, however, found it more difficult to acknowledge any problems. One imam argued that there is no violence in the Qur'an: cutting off the hand of a thief or stoning an adulteress is the will of God and thus, he argued, cannot be called violence.

At the Passaic County Islamic Center in New Jersey, another Muslim leader insisted that Muslim rulers have always treated Jews and Christians justly. When a contrary historical instance was cited, he stressed that if some people did things that violate Muslim principles, one could not call them Muslims.

Most dramatic of all, another Muslim leader, who had participated in an interfaith prayer service after 9/11, was confronted with his own fierce and violent anti-Semitic remarks from ten years earlier. After reflection, he publicly apologized and stated that at the earlier period he did not know any Jews or Christians personally; he claimed that through dialogue and interaction with others he had become a new person in the intervening years. Both Christians and Muslims face the challenge of moving beyond old stereotypes, of acknowledging the problematic aspects of our respective traditions, and working to build a healthy community of religions for the future.

—*Leo D. Lefebure*

The end of debate?

In the midst of tragedy and horror, there came some good. In a time that often seems bereft of heroes, it was good to have heroes. Few will soon forget those firemen heading up the stairs as everyone else fled down. In a world so full of ambiguity, it felt oddly good to confront something as unambiguously evil as murder

by hijacked plane. The U.S. invasion of Afghanistan raised more complicated issues, but it is at least good to think that many of that country's people—certainly its women—now have a shot at a better life.

But now something really wrong seems to be emerging. Our government apparently plans to invade Iraq. The worst consequences of such an action would be the deaths of great numbers of Americans and Iraqis. But there would also be isolation from our allies, disruption of oil supplies, unpredictable changes in Middle Eastern balances of power, and yet more hatred of Americans.

Our leaders seem unable to describe what “success” would mean—what sort of Iraq and Middle East they aim to create, let alone how they will do it without engaging in the “nation-building” they keep rejecting in Afghanistan.

We move toward this potentially disastrous invasion virtually without public debate, as if we were no longer a democracy at all. Many of us feel unease or worse, but the newspapers report only occasional leaks from the secret planning process, as if it all had a kind of inevitability. Somehow—is this the idea?—we are supposed to stop arguing about such things after September 11.

If part of the legacy of September 11 turns out to be that our nation moves toward a terrible mistake without ever having been able to talk about it, then tragedy will have been piled on tragedy.

—*William C. Placher*

Global theology

The reaction to the terrorist attacks is an ambiguous, expensive war on terrorism, with no foreseeable mark of victory. No government could fail to respond to such attacks and keep the loyalty of its people or claim to be a force for justice. Still, the war invites policies that threaten the principles on which the nation is based.

When ordinary power cannot control things, more power flows to the already powerful. Self-flagellation bred by the mistakes of the war in Vietnam may have dissipated, but the legacies of Jefferson, who sought constitutional limits on centralized power; of Lincoln, who sought a more coherent justice to bring freedom to the enslaved; and of Wilson, who sought moral agreements to limit nationalist power, are being threatened.

September 11 changed America's short-term political psychology, but it did not alter the most important developments of our age or create a sense of how to shape the emerging worldwide civil society. It did not stop the expansion of global communication systems, the quest for democratic orders with guarantees of human rights, the progress of science and technology, the advances in military prowess, the emergence of a global economic system, or the increasing influence of corporations as centers of power. Nor did it evoke a moral or spiritual vision for any of these spheres of change.

The most difficult challenge is theological. The global developments cited above are rooted in certain principles, convictions and values of the Christian tradition. While they are partly supported by some elements of other faiths, they are also opposed by critics from still other traditions who are ready to kill and die to destroy these global developments. None of the ongoing developments or efforts to modify or oppose them can be undertaken without attention to the operative power of religious convictions and to each religion's distinctive vision for the future.

How can we reasonably and justly assess these competing visions? What would a godly world society look like? Or is it true that we shall simply have a clash of civilizations?

Sad to say, few Christian clergy or public intellectuals are prepared to give guidance on these matters. Confessional theologies, secular ideologies and postmodern philosophies cannot provide what is needed. The need for a compelling cross-cultural public theology was made more obvious by the attack; its continued lack remains the greatest socio-spiritual crisis of our time. "Without a vision, the people perish."

—*Max L. Stackhouse*

Realism and hope

The tasks presented to the churches by September 11 remain unfinished. Churches need to continue to develop a theology of the religions that is ecumenical in spirit but also recognizes complexities and oppositions. The churches should enter conversations with other faith communities about common challenges and realities (such as international politics, terrorism and the use of military power).

In this context, I would emphasize the need both to develop realistic perspectives and to lift up reasons for hope. The events of September 11 call for realistic

theological interpretations of what people are capable of doing; of social, cultural and political pressures in the Arab world; of the functions of nation-states and their armed forces; of current and contemplated military operations and the morality of war; and of the tendency even of well-established democracies to neglect human rights and civil liberties when vital interests are threatened. September 11 also offers reasons to hope for renewed possibilities and communities—the routinely heroic performances of New York City firefighters, police, and government officials; the ability of the U.S. military to carry out missions with effectiveness and restraint; the prospects (however fragile) for stability and tolerably just government in Afghanistan.

Now is not the time either to celebrate or lament the churches' responses. It is time to sustain theological discourse and reflection informed by renewed attention to some classic themes: human nature, the persistence of human fault, and irrepressible grace.

—*Douglas Ottati*

A hostile global village

"We live in a globalized world, only I can't go there." So said a young American soon after 9/11. Whatever truth there may be in the belief that "everything has changed," much has certainly changed for the youngest of us. Coming to world-awareness in the '80s and '90s, American youth had many reasons to feel that they were stepping into a wide-open society. The cold war was over, with the U.S. on top. One read regularly of 30-year-old "Dot.com" millionaires. You could pick up your cell phone and call a friend in Tokyo. It was a world without borders, with Internet, e-mail, CNN—and that glittering stock market. Windows on the World: what a great name for the top floor of the World Trade Center.

Abruptly our unalloyed optimism did change. Americans were put on notice that our country has engendered resentments which can yield exquisitely planned murder. The unkindest cut in our national self-esteem and security was this: the terrorists targeted us for what some of us may have done but for which they deem all of us responsible. A yellow Star of David once identified Jews in Nazi Germany as public enemies simply for being Jews. We now have our own taste of vicious identity politics. An American accent can make us targets of terrorist choice anywhere in the world.

Depressing? Yes, but especially for the optimistic American young. Somehow we who wanted to be their teachers did not adequately warn them that the global society bursting upon us is suffused with limits: limits of power, wealth, security and virtue on all sides. It turns out that the wealthiest, most militarily powerful nation in history is vulnerable to other powers, other perceptions of justice, and hatreds based on alien critiques of American goodness.

What have we all to learn from this, our new experience of vulnerability? How shall we sort out the true from the false perceptions of ourselves across the spectrum of human opinion worldwide? Is global friendship possible now in the face of global enemies? What might God be telling us in it all? Such questions were not on the mental horizon of American 15-year-olds a few years ago; they are now.

—*Donald W. Shriver Jr.*

In need of self-doubt

Until “Go shopping!” became the favored response, there were a few weeks when the media and public intellectuals reflected on why 9/11 happened. Then the window closed. Neither our national nor our religious leaders have offered us sustained help in repairing the unlovely sides of the American lifestyle and foreign policy that contribute to our situation. Our dignity now comes, not from the joy of conscious integrity, but vicariously, through our rescue workers—men trained to respond with skill, brawn and determination when what needs to be done is immediate and clear.

The glee in parts of the world at our vulnerability should give us pause. We stand united behind a lifestyle that we insist on exporting, even though others may not want it. Our foreign policy pursues our interests, not the needs of those around the globe. We act as if the world were no more than a market for our goods. Perhaps it was sometime around the Columbine school shootings that we started to realize that something is wrong, and it has something to do with us, not them. Or maybe it was Oklahoma City. These were not just isolated horrors; it turns out they were the beginnings of a national trend: people shooting each other in the office, on the highway, in school, over sneakers, at a red light. The current gush of business and pedophilia scandals offers fresh opportunities for self-examination. We are not in control of our own culture.

We are distressed and depressed that we are fat and rude, yet resist measures that might recoup respect from abroad and restore our self-respect: learning foreign

languages, practicing sexual modesty, and lowering our demand for, well, everything. To begin seeing the rest of the world as itself, rather than as an extension of our own needs, perhaps every American should spend a night in jail, turn off the water and electricity for a week, or simply remain silent and watch for 24 hours. In short, the great lost opportunity after 9/11 is for some healthy self-doubt.
—*Ellen T. Charry*

Still doing theology

Given the widespread assertion that “everything changed” on September 11, we would do well to recall the wisdom of the Swiss theologian Karl Barth during a far worse time. Barth was an unrelenting opponent of the Nazi monstrosity. Yet he steadfastly refused to be panicked by this unprecedented evil, as if it required a new definition of Christian faith. Instead, Barth called his colleagues in the Confessing Church to do “theology and only theology”—as if nothing had happened.

Barth had nothing “new to say,” he insisted, “apart from what I have always endeavored to say: that we [can] have no other gods than God, that holy scripture [is] enough to guide the church into all truth, that the grace of Jesus Christ [is] enough to forgive our sins and to order our life.”

Yet Barth also admitted—and after September 11, so must we—that his situation had changed, and that his Christian witness had changed with the horrors of his time. Theology was “no longer just an academic theory,” Barth later declared. “Without any conscious intention or endeavor on my part, [what I had to say] took on the character of an appeal, a challenge, a battle-cry, a confession.”

So must the work and worship of our churches and their colleges acquire a keen new urgency, an authentic gospel militancy. For we can say to a terror-traumatized world what it cannot say to itself. Amidst the lowering gloom, we are called both to announce and to enact the Good News that the victory has already been won, that the battle is finished and over, and thus that we can still sing the Alleluia that alone can rout the circumambient sadness.

—*Ralph C. Wood*

Religion and violence

Not everything changed on September 11, but what happened that day signaled how much everything had been changing, some of it for a very long time. Though we

continue to fear another terrorist attack, it may well be that the particular network that planned September 11 has already been effectively destroyed. That would be a victory of sorts, but it should free our attention for the larger problems.

The massive nuclear threat we had faced since the beginning of the cold war has been replaced by a more random violence that comes without immediate provocation and without warning. The predictable calculus of enemies who were protecting empires of their own has been replaced by martyrs who have nothing to protect and who aim only to inflict the most devastating blow they can. In that new world, conventional military forces are often ineffective, and religiously motivated violence is a factor to be reckoned with. The modern state, which has served for at least half a millennium to wield military power in the national interest and to contain the threat of other kinds of violence, suddenly appears incapable of doing the main job for which it was created.

In this new situation, religious leadership across all lines of creed and culture will have to take new responsibility for dealing with religiously motivated violence, because governments are no longer able to do so. The idea that our deepest beliefs about the value and destiny of human life are “private,” so that we need not concern ourselves about how others think about these things, is about to disappear, along with the equally outdated idea that the threat of state coercion is sufficient to keep the effects of those beliefs under control.

—*Robin W. Lovin*