

The language of terror

We have a choice which language we speak, how the conversation goes on.

by [Rowan Williams](#) in the [September 26, 2001](#) issue

For a couple of hours on September 11 I, along with a lot of other people in southern Manhattan, had to face the real possibility of sudden and violent death as buildings collapsed and the streets filled with choking dust, fumes and falling debris. I remember the strong feeling, “Now I know just a little of what it is like for so many human beings, Israelis and Palestinians now, and Iraqis a few years ago.”

And, thinking about it in the hours and days afterwards, it seemed that there was a clear word here. This moment of terror and extreme vulnerability brought us close to others—we’d have a language in common, even though our experience was less and our danger short-lived. How could such a common language become normal, the ordinary currency of human beings?

The other thought was this: We’ve been “spoken to” in the language of terror and hate; if we reply in the same terms, we say, “All right, that’s how we are going to go on, that’s what we treat as normal.” We have a choice which language we speak, how the conversation goes on.

It seemed that morning that the closer you were to facing and accepting death, the harder it was to wish the fear on anyone else. I know this is too simple—the suicide bomber accepts death, ardently wanting others to die. But perhaps the difference is that he is in control, his “martyrdom” is a drama he is producing. For others, the threat is about being helpless, not being in control, and I think that, for them, it is hard to wish it on another. The prospect of death elbows aside thoughts of power and revenge.

The unspeakable tragedy of thousands of innocent dead cannot be made “better” by more deaths. It may be humanly as unforgivable as it gets; but that is not the same as saying that revenge (as opposed to just punishment) is what is needed.

God chooses to speak a common language with us by sharing the experience of terror and death. And when we speak to God the language of hatred and rejection, nails and spears, nail bombs and air strikes, terror attacks and the bleeding bodies of children, in Ireland, Baghdad, Jerusalem or New York, God refuses to answer in that language. He can only speak his own Word which, in the incarnation, is a Word shared with us. But how hard for us really to believe we are free to speak God's language! Perhaps only the terrible moments of vulnerability remind us of it. How do we make it normal and natural? But does the church exist, ultimately, for any end but this?