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September 11, 2001: A Pacifist Response

I want to write honestly about September 11, 2001. But it is not easy. Even now, some months after that horrible event, I find it hard to know what can be said or, perhaps more difficult, what should be said. Even more difficult, I am not sure for what or how I should pray. I am a Christian. I am a Christian pacifist. Being Christian and being a pacifist are not two things for me. I would not be a pacifist if I were not a Christian, and I find it hard to understand how one can be a Christian without being a pacifist. But what does a pacifist have to say in the face of terror? Pray for peace? I have no use for sentimentality.

Indeed some have suggested pacifists have nothing to say in a time like the time after September 11, 2001. The editors of the magazine *First Things* assert that “those who in principle oppose the use of military force have no legitimate part in the discussion about how military force should be used.”¹ They make this assertion because according to them the only form of pacifism that is defensible requires the disavowal by the pacifist of any political relevance. That is not the kind of pacifism I represent. I am a pacifist because I think nonviolence is the necessary

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condition for a politics not based on death. A politics that is not determined by the fear of death means no strong distinction can be drawn between politics and military force.

Yet I cannot deny that September 11, 2001, creates and requires a kind of silence. We desperately want to “explain” what happened. Explanation domesticates terror, making it part of “our” world. I believe attempts to explain must be resisted. Rather, we should learn to wait before what we know not, hoping to gain time and space sufficient to learn how to speak without lying. I should like to think pacifism names the habits and community necessary to gain the time and place that is an alternative to revenge. But I do not pretend that I know how that is accomplished.

Yet I do know that much that has been said since September 11, 2001, has been false. In the first hours and days following the fall of the towers, there was a stunned silence. President Bush flew from one safe haven to another, unsure what had or was still to happen. He was quite literally in the air. I wish he might have been able to maintain that posture, but he is the leader of the “free world.” Something must be done. Something must be said. We must be in control. The silence must be shattered. He knew the American people must be comforted. Life must return to normal.

So he said, “We are at war.” Magic words necessary to reclaim the everyday. War is such normalizing discourse. Americans know war. This is our Pearl Harbor. Life can return to normal. We are frightened, and ironically war makes us feel safe. The way to go on in the face of September 11, 2001, is to find someone to kill. Americans are, moreover, good at killing. We often fail to acknowledge how accomplished we are in the art of killing. Indeed we, the American people, have become masters of killing. In our battles, only the enemy has to die. Some in our military are embarrassed by our expertise in war making, but what can they do? They are but following orders.

So the silence created by destruction was soon shattered by the need for revenge—a revenge all the more unforgiving because we cannot forgive those who flew the planes for making us acknowledge our vulnerability. The flag that flew in mourning was soon transformed into a pride-filled thing; the bloodstained flag of victims transformed into the flag of the American indomitable spirit. We will prevail no matter how many people we must kill to rid ourselves of the knowledge Americans died as victims. Americans do not die as victims. They have to be heroes. So the stock trader who happened to work on the seventy-second floor becomes as heroic as the policemen

and the firemen who were doing their jobs. No one who died on September 11, 2001, gets to die a meaningless death. That is why their deaths must be revenged.

I am a pacifist, so the American “we” cannot be my “me.” But to be alienated from the American “we” is not easy. I am a neophyte pacifist. I never really wanted to be a pacifist. I had learned from Reinhold Niebuhr that if you desire justice you had better be ready to kill someone along the way. But then John Howard Yoder and his extraordinary book *The Politics of Jesus* came along. Yoder convinced me that if there is anything to this Christian “stuff,” it must surely involve the conviction that the Son would rather die on the cross than for the world to be redeemed by violence. Moreover, the defeat of death through resurrection makes possible as well as necessary that Christians live nonviolently in a world of violence. Christian nonviolence is not a strategy to rid the world of violence, but rather the way Christians must live in a world of violence. In short Christians are not nonviolent because we believe our nonviolence is a strategy to rid the world of war, but rather because faithful followers of Christ in a world of war cannot imagine being anything else than nonviolent.

But what does a pacifist have to say in the face of the terror September 11, 2001, names? I vaguely knew when I first declared I was a pacifist that there might be some serious consequences. To be nonviolent might even change my life. But I do not really think I understood what that change might entail until September 11. For example after I declared I was a pacifist, I quit singing the “Star-Spangled Banner.” I will stand when it is sung, particularly at baseball games, but I do not sing. Not to sing the “Star-Spangled Banner” is a small thing that reminds me that my first loyalty is not to the United States but to God and God’s church. I confess it never crossed my mind that such small acts might over the years make my response to September 11 quite different from that of the good people who sing “God Bless America”—so different that I am left in saddened silence.

That difference, moreover, haunts me. My father was a bricklayer and a good American. He worked hard all his life and hoped his work would not only support his family, but also make some contribution to our common life. He held a war-critical job in World War II, so he was never drafted. Only one of his five bricklaying brothers was in that war, but he was never exposed to combat. My family was never militarized, but as Texans they were good Americans. For most of my life I, too, was a good American, assuming that

I owed much to the society that enabled me, the son of a bricklayer, to gain a Ph.D. at Yale—even if the Ph.D. was in theology.

Of course there was Vietnam. For many of us Vietnam was extended training necessary for the development of a more critical attitude toward the government of the United States. Yet most of us critical of the war in Vietnam did not think our opposition to that war made us less loyal Americans. Indeed the criticisms of the war were based on an appeal to the highest American ideals. Vietnam was a time of great tension, but the politics of the antiwar movement did not require those opposed to the war to think of themselves as fundamentally standing outside the American mainstream. Most critics of Vietnam (just as many that now criticize the war in Afghanistan) based their dissent on their adherence to American ideals that they felt the war was betraying. That but indicates why I feel so isolated even among the critics of the war in Afghanistan. I do not even share their allegiance to American ideals.

So I simply did not share the reaction of most Americans to the destruction of the World Trade Center. Of course I recoil from murder on such a scale, but I hope I remember that one murder is too many. That Americans have hurried to call what happened “war” strikes me as self-defeating. If this is war, then bin Laden has won. He thinks he is a warrior not a murderer. Just to the extent the language of war is used, he is honored. But in their hurry to call this war, Americans have no time for careful discriminations.

Where does that leave me? Does it mean, as an estranged friend recently wrote me, that I disdain all “natural loyalties” that bind us together as human beings, even submitting such loyalties to a harsh and unforgiving standard? Does it mean that I speak as a solitary individual, failing to acknowledge that our lives are interwoven with the lives of others, those who have gone before, those among whom we live, those with whom we identify, and those with whom we are in Christian communion? Do I refuse to acknowledge my life is made possible by the gifts of others? Do I forsake all forms of patriotism, failing to acknowledge that we as a people are better off because of the sacrifices that were made in World War II? To this I can only answer, “Yes.” If you call patriotism “natural,” I certainly do disavow that connection. Such a disavowal, I hope, does not mean I am inattentive to the gifts I have received from past and present neighbors.

In response to my friend I pointed out that because he, too, is a Christian I assumed he also disdained some “natural loyalties.” After all he had his

children baptized. The “natural love” between parents and children is surely reconfigured when children are baptized into the death and resurrection of Christ. Paul says:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in the newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.²

Christians often tend to focus on being united with Christ in his resurrection, forgetting that we are also united with him in his death. What could that mean if it does not mean that Christians must be ready to die, indeed have their children die, rather than betray the Gospel? Any love not transformed by the love of God cannot help but be the source of the violence we perpetrate on one another in the name of justice. Such a love may appear harsh and dreadful from the perspective of the world, but Christians believe such a love is life-giving not life-denying.

Of course living a life of nonviolence may be harsh. Certainly you have to imagine, and perhaps even face, that you will have to watch the innocent suffer and even die for your convictions. But that is no different from those that claim they would fight a just war. After all, the just warrior is committed to avoiding any direct attack on noncombatants, which might well mean that more people will die because the just warrior refuses to do an evil that a good may come. For example, on just-war grounds the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were clearly murder. If you are serious about just war, you must be ready to say that it would be better that more people died on the beaches of Japan than to have committed one murder, much less the bombing of civilian populations.

This last observation may suggest that when all is said and done, a pacifist response to September 11, 2001, is just one more version of the anti-American sentiments expressed by what many consider to be the American Left. I say “what many consider” because it is very unclear if there is a Left left in America. Nowhere is that more apparent than in the support to the war on terrorism given by those who identify as the “Left.” Yet much has been made of the injustice of American foreign policy that lends a kind of intelligibility to the hatred given form on September 11. I am no defender of

American foreign policy, but the problem with such lines of criticism is that no matter how immoral what the American government may have done in the world, such immorality cannot explain or justify the attack on the World Trade Center.

American imperialism, often celebrated as the new globalism, is a frightening power. It is frightening not only because of the harm such power inflicts on the innocent, but because it is difficult to imagine alternatives. Pacifists are often challenged after an event like September 11 with the question, "Well, what alternative do you have to bombing Afghanistan?" Such a question assumes that pacifists must have an alternative foreign policy. My only response is I do not have a foreign policy. I have something better—a church constituted by people who would rather die than kill.

Indeed I fear that absent a countercommunity to challenge America, bin Laden has given Americans what they so desperately needed—a war without end. America is a country that lives off the moral capital of our wars. War names the time we send the youth to kill and die (maybe) in an effort to assure ourselves the lives we lead are worthy of such sacrifices. They kill and die to protect our "freedom." But what can freedom mean if the prime instance of the exercise of such freedom is to shop? The very fact that we can and do go to war is a moral necessity for a nation of consumers. War makes clear we must believe in something even if we are not sure what that something is, except that it has something to do with the "American way of life."

What a gift bin Laden has therefore given America. Americans were in despair because we won the cold war. Americans won by outspending the USSR, proving that we can waste more money on guns than they can or did. But what do Americans do after they have won a war? The war was necessary to give moral coherence. We had to cooperate with one another because we were at war. How can America make sense of what it means for us to be "a people" if we have no common enemy? We were in a dangerous funk having nothing better to do than entertain ourselves with the soap opera Bill Clinton was. Now we have something better to do. We can fight the war against terrorism.

The good thing, moreover, about the war on terrorism is it has no end, which makes it very doubtful that this war can be considered just. If a war is just, your enemy must know before the war begins what political purpose the war is to serve. In other words, they need to know from the beginning

what the conditions are if they choose to surrender. So you cannot fight a just war if it is “a war to end all wars” (World War I) or for “unconditional surrender” (World War II). But a “war on terrorism” is a war without limit. Americans want to wipe this enemy off the face of the earth. Moreover, America even gets to decide who counts and does not count as a terrorist.

Which means Americans get to have it any way they want it. Some that are captured, for example, are prisoners of war; some are detainees. No problem. When you are the biggest kid on the block, you can say whatever you want to say, even if what you say is nonsense. We all know the first casualty in war is truth. So the conservatives who have fought the war against “post-modernism” in the name of “objective truth,” the same conservatives that now rule us, assume they can use language any way they please.

That Americans get to decide who is and who is not a terrorist means that this is not only a war without clear purpose, but also a war without end. From now on we can be in a perpetual state of war. America is always at her best when she is on permanent war footing. Moreover, when our country is at war, it has no space to worry about the extraordinary inequities that constitute our society, no time to worry about poverty or those parts of the world that are ravaged by hunger and genocide. Everything—civil liberties, due process, the protection of the law—must be subordinated to the one great moral enterprise of winning the unending war against terrorism.

At the heart of the American desire to wage endless war is the American fear of death. The American love of high-tech medicine is but the other side of the war against terrorism. Americans are determined to be safe, to be able to get out of this life alive. On September 11, Americans were confronted with their worst fear—a people ready to die as an expression of their profound moral commitments. Some speculate such people must have chosen death because they were desperate or, at least, they were so desperate that death was preferable to life. Yet their willingness to die stands in stark contrast to a politics that asks of its members in response to September 11 to shop.

Ian Buruma and Vishai Margalit observe in their article “Occidentalism” that lack of heroism is the hallmark of a bourgeois ethos.³ Heroes court death. The bourgeois is addicted to personal safety. They concede that much in an affluent, market-driven society is mediocre, “but when contempt for bourgeois creature comforts becomes contempt for life itself you know the West is under attack.” According to Buruma and Margalit, the West (which

they point out is not just the geographical West) should oppose the full force of calculating antibourgeois heroism, of which Al-Qaeda is but one representative, through the means we know best—cutting off their money supply. Of course, Buruma and Margalit do not tell us how that can be done, given the need for oil to sustain the bourgeois society they favor.

Christians are not called to be heroes or shoppers. We are called to be holy. We do not think holiness is an individual achievement, but rather a set of practices to sustain a people who refuse to have their lives determined by the fear and denial of death. We believe by so living we offer our non-Christian brothers and sisters an alternative to all politics based on the denial of death. Christians are acutely aware that we seldom are faithful to the gifts God has given us, but we hope the confession of our sins is a sign of hope in a world without hope. This means pacifists do have a response to September 11, 2001. Our response is to continue living in a manner that witnesses to our belief that the world was not changed on September 11, 2001. The world was changed during the celebration of Passover in A.D. 33.

Mark and Louise Zwick, founders of the Houston Catholic Worker House of Hospitality, embody the life made possible by the death and resurrection of Jesus. They know, moreover, that Christian nonviolence cannot and must not be understood as a position that is no more than being “against violence.” If pacifism is no more than “not violence,” it betrays the form of life to which Christians believe they have been called by Christ. Drawing on Nicholas Berdyaev, the Zwicks rightly observe that “the split between the Gospel and our culture is the drama of our times,” but they also remind us that “one does not free persons by detaching them from the bonds that paralyze them: one frees persons by attaching them to their destiny.” Christian nonviolence is but another name for the friendship we believe God has made possible and constitutes the alternative to the violence that grips our lives.

I began by noting that I am not sure for what I should pray. But prayer often is a form of silence. The following prayer I hope does not drown out silence. I wrote the prayer as a devotion to begin a Duke Divinity School general meeting. I was able to write the prayer because of a short article I had just read in the *Houston Catholic Worker* by Jean Vanier.⁴ Vanier is the founder of the L’arche movement—a movement that believes God has saved us by giving us the good work of living with and learning to be friends with those the world calls retarded. I end with this prayer because it is all I have to give.

Great God of surprise, our lives continue to be haunted by the spectre of September 11, 2001. Life must go on and we go on keeping on—even meeting again as the Divinity School Council. Is this what Barth meant in 1933 when he said we must go on “as though nothing has happened”? To go on as though nothing has happened can sound like a counsel of despair, of helplessness, of hopelessness. We want to act, to do something to reclaim the way things were. Which, I guess, is but a reminder that one of the reasons we are so shocked, so violated, by September 11 is the challenge presented to our prideful presumption that we are in control, that we are going to get out of life alive. To go on “as though nothing has happened” surely requires us to acknowledge you are God and we are not. It is hard to remember that Jesus did not come to make us safe, but rather he came to make us disciples, citizens of your new age, a kingdom of surprise. That we live in the end times is surely the basis for our conviction that you have given us all the time we need to respond to September 11 with “small acts of beauty and tenderness,” which Jean Vanier tells us, if done with humility and confidence “will bring unity to the world and break the chain of violence.” So we pray give us humility that we may remember that the work we do today, the work we do every day, is false and pretentious if it fails to serve those who day in and day out are your small gestures of beauty and tenderness.

Notes

- 1 “In a Time of War,” *First Things* (December 2001).
- 2 Romans 6:3–5.
- 3 *New York Review of Books*, January 17, 2002, 4–7.
- 4 “L’arche Founder Responds to Violence,” *Houston Catholic Worker*, November 16, 2001.

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