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SEPTEMBER 11 AND CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY IN THE UNITED STATES

Thomas Hughson

THE EVENTS OF SEPTEMBER 11 2001 have altered the lives of people throughout the world, not just in the United States and in Afghanistan. This brief article, however, focuses on the experience of Christians in the United States. Thousands of families, predominantly middle- and low-income, lost husbands, wives, children and friends, whether on the aircraft, in the World Trade Center or at the Pentagon. If the victims represented the US population at large, over 90% were Christians; others were Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, or Buddhist; some may have had no specific religious affiliation. But this may not be fully accurate, because citizens from more than 60 nations perished when the World Trade Center towers came down. Al-Quaida's meticulously planned, low-tech assault changed everyday life in the US. Defence measures were tightened; security measures at borders, in airports, and aboard planes became more stringent. Civilian flight crews and airline passengers assumed the worst about any aggressive behaviour, and acted against it.

Soon some commentators noticed that people in public spaces seemed to feel more connected to one another, especially in New York. Others remarked that ambitious young women and men were talking about a new focus on family life and friendships. A few noted that when people talked about heroism, they were talking, not so much about sports and film stars, but rather about those who fell in the line of duty that day. Nevertheless, it is interior images which are now the sharpest effects of the attacks, images carrying a weight of subdued grief. The memorial illuminations at the World Trade Center were turned off in March. Security breaches at airports cause inconvenience but less alarm. The sense of national emergency that shaped autumn 2001 has begun to wane. A version of normality has returned. Admittedly, students, workers and celebrities across the nation are still wearing caps marked 'FDNY', in tribute to the Fire Department of New York, and the *New York Times* ran capsule biographies of World Trade Center

victims for much of the following year. It is the broad contours of daily life after September 11 that are different, not many of the external details.

Can one say anything about how September 11 has affected less visible currents in the lives of Christians in the United States—their faith, their interior lives, their spirituality? Has the trauma intervened in religious spontaneity so as to plunge people into a new condition of perplexity? One possible reading of the situation is that September 11 has indeed drawn Christians from a relatively well-organized society into a collective experience of no-exit. And this experience may be positive. September 11 may have drawn us, to use ideas of John of the Cross,¹ into a dark night of the American soul. John helps us see that fidelity to God, whether for an individual or a church, does not

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necessarily mean that the spiritual life carries on as usual. Quite the contrary. God can draw a person or a Church into a condition of perplexity: familiar categories cease to work; one feels unable to pray; one is challenged to stay faithful. The dark night is a purifying passage to deeper love through the transformation of desire. Though September 11 led many US Americans of all religions to public prayer, to the standard religious responses of civil spirituality, there was also a certain confusion accompanying this for many Christians. They were absorbing a pain and loss that were somehow too acute to be contained in this way. Perhaps September 11 marked the beginning of something new. Perhaps the Lord of history is using this occasion to draw US Christians beyond civil spirituality, transforming their desires and drawing them into closer intimacy.

An alternative reading focuses on the heroic devotion to duty shown by so many. We can think of Fr Mychal Judge OFM, Chaplain to the Fire Department of New York, as well as of the firefighters, the policemen, and the Port Authority personnel who died in the World Trade Center. Such people may have opened up some new possibilities. They show us that our occupations can be seen primarily as service of others—families, friends, society—rather than as ‘careers’ oriented

¹ In a widely appreciated article, ‘Impasse and Dark Night’, Constance Fitzgerald OCD has explored various forms of societal impasse in terms of John of the Cross’ dark night of the soul. The article is most easily available in *Women’s Spirituality: Resources for Christian Development*, edited by Joann Wolski Conn (New York: Paulist Press, 1996 [1986]), pp. 410-435. Thanks to Carol Ann Smith SHCJ for helpful remarks on this subject.

towards self-interest and private gain. They are counter-witnesses to an individualistic model of citizenship. They help Roman Catholics appropriate their Church's social teaching more deeply; they model Vatican II's teaching about Church-as-communion being the full expression of human existence, understood as inherently relational. But it is too soon to know whether such a change in attitudes might take hold. Again, it would require a transformation of desires: success would no longer be defined by wealth.

Another approach would be more negative. Perhaps the attacks need to be understood in terms of what Ignatius says about the Two Kingdoms in the *Spiritual Exercises*. Perhaps they reveal the complete opposite of Christ's teaching about God's Kingdom and how it advances. Perhaps they confronted Christians in the United States with cruel deeds, with the very opposite of the Kingdom of justice, mercy, and love. There is undoubtedly a truth here, but again we cannot yet tell whether it will be of lasting significance.

Many Christians, whether versed in Ignatian spirituality or not, find themselves without any familiar path of response to September 11. The events raise questions about the situation of Islamic peoples, and about solidarity with the oppressed, that cannot be easily answered. One frequent, though in my view mistaken, response interpreted the al-Qaeda assault on civilians as a desperate and illegitimate, but nevertheless understandable, lashing out. The stricken Third World was protesting against an international economic order that keeps the poor in misery. The sensitivity to international social justice lying behind such a response is obviously admirable. But the response avoids an uncomfortable fact. It was not a desire to improve anyone's economic condition that determined the goals, strategy and practice of Usama bin Laden, of the former Taliban authorities, and of al-Qaeda: it was a set of theocratic principles. The events of September 11 came out of a theology quite unconcerned with the economic condition of the poor, whether in Afghanistan, in Somalia or elsewhere. Among documents retrieved from an Afghan cave was a written oath by one of al-Qaeda's *jihadi*: 'that I will slaughter infidels my entire life . . . and with the will of God I will do these killings . . .'. Such sentiments are not those of a liberation movement.

We are in no position to reflect fully on the impact of September 11: there is no clarity regarding what it means for Christianity. US citizens are still confused about it; and in any case spiritual experience

of any kind cannot be reduced to particular doctrines. Those most directly affected, those who have borne the full weight of the suffering, are in the end the ones with sufficient knowledge and standing to speak with moral authority. Whatever clarity is attainable will emerge according to its own rhythm; it will not simply respond to our search for answers. For the moment, all we can do is pray for enlightenment, and make some brief conjectures.

Listening

We can begin by noting that September 11 introduced US citizens to a new sense of vulnerability to external attack. This has not been part of US consciousness: the country is flanked by only two nations, and its relationships with its neighbours to the north and south are peaceful. Such vulnerability is not part of US American civil spirituality, not part of how the citizens of a superpower articulate their national identity. US history has certainly been marked by suffering, but not by this kind of vulnerability. The Civil War was internal, with limited incursions from abroad. US citizens have died in foreign wars since then of course, notably in World War II. Here, however, it was civilians who died, at home. The experience was unsought, unexpected. Such an experience cannot but call forth—however fleetingly—an experience of being placed near the Cross: the saving Cross of the sinless Christ. For people in this condition, words of solidarity from ordinary people and from officials around the world became a powerfully consoling balm. Blessed is the nation that mourns, for it shall be consoled in seeing the goodness of others.

Perhaps the spiritual lives of US Christians need to carry this vulnerability. Perhaps US Christians need to learn more about this strength received from other peoples, and to drop the illusion of national self-sufficiency. If so, it would represent a shift in US civil spirituality.

Since the eighteenth century, millenarian expectation in the United States, born of revivalist evangelical readings of the Book of Revelation, has looked to Christ's return. This apocalyptic perspective animated the Second Great Awakening,² and it has shaped the national culture in many ways. US civil spirituality has often imagined the righteous Lamb

² This term is used to denote an evangelical revival movement in the 19th century that affected all Protestant denominations, Catholicism, and US civil religion.

of God, Christ, as the returning Judge of the world. It has then identified with the righteous who will be blessed before his throne, while the unrighteous will be assigned eternal loss—a judgment occurring not in heaven but on earth. So, for example, the famous Civil War anthem sung by the northern army, ‘The Battle Hymn of the Republic’, uses such language with reference to victory over the South. President Reagan’s reference to the Soviet Union as an ‘evil empire’ drew not just on *Star Wars* but also on the Book of Revelation.

Within such a framework, the suffering endured by Christians in the United States at the hands of their enemies is part of the travail endured by the saints before the coming of Christ. The story will be completed when the reality of divine judgment appears in human history, perhaps soon; US Christians will then appear as agents of divine righteousness. President George W. Bush floated the idea of naming the military campaign against al-Qaida as ‘Operation Infinite Justice’. This counterpart to a *jihad* did not sit well with many US Americans and it was dropped. But it was a fleeting glimpse of a civil spirituality—a civil spirituality that assumes not only that God is on our side, but also that God has chosen the United States to be an instrument of divine righteousness and justice.



A view of the World Trade Center

This civil spirituality differs from a more typically Catholic spirituality of the cross. This latter would understand the present suffering of Christians as a sign of nearness to the crucified Christ, nearness to One who can redeem suffering by drawing it into his own passion. Perhaps, then, September 11 is inviting US Catholics back to their own deepest experience of faith, and to transform what they have absorbed from civil millenarianism. Perhaps September 11 has reawakened US Catholics' sense of being linked to an international communion of Churches; perhaps it has begun to transform their desire, and to lead them into a more visible witness to Christianity as international communion. Perhaps it has begun to wean them off understanding themselves as a righteous body of saints starkly and apocalyptically opposed to its enemies. Perhaps we have begun to defend the common good by a variety of means—means which may include military force, but which extend beyond such an option.

It should nevertheless be noted that this experience of vulnerability has not called any of the major institutions of US society into question. Neither the US government, nor the public at large, nor Christians specifically feel themselves in a state of impending collapse. September 11 has not undermined the credibility of either church or state; nor has it caused people to have any doubt as to whether the government has a basis on which to govern or to think that Christianity itself has been put at risk. By contrast, the unprecedented closeness of the 2000 presidential election was quite threatening. Al-Quaida would have done more to destabilise the institutions of democracy had it stuffed ballot boxes in Miami. A similar point can be made about people's sense of their faith. Perhaps grieving families ask, 'why did this happen?', but in general it is clergy scandals, not September 11, that have had a negative effect on the confidence of US Roman Catholics in their Church. Indeed, the heroic witness of the Fire Department, which includes many Roman Catholics, has moved the nation to awe and gratitude.

'Lord, Whose Sin Was It?'

The crash of Flight 93, and the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, provoked both the religious right and the secular left to offer answers to the kind of question put to Jesus: 'whose sin was it, theirs or

their parents?³ For which sin, and whose, did the United States deserve September 11? Jesus' strategy with such questions was to deflect the inquirers' interest, to move them forward from blaming the victim into a larger framework of repentance and belief in the gospel. The religious right, by contrast, spoke of America's sins of pornography, homosexuality, drug-abuse and abortion: finally God had been provoked into withdrawing protection so that instruments of wrath could inflict long-deserved punishment upon an immoral nation. With equal assurance, the secular left declared that the attacks were an obvious result of blundering imperialism.

However, most people did not seem to think September 11 was so clearly and easily commensurate with America's wrong-doing, of whichever sort. They wondered instead about Usama bin Laden's religio-political vision of the world. The Cold War had set the West in more or less acute confrontation against a regime that was officially atheistic. By contrast, this new situation revolved around another set of issues that could not, despite the efforts of some, be assimilated into a Cold War framework. It was no longer that the US was standing on the side of a social order open to human spirituality and divine transcendence, and opposed to the dialectical materialism of the Soviet Union. Something more unsettling had emerged: now the very liberty of the West was being violently rejected as godless secularism. Perhaps the hand of God was to be sought, not in any message the terrorists were bringing, nor indeed as guiding any measures of retaliation, but rather in how people were being led, tentatively, to cope with the ambiguities of a new, post-Cold War historical condition.

September 11 cannot be understood within a Cold War framework

During the week after September 11 Edward Cardinal Egan of New York was invited by a concerned television pundit to explain how a good God could let such a terrible thing happen. What were parents to tell their children? Instead, however, of trying to develop a theodicy, as Leibniz had done in response to the Lisbon earthquake, the Cardinal had the wisdom just to recount his experiences with suffering victims and with distraught family members. These people were not asking for explanations, but for someone to be with them, to pray with them, to contact their loved ones. The Cardinal's response seemed to emerge from a spiritual reflex influenced by Vatican II's *Gaudium et spes*. In that

³ John 9:2, compare Luke 13:1-5.



document, the response of faith to suffering takes the form of practical, effective solidarity, rather than theoretical justification of God's ways. Cardinal Egan was giving public witness to a spirituality that had appropriated the spirit of the gospel as taught by Vatican II. Sharing the Cross of Christ had been integral to every Christian spirituality. But *Gaudium et spes* presented compassionate solidarity as a renewed way of being Christian in a broken world. Compassion and effective service—as modelled in different ways by the men of the Fire Department and by the Cardinal in this response—are surely the best immediate answer to questions about a disaster, even if there may be a place for theodicy later.

Al-Qaida had laid its plans according to an accusation that amounted to an absolutely certain and brutally simple answer to the question, 'Lord, whose sin was it that caused September 11?' The sin was that of a modern West still thought of—strange though it may seem—as Christendom: specifically the United States physically trespassing into Saudi Arabia and supporting Israel, as well as the more diffused Western intrusions of mass media and global marketing.

Though there were a few vengeful incidents, the President and the people of the US distinguished al-Qaida from Islam. A televised prayer service at National Cathedral in Washington DC, with the President in

view, included an imam offering public Islamic prayer alongside Christian clergy and a Jewish rabbi. This drew Christians into a civic spirituality of creatureliness not connected to any specific religious identity or organization. Though this could degenerate into a vague, Deist mystique, Roman Catholics can read it in terms of Vatican II's affirmation of religious liberty, and its commitment to what religions have in common. And US citizens of all religions—perhaps apart from some sects—hold this openness to others as a primary virtue in what might be called a civil spirituality: a sacred commitment to liberty that gives rise to a set of tolerant attitudes towards different religions.

Western Christianity speaks of self-transcendence. One easy line of thought is to say that Western religion must therefore somehow absorb some elements of Islam's critique of the West, somehow let itself be challenged by Islam's otherness. It is quite fashionable for critics to suppose that religions must be judged from some ahistorical, Archimedean point, independent of any commitment, if the true spiritual substance of any religion is to be found. This familiar way of thinking disconnects true spirituality from the Church, and indeed any specific, social, organized religion. Paradoxically, it discredits the social structures that are logically necessary if any contact between different religions is to be possible. The truth, rather, is more demanding: it is precisely the spirit of the *gospel* that we are being drawn to re-appropriate, in order that we can revise prior, one-sided views of Islam.

We are being drawn to re-appropriate the gospel so that we can revise our views of Islam

The hasty interpretations of September 11 offered by the religious right and secular left were deterministic: they presented the attacks as the inevitable consequence of different forms of US wrongdoing. What such approaches cannot accommodate is that the destruction emerged from free choice, nourished by religious practices and ideas that were somehow perverse. Yet this latter interpretation seems more plausible, closer to the reality we have always to be dealing with. It was not legitimate Third World resentment about the chasm between rich and poor that caused the attacks; it was religion gone wrong.

We often suppose that sincerity, zeal and commitment are hallmarks of genuine religion. September 11 disabuses us of that belief: the religious terrorists had those qualities in abundance. Faced with secularism, modern Christians have tended to defend 'religion' as such. Perhaps that strategy is too unspecific, too neglectful of real problems in

religious practice. Religion is ambiguous. September 11 has brought an awareness of that point from the precincts of theology and religious studies into the daily experience of US Christians. Such awareness does not represent a sell-out to Enlightenment critiques of religion. On the contrary, it is an integral part of growth into the probing discernment of all things, including the actual life and thought of devout religion, a discernment proper to Gospel living in the Spirit.

Becoming Catholic

Another effect of September 11 was to make people in the United States aware, at least briefly, of a deep level of connection that they felt with their fellow-citizens. Christian spirituality cannot ignore this kind of experience, and some sociologists of religion are sensitive to the reality:

. . . the full depth of the political life of our communities is so identified with the foundations of our existence as the concrete persons we are that this depth can only be regarded as sacred . . .⁴

But this sacred or religious depth in our political and cultural life is unstable and ambiguous. In so far as it implies an absolute identification between a political agenda and the fullness of justice or goodness, it leads us to confuse a vital distinction between merely creaturely realities and the utterly transcendent Creator. A political project is treated as if it were divine; thus it becomes an idol, often inciting violence against perceived opponents. In such a situation, the sacred ceases to be a source of 'creativity, courage, and confidence'. Instead it unleashes the reins 'of blind fanaticism, of infinite arrogance, of imperial ambition, of unlimited cruelty, and of ultimate violence'.⁵

This ambiguity means that there are some forms of religious fanaticism that US American Christians find themselves opposing, quite as much as they resisted Communist atheism during the Cold War. Moreover, if they are to repudiate bin Laden's perversion of Islam, and be consistent in so doing, they must also be vigilant against similar fundamentalist tendencies within themselves, their churches and their

⁴ Michael J. Himes and Kenneth R. Himes, *Fullness of Faith: The Public Significance of Theology* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1993), p. 80.

⁵ Langdon Gilkey, 'The Political Dimensions of Theology', in *Society and the Sacred: Toward a Theology of Culture in Decline* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1981), pp. 42-56, here p. 45, quoted in Himes and Himes, *Fullness of Faith*, p. 81.

nation. Christian prayer, worship and morality, if authentic, will always involve a demanding summons to conversion, conversion away from our own idolatry.

September 11 evoked a powerful sense of national community; religiously pluralist though the US may be, a sacral depth of fellowship irrupted. US Christians need to consider how to interpret this. From a Christian perspective, such experiences can only be a beginning. The direction of growth, of a pilgrimage led by the Spirit deeper into the mind and heart of Christ, can only be towards catholicity, towards a community *transcending* national boundaries, open to forms of life and to religious expressions not native to Christianity. Edward Schillebeeckx once made a sage observation that Christians too often ignore manners of divine mediation not specifically Christian and so lose access to common ground in religious experience with non-Christians, as well as overlooking the possibilities for Christian growth in holiness given by more general kinds of religious experience.

This catholicity requires of us a discerning, critical alertness. I suspect that an important distinguishing feature of contemporary Christian spirituality is an openness to how God works in human lives and human societies not avowedly Christian. If the Church is to grow in catholicity, its inner life must be informed by this generous Christian vision. Only so can it be a true sign and instrument of human unity.

Civil spirituality

However, this pilgrimage leads US Christians into an encounter with their civil religion. The theological influences on this religion are Protestant, even Deist; its vision of human society centres on liberty under law. The orthodoxies it generates are, perhaps, resistant to any sense of sacred depth in fellowship across national boundaries or to varieties of religious experience not specifically Christian. Admittedly, the founders of the Republic were more Deist than Christian—but that is not to say that they were any closer to Judaism, to Islam, or to the sacred cultures of the native Americans. They were influenced not just by Enlightenment humanism but also by Puritan beliefs and outlook. Puritan covenant theology imparted a diffuse habit—and one that is now largely unreflective—of referring the origin and history of the United States to God's sovereignty and providential purposes. Thus it is that US national consciousness will still draw on the language of divine

election, covenant, purpose and accountability. When persons and Churches appropriate this way of understanding the nation under God, a civil spirituality is generated, emphasizing the duty to support this divinely-appointed national mission. Significant national events are couched in terms of divine transcendence and judgment. Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg address stands in such a tradition; the most notable twentieth-century example is Martin Luther King Jr.'s 'I Have A Dream' speech.

***US civil religion
has no memory of the
Crusades***

Usama bin Laden makes connections between the United States and Western crusades. This rather obscures the truth that the United States originated as a breakaway from Western Christendom. The earliest Pilgrims and Puritans emphatically did not understand themselves as the successors of medieval Western Christianity. For them, the Atlantic Ocean was the Red Sea; European monarchy in general, and the English monarchy in particular, functioned as Pharaoh in their religious imagination; New England was a new Israel, a transatlantic promised land, a new home. The history of conflicts with Islam did not feature within this imagery. Thus, civil religion or spirituality in the United States has no memory of St. Bernard of Clairvaux preaching a crusade against Islamic forces, of the Spanish *reconquista* or of the Battle of Lepanto. US civil religion inherited no crusader dedication to the Holy Land. It was the experiment in secular democracy that became invested with a sense that the nation stands in a national covenant with God, a sense that still marks evangelical Protestantism in the US. When the religious right connected September 11 to the sins of US society, they were presupposing that the US had failed to abide by such a covenant. Thus, like Israel in the bible, it had been punished by God.⁶

The debates about how to respond to the terrorism can be seen in terms of a contrast between civil spirituality and a more thoroughly Christian spirituality. Civil spirituality encourages a sense of the US as a

⁶ A large measure of righteous innocence nonetheless shapes civil religion and civil spirituality. For example, not too many recalled after September 11 that the cities selected for the Atom Bomb in 1945—Hiroshima and Nagasaki—had contained large numbers of civilian casualties. The calculation was that these would demoralise a bellicose government, and that the war in the Pacific would end more quickly. Similar rationales underlay the bombings of Hamburg and Dresden. Some, but not many, US Christians publicly opposed this kind of bombing. It did not succeed. After all the Axis alliance had sought to enslave and exterminate Jews, while it was an Asian enemy that had launched a surprise attack on Pearl Harbor.

divinely chosen instrument, appointed after September 11 to the task of a world-wide, cleansing mission against all terrorism of whatever sort or definition, rather than merely a campaign limited to the defeat of al-Qaeda for the sake of national self-defence. A more developed Christian spirituality, Catholic or Protestant, does not make such simple assumptions about a national covenant. God's covenant does not focus on one nation alone; political leaders have no clear or easy access to God's purposes for the nation. Most responses to the attacks have been moderated. In the immediate aftermath of September 11, the US sought to respond militarily to the attacks not as the single agent of divine purpose, but as part of a community of nations.

Perhaps there are some connections between this more thoroughly Christian response to the attacks, and the kind of tentativeness in religious matters encouraged by what is termed postmodernity. Life before God in faith; communion with Father, Son and Spirit; participation in the visible Church as the body of Christ—all these remain, even when we have lost confidence in grand cultural narratives, even when we live in a religiously pluralist world. We live in fragments. We experience them as valid and indeed definitive; but we do not know what will happen when we engage in dialogue with adherents of other religions. Nevertheless, God is calling us to openness and dialogue, even as we seek to defend ourselves against a violently distorted form of Islam. Christians in the United States may well be committed to national self-defence, but—I would guess—not many of them define their spiritual lives primarily in such terms. Many are uncertain about how to combine a commitment to national security with other concerns: the desire for a deeper grasp of Islam; a sense that US policies must always be critically reviewed in the light of a commitment to social justice; and the search for a practical way of being religious that acknowledges religion's own ambiguity.⁷

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⁷ An earlier version of this article appeared in *Lumen Vitae*, the catechetical journal published in Brussels.