

Roots, Rites and Sites of Resistance

The Banality of Good

Edited by

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Thinking after Terror: An Interreligious Challenge

Richard Kearney

One of the images broadcast on the Internet in the aftermath of 9/11 was that of a face peering through the fumes and ashes, rising like sacrificial smoke from the twin towers. This, we were ominously informed, was the visage of Bin Laden: the enemy who was there and not there. The face of an unspeakable, inexplicable, unlocateable terror which was now suddenly, mysteriously, crossing our radar screens. Here was the epitome of all those impure substances that infiltrate our being: nicotine, drugs, alcohol, the AIDS virus; or more ominously still, the anthrax powder filtering through buildings and letter boxes. Like planes slicing through air-conditioned offices of a New York high rise. Like terrorists impersonating law-abiding neighbours next door. This horror of horrors was threatening to invade the very borders of the nation, the frontiers of the state, the precincts of our cities, the walls of our homes, the skin of our bodies – spiralling into the core of our being. This was one particular phantasmagoria of terror in the wake of 9/11.

The philosopher Spinoza offered this counsel in the face of enigma: 'Do not complain, do not rejoice, try to understand'. But how are we to understand Bin Laden and Al Qaeda? How do we even begin to attempt to get into the minds of those who slaughtered so many innocents on that fateful morning in Manhattan? It is hard to proffer some response without sounding homiletic, naïve or downright insensitive. But one thing that must surely be clear at this stage is that the inflated apocalyptic language used by both sides in this aggression has not helped. In fact, I will argue that it has led to a double impoverishment of our politics and our spirituality. Let me begin with a brief account of the apocalyptic demonizing of the enemy which occurred in the wake of 9/11 before endeavouring to sketch some tentative responses from the perspective of religion.

In the aftermath of terror

The initial response of President Bush was to carve the world into good and evil. In the days immediately following the terror, he declared a 'crusade' against the evil scourge of terrorism. He cited his Second World War predecessor, President Roosevelt, invoking the 'warm courage of unity' that possesses a nation at war. And reaching further back into the missionary history of American warfare, Bush quoted the famous Wild West phrase that the outlaw (Bin Laden) should be brought in 'dead or alive'. Manifest Destiny was back with a vengeance. There was much use of religious idioms of apocalypse and purification. Terms like 'sacrifice' and 'purge' were frequently heard and the military campaign launched against the enemy was initially called 'Campaign Infinite Justice' (later altered, because offensive to Muslims, to 'Enduring Freedom'). War had been declared and everyone, as Bush made plain, had to 'take sides': for the 'civilized' or the 'barbarians'; for the innocent or the damned; for the courageous or the 'cowards'.

Most mainstream media responded in kind. Images of apocalypse were commonplace. One commentator spoke of the attackers as many-headed beasts whose tentacles were threatening to violate every secure space in the Nation. Another invoked the image of a fearsome incubus invading the free world. Idioms of virus, poison, pollution, disease and contamination were variously deployed to express the sense of an omnipresent menace – especially when the terror *from* the air was accompanied by terror *in* the air: the fear of anthrax, smallpox and other agents of bio-chemical destruction. Fear filtered through the land. Yet the flip side of this was a phenomenal upsurge of patriotic fervour evidenced in the proliferation of star-spangled banners and typified in the 24 September cover headline of *Time* magazine – 'One Nation, Indivisible'. This sentiment was emotively evoked in an anonymous street poem, entitled 'We Are One', written over a picture of the US Flag and posted in a store window situated beside Ground Zero in New York. It read: 'We stand behind our Country/We stand behind our Faith/And Pray that in our Future/Our Flag will stand and Wave'.

President Bush reinforced this notion of a single Nation united in war against barbarism when he delivered a broadcast address on 8 November, wrapping up with this rousing military summons: 'We wage a war to save Civilization itself. . . . We have our marching orders. Fellow Americans, Let's Roll!' As the philosopher, Paul Virilio, remarked in *Ground Zero*: 'On September 11, 2001, the Manhattan skyline became the front of a new war' (Virilio, 2002: 182).

Al Qaeda deployed even more emphatically apocalyptic terms. The issue was not in doubt – *apocalyptic war*. In messages broadcast on Al-Jazeera satellite television, Bin Laden summoned all Muslims to embrace the ultimate battle between good and evil, demonizing America as the Great Satan and Israel as the Little Satan. He called on the Islamic faithful throughout the world to join a Jihad or holy war (the traditional Islamic counter-term to 'crusade') and denounced the American campaign against the Taliban as a 'terrorist Christian crusade'. Bin Laden went on to castigate the Pakistan government for 'standing beneath the Christian banner', provoking wide-scale riots in that country and prompting thousands of Pakistani tribesmen to cross over the border to join the Taliban. Al Qaeda insisted that any Muslim who supported the US-led military alliance in any way was 'an apostate of Islam'. And one found many propaganda statements replete with references to the US and its allies as monsters, dragons and other demonic beasts who needed to be purged from the earth through acts of sacrificial violence, so that the world may be made 'holy' again.

In both these rhetorics – though I am not proposing a moral equivalency here – we witnessed a disturbing tendency to endorse the dualist thesis that divides the world schismatically into West and East. This echoed the 'Clash of Civilizations' scenario, famously outlined by Samuel Huntington in the summer 1993 issue of *Foreign Affairs*, and subsequently republished as a best-selling book in 1996. Here one found a vivid schema of the West-versus-Islam dichotomy, making for what Edward Said (2001) has called a 'cartoonlike world where Popeye and Bluto bash each other mercilessly, with one always more virtuous pugilist getting the upper hand over his adversary'. Such caricature totally ignored the plurality, complexity and interdependence of each civilization.¹ A crude mythico-religious terminology of *pure versus impure* took precedence over a more reasoned discourse about justice and injustice. It must be said, of course, that, despite the dualist metaphors, some members of US government went to considerable lengths – after Bush's 'Crusade' gaffe – to make clear that this was *not* a war against Islam. So doing they were concurring with the wise counsel of intellectuals like Alan Wolfe (2001) that '[t]he more we think that what is at stake is a clash of civilizations, the more like our enemy we become'.

To the extent that such rhetorics promulgate the notion of religious war, it has to be admitted that this is religious war with a *difference*. That is to say, it is a postmodern religious war. First, as even Secretary Rumsfeld himself admitted, this would not be just a conventional war fought with tanks and bombs, but a cyber-war fought with computers

and information flows. In short, it would be a credit war: a war of credit cards, credit transfers and, above all, credibility in the sense of belief and persuasion. A war of psycho-propaganda (Psy-Ops). 'The uniforms of this conflict will be bankers' pinstripes and programmers' grunge just as assuredly as desert camouflage', said Rumsfeld. 'Even the vocabulary of this war will be different. When we "invade the enemy's territory", we may well be invading his cyberspace. There may not be as many beachheads stormed as opportunities denied'. (There are echoes here, curiously, of Jean Baudrillard's thesis that contemporary war is TV war).

But if the battle was shifting from hardware to soft-war, as it increasingly virtualized and immaterialized the weapons of engagement, it was also shifting from a battle conducted exclusively on foreign territory – like all of America's interstate wars since 1812 – to one also fought *within* US national territory. With the alarming introduction of so-called 'weaponized' anthrax, an almost invisible toxin of corrosion and death, the Pentagon was compelled to 'shuffle its command' (as a front page headline in the *Boston Globe* put it on 27 October). The military spotlight was now on 'home soil'. This division of the battle into 'overseas' and 'domestic' had radical repercussions. Once again, Secretary Rumsfeld had to change gear, appointing a pair of military commanders with additional responsibilities for defending US territory and considering the option of a permanent 'homeland' defence command. Up to this point, the US military's defence focus was on guarding the borders and protecting the country from *external* threats. But this response to the unprecedented threat of bio-terrorism sparked a nervous debate in Washington over the extent to which the active-duty military should be involved in domestic 'civil defence'.

With the arrival of the anthrax scare, another front opened up. War against terror was now being fought, as mentioned above, both inside and outside the national borders. And, in the process, borderlines themselves became blurred and undecidable. The Minotaur, the horror, evil itself, was now within 'US' – inhaled like imperceptible spores of anthrax into the body politic – as well as 'somewhere out there', in THEM. Moreover, the difficulty of tracking down the culprits in their cellars or caves – due to the continuing elusiveness of the enemy – was further exacerbating the sense of uncanny anxiety. Al Qaeda was proving to be as invasive as anthrax itself. In significant part, this was a war of disturbingly protean substances: a deadly game of smoke and mirrors. Nightly TV images showed grey fumes still smouldering from the subterranean bowels of Ground Zero or rising up from the bombarded front-lines of the Taliban. While the mirrors became the Bush–Bin Laden

game of satellite images and counter-images, bouncing back and forth across the global air-waves. The war of terror had indeed entered the digital realms of cyberspace. In a curious echo of the choral ode of *Antigone* on uncanniness, the postmodern warrior had found himself trapped in a labyrinthine web: 'with no way out (*aporos*) he comes to nothing' (Greisch, 2002).

A major documentary on George W. Bush's apocalyptic mentality entitled 'The Jesus Factor', broadcast on 'Frontline' in April 2004, confirmed that the President's evangelical relationship with Jesus was no longer just a matter of personal salvation, but a global battle between good and evil. And there was no doubt whatsoever in the President's mind as to which side the Messiah was on. His disciples in the Pentagon plainly agreed, as evidenced in Lieutenant General William G. Boykin's much-publicized declaration of theological superiority *vis-à-vis* the rival God of the Muslim enemy: 'I knew that my God was bigger than his... My God was a real God, and his was an idol'.² The rest was silence... until the bombs dropped.

But the sacrificial-demonic scenario did not end with the invasion of Iraq. The heinous abuse of enemy prisoners, in Iraq military camps and the Guantanamo Bay penitentiary, was also symptomatic of the apocalyptic vision. Many of those tortured belonged to the telling category of 'unlawful combatants', deprived of the legal status of either 'political prisoner' or 'common criminal'. And in the case of Guantanamo, there was the additional factor that, in being 'de-territorialized' – that is, transplanted thousands of miles from the local battlefields of the Middle-East to an army camp in the Caribbean –, they could be not only deprogrammed, but dehumanized. These prisoners were no longer recognized citizens of a recognized state, nation or community. They were placeless nobodies entitled to no legal or constitutional protection. Indeed the Red Cross reported that 70–90 per cent of those held appeared to have committed no crime other than being in the wrong place at the wrong time when the 'sweep of suspects' occurred. The main reason for their being held was not, so it seemed, punishment for crimes but for 'interrogation' purposes.

Writing of such abuse, Susan Sontag offered this observation:

The notion that apologies or professions of 'disgust' by the president and the secretary of defence are a sufficient response is an insult to one's historical and moral sense. The torture of prisoners is not an aberration. It is a direct consequence of the with-us-or-against-us doctrine of world struggle with which the Bush administration has

sought to change, change radically, the international stance of the US and to recast many domestic institutions and prerogatives. The Bush administration has committed the country to a pseudo-religious doctrine of war, endless war – for ‘the war on terror’ is nothing less than that. Endless war is taken to justify endless incarcerations. Those held in the extralegal American penal empire are ‘detainees’; ‘prisoners’, a newly obsolete word, might suggest that they have the rights accorded by international law and the laws of all civilized countries. This endless ‘global war on terrorism’ – into which both the quite justified invasion of Afghanistan and the unwinnable folly in Iraq have been folded by Pentagon decree – inevitably leads to the demonizing and dehumanizing of anyone declared by the Bush administration to be a possible terrorist: a definition that is not up for debate and is, in fact, usually made in secret.

(Sontag, 2004)

Sontag goes on to conclude that if ‘interrogation’ is the main point of detaining prisoners indefinitely, ‘then physical coercion, humiliation, and torture become inevitable’ (ibid.).

The us-versus-them strategy is not, of course, new. Rene Girard traces the origins of apocalyptic scapegoating of adversaries back to the origins of all sacrificial religions, where the need to separate ‘pure’ from ‘impure’ is paramount. Many communities in crisis and conflict reach for some kind of binding consensus by choosing to direct their violent aggression towards an ‘outsider’. The ritual humiliation and immolation of this threatening alien then provides the divided community with a renewed sense of unity and mission: a miraculous (if perverse) catharsis. Julia Kristeva adds a psychoanalytic perspective on this process in her study of sacrificial fear and abjection in *Powers of Horror*. And many modern thinkers as different as Carl Schmitt, Jacques Derrida and Slavoj Žižek, have recognized the deeply political implications of the Same-Other polarization in the waging of both psychological and physical warfare.

Commenting on Schmitt’s famous ‘friend/enemy’ model, Žižek applies this scenario to the current compulsion to put a face on terror, to translate its invisible and ineffable dimension into some kind of visage:

The lesson to be learnt here . . . is that the divide friend/enemy is never just the representation of a factual difference: the enemy is by definition, always – up to a point, at least – *invisible* . . . he cannot be directly

recognized – this is the big problem and task of the political struggle in providing/constructing a recognizable *image* of the enemy.

(Žižek, 2002: 109–110)

Žižek goes on to argue that ‘enemy recognition’ is invariably a performative procedure which, like Kant’s notion of the transcendental power of imagination (*Einbildungskraft*), ‘schematizes’ our experience of the Other (alien, stranger, monster, adversary, demon), thereby furnishing it with ‘concrete tangible features which make it an appropriate target of hatred and struggle’ (ibid.: 110). Žižek addresses the emergence of Bin Laden as follows:

After 1990, and the collapse of the Communist states which provided the figure of the Cold War enemy, the Western power of imagination entered a decade of confusion and inefficiency, looking for suitable ‘schematizations’ for the figure of the Enemy, sliding from narco-cartel bosses to a succession of warlords of so-called ‘rogue states’ (Saddam, Noriega, Aidid, Milosovic . . .), without stabilizing itself in one central image; only with September 11 did this imagination regain its power by constructing the image of Osama Bin Laden, the Islamic fundamentalist *par excellence*, and Al-Qaeda, his ‘invisible’ network. What this means, furthermore, is that our pluralistic and tolerant liberal democracies remain deeply ‘Schmittian’: they continue to rely on the political *Einbildungskraft* to provide them with the appropriate figure which reveals the invisible Enemy. Far from suspending the ‘binary’ logic Friend/Enemy, the fact that this Enemy is defined as the fundamentalist opponent of pluralistic tolerance simply adds a reflexive twist to it. Of course, the price of this ‘renormalisation’ is that the figure of the Enemy undergoes a fundamental change: it is no longer the Evil Empire, that is, another territorial entity (a state or group of states), but an illegal, secret – almost virtual – worldwide network in which lawlessness (criminality) coincides with ‘fundamentalist’ ethico-religious fanaticism – and since this entity has no positive legal status, this new configuration entails the end of the international law which – at least from the onset of modernity – regulated relations between states.

(ibid.: 111)

The anthrax scare dramatized by the media in the wake of 9/11 and the convenient morphing of Bin Laden (disappeared in his cave) into

Saddam Hussein (caught in his cave), were further instances of how the invisible/visible dialectic unfolds. Unimaginable terror calls out for images in order to keep the game of hide-and-seek going indefinitely. Now you see it, now you don't. Now here, now gone. *Fort/Da*: one of the oldest games in the world that never seems to lose its fascination for the human mind. Bush played right into Bin Laden's court as the latter began to assume quasi-mystical proportions – going up in the holy/unholy smoke, rising from the towering inferno of New York. And his magical morphings, reincarnations and sightings did not end there. As the philosopher Jean Baudrillard dramatically put it in his commentary on 9/11, *The Spirit of Terrorism*: 'A (key) aspect of the terrorists' victory is that all other forms of violence and the destabilization of order work in its favour. Internet terrorism, biological terrorism, the terrorism of anthrax and rumour – all are ascribed to Bin Laden. He might even claim natural catastrophes as his own. All the forms of disorganization and perverse circulation operate to his advantage' (Baudrillard, 2002: 33).

In citing the examples above, however, one can never repeat enough how the slaughter of 9/11 – not to mention subsequent heinous acts of beheading hostages and systematic suicide bombing – is irrefutable evidence of just how far the 'terrorists' themselves are prepared to go in the game of apocalyptic demonization. The larger point is that, whichever side of the US/THEM polarity one chooses to explore, the fact remains that such Armageddon scenarios signal an impoverishment of both our politics and our theology. In the remaining part of this chapter, I want to look at some ways in which we might begin to respond to this double impoverishment by exploring new resources within our spiritual cultures.

The power of wisdom traditions

How do we overcome the terror of 9/11? How do we mourn the loss? How do we work through the trauma? How do we even begin to imagine pardoning Bin Laden? How do we transform hate into love? War into peace? Before I try to respond to these questions, let me first acknowledge the huge difficulties involved.

Christopher Hitchens, writing on the first anniversary of the atrocities, offers this powerful defence of war as the only appropriate remedy:

[I]t is impossible to compromise with proponents of sacrificial killing of civilians, with the disseminators of anti-Semitic filth, with the

violators of women and the cheerful murderers of children. It is equally impossible to compromise with stone-faced propagandists for Bronze Age morality: morons and philistines who hate Darwin and Einstein and who managed, during their brief rule of Afghanistan, to erase music and art while cultivating their skills at germ warfare.

(cited by Dooley, 2003: 335)

This is strong, if emotive, stuff. An even more vehement justification of this line of thinking is offered by the philosopher Mark Dooley, who pushes Hitchens's logic to an all-out apologia for violence as the most fitting response to terror. The good-versus-evil scenario could hardly find a more articulate advocate:

When faced with the likes of Al Qaeda, our response should not be to look for sophistication and theory in order to 'understand' what it is we are dealing with. Rather, a better response may, in fact, be the one that Bush propounded. ... In this case, it really is a good old-fashioned fight between good and evil, which is why Bush was quite justified in using the rhetoric of the 'evil scourge of terrorism' to describe Bin Laden's hideous activities.

(Ibid.)

Dooley concludes: 'Neither neutrality nor pacifism are luxuries we can afford in our dealings with this particular monster, given its odious ambition to destroy everything, even our children' (ibid.: 335–357).

Persuasively put. But if that is the only adequate response to terror and 'evil' (I have no quarrel with this designation to describe 9/11), then it is hard to convince our 'enemy' – in this case, Al Qaeda and its associated terrorist movements – that there is another way of responding to what *they* consider to be the 'terror' and 'evil' inflicted on them by us. One does not, of course, have to fall into moral relativism or equivalency here. One does not have to endorse Bin Laden's lurid apocalypticism to try to persuade him and his many supporters that there is another way, besides bombs and blood, to work through anger and aggression. However much we are appalled by Al Qaeda's logic of demonization – and the atrocious acts which follow from it –, surely one of the *worst* ways to respond is by demonizing the demonizers in turn! That is very understandable in the immediacy of the moment, after one's loved ones are butchered, violated, tortured, murdered. But is it the wisest mode of reaction in the long term, or the most *effective*? There is a long history of wisdom traditions in the world which suggests otherwise. And it is to some examples of this history that I now turn by way of offering an

alternative to the Bush–Bin Laden logics (for they are specific in each case) of moral fundamentalism.

The common phrase ‘Wisdom Traditions’ applies to most of the world’s great religions. It refers to the widely held view that certain profound spiritual teachings and practices can guide us to tolerance, that is, to a more peaceful, compassionate and just life beyond the violence and rivalry of power politics. The pioneering Benedictine monk, Bede Griffiths, writes about this parallelism (but not syncretism) of wisdom traditions in his Christian commentary on the Bhagavad Gita entitled *River of Compassion*. Referring specifically to the ‘holy history of India’, where he spent most of his life as spiritual director of an Ashram, Griffiths comments:

It is really remarkable how one can see this new understanding, this conception of a personal God, coming to light a little before the time of Christ. I think that it is a movement that took place in many parts of the world, not simply in Israel. There was an advance both in Buddhism with its idea of the *bodhisattva* and in Hinduism with the idea of a personal God as the embodiment of love and compassion, these developments taking place at about the same time. We realise that God is revealing himself in many ways, not only to Israel but to India, to China, and to (so-called) primitive people also.

(Griffiths, 1995: 117)

In more practical terms, this spiritual wisdom translates into a certain ‘middle way’ of prudent judgement, discriminating discernment and right action. When it comes to the primary qualities that lead to wisdom, Griffiths points out, these are largely universal and can be found alike in Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and so on. In the Vedantic tradition, as presented in Chapter 13 of the Gita, these include the virtues of non-fearful non-violence (*ahimsa*) issuing in the ultimate good of forgiving toleration (*kshanti*), so central to the life of the wise person (*sannyasi*).

Griffiths explains:

Harmlessness (*ahimsa*) is the virtue which Gandhi made the basis of his life and philosophy, but it is fundamental also for a *sannyasi*. It is said that a *sannyasi* is not afraid of anyone and no one is afraid of him. It is not simply negative in the sense of ‘not killing’, but it is a whole attitude of mind involving freedom from aggression. Then there is *Kshanti* – ‘forgiveness’, ‘forbearance’, or ‘tolerance’. This is

central to St. Paul’s list of virtues in the letter to the Colossians, with which this whole passage can be compared.

(Col. 3.1, 13)

It is also at the very heart of Gandhi’s teaching on non-violent resistance (*satyagraha*). ‘Nonviolence is the greatest force at the disposal of mankind’, wrote Gandhi. ‘It is mightier than the mightiest weapon of destruction devised by the ingenuity of man’ (Tolstoy, 1984: 116).

One finds similar wisdom teachings on non-violence in the Buddhist tradition. The Mahayana school, for example, recommends ‘four boundless attitudes’ – namely, unconditional love (*maitri*), compassion (*karu*), sympathy (*mudit*) and equanimity (*upek*) – as the most effective response to violence. It identifies the construction of a demonic enemy as a projection of our minds resulting from non-virtuous *karma*. The Buddhist scholar, John Makransky, explains the cycle of vengeance, aggression and scapegoating in the following contemporary language:

For example, in a moment of intense anger at someone, very quickly a narrow, inaccurate image of self and other is projected (e.g., oneself as simply the righteous wronged one, the other as simply a demonic being). That projection is accompanied by a painful mental feeling. From that projection and feeling, the emotive energy of rage takes shape in the wish to hurt the other by word or physical action. That invention, and any actions following from it, are an example of non-virtuous karma. Karma is activity of mind and body reacting to one’s own thought-made projections of self and other, unaware that the projections have been mistaken for the actualities. As we react in that way, it is taught, we make new karma, i.e., further imprint the habit of experiencing the world through our own projections and reacting to them unawares.

(Makransky, 2003: 337)

By a practice of skilful means (*upaya-kaushalya*), the Buddhist seeks to overcome the limits of the friend or enemy distinction, eventually embracing a position of ‘no enemies’. The process goes something like this. Diagnosis:

In the moment we falsely apprehend ‘enemy’ (not as a thought construct projected upon another person, but as an object inherently deserving of hatred), we feel hatred, act from hatred, and the conditioned arising of suffering goes on. Until we discern the emptiness of

our moment by moment construction of reality, we reify our representations of it, cling to them unawares, grasp to some, hate others, and suffer.

(Ibid.: 348)

Prognosis:

Compassion for all beings caught in the subtle confusion that reifies and clings to representations, who suffer for it in all realms of rebirth, is called 'universal compassion' (*maha-karuna*). Transcendental wisdom (*prajna-paramita*), by seeing through that confusion into its empty, thought-constructed nature, realizes freedom from it, eliciting even more intense compassion for all who are caught in it. Thus, transcendental wisdom and compassion, mutually empowering, are cultivated in synergy on the Bahisattva path to full enlightenment.

(Ibid.: 348)

And this is not some naïve piety. It actually *works*. The most useful and practical way of protecting oneself and one's loved ones from violence is, the Buddhist saint Shantideva taught, 'to practice exchanging self for other, the great mystery' (cited by Makransky, 2004).

The teachings of peace-activists like Tich Nhat Hahn (Vietnam), Aung San Suu Kyi (Burma) and the Dalai Lama (Tibet) epitomize this practice of non-violence. What each of these figures shows is that Buddhist wisdom is not just an attitude of non-violence professed by 'beautiful souls', but also a matter of *efficacy*. These are not aloof spiritual mandarins, but politically effective activists. Just like Gandhi in the Hindu tradition of non-violence, or people like Martin Luther King and Terence McSwiney in the Christian tradition – peace-makers who offered their own lives so that their world might be radically transformed. And it was. Gandhi liberated India; McSwiney and fellow martyrs led the way for Irish emancipation; Martin Luther King brought about Civil Rights for Blacks; and spiritual founders like Jesus, the Buddha and Socrates changed the entire nature of their world by choosing to suffer violence rather than inflict it on others.

These are powerful testimonies – and there are many others – to the fact that peace is more powerful and more efficacious than the most heavily equipped armies. Right is greater than might. It is not really surprising to find such suggestive intersections between the different wisdom traditions, given the insights of so many of the great spiritual mystics that God is ultimately one even as the ways to God are many. The earliest Vedic scripture, *Rigveda*, suggests as much when it states

that 'to what is One, sages give many names' (1.164.46). And one finds similar convictions being expressed within the Christian tradition as when, for example, Saint Martin observes that 'all mystics speak the same language since they all come from the same country' (Underhill, 1974: 80; see also Myladil, 2000; Saux, 1998; Clooney, 2000). Such a belief is deeply resistant to the triumphalist dogma of fundamentalism, which claims that only one's own particular religion is legitimate.

In the biblical tradition, this wisdom revelation is powerfully manifest in the three books of Solomon the wise ruler, namely, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs. What is striking about these books is how they manage to convey the heritage of wisdom through particular narratives and metaphors. This mode of wisdom is deeply figurative, communicating in multi-layered 'figures of speech'. Indeed, the third and final book of Solomon's wisdom, the Song of Songs, is so richly symbolic in meaning as a marriage-drama of bride and bridegroom, that it has provoked the hermeneutic imagination of many great thinkers. These include early Church Fathers like Origen, Gregory of Nyssa and Maximus the Confessor, medieval commentators in both the Christian and Jewish traditions, celebrated mystics like Bernard of Clairvaux, Theresa of Lisieux and John of the Cross, and, more recently, such contemporary philosophers as Paul Ricoeur, Andre LaCoque and Julia Kristeva. The polysemantic resources of the Canticles are hermeneutically inexhaustible.

This is a wisdom that does not translate easily into *theoria*, the abstract propositions of purely scientific and mathematical knowledge. It calls rather for a special exercise of practical wisdom, what Aristotle called *phronesis*, capable of articulating a more provisional, tentative, approximate mode of understanding, open to multiple interpretations and applications (which does not mean limitless relativism). Above all, this mode of phronetic understanding is capable of negotiating a medial position between the claims of universality and particularity, thereby conjoining the all-inclusive claims of timeless *sophia* with the more specific claims of temporal faith traditions – Biblical, Buddhist, Hindu and so on; and each of these wisdom traditions, in turn, possesses its own special historicity of production, transmission, translation and reception. Whether the nuptial poetics of the Song of Songs are really about the relation between Israel and Yahweh, the Soul and Christ, the Church and the Father, or simply a love-sick fiancée and her long-awaited lover, is a matter of interpretation.

Because these, and several other meanings, are not just allowed, but actually solicited by the pluralist potencies of this wisdom text, we find

here a powerful example of hermeneutic tolerance. As the Talmudic rabbis liked to remind us, each line of this wisdom story calls for at least ten different readings! Moreover, the fact that the books of Solomonic wisdom are committed to a particular blending of the moral and the aesthetic, again confirms their proximity to the Greek notion of *phronesis*, which comprises these same dual functions. The advantage of this double duty of ethics-poetics is that religious wisdom is not allowed to become either too moralistic (ethics without poetics) or too arbitrary (poetics without ethics). The proper balance between these two wisdom functions promises, I would suggest, a reliable recipe of toleration, religious or otherwise (see also Chouliaraki, this volume).

However, the poetics of the Song of Solomon also call for an ethic of generosity to the extent that it portrays a deity who is vulnerable, that is, dependent on humanity for love. This theo-erotic drama between human and divine lovers reveals a God who needs humans, who calls out to his finite lovers to be made flesh, incarnate, embodied. Far from the power politics of omnipotence, the Solomonic bringer of wisdom is, to use Joyce's expression, a 'bringer of plurabilities', a harbinger of infinite reference, allusion and-association. This is the God who *may be in the flesh of history* only if we say yes to the call of love and justice. A God of little things, of the least of these, of mustard seeds and yearnings and longings of the heart. A God desperate to desire and be desired, to love and be loved, to transfigure and be transfigured, to say and be said in many different ways to many different people. A God of infinite tolerance far removed from the totalizing metaphysics of omnipotence and omniscience. A God, in short, of radical non-violence (see further Dillard, 1999).

The biblical art of polysemy was not confined to rabbinical and talmudic traditions. Within Christian traditions, too, we find a radical commitment to the Middle Way – what elsewhere I call 'diacritical interpretation', that is, discernment of signs between opposite extremes (Kearney, 2003). Jesus did indeed claim, true to his monotheistic heritage, that he was the 'way, the truth and the life'. But he never claimed to be the *only* way, the *only* truth and the *only* life. Indeed, had Jesus done so, he would, arguably, have disqualified himself from his avowed role as Lord of all-embracing love. One only has to recall such narrative scenes as the exchange with the Samaritan woman at the well, or the healing of the sick on the Sabbath, or the writing in the sand during the trial of the woman taken in adultery, to appreciate what an extraordinary master of hermeneutic tolerance – and ethical toleration – Jesus was. We sometimes forget that Jesus took great care never to *write*

anything, except those discreet words in the sand that resisted murder. And when some of his words were eventually committed to writing, the Spirit that likes to blow where it will made sure there were a healthy plurality of scribes and witnesses (four at the very least) to translate it. Jesus's word was revealed by love rather than dogma – as is dramatically illustrated in his sharing of bread with the disciples at Emmaus *before* 'their eyes were opened and they recognized him'. Only after love do they receive *retrospectively* the wisdom he revealed to them 'when he opened the Scriptures' to them on the road from Jerusalem (Luke 24). In other words, the wisdom attested to by Christ, as by the Jewish prophets before him, was one of embodied action which subsequently called out for an endless hermeneutics of attentive interpretation and translation.

The followers, Peter and Paul, also testified to the tolerant wisdom of the Middle Way in the famous compromise of the Jerusalem Conference. This was a crucial meeting of opposed minds, a negotiated settlement between those who wanted to keep Christianity as a local movement within Judaism (James and Peter) and those who wanted to break all such historical ties and open up a purely spiritual universalism (Paul and the Gentiles). The conference was a historic *combinatio oppositorum* which set the tone for an open and flexible legacy within Judeo-Christian monotheism – a way of acknowledging that, if God is indeed One, there are many different paths leading to this Oneness. In his recent book, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, Alain Badiou sums up the importance of the Jerusalem accord:

By allowing Paul's (universalist) action to develop at the same time as that of Judeo-Christians of strict observance, the Jerusalem conference ultimately prevents Christianity from becoming a Jewish sect, another precarious scission (in the wake of many others). But in curbing the zeal of those Gentile-Christians hostile to Judaism, and perhaps that of Paul himself, it prevented Christianity from being merely a new illuminism, one just as precarious because devoid of all basis in historical Judaism. The Jerusalem conference is genuinely foundational, because it endows Christianity with a twofold principle of opening and historicity. It thereby holds tight to the thread of the event (Christ's incarnation and resurrection) as initiation of a truth procedure. That the event is new should never let us forget that it is such only with respect to a determinate situation, wherein it mobilizes the elements of its site.

(Badiou 2003: 25)

If something analogous to this hermeneutic tolerance were to be applied to the opposition between Palestinians and Israelis in today's Jerusalem, or Catholics and Protestants in Belfast, or Christians and Muslims in Bosnia, might it not be possible to imagine such intractable hostilities coming to an end? For the Jerusalem formula allows one to remain faithful to one's particular identity while expressing equal fidelity to a common vision of love and justice. This is something which should not be so inconceivable for Muslims, Christians and Jews since, as noted, all claim allegiance to the same monotheistic deity. (Even Bush and Bin Laden, let us not forget, invoke a common Abrahamic heritage.) We have discussed this in relation to Jewish and Christian sources; but we have said little or nothing yet on Islamic sources. It is surely timely, then, at this point in our review of possible religious responses to 9/11, to recall just how central to the Koran are the notions of non-aggression, charity and hospitality to strangers. One need only cite here the importance of the notion of *Ihsan* – referring to exalted spiritual actions of profound beauty, love, growth and human connection, and praised in the Koran prayer 'Allah loves those who do Ihsan' – to realize the deep resources for non-violent resistance within the Islamic tradition. A brief look at the life of Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, whom Gandhi praised as his teacher in non-violence, offers a powerful testimony to the power of this deeply cherished Muslim principle. The promotion of the practice of *Ihsan* is crucial for the reformist movement of Salafi Islam even as it is all too often ignored and betrayed by many in the Jihadi movement (from which Bin Laden hails) whose absolutism and exclusivism denounce all reformist tendencies as idolatry.

To assist in the task of tolerance between adversaries, another crucial function of phronetic wisdom might be called into play here, that of exchanging readings with other traditions (Ricoeur, 1996: 3–14). The more Muslims, Jews and Christians (to speak only of the biblical heritage) can learn to re-tell and re-narrate their own versions of sacred history and exchange them with their rival opponents, the more likely they are to discover that each has a history of suffering and persecution, of bondage and exodus, of death and rebirth, and that, in many instances, they actually share the same founding Abrahamic narratives of commemoration. Thomas Mann made a powerful point about this exchange of wisdom memories in his rewriting of the Exodus stories in *Joseph and his Brothers*, a novel written in the middle of the Second World War. His aim was to remind his fellow Germans that the Nazi hatred of Jews was a total betrayal of the narrative wisdom traditions commonly shared by Christianity and Judaism. And this argument has been reiterated in

different ways since by other advocates of narrative tolerance such as Hannah Arendt, Franz Rosenzweig and Paul Ricoeur.

What is true of interreligious dialogue between the Abrahamic faiths – so travestied in the apocalyptic distortions of Bush and Bin Laden – is, equally, perhaps even more, the case when we come to interreligious exchanges with non-biblical traditions. I strongly believe that the voice of the 'stranger' adds hugely to the reading of one's own wisdom tradition. It is often 'by indirection that we find direction out'. In other words, it is frequently by means of hermeneutic detours through foreign and unfamiliar perspectives that the wisdom of one's own particular heritage is most powerfully revealed to us. I think of Bede Griffiths' reading of the Bhagavad Gita, the Dalai Lama's reading of the Gospels, Chirazi's translation of Saint John's Gospel, Tich Nhat Hahn's reading of the Bible, Thomas Merton's reading of Taoist and Buddhist scriptures and so on. So often it is the voice that comes from the wilderness, from the outside, from a land and language alien to our own, which reveals us to ourselves – sometimes as the thinnest and smallest of voices. If only we have ears to hear its wisdom. Is that not why, in the Song of Songs, the Shulamite woman desires Solomon and Solomon desires her? And is it not why, in the Gospels, the Samaritan woman listens to Jesus and Jesus listens to her?

For a hermeneutic of tolerance

Let me conclude with some remarks on the hermeneutic of tolerance sketched out by my friend and mentor, Paul Ricoeur. Such a hermeneutic would provide, first, a basis for an *ethic of narrative hospitality* which involves 'taking responsibility in imagination and in sympathy for the story of the other, through the life narratives which concern the other' (Ricoeur, 7). In the cross-over of testimonies and memories between people of different religious traditions we might witness a salutary transference and translation permitting us to welcome the story of the other, the stranger, the victim, the forgotten one. Second, such hermeneutic tolerance solicits an *ethic of narrative flexibility*. Religions constantly face the challenge of resisting the reification of a founding religious event (Creation, Incarnation, Revelation, Enlightenment, Theophany, Manifestation, Sermon, Martyrdom) into a fixed dogma. The best way of doing this would be to show how each event may be told in different ways by different generations and by different narrators.

Not that everything thereby becomes relative and arbitrary. On the contrary, acts of foundational religious suffering, for example, call out

for compassion and justice, and the best way of achieving this is often to invite empathy with strangers and adversaries by allowing for a plurality of narrative perspectives. The resulting overlap may thus lead to what Gadamer calls a 'fusion of horizons', where diverse horizons of consciousness and conscience may at last find some common ground (Gadamer, 1975): a reciprocal transfer between opposite minds. 'The identity of a group, culture, people, or nation, is not that of an immutable substance', writes Ricoeur, 'nor that of a fixed structure, but that, rather, of a recounted story'. A hermeneutic exchange of stories effectively resists arrogant conceptions of religious cultural identity, which prevent us from perceiving the radical implications of the principle of narrativity, namely, 'the possibilities of revising every story which has been handed down and of carving out a place for several stories directed towards the same past' (Ricoeur, 1996: 7). This mode of attentiveness to stories other than our own might be said to consort well with the virtue of detachment (the stage in yoga called *pratyahara*) *vis-à-vis* one's own obsessive attachment to what is 'mine' and 'ours'. It is such a practice that Christian and Muslim fundamentalists who propagate the language of apocalyptic absolutism – before and after 9/11 – could heed instead.

This leads us to a third tolerance principle, that of *narrative plurality*. Pluralism here does not mean lack of respect for the singularity and uniqueness of a particular religious event. It might even be said to increase our sense of awareness of such singularity, especially if it is foreign to us in time, space or cultural provenance. '*Recounting differently* is not inimical to a certain historical reverence to the extent that the inexhaustible richness of the event is honored by the diversity of stories which are made of it, and by the competition to which that diversity gives rise' (ibid.: 8).³ Multiple perspectives need not betray the concrete specificity of a confessional event; on the contrary, they may eloquently testify to its exfoliating richness and inexhaustible suggestiveness. And this faithful testimony may, in fact, be deepened as we extend the circle of reference to include further perspectives from other religious confessions. Ricoeur adds this critical point:

The ability to recount the founding events of our (religious) history in different ways is reinforced by the exchange of cultural memories. This ability to exchange has as a touchstone the will to share symbolically and respectfully in the commemoration of the founding events of other cultures, as well as those of their ethnic minorities and their minority religious denominations.

(Ibid.: 9)

This point applies as much to events of pain and trauma as to events of grace and epiphany. And 9/11 may well serve, in time, as another such watershed 'foundational' event. The jury is still out.

A fourth feature of hermeneutic tolerance is the *transfiguring of the past*. This involves a creative retrieval of the betrayed promises of history, so that we may respond to our 'debt to the dead' and endeavour to give them a voice. The goal of tolerant testimonies is, therefore, to try to give a future to the past by remembering it in a more attentive way, both ethically and poetically. A crucial aspect of reinterpreting traditions is the task of discerning past promises which have *not yet* been honoured. For 'the past is not only what is bygone – that which has taken place and can no longer be changed –, it also lives in the memory thanks to arrows of futurity which have not been fired or whose trajectory has been interrupted' (ibid.: 8; see also Ricoeur, 2004a: 5–11, 12–17; 2004b). In other words, the unfulfilled future of the past may well signal the richest dimension of a religious tradition, for example, Islamic, Christian, Jewish. And the emancipation of 'this unfulfilled future of the past is the major benefit that we can expect from the crossing of memories and the exchange of narratives' (Ricoeur, 1996: 8; see also Gross and Muck, 2002; Tyagananda, 2000).

It is especially the founding events of a religious community – traumatic or revelatory – which require to be reread in this critical manner in order to unlock the potencies and expectancies which the subsequent unfolding of history may have forgotten or betrayed. Fundamentalism, of whatever confession, is another term for such betrayal. This is why hermeneutic tolerance involves a special acoustic, a particular practice of auditory imagination attuned to certain seminal moments of suffering or hope, and to the various complex testimonial and textual responses to those events, which are all too often occluded by Official History. 'The past is a cemetery of promises which have not been kept', notes Ricoeur. And attentive modes of remembrance may provide ways of 'bringing them back to life like the dry bones in the valley described in the prophecy of Ezekiel' (Ricoeur, 1996: 9).

A fifth and final moment in the hermeneutics of tolerance is *pardon*. Here, surely, we touch on what must be the most difficult aspect of our response to 9/11. If empathy and hospitality towards others are crucial steps in an ethic of non-violence, there is something *more* – something which entails moving beyond narrative imagination to forgiveness. In short, the exchange of memories of suffering demands more than sympathy and duty (though these are essential for any kind of justice). And this something 'extra' involves pardon in so far as pardon means 'shattering the debt'. Here the order of justice and reciprocity can be

supplemented, but not replaced, by that of the more explicitly religious order of 'charity and gift'. Such spiritual forgiveness demands huge patience, an enduring practice of 'working-through', mourning and letting go. But it is not a forgetful forgiveness. Amnesty can never be based on amnesia. It remembers our debt to the dead while at the same time introducing something other, something difficult almost to the point of impossibility, but something all the more important for that.

One thinks of Brandt kneeling at Warsaw, Havel's apology to the Sudeten Germans, Hume's dialogue with the IRA, Sadat's visit to Jerusalem, Hillesum's refusal to hate her hateful persecutors. Or of certain extraordinary survivors of 9/11 who, having witnessed what they did or lost loved ones, still refused to cry vengeance. Such exceptional moments signal a point where an ethics of justice is touched by a poetics of pardon. And such a poetics, I would argue, is usually of a spiritual or religious nature. But I repeat: the one does not and cannot replace the other; *both* justice and pardon are crucially important in our response to suffering. One cannot replace the other. They are both called for. For, as Ricoeur reminds us, if at moments charity does indeed exceed justice, 'we must guard against substituting it for justice'. Charity remains a surplus; and it is this very 'surplus of compassion and tenderness (which) is capable of giving the exchange of memories its profound motivation, its daring and its momentum' (Ricoeur, 1996: 11; see also Kearney, 2003). The surplus, evidenced in pardon, is endless in its demands and inexhaustible in its resources. It is what makes the impossibility of forgiving possible. Though no less difficult for that. That is why, as Julia Kristeva observes, 'to forgive is as infinite as it is repetitive.'⁴

In the difficult act of pardon, religious tolerance must always remain attentive to the demands of moral and political justice. In response to 9/11, as to other terrible atrocities, the bottom line is this: pardon cannot forget protest any more than love can forget action.

Notes

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1. Samuel Huntington later published a full-length book on the subject entitled *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* (2001), where he expanded on his prediction that twenty-first-century global conflict would not be waged between nation-states but between general 'civilizations' defined by shared cultures, values and religions, and transgressing the boundaries of sovereign nations. Of the eight major civilizations, Huntington predicts

that the most violent clash will occur between the Christian West and the Muslim nations of the East stretching from Africa and the Middle East as far as Indonesia. While I do not deny that this scenario may indeed be the preferred view of Bin Laden and certain generals in the Pentagon, I would support Said's argument that we should do everything to combat such monolithic models of schismatic thinking to the extent that they deny the complex realities of difference, diversity and dissent within every civilization, no matter how hegemonic or totalizing it may presume to be.

2. For further commentary on the apocalyptic character of the Bush-Bin Laden war, see Lifton (2003), Falk (2003), Rockmore and Margolis (2004), Chomsky (2003) and Derrida (2004).
3. This principle of radical hermeneutic plurality calls for an equally radical pluralist politics. I would suggest a political theorist like Chantale Mouffe who offers some interesting possibilities here when she talks about moving beyond an 'antagonistic' politics of us-versus-them to a more democratic 'agonistic' politics which fosters a robust and creative conflict of interpretations. She argues that, when the political channels are not available through which conflicts can take an 'agonistic' form, they degenerate into the 'antagonistic' model of absolutist polarization between good and evil, the opponent being perceived as an 'enemy' or 'demon' to be destroyed. The mistakenness of apocalyptic politics is evident here. But there is a more subtle error committed by certain strands of liberal rationalism and individualism when they ignore the crucial motivational role played by communal affects, passions and identifications in our contemporary world. Mouffe concludes that the goal of genuine democracy is not to move from a bipolar to a unipolar system of politics but to foster the emergence of a multipolar world with a balance among several regional poles allowing for a plurality of powers. By converting *antagonism* into *agonism* we allow dissent to express itself within a common symbolic space rather than resorting to violence. Adversaries thus become legitimate opponents rather than illegitimate enemies. This, she suggests is the only way to avoid the hegemony of one single hyperpower or the collapse into violent chaos (see further Mouffe, 2005).
4. Cited by Kelly Oliver (2003: 280). Oliver offers a very useful critical overview of some of the most recent discussions of forgiveness in contemporary psychoanalysis and deconstruction, with particularly instructive attention to the work of Derrida, Arendt and Kristeva. She proposes this response:

The notion of the unconscious gives us an ethics of responsibility without sovereignty. We are responsible for what we cannot and do not control, our unconscious fears and desires and their affective representations. In addition, we are responsible for the effects of those fears, desires, and affects on others. This impossible responsibility entails the imperative to question ourselves and constantly engage in self-critical hermeneutics, which also gives meaning to our lives. Responsible ethics and politics requires that we account for the unconscious. Without doing so we risk self-righteously adhering to deadly principles in the name of freedom and justice. (ibid.: 289)