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Terrorism and Interreligious Wisdom

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Phantasmagoria of Terror

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 unspeakable, inexplicable, unlocateable terror 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. This horror of horrors was threatening to invade the very borders of the nation, the precincts of our cities, the walls of our homes, the skin of our bodies – spiraling in to the core of our being. This was one particular phantasmagoria of terror in the wake of 9/11.

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? One thing that must surely be clear at this stage is that the apocalyptic language used by both sides has not helped. In fact, I will argue that it has led to a double impoverishment of our politics and our spirituality.

Apocalyptic Demonization

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 WWII predecessor, President Roosevelt, invoking the “warm courage of unity” that possesses a nation at war. And reaching further back into the history of American warfare, he used a famous Wild West

phrase: the outlaw (Bin Laden) should be brought in "dead or alive." The military response, quickly decided on, was christened, "Operation 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.'

In the mainstream media, images of apocalypse became 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.

There was a phenomenal upsurge of patriotic fervor evidenced in the proliferation of star-spangled banners and typified in the Sept 24 Cover headline of Time Magazine – "*One Nation, Indivisible*." President Bush ended a broadcast address on Nov 8, 2001 with the words: "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* (London and New York, Verso Press, 2002, p.182): "On September 11, 2001, the Manhattan skyline become the front of a new war" (p.1).

Al Qaeda deployed even more starkly apocalyptic terms. 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 the Islamic faithful throughout the world to join a Jihad or holy war and denounced the American camp 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 the border to join the Taliban. Osama bin Laden 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 monstrous dragons and other beasts who need to be purged from the earth through acts of sacrificial violence, so that the world may be made 'holy' again. The slaughter of 9/11 – not to mention subsequent heinous acts of kidnapping, hostages and systematic killing of civilians – shows just how far the terrorists' themselves are prepared to go in the game of apocalyptic demotion.

Clash of Civilizations Rhetoric

In both these rhetorics – though I am not proposing a moral equivalence here – we witnessed a tendency to endorse the dualist thesis that divides the world into West and East. This echoed the 'Clash of Civilizations' dichotomy first outlined by Samuel Huntington in the summer 1993 issue of *Foreign Affairs*. Such caricatures totally ignored the plurality and complexity of each civilization, and its interdependence. In *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (2001), Huntington expands on his prediction that 21st

tury 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.

The curious irony is that the most enthusiastic beneficiary of the Huntington thesis is the Al Qaeda itself. Huntington's thesis is acutely criticized by Edward Said, "The Clash of Ignorance" in *Z Magazine*, September, 2001. Said concludes that the Huntington thesis is an ideological distortion that wants to make 'civilizations' and 'identities' into what they are not: shut-down, sealed-off entities that have been purged of the myriad currents and countercurrents that animate human history, and that over centuries have made it possible for that history not only to contain wars of religion and imperial conquest but also to be one of exchange, cross-fertilization and sharing. This far less visible history is ignored in the rush to highlight the ludicrously compressed and constricted warfare that "The Clash of Civilizations" argues is the reality.

Some members of the US took pains – after Bush's 'crusade' gaffe – to stress that this was not a war against Islam, in accord with the wise counsel of Alan Wolfe: "The more we think that what is at stake is a clash of civilizations, the more like our enemy we become... By insisting that we are not at war with Islam, Mr. Bush deprives Mr. Bin Laden of the religious battle he so intensely desires" ("The God of a Di-

verse People," in *The New York Times* Op-Ed, Oct 14, 2001).

Horror in the Homeland

With the anthrax scare, another front opened up. The Pentagon was compelled to "shuffle its command" (as a front page headline in the *Boston Globe* put it on Oct 27). The military spotlight was now on "home soil." Secretary Rumsfeld had to change gears, appointing a pair of military commanders with additional responsibilities for defending US territory and considering the option of a permanent 'homeland' defense command. Up to this, the US military's defense 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 defense.'

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 was further exacerbating the sense of uncanny anxiety. This was a war of disturbingly protean substances: a deadly game of smoke and mirrors. Nightly TV images showed grey fumes still smoldering from the subterranean bowels of Ground Zero or rising up from the bombarded front-lines of the Taliban. The mirrors were the Bush-Bin Laden game of satellite images and counter-images, bouncing back and forth across the global air-waves.

A documentary on George W. Bush's apocalyptic mentality entitled "The Jesus Factor," broadcast on Frontline

in April 2004, confirmed that the President's relationship with Jesus was no longer just a matter of personal salvation but a global battle between good and evil. This theology was amplified by supporters in the Pentagon such as Lieutenant General William G. Boykin, who said of the Muslim enemy: "I knew that my God was bigger than his...My God was a real God, and his was an idol" (5). Irresistibly, this ideology moved to violent enactment, in the bombings first of Afghanistan and then, to the world's consternation, in Iraq.

Endless War and Dehumanization

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 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 'deterritorialized' – 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 to 90 percent 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, 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, the secretary of defense are a sufficient response is an insult to common 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 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 – 'detainees'; 'prisoners', a newly coined word, might suggest that they should have the rights accorded by international law and the laws of all civilized countries. This endless 'global war on terrorism' – into which both the 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 potential terrorist: a definition that is not up for debate and is, in fact, usually made secret ("Regarding the Torture of Detainees," *New York Times*, May 23, 2004).

Perverse Catharsis

Sontag concludes that if 'interrogation' is the main point of detaining prisoners indefinitely, "then physical coercion, humiliation and torture come inevitable."

Many communities in crisis are afflicted, as René Girard points out, for some kind of binding consensus choosing to direct their violent aggression towards an 'outsider.' The humiliation and immolation of a threatening alien then provide a divided community with a re-

sense of unity and mission, in a miraculous (if perverse) catharsis. Thinkers as different as Carl Schmitt, Jacques Derrida and Slavoj Žižek, have recognized the role of the Same-Other polarization in the waging of both psychological and physical warfare. As Žižek writes:

The lesson to be learnt here – from Carl Schmitt – 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 (*Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, Verso Press, 2002, pp.109-110).

Žižek goes on to argue that:

'Enemy recognition' is invariably a performative procedure which '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 (p.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, Milosevic...) 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... 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 "renormalization" 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 (p.111).

Unimaginable terror – with all the 'sublime' connotations given it by Kant and Burke – 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. 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 and reincarnations and sightings did not end there. As the philosopher Jean Baudrillard put it in his commentary on 9/11, *The Spirit of Terrorism* (Verso Press, 2002):

A (key) aspect of the terrorists' victory is that all other forms of violence and the destabilization of order work in its favor. Internet terrorism, biological terrorism, the terrorism of anthrax and rumor – 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 (p.33).

Demonizing the Demonizers

War seems to many the only logical response to this situation. Christopher Hitchens wrote on the first anniversary of 9/11:

It 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.

Quoting this, philosopher Mark Dooley adds:

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.

Dooley concludes:

Neither neutrality nor pacificism are luxuries we can afford in our dealings with this particular monster, given its odious ambition to destroy everything, even our children (in *Religion in the Arts* 7, 2003, pp. 335-7).

Such advocacy of war is well argued. But if that is the only response to terror and 'evil' (I have no quarrel with this designation to describe 9/11), then it is hard to convince our 'enemy' that there is another way of responding to what they consider to be the 'terror' and 'evil' inflicted on them by us. However much we are appalled by Al Qaeda's logic of demonization, surely one of the worst ways to respond is by demonizing the demonizers in turn! There is a long history of wisdom traditions in the world which offers an alternative to the Bush-Bin Laden logics (for they are specific in each case) of moral fundamentalism.

A Religious Hermeneutics of Tolerance

Some think that religion is invariably a force for intolerance, belligerence and division. It will be my wager here that a certain kind of religious hermeneutics can help lead us in the opposite direction – out of war towards peace and justice. To support this claim I will sketch some steps towards a hermeneutics of religious toleration, including *narrative wisdom*, *interpretation exchange*, and *pardon*.

Parallelisms in Wisdom Traditions

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 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* (NY: Continuum, 1995). Referring specifically to the 'holy history of India,' where he spent most of his life as 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 realize that God is revealing himself in many ways, not only to Israel but to India, to China, and to (so-called) primitive

people also (p.117).

The Hindu Tradition

In more practical terms, this spiritual wisdom translates into a certain 'middle way' of prudent judgment, discriminating discernment and right action. Citing the example of yoga, Griffiths writes:

Yoga is a real guide to life. There is always this middle way...The integrated man (*yukta*) is the one who knows the point of equilibrium between extremes. He it is who is always sama, he always remains the same between the pairs of opposites (p.2).

When it comes to the primary qualities that lead to wisdom, Griffiths points out that 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 goods 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 (Col. 3.12-13). 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." These quotations come from Leo Tolstoy's writings on this subject, in dialogue with Gandhi, *The Kingdom of Heaven is Within You* (University of Nebraska Press, 1984, p.116).

The Buddhist Tradition

One finds similar wisdom teachings on non-violence in the Buddhist tradition. The 'four boundless attitudes' – namely, unconditional love (*maitri*), compassion (*karuna*), sympathetic joy (*mudita*) and equanimity (*upekkha*) – are an effective response to violence. Buddhism 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 ("Buddhist Perspectives on Truth in Other Religions," *Theological Studies* 64, 2003, p.337).

The Buddhist seeks to overcome the limits of the friend/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 (p.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 Bodhisattva path to full enlightenment (p.18).

"Hatred is never quelled by hatred in this world. It is quelled by love. This is an eternal truth" (*Dhammapada* 1.5). 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" (p.19).

Peace Activism

The teachings of peace-activists like Thich Nhat Hanh, Aung San Suu Kyi and the Dalai Lama stress this prac-

tice 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. 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. 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).

The Song of Songs

In the biblical tradition, this wisdom revelation is powerfully manifest, in the three books ascribed to Solomon – 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. The polysemantic resources of the Canticles are hermeneutically inexhaustible. Or as John of the Cross put it in his *Prologue to the Spiritual Canticle*, speaking of the 'divine Song of Solomon' which he was revisiting:

The Holy Spirit, unable to express the fullness of his meaning in ordinary words, utters mysteries in strange

figures and likenesses. The saintly doctors, no matter how much they have said or will say, can never furnish an exhaustive explanation of these figures and comparisons, since the abundant meanings of the Holy Spirit cannot be caught in words. Thus the explanation of these expressions usually contains less than what they embody in themselves" (*Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, Washington, ICS, 1991, p.470).

Phronetic Interpretation

This is a wisdom that does not translate easily into the abstract propositions of purely scientific knowledge. It calls rather for a special exercise of practical discernment, 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 etc., 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, or the Church and Christ, or simply a love-sick fiancée and her long-awaited lover, is a matter of interpretation. And 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 text calls for at least ten different readings! Moreover, the fact that the books of Solomonic wisdom are (as Origen notes) 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.

But 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 pluralities," 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.

Christian Tolerance

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 was a healthy plurality of scribes and witnesses (four at the very least) to translate it.

Jesus' 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 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* (Stanford University Press, 2003), 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 (p.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 all claim allegiance to the same monotheistic deity. (Even Bush and Bin Laden, let us not forget, invoke a common Abrahamic heritage.)

The Koran

Central to the Koran, too, are the notions of non-aggression, charity and hospitality to strangers. One need only cite here the importance of the notion of *Ihshan* – referring to exalted spiritual actions of profound beauty, love, growth and human connection and praised in the Koran prayer “Allah loves those who do *Ihshan*” – 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 *Ihshan* 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 denounces all reformist tendencies as idolatry.

Exchanging Wisdom Memories

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. 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 it is 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 Genesis stories in *Joseph and his Brothers*, a novel written in the years of the Third Reich. 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. 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. 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?

Welcoming the Story of the Other

Let me conclude with some remarks on the hermeneutic of tolerance sketched out by my friend and mentor, Paul Ricoeur, in his essay "Reflections on a New Ethos for Europe" (in Paul Ricoeur: *The Hermeneutics of Action*, edited by R. Kearney, London, Sage, 1996, pp.3-14). This hermeneutic provides, in the first place, 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" (p.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.

Narrative Flexibility

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 by showing 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.

"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" (ibid.). 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.'

Narrative Plurality

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' (p.8).

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" (p.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.

Transfiguring the Past

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 endeavor 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 honored. 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" (p.8).

In other words, the unfulfilled future of the past may well signal the richest dimension of a religious tradition – e.g., Islamic, Christian, Jewish. And the emancipation of "this unfulfilled fu-

ture of the past is the major benefit that we can expect from the crossing of memories and the exchange of narratives" (p.8). 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" (p.9).

Pardon

A fifth and final moment in the hermeneutics of tolerance is pardon. And 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 reciproc-

ity 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.

Justice Touched by Pardon

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" (p.11). 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..." ("Forgiveness," *PMLA* 117, 2002, p.282).

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.

