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Thinking after Terror: An Interreligious Challenge

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I explore some possibilities of interreligious dialogue as a response to the terror of 9/11. My basic hypothesis is that if a certain misappropriation of religion is at the source of this recent violent conflict – the so called 'War of Terror' – a reappropriation of the vision of non-violence in a variety of religious 'wisdom traditions' may also be essential in providing a solution. Contrary to the prevalent Western view that contemporary wars are to be understood uniquely in terms of politics, economics and sociology I argue that there is a tacit mobilisation of the 'religious imaginary' at work here which we ignore at our peril. In short, it may well be in the hidden cause of the problem that we may also find an effective antidote amongst others. If only we can move from the language of religious exclusivism, triumphalism and absolutism to one of spiritual dialogue and tolerance.

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 NY high rise. Like terrorists impersonating law-abiding neighbors 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 – spiraling in to 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 endeavoring to sketch some tentative responses from the perspective of religion.

I

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 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 fervor evidenced in the proliferation of star-spangled banners and typified in the September 24 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 to 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 Nov 8, 2001, wrapping 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 tribesman 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 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".¹ Such caricature totally ignored the plurality, complexity and interdependence of each

¹ Edward Said, 'The Clash of Ignorance' in *Z Magazine*, September, 2001. 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 21st 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. The curious irony is that the most enthusiastic beneficiary of the Huntington thesis is the Al Qaeda itself. 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". The hasty attempts to draw unambiguous lines in the sand, in the immediate wake of Sept 11th – between US and THEM, West and Islam etc – not only denies the disorderliness of reality but also masks the "interconnectedness of ordinary lives, 'ours' as well as 'theirs'". It often takes writers like Conrad, for instance, to remind us that the 'heart of darkness' we think is located way out there is also often to be found in the midst of the 'civilized' world itself. It was also Conrad, Said adds, who in *The Secret Agent* (1907) so brilliantly described 'terrorism's affinity for abstractions like 'pure science' (and by extension for 'Islam' and 'the West'), as well as the terrorist's ultimate moral degradation".

civilization. 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 in spite of 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 that “The more we think that what is at stake is a clash of civilizations, the more like our enemy we become”).²

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

² Alan Wolfe adds: “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 Diverse People’ in *The New York Times Op-Ed*, Oct 14, 2001). 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”. (Echoes here, curiously, of Jean Baudrillard’s thesis that contemporary war is TV war). But if the battle was shifting from hardware to software, as it increasingly virtualized and immaterialised the weapons of engagement, it was also shifting from a battle conducted exclusively on foreign territory – like all of American’s interstate wars since 1812 – to one also fought *within* US national territory. With the alarming introduction of so-called ‘weaponised’ 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 Oct 27). 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 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’.

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. This was a war (in significant part) 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. 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”.³ The rest was silence ... until the bombs dropped.

II

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 ‘deterritorialised’ – 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

³ 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).

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 and the secretary of defense 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 goes on to conclude that if ‘interrogation’ is the main point of detaining prisoners indefinitely, ‘then physical coercion, humiliation and torture become inevitable” (Sontag 2004).

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* (see footnote 17, below). And many modern thinkers as different as Carl Schmitt, Jacques Derrida and Slavoj Zizek, 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, Žizek 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 – from Karl 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" (Žizek 2002: 109–10). Žizek 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" (p. 110). Žizek 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" (Žizek, *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 – 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. *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 and 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 favor. Internet terrorism, biological terrorism, the terrorism of anthrax and rumour – all are ascribed to Bin Laden. He might even claim natural catastrophies 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 demonisation. 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 study, 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.

III

So what is to be done? 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 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 defense of war as the only appropriate remedy: “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” (cited by Dooley 2003: 335). Strong, if emotive, stuff. An even more vehement justification of this line of thinking is offered by the philosopher Mark Dooley, who pushes Hitchens’ 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”. 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” (Ibid.: 335–37). Persuasively put.

Such advocacy of war may well be right. It is certainly well argued. 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. But however much we are appalled by al Qaeda’s logic of demonisation – and the atrocious acts which follow from it – surely one of the *worst* ways to respond is by demonizing the demonisers 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.

IV

Is religion inevitably and invariably a force for intolerance, belligerence and division? Are the very notions of spiritual purity or purgation not condemned to sacrificial dramas of Good versus Evil, Elect versus Damned, Angels versus Demons?⁴ I do not think this is the only religious response to terror and fear. In fact, 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 a) *narrative wisdom*, b) *interpretation exchange* and c) *pardon*.

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 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. Aristotle speaks of virtue as the mean between the extremes, and the Buddha teaches the Middle

⁴ For one of the most cogent explorations of the originary violence of religion, especially monotheistic, see Schwartz 1997; Bataille 2000; Girard 1977; and ‘Violence and the Sacred’, a special issue of *The Hedgehog Review*, ed. Jennifer Geddes, vol. 6, no 1, 2004. See in particular, for the purposes of our own argument below, the articles ‘Speaking, Killing and Loving in God’s Name’ by Khaled Abou El Fadl and ‘Peacemaking among the Abrahamic Faiths: an Interview with Peter Ochs’ by Jennifer Geddes.

Way. St. Benedict's Rule is precisely the middle way for the monk, rather than the extreme of either indulgence or asceticism. 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" (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', 'forebearance' 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)".⁵ 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.

⁵ See Leo Tolstoy's writings on this subject, in dialogue with Gandhi (Tolstoy 1984).

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 skillful means (*upaya-kaushalya*) 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" (Makransky, *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). Or as the famous teaching of the Kyamuni Buddhi put it: "Hatred is never quelled by hatred in this world. It is quelled by love. This is an eternal truth' (*Dhammapada* 1, 5). 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'.⁶

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. And what each of these figures shows is that Buddhist wisdom is not just an attitude of non-violence professed by 'beautiful

⁶ Cited by Makransky, 'No Real Protection without Authentic Love and Compassion', delivered at the Katmandu University Center for Buddhist Studies at Rangjung Yeshe Institute, 2nd Annual Symposium, Oct 25, 2004. Makransky goes on to argue that Where the boundless attitude of compassion etc. is lacking we lose our real 'protection' against 'malice, violence, jealousy and prejudice'. For these latter deluded tendencies, the Buddhists teach, 'destroy oneself, others and morality. Through them one is damaged, impoverished and made defenseless' (*Mahayana-sutra-alamkara*, 17, 25).

souls', but also a matter of *efficacy*. These are not aloof spiritual mandarins but politically effective activists. Just like Ghandi 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. Ghandi 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, St. Martin observes that “all mystics speak the same language since they all come from the same country”.⁷ Such a belief is deeply resistant to the triumphalist dogma of fundamentalism, which claims that only one’s own particular religion is legitimate.

V

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

⁷ See Underhill (1974: 80). See also Myladil (2000: 81f) and Saux (1998). For one of the most illuminating and original presentations of the philosophical and methodological stakes involved in the interreligious dialogue between wisdom traditions, see Clooney (2000, in particular pp. 20–28). I am especially indebted to Francis Clooney and John Makransky, colleagues of mine at Boston College, for introducing me to some of key critical issues of ‘comparative theology’, particularly as it relates to the Christian-Hindu-Buddhist conversation; and to Peggy McLoughlin for helping to instruct me in the teachings and practice of the Patanjali Yoga tradition (though I remain a faltering novice in both).

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. 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".⁸

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 a) the all-inclusive claims of timeless *sophia* with b) 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, the Church and the Father, 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

⁸ St John of the Cross, *The Spiritual Canticle* in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, ICS Publications, Washington, 1991, p. 470.

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 (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 totalising metaphysics of omnipotence and omniscience.⁹ A God, in short, of radical non-violence.

VI

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

⁹ For a most suggestive reading of the implications of such a non-omnipotent tolerant divinity for interreligious dialogue see Dillard (1999: especially 134–41, 195–203). See for example: "This God does not direct the universe, he underlies it. Or he 'prolongs himself' into it, in Teilhard's terms After all the semipotent God has one hand tied behind his back. (I cannot prove that with the other he wipes and stirs our souls from time to time, or that he spins like a fireball through our skulls, and knocks open our eyes so we see flaming skies and fall to the ground and say, 'Abba! Father!')" (p. 140). Combining the teachings of Jewish mystics like Rabbi Luria and Christian mystics like Teilhard de Chardin, Dillard explores the theme that the world is God's body and we are God's hands. It is always man who is absent, she writes, not grace. See also Kearney (2001).

interpretation', that is, discernment of signs between opposite extremes.¹⁰ 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' 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 an 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

¹⁰ See 'Introduction' to our *Strangers, Gods and Monsters*, Routledge, London and New York, 2003.

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 – practiced by Paul and Peter two thousand years ago – 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 *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, who 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 *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.¹¹

VII

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 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 Exodus stories in *Joseph and his Brothers*, a novel written in the middle of the Second War World. 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, Chiraqi’s translation of St. 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.

¹¹ I am grateful here to the instructive presentations by Mohammed El-Nawawy and Lawrence Wright at the CUNY conference on ‘The New Face of Global Terrorism: Al-Qaeda’, New York, May, 2004.

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?

VIII

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, *ibid.*: 7).¹² 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 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 (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

¹² Another plea for a certain kind of understanding, wisdom and phronetic ‘reason’ as alternatives to panic and fear before terror is offered by Corey Robin (2003).

of detachment (the stage in yoga called *pratyahara*) vis-à-vis one's own obsessive attachment to what is 'mine' and 'ours'. Would that those Christian and Muslim fundamentalists who propagate the language of apocalyptic absolutism – before and after 9/11 – might heed such a practice?

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" (Ricoeur, *ibid.*: 8).¹³ 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

¹³ This principle of radical hermeneutic plurality calls for an equally radical pluralist politics. I would suggest a political theorist like Chantale Mouffe 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 (Mouffe 2005).

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 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 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. p. 8; see also Ricoeur 2004a: 5–11, 12–17).¹⁴ 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 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).¹⁵ 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, *ibid.*: 9).

¹⁴ For a more detailed treatment of these themes see Ricoeur (2004b). See also on this subject of critical and empathic remembrance our ‘Narrative and the Ethics of Remembrance’ in *Questioning Ethics*, pp. 18–30.

¹⁵ See also Francis Clooney, *Hindu God, Christian God*, pp. 26–7; Gross and Muck 2002; Tyagananda 2000.

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 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 persecutions. 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).¹⁶ The surplus, evidenced in pardon, is endless in its

¹⁶ For a more elaborate analysis of this point see Ricoeur, ‘Love and Justice’ in Paul Ricoeur: *The Hermeneutics of Action*, pp. 23–40. See also here Ricoeur’s concluding section on ‘Difficult Pardon’ in *Memory, History and Forgetting* and Derrida’s more deconstructive notion of ‘impossible pardon’ in Derrida (2001). Notions of unconditional love, pardon and compassion are by no means the exclusive preserve of the great monotheistic or religious Wisdom traditions. They are also centrally present in the philosophical tradition of ancient Greece, as we have noted elsewhere: see the conclusion to ‘On Terror’ in my *Strangers, Gods and Monsters* (Routledge, London and NY, 2003), p. 137: “... Theseus sets out to

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...”¹⁷

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.

slay the Minotaur. But Socrates declines that option. He argues instead that the Monster is best resisted by the guiding principle: ‘do not harm, no matter what the circumstances’. Socrates prefers to stay on in the city than to become a murderer of its laws by escaping. Resolving to address the hidden cause of the Monstrous, rather than simply slay the beast, Socrates confirms his basic philosophy that it is better to suffer than to do wrong. He says no to the lure of sacrificial vengeance. He refuses to scapegoat”. On the challenge of responding creatively, spiritually and therapeutically to our hidden monsters of fear, terror and darkness, see Moore 2004.

¹⁷ Julia Kristeva, ‘Forgiveness’ *PMLA*, 117.2 (March 2002), 282, cited by Kelly Oliver in ‘Forgiveness and Subjectivity’, *Philosophy Today*, vol 47: 3, p. 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 concludes her analysis with a plea for an ethics of the unconscious, capable of combining responsibility with forgiveness: “Subjectivity requires revolt and transgression in order to individuate but it also presupposes forgiveness in order to belong to the community ... the revolt of those excluded from the dominant order is seen as uppitness, perversion or terrorism. Their revolt is not forgiven. ... This withholding or foreclosure is an essential part of domination and oppression, which operate through the colonization of psychic space precisely by denying the possibility of sublimation, revolt and forgiveness”. 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” (p. 289).

COMMENT 1

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I read with great interest Richard Kearney's reflections on the interreligious challenge of 9/11 and have much sympathy with his advocacy of the vision of non-violence from the wisdom traditions as an antidote to the prevalent varieties of extreme dualism. Kearney begins with an analysis of the apocalyptic language used both by President Bush and Osama bin Laden. Apocalypse is dramatic, which perhaps explains its appeal to the international media that thrives on what Deborah Tannen calls 'the argument culture'.

As Kearney observes, the psychological roots of this response go back to the end of the Cold War and the disappearance of Communist enemy that defined the Western foreign policy mission. However, the search for a new enemy did not take long. Indeed it was an imperative if the Cold War level of military expenditure was to be maintained. In his book 'Behind the War on Terror', Nafeez Mosaddeq Ahmed explains how the CIA played a role in bringing Saddam Hussein to power in 1979, and supported him in the war against Iran during the 1980s, while turning a blind eye to human rights abuses perpetrated during that period. The war left Iraq deeply in debt, including \$30 bn owed to Kuwait. During the war Kuwait had illegally extended its border northwards to take in 900 square miles of the Rumaila oilfield. It then stole oil using diagonal pipes under the border at the same time as violating its OPEC quota and contributing to a drop in the price of oil from \$21 to \$11 a barrel, depriving Iraq of \$14 bn a year.

Meanwhile the US administration made it clear to the Kuwaitis that they would intervene in the event of an invasion, while assuring Saddam that they had no defence agreement with Kuwait. Saddam then walked straight into the trap and the full might of the US military landed on Iraq. In the ensuing decade, the US sold \$43 bn worth of arms to Saudi Arabia and \$16 bn to other Arab states. It is a chilling fact that the arms industry needs continuing conflict for its business to flourish and one means of assuring influence is to make political donations to both main parties.

Kearney takes the official account of 9/11 at face value and does not mention the foreign policy background expressed by members of the

Bush administration behind the Project for a New American Century that promulgates the policy of pre-emptive war and demanded the invasion of Iraq as early as January 1998. What was required, they said, was 'A New Pearl Harbour' that would bring the American people round to their viewpoint. Whatever one's interpretation of the events surrounding 9/11, it certainly provided the window of opportunity to carry through the premeditated policy.

In his book 'The New Pearl Harbour' and its sequel on the 9/11 Commission, philosopher David Ray Griffin takes apart the official explanation of these events and shows how many unanswered questions remain. One is why Osama bin Laden has not been caught. His exact whereabouts were known in early November 2001 but he was simply allowed to escape. In my view, it suits US foreign policy for the enemy still to be at large; and after all, bin Laden too was trained by the CIA in Afghanistan. Moreover, it is not clear that some of his recent speeches are not in fact put-up jobs fabricated by the intelligence services to maintain the enemy image and its accompanying rhetoric. Kearney does not mention that it was Jung who first formulated the idea of the shadow and its projection onto the enemy.

Is Kearney's non-violent antidote a realistic possibility? Can a sufficient number of human beings move beyond the binary logic that he quotes? This is a tall order since this structure of thinking is as old as tribal society itself: in-group and out-group, friend and foe, even self and other. Kearney is surely right to insist on the self-defeating nature of reciprocal violence, as Pitirim Sorokin argues in his seminal book 'The Ways and Power of Love'. Sorokin points out that the highest expression of love is closely correlated with the experience of the unitive supraconsciousness in mystical states. This represents a highly evolved state of consciousness way beyond the average level in the world today. It is exemplified by many of those quoted in the article, but they are the advance guard of a more compassionate humanity.

Kearney rightly insists on the efficacy of this approach but it has been tried in only a handful of cases when compared with more traditional belligerent policies based on power politics. This by no means invalidates it, but suggests that we have a long way to go both individually and collectively before such non-violence becomes the norm.

Towards the end of his essay, Kearney discusses the role of pardon and the way in which it must be allied to justice as a response to human suffering. In his book 'No Future without Forgiveness', Archbishop

Desmond Tutu relates the story of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. The title is indicative, not only in South Africa, but everywhere where one finds deeply embedded conflicts between implacable enemies. Forgiveness can break the cycle of retaliation, as Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount. But this requires real honesty and integrity of a kind far removed from the manipulations of power politics and the underground machinations of secret services with their misleading covert operations. It requires transparency and a lack of naivete on the part of the general public; and moral courage to blow the whistle when necessary. As Jesus put it 2,000 years ago - 'be ye wise as serpents and gentle as doves'.

COMMENT 2

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Fundamentalism and the Ethic of Narrative Flexibility

In the month of September 2001, I had just begun teaching a course on some questions around the themes of fundamentalism and violence when the reality of the subject matter struck home with devastating horror. While most studies of fundamentalism pointed to its antagonistic and aggressive attitude toward all opposing or alternate conceptual and ethical systems of thought, the sheer magnitude of the violence and suffering defied immediate comprehension. Much of the interpretation came to focus on the social, political and economic causes leading to such extreme forms of animosity. Yet it was religion, or at least a particular interpretation of religion which provided the ultimate motive and justification for such crimes. The use of religious categories in not only terrorist but also anti-terrorist discourse seemed to expose the vulnerability of religion in new ways, raising again the critical question of whether religions are to be regarded as inherently intolerant and prone to division and violence. In "Thinking after Terror: an Interreligious Challenge," Richard Kearney rejects this fateful understanding of religion by pointing to the many resources for non-violence and pardon present in the wisdom traditions of most religions. This begs the question of why such nuanced understanding of scripture and tradition is largely lost on fundamentalists themselves, who generally disregard all but their own particular interpretation of their

sacred texts. The problem of fundamentalism, it may thus seem, is ultimately hermeneutical rather than an inherently religious.

Fundamentalists usually regard themselves (and are also often regarded by others) as the faithful guardians of the tradition, as the stalwarts of the purity and truth of their sacred texts. Indeed, fundamentalism has often been associated with scriptural literalism, with an attempt to live up to all scriptural teachings and injunctions. However, as many scholars have argued, fundamentalists in fact develop a highly selective relationship to scripture and tradition. They are, as Martin Marty and Scott Appleby point out, “selectively traditional and selectively modern;” and they “do not simply reaffirm the old doctrines; but subtly lift them out from their original context, embellish and institutionalize them, and employ them as *ideological weapons against a hostile world*.”¹⁸

Fundamentalism thus differs from religious conservatism in that it is not so much concerned with maintaining the purity and integrity of the tradition as a whole, but only of certain beliefs and practices which serve its own purpose. Bruce Lawrence identifies the authors or agents of such selective engagement with scripture and tradition as a “secondary-level male elite” who “claim to derive authority from a direct, unmediated appeal to scripture, yet because interpretative principles are often vague, they must be clarified by charismatic leaders who are invariably male.” (Lawrence 1989: 100). Fundamentalism may thus be defined as a reactionary, innovative and aggressive form of traditionalism. It involves the selective appropriation of and distinctive interpretation particular beliefs and practices that are elevated beyond critical reflection and that become the basis of all thought and action.

As an antipode to this fundamentalist ethic, characterized by a rigid and intolerant hermeneutic, Richard Kearney proposes a “hermeneutic of tolerance.” Following Paul Ricoeur, he points to the reality and possibility of narrative plurality and flexibility, based on the continuous discovery of new layers of meaning, through engagement of the text both from within and, at present, increasingly from without one’s own tradition. This approach draws attention to the polysemic nature of religious symbols and sacred texts such as fundamentalists consciously or unconsciously deny. Kearney demonstrates the infinite richness and hermeneutic versatility of texts by referring to the history of

¹⁸ Martin Marty and Scott Appleby, “Conclusion: An Interim Report on a Hypothetical Family” in Marty and Appleby (1992: 825–6).

interpretation of the *Song of Songs*. One of the major challenges for the development of a hermeneutic of tolerance lies in the exclusivist categories which have been developed within religions to affirm the own identity over against other religious traditions. Even here, however, the principles of narrative flexibility may be seen to be operative in the work of scholars from different religions who, faced with the challenges of religious pluralism and interreligious dialogue, have come to propose new ways of understanding one's own religious identity in relation to that of others. One of the central categories in Jewish self-understanding is that of being the chosen people. In the course of history, this notion of election has led to considerable tension, whether from within or from without, with the gentile peoples and cultures surrounding the Jewish minorities. In his book, *The Dignity of Difference*, Rabbi Jonathan Sachs, for example, attempts to develop a new understanding of the traditional Jewish emphasis on the election of Israel, not as an epithet of superiority and exclusivity, but as an affirmation of particularity and distinctiveness (Sachs 2002). Such approach would then allow for the recognition of the distinctive identity or specificity of other religious traditions and an affirmation of the genuine complementarity of religions.¹⁹ Within Christianity, it is the Cross which has often been regarded as the symbol of Christian uniqueness and superiority. Ever since Constantine, the Cross has indeed been wielded on banners and flags as an expression of Christian triumphalism. And belief in the unique soteriological significance of the death and resurrection of Christ has been regarded as the main stumbling block in the dialogue with other religions. However, rather than as a sign of superiority, a number of Christian theologians have come to view the Cross as an expression of self-denial and self-emptying, including in relation to other religions. The French philosopher Stanislas Breton (1981: 154), thus states:

The weight of the Cross is identified thus with the weight of the other as other, with the mysterious weight which draws us to the region of our dissemblance.

For him, the defining symbol Christianity thus comes to represent the proper ground for a centrifugal relation to the other. The Muslim attitude toward Christianity and Judaism has generally been governed by the belief that Islam is the only religion in the eyes of God and that

¹⁹ It is to be noted, however, that this proposal has encountered considerable opposition from ultra-Orthodox Jewish circles, leading to a modification of some of his views in the second edition of the book. A discussion of some of the alterations may be found in Rucker (2003).

Jews and Christians are *kafir*, usually translated as ‘unbelievers’. Contemporary Muslim scholars such as Tariq Ramadan (2005), however, have come to enlarge the meaning of the term Islam to include all those who, like Abraham, submit themselves to the will of God, while the term *kafir* is used in more ‘neutral’ or descriptive terms to designate those who do not follow the Qur'an and the prophet Mohammed:

They deny (*yakfuru*) the truth of the message and its Prophet, but this does not mean we may call them “miscreants” in the sense that their faith in God is not recognized. (Ibid.)

Even though these attempts at a new hermeneutic of identity and relation are relatively new and somewhat controversial, they illustrate the radical and far-reaching possibilities of a narrative flexibility which could provide the basis for a genuine hermeneutic of tolerance.

The ethic of narrative plurality thus presents itself as the antipode or corrective to a fundamentalist ethic. While the latter rejects all but its own narrow, rigid and polarizing self-understanding, the former recognizes the possibility or necessity of narrative plurality and thus the limitation of any particular interpretation of a symbol or text. But this still leaves unanswered the question of how to situate and conceive a fundamentalist interpretation of sacred texts within the general attitude of narrative flexibility. Can a hermeneutic of tolerance also recognize the possibility of an intolerant hermeneutics? Or how is a religion to relate to fundamentalist interpretations of its own texts and traditions? For many individuals embracing a more open and tolerant understanding of the own tradition, fundamentalism represents an aberration and/or an embarrassment. It generally ignores or denies the rich history of the own tradition as well as modern historical consciousness. It reduces one's religion to a few simple principles which are often interpreted in ways not in keeping with remainder of the tradition. In this sense, then, fundamentalists may even be regarded by the mainstream as belonging to an altogether different religion. Nonetheless, it cannot be denied that they draw their inspiration and their normative ideas and moral precepts from the same texts which the religion as a whole regards as revealed and authoritative. And indeed, most sacred texts do contain beliefs and principles which may readily be understood and interpreted in dualistic and exclusivist terms. Moreover, fundamentalists often maintain a highly demanding lifestyle of purity and observance, largely in keeping with scriptural injunctions. As such, it may seem inconsistent to deny fundamentalism the right to interpret and embody the tradition in their own particular way.

All the same, the recognition of fundamentalism as one possible expression within the ethic of narrative plurality does entail certain logical contradictions and tensions. After all, fundamentalism does not merely represent one among any number of hermeneutical approaches to the text: it is a reaction against the very notion of narrative plurality and flexibility. Historically, fundamentalism has come to develop largely within the context of modernity, as a reaction against the integration of historical critical methods of scholarship within religion and against the development of various liberal interpretations of scripture and tradition. This is evident in the case of Christian fundamentalism in the United States, which found its main target in the teaching of evolution theories in schools. But it is also clear in the early development of the Jewish Haredi movement, which reacted against the perceived accommodationism and reinterpreting of Jewish Law and customs in line with the modern world. It is the very notion of a plurality of interpretations that constitutes a threat and stimulates a thirst for clear, simple and absolute principles for living. Fundamentalists are generally as intolerant or even more intolerant of other schools of thought within their own religion as they are of other religions. They thus illustrate a resistance, inherent in most religious traditions or in religious consciousness, to advanced forms of narrative flexibility and plurality, especially as it concerns one's own religious identity in relation to others. The fundamentalist ethic appeals to the need for moral and religious clarity and simplicity, and absence of all ideological complexity and doubt. As such, fundamentalist groups may be seen to have more in common, sociologically speaking, with cults or sectarian movements than with the religions from which they emerge. Like sects or cults, they are based on a dualistic worldview of good versus evil, pure versus impure; on a strong sense of internal solidarity and opposition to the world; and even on self-willed isolation and apocalyptic expectations.

The relationship between a hermeneutic of tolerance and a fundamentalist hermeneutic then becomes not only a logical and theological question but also a pragmatic and political one. How might a hermeneutics of tolerance come to function not only as an antipode, but also as a genuine corrective to a fundamentalist hermeneutic of intolerance? The experience of dealing with sectarian movements as a whole has made it clear that little is to be gained from a strategy of alienation and exclusion. Fundamentalists thrive on a sense of rejection by mainstream religion and the secular world. They are, as Marty and Appleby (1992: 818) put it, "intentionally scandalous." The very opposition, whether by society at large or by the secular government to

wearing the veil or teaching Biblical creation narratives in the schools reinforces the sense of correctness of the original cause. As such, the isolation of fundamentalists by the religious mainstream may be counterproductive and dangerous. Of course, violent acts committed in the name of religion should be denounced by representative figures within that tradition. But it is only through a process of engagement of fundamentalists in the mainstream political and religious processes of reflection and decision making that one may hope to temper their extremist zeal. Hindu fundamentalist parties have become considerably more moderate during their tenure in power, while the radicalism of Islamic groups seems to grow in proportion with their marginalization. A certain degree of recognition and accommodation may thus be regarded as the only alternative to a further polarization and radicalization. This recognition may evolve from a hermeneutic of tolerance, so long as, or to the degree that it finds a way to come to terms with an intolerant hermeneutic as somewhat more than a simply anomalous position. It is only through dialogue at the heart of a particular religion that one may hope to raise awareness of the polysemantic resources of one's own tradition and indeed to shed some light on the limited and restrictive nature of a fundamentalist hermeneutic.

COMMENT 3

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Dr. Kearney's essay is an admirable one and occupies a role that is much needed in our society. It has to do with, among other things, the leadership of world religions and wisdom traditions towards a systematically eirenic role.

Dr. Kearney is to be congratulated on his erudition, and on the elegance and graciousness of his writing style. Also, the extent at which he calls upon resources, literary and spiritual from numerous religious traditions is commendable.

Now I would like to address to some deeper concerns I have about the approach that Dr. Kearney is taking.

If the purpose of the essay is to awaken the energies of religious leaders, then it would be more effective if it were to take the form of a

direct call to particular religious constituents. The underlying danger here, from my point of view, is that doctrines are substituted for diplomacy, and ideas for leadership.

The wider point here is the idea that, in the broadest political sense, salvation comes through understanding rather than through action: orthodoxy rather than orthopraxis. Behind this lies the long tradition of neo-Platonism as a way of being religious, which has infected theology and deflected it from the mission of the people of God – a mission to be agents of love, compassion and emollient science. (I have argued this at greater length in my books “*Christians and the World of Computers*” and “*The Temples of Tomorrow*”, 1990 and 1993 respectively.)

The same point can be stated as follows: it is the alarming possibility that in Philosophy of Religion, Comparative Religion, or even theology or missiology, the operative ideology is actually not a call to social action, but is Gnosticism – or any general idea of salvation through understanding, or the idea that correct understanding is the best political intervention. It is precisely the possible underlying presence of this assumption that makes me so alarmed about the line of reasoning of Dr. Kearney’s essay and makes me worry that it can be one more distraction from political action with the religious leaders directly.

Having said that, I do think that Dr. Kearney’s article gives us a very peaceable approach to a conversation that could be had with the religious leaders of such organizations as, the World Parliament Religions and the United Religion Organization formed by, Bishop Bill Swing. The question is however, whether this conversation will be inspired, or not by Dr. Kearney’s approach.

To conclude, I would like to suggest that we endeavor to construct an ortho-praxis for comparative, or even better COLLABORATIVE religion rather than an ortho-doxy. Although I am very far from being a Marxist, I do think that we can profitably remember some aphorisms of Karl Marx – one being that the point of philosophy is to change the world not to understand it as heretofore; and this could be said of philosophy of religion too. The point of philosophy of religion could be stated as: to change the world of religion into a dynamic force for action. Such writers as Fanon in “The wretched of the Earth” and Susan George in “How the Other Half Die” and Gustavo Gutierrez in “Liberation Theology” and Julien Benda in his “Treason of the Intellectuals” (French title: *Le Trahison des Clercs*) and many, many others have made it clear how dangerously seductive can be the idea that correct ideas are enough to change the world. I confess my viewpoint is that of a man dedicated to

political action – though I am professionally a theologian. But it is precisely this combination which makes it so vital to support the work of such scholar-thinkers as Richard Kearney in getting into direct action in speaking to the world of religion and calling them to act. I fear that between the thought and the act is not an easy step but a possibly unbridgeable gulf. It is perhaps for this reason that in the New Testament that we read about the “Acts of the Apostles” and not the “Thoughts of the Apostles.” Even so, the sheer quality of Dr. Kearney’s essay is such that it invites a direct ‘translation’ into the ‘categories’ of political or social action – and such seems to be a great task, a Magnum Opus for philosophy of religion in our parlous times. Such a task would require a rethinking, a re-feeling, a rebirthing of the Academy in a way that harmonizes the Platonic and Judeo-Christian and Hindu-Buddhist and Islamic and Taoist spiritualities – a task which the thousand year birth and decline of the Scientific Outlook through the vicissitudes of Renaissance, Reformation and the birth and death-struggles of the Modern World has made poignant and supremely urgent.

As Olaf Stapledon (1886–1950), the master mind of scientific philosophy, famously wrote in his Magnum Opus “*Star Maker*”, composed in 1937’s Nazi-dominated days: “... the hypercosmical reality” makes it more, not less urgent, to intervene with maximum lucidity, intelligence – and perhaps simple speed – in the supreme crisis of the human race. It is because Dr. Kearney is writing of such a high-stakes game that we must judge it by the highest standards of all philosophies – political as well as religious – and call it into immediate service on behalf of the world Body Politic.

COMMENT 4

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First of all, I would like to express my thanks to Richard Kearney for writing this article, and to Richard Kirby for drawing it to my attention. I would like to deal briefly with Richard Kirby’s response first (Comment 3, above), before discussing the original article.

I think Dr. Kirby is in danger of unduly talking down orthodoxy, which is not unimportant. Yes, we learn about the Acts of the Apostles, but we learn a great deal more of the teaching of Paul and others in the Epistles, not to mention Christ’s teaching in the Gospels. Knowledge

does not save us: grace does, but without a solid core of knowledge of God, it is far too easy to drift off into some comfortable heresy and lose sight of the truth. As far as Marx goes, the point of philosophy as I read it is to teach us how to live virtuously, which is not quite the same thing as changing the world. A fortiori, Philosophy of Religion should instruct in virtue. It must be said, however, that most of the philosophy I have studied is ancient or mediaeval, and I have had very little contact with modern German philosophy, so Marx may not be talking about exactly the same thing. My impression, however, is that he talked about revolution as a way of changing the external world, and had less (little?) interest in the inner world, as long as everyone worked for the common good. By contrast, the philosophy I have read deals as much with changing the inner world as the outer.

My concern about Dr. Kearney's article, however, is rather different: I am far from convinced that the text of John's Gospel supports the interpretation he places upon it. The sentence with which I have most problem is "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." This is a reference to John 14:6: "Jesus said to [Thomas], 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me'". I shall consider five commentaries on this verse. Four of them were written by Christians: C. K. Barrett (1960), George R. Beasley-Murray (1999), F. F. Bruce (1983) and Leon Morris (1971). The fifth was written by a Messianic Jew: David H. Stern (1996).²⁰

To begin with the standard work, Barrett (1960) observes that the truth and the life are explanatory of the way. Because Jesus is the means of access to God, who is the source of all truth and life, Jesus is himself the truth and life for humanity. Nevertheless, if John was aware of the other religions of his day, as seems likely, "he was quite sure that those religions were ineffective and that there was no religious or mystical approach to God which could achieve its goal. No one has ascended into heaven but the Son of man who came down from heaven (3.13); he alone is the link between God and men (cf. 1.51), and there is no access to God independent of him." (Ibid.: 382). Morris (1971) adds that Jesus not only shows us the way, "He *is* the way (*i.e.* he redeems men)." (p. 641.

²⁰ I have also consulted several other commentaries, which I have not cited. I have been unable to find a single dissenting voice.

Emphasis original). The truth has saving consequences, and Jesus is both life, and the source of life to humanity. This is followed by a strong claim of the uniqueness of Jesus and the sufficiency of His work (Ibid.).

Beasley-Murray (1999) explains that Jesus is the way because He is in the truth, i.e. the revelation of God, and because the life of God lives in Him. Jesus leads His own to the Father's house, revealing the truth about the goal of existence and how it may be reached, and by making this possible by granting entrance to life with the Father. However, this is not an exclusive view of salvation: it has to be interpreted in the light of John's Prologue, which shows Jesus giving light to all (Ibid.: 252). Bruce's summary of this is a model of clarity:

Thomas's bewildered question, like many questions in the Fourth Gospel, provides Jesus with the opportunity of expanding and elucidating what he has just said. Jesus is going to the Father, and the disciples are to follow him; for them he is himself the way to the Father. He is, in fact, the only way by which men and women may come to the Father; there is no other way. If this seems offensively exclusive, let it be borne in mind that the one who makes this claim is the incarnate Word, the revealer of the Father. If God has no avenue of communication with mankind apart from his Word (incarnate or otherwise), mankind has no avenue of approach to God apart from that same Word, who became flesh and dwelt among us in order to supply such an avenue of approach. Jesus' claim, understood in the light of the prologue to the Gospel, is inclusive, not exclusive. All truth is God's truth, as all life is God's life; but God's truth and God's life are incarnate in Jesus.

(Bruce 1983: 298-9)

Finally, Stern (1996) explores the two-covenant theology of Rabbi Ben-Maimon, which holds that the Jews were already close to God through the Abrahamic covenant and the Torah, so they have no need to draw close to the Father. Accordingly, its supporters interpret "no one comes to the Father except through me" as "no Gentile comes to the Father except through me". This can be seen as a development of the Talmudic doctrine that Jews are bound by the Torah, but Gentiles share in the world to come if they obey the seven 'Noachide laws' given after the flood: prohibitions against idolatry, murder, incest, theft, blasphemy and eating the flesh of living animals, and the command to promote justice. However, this is not to take the New Testament on its own terms. Jesus was a Jew, and presented Himself to Jews, who remained Jewish after they became His disciples. Both Peter and Paul presented Jesus to Jews as a Jewish Messiah (Stern 1996: 196-7). Thus, to replace 'no one' with 'no Gentile', or, for that matter 'no non-Christian', "does unacceptable

violence to the plain sense of the text and to the whole New Testament.” (Ibid.: 197) Stern goes on:

Messianic Judaism and Christianity, which accept this teaching, are indeed in a sense exclusive, for they deny that there are other men, other religious leaders, who have come from God and paid the death penalty for mankind’s sins. In this sense, then, Yeshua is *the* way; and it is not true that “on the mountaintop all paths meet,” for only Yeshua’s path arrives there. Nevertheless, this exclusivity is tempered by three factors:

- (1) The path is open to everyone (Ro 10: 9–13)
- (2) Yeshua’s path sets no precondition except turning from sin to the one true God. In particular, it does not require Gentiles to stop being Gentiles or Jews to stop being Jews.
- (3) It is God’s one true path; it exists. This simply means that, rather than complaining about exclusivity, one should be profoundly grateful to God for providing a way out of the sinful position that besets every human being.

True exclusivity would be either God providing no path whatsoever, instead of one which suffices for all, or providing it for some but not for everyone. To want some way other than what God has offered is simply to want to play God, to design one’s own remedy for sin, and ultimately not to take the evil of sin seriously (on the New Testament’s remedy for sin, see Ro 5: 12–21&N). This is true arrogance and *chutzpah* (Ibid.: 198, emphasis original).

For Stern, tolerance requires Messianic Jews and Gentile Christians to accept the right of all to seek the truth as best they can, and to profess whatever religion seems to them to express this truth most fully. This does not, however, require them to accept that other religions are true.

These commentators are agreed, then, that interpreting this passage in a way that suggests that Jesus is only one of many ways to God can only be done by distorting the intended meaning, and abandoning his claim to truth. Indeed, it is widely accepted that the uniqueness of Jesus is one of the great themes of John’s Gospel. This view takes in all sections of the Church, Catholic and Protestant, and is not limited to fundamentalists. It is clear that John’s emphasis (like Paul’s) is on universality (Christ offers salvation to everyone), not Universalism (everyone will be saved).

While I recognise and welcome the pastoral intent behind Dr. Kearney’s suggestion, I simply do not think his position on this point is tenable, and I suspect that Muslim scholars could make a similar case on behalf of the Quran’s claim that Mohammed is the greatest of the

prophets, and that his revelation from God exposes extensive flaws in the Judeo-Christian Scriptures.

Compared with this, my other comments are nit picking. While it is true that no original work by Jesus has survived, do we actually know that he took great care never to write anything except those words in the sand? This sounds like an argument from silence, which is a notoriously difficult type of argument to defend. Finally, detachment may be seen as a virtue in Eastern religions, but it is often seen as a sin in the Christian tradition, which invites everyone to engage with God and each other. True, obsessive attachment to what is ‘mine’ or ‘ours’ is also a sin, but this is because it is a departure from Christianity, not an expression of it.

Despite all this, I recognise the need to defuse the tensions caused by apocalyptic absolutism, and I commend Dr. Kearney for his attempts to advance this process. However, I do not believe it will succeed until a way can be found for the religions to coexist without sacrificing their claims to truth.

COMMENT 5

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Thinking in Terror

Refocusing the interreligious challenge from “Thinking after Terror”²¹

Richard Kearney’s valuable exercise explores some possibilities for interreligious dialogue as a response to the terror of 9/11. The paper is valuable in shifting the level and subtlety of reflection. What follows is an effort to work with some of the arguments put forward, but to suggest that there may be some vital dimensions that might be usefully added to Kearney’s insights as Professor of Philosophy at University College Dublin and Boston College – and as a poet and Irish cultural critic.

²¹ For an online version of this comment visit:
<http://www.laetusinpraesens.org/docs00s/terthink.php> – Editor.

Nature of terror

A first concern would be with the identification of the nature of terror and who is exposed to it in the light of the range of its forms as explored elsewhere (*Varieties of Terrorism: extended to the experience of the terrorized*, 2004).²² The purpose there was to demonstrate that “terror” is not just what lends itself to extensive representation according to media criteria. The media cannot show the terror experienced daily by inarticulate “unimportant” people subject to every form of deprivation and suffering – or even the bullying, intimidation and violence to which many are exposed in schools, housing estates or on the street – whether or not these result in obviously violent death. Like the Holocaust, 9/11 dramatizes the challenge of terror but it does not help understand its ubiquitous nature that many (if not all) are complicit in sustaining to some degree. Avoidance of this challenge suggests that the “terror of thinking” about these dimensions is as important as a particular stimulus to “thinking after terror”.

Kearney provides an excellent description of how religious imagery has been appropriated to reinforce portrayal of the cause of some as an “evil” infliction on the condition of others as innocent victims – thereby framed through binary logic as the “good”. It is clear that this form of argument lends itself to appropriation in support of particular political perspectives. But he does not consider how the imagery of the standard fare of crime and espionage movies has been similarly appropriated – perhaps deliberately so, given the documented relationships between the Pentagon and Hollywood.

Kearney also recognizes that those perpetrating “terror” have their own way of framing themselves as the “good” and those they attack as “evil” – or complicit with it. Both sides feel justified in excusing themselves a degree of “collateral damage” in the event of any violence. Kearney however warns against the trap of moral relativism or equivalency in envisaging the need for some other way of articulating the challenge. But in doing so there is nevertheless a need to recognize that there may be dimensions to the understanding and position of those righteously perceiving themselves as representing the innocent or “good” that are as questionable as the refusal to accept a degree of “good” in those framed as inherently “evil”. This radical polarization, the “dualist thesis” identified by Kearney, excludes any possibility of

²² <http://www.laetusinpraesens.org/docs00s/varterr.php>

dialogue. No doubt; no dialogue? It even suggests that attempts at such dialogue would be tantamount to “supping with the devil”.

Complicity with terrorism

In his extensive exploration of this polarization, Kearney appears not to be prepared to address explicitly the dimension of “I have seen the enemy and he is us”. The “invisibility” he acknowledges as characteristic of the terrorist enemy is in no way related to any appreciation that it may be a consequence of the implication of the failure of the perceptual/conceptual process in responding to an Other. Kearney does not introduce the Jungian insight into the Shadow, at a time when “terrorism” can to some degree be usefully understood in terms of the shadow of humanity (cf. Ray Harris, 2002). He also avoids the issue of terrorism arising from the misappropriation of symbolization of order of which gnosticism is strongly accused by Eric Voegelin (1968/2005).

The dimension he does not therefore fully address is argued by others, notably with respect to the natural environment, in terms of the participatory or embodied mind (Varela et al. 1991; Skolimowski 1994). Here it might be argued in terms of cognitive participation in a psycho-social environment widely characterized by terror. This appreciation might be contrasted with that of Eric Voegelin (1968).²³ But Kearney does take this up with regard to the dynamics of “the construction of a demonic enemy as a projection of our minds”. The question is whether this is to be as focused on a singular Other, as he argues, rather than a general characteristic of the relation to the psycho-social construction of a reality imbued with terror.

Kearney makes the point that “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 demonisation.” But to what extent does this focused emphasis on a particular period in time obscure the existence of forms of terror that are distributed across societies over extensive periods of time? Jacques Chirac warned the World Economic Forum (Davos, 2005) of the world’s chronic suffering from what he strikingly called the *silent tsunamis* of despair and unemployment: “Famine. Infectious diseases that decimate the life force of entire continents. Violence and revolt. Regions

²³ http://www.fritzwagner.com/ev/gnosticism_the_nature_of_modernity.html

given over to anarchy. Uncontrolled migratory movements. Rises in extremism, breeding grounds for terrorism.” [\[more\]](#)²⁴

Does this not raise the question of the distinction between blatant terrorism and the insidious terrorism of structural violence – possibly to the point of demonizing the former and excusing the latter as somehow characteristically “human”? Will the future see parallels between the definition of homicide (as deliberately undertaken by the “evil”), and “involuntary manslaughter” (namely that effected inadvertently by the innocent)? How “evil” will the future judge the systematic negligence of the condition of the deprived – and the withholding of timely assistance to those in need? Should that not also be associated with the “evil scourge of terrorism”? Is the lifelong suffering caused by such negligence not worthy of Kearney’s citation of Mark Dooley: “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”? Again, to what extent are we ourselves that monster?

Elusive way forward

It is in this context that Kearney turns for insight, using a form of religious hermeneutics, to the “wisdom traditions” associated with the world’s religions. His purpose is to seek a way “out of war towards peace and justice” – “to a more peaceful, compassionate and just life beyond the rivalry of power politics”. This articulation appears to point to a condition whose nature and dynamics are understandable and understood. Given the difficulties over centuries in reaching or achieving this condition, it is useful to consider the possibility that it is less understandable than is assumed and that it may not even be possible to articulate its nature within the languages that we habitually use. Such elusiveness is of course a characteristic of wisdom and the wisdom traditions.

Kearney makes good points in referring to the middle way and to the insights of yoga, or other integrated perspectives, in embodying values appreciated by many religions. With regard to non-violence, he argues persuasively to the point that: “And this is not some naive piety. It actually works. The most useful and practical way of protecting oneself and one’s loved ones from violence is... ‘to practice exchanging self for other, the great mystery.’” And further that this quality of non-violence

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<https://members.weforum.org/site/homepublic.nsf/Content/Special+Message+by+French+President+Jacques+Chirac>

is not just an attitude “possessed by ‘beautiful souls’, but also a matter of efficacy.”

The challenge seems to lie in the extent to which the successful application is indeed “a great mystery”. Kearney does not address the gap between the widespread shared appreciation of the wisdom of such perspectives and the practice through which religious perspectives themselves have long been at the very heart of the process through which demonisation is cultivated and violence is engendered. Somehow religions, with the greatest complacency, fail appallingly to address this matter with any “efficacy” – however often their “beautiful souls” engage in inter-faith dialogue. It is not sufficient to frame certain co-religionists as lacking in the necessary wisdom or understanding of the requisite practice – and therefore less “pure” in their understanding.

Fish-scale model of religious complicity

The fish-scale model of interdisciplinarity (Campbell 1969) can be understood to demonstrate the overlapping complicity of the disciplines in encompassing reality as a whole. Given this model, it might be argued that religions overlap in a similar way, both in encompassing the whole but also in their complicity with co-religionists framed as “less pure” – due to their more active engendering of violence. It is after all extraordinary that “extremists” of various religions should so actively favour violence against “evil” whilst their less extreme co-religionists should consider themselves sufficiently distant from that perspective to share in no responsibility for it and be in no way tainted by it.

The challenge appears otherwise if extremists merely represent scales at extreme positions on the anatomy of the same fish! And, in terms of cultural memory regarding demons and dragons, there is a certain irony to comprehending the complete set of religions as the scales together protecting such a reptile – thereby suggesting the potential for evolution into other models of the whole. In this light, there is also some irony to a fish being an early symbol of the Christian faith – and, paradoxically, to representations of the anti-Christ as scaled.

Mysterious practice of tolerance

Kearney usefully contrasts the relevant wisdom with the abstract propositions of scientific and mathematical knowledge (*theoria*), arguing instead for “a special exercise of practical wisdom” (Aristotle’s *phronesis*) “capable of negotiating a medial position between the claims of universality and particularity”. He calls for the recognition of a “God, in short, of radical non-violence”. It is a wisdom of “embodied action which

subsequently called out for an endless hermeneutics of attentive interpretation and translation.” He then asks whether if “something analogous to this hermeneutic tolerance ... were to be applied to the opposition between Palestinians and Israelis ... might it not be possible to imagine such intractable hostilities coming to an end”?

The problematic key operator here is associated with the term “applied”. The challenge is more readily seen in more familiar conflictual psycho-social contexts. The politics of who acquires or assumes the power to “apply” is fundamental to the ability of any human relations consultant / therapist to bring their particular skills and wisdom to bear – even in family therapy. In large corporations this requires the sanction of the CEO. In the emerging context of faith-based governance, one can indeed imagine efforts to “apply” religiously inspired insights – and one can imagine the nature of the resistance to such efforts. In the case of the Parliament of the World’s Religions (Chicago, 1993), the organizers were obliged to deprive the multitude of consultants, offering distinct group dynamic insights and wisdom, of the key roles they sought in ensuring the emergence of harmony between the religions represented. It might even be argued that many religions are in fact waiting for God to “apply” hermeneutic tolerance to humanity.

Kearney appeals elegantly in support of interreligious attention to the practices in support of the requisite hermeneutic tolerance. He points usefully to five “moments”:

- an ethic of narrative hospitality
- an ethic of narrative flexibility
- narrative plurality
- transfiguring the past
- pardon (and its poetics)

But such appeals have been made in other terms for decades, if not centuries. This should suggest that some dimension, or ingredient, is missing in the way the challenge is framed. The mystery of how indeed remains “a great mystery”.

Identification of clues to the mystery

The challenge is to locate clues to what has not been effectively addressed:

- Why are there different religions? To what in a person’s (or a group’s) psychology do they variously appeal in offering spiritual insights claimed as the most profound? Namely are

these differences engendered and sustained by psycho-social (pre)dispositions indicative of the necessary diversity of human nature?

- Beyond fish-scale models, are there more meaningful ways of determining the anatomy of the symbolic creature that can hold that variety? Or are there several constituting an ecosystem and determining its dynamics?
- How can the profound originalities of spiritual insights of different religions be reconciled if they are understood as facets of a larger understanding beyond expression through any form? How is the scaled dragon to be understood?
- If a facet of a spiritual whole is necessarily a more limited frame (of lower dimensionality), how can the range of facets be fully and appropriately acknowledged, configured and separately honoured so that there is no sense of their being individually “demeaned”? Are some of the more abstruse branches of mathematics capable of pointing towards the nature of a form (of higher dimensionality) that might interrelate such facets?
- In effectively appealing for the “hegemony” of particular qualities in the hermeneutics of tolerance, what is the role of those qualities that are thereby suppressed? How is any failure to appreciate the merit of the higher (dimensional) qualities to be integrated into a multi-dimensional understanding?
- In terms of a “participatory” understanding, are the reprehensible qualities associated with demonisation and violence carriers of a vital dynamic that is inadequately expressed in contemporary understandings of the sensitive appeals for tolerance? Is the polarization of violence and tolerance subject to the same critique as that of “evil” vs “good”? Why do such polarizations carry some of the limitations of that between “dynamism” and “stasis”?
- If the purpose of interreligious dialogue is not to have some syncretic outcome, then what is exchanged in that dialogue between complementary perspectives so as to sustain that complementarity – and how can the growth of insight be perceived as a result? Does each pair of complementaries engage in a particular kind of eternal “dance”, having a particular aesthetic quality?

- In envisaging the above-mentioned five “moments” in the hermeneutics of tolerance, what is the nature of the dynamics between them? How are the skills they represent integrated in practice? Where are those who claim to have acquired such skills tested?
- Does inability to embody that integrative dynamic result in the projection of understanding into a dialogical space of lower dimensionality in which learning can take place with greater “efficacy”? One characterized by demonisation and terror for example?

A Wholly Trinity?

The relation between religion and terror suggests three complementary totalizing approaches to achievement of coherence and order – perhaps fundamental to any future faith-based governance that may together bring the terrifying existential challenge of humanity to a focus:

- a. through **religion**, in the search for spiritual order, and holiness – notably through the accumulation of merit guided by understandings of “God’s law”:
 1. as a preemptive response to the terror of the afterlife and the judgement of God
 2. in fulfillment of any “Great Commission” to proselytize the world, irrespective of the terror that this may engender in other cultures
- b. through **totalitarian politics**, in the efforts towards imperial hegemony – notably through the accumulation of power guided by understanding of (Machiavelian) *Realpolitik*:
 1. as a preemptive response to terror of possible failure of protective (national) security measures
 2. in fulfillment of any sense of Manifest Destiny, irrespective of the terror engendered in subordinated populations
- c. through **economic globalization**, in efforts towards global integration – notably in order to achieve accumulation of wealth and control, guided by understanding of the law of the market:
 1. as a preemptive response to terror of poverty and dependency and the need to safeguard resources

essential to a lifestyle through which cultural identity is defined

2. in fulfillment of convictions concerning the most appropriate economic model of benefit to others, irrespective of whether they are terrorized (or left in terror) in the process

The interaction between pairs of these three complements may each be understood as imbued with a degree of terror:

- religion (a) and wealth (c):
- given the terrifying challenges to the rich of seeking entrance to heaven (of “passing through the eye of a needle”)
- given that promotion of “spirit in business” (“God is good for business”, doing business with co-religionists) may be reframed as ensuring “my spirit in your business” or praying for wealth to avoid the terrors of poverty
- power (b) and religion (a):
- given the central political role of religion recognized by neo-conservatives, theo-conservatives, and religious political parties in seeking to impose a new order
- given the inspiration of destructive initiatives by religious fundamentalists: (self) immolation, suicide bombing, and their righteous use of the “cleansing power” of fire
- wealth (c) and power (b):
- given the use of terror (intimidation, “dirty tricks”, etc) to extend economic control, and notably the terror of being uprooted and displaced, of losing the connection to the natural world on which individuals had previously centered their being
- given the willingness to “think the unthinkable” in considering the design and use of ever more terrifying weapons of mass destruction

Petrifying abomination: personal complicity?

This comment has been entitled “Thinking in Terror” to suggest that there may be an abomination more terrifying than the terrors of the Holocaust and 9/11. How might this feature in the “great mystery”? There is the possibility that the terror is unconsciously recognized as so great that thinking about it is set behind the most rigid forms of denial – petrifying those that consider its implications (as suggested by the

Gorgon Medusa²⁵ and other myths) [more].²⁶ This may effectively give rise to a “terror of thinking”. What might cause such terror?

One possibility is that it is intimately associated with our degree of personal complicity as active causative agents in events such as the Holocaust and 9/11 – and in Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib. Our personal and group identity, in reality, may be both as terrorist and as victim. We may evoke such abuse – “thinking in” terror as a form of invocation – as is suggested by the nightly proclivity of our civilization for the most extreme forms of media dramatizations of violence and horror. We may indeed be the “monster” to which Kearney refers. This monster not only manifests through such mediated events. It also manifests in the many insidious forms of terror inflicted on others – for which media violence may effectively programme us with the greatest efficacy. We may well be rightly perceived as demonic by others – however angelic we would like to assume we are.

How do such dimensions relate to Kearney’s interreligious challenge? Is the form taken by the Other effectively a “petrification” of some understanding of ourselves? For many religions it is therefore intriguing that some form of stone is used to signify their most holy dimensions. In the case of the Abrahamaic religions, this focus was preceded by the central role of the omphalos in the Mediterranean basin (akin to the lingam²⁷ in Asia) [more²⁸ | more²⁹]. Islam has the Ka’aba as its focal point in Mecca, Judaism has the Temple Wall, and for Christianity Peter is the rock on which the Church is built (*Matthew* 16:18).

The three religions at the heart of so much violence are intimately associated through the rock of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem – and dissociated by their divergent understandings of its significance. Is it that such stones hold, locked in stasis, the fundamentally terrifying dynamic of spiritual experience – safely celebrated by rituals around them? But to what extent are the existential questions raised by interreligious dialogue themselves experienced as petrifying – with each encounter involving a humbling (if not humiliating) loss of identity and self-esteem?

Another special kind of “stone”, potentially a keystone to transforming the relationship between religions in dialogue, is the “philosopher’s stone”. Described variously, it was sometimes said to be a common

²⁵ <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/classes/finALp.html>

²⁶ <http://www.loggia.com/myth/medusa.html>

²⁷ <http://www.indopedia.org/Linga.html>

²⁸ <http://www.cs.utk.edu/%7Emclennan/OM/>

²⁹ <http://www.indigogroup.co.uk/edge/blstone.htm>

substance, found everywhere but unrecognized and unappreciated. It has been claimed to signify the force behind the evolution of life and the universal binding power which unites minds and souls in a human oneness. Finally, it represented the purity and sanctity of the highest realm of pure thought and altruistic existence.

Thinking within a terrifying reality

Kearney positions his reflection in time as “thinking **after** terror”. This temporal displacement has unfortunate cognitive consequences, effectively favouring a preoccupation with a terror-focused variant of Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome – focusing on the terror as trauma **after** the event. There is nevertheless a strong case for “thinking in terror” – **within** the actuality of the moment when terror is experienced. This may be the continuing lived reality for many. Religions may even be said to emerge as a response to terror of the unknown and inexplicable – to be nourished by it, especially in nourishing terror of the afterlife (cf. Belinger 2004). As such they might be said to thrive in terror. What apostate has failed to remember a prayer in a moment of direst need?

On the other hand, it has been presented as an axiom of spiritual experience that no one can know the true grace of God who has not first known the fear of God [[more](#)³⁰ | [more](#)³¹]. This knowledge might in some way be understood as internalizing the terror that is otherwise projected into an engendered superficial world of petrified relationships with the Other. This then accords with the irony of the similarity of pronunciation of “terror” and “terra”.

Such participatory internalization (explored through enactivism³²) suggests the possibility for “thinking in terror” as a means of relating to a “God of radical violence” – the neglected pole of the duality set up by Kearney’s valuable call for recognition of a “God of radical non-violence”. It is through this aspect that the interreligious theological challenges of the terrifying horrors of the Asian tsunami of 2004 might be better addressed after the fact [[more](#)³³ | [more](#)³⁴ | [more](#)³⁵]. Recognition of both would also help to reframe the sterility inherent in contemporary thinking about the duality of war and peace – and the vain effort to

³⁰ http://www.acts17-11.com/snip_tozer_terror.html

³¹ <http://www.acts17-11.com/fear.html>

³² <http://plato.acadiau.ca/courses/educ/reid/enactivism/EnactivismDef.html>

³³ <http://www.crosswalk.com/faith/1304839.html>

³⁴ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/guardianweekly/story/0,,1383765,00.html>

³⁵ <http://www.pubtheo.com/page.asp?PID=1429>

promote the latter without being able to express through it the terrifying dynamics that are therefore better articulated through the former, and perhaps through gnostic insights [[more](#)³⁶]. The tsunami has already evoked the comment in Asia that links it to the destructive Hindu female goddess Kali. Muslims and Baptists, amongst others, have claimed the tsunami to be an Act of God against Asian sex tourism [[more](#)³⁷].

The dynamics between aspects of a deity may well be better understood through the pantheons of non-Abrahamaic religions. As a design challenge, how could the complementary insights of different religions then best be embodied in the structure of a single “interreligious temple” – whether of real or virtual stone? What is the most facilitative design of an interreligious dialogue space?

This raises the issue of how the non-Abrahamaic religions celebrate insights beyond the “mechanical” duality of **violence** vs. **non-violence**. They tend to achieve this by a more natural acceptance and honouring of the significance of the feminine and the symbolism of the relationships between the sexes. These are exemplified in the process of making love – which is treated so simplistically in Abrahamaic theology. The challenge, as notably celebrated in Celtic nature religions, lies in the complex dynamic through which potential spiritual **violation** is transformed into fruitful mutuality and consummation to enable reproduction and sustain community.

Both radical feminism and anti-cult movements are vigilant regarding “spiritual rape”, despite the challenge of reactive, sterile “celibacy” [[more](#)³⁸]. However it is the feminist theologian Sally McFague (1982) that has offered widely cited organic models of greater acceptability to Abrahamaic theology: God as mother, as lover, as friend, and finally, God as embodied by the universe itself. (see also *Imaging A Theology of Nature: The World as God’s Body*, 1990).³⁹ Sex, however, whether in practice or through its spiritual connotations, may remain a truly terrifying reminder for some of the fine and complex balance between violence and non-violence.

³⁶ <http://www.gnosis.org/library.html>

³⁷ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/4138095.stm>

³⁸ <http://website.lineone.net/%7Ekwelos/thealogy.htm>

³⁹ <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=2324>

In discussing religious dialogue, Arthur Leichnitz⁴⁰ calls for attention to the contrast between “rock logic” and “water logic” made by Edward de Bono (1990,1993). Rock logic is based on concepts effectively “cast in stone” – rigid categories, absolutes, argument and adversarial point scoring – characteristic of much interfaith dialogue. He contends that such traditional logic is static, based on the solid foundations of “is” and identity. He proposes “water logic”, based on “to” and the flow of the mind: “What does this lead to?” as opposed to “What is ...?”. This accords with the inner spiritual discipline of the Taoist exercise of T’ai Chi Chuan that is specifically inspired by the flow of water. Is it possible that the significance of “holy water”, held in chalices in temples of stone, derives in part from this phase transition?

Withdrawing into the stones

As an Irish cultural critic, the mytho-poetic status of configurations of standing stones should also be of significance to Kearney, given the traces they offer of the religious worldview and deities of earlier cultures in Ireland. As noted elsewhere (*The Isdom of the Wisdom Society: Embodying time as the heartland of humanity* 2003),⁴¹ mytho-poetic folk legends, and modern fictional explorations, serve to sustain and echo the archetypal insights in many cultures relating to elder “ancestral” races who “withdrew into the stones” – or to those that may have been “trapped” therein, like Merlin and the proverbial geni in the bottle.

To what extent is this process evident in the profound psycho-cultural association of both Jews and Palestinians with “their land” – as with the many indigenous peoples, like the Australian Aborigenes, for whom it is the very essence of their identity? (see Posey 1999). How real is the terrifying perception of spiritual rape when one religion invades, with a new construction of stone, the sacred stone-demarked place of another?

It is curious how widespread are the tendencies to invest cultural memories in commemorative stones. And, ironically, how should any “withdrawal” of an ancient civilization into stones (composed primarily of silicates) be compared with the progressive embodiment of all that is significant in modern civilization into computer silicate memory (characterized by its phase transition properties) – with some already set on “uploading” their own personalities? [[more⁴²](#) | [more⁴³](#) | [more⁴⁴](#)].

⁴⁰ http://www.worship.ca/docs/sp_al.html

⁴¹ <http://www.laetusinpraesens.org/docs00s/isdom.php>

⁴² <http://www.transhumanism.org/index.php/th/more/363/>

⁴³ http://www.space.com/business/technology/technology/uploading_life_010618.html

Curiously there is also the widespread drive to “get stoned” – in part to numb the existential experience of terror.

Perhaps there are clues to more appropriate dialogue in the interplay in nature between “rock” and “water”, rather than in favouring one over the other as suggested by de Bono. An intriguing lead is that offered by the use of sound in sustaining the sacred – from temple chants to “singing the land” (notably by Australian Aborigenes). The role of vibration in that interplay has been given force by investigations into “vibratory revitalization” of the “memory of water”, especially following interaction with stone silicates in watercourses [[more](#)⁴⁵ | [more](#)⁴⁶ | [more](#)⁴⁷]. The dynamic forms suggest the possibility of new, and necessarily “more fluid”, patterns of dialogue. There is however the tragic possibility that the “songs” of many species in process of extinction by human activity may well have an as yet unrecognized function in revitalizing both stone and water in ways vital to human well-being. Whales may in some way be “singing the sea”.

There may well be learnings for the interreligious challenge of terror and dialogue from earlier understandings of stones and their fruitful configuration. Can one thrive in a terrifying dialogue? As the most precious stone, the light-refracting facets of a cut diamond point to the possible relationship between the contrasting insights of the religions – perhaps implicitly celebrated by the Diamond Way school of Buddhism. For example, elsewhere (*Patterning Archetypal Templates of Emergent Order: implications of diamond faceting for enlightening dialogue*, 2002)⁴⁸ it was argued that:

Previously widely held amongst Celtic peoples, the belief survives of an invisible realm to which an other-worldly ancestral race, the Daoine Sidhe, has withdrawn – after living ... as the highly cultured Tuatha Dé Danaan “in the age before this one” [*see extensive web references*]. Originally an aristocratic, warrior race of heroic proportion, they dwindled in size after retreating underground, to become the Daoine Sidhe or diminutive faeries of Irish folklore. The description of them as “gods and not gods” and “something in between” is consistent with a form of transcendence of duality reinforced by attribution to them of magical powers – akin to those associated by Buddhists with achievements on the Diamond Way. Their withdrawal “below the

⁴⁴ <http://www.rense.com/ufo6/live.htm>

⁴⁵ http://www.nationalwatercenter.org/vibrational_water.htm

⁴⁶ <http://www.auroville.com/vijnana/other/water.htm>

⁴⁷ <http://www.hippocrates.com.au/grander.html>

⁴⁸ <http://www.laetusinpraesens.org/docs/behil>

surface”, or “underground”, into an “invisible realm”, “beyond the veil”, could well be understood as an effort to describe their unusual relationship to space-time and to the conventional objective world whose surface they live “behind” – “fading into the hills” and into the fabric of reality. This same “in-betweenness” is evident in their creation myth describing them as born of the union between the great Creatrix (Dana) and the stars themselves – again reminiscent of the Vajrayana goal of identification with the bonding of “light and void”.

There is a challenge offered by terrorism from a spiritual perspective – and by the scientific innovations offering ever more horrific means of causing terror. The challenge lies in whether the theoretical advances in the fundamental sciences regarding the nature of reality offer cognitive guidelines and templates through which dialogue can transcend the dualism separating religions. Pointers are, for example, offered by physicist David Bohm (1980) and his subsequent deep involvement in dialogue processes [[more](#)⁴⁹], or by mathematician Ron Atkin (1981) [[more](#)⁵⁰]. People might thereby be carried into the “fabric of reality” – into “the stones” – through a process that may hold a key to the “invisible” character of the ubiquitous “unspeakable, inexplicable, unlocateable terror” to which Kearney refers.

COMMENT 6

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Without Love, No Real Safety in this World

In his paper “Thinking after Terror,” my colleague Richard Kearney has presented an incisive analysis and critique of the religious themes

⁴⁹ <http://www.theosophy-nw.org/theosnw/science/prat-boh.htm>

⁵⁰ http://www.uia.org/strategies/stratcom_bodies.php?kap=59

which polarizing leaders in the United States and Middle East have drawn upon to construct a vivid dualism between Us (God's representatives on earth) and Them (the inherent evil), thereby encouraging masses of people to sign up for an apocalyptic war to defeat the evil other once and for all. In response to such misuse of religion, Kearney has intelligently delineated a number of other ways to draw upon the wisdom of diverse religious traditions to chart a direction following upon 9/11, including what he has explained as an ethics of narrative hospitality, flexibility, and plurality, together with the power of forgiveness wedded to an ethics of justice.

Buddhist traditions have identified the self-grasping tendency to construct a seemingly absolute duality between 'us' and 'them,' 'enemy' and 'friend,' as part of the very root of human suffering and very source of evil. Notice how evil, in Buddhist terms, is not at one pole of the duality, but is rooted in the very tendency to construct one's world *as* such a duality. That construct unleashes the motive force of individual and communal fear and hatred. On the other hand, the Buddha taught, human beings have the potential to cultivate a discernment (*prajna*) that recognizes the fabricated nature of the duality, that sees through its projections of inherent enemy and friend. Whereas the fabricated dualism takes expression in the motive power of fear and hatred, the wisdom that utterly disbelieves the dualism, it is taught, manifests in the unconditional love of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.⁵¹

In the past year, partly as my own response to the violence of 9/11, terrorism, war, but also to daily news of violence in homes and neighborhoods in my own country, I have found my attention turn to concrete cultivation of the four boundless attitudes of love that are central to my own tradition.

The four boundless attitudes appear prominently in Shakyamuni Buddha's recorded teachings. Buddhist texts refer to them as 'apramanas,' 'boundlesses,' and also as 'brahma-viharas,' 'divine abodes.' The four boundless attitudes are four powerful states of mind that are literally unconditional and all-inclusive in scope: boundless, unconditional love (*maitri*), compassion (*karuna*), sympathetic joy (*mudita*), and equanimity (*upeksa*). 'Love' here is the wish for beings to be deeply well and joyful, and to possess the inner causes of such joy

⁵¹ "All beings tremble before violence. All fear death. All love life. See yourself in others. Then whom can you hurt? What harm can you do? He who seeks happiness, by hurting those who seek happiness, will never find happiness." (Kornfield 1993: 10).

(inmost virtue). ‘Compassion’ is the wish for beings to be free of suffering, and free from its inmost causes (free from patterns of self-grasping and karmic reaction). ‘Sympathetic joy’ is joy in the joy of beings and in the means to their joy. ‘Equanimity’ is the impartiality that permits the prior attitudes to focus on every being equally, without discrimination. Buddhist traditions following Shakyamuni provide specific meditation methods for the cultivation of these all-inclusive attitudes. In Buddhist traditions where the teaching of Buddha nature (*tathagata-garbha*) is central, such attitudes are posited as innate capacities of mind that manifest spontaneously as the self-grasping patterns that obscure them are cleansed away by spiritual practices.

In early Buddhist and Theravada traditions, the boundless attitudes have been cultivated specifically to overpower obstacles to the path (such as hatred and jealousy) and to achieve states of highly refined meditative concentration (*dhyanas*). In my own traditions of practice (Tibetan, Mahayana), the four boundless are cultivated to empower the emergence of *bodhicitta*, the Bodhisattva resolve to attain fullest liberation (Buddhahood) for the sake of all beings. *Bodhicitta*, the motive force of the Bodhisattva path, IS the motive power of the four boundless attitudes conjoined with wisdom when they are harnessed to attain or express Buddhahood. In Vajrayana Buddhist practice, the four boundless take sacramental form as the four doorways of the tantric mandala, the passageways to enter into the Buddhas’ realm, to commune and merge with the Buddhas’ qualities and to participate in their liberating activity for beings.

But such soteriological schemes may seem abstract. I would like to discuss a few passages from one of my favorite Buddhist treatises which appears remarkably relevant to the violent time in which we live.

Without Love and Compassion, No Safety: The *Ornament for Mahayana Scriptures*

The *Ornament of the Mahayana Scriptures* (*Mahayana-sutralamkara*, abbreviated MSA), traditionally ascribed to Maitreya and Asanga (ca. fourth century CE) raises a key question: without love, what follows? What happens if boundless attitudes of love are lacking? Then, says the MSA, we become defenseless before their opposing tendencies: It declares: “Where the boundless attitudes of love, compassion, joy, and equanimity are lacking, persons become subject to their opposing tendencies: malice, violence, jealousy and prejudice,” and, “Those who come under the power of malice, violence, jealousy and prejudice undergo many miseries” (MSA 17.24 *bhasya* followed by MSA 17.24). It

also says: “Such deluded tendencies destroy oneself, destroy others, and destroy morality. Through them, one is damaged, impoverished and made defenseless” (MSA 17.25).⁵² Elsewhere it declares: “Boundless love destroys deluded tendencies. ... It unravels the mind-made knots of deluded emotions, so their objects [of projection] are cut.” (from MSA 17.19 with *bhasya*).⁵³

In other words, if love, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity are lacking, the fundamental power of care for others’ well being, the essential will for good, is just not there. According to the MSA teaching, strategies of assistance or protection for self and others which lack the fundamental motive force of love, of authentic care, automatically tend to express individual and communal dispositions toward jealousy, prejudice, fear, and violence, in the face of which all are rendered defenseless. Even when we claim to be helping others through our various agencies and governments, our ‘helping’ strategies are ineffective or harmful if they are not the expression of a genuine, strong will for the good of others, the will of loving kindness that wishes others to be deeply well. According to the MSA, there is simply no escape from this fundamental truth.

Applying the MSA to Contemporary Examples

When I first read the MSA section quoted above, it brought to mind part of my own experience as a young man in the U.S. Peace Corps in the Philippines. I worked in a rural tuberculosis treatment program. Patients had to take the necessary medicine each day for a full year. If they stopped, their tuberculosis might return in even more vehement forms. But the region has monsoon rains many months each year, during which floods make it difficult for village patients to travel miles to the clinics. If the effort was to be successful, it would require tremendous dedication, health workers carrying medicine to villages during the rainy season at great personal inconvenience or risk. Local government agencies and international agencies put much resource and medicine into the TB program, and many (underpaid) health workers were remarkably dedicated, but overall, the will to get the medicine to village patients during flood season was just not strong enough to overcome the obstacles. The sheer power of care, love and compassion for those

⁵² Translated from the Tibetan of MSA and *bhasya* within sDe-dge phi, fols. 214a6-214b2.

⁵³ MSA and *bhasya* within sDe-dge phi, fols. 213b3 to 213b4.

suffering from TB was just not strong enough to make the program successful. Lacking that, human tendencies toward jealousy, competition (some agencies competing with others for limited resources), communal prejudice and apathy rendered communities helpless to deal effectively with the problem. As the MSA declares, when sufficient love and care are lacking, we become helpless before their opposing tendencies, in this case individual and social tendencies toward narrow self-concern, competition for funds and reputation, or even prejudice against the rural poor.

Indeed, this experience partly motivated my early exploration of Buddhism just after my service in Peace Corps: it appeared to me that real solutions to individual and social suffering required much more than material resources, strategies and technologies. What was needed in order for social development work to actually make a difference in people's lives was a tremendous care for people, an indomitable will for the good, immense love and compassion which doesn't become discouraged at numerous social and material obstacles to progress and doesn't dissipate into apathy or self-concerned competition among "helping" individuals and agencies. Without a tremendous motive force of genuine care for persons, as the MSA declares, the common good simply will not hold together, no matter how clever the strategy for development, no matter how advanced the technologies.

In my own city of Boston there was a recent news story. A man, jealous of his former girlfriend, took revenge upon her by murdering her children. A friend of mine teaches in a school for youths from poor inner-city neighborhoods of Boston. Several of his students, deeply upset at the news, told him that they personally knew the children who were murdered. Then, one by one, students told their own stories of friends and relatives who had been murdered in their neighborhoods, often by rival ethnic gangs of youths who attacked at the slightest provocation, or with no provocation at all. The students told him: "This is the world. This is how it is." When individuals and groups do not experience being loved, cared for, when communities lose hope that anyone cares, fear and violence are often seized upon as seeming protectors in the form of gangs, mobs, and communal hatreds. Where each fears the others, the only seeming protection is to be on the strongest, most violent side. Indeed, when the tendencies opposed to love and compassion become so seemingly omnipresent, their projections of fear and hatred appear simply to *be* the world – so those students declared.

The attitudes of prejudice, hatred and violence are radically cut off from the realities of persons, lost in projections of fear and malice which, in the absence of all-inclusive love and compassion, present the appearance of *being* objectively what persons are, what the world is. Current perpetrators of violence here and abroad often perceive themselves as the historical victims who finally get 'justice' through violence, while their current victims fantasize being able someday to become the perpetrators so as to inflict their own revenge in the name of 'justice.' Fundamentally contrary to that dynamic are the all-inclusive attitudes of love, compassion, equanimity and sympathetic joy, which are attuned to the *actual* realities of persons beyond such projections. These attitudes sense and respond to persons accurately, as they are, in the qualities shared by all: layers of human suffering and fear often hiding a tremendous inner capacity for generosity, love and fundamental goodness.

It is extremely hard to break out of the communal maps which project the appearance of a world of intrinsic 'friends,' 'enemies,' and 'strangers,' the maps that organize communal violence here and abroad, precisely because such maps are a social construction viewed as real by social consensus. This is an important meaning of the Buddhist term 'karma' for our time. 'Karma' in classical Buddhist theory refers to the habitual patterns of thought, intention and reaction through which individuals experience and react to their world. Largely missing in classical Buddhist treatments of this topic is the way that patterns of thought and reaction (karma) comprise not just individually conditioned but also socially conditioned and reinforced phenomena.

That is why most of us find it so hard to believe we could ever really become free from our deluded emotions of fear and aversion, to realize all-inclusive love as a real human possibility. When everyone around me believes that only certain people deserve to be loved while certain other people deserve just to be hated and feared, I become accustomed to seeing and reacting to them in that way, and as I treat them that way, I receive the feedback that reinforces the impression, react accordingly, and thereby condition others around me to the same deluded view. Such social patterning of interpretation and reaction (karma) is largely subconscious, hard even to notice, hence to change.

If I put down this presentation, walk outside and encounter people on the street, some are categorized the moment I see them, pre-reflectively, as 'friend' (someone who deserves to be loved), some as 'enemy' (a person who should not be loved), and the vast majority, not personally

known to me, as ‘stranger’ (a person of no value, who matters no more than a block of wood). See if this is not the case. That is karmic patterning, individually and socially conditioned, which pre-consciously effects our reactions to everyone we meet, profoundly obscuring the fuller, more mysterious reality of each person.

A remarkable movie came out a few years ago entitled, ‘Beautiful Mind,’ about a mathematical genius named John Nash who taught at Princeton University, until he descended into the mental illness of schizophrenia, experiencing delusions of hearing, seeing and reacting to people who were not really there. After many years recovering from his mental illness, John Nash was visited by a Nobel prize investigator who wanted to know if he was sane enough to be invited publicly to receive the Nobel prize in mathematics for his early work. The investigator asked Nash whether he still experienced delusions, hearing and seeing people not really there. Nash replied, “I do continue to experience such delusions. But I have learned not to pay attention to them.” That is a profound point. When we continually cognize and react to others within the delusion that most persons are of no importance (‘strangers’), some deserve our love (‘friends’) and others do not (‘enemies’), we are experiencing our world through the delusion of intrinsic ‘friend,’ ‘enemy,’ ‘stranger’ without yet having learned John Nash’s lesson: how to recognize it *as* delusion, how *not* to pay attention to those reductive, inaccurate projections of persons.

But, as MSA 17.19 and its commentary declare: “Boundless love destroys deluded tendencies. ... It unravels the mind-made knots of deluded emotions, so their objects [of projection] are cut.” The component of impartiality in unconditional love and compassion contains a wisdom that does not believe in the projected appearances of such deluded tendencies. The lens of the boundless love and compassion is the wisdom of equanimity that sees through projections of individual and communal violence; that simply does not believe the reduction of persons to objects of hatred and fear.

When the evening television news reported that a young man killed his ex-girlfriend’s children out of jealousy, I did not hear the anchorperson announce: “Last night a young man, *mistaking his own jealous projections of his ex-girlfriend for the actual person*, seeking revenge, killed her children.” Why was this simple truth never spoken? Who will come right out and tell both the potential murderer and those who scream for the death penalty in ‘righteous’ hatred of him, *before* they kill, that our images of persons in every moment of malice, jealousy,

and violence are illusory constructs of thought, distortions of persons, NOT the actuality of those persons? It is the perspective of boundless love and compassion that holds that vision, that knowledge. The boundless attitudes cut through their opposing tendencies by dispelling distorted projections of self and other, and by the sheer power of such unconditional attitudes to uplift oneself and others to our true potential for unconditional goodness.

All this would sound unrealistic if the boundless attitudes were just rarities of birth, unattainable, un-cultivable. But there are clear and specific ways to cultivate them, now provided by Buddhist traditions to whomever wishes to take them up (not just for Buddhists).⁵⁴ It is not enough merely to repeat sayings like “love your neighbor as yourself,” “the lives of all are invaluable,” and so forth when we see and deeply feel the world in the distorted, conditioned ways we do. Such pronouncements have little effect, because they provide neither the motivation nor any precise method to see through the conditioned projections and reactions that each moment make others appear vividly as if they were value-less or discardable, that hide their mystery, their intrinsic worth beyond reduction to our projections of them. What the world desperately needs is widespread exposure to specific means of realizing the boundless attitudes as a real human possibility, together with the recognition that where they are lacking, no scheme, strategy or technology of itself will have the power to hold together the human family.

My argument is not that individual cultivation of boundless attitudes, by itself, will alleviate the problem of violence in our world. Also required is continued analysis of connections between poverty, unjust social systems, and the social and material conditions that feed communal fear, hatred and violence, followed up by social action. I do argue, however, that all such strategies for social intervention, in themselves, will never be sufficient. The power of the boundless attitudes, the sheer power of good will for all involved, is essential. These attitudes provide the motive force required for social and material actions for peace to bear lasting fruit, without which, they do not.

⁵⁴ There are now several authentic writings in English that teach clear ways to cultivate the boundless attitudes of love, based on their authors’ long traditional training and practice experience. Especially accessible to contemporary readers (whether they are Buddhist or not) are the following: Salzberg (1997); McLeod (2001: chapter 7); Surya Das (2000). I am also working on a book on cultivating the boundlesses.

Where all-inclusive love and compassion are lacking, their opposing tendencies tend to become the dominant motive force of social activity; whether or not the activity purports to help or to harm. According to the texts I have quoted, there is no escape from this truth. But there are means to conform to it. Clear, precise ways to cultivate all-inclusive love and compassion are the Buddha's gift to the world, not just his gift to Buddhist ethnic groups and religious communities. Those who have long trained in the boundless attitudes within Buddhist social institutions can and should introduce the means to their cultivation more and more widely into societies beyond Buddhist institutions. We can, and should, work to make the cultivation of all-inclusive love and compassion an essential part of education in contemporary societies, for children, youths and adults, as the necessary complement to our technocratic trainings. Little by little, this could beneficially inform the future development of our social theories, our social institutions and our individual responses to the challenges we face.

COMMENT 7

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Towards An Intercultural Hermeneutics of Post-'9/11' Reconciliation

Working at the forefront of hermeneutical philosophy, widely known, *inter alia*, as mediator in seminal round tables on the gift and on forgiveness around Derrida and Marion, and combining a professorial position in Ireland with one in Boston, U.S.A., Professor Kearney is particularly well situated to reflect on the way out from the aporia generated by the attack on various locations on the eastern U.S.A. seaboard on 11 September 2001, commonly known as '9/11'. With the article under discussion here, he does so in a journal published in South Asia yet electronically circulating world-wide, which adds another element of potentially global relevance to his argument. However, for such potential to materialise, a number of further conditions need to be fulfilled:

1. the attempt to adopt a truly global perspective;

2. the avoidance, therefore, of parochial myopias of a denominational and geopolitical nature;
3. and closer reflection on the practical mechanisms of reconciliation.

My comments explore how these themes may illuminate and render even more effective Richard Kearney's thoughtful and sympathetic argument.

Early in his argument, our author takes for granted that '9/11' is to have an effect on inter-*religious* dialogue. But why should this be so? Must we assume that '9/11' was part of a primarily *religious* conflictive interaction? The victims cannot all be taken to have been Christians, or even religious people, at all. The same holds for the U.S.A. at large, to which the victims largely belonged. And although the perpetrators may have justified their deeds in terms of their particular version of Islam, they did not in the least act with the mandate of all, or most, Muslims in the present world. I doubt whether '9/11' can be legitimately construed to constitute a *religious* event. And if it cannot, what then is the place of religion in this context of a non-religious event? What is it in religions that suggests they have a role to play in the aftermath of events like '9/11'? Kearney sees the problem (for he speaks of *misappropriation* of religion, implying that this is what the perpetrators were guilty of in addition to their heinous physical violence and the violation of common human combative codes), but does not offer an answer.

With rather a poetical or homiletic turn that is not supported by explicit discursive reasoning either, Kearney suggests that the perpetrators' misappropriation of religion ought to be countered by a corresponding re-appropriation of non-violence among the other camp – loosely but significantly identified as 'us', 'we'. But who is re-appropriating what, here? The vision of non-violence has formed a widespread code governing intimate face-to-face relations in the sphere of kinship and co-residence in the majority of human societies throughout known human history (cf. van Binsbergen 2001a), – long before it became a precept for the relations between non-kin and strangers, in the wider public space, in formal codes of law, ethical philosophies, and world religions. The vision of non-violence is nobody's and everybody's property. It calls for application, re-dedication, revival, rather than re-appropriation.

However, the operative word here is 'we', rather than 'non-violence'. If such re-dedication to non-violence, also in the public sphere, even in intercultural, interethnic, interreligious and intercontinental relations, is

to provide 'the solution' to the '9/11' aftermath, as Kearney suggests, this presupposes that there is one and only one problem: that there is a unanimous set of people (the unidentified 'we' featuring in Kearney's argument) who are evaluating the events of '9/11' (and the chain of events leading up to and following the '9/11' drama) from a shared perspective, groping for one interpretation common to them all. However, the fundamental fact to face in the context of '9/11' is that there are a number (at least two, probably several more) of distinct positions, from which very different evaluations will be attached to recent intercontinental history, including '9/11'.

When – as in the case of '9/11' – a small set of humans are brought to violate widespread and fundamental codes such as the respect for human lives, for civilians, for the latter's beloved ones, for other people's property and the fruits of human labour (in the form of buildings and airplanes), for the orderly conduct of armed conflict, and even turn out to be prepared to sacrifice their own lives in the process, then, in principle, the whole of humanity qualifies as victims – materially, by association, vicariously, and by implication; and this even includes the perpetrators themselves, whose sense of historical injury and dehumanising hatred we, the other humans, can only begin to fathom inside ourselves. This implies the possibility of a 'we' that encompasses the whole of mankind, and that contains in itself the conditions for all suffering and for all reconciliation.

Yet, unmistakably, Kearney's 'we' means mainly 'U.S.A. citizens and others identifying with them', including himself. Admittedly, and somewhat courageously if considered from a mainstream U.S.A. standpoint, he qualifies the 'we' perspective in several ways: it should not imply condoning the torture of Iraqi and Guantanamo Bay prisoners; it should not imply the mutual demonisation in which not only the perpetrators but also the U.S.A. leadership have publicly engaged; it should combine a Christian inspiration with a Buddhist, Hinduist, and Graeco-Roman classical one, and even have some room for Muslim mysticism; it should not be entrapped in a naïve 'we'/'them' dichotomy; it should not fall into the Huntington (1996) trap of conceptualising the conflict in terms of a clash of civilisations (but neither overstress pardon at the expense of justice, i.e. trial and punishment). Yet despite all these qualifications, the 'we' in Kearney's argument remains a North Atlantic 'we' that is loyal to U.S.A. concerns. It does not shun from criticism of the U.S.A. leadership, it does acknowledge the existence (but scarcely the contents) of a highly critical assessment of the U.S.A. performance like

Virilio's (2002), yet carefully matches such criticism with ample attention for no-nonsense patriotic statements of such hawks as Dooley and Hitchens, who are cited in (apparent?) approval. Even for an Irish intellectual there are, apparently, limits to what one can write if one has a part-time professorship at Boston, which is from whose airport the '9/11' airplanes took off on their way to destruction.

However, given his practical commitment to U.S.A. society Kearney probably needs to wrap up his unmistakable criticism in this way. He needs to create a context of mainstream credibility in which he can yet pose his question "How do we even begin to imagine pardoning Bin Laden?" (p. 9) without immediately disqualifying this question as rhetorical, as implying 'such pardon is impossible to imagine under whatever circumstances'.

Kearney claims that inhabitants of the North Atlantic (or rather, by implication, their intellectual, journalistic and political spokespersons) tend to look at contemporary wars 'uniquely in terms of politics, economics and sociology'. Again he skips one step, failing to argue why sudden violent attacks on civil targets, without prior declaration of war and without being immediately claimed by a particular nation or political movement, qualify as 'war'.⁵⁵ Somewhat uncritically, he adopts the naïve definition of the situation as offered by the U.S.A. leadership, in terms of 'War of Terror'.

Probably Kearney's hermeneutical position is primarily responsible for his seeing '9/11', legitimately, as a religious event: he is merely representing the protagonists' own views of the matter. The demonising idioms, the emotional repertoire of images, employed by the leadership on both sides suggest that one is not dealing here with a secular conflict but with one saturated with religious overtones, on both sides. 'Axis of Evil' (in the idiom employed by the U.S.A. leadership) is not a secular but a religious term. Yet I suggest we must go beyond what Kearney advocates: we must not only discover the religious imagery here which we may at first have risked to ignore, – we must also analyze that religious imagery and see what implications it has for understanding,

⁵⁵ Are we not all trying to interpret '9/11'? In a collection I edited recently, von Trotha (2003) insightfully argues that so-called 'terrorist' attacks constitute a totally new category of warfare in their own right, characterised *inter alia* by the fact that one derives one's weapons not from the arms trade but from among the technological complexity and vulnerability of North Atlantic urban mass society itself: the Internet, civil aviation, postal services, the convergence of large numbers of people around train stations, etc.

controlling, and resolving this intercontinental conflict that has already claimed many thousands of lives and that threatens to endanger world peace for decades to come. The gain of empathy and representation inherent in the hermeneutical position, may also be its loss: it allows us the identification and exegesis of the protagonists' public pronouncements, but does not allow us to speak of their hidden or dissimulated agenda's, let alone to analyse, distantly and objectifyingly, the political economy and other structural constraints to which the protagonists may be argued to be subjected even without them consciously, explicitly realising so - or without us having evidence that they do. In terms of an established usage in cultural anthropology (cf. Headland et al. 1990), hermeneutics allows us an *emic* analysis but not an *etic* one. The dilemma also reminds us of the classic Gadamer/Habermas debate of the 1960s-1970s - of which Ricoeur has been a major commentator. If, complementary to a hermeneutical perspective, we would feel free to adopt a distancing analytical perspective, we would ask ourselves whether the '9/11' confrontation between the (dominant elites of the) North Atlantic region and the world of militant Islam, in addition to the emic religious overtones, is not also a rational conflict over scarce resources in the political and economic domain (on the U.S.A. side: solidarity with Israel, a new phase of geopolitical expansion into the Middle East, and reliance - for industry and for highly-valued individual mobility - on cheap mineral oil; on the side of the militant Islamists: acknowledgment of historical wrongs done to Muslims in recent global history, and recognition of the validity of the view that Islam as a path through modernity and globalisation offers a valid alternative to dominant North Atlantic patterns). Such an analytical perspective would do something very important that is utterly beyond the hermeneutical approach: it would allow us to view '9/11' in terms of global hegemony and counter-hegemony. In more practical terms, it would make it possible to contemplate the extent to which the U.S.A. leadership themselves may have been partly responsible for the escalation leading to '9/11', so that the firm rhetorical distinction between perpetrators and victims begins to dissolve, and one obvious (if only partial) way out after '9/11' would become discernable: trying to undo, on *both* sides, the conditions that led to such escalation.

If Kearney insists on the religious dimension yet takes his distance from Huntington, this makes sense. For Kearney the fact that the '9/11' conflict has profound religious aspects, means not that it is unsolvable (Huntington), but, quite to the contrary, enables Kearney to point at the potential of religion to cross or overcome boundaries and to move

towards reconciliation. In that respect his approach is far more sympathetic than Huntington's. Yet it is similarly myopic in failing to explore – given the non-religious aspects of the conflict I have just indicated – non-religious roads to conflict resolution. Remarkably, Kearney insists – and this makes up most of his article – that religion has a great conflict-resolving potential, but

1. without offering an explicit argument as to why this should be so – and
2. while apparently glossing over the contradiction that both parties in the '9/11' conflict articulate only their irreconcilable enmity, but not their preparedness towards reconciliation, in terms of the world religion they respectively adhere to. It is as if Kearney is saying:

‘you who are casting your post-“9-11” enmity in a religious idiom, and who are capitalising on the perennial association between religion and violence,⁵⁶ please realise that the same idiom contains such elements as would allow you to overcome your enmity – and, incidentally, the same elements also appear in other religions and worldviews, e.g. in those of South Asia’.

This is profoundly meaningful, yet two crucial conditions continue to inform the situation and render Kearney's recommendations rather ineffective:

1. The overall appeal to wisdom traditions' hermeneutical tolerance fails to identify *the specific social, political and communicative conditions under which the parties involved may reject, or may be*

⁵⁶ Kearney acknowledges the intellectual movement (Freud, Girard etc.) that sees religion as essentially a product of violence. I have no quarrel with Kearney's rendering of that movement, however succinct, but I think the idea behind the movement is utterly one-sided. Both Kearney (2001) and I (van Binsbergen 1981; van Binsbergen & Schoffeleers 1985, and many later publications, largely available at <http://www.shikanda.net>) have written extensive theoretical arguments on religion, and this is not the place for a debate on this point. Let me merely say this. In my opinion religion is not just about the transmutation or sublimation of violence. It is an (apparently almost inevitable) by-product of human thought organised into patterned action and relatively stable metaphors. It is risky to make presuppositions about an undocumented distant past (the Middle Palaeolithic) when we have evidence of interhuman violence but not of articulate speech. Yet under contemporary, literate conditions it is safe to say that violence may be as much a product of discursive thought (*inter alia*, religious thought), as that discursive thought (*inter alia*, religious thought) is a product of violence.

prepared to adopt, the proposed shift from a conflictive and boundary-emphasising to a boundary-crossing and reconciliatory selection from among the repertoire of their respective religion, as exponents of the long history of wisdom traditions in the world. Kearney's strategy in his argument – even though it is published in a South Asian venue – is to address those in the North Atlantic with Christian, Buddhist and Hinduist identifications or sympathies, and show them – with considerable erudition and eloquence – how here a road to hermeneutic tolerance may be found which would allow them ('us') to forgive the perpetrators (but see above) of '9/11'. It is somewhat unfortunate that Kearney's hermeneutical perspective does not extend beyond the dominant groups in the North Atlantic region, especially not to Muslims in general (including those many millions of Muslims currently residing in the North Atlantic), let alone the militant Islamists behind the '9/11' attacks. Only towards the end of his argument there is a passing admittance that also Islamic spirituality provides examples of the hermeneutic tolerance that Kearney advocates as the way out. His argument would have been much more impressive if he would have explicitly addressed the crucial question as to what kind of perspective (religious, political, economic) one would have to offer to Muslims, and to militant Islamists particularly, in order to bring them to the point where reconciliation becomes possible and past deeds may be brought to redressive and reintegrative trial in mutual recognition of their unacceptability. Moreover, it would have been an impressive display of intercultural sensitivity if Kearney had acknowledged traditions of reconciliation world-wide, including those outside the established literate world religions, e.g. in the African and Native American context.⁵⁷ Kearney's plea to let the world's wisdom traditions do the work of reconciliation would have been much more effective, and convincing, if this plea had not stressed the North Atlantic region, philosophical and Christian/ theological tradition so ethnocentrically – which is where his short excursion into South Asian wisdom traditions soon takes Kearney. If he mentions mysticism, why miss the golden opportunity of exploring Islamic mysticism (al-DJili, ibn al-'Arabi, al-Hallaj, al-GHazzali, etc.) as a possible source of a wisdom that could well be persuasive to militant Islamists. If he mentions Aristotle, why not

⁵⁷ On Africa, cf. Ngwane 1996; van Binsbergen 2003a.

exploit the fact that Aristotle was transmitted to the North Atlantic through Islamic thinkers and left traces in Islamic thought even after al-Ghazzali had concluded the victory of theology over philosophy, in the world of Islam? The existence of an extensive and enduring Islamic wisdom tradition (Sufism, associated with its exponents' woollen – Arab. *suf* – garments according to some popular etymology, but in fact the pursuit of (Greek) *sophia*, 'wisdom') is largely ignored by Kearney. This is all the more regrettable, because Sufism, much more than the formal conceptual and confrontational thought of militant Islamism, has been the popular Islam of the Middle Eastern and North African masses for almost a millennium now.⁵⁸

2. *The public underpinning of either side's post-'9/11' position by reference to a religious idiom may be only a minority option.* Kearney seems to preach for his own parish, which not only is limited to dominant groups in the North Atlantic region, but among the latter, to those with a Christian or South Asian religious identity or at least sympathy. Given high levels of secularisation, the set thus defined only comprises a minority of the current population of the North Atlantic region. How are the secularised others to be involved,⁵⁹ including those who prefer to see the Christian idiom employed by the U.S.A. leadership as mere rhetoric? How are Muslims to be involved, without first being blackmailed into having to publicly denounce the militant Islamists and the,

⁵⁸ This is not an idle claim, but one based on my years of historical and ethnographical research on North African popular Islam, around 1970 – basis for a two-volume scholarly study now being finalised for publication.

⁵⁹ Failure to appreciate how the vast majority of the North Atlantic population is no longer actively committed to Christianity or Judaism also affects other parts of Kearney's argument. Thus he claims that the tolerance between adversaries is to be increased by the realisation that they both belong to the Abrahamic tradition (but so do the opponents in the Northern Ireland conflict, and in most conflicts that have waged in Europe in the course of the last thousand years, including Christians' treatment of Jews throughout that period), and also (Ricoeur) by reading each others' sacred scripture. Again, the latter recommendation is correct in principle, but how is it going to have a genuine impact on the North Atlantic region today, and on North Atlantic/Muslim relations, if due to secularisation only a minority of North Atlantic inhabitants identify as active adherents of the Christian and Jewish faith any more, while Islam is establishing itself, in the same region, rapidly and self-confidently? Christianity may be the rhetorical and performative idiom of the U.S.A. leadership, but it is no longer the worldview of all U.S.A. citizens, let alone of all citizens of the rest of the North Atlantic region.

admittedly totally unacceptable, extremes to which the latter went in the context of '9/11'? Surely it would be an interreligious naivety, not to say insult, to expect Muslims to let other religious orientations than Islam inspire them towards an attitude of reconciliation that is, in the most literal sense, at the very heart of Islam. Are we seriously to consider the polysemy of the Judaeo-Christian *Bible's* Song of Songs, to which Kearney refers, as an argument that is going to win Muslims over towards reconciliation? Moreover (contrary to some of the examples Kearney gives: Griffiths, Makransky, Tolstoy), the sensitivity politics of interreligious and intercultural hermeneutics would certainly abhor a situation where outsiders, strangers, to one's own religious tradition are claimed to occupy a privileged vantage point from where to interpret one's own religious tradition; such a claim smacks of condescension and hegemony (cf. van Binsbergen 2003b). How are Muslims to be involved in the post-'9/11' reconciliation process, on the basis of *their own* spiritual traditions? This is for Muslims to say; and all non-Muslims need to do is to reserve seats for Muslims around the table, far more explicitly and generously than Kearney has managed to do in his argument, even though his argument was clearly written in the same spirit as my recommendation on this point.

Kearney's plea for hermeneutical tolerance is sympathetic, timely and well-taken, but we need to be far more specific if we want it to work. The hermeneutical recognition of polysemy alone is not the answer to '9-11'. The point is not that words can be interpreted in so many ways at the same time. The point is, for instance, that, in the modern world, hardened positions of exclusion and enmity represent a violence of words simultaneous with – often even preceding – the physical violence of deeds, while state-of-the-art technologies lend to these violent words an unprecedented new power by diffusing them all over the globe, at the same time lending the technological means to bring them into violent practice. And the point is to recognise militant Islamism, not as an inevitable and perennial core of Islam, but as a recent and relatively deviant ideological product of *the very same* globalisation of our times⁶⁰

⁶⁰ In other words, I propose to analyse today's contemporary militant Islamism from the same perspective as that which I applied elsewhere to Southern African *ubuntu* philosophy and to the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission; cf. van Binsbergen 2001b, 2004. My approach has however generated considerable controversy, cf. Bewaji & Ramose 2003.

as has lend, to militant Islamism, its singularly widespread appeal (through globalised media) and (in the sense of von Trotha's 2003 argument cited above) its singularly material destructiveness. Militant Islamism, as a performative and thus deliberately atavistic revival of jihadist tendencies of the times of the Prophet Muhammad, is not the intrinsic nor the inevitable format of contemporary Islam, but a re-invention, the result of the marriage between Islam and recent globalisation.

Anyway, given the links between words and violence, one place where reconciliation may be found is in the interstices between words and between messages, in *silence*.

But that is not the only place.

As Kearney suggests, a legal framework ensuring fair trial may also be a way to bring about ultimate reconciliation, and would certainly not stand in the latter's way. I do agree on this point, and I am reminded of a case where the emphatic insistence on non-violent patterns of confession, forgiving and reconciliation, rather than on lawful punishment, may have prevented the catharsis that is needed for a true overcoming of the violence of the past: the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission.⁶¹ But, much like I myself in the latter work cited, Kearney does not give the reasons why pardon should be complemented by justice – he simply tells us that this is what Ricoeur posits.⁶²

Another passage makes us wonder just how convincing Kearney's discourse on law – or on Christianity – may be. When he refers in passing to 'those discreet words [of Jesus] in the sand that resisted murder' (cf. the book of John 8: 6 in the Christian *New Testament*) a number of points may be made. This passage is generally considered, among New Testament scholars, to be corrupt, a late insertion. The original Greek text has 'earth', not 'sand' (a significant distinction in a time when working out mathematical problems on sand was standard

⁶¹ 1994–1998; cf. Salazar et al. 2004 with references to the extensive literature; van Binsbergen 2004.

⁶² The obvious reason, not likely to be found with Ricoeur, is that the opponents on both sides bring to the conflict and its subsequent reconciliation general notions of justice, punishment and retaliation which may be creatively addressed and negotiated in the course of reconciliation (especially by a skilful outsider), but hardly so creatively as to totally eclipse or obliterate these notions; therefore, any reconciliation that does not take such particularistic notions of justice into account, risks to remain on performative, unable to prevent that the conflict simmers on underneath as a form of resentment still demanding satisfaction.

academic practice), and speaks of ‘writing’ but not of ‘words’ – it may have been magical or divinatory signs, or – as many commentators would have it – mere doodles to buy time. Most important, I am puzzled that Kearney accuses Jesus’ interlocutors in that situation of *murderous* intentions. In ways certainly to be abhorred from our present-day standpoint,⁶³ but legal at the time (the beginning of the Common Era), they were about to administer the standard communal punishment (death by collective stoning) for an individual act of transgression (adultery). In principle, murder is the infringement, not the implementation, of the law of the land. Theologically, Jesus’ reconciliatory action in this narrative illustrates how he offsets the New Law, which from a Christian standpoint he embodies (that of an accommodating love), against the Old Law, which from a Christian standpoint he is considered to render obsolete: that of formal strictness and retaliation. Kearney’s ethnocentric misreading of this passage (i.e. his projection, across time and space, of current North Atlantic notions of the lawful versus the unlawful termination of human life) *shows how difficult it is, even for a hermeneutic philosopher of the first ranks and of long standing, to develop an intercultural hermeneutics of sufficient sophistication to cope with a situation like ‘9/11’*. Undeniably, by North Atlantic national versions of public law, and by the human rights code adopted by the great majority of states in the hope of thus rendering it universal, the perpetrators of ‘9/11’ acted criminally; yet in their own eyes they must have considered themselves legitimated by reference to some higher law, and in the process they were prepared to sacrifice not only other peoples’ lives but also their own. Reconciliation is only possible if we do not deny this conflict of perceptions of legality, but if, instead, we actively invent a discourse (cf. van Binsbergen 2003b, especially the introduction) in which, through creative symbolic sleight-of-hand, both perspectives may be recognised, accommodated and overcome.

Thus it is only *in principle* that Kearney is right in his claim that hermeneutic tolerance may be the way out of protracted violent conflicts such as in Palestine/Israel, Northern Ireland, and Bosnia. As an instance of hermeneutic tolerance, the founding of Christianity in the formal, collective acceptance, by Jesus’ earliest followers, of Paul’s universalism has only limited applicability to such situations, *pace* Kearney. For

⁶³ Informed as this standpoint is by the explicit formulation, canonisation, and globalisation, of ‘human rights’, cf. the 1948 United Nations Declaration, after the 1789 model of the French revolution.

although that foundation situation may have considerable appeal to Christians as a model for emulation, it was very small-scale, and it particularly lacked the history of accumulated collective violent trauma in a conscious, identity-constructing historic process, which characterises all such protracted modern conflicts including that leading on to, and following, '9/11'. *It is the historicity of identity formation through violence*, which we have to deal with in the context of '9/11', on both sides; and that has no parallels in the *New Testament* except perhaps (obliquely and in largely unarticulated form) in the confrontation between Jews and Romans (which, more than Paul's universalism, may well have been the prime factor in the emergence of Christianity). Moreover, the subsequent two millennia of Christian-Jewish relations (which, without much exaggeration, may be summarised as a long chain of intolerance, exclusion and violence inflicted upon Jews by Christians) has shown that Paul's universalism has seldom allowed his spiritual heirs, the Christians, to effectively mobilise a similar hermeneutic tolerance towards the co-religionists of the founder of Christianity, the Jew Yeshua bar Miriam. Nor has the appeal to such hermeneutic tolerance, however admittedly foundational to Christianity [Badiou's idea (2003) as cited by Kearney is correct but far from new], inspired the proclaimedly Christian U.S.A. leadership to employ that attitude in its stance vis-à-vis the perpetrators of '9-11'.

Therefore, after identifying this kind of hermeneutical tolerance as one of the ways out, Kearney would have been expected to spell out how it can be practically deployed in the present situation, by Christians not automatically practicing it, and by Muslims not likely to be impressed by it as long as it is presented in specifically Christian trappings. Of course Kearney far from suggests that such hermeneutical tolerance is specifically Christian: indeed, as I have argued elsewhere (van Binsbergen 2003a), any conflict resolution involving reconciliation depends on it, and it is particularly small-scale African societies that can be shown to have developed this socio-communicative technology to high levels of perfection. In my argument cited, I also explore the inner mechanisms of such reconciliation. These turn out to involve, *inter alia*:

1. the recognition that both sides in the conflict are, by their own standards and perceptions, right, and act in rational integrity;
2. secondly, the only way to reconcile two such positions is by a hermeneutics that is not only tolerant, but that is to be emphatically inventive and innovative: a new overarching discourse needs to be invented that, in the eyes of both parties,

dissolves their irreconcilable positions of incompatible rightness into compromise – which requires a skilful and inspired, charismatic act of social communicative sleight-of-hand;

3. this can only be done by virtue of both parties recognising and affirming each other's common humanity which they share – putting an end to all earlier rhetoric of mutual demonisation.

Following Ricoeur, and in a way remarkably similar to mine yet somewhat less concrete and practical, Kearney sees four benefits to come from an hermeneutics of tolerance:

1. an ethic of narrative hospitality (cf. my 'recognition of a shared humanity');
2. an ethic of narrative flexibility (cf. my 'sleight-of-hand');
3. narrative plurality (cf. my recognition that both parties are right and endowed with rational integrity);
4. the transfiguring of the past (cf. my 'creative and innovative'); and is to ultimately lead on to
5. 'exceptional moments (...) where an ethics of justice is touched by a poetics of pardon'.

I could not agree more. Yet my opening question remains: What is it in organised religion, that would privilege it to bring about these five stages, over and above other communicative and performative repertoires available in the modern world, despite the fact that the latter is by and large involved in a process of secularisation? Kearney tells us that the *poetics of pardon* is usually of a spiritual or religious nature, but does not argue his case. The extent to which, and the reason why, the process of reconciliation should have religious overtones, remains the crucial question behind his argument. It needs to be answered, especially in the light of the fact that both opposing parties so far have cast their demonising idiom in the terms of the world religion they claim to adhere to. And again, in Kearney's concluding passage, there is the ominous 'we': for 'us', it is difficult to forgive the perpetrators of '9/11' – but where is the empathic argument that makes their position at least understandable, and would allow 'them' to forgive 'us', or would allow humanity ('history') to forgive both 'them' and 'us'?

COMMENT 8

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God against God, no winner, we all loose

In his most remarkable paper “Thinking After Terror: An Interreligious Challenge” Richard Kearney, realizing the existence of a tactic mobilization of the ‘religious imaginary’ in the discourses of both the al-Qaeda and the Bush administration, tries to explore some possibilities of interreligious dialogue as a response to the terror of 9/11, a dialogue that can move from the language of religious exclusivism, triumphalism and absolutism to one of a spiritual dialogue and tolerance (p. 1.)

He rightfully points out that the apocalyptic language used by both sides has not helped; it has led to a double impoverishment of the US politics and spirituality when 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 (p. 3).

Al Qaeda deployed even more emphatically apocalyptic terms. The issue was no doubt *apocalyptic war*. In both these rhetorics there was a disturbing tendency to endorse the dualist thesis that divides the world schematically into West and East. This echoed the ‘clash of civilizations’ scenario (p. 4). It is remarkable to realize that this West-East schematic division of the world was already at work during the cold war; it was West Europe versus East Europe. ‘Clash of Civilizations’ theory has just transformed the formula.

“So what is to be done? 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 transform hate into love? War into peace?” – the author wonders (p. 9). He further emphasizes that, advocacy of war may well be right. It is certainly well argued. But if that is the only adequate response to terror ... then it is hard to convince the 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. ... 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* (p. 10)?

There are here so many implicit claims that the detailed information revealed in the context of this immediate justified war on terrorism challenges. If there is an explicit apocalyptic vision in al-Qaeda discourse, the apocalyptic vision of the US is constructed to justify the war. In other words, the war in Afghanistan and the invasion of Iraq are not the consequences of this apocalyptic vision as seems to be implied in the author’s view. Was the scandalous abuse of enemy prisoners, in Iraq military camps and the Guantanamo Bay prison, symptomatic of the apocalyptic vision? Quoting Susan Sontag, the author highlights that “the torture of prisoners is not an aberration. It is a direct consequence of the with-us-or-against us doctrine of the world struggle with which Bush administration has sought to change, change radically, the international stance of the US and to recast many domestic institutions and prerogatives. It has committed the country to a pseudo-religious doctrine of war, endless war, for ‘the war on terror’ is nothing less than that. ... 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.”

The question here is, was the American nation in need of this sacrificial-demon scenario to separate ‘pure’ from ‘impure’ in order to create that apocalyptic scapegoating of al-Qaeda? In other words is the US a community in crisis and conflict that needed to reach for some kind of binding consensus by choosing to direct their violent aggression towards an ‘outsider’? Would Rene Girard’s (1977) explanation of the origin of all sacrificial religions, be applied here?

If we learn the lesson from Karl Schmitt, we understand that it is a task of political struggle to provide/construct a recognizable *image* of the enemy. We have, therefore, to ask the question: why the US politics has to create an enemy immediately after the end of the cold war? Does it have to do with the possible decline of the military weapons market? During the cold war this market was flourishing providing the small

wars here and there with the needed weapon, wars that happened so far away from the two major enemies though conducted and directed by them. One of the major markets of the industry of military weapons was the Middle East: the Arab-Israel conflict and the Iraq-Iran war where Saddam Hussein's regime was supported and supplied.

We also have to mention the fact that during the Afghan resistance to the Russian occupation Jihad was highly appreciated as long as it was against the infidels, according to Islamic terminology, and against the 'kingdom of evil', according to the Reagan administration.

The apocalyptic division of the world is not a consequence of 9/11; it was always employed long before in both the US and the Muslim world, Iran in particular. My point here is by no means to undermine the necessity of the proposed interreligious dialogue, or to put all the blame on one side. We have to be fully aware that a hermeneutics of religious toleration, though highly demanded in all the religious traditions of the world, will not *alone* solve the complicated problem of world injustice. Religion is after all nothing but what the believers claim. Let me now try to raise three questions in regard to my claim.

1. What is religion all about? The simple answer is, 'it is about God, man, and the universe'. If we only limit ourselves to the God-man relation, because the concept of 'man' presumes that man exists in the universe, it would be appropriate to define 'religion' as a sphere of existence that embraces both God and man. It could also be said that in the sphere of 'religion' God is humanized and man is divinized. The 'Covenant' presents this sphere in Judaism, while it is embodied in the person of Jesus in Christianity. In Islam this sphere of existence is presented in the Qur'an, the eternal word of God according to orthodox theology. The significance of such a sphere of existence is to create a peaceful co-existence, or harmony, between man and the world around him. By performing ritual contemplation, spiritual devotion etc., man is capable of exploring the ties and bonds of belonging to the world in general, and to the human race in particular. This is not possible without having one active principle penetrating the whole universe. This one active principle has different names in different religious traditions; if we use English as a matter of convenience, the name is God in the three well-known religions.
2. The second question is: do scholars have to approve that religion, by definition, is a way of creating a peaceful individual state of mind, and, consequently, establishing a peaceful society? The basic

doctrine of the 'Creator', the Lord of the universe, the Mighty and Merciful, the Omniscient and Omnipotent is to explain to man where he stands in this unknown universe. The essential message is to tell man that he is not lonely, his existence is not in vain; there is a 'meaning' in his life on earth. This meaning could only be attained and reach its full manifestation through communal and social life.

A top priority of every religion is the establishment of a just society. Social justice is based on the fact that all humans are equal in God's eyes; they are all dignified by the very fact that each of them represents in a unique way the 'image' of God. Shall I say that 'peace' is an essential component of any religious decree? Whether it refers to a state of mind or denotes an essential condition of social life it is strongly connected to a certain mode of belief.

But we have also to realize that both 'war' and 'peace' are two sides of one coin. The interrelation between 'war' and 'peace' parallel to the interrelation between 'mercy' and 'might' in the divine attributes of God in every religion. I am referring to 'war' when it is the only option to fight against injustice. As God has to punish the sinful and to reward the righteous, the establishment of justice on earth needs sometimes to be done by means of 'fighting against'. I should also make another distinction here between 'fighting against,' which means the existence of a hostile camp (enemy of justice) and 'killing' indiscriminately innocent people.

3. The third question is: is it religion that always determines and shapes social life, or is it also shaped by and interpreted in a certain socio-historical context? In order to answer such a question, a clear distinction has to be made between the original socio-historical context of a given religion and its development(s) through its socio-historical journey up to the present. Judaism, for example, was to set free the people of Israel and to unify the tribes under one religious and political leadership. It was thus necessary to advocate the notion of 'the chosen people' alongside so many symbols of exclusive identity, such as circumcision. Christianity, on the other hand, was to reform Judaism from its materialistic orientation by emphasizing spirituality. 'I did not come to change the law,' Jesus says, 'but to bring the people of Israel back to the right path'. The claim that the temple was turned into a market place gave justification to the new message. As for Islam,

according to the Qur'an, it was not a new religion; it was the same religion of Abraham, Isaac, Ishmael, Jacob, and Moses. See, for example Qur'an, 57: 26–29.

Through the long journey of every religion in history, layers of interpretation and re-interpretation, or rather interpretation and counter-interpretation, are accumulated around the original texts to the extent that the original socio-historical context is veiled. But fortunately this creates multiplicity of trends of thought within every religion. Our target as scholars of religion and believers is to emphasize by all possible means this empirical fact, i.e., religion is what the believers make out of its original sources. Scriptures do not speak by themselves; they speak out through the voice of the believers. I might even go further to claim that even God speaks through man; His divine discourse is, therefore, man-made after all. The religious meaning either stagnates or is allowed to be transformed in time and place. It all depends on the socio-political and historical conditions of any given community.

In our modern era it became essential to present an understanding of religion, which explicates the universal dimension and critically explains the limited significance of its historical dimension. The problem with 'fundamentalism' as an exclusive way of thinking that can automatically lead to violence and terrorism, is that it takes on historical dimension of a certain religion and presents it as an eternal religious truth. As I mentioned earlier religion is expressed in a scripture, which means human languages, the carrier of its historical and cultural background. Nevertheless, these languages contain the divine revelation of God, which means that these languages signify more than they convey. The literal interpretation adopted essentially by the fundamentalist groups in every religion reifies the divine message by claiming the historical as eternal. The proposed hermeneutics of religious texts should not take the other extreme, absolutely divinizing every passage; it should rather apply analytical methodology to differentiate between the 'universal' and the 'historical' dimensions, trying to preserve an essential equilibrium.

Now, to conclude, it is true that because of the revolutionary progress in the technology of communication the world became actually a small village. But the structure of this village is based on the hegemony of the politically, militarily, and financially powerful nations, where the weak, poor, helpless nations are disregarded. Even within the powerful countries the gap between the rich and the poor, between the powerful and the weak, has increasingly widened. Under the challenge of

socialism, as represented in the Soviet Union, capitalism had always to watch its rigid structure and restructure itself in favor of providing some protective measures for the needy. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, *the Red Satan* as it was labeled during the Cold War era, Capitalism revealed its hidden face; its monstrous face became apparent.

Within the process of marketing the ideology of ‘globalization’, the emergence of a new religion with its supporting theology can be discerned. If the god of all religions, whether primitive or monotheistic, scriptural or not, has the double attributes of both might and beauty, of power and mercy, the new god of globalization has only one face, the mighty and merciless. It is against this god that all religions have to unite, to deploy the energy of the believers, to fight this new emerging injustice. Recontextualizing religions, and reconstructing their meanings accordingly, is an essential procedure to bring them together in order to activate the power of faith in the right direction, for the benefit, not only of all humans, but of all beings on this earth.

REPLY TO COMMENTS

Catherine Cornille argues that since fundamentalists ‘generally disregard all but their own particular interpretation of their sacred texts’, the problem of fundamentalism is thus ‘ultimately hermeneutical rather than inherently religious’. She goes on to claim that their interpretation is both ‘selectively traditional and selectively modern’, constructing its particular ‘ideological’ reading as if it were the literal truth itself. I would add that the main problem with fundamentalism is precisely its denial of its own hermeneutical status. If fundamentalists did acknowledge that their reading of the Bible or Koran is one among others – rather than literal truth itself – they would be less beholden to their own isolationist stance. Indeed one suspects that fundamentalist fanaticism and violence are often ways of blocking out any awareness of the complex hermeneutics involved in all religions, East and West, their own as well as others’.

But Cornille goes on to pose a more challenging question still: ‘can a hermeneutics of tolerance also recognize the possibility of an intolerant

hermeneutics?’ Is it not inconsistent to deny fundamentalists the right to interpret their Scripture in their own particular way, however one might disagree with it or see it as a threat to one’s own tolerant attitude? Moreover, Cornille makes the astute observation that alienating or marginalizing the fundamentalists only plays into their camp, confirming their siege mentality of absolutist purity and apartness. Observing how the isolation of fundamentalists by the respectable religious mainstream has often proved counterproductive, Cornille recommends that some kind of ‘accommodation’ be considered as the ‘only alternative to a further polarization and radicalization’.

I fully agree with Cornille here while not underestimating for a moment – any less than Cornille herself – the difficulties involved. How, after all, are we to transform what Rawls calls ‘unreasonable disagreements’ into relatively ‘reasonable’ ones which allow for some kind of dialogue. Perhaps one way is to point to certain religious resources within one’s own tradition – pardon, hospitality to the stranger, grace in suffering, humility before the divine, the peace of inner prayer and meditation – which may find resonances in the religious experiences, rites and narratives of the adversary. No where is this more relevant, post 9/11, than in the reciprocal rapport between the Judeo-Christian and Islamic interpretations of their common Abrahamic heritage.

This is a point raised by several of the respondents above. It seems clear that we in the West – I speak as an Irish Christian now residing in the USA – need to demonstrate a greater attentiveness to the Islamic tradition and its positive historical, philosophical and spiritual contributions to our world, West as well as East. Given the pressing need to understand exactly what motivates the Islamic fundamentalists and terrorists – religiously as well as politically – it would seem incumbent on those of us writing and teaching in the West (and I would extend that to include all primary and secondary levels of our educational establishments) to include comparative religious studies as a key item in our curricula. And, needless to say, this would be equally recommended for educational institutions in the East regarding Western spiritual traditions. Writing from one’s own hermeneutic perspective, it is sometimes easy to forget that one has no prerogative on universal wisdom. So a wise procedure would seem to be a) to acknowledge one’s own cultural religious standpoint, and b) to engage, where possible, in dialogue with that of one’s other or adversary. What is needed, in short, is a sort of spiritual transvestism where we learn to exchange places,

translating and transposing ourselves into the minds and hearts of others.⁶⁴ This requires a huge feat of imagination. For as the novelist, Ian McEwan, remarked: the terrorists could not have done what they did if they had imagined themselves in the skins of their victims. In a similar feat of empathy, we are challenged to imagine ourselves in the place of the fundamentalist terrorists – however disagreeable and difficult that may be – so that we may invite them in turn to do likewise. We can only teach by example; and example presupposes courage and invention. This is where interreligious faith needs to be motivated and supplemented by interreligious imagination. Is there anyone, no matter how adversarial, of whom we cannot imagine even one good thing, gesture, moment, thought, action?⁶⁵

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Richard Kirby makes a plea for a new ‘orthopraxis’ of religious dialogue, aimed more directly at action and leadership than at ideas and understanding. He warns against ‘Gnosticism’ replacing ‘social action’. And to this end, he quotes Marx about the necessity to change the world rather than interpret it. He also cites the work of Fanon, George, Benda and Gutierrez as embodying such a brand of thought-committed-to-action. I have great sympathy with this view and very much appreciate the author’s sense of urgency and concern. In fact, when I write of ‘understanding’ in my essay I try to make it plain that I am not speaking

⁶⁴ See Paul Knitter (2004): ‘To be a theologian in any one tradition one must be, at least to some extent, a theologian of another tradition’, p. 138. Knitter’s speaks of ‘passing over and back’ between different traditions and interprets his own Christian confessional commitment as an invitation to interreligious dialogue: ‘Christ is the way that is open to other ways’. See also the pioneering work in interreligious dialogue advanced by thinkers like Francis Clooney (2004); Diana Eck (2003); Thich Nhat Hanh (1995); Bede Griffiths (1995), or Abhishiktananda (1969).

⁶⁵ See Abhishiktananda (1976): ‘Prayer is to see God in any man, or in any creature, with which we come in contact. God has no form. He is beyond every form. Precisely for that reason he can reveal and manifest himself under any form.... No form may be considered unworthy to be his sign ... Such a man may be coarse, rude, ugly, wicked. I may have to avoid too close contact with him, nor to be hurt or maimed in my mind or body. I may have to threaten him, to rebuke him, I may have to claim what is due from him. Yet I can never forget that there is always in him a spark at least of divine love.... God needs, so to speak, my respect and my love for that man, in order to bring out of him the love of which he is capable. This is indeed the precise theology that underlies the theory and practice of non-violence; to show such above to the so-called foe, that the warmth

of some kind of abstract theory but of a practical wisdom and narrative *phronesis* which derive from the world of action and return to it, again and again. Hence the crucial import of my concluding sentence: ‘The bottom line is this – pardon cannot forget protest any more than love can forget action’. Besides, high-stakes action almost invariably benefits from a certain exposure to critical reflection (derived from philosophical enlightenment) and to compassionate ‘awareness’ of the stranger (taught by wisdom traditions). Secondly, while I take Kirby’s point about the pragmatic need to direct my message to leaders – or at least those in positions of leadership in bodies like the World Council of Churches – I think it would be a mistake to focus only on those ‘at the top’. Central to the message of non-violence in the great wisdom traditions is the idea that change begins at the bottom, in the smallest and most insignificant of events. Giving the cup of cold water to the least of these. Caring for the widow, the orphan and the stranger. Welcoming the outsider. Attention to the divine in the most immediate and singular places, beginning with the inner space of each heart (*guha-akasa*) where Atman and Brahman convene.⁶⁶ Leadership should surely take its lead from below, not vice versa. This is what I call elsewhere a ‘micro-eschatology’ of the everyday, which I believe provides a fruitful basis for both spiritual awareness and ethical-political action.⁶⁷ I presume Richard Kirby would agree that a delicate balance may be struck in the dialectic of great and small.

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Gordon Arthur takes me to task over my reading of John 14:6 – ‘I am the way, and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me’. Citing five scholarly commentators in support of his view, he concludes that all agree that ‘interpreting this passage in a way that suggests that Jesus is only one of many ways to God can only be done by distorting the intended meaning, and abandoning his claim to truth’. Arthur recommends that some way be found ‘for religions to co-exist without sacrificing their claims to truth’.

I could not agree more with this recommendation and never intended to suggest that any religion – Christian or otherwise – should abandon

and the fire of this love may in the end kindle the love which is dormant within him, deeply buried perhaps under mountains of egoism’ (pp. 14–16).

⁶⁶ See the *Chandogya Upanisad*, 8.1; also Abhishiktananda (1974).

its claim to truth. The whole question here is surely whether we need to see the truth claims of the different wisdom traditions as mutually exclusive, each affirming that *only their own* Name or manifestation of the divine is true at the expense of all others. This is not of course to deny the crucial importance of religious diversity or to diminish the unique character of each religion. It is merely to express a faith in religious plurality which seeks a middle road between absolutism and relativism.

Yes, Christ claims to be the way to the Absolute, but I do not believe he is prescribing the doctrines and dogmas of Christianity as an *absolute means* to that end. So, if he is indeed claiming to be the way to the Father, everything depends – as I see it – on how one interprets this way. If it is, as Christ reveals, a matter of giving a cup of cold water to the least of these (Christ did not suggest we confine our charity to those with baptismal certs), of identifying with the suffering and persecuted (as he tells Paul on the road to Damascus), of sharing one's bread with one's neighbor (as on the road to Emmaus or the last supper), then we may say that no one – irrespective of their being baptized in a Christian Church or doctrinally exposed to the Revealed Truth of Sinai – is excluded from this way. Jesus is the way the truth and the life for all who feed the hungry, chose love and justice over hate and violence, and believe that the impossible may be made possible. Grace of spirit is, I suspect, accessible through all of the great wisdom traditions though they may call it by another name – Krishna, Buddha, Toa, Brahman – and narrate it differently. That is why it seems nonsensical to me that if Christ met Buddha he would try to convert him! He would surely rather embrace a brother in wisdom, compassion and grace – a holy one (albeit in a different manner to Jesus) emphasizing different aspects of divine truth in different ways, but embodying, for all the differences, no less a viable way, truth and light in his own Buddhist right. Jesus spent his life identifying with others, those precisely who were strangers, outcasts and aliens, from Mary Magdalene and the Samaritan woman to the widow with the withered hand. There was no one so lowly as to forfeit his love. So, if this is true of the 'least of these' (*elachistos*), how much truer is it of the 'greatest of these' – Buddha, Krishna, Brahman?

The alternative to doctrinal absolutism (there is only one truth, we have it and you don't) is not relativism (there is no truth at all). It is, I

⁶⁷ See my 'Epiphany of the Everyday: Aftering God' and 'Enabling God' in *After God: Richard Kearney and the Religious Turn in Continental Philosophy* (Fordham University Press, New York, 2005).

suggest, what we might call confideism: con-fidence, or *con-fiance* in the other – my faithful trust in the sincerity and validity of the other’s truth claim reciprocating the other’s trust in mine. Is that not what Jesus Christ taught? That the divine Way is open to other Ways? That the gracious ‘possibility’ (*dunamis*) of divinity is revealed – ‘all in all’ – to the inner ‘eyes of the heart’ (*tous ophthalmous tes kardias*) in each human person (Ephesians, 1)?⁶⁸ I will return to this below.

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One final point in response to Gordon Arthur’s other challenging rebuttal: ‘detachment may be seen as a virtue in Eastern religions, but it is often seen as a sin in the Christian tradition, which invites everyone to engage with God and each other’. I think I know what Arthur means. But does detachment have to be seen in this life-denying way? The generous readings of Hindu and Buddhist texts by holy Christian monks like Thomas Merton, Bede Griffiths and Henri Le Saux serve to remind us Judeo-Christian monotheists that the way of ‘Eastern’ detachment is not at all a renunciation of this life (as is so often thought). It is, as so many Vedantic and yoga teachings reveal, a summons to a deeper spiritual interiority which leads to a greater sense of commitment to the life of others.⁶⁹ Moreover, it may well be precisely in the open-hearted encounter with the religions of the Other – for the West the East and vice versa – that Christians (I speak as a Christian) may discover the crucial role which ‘detachment’ plays in its own tradition.

Let me give some brief examples of a ‘hermeneutic of detachment’ in the Gospel accounts of the Resurrection. It is surely telling that almost all of the narrative versions speak of the revelation of the Risen Christ in terms of a gradual, discreet and patient process of hermeneutic disclosure rather than some blinding mass miracle. Christ refuses the temptation of spectacular magic that would compel all to believe. As he

⁶⁸ I am grateful to two of my friends and teachers – Frank Clooney and Peggy McLoughlin – for bringing my attention to this passage in Paul and analogous passages on the inner space/cave/chamber/eyes/seed of the heart in the Vedantic and Yoga traditions of the East (e.g. *Chandogya Upanishad* 3: 13-14 and 8: 1-3 for example). I am also grateful to my colleagues, Mary Anderson and John Makransky, the former for showing me the importance of the heart image in the Islamic Sufi tradition and the latter for informing me of its centrality to the Tantric Buddhist tradition. When Paul speaks of the ‘heart’ he may well be referring to the Jewish Rabbinical teachings on the good ‘inclination of the heart’ (*yetzer hatov*). I am indebted to another Boston College colleague, Anne Davenport, for the notion of interconfessional *con-fiance*.

⁶⁹ See the *Yoga Sutras* of Patanjali and Abhishiktananda (1969: 64–66).

did when resisting the temptations of the devil in the desert, so brilliantly commented by Dostoyevsky in *THE BROTHERS KARAMAZOV*. And as he did after almost every divine healing when he asked the healed to remain silent. Or when he bade the evil spirits not to say his name; or forbade the disciples who witnessed his transfiguration to speak to anyone about it or to construct a memorial of worship. The resurrected Christ is aware, as Peter says in the Acts, that he could have appeared to many, indeed to everyone, but he chose to reveal himself to only a few. Why? Why this gesture of discretion and withholding? Why this kenotic self-limitation? So that we too might learn to appreciate detachment over attachment, dispossession over possession, freedom over coercion, charity over compulsion. Why does no one recognize the risen Christ when they first see him even though his disciples spent years by his side? Neither Peter nor John as they take turns to enter the burial chamber ('for they did not yet understand the Scripture that he had to rise from the dead', John 20.9). Nor Mary Magdalene and the other Mary as they first confront the angel (whose clothing, like Jesus on Mt Tabor, was 'white as snow') (Matthew 28). Nor Mary who, in yet another version, sees the gardener but not yet the Christ in him. Nor Cleopas and his fellow disciple as they talk with the stranger on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24). It is, typically, in the sharing of fish or the breaking of bread that Jesus gradually reveals himself. Never in a single miraculous flash. So that if it is true that Christ spent most of his life in 'indirect communication' (or 'incognito' to use Kierkegaard's terms), he still communicates through signs and apparitions even in his risen life, when he has come into his fullness.

Christ, it seems, went to great lengths to be avoid the traps of supremacism supercessionism. His way was open to many ways. He took the ultimate kenotic step of not only forgoing his parity with the divine Father but of undergoing a human death so that the 'single grain' of seed could 'yield a rich harvest' (John 12: 24-25), the unique one multiplying as many, the sacred incarnating itself in the 'least of these'. For, as GM Hopkins puts it, 'Christ plays in ten thousand places ... to the Father through the features of men's faces'. There is no limit, it seems to me, to this infinite readiness for incarnational convertibility. The perpetual enfleshment (*ensarkosis*) of the divine in the human. Christ as endless passage, translation, substitution, transit. So if it is true that we can 'only' find salvation through Christ, the only thing that this 'only' excludes is exclusiveness. Christ is the option of inclusivity par excellence - 'all in all' and each in each.

This is the centrifugal Christ. This is the divinity that goes out to everyone and resists being confined to a single person (in human history no less than in the holy Trinity). The one who refuses to allow his resurrection to be reified as a literal fact but discloses it as a series of unveilings, approaches and withdrawals, probings and testimonies. The Risen Lord calls for a hermeneutics of 'con-fiance', of mutual trust and faith between revealer and believer (just think of the gardener's exchange with Mary Magdalene): a hermeneutics which points towards an open ecumenism from which no one is excluded, except those who exclude themselves. This is far more than some relativist conversation (à la Rorty) which forfeits all claims to truth. Christ does claim to be the truth; but he does not claim that any of us ordinary mortals possesses this truth in an absolute or exclusive way. This is why Christian revelation – no less than other revelations in the great wisdom traditions – is an invitation to an infinite hermeneutic of hospitality, humility, tolerance, love and ever innovative interpretation. A good basis for dialogue between the religions whose militant claims to possess absolute truth absolutely have led to countless wars throughout the ages, right down to the present day.

Some other wisdom traditions, it must be said, have less of a problem on this issue. It is well known that one can be a Christian, Jewish or atheist Buddhist for example. And in the Bhakti Sutras of Narada, from the Vedic tradition, we read that 'It is not proper for one to enter into a controversy about God ... or about comparative merits of different devotees. For there is plenty of room for diversity in views, and no one view, based upon mere reason, is conclusive in itself' (Sutras 74–75) – a statement which is seen as the basis of the virtues of 'non-violence' (Sutra 78).

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Anthony Judge takes me to task for not sufficiently acknowledging the degree of 'projection' (he cites the Jungian notion of Shadow) in our construction of the enemy. But, although I did not cite Jung, the examples I cite from Baudrillard, Žižek and Makransky, all refer to the decisive role played by symbolic/imaginary/unconscious processes in the demonizing of the 'terrorists' as irrevocably impure and evil. Indeed the main premise of the first part of my paper is that the War on Terror is, in significant part, a result of a distorted religious imaginary which ignores the complex realities at work in our understanding (or misunderstanding/*méconnaissance*) of both Self and Other. This is a phenomenon which I explored in more detail and depth in previous

books, such as *Strangers, Gods and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness* (2003) and *On Stories* (2002). And there I made it clear that the central role played by our psychic processes in the construction of the enemy does not mean that there is *never* an enemy out there – one who wishes to do evil and cause harm to innocent people. Genocides and holocausts are ample testimony to the real existence of evil people in the world. A certain New Age tendency to say there is no difference at all between the innocent and the guilty is, in my opinion, a betrayal of those who died in massacres or torture chambers. And I would include the victims of 9/11 in the category of the innocent here, and their killers in the category of the guilty. The extension of these categories to include a) *all* Americans as innocent victims, and b) *all* Arabs who resist the American presence in the Middle East as guilty, is another matter entirely. Most people, it is true, probably have a little bit of St Francis and a little bit of the Marquis de Sade in their unconscious. Few are pure saints and few pure demons. But that does not mean that there is no way of making some kind of ethical distinction between benevolent and malevolent others.

Anthony Judge goes on to ask another troubling question: namely, why have the wisdom traditions failed so miserably to address the problem of violence and non-violence with any ‘efficacy’? And this in spite of how often their ‘beautiful souls’ engage in inter-faith dialogue. My answer is that inter-faith dialogue has, in fact, been practiced with extreme *rarity* in human history. When pioneering figures like Thomas Merton or Abhishiktananda were trying to bring about dialogue between Christians, Jews, Hindus and Buddhists prior to the nineteen Sixties (and Vatican II in the Catholic Church), they met with considerable resistance and incomprehension. Comparative theology and interreligious exchange is, in reality, a surprisingly recent phenomenon. The pluralist movement of world religions is still a fledgling. Which brings us back to the old adage that the reason that genuine inter-religious tolerance has never worked is that it has hardly ever been tried.

Why is this? Is it a failure of leadership? At one point, Judge makes the point (regarding the Parliament of the World’s Religions, Chicago, 1993) that ‘many religions are in fact waiting for God to ‘apply’ hermeneutic tolerance to humanity’. Judge is right to question a common tendency of the religious mind to defer to divine authority to solve our problems – or if God is not immediately forthcoming, then those to whom he has delegated his authority on earth: the leaders of the world’s great religions. There is no doubt that statements by the Dalai Lama or the Pope, for example, can have a great impact on their own faithful and

indeed on the larger world. And Judge finds support here from other respondents. Peter Kirby takes me to task for not sufficiently focusing on the practical politics of religious 'leadership'. As does Peter Lorimer for taking my examples of non-violent wisdom from 'an advance guard' who possess a 'highly evolved state of consciousness way beyond the average level in the world today'.

I take these points. But a danger that I see here is in appealing overly to 'top-down' decisions that basically remove our own responsibility for non-violent practice at the ground level of our everyday actions and decisions. Many of those who began their campaigns of non-violence by engaging in local daily practices – without waiting for edicts or encyclicals from above – include the likes of Dorothy Day, Etty Hillesum, Mahatma Gandhi, John Hume, Martin Luther King, not to mention countless others who never made the limelight but whose work had a deep effect on people in their environment. If the message of tolerance and *caritas* does not begin at the lowest level of daily interaction, because it is deferring to the higher echelons of religious authority, it is hard to see how it can ever really take root. Indeed, Henri Le Saux/Abhishiktananda, goes so far as to suggest that if interreligious dialogue does not begin at the very centre of one's own being (what he termed 'guha' or the cave of the heart) and, by extension, of one's quotidian interaction with fellow human beings, it will never begin at all. Real confessional hospitality – where we genuinely respect the other's right to believe in a spiritual option other than one's own – is primarily a practice rather than a program, an inspiration from below rather than from above.

Finally, Judge raises the critical question of the *limits* of non-violence. He alludes to the existence, in several religions, of phenomena such as 'spiritual rape' or sacrificial violation. I take it that he is cautioning us against an Eirenic or naive view of religion expressed in cults of compulsory celibacy or extreme passivism. As he puts it, 'sex, whether in practice or through its spiritual connotations, may remain a truly terrifying reminder for some of the fine and complex balance between violence and non-violence'. And a similar complexity, it seems, surrounds the question of responding practically and effectively to military violence. Martin Buber already posed the hard question to Gandhi regarding passive resistance to Nazism. What were those in the Warsaw Ghetto to do? On this one, I have to say I agree with Buber. The religious wisdom of non-violence does not necessarily mean unconditional passivism. There are circumstances – Nazi atrocities being

one of them – where non-violence is impossible. Something only a God could practice.⁷⁰

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Both Richard Kirby and Nasr Abu-Zayd raise the vexed question about the relation between theory and action. Abu-Zayd writes that a ‘hermeneutics of religious tolerance cannot *alone* solve the complicated problem of world injustice’, while Kirby argues that we must call such a hermeneutics ‘into immediate service on behalf of the world Body Politic’. I have great sympathy with this sense of urgency to change rather than merely interpret the world. In fact, my article ends with the declaration that ‘pardon cannot forget protest any more than love can forget action’. Theory – including the hermeneutical account of religious tolerance which I explore in my article – derives from the world of action and finally returns to it again. Here I follow Paul Ricoeur’s hermeneutic arc of action-text-action. But I would argue that the *detour* through critical and conceptual understanding can help us discriminate and discern between different modes of action. And I believe that such practical wisdom and understanding, based on the Aristotelian notion of *phronesis* and the spiritual notion of ‘wisdom’ (*Sophia*), may ultimately assist us in changing the world of action for the better. Understanding and action are not, in my books, polar opposites but complementary pairs. It is not a matter of either/or but of both/and.

So, I would agree with Abu-Zayd – and Van Binsbergen – that a hermeneutics of religious tolerance cannot ‘alone’ solve the problem. But it is an important means, amongst others, to such a solution and should not be ignored. Indeed, my argument is somewhat stronger than that in so far as I claim that since the perversion of the religious imaginary – on both sides in the War of Terror – is central to the proliferation of violence, it is wise and indeed expedient to look to the religious imaginary for a response: one that might supplement the standard political, economic and military ones. Such a move would observe the homeopathic remedy of curing like with like. And it would also take into account, as I try to do in my article, the powerful testimonies in our history to the use of religious wisdom to address the root problems of

⁷⁰ Even Jesus, as Paul Ricoeur has suggested, found it impossible to forgive the violence inflicted on him by his enemies – he had to appeal to the God within and beyond him to do so: ‘Father, forgive them for they know not what they do’. I discuss this question of possible and impossible pardon further in my recent book, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters* (Kearney 2003).

injustice and violence. (Which is not to deny that these problems are also inextricably socio-political in nature). So if I do focus primarily on the religious aspect of this war – especially as it informs the rhetorical unconscious of the apocalyptic discourse of Us and Them – it is largely because this aspect of the conflict has been largely ignored or downplayed (even by those astute philosophical commentators of 9/11 whom I cite: Virilio, Zizek, Baudrillard, Sontag, Chomsky, Said etc). Though we live after the Enlightenment, religion has not gone away. And this is true both East and West. Just think, for example, of the central role played by the debate on religious ‘values’ in recent Presidential elections in the US, one of the world’s most sophisticated and advanced democracies. Or consider of the extraordinary displays of mourning for John Paul II. Or the moral impact of a statement by the Dalai Lama or Aung San Suu Kyi or leading Mullahs and Ayatollahs in the Muslim world.

It is not just in the diagnosis of violence that religion features; it is also in the prognosis. I am not claiming, I repeat, that religious wisdom is the only effective response to violence. All I am suggesting is that it is a potentially crucial force in the struggle against fear and hatred, to be deployed alongside the more obvious political and economic responses; and one which we ignore, I submit, at our peril. As David Lorimer says, citing Jesus, ‘be ye wise as serpents and gentle as doves’. A hermeneutic readiness for multiple religious belonging – at least in spirit and imagination – is surely a positive step in the direction of a more global ethos of non-violence.

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So let me be clear: I am not at all saying that non-religious people are somehow ineligible for such a wisdom response. Atheism and the critical doubts and detachments that often go with it are, to my mind, essential ingredients in any healthy faith tradition (indeed many of the great mystics and spiritual innovators were called atheists in their day). But even where modes of humanistic atheism wish to dispense with any relation to the religious whatsoever – even be it one of critical interrogation – I would still consider such atheists to have access to the wisdom of non-violence. To believe in a Godless universe yet struggle for the seemingly ‘impossible’ goals of unconditional pardon, peace and non-violence – like many wise secular minds from Bertrand Russell to Jacques Derrida – is something commonly witnessed in our time. To claim that the wisdom of non-exclusive tolerance excludes atheists would itself be an act of intolerance. And a particularly perverse one at

that. No one is excluded from the way of wisdom. Wisdom goes by many names. Sometimes by no name at all. The great apophatic thinkers taught us this. And they were not known for violence or dogmatism. Any more than the teachers of the Bhakti Sutras who wrote that ‘it is not proper to enter into controversy about God, or other spiritual truths ... for there is plenty of room for diversity in views, and no one view, based upon mere reason, is conclusive in itself’ (Sutras 74–75).

So what is to be done? John Makransky offers the practical and prudential suggestion of making ‘the cultivation of all-inclusive love and compassion an essential part of education in contemporary societies, for children, youths and adults, as the necessary complement to our technocratic trainings’. And he suggests that this could – ‘little by little’ – inform the ‘future development of our social theories, our social institutions and our individual responses to the challenges we face’. I fully agree with this and feel that the phrase ‘little by little’ is crucial here. For one temptation when appealing to the religious imaginary – or more specifically, the spirit of non-violence – is to expect miracles. Leave it all to God. Some *Deus ex machina* will save the world and let us all off the hook. In my view, Sartre and other critics of theistic passivism and quietism were entirely correct here. The cultivation of wisdom is our human responsibility; and if one believes that God exists it is up to us, in Etty Hillesum’s words, to ‘help God to be God’. This appeal to a God of little things and little steps – rather than the Omni-God of miraculous force and fiat – may, I believe, look to resources in all of the great wisdom traditions (often lamentably neglected). Whether it be compassion for all sentient beings in Buddhism, the Abrahamic plea for the ‘widow, orphan and stranger’, or the Christian appeal to the ‘least of beings’ (*elachistos*) – in these and other cases in other traditions, we find a commitment to deep change at the most basic, simple and everyday level of existence. From which, I repeat, no one is excluded. (To take just one example from the Gospels, when Jesus says that if we give a cup of cold water to one who is thirsting we give it to God himself, is he suggesting we only give to those with baptismal certs?) If we follow a wisdom which bids us to start from where we are here and now, in the very interiority of our being as it responds to the needs and demands of those around us, it may not be too long before, ‘little by little’, the fruits and testimonies of such small actions ripple and radiate out to include a larger, even global, constellation of relations with others, allies and adversaries alike. Moses, Jesus, Siddhartha, Socrates, Patanjali, Confucius and many other spiritual visionaries were all beings who began at the beginning, taking one step at a time, ‘little by little’, without end.

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Finally, Vim Van Binsbergen raises several cogent comments which I would like to address before signing off. He makes the point that when I refer to 'we' I mean mainly 'USA citizens and others identifying with them'. Later again, he accurately observes that my address is delivered largely to the dominant religious groups in 'the North Atlantic region' in its appeal for a hermeneutic tolerance to 'forgive the perpetrators of 9/11'. As such, he argues, it does not sufficiently acknowledge the resources within the Islamist (and other) movements capable of forgiving 'us' here in the West. 'It would have been an impressive display of intercultural sensitivity if Kearney had acknowledged traditions of reconciliation world-wide, including those outside the established literate world religions, e.g. in the African and Native American context'.

I concede this point immediately. I was in fact addressing my remarks to a Western and American audience when I first wrote this talk, and should have acknowledged as much in my opening remarks. I was indeed, to use Van Binsbergen's phrase, 'preaching for my own Parish'. It is the duty of every hermeneutic thinker to begin by stating his/her own point of origin in time, place, culture and history, rather than assuming the stance of some 'universal We' (what Thomas Nagel calls the 'God's-eye view' of the world). I was remiss in this regard. Particularly when one finds oneself, as I do, situated in the very midst of the dominant Western discourse which has so often and so egregiously offended on the score of 'ethnocentrism' – assuming its view to be *the* view. I of course never intended such a centrist claim, nor did I personally identify with the dominant North Atlantic discourse. Indeed, when I quoted two respected European thinkers – Dooley and Hitchens – who defended the war in Iraq I did not, *pace* Van Binsbergen, do so with approval but simply with a view to giving my intellectual opponents here in the West a fair hearing, before moving on to develop my own position against the war. But where I do own up to a certain sin of omission it is with regard to the Islamic tradition. Though I do refer to the Koranic principles of compassion and *Ihsan*, I do not, I admit, sufficiently explore the extensive wisdom resources in Islam, and more specifically Islamic mysticism, mentioned by Van Binsbergen (e.g. al-Ghazzali, al-Hallaj, Ibn al-'Arabi, al-Dijili and others in the Sufi tradition eligible for citation in any inclusive interreligious dialogue in the wake of 9/11) (see also Palacios 1981).

Here I must simply confess to my lack of competence and knowledge with respect to this tradition, something which I, and I hope many other intellectuals in the West, will address as a matter of some urgency. Van Binsbergen's proposal to open up a broader perspective which would enable us to 'undo, on *both* sides, the conditions that led to such an escalation' of war and terror, is one which I wholeheartedly endorse. As I would endorse his concluding plea to render one's adversary's position 'at least understandable' and thus aim for a new and more comprehensive understanding which might allow 'them' to forgive 'us', or might 'allow humanity to forgive both 'them' and 'us''. Agreed. The practice of a generous interconfessional hospitality would, I believe, make a significant contribution to such an understanding.

I think such a perspective is one shared by Makransky, Cornille, Kirby and most of the other respondents in this issue. For it proposes, as I see it, a dialogical bridge which acknowledges and traverses religious differences while crediting the possibility of a shared peace-making wisdom: a wisdom which simultaneously precedes and exceeds these differences in the name of a deeper, larger humanity. Such a hermeneutic bridge passes over and back between faiths, its multilateral traversals opening up a space where diverse confessions may criss-cross, convene, and in part at least, converge.

In this light, we could begin to speak of a *mutual convertibility* between wisdom traditions – a sort of reciprocal accommodation which respects the equally valid claims of religious specificity and communality. It is my wager that such a dialogue might blaze a path to peace beyond the belligerent rivalries of our world. And my wager is my hope.

Richard Kearney

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