Responding to September 11 — and October 7 and January 29: Which Religion Shall We Follow?

J. Denny Weaver

The events of September 11 shocked the world, and as the towers of the World Trade Center tumbled, the United States seemed shaken to its very foundations.[1] Most Americans felt themselves to be personally offended and attacked by the suicide pilots on planes in New York, Pennsylvania, and Washington, D.C.[2] The American public called overwhelmingly for a military response, and voices were also raised to say that this unprecedented series of events challenged our categories of pacifism and justifiable war, and that the peace church may need to rethink the meanings of peace and nonviolence in this new world.

For people not committed to nonviolence, the questions What would you do about bin-Laden? or What would you do about 9-11? have become the virtual equivalents of the perennial questions What would you do about Hitler? and What would you do if a crazed person came after your mother/wife/daughter with a gun? In each case, the questioner assumes that these are the ultimate situations for which the only possible answer is to use violence. People committed to nonviolence also pose these questions, often wistfully wishing for nonviolent answers when there appear to be none.

However, when we examine the September 11 events in historical perspective, there is a profound sameness in both the U.S. president's policy direction and military response to September 11, and the public's patriotic response and support for him. And the sameness reveals that this particular challenge to the peace church is not a new challenge; it is merely a new form of the same old arguments. Although George W. Bush likely does not recognize it, he is following a script that prescribes his words and actions as he leads the nation in this so-called "war against terrorism." So too, without recognition of it, the American public follows the same script as they sing in the choir that the

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president is leading. This essay sketches the script by means of a brief overview of American civil religion, and provides a realist nonviolent response to the events of September 11.

American Civil Religion[3]

The script that both George W. Bush and the American people are following comes from what is known as American civil religion. American civil religion consists of a "set of sacred persons, events, beliefs, rituals, and symbols," all the elements of religious tradition. These elements imbue the United States with a divine identity and divine agenda.[4] The purpose of this civil religion is to associate the American nation with the divine, to infuse the nation with a sense of divine chosenness and a belief that it has a sacred mission in the world. Civil religion teaches that the U.S. is God's country, and that carrying out its national mission is to do God's work.

These sacred connotations about the American nation are derived from a founding myth. According to this myth, oppressed peoples from Europe came to America seeking freedom, which was then vouchsafed and forged in revolutionary fashion by a war against England in 1776. The righteousness of this war was anchored in an appeal to God, as the Declaration of Independence put it, in "a firm Reliance on the Protection of Divine Providence." This founding myth becomes the story of every American, even recent immigrants sworn in as citizens, who learn that their newly acquired freedom comes from George Washington's defeat of the evil British in 1776. A central feature emerging from this myth is the idea of the nation's chosenness. This idea comes from the Pilgrims and Puritans who settled in Massachusetts beginning in 1620. Shaped by predestinarian Calvinism, they believed themselves to be God's new, chosen people, making an exodus from evil England parallel to ancient Israel's escape from Egypt, and now destined by God to inherit the promised land of the new world. As a "new Israel," they intended to base their civil laws on God's revealed law, the Bible, and believed that to disregard that law threatened the new society's special destiny. This was an established church, with religious beliefs linked to political structures.

A fundamental dimension of an established church is the assumption that Christian faith encompasses the social order. There is one structured church for the state, because Christianity has become identified with and

encompasses all of the social order. And when Christianity does that, the church as "people of God" has become identified with a society, an ethnic group, or a political entity. Church no longer consists of those who respond in faith to the call of Jesus Christ, but instead consists of the mass of the population, identified by geography, politics, or ethnicity. Modern terminology for this amalgam of church and state is Christendom or a "Christian society."

Later versions of the mythology kept the Puritan world view but translated being a divinely ordained society into secular language. In the Declaration of Independence of 1776, for example, the Christian God of the Puritans became Nature's God, the Creator, Supreme Judge of the World, and divine providence. Laws were no longer based on God's revealed law, but protected 'inalienable rights,' a secular way shaped by the deistic thinking of the Enlightenment to identify innate rights without mentioning God. In the nineteenth century, the sense of being a predestined, chosen people eventually became a "manifest destiny" for European settlers to possess the continent and displace the native inhabitants. Thus modern American civil religion is a contemporary expression of an ancient idea, with the American nation replacing the church in being called to carry out a divine mission.

Closely linked to the sense of divine chosenness is the belief that this chosenness is vouchsafed by the success of the nation's endeavors. On the *Arrabella* as the Puritans were appoaching landfall, Governor John Winthrop said, "Now if the Lord shall please to heare us, and bring us in peace to the place wee desire [the North American coast], then hath hee ratified this Covenant and sealed our Commission."[5] Winthrop and his flock assumed that arriving without shipwreck would be God's ratification of their endeavor. In the Declaration of Independence, this claim of divine approval became an appeal "to the Supreme Judge of the World for the Rectitude of our Intentions," which takes place "with a firm Reliance on the Protection of divine Providence." The claim of divine blessing warranted through success continues in the pervasive American need to display divine favor by being the richest and strongest country in the world both militarily and economically, to be first to the moon, to control space, to win the most Olympic medals, to function as the world's policeman, *ad nauseam*.

The founding myth is built on war. War gave birth to the divinely sanctioned people and inaugurated their entry into the new era. War preserved

the Puritans from the indigenous population whose land God was supposedly giving them. In 1776, war supposedly freed the colonists from the clutches of the evil British. As the supposed supreme event in the nation's founding, the story of this war is placed in school curricula to teach that war is the basis of freedom and that without it there will be no freedom.

Participants in the original founding myth are the "saints" of civil religion: George Washington, who led the armies in 1776; Thomas Jefferson, who penned the foundational documents of the nation; and Abraham Lincoln, who supposedly preserved the unified nation and freed the slaves through the Civil War, and then paid the price of unity with his own blood. National holidays such as the Fourth of July and Memorial Day — the holy days of civil religion — celebrate the link between violence and freedom. On these occasions, the president as the "high priest" of civil religion leads the nation in celebrating past wars and honoring the people who fought them. As the high priest, he is expected to personify the nation's virtue, which explains why Bill Clinton's sexual philandering attracted great opprobrium, while even more blatant sexual offenses are tolerated or ignored for entertainment and athletic idols.

Civil religion portrays its version of religion in primarily civil or secular terms. In the Declaration of Independence, the God of civil religion is referred to in rather vague, distant terms — Supreme Being, Supreme Judge, Providence, and so on. More recent usage has employed additional imprecise terms for God — such as Richard Nixon's profession of his great faith in "Something Else" in a televised Billy Graham crusade. Such vague references are intentional. They both allow and presume that every religious group and denomination will include itself as a smaller subgroup under the umbrella of the wider or higher national civil religion. Each denomination then becomes a particular representation of the national religion. American flags in churches symbolize this union.

American civil religion has lifted a specific political philosophy (one-person, one-vote democracy), and a specific economic philosophy (neoliberal capitalism) to the level of ultimate, unquestioned belief. Alongside these social doctrines stand a number of individual rights, also given ultimate — that is, inalienable, by right of birth — significance: the freedoms of speech, press, assembly, and so on. The ultimacy of these social and individual beliefs becomes clear when one notices that the nation reserves for itself the right, in

the name of these beliefs, to invoke the supreme sanction — death — on people and nations that challenge the U.S. version of ultimate beliefs.

Millennial Outlook

American civil religion has a distinctly future-oriented or millennial outlook — the belief that a past or present evil is on the point of being overcome, so that the nation stands perpetually on the verge of the millennium — a new era of unprecedented opportunity, goodness, and prosperity.[6] For the early Puritan settlers, the golden age would be the new epoch in God's history they planned to create. A few decades later, the idea of standing on the verge of a new epoch was translated into secular terms, and became the "novus ordo seculorum" or new order of the ages, as proclaimed on the great seal of the United States. Former president George Bush may have been unaware of the myth-shaped, theological tradition he was continuing when he announced that the 1990 war against Iraq would produce a "new world order."

Restatement and reenactment of the myth of the looming millennium has followed a cyclical pattern which is well depicted in William McLoughlin's *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform*.[7] A given cycle starts with an assumption that the society should be unified. When the fragmentation is perceived, blame for the break-up must be placed somewhere. Finally, an enemy is found that can represent all the evils which appear to threaten the fragmented society, the last obstacle between the present circumstances and the realization of the new order. Suddenly it seems that a rapid, violent elimination of the enemy will speed the process of creating unity and usher in the new age.

That cycle has repeated itself several times. As previous wars removed the Native Americans, who stood between European Puritans and their destiny, the war in 1776 eliminated the British, who held back later colonists from their destiny. Then came the Civil War, supposedly fought to eliminate the sin of slavery and to preserve the sacred unity of the nation. In the twentieth century, wars were supposedly fought to eliminate the Kaiser and "make the world safe for democracy," and to eliminate the scourge of Hitler and the Axis powers. Ronald Reagan's arms build-up and his rhetoric about the Soviet Union as the "Evil Empire" clearly fit the paradigm. Some readers may recall Reagan's joke when he spoke into an unexpectedly open microphone, saying "I've outlawed the Soviet Union — the bombing starts in five minutes." However,

the Soviet empire collapsed without a great conflagration, and it remained for George Bush to proclaim the war that was supposed to inaugurate a "new world order" by eliminating the last evil, namely Saddam Hussein. In all of these examples, war was good. It was always also a crusade, fought in the name of a good cause with the blessing of divine power, and wrapped in the terminology of the mythical model of the last war before the dawn of the golden age — the millennium.

The Shaping Power of the Myth

The myth of the American nation founded in revolutionary violence shapes the understanding of United States history. It makes war one of the nation's most important endeavors, virtually an ultimate good. The result is a public ethos and a system of values that predisposes particular individuals as well as American society in general to choose violence and war as a means of solving problems, even as individuals — whether as private citizens or politicians in the public sphere — fervently profess and believe themselves to support peace and to oppose war.

A few additional facts reveal the myth's power to reshape both past and present reality. Its shaping power makes it convenient to forget that in 1776, only a third of the population actually supported the rebellion, and that the taxes colonists resented paying were being collected to pay debts incurred in the war only thirteen years earlier when they had considered Britain their savior from the heinous French. The myth of war as the way to purge the nation's sin led the nation to pretend it had solved the race problem with the Civil War. The same mythology leads modern people to forget that possession of great quantities of armaments was a principal cause of World War I, that the harsh settlement imposed on Germany after that war produced resentment that came to fruition in the Second World War, and that this latter war was not really fought to save the Jews.[8]

The Vietnam war was traumatic because it did not fit the mythical pattern. It showed that the nation was not invincible, an idea unthinkable if God had given America a special destiny. Atrocities brought home via the televised evening news disproved mythical assumptions about national goodness, purity, and selflessness. The war's end ushered in no new era in which the nation could take pride. On the contrary, it gave birth to a time of

suspicion and distrust of government, and to serious doubts about national direction. Because this war did not fit the mythical formula, it troubled the United States greatly for the last quarter of the twentieth century.

The traumatic experience of Vietnam played a role in the U.S. rush into the Gulf War of 1991, as well as its interpretation afterward. As the spokesman for war and as the civil religious high priest for the divinely called nation, it was important that president George Bush let it be known he had spent time in prayer with Billy Graham before declaring war. When the president addressed Congress to announce the end of hostilities, he told war stories that supposedly showed the true character of Americans — their compassion. A very significant Bush comment was his declaration that "we have excised Vietnam." The Gulf War allowed the U.S. once again to reclaim its status as the invincible and selfless force on the side of freedom anywhere in the world. On the other side, the myth has in effect caused the nation to ignore some very sad dimensions of the Gulf War — the 100,000 Iraqi battle-related casualties, hundreds of thousands of children dead from food shortages and epidemics caused by the massive destruction of water and sewage disposal systems, considerable ecological damage, and uncounted millions of barrels of oil wasted by this war to secure American control of the flow of oil to Japan.

The United States' national mythology requires an enemy to blame for its problems. After all, how could the elect, invincible, and righteous nation have fundamental problems of its own making? For fifty years, the Soviet Union and its satellites in Eastern Europe served well in the enemy role. Since the demise of the Soviet Union and the tearing down of the Berlin Wall, the national mythology required creation of a new enemy. Iraq has done service as the enemy of choice but has needed periodic augmentation in that role from both the Clinton and current Bush administrations. With external enemies difficult to sustain in recent years, until September 11 some of the search for an enemy had also turned inward. Those blamed for the nation's ills included illegal aliens, the poor, criminals, and homosexuals.

In the understanding of Robert Bellah, whose 1967 article has stimulated discussions for a third of a century, civil religion was a phenomenon arising spontaneously from the people and was a creation of culture. For Bellah, the product of this spontaneous creation could perform two salutary functions. One was to promote national unity. Since each particular religious or cultural

group could be a version of the national civil religion, Bellah saw it as a unifying agent for a culturally diverse population. The second function was prophetic critique. Since civil religion arose spontaneously from the culture and was independent of government, and since it allegedly represented a divine mission and the nation's highest values, it should function as critic and judge, reminding the nation of its need to act justly and challenging it when it did not. Bellah used civil religion as a critique of the nation's involvement in Vietnam.[9]

In a recent book, Marcela Cristi has distinguished two models of civil religion, one offered by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who first used the term, and the other from Emile Durkheim. Although Rousseau is the writer whom Bellah and most other scholars reference for the beginning of modern discussion of civil religion, Cristi points out that Bellah's description actually follows Durkheim's account.[10] Her emphasis on Rousseau's concept interjects an important element into the discussion here. In contrast to Durkheim, Rousseau pictured civil religion as the creation of the ruler, used by him to establish and maintain social order, and to impose and legitimate his program on the population. The difference between Durkheim's and Rousseau's concepts is significant. For Bellah, one unifying myth can bring together a diverse society. But from the perspective of Rousseau's understanding, competing cultural versions of civil religion can and do exist, and more than one cultural myth can strive to be the unifying factor. And with myths being created and used by rulers, it is apparent that the myth functions both to shape the views of the population and to express those views.

Civil Religion and the American Response to September 11

Since September 11, George W. Bush has been calling the nation and the world to a supposed last great war to rid the planet of the last great evil. Bush's manner of interpreting the horror of September 11 and of justifying the subsequent "war against terrorism" is strikingly consistent with, and a continuation of, the American myth depicted thus far. In both presidential rhetoric and the apparent view of the overwhelming majority of the public, all the elements of American civil religion appear front and center. Quite obviously there is a newly-identified enemy — an ultimate evil — to eliminate. And the nation pictures itself as the aggrieved innocent victim of this intrinsically evil person who hates the United States because of its virtues, values, and goodness.

As President Bush encourages citizens to resume their daily lives and enjoy the freedoms of America, the scenario being pictured is removal of the last real obstacle to the nation's realization of its true destiny. Already forgotten in this rhetoric is that little more than a decade ago, there was another ultimate evil, namely Saddam Hussein, whose defeat would bring in the "new world order," and before him Ronald Reagan's designation of the Soviet Union as the evil empire.

War, the sacred act, was the only response to September 11 actively considered. When measured against the foregoing sketch, it appears that both the violent response and the language in which it is couched come directly from the civil religion script. The only real questions were how soon and how big the response would be. As the leader of civil religion, the president has benefited from his position as its spokesman — his popularity has risen to the highest level of any sitting president in U.S. history. This event has generated its own holy days — as I write, there are still commemorations on the 11th of each month.[11] The response — to root out terrorism once and for all wherever it is found anywhere in the world — fits the millennial outlook of the United States, namely to exercise its sacred calling to rid the world of the last great evil through one last war to speed the arrival of security and prosperity for peace-loving people everywhere.

The myth is also shaping the interpretation of the events and of the response. One example is the description of the installation of Hamid Karzai as head of the new interim government in Kabul. For days before Karzai's installation there was an extensive American bombing campaign, and Americans gave considerable assistance to armies of the Northern Alliance in a drive to oust the Taliban. Yet after all this military activity and bloodshed, when Karzai was installed, James Dobbins, the U.S. Special Envoy for Afghanistan, called it "the first peaceful transfer of power in decades if not in centuries" in Afghanistan. Without attributing the idea to any particular spokesperson, newspaper accounts of the installation began "In the first peaceful transfer of power in Afghanistan for decades, . . ." Under the shaping power of the myth, the extensive military action, massive bombing, and violent removal of the Taliban was almost magically transformed into a "peaceful transfer of power." I heard no mention of this irony anywhere in the public media.

Under the power of the myth, other things seem to become invisible. An example is the report in the foreign press of the publication of a book[12] that claims to document negotiations between the administration of George W. Bush and the Taliban early in the Bush administration. According to the published account, the Bush administration slowed down FBI investigations of al-Qaida and terrorism in Afghanistan in order to make a deal with the Taliban for an oil pipeline across Afghanistan. As late as a month before September 11, the Bush administration was apparently willing to deal with people it now claims to know are wholly evil. Although this book was mentioned in a CNN interview, the major American media have ignored the story, as it does not fit with perceptions of an innocent nation and a fearless leader in a transcendent battle with evil.

The transformative power of the national myth apparently renders both president and population incapable of recognizing possible American contributions to the events of September 11. The foremost issue concerns the indifference of American foreign policy to the plight of Palestinians living under increasingly brutal military occupation, coupled with the overwhelming financial and military support that the U.S. provides to Israel. This aid stands officially at approximately $3 billion per year. The figure is actually much higher, since an equivalent amount is given as guaranteed loans — and to date, all such loans have been forgiven. This combination of indifference and support has undoubtedly contributed to the depression and hopelessness in a lot of people. It is people without hope, without a sense of a future, who do desperate things like undertake suicide missions. Violence is never right, and this analysis is in no way a justification of the events of September 11 or any other terrorist acts. Rather, the purpose here is to point out an issue that needs to be part of the discussion when deciding how to respond, particularly in a way that will undercut the possibility of such future terrorist acts.

Beyond the Israeli-Palestine conflict, another issue here concerns American wealth and influence in the world. The United States takes pride in its standard of living and in being the world's wealthiest country. The U.S. has 4.5 percent of the world's population while consuming about 40 percent of the world's resources. And the nation considers it an inalienable — God-given — right to consume more than its proportional share. On top of that over-consumption, there is also the fact that the United States is parsimonious in

terms of contribution and assistance to poorer nations. According to figures from the World Health Organization, among the developed nations the U.S. "ranks dead last, well behind far poorer countries such as Portugal and Greece" in terms of gross national product given in foreign aid.[13] It requires little imagination to suspect that such attitudes and actions contribute toward resentment of the U.S. in which terrorism could fester.

These observations belie the idea of the United States as only innocent victim. And they render rather laughable the presumed innocence in the Bush administration's move to engage Charlotte Beers at the level of Undersecretary of State to develop an advertising campaign to present the American case in the Arab world. As an innocent victim, the administration claims, America does not need to change. The problem is rather that America has been misunderstood in the Arab world — a misunderstanding that can be remedied by advertising. Here American civil religion is fostering appalling ignorance on the part of both official Washington and the public. The focus on victims and victimization also underscores the presumption of innocence of the *nation*. A victim is both blameless and helpless, one who suffers through no fault of herself or himself. The nearly 3,000 people who died on September 11 are clearly innocent victims. They were living their daily lives and just happened to be at the wrong place on that fateful day. But Americans have extended and transferred that innocent victimage to the nation itself.

The difference between the approaches to civil religion in Durkheim and Rousseau seems visible in the public responses to September 11. One has only to observe the ubiquitous American flags to know that a lot of spontaneous, grass-roots expressions of patriotism — civil religion — have emerged since that day. These expressions have generated a renewed sense of national unity, and a manifest desire to rally behind the president. Gone from view is the controversy about Bush's election by less than a majority of the votes cast, and the claims that the election was handed to him by the Supreme Court. Much transformed under this sense of national unity was the rising controversy about the disappearance of the budget surplus, and the massive tax rebate and tax reduction that primarily benefited the most wealthy (top 1%) of taxpayers. Bellah's sense, in the Durkheim line, that civil religion arises spontaneously and has the potential to promote civic and national unity is certainly evident here.

However, there are elements of control through civil religion that recall Rousseau's philosophy. President Bush's defining the conflict as wholly good versus complete evil, and the declaration that other nations as well as individuals are either "with us or against us," are clear attempts to manipulate public opinion through assertion of the myth of American chosenness and goodness. This manipulative effort continues with Bush's declaration of an "axis of evil" — despite the fact that Iraq's military was destroyed in 1991, that Iran and North Korea have both made overtures about normalizing relationships with the U.S., that soon after September 11 there were even reports that Iran was being supportive of the U.S., and that early in the administration of George W. Bush his father had counseled him not to condemn North Korea because such condemnation undercut American ally South Korea's efforts at reconciliation with North Korea. Another example of control through use of civil religion is the abridgment of individual freedoms proclaimed in the new policies of Attorney General John Ashcroft — trials in military tribunals where legal protection need not be followed, approval of more invasive and secretive search procedures, monitoring of communication, and more.

A Nonviolent Response to September 11

The mythology of United States history poses a powerful challenge to would-be peace people. The temptation is to believe that violence, or structures and movements of violence, are the ultimate moral agents in God's world, and that by serving those agents one advances the purposes of the reign of God. The events of September 11 have made this always present temptation more acute, particularly because those events are unique in United States history. Even people who generally resist the American myth can find themselves asking whether this series of events is finally an instance where a violent response is the only realistic and responsible one and thus requires a suspension of our nonviolent commitment "just this one time."

Returning to the standard What-about-Hitler and now What-about-bin-Laden questions intended to ensnare pacifist arguments, does a pacifist or nonviolent response merely leave the door wide open for future terrorist acts to take more (American) lives? Can there be a nonviolent response to September 11 that is fully cognizant of the situation in the so-called "real world," and that

would act to avoid more victims and to prevent future terrorism? Has this terrorist event changed the answer for those committed to nonviolence?

A necessary part of a response is recognizing that the What-about question now in the bin Laden form is not usually an open question. Like the previous What-about questions, it is really an assertion in the form of a question, a rhetorical device that assumes only one possible answer. As usually posed, the question assumes that the pacifist has been confronted with the ultimate example of why nonviolence is unworkable and violence is necessary. John Howard Yoder's *What Would You Do?* provides an answer for the wife/mother/daughter question. The following discussion draws on analysis from that book, as well as other Yoder comments, and on material from Walter Wink's *Engaging the Powers*.[14]

The first part of an answer is to establish a starting point or frame of reference. I am writing as a Christian who believes that Jesus's rejection of the sword is intrinsic to his life and work; I write as a Christian pacifist. Establishing the meaning of Jesus, or developing theology about Jesus, without making visible his rejection of the sword, poses an inadequate, incomplete statement of who Jesus was and what he calls us to today. Positing Jesus as intrinsically nonviolent is a faith commitment, not an assertion of a political philosophy founded on supposedly neutral claims generally accessible to anyone. That is, I am a Christian pacifist because I identify with the nonviolent story of Jesus, not because nonviolence can be validated by appeal to a neutral or universal or universally accessible and authoritative norm. At the same time, if one begins with the assumption that nonviolence is true (because it is a reflection of the reign of God made visible in Jesus), it is possible to make a coherent argument for nonviolence in the *real* world that God created. What follows attempts to illustrate that argument.

The What-about-bin-Laden question is unfair to pacifists in at least two ways. 1) It is unfair to assume that pacifists, who did not create the long build-up of frustrations that produces people with a feeling of hopelessness who do terrible things, can now be dropped into the middle of it with an instantaneous solution. Similarly, it is equally unfair to plunge pacifists into the middle of World War II and ask them to "stop Hitler" when they did not engineer the humiliation of Germany in the Treaty of Versailles after World War I that created the climate in which Hitler and the Nazi party could fester and grow.

2) The question is also unfair because it assumes that there are very few pacifists, and that these few would be helpless in stopping terrorism/bin Laden/ et al. The usual assumption is that because I and perhaps a few Christian Peacemaker Team (CPT) reservists cannot parachute into a situation and resolve the problem on the spot, pacifism is proved irrelevant and misguided.

For the "What-about" question to be fair, pacifists need equal time to prepare and equal numbers of people involved — say, three peace academies (parallel to the Naval Academy, West Point, and the Air Force Academy) graduating several hundred men and women each year highly trained in nonviolent techniques, plus standing reserve companies of thousands of men and women trained in nonviolent tactics, all of whom have access to billions of dollars to spend on transportation and the latest communications equipment. Merely observing that compared to national military preparedness, the nation spends practically no money on nonviolence and has no structures in place even to think about it, makes it glaringly obvious that no serious attention was given to anything but violent responses to September 11. The nation's response was far from a calculated decision based on careful consideration of a range of options. Quite transparently, it was shaped by — and is the current expression of — the national myth that shapes American identity. Both for government policy and in the mind of the public in general, violence was the only option considered, anticipated, and prepared for. Peace people, people committed to nonviolence, ought not to be deceived that a clear consideration of options reveals this specific situation as different, as calling for an abandonment of the commitment to nonviolence. In fact, these observations should make it clear that October 7, when the American "war against terrorism" began, and January 29, when the president's State-of-the-Union address conjured up the existence of the "axis-of-evil," are part of the violence problem.

Alongside analysis of the source of the response to September 11, we should apply some *realism* to the violent approaches. Ask how often violence *really* works. First, note that in any violent conflict, *both* sides assume that violence works. This conflict is no different. Someone has said that the only way to get Americans to see reason and change their behavior was to use violence. The Americans are responding on the same basis — that the only way to deal with the perpetrators of September 11 is to use violence. Every war and violent conflict proceeds on the assumption that violence works. But

since each side believes this, violence is guaranteed to fail half the time. In fact, since the "winning side" also experiences losses, and outcomes are often less than clear cut, violence actually fails more than half the time. Contrary to the assumptions in the "What-about" questions, on a *real-world* scale, violence cannot always work. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict constitutes an obvious example. If violence and retaliation always worked, either Israel would be the most secure state in the world, or Palestinians would be free of Israeli occupation and enjoying an independent state.

For another striking indication of how frequently violence fails, take note of this list of countries that the United States has bombed and/or used military force against for political reasons since the 1940s: China (1945-46), Korea (1950-53), Guatemala (1954, 1960, 1967-69), Cuba (1959-60), Congo (1964), Laos (1964-73), Vietnam (1961-73), Cambodia (1969-70), Grenada (1983), El Salvador (1980s), Nicaragua (1980s), Panama (1989), Iraq (1991-present), Sudan (1998), Afghanistan (1998), and Yugoslavia (1999). Although each of these countries was subjected to military action by the United States, in no case did a democratic government respectful of human rights develop as a result of that action.

While it is too soon to make definitive statements, indications to date point to a similar result in Afghanistan. After several weeks of sustained bombing and ground maneuvers, the Taliban have been expelled and a supposedly friendly coalition government installed. This coalition, however, is composed of formerly warring factions who previously lost out in the civil war in Afghanistan, and whose earlier removal from government was greeted with joy by Afghans when the Taliban first took control. Buried on the inside pages of our newspapers are stories of already renewed fighting among these factions.

While the American government keeps assuring its people that the war is going well and that progress has been made, people are actually feeling less rather than more secure because of the bombing, and other problems have arisen *because* of the bombing. As of this writing, it seems highly likely that Afghanistan is once again joining the list of countries where U.S. bombing and military action has not achieved the promised results. Application of realism is very definitely called for. Even though obedience and faithfulness to Jesus Christ ought to be the first premise for a Christian pacifist response to violence, we can also call for *realism* about bombing's historic ineffectiveness. Violence/

bombing has a verifiable past *on the record*, showing that bombing and retaliation do not work. At the same time, Christian pacifists need to remember that realism should be a middle axiom, not a first or final premise.

If not bombing and other military activity, what can the peace church recommend as a response to September 11, and October 7, and January 29?

Sources of Anger

A first element is to recognize and develop better understanding of the basis of the anger expressed in the terrorist activity. Its sources are multiple. A beginning list might include: 1) Frustration with Westerners encroaching on Islam and the Arab states. There is a pattern of Western action that dates from the medieval crusades. For centuries, the predominant face that many Muslims and Arabs have seen of Christianity and the West is a military face. Christians and Westerners were the people who come from elsewhere to take their land, redraw their boundaries, establish a colonial presence, and tell them who their allies were supposed to be and what kind of government they could have. After close to a millennium of this encroachment, the Arab and Muslim world has some intrinsic suspicion of Europeans and North Americans. 2) The overwhelming US support for Israel, to the tune of $3 billion each year, plus an equivalent amount in guaranteed loans that have all been converted into grants.[15] Israel receives more U.S. foreign aid than any other country, perhaps a third of the entire budget for such aid. This support is a specific instance of the more general point about the imposition of a Western, colonial presence in the heart of the Arab world. 3) The continued humiliation of Iraq after its defeat in the Gulf War. While American academic historians acknowledge that the humiliation of Germany after World War I prepared the soil for the seeds of Hitler's agenda to sprout and flourish, there has been virtually no recognition that Iraq's continued humiliation establishes similar resentment in much of the Arab and Islamic world. 4) The fact that the US has 4.5 per cent of the world's population but consumes about 40 per cent of the world's resources; the fact that a lot of people have too little, because the United States has too much, has produced hostility in locations around the world.

Pacifists cannot drop into the middle of the situation and "do something about bin Laden and terrorism" overnight. However, if pacifists had been making the primary decisions for the past several decades, the problems

identified in 1) through 4) would have a very different shape, and the bitterness and hostility that produced the terrorism of September 11 would not exist. Thus the primary focus of a nonviolent response to September 11 should focus on changing the context in order to remove the conditions that cultivate terrorism. Many possible avenues might lead toward changing the equation that produces terrorism. To "do something" about bin Laden and terrorism would mean to do something about the items enumerated above. "Doing something" would mean challenging and changing the context of injustice that has produced a great deal of hostility in the world. The number of possibilities is virtually infinite. A few suggestions follow.

Doing Something . . . a Few Suggestions

(1) Withhold a portion of the total of $6 billion per year given to Israel until Israel develops a humane policy toward Palestinians, including cessation of settlement expansion and of house demolitions, and withdrawal from occupation. While the United States waits for that response, it could give the withheld money to Palestinians to develop a viable economy and to rebuild dwellings and infrastructure demolished by Israel. This suggestion is not one of turning against, undercutting, or overthrowing the state of Israel. On the contrary, Israel would be in a stronger position if Palestinians had a secure state, which would eliminate many conditions provoking the hopeless feelings that feed terrorism.

(2) Afghanistan had a large refugee problem (estimated at 3 million persons) even before the beginning of the American assault. With bombing and other military operations halted, aid workers accompanied by large numbers of unarmed, nonviolent activists could travel to Afghanistan to distribute food to the more than 3 million people dependent on that food. (This real aid would be a clear contrast to the insulting, self-congratulatory "humanitarian" dropping of yellow-colored food packages by US bombers.)

(3) With just a fraction of the more than $100 billion that the United States Congress has pledged for the war, it would be possible to build dwellings for most of the current refugees in Afghanistan.

(4) It would still be possible to convene an international conference of Islamic religious leaders and Arab political leaders, and *ask them* what the United States should do about bin Laden and terrorism, ask what help they

could provide. "Asking" is not the same as President Bush's efforts to send Donald Rumsfeld or Colin Powell to Arab countries to inform them what will happen if they fail to support U.S. desires. If the United States had already begun to engage in such steps as suggested here, both religious and political Islamic leaders might now be willing to help. When they see that the U.S. is genuinely interested in their help and in dealing with problems in their areas, these leaders might take steps to control bin Laden. It would be in their own interests to control him, since his actions would threaten the good things starting to flow from the United States.

These suggestions are not policy proposals so much as an exercise in imagination, an effort to "think outside of the box." They challenge the imaginative horizon of American civil religion that can visualize only a violent response, and they are no less realistic than the conventional belief that dropping daisy cutters and other ordnance on Afghan villages will promote freedom and democracy.

This analysis reveals several things about the ongoing public response to September 11 and the assumptions behind the What-about questions. For one thing, it displays that in the public mind and in the expressed national myth, responses to September 11 will almost always be violent. Such responses only contribute to a continuing cycle of violence that is fostered by the American myth. Rather than contributing to that cycle, working to eliminate terrorism should mean working to change the circumstances that foster terrorists. The situation that produces tension is not fundamentally changed if the American response focuses only on expelling the Taliban, exterminating Al Qaeda, and installing an American-controlled regime in Afghanistan. Rather than helping the situation, it only sows the seeds for future retaliation.

People committed to nonviolence should look at this situation through the lens of *restorative* justice, rather than through the retaliative lens of *retributive* justice that has shaped almost all national responses. Retributive justice thinks in terms of retaliation as punishment for an evil deed. When an evil deed has caused pain and suffering, retributive justice assumes that justice is done when an equivalent amount of pain and suffering is inflicted on the perpetrator. In this quid-pro-quo, violence on one side requires violence on the other. In terms of the "war on terrorism," it is a never-ending cycle with each side supposedly inflicting punishment on the other after each round. And

since each side sees itself as right, each feels vindicated by inflicting violence on the other. In contrast, restorative justice looks for ways to change the situation so as to bring a halt to the violent cycle. Suggestions made above can be considered steps to change the equation and begin a process of restorative justice.

Changing the equation under a philosophy of restorative justice in no way means ignoring evil deeds. Restorative justice would have a place for sanctions against bin Laden as have rightly been put in place. But such sanctions are not merely punitive. Although difficult to visualize it in specifics, the goal would be to bring the perpetrator to acknowledge harm caused and to develop a desire for reparations, rehabilitation, and restoration. If bin Laden is wealthy, his wealth could be used to work for restoration of damage. Working to rehabilitate him and to have him participate in restoration would not be as exciting as killing him, and would not satisfy the seeming blood lust in American calls for vengeance, but rehabilitating him with the help of the Islamic and Arab world would certainly make the world much safer than continuing the military occupation of Afghanistan. This goal may seem unrealistic, but it is not any less so than the idea that a change of regimes in Afghanistan, Iraq, and North Korea will finally once and for all eradicate terrorism in the world.

Patriotic supporters of the American myth and of the violent response to September 11 can easily scoff at much of what is written here. So be it. But the argument has exposed the fact that the United States has barely, if at all, looked for any but military solutions driven by retaliation and retribution. The argument has at least demonstrated that the violent response was far from a last resort. This point matters, since one criterion for a just war is that it be a last resort. This point also matters for peace people who may question whether September 11 is the one case where violence is the only response. By demonstrating that the nation's violent response was far from a last resort, I am also calling peace people to resist the temptation to believe that this particular opting to war merits support because it was a rational decision reached after all other options proved fruitless.

My proposal is not an argument for withdrawal. Even through we are called to identify first of all with the reign of God, we are also part of the present social order and we seek the peace of our earthly city. One dimension of my argument is a concern for American society. That society would be

safer (along with Afghanistan and other nations under attack by the United States) with a different kind of response to September 11. My proposal appears to be irresponsible withdrawal only if one assumes, in line with the American myth, that the only relevant and responsible response is a violent one. Otherwise, my proposal accepts responsibility — both for the future safety of American society and for the safety of Afghans, Palestinians, Israelis and more. Further, what I have proposed is a call for engagement at all levels. It might begin with speaking to the patriotic neighbor across the street and pass through witnessing to co-workers, supporting CPT and other nonviolent organizations, through political involvements all the way to the highest reaches of government. Whatever level we occupy, my call is for us to act out of a nonviolent impulse rather than a violent one. My engagement in a society with a proclivity to violence aims at moving it in a less violent direction. That intent can be engaged in at any level.

Some Christian pacifists may argue that my suggestions offer a response in terms of contemporary politics that lacks a nonviolent Christian witness. The American government and the vast majority of the American people would obviously not respond to an appeal to Christian pacifism. Much of my argument is based on what John H. Yoder once called "middle axioms,"[16] using elements that American society can recognize in an attempt to move the agenda in the direction of peace. For example, undercutting the myth of redemptive violence by arguing that violence is guaranteed to fail half the time when both sides use it is not explicitly an argument from biblical pacifism, but from data available to anyone. But it does not contradict pacifism, and it does have the capacity to challenge policies that are even farther from being biblical. At the same time, the final criterion of how Christians committed to nonviolence should respond to September 11 and October 7 and January 29 is faithfulness to the reign of God made present in Jesus Christ.

Our calling is to work in the world in ways that witness to and make present the reign of God. It is not a matter of whether to be involved in the world. It is rather a question of whose religious criteria we allow to shape our involvement — those that come from American civil religion and the American myth, or those that come from the peaceable reign of God.

Notes

[1] Even though I risked not accepting some of their suggestions, I am grateful for comments made on earlier drafts of this paper by Gerald Biesecker-Mast, Perry Bush, James Satterwhite, and Daniel Wessner.

[2] While the designation "American" properly applies to anyone living in North or South America, for ease of reference this essay follows conventional usage that identifies citizens of the United States as "Americans."

[3] This analysis of civil religion is a revised version of comments on civil religion in a presentation to the Hanover Steinbach Historical Society, 26 February 2002, and published in *Preservings* no. 20 (June 2002).

[4] Russell E. Richey and Donald G. Jones, eds., *American Civil Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 6. An extensive literature is available on civil religion. The recent, widespread use of the term was stimulated by Robert N. Bellah's article, "Civil Religion in America," *Daedalus* 96.1 (Winter 1967), 1-21. This watershed article has been reprinted several times, including in Richey and Jones, *American Civil Religion*, 21-44. This book remains one of the best introductions to the topic. See also Robert N. Bellah, *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial* (New York: Crossroad, 1975); Sidney E. Mead, *The Nation with the Soul of a Church* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975); Catherine L. Albanese, *Sons of the Fathers: The Civil Religion of the American Revolution* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1976); William G. McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings and Reform: An Essay on Religion and Social Change in America, 1607-1977* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978); John F. Wilson, *Public Religion in American Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1979).

Among writings that have shaped my critique of civil religion are: Donald B. Kraybill, *Our Star-Spangled Faith*, intro. Martin E. Marty (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1976); John Howard Yoder, "Civil Religion in America," in *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1984), 172-95; John A. Lapp, "Civil Religion is but Old Establishment Writ Large," in *Kingdom, Cross and Community: Essays on Mennonite Themes in Honor of Guy F. Hershberger*, ed. John Richard Burkholder and Calvin Redekop (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1976), 196-207; Stanley Hauerwas, *After Christendom? How the Church is to Behave If Freedom, Justice, and a Christian Nation Are Bad Ideas* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991); Marcela Cristi, *From Civil to Political Religion: The Intersection of Culture, Religion and Politics* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2001).

[5] John Winthrop, "A Modell of Christian Charity," in *God's New Israel: Religious Interpretations of American Destiny*, ed. Conrad Cherry (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 40.

[6] McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings and Reform*.

[7] For a summary of the repetitions of the cycle, see chapter 1.

[8] For such alternative perspectives on United States history, see James C. Junhke and Carol M. Hunter, *The Missing Peace: The Search for Nonviolent Alternatives in United States History* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press; co-published with Herald Press, 2001); James W. Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong* (New

York: Simon & Schuster, 1995); Louise Hawkley and James C. Juhnke, eds., *Nonviolent America: History Through the Eyes of Peace*, Cornelius H. Wedel Historical Series, no. 5 (North Newton, KS: Bethel College, 1993); John M. Swomley, *American Empire: The Political Ethics of Twentieth-Century Conquest* (New York: Macmillan, 1970).

[9] Bellah, *Broken Covenant.*

[10] Cristi, *From Civil to Political Religion*, 1-13. The remainder of the book then develops this comparison in conversation with a great deal of the literature on civil religion.

[11] I have read one newspaper columnist who asked when it might be legitimate to take down the omnipresent flags and stop memorializing the 11th of the month without appearing to be unpatriotic.

[12] Published in Paris as Jean-Charles Brisard and Guillaume Dasquie, *Bin Laden, la verité interdite* ("Bin Laden, the forbidden truth").

[13] Data from WHO cited in Paul Krugman, "The Scrooge Syndrome," *The New York Times*, 25 December 2001, A27.

[14] John H. Yoder, *What Would You Do?: A Serious Answer to a Standard Question* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1983); Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*, The Powers, vol. 3 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992).

[15] Shirl McArthur, "U.S. Tax Dollars at Work: Calculating Foreign Aid to Israel," *Information Brief*, no. 54 (27 November 2000), http://www.palestinecenter.org/framecpap.html (Accessed 2/14/02).

[16] See John H. Yoder, *The Christian Witness to the State*, Institute of Mennonite Studies, no. 3 (Newton, KS: Faith and Life, 1964).