Thinking faith
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9/11 Ten Years On: Setting an Interreligious Agenda

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Did the events of 11 September 2001 change the future of interreligious relations? Michael Barnes SJ offers an in-depth analysis of the place of religion in the public consciousness over the last ten years, and of how this has affected the way in which religions talk to one another. How can any person of faith begin to narrate the events of 9/11, personally or in dialogue with others?

On the afternoon of 11 September 2001 I was at a meeting to discuss the future of interreligious relations. By the time I got back to my office the future looked very different. Yet, as time has elapsed, and instant opinions – about the evils of Islam, about the links between religion and violence, about the place of apocalyptic language in public discourse – have shifted into more considered judgements, glimmers of light have begun to appear in the darkness.

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In this brief article I do not want to suggest that 9/11 was anything other than a violent crisis, the fall-out from which will affect us for decades to come. In pondering the future of interreligious relations in the wake of that catastrophic event I write not as an historian or social scientist but as a theologian. I want to make three sets of remarks. The first is to note the effect that the prominence of Islam has had on the wider relations between religions. The second is to focus on more political issues and the debate about the place of religion in the public sphere. The third is a sort of theological coda.

In pulling them together I run a risk. The theologian's temptation is to smooth out the awkward contingencies of history in favour of some all-encompassing entity like the 'plan of salvation' or 'God's will'. I shall try to avoid such pious reductionism, but I make no apologies for taking the long view. It has become something of a cliché to say that the world changed on 9/11. That judgement certainly summed up the popular mood at the time. Six months after the event, I attended an ecumenical conference. One remark stands out in my mind: the wise words of the American theologian, Stanley Hauerwas, quoted in the documentation for the conference. 'No, the world changed in 33 AD. The question is how to narrate what happened on Sept 11 in light of what happened in 33 AD.'[1]

Impetus given by Islam

Ten years ago there was no doubt that Islam was already setting the interreligious agenda. The census of that year showed that there were nearly one and a half million Muslims in the UK, the majority from the Indian sub-continent. Many had been established for decades; some had become quite prosperous. When I spoke at an interreligious event in Blackburn Cathedral in the mid-90s I was expecting a large majority of the Anglican faithful. What confronted me was a well-organised turn-out from the local

mosques. The meeting was not untypical of the sort of thing which local inter-faith councils and forums had been organising busily for years. Then in the summer of 2001, just months before 9/11, riots erupted in northern towns such as Bradford, Oldham and Burnley. Many Muslim communities had been leading what the Cantle review called 'parallel lives'.[2] The UK, it seemed, was very far from achieving any sort of multi-cultural harmony.

In the last ten years perceptions of Islam have changed. In 1994, just five years after the 'Rushdie affair' and the infamous burning of *The Satanic Verses*, Philip Lewis wrote about the tendency to ascribe the term 'fundamentalist' uncritically and indiscriminately to Islam.[3] Since then the terminology has become a little more nuanced. Whatever the roots of fundamentalism, it is clearly not an exclusively Muslim phenomenon. Most Muslims are not fundamentalist, and plenty of fundamentalists are not Muslim. Islam is no longer presented as a monolithic tradition, the single *umma* or community to be defended at all costs. It is impressive to witness the pride that many Muslims take in the sheer diversity and richness of Islamic civilisation and the openness with which some are prepared to talk about divisions and even rank disagreement.

Islam is now lived out in the full glare of media publicity. That position may make many Muslims feel distinctly uncomfortable but it has also ensured that the frustration caused by Britain's archaic blasphemy laws in the early 90s has shifted to a much more straightforward, and at times sophisticated, refusal to have the ancient beliefs of Islam domesticated in order to fit in with public opinion. There can be little doubt that it is precisely that exposure which has raised the 'question of God' in the great national conversation with a renewed vigour - much to the chagrin of diehard secularists like Dawkins and Grayling. Largely because of the intense interest, not to say morbid fascination, aroused by the events of 9/11, sales of books about Islam have rocketed and TV programmes multiplied.

Not least because of its growing self-confidence and reputation for robust argument, Islam is spoken of with respect and even awe (no doubt mixed with a modicum of fear) – this time much to the chagrin of other faith traditions, notably Sikhs and Hindus. Ancient antagonisms die hard. The events of partition in India in 1947 are still vivid in the minds of an older generation and the fall-out from interreligious conflict on the sub-continent (such as the ghastly events which attended the destruction of the Bhabri mosque in Ayodhya in 1992) continues to be felt in the immigrant areas of many of the UK's inner cities. The attention that Islam commands can cause serious resentment. For some less powerful – or less fractious – communities this can lead to untypical outbursts of anger. The Sikh demonstration against the play, *Behzti* or Christian protests against *Jerry Springer the Opera* have echoes, says Paul Weller, of 'The Rushdie Affair'.[4]

At the more theological level dialogue between Muslims and Christians has become much more serious – on both sides, because both now realise how much is at stake. Pope Benedict's Regensburg lecture in September 2006[5] unleashed instant fury in many parts of the Muslim world, but had at least one positive result. A year later, 138 Muslim scholars and clerics representing a wide variety of Islamic schools and opinions wrote a letter, *A Common Word*, addressed to the pope and leaders of all the world's churches. They started a process of engagement which has spread from the Vatican to Canterbury and academic centres in the West and the Middle East.

Most major Christian theologians now have a view on Islam and many have committed themselves to developing the dialogue in positive directions. In July 2008, Rowan Williams offered his own response, entitled *A Common Word for the Common Good*. He welcomed the letter, with its focus on love of God and love of neighbour, and in expanding the original title deftly acknowledged Muslim concern for justice in the world as well as expressing his own Trinitarian faith in the God who is 'at once the source of divine life, the expression of that life and the active power that communicates that life'.[6]

Civic Religion and Social Cohesion

Just what sort of impression such high level dialogue makes on the average Muslim in the mosque is a moot

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point. There can, however, be little doubt that a tradition with a self-consciously public face has shifted interreligious dialogue away from the relatively comfortable issues of prayer, meditation and religious experience to more hard-edged questions about political and social relations. The sound-bite culture has not yet allowed for the necessary nuance in expounding the complexity of religious issues but it is clear that faith is now a much more serious item both in domestic debate and in international relations, where the significance of religion in promoting and preventing conflict is increasingly recognised.[7]

The extraordinary diversity of religion – especially as it manifests itself in the UK at the moment – presents some important challenges for religious and political leaders alike. With the Labour landslide of 1997, government started getting seriously interested in religion. In the first place this was driven by the policy of promoting partnership with 'stakeholders' in the private sphere; religious communities seemed rather good at motivating people and getting things done. After 9/11, however, and more particularly the London bombings of 7 July 2005, the less benign face of human religiosity asserted itself, resulting in a series of anti-terrorist and 'Prevent' strategies (which clearly have as their target radical Islam).

At the same time the policy of multiculturalism, which began in the late 1960s as the promotion and celebration of group difference, has come in for a good deal of negative criticism. More recently a number of consultations and reports have appeared, aimed at developing 'social cohesion'.[8] The question that they raise is certainly tricky: how religious communities – some separated by historical traumas which have bred years of suspicion – can be encouraged to look beyond their own partisan interests and work with others to build up 'social capital'.[9]

A number of bilateral forums and meetings, some under the aegis of the Church of England, some arising from initiatives of the Inter Faith Network, have established regular conversations between different religious communities. These have, for the most part, maintained positive links with government while yet remaining critical of the underlying assumption in the corridors of power that religion is a political problem which needs somehow to be 'managed'. Clearly there is some truth in the perception that religious difference can be problematic. There is, however, another side to the issue – one which many traditional communities, not just Muslims, are anxious to promote.

Historically in the UK a fund of 'social capital' has been provided by the Church of England which, in its parochial structure, still takes responsibility for managing various aspects of social cohesion in local areas – not least in facilitating forums of faith. That responsibility is now more broadly shared by other Christians and other religious communities. There are plenty of examples of good practice which show that the public space may not be quite as contested as secular critics would have us believe.[10]

It is not *diversity as such* which leads to division. There is more to religion than a set of incomprehensible musings about eternal verities or a privatised spirituality for a few eccentric 'faith-heads' – as the good Professor Dawkins puts it. What we are witnessing today is something of a reaction against such disdainful dismissal of the wisdom of centuries. Many faith communities refuse to collude with the patronising reduction of complex patterns of holy living to versions of the 'same thing'. More important perhaps, they are also ready to share their sources of creative energy for the sake of the common good. On the whole, given the horrors we have endured, interreligious relations in the UK have survived the trauma of 9/11 remarkably well.

Led by the Spirit

In pulling these comments together let me return to Hauerwas's remark about narrating 9/11 in the light of what happened in 33 AD. No theological sleight of hand is ever going to make sense of the violent deaths of thousands of innocent people at the hands of a fanatical sect. As noted earlier, we need to be careful not to presume that some explanation of 'events' can always be found if we but dig deep enough. Hauerwas's point is that for Christians there is only one meaning-giving event, the Paschal Mystery of the Death and Resurrection of Christ. But this does not give the key to everything else, as if allowing some

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unique vantage point which puts everything else in perspective. The light which the Paschal Mystery sheds is less some blazing beacon set above the fissures and fractures of human suffering than a more humble yet persevering inner wisdom which knows how to find its way through the pain and is constantly learning how to empathise with the suffering of others. In that sense the Church is always beginning again.

This latter perspective, I suggest, comes closer to the narrative which unfolds in the Acts of the Apostles. The 'Gospel of the Holy Spirit' begins with an anti-climax – the return of the eleven apostles to Jerusalem after the Ascension. Waiting prayerfully for the promised return of the Lord, they set about putting things in order by replacing the traitor Judas with another witness of the Resurrection who can make up the proper numbers. It's a strange episode – but just the sort of thing which we all do when we're not sure what comes next. Clean the house, tidy the shelves, throw out the rubbish, get some order into life. What comes, of course, is the Holy Spirit, all rushing wind and tongues of fire, not so much confirming what has gone before as propelling the disciples forward into an uncertain future.

The Spirit is the unseen companion to a Church just beginning to come to terms with what has happened. Two episodes stand out, juxtaposed in the middle of the text: the conversion of Saul the persecutor and the rather different but equally significant 'conversion' of Peter. Saul is knocked off his horse and temporarily blinded. His world has been turned upside down. The Jesus whom he has been persecuting in the form of the first community is in truth the Risen Lord who quickly and overwhelmingly becomes the centre of his life. Saul begins to understand when he receives the Spirit through the mediation of the devout disciple Ananias, himself called by the words of the Lord to which he replies, in classic prophetic fashion: 'Here I am, Lord' (Acts 9:10).

Something of the same pattern is repeated in the story of Peter and the centurion, Cornelius. Here the visions are less violent – but equally disconcerting. Cornelius, 'a devout man who feared God' (10:2) is told by an angel to seek out Peter. As his envoys approach the town where Peter is staying, Peter goes up on the housetop to pray, but it is mid-day and he feels hungry. He has a vision of 'a great sheet, let down by four corners upon the earth' and containing 'all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air' (10:11). He is told to eat and replies immediately that he has never eaten anything unclean. Three times the vision and the command are repeated and Peter is left pondering their meaning when the delegation from Cornelius arrives. Prompted by the Spirit, he goes down to meet them and they become his guests. The next day Peter arrives at Cornelius's house and Cornelius greets him and explains his vision. Struck by the faith of this extraordinary Gentile, Peter responds by saying: 'I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation any one who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.' (10:34-5)

Although in many ways very different, both stories revolve around the meeting of people who have received visions or revelations from 'on high'. Nothing, however, is clear and straightforward; there is perplexity and lack of understanding on all sides. The zealous Saul is blinded, the devout Ananias fearful; Peter just confused, and Cornelius, a man of great faith yet still searching for God, terrified and unsure where to turn. But the major player is none of these. In the words of John Paul II: 'Every quest of the human spirit for truth and goodness, and in the last analysis for God, is inspired by the Holy Spirit.'[11] At one level these are very human and deeply touching stories, about how generous hospitality and willingness to learn can lead to wisdom and understanding. At another they are part of a broader narrative in which the Holy Spirit is always at work amongst human beings, helping them to knit together hesitant insights into something which begins to make sense.

The key word is 'begins'. Interreligious relations are never about completion or fullness, for that remains in the future, in God's good time, and the manner of it is not something we can ever predict or presume to know. The narrative which takes its rise from the events of that first Easter Sunday and which the Spirit confirms through the events of Pentecost and the turn to the Gentiles is not straightforward. It is also

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marked by opposition and misunderstanding, by events like the deceit of another Ananias, the martyrdom of Stephen and the incomprehension of the Areopagites.

The events of 9/11 and the 'war on terror' which they precipitated have hovered like a baleful cloud over the last decade, stirring deep passions in the world of Islam and provoking an angry and frustrated soul-searching in Western societies. No end is in sight, or likely to be for the foreseeable future. Yet the lack of some sort of magisterial overview makes no difference to the practice of Christian discipleship. In the middle of it all the light of the Risen Lord continues to shine. God's blessing stays where the community is gathered, where genuine hospitality is practised and respectful friendships formed. Holding on to the questions and consolations which the Spirit bestows is enough – and, for those prepared to begin again, always proof against the inevitable eruptions of evil.

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[1] The conference, entitled 'Six Months After 11 September: Hopes and Fears', was hosted by Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, 7th March 2002. Hauerwas's remark was quoted in a paper by Jim Wallis, 'Hard Questions for Peacemakers', originally published in *Sojourners Magazine*, January-February, 2002.

[2] For the review, published in 2006, see www.oldham.gov.uk/cantle-review-final-report.pdf.

[3] Philip Lewis, *Islamic Britain: Religion, Politics and Identity among British Muslims*, London and New York: Tauris; 1994; p5. For an excellent account of the fallout from the Rushdie Affair see Paul Weller, *A Mirror for Our Times: 'The Rushdie Affair' and the Future of Multiculturalism*, London: Continuum; 2009.

[4] *A Mirror*, pp 154-7.

[5] Meeting with the Representatives of Science, University of Regensburg, 12th September 2006; available at www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2006. The text of the lecture is published along with a commentary in James V Schall, *The Regensburg Lecture*, South Bend: St Augustine's Press; 2007.

[6] For this document and others connected with the process, plus a number of Christian comments and reflections, visit the website of *A Common Word* at www.acommonword.com. The most substantial contribution to the continuing dialogue comes from the essays by both Christian and Muslim thinkers edited by Miroslav Volf, Ghazi bin Muhammad and Melissa Yarrington, *A Common Word: Muslims and Christians on Loving God and Neighbor*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; 2010.

[7] See, for instance, a perceptive article by Scott Thomas, 'A Globalized God: Religion's Growing Influence in International Politics', in the journal *Foreign Affairs*, Nov-Dec 2010; pp 93-101.

[8] See especially *Face to Face and Side by Side: a Framework for Partnership in our Multi-Faith Society*, published by the Department for Communities and Local Government, 21st July 2008; available on line at www.communities.gov.uk/publications/communities/facetofaceframework.

[9] A term made popular through the work of the American sociologist Robert Putnam, especially *Bowling Alone: the Collapse and Revival of American Community*, New York: Simon and Schuster; 2000.

[10] See examples collected in the DCLG's *Face to Face and Side by Side*.

[11] General Audience, Wednesday 9 September 1998.

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