

After September 11: Thinking as Christians

by [Gilbert Meilaender](#) in the [September 26, 2001](#) issue

In the terrible terrorist attacks of September 11, thousands of our fellow citizens were buried under the rubble. The rest of us have been buried under the rubble of words that followed. It is hard to criticize such words; all of us utter trivial platitudes in moments when events simply exceed our capacity for reflection and insight. Some words are always appropriate—prayers, for example, for those who have suffered most directly from the attacks. But I confess that, apart from such prayers, I have not been much helped by most of the Christian talk I have heard. Much of it, indeed, has seemed strangely irrelevant, as if we have lost the capacity to bring our theological talk into any serious relation with the world we inhabit. This seeming irrelevance may—as I hope—reflect nothing more than my own narrow range of experience, but there are things Christians ought to say that I myself have not much heard. Each of these points is complicated and arguable. I do not attempt to sort out all their complications here, and I may not have articulated them in the best possible way, but I would be helped by hearing them discussed.

First, Christians should care about justice. In our eagerness to understand what might have motivated Islamic terrorists, in our quite proper desire to remind ourselves that vengeance has been taken out of our private hands (because reserved for God!), we dare not lose the language of justice. What we have experienced is not a tragedy; it is different from the devastation brought by earthquake or flood. When innocent people are killed—and killed deliberately, as is the point of terrorism—those who are guilty ought to be punished. And civil authorities exist by God's providential ordering both to protect their citizens against such attacks in the future and to serve as the agent of God's punitive justice.

We know, of course, that the terrorist networks which threaten us have their own litanies of injustice to recite, going back at least to the destruction of the Ottoman Empire. Some of these complaints are, no doubt, more well grounded than others, but we need not sort them out here. Rather, we must say that to understand all is

not to forgive all—only to understand. And what we understand is just this: that terrorists, consumed by sorrow and hatred, do evil and bring guilt upon themselves.

Perhaps, even, though the lines of descent are more complicated than we can trace, we ourselves bear some responsibility for the hatred that consumes them. Then we must make our confession of sin and resolve to do better. But we might usefully return at this time to Reinhold Niebuhr to be reminded that the “equality of sin” we all share does not efface the “inequality of guilt” that also exists. Terrorists have done terribly evil deeds—and will do more if they are not stopped. That guilt must be punished, those possible future deeds thwarted, and civil government exists as God’s servant to carry out such tasks. Perhaps we should even learn again not simply to recoil when Calvin says that the magistrate who refuses to bloody his sword dishonors God. In short, unless and until Christians can bring their talk of “reconciliation” and “forgiveness” into some coherent relation with the equally theological language of “justice,” that theological talk will be largely idle.

Second, we need to acknowledge that we stand in relationships of special moral responsibility to certain people, such as our fellow citizens. For Christians our final loyalty can never be to any earthly community, and we know that the very greatness of a nation such as ours can all too easily evoke an idolatrous love. Indeed, what we share with Christians scattered throughout the world, even in states hostile to ours, is ultimately more significant than what we share as Americans. Ultimately. But, again, if we are unable to bring those theological truths into any living relationship with bonds of great penultimate importance, our talk is largely idle.

Indeed, if we can find no way to speak of and acknowledge the special ties we have to those who share with us a particular way of life in our communities and nation, then our talk becomes more gnostic than Christian. In the days immediately following September 11 there has, of course, been much talk that affirms these particular bonds, but I have in mind specifically Christian talk. We are good at “embracing the whole human family,” but we seem less able to connect that (important) affirmation with the truth that God places us in particular communities to which we have special obligations.

It is inevitable at a time such as this that we should hear much talk about America’s greatness. And America is in many respects a very great nation. But America has our loyalty as citizens not because it is great, but because it is the place—and the

people—given us. Precisely that is our protection against an idolatrous loyalty. But we cannot have that protection if we are merely citizens of the world or members of the human family—as if we had no location in space and time. Once we have recognized the special obligations that bind us we can go on to remind ourselves that the terrorists have sinned not just against Americans but against humanity. We should hold them responsible on both counts.

Third, Christians need to talk seriously about Islam, for, at least in my judgment, this is a moment in which Islam is being tested. The Christian talk I have heard—and, again, perhaps my range of listening is too narrow—has been almost exclusively concerned to make certain that we not stereotype Arabs, and that we not imagine that these terrorists are genuine representatives of Islamic teaching. Fair enough. That should be said, and I do not think we are in any danger of not having it said—at least among the Christians to whom I have been listening.

But we also stand at the point where Samuel Huntington's "coming clash of civilizations" seems to have arrived with a bang. However many qualifications must also be made, this clash is in many respects between Islamic countries and the Christian West. If our desire to be politically correct is so intense that we cannot say this, think what we really say by our silence. We deny that centuries of Christian faith have had any shaping, transformative impact on the West. We say that our faith is largely irrelevant to the culture it has inhabited for two millennia. Not just words, but the faith itself then seems idle. The influence of Christianity upon our civilization has not always been benign, of course. It has sometimes been bad. But Christian believers have developed a considerable capacity for self-criticism, for criticism of the very communities they love most, and our civilization has been shaped in large measure by that capacity.

Two great civilizations, each formed to a considerable degree by religious belief, now confront each other, and Islam's capacity for such self-criticism, its standing as a great "world religion," is being tested. In order to help us make the distinctions we must make between these terrorists and Islam at its best, we need to hear from Islamic leaders sincere condemnation of the attacks. Not ambiguous comments designed to ward off military reprisal, and not condemnations which—in the same breath—condemn Israel. We cannot do this for them; they must do it themselves.

Finally, we need to remind ourselves that it is not within our power to make ourselves, our nation or those we love most "secure." Perhaps we have sometimes

forgotten that simple truth of the faith, forgotten how fragile and delicate a flower is our life and our civilization. If so, the terrorist attacks have been a terrible way of reminding us of truths we should have known.

On October 22, 1939, at the Church of St. Mary the Virgin in Oxford, C. S. Lewis preached at evensong. To anxious undergraduates, many of whom would soon face death, and all of whom must have wondered what they were doing studying mathematics or metaphysics at a time when their nation was in mortal peril, Lewis said: "If we had foolish unchristian hopes about human culture, they are now shattered. If we thought we were building up a heaven on earth, if we looked for something that would turn the present world from a place of pilgrimage into a permanent city satisfying the soul of man, we are disillusioned, and not a moment too soon." The threat of war and the possibility of imminent death only magnify what is the permanent condition of human life, and great though the beauty and joy of life often is, there is no security to be found here.

Every time we have some national "tragedy" such as a school shooting we trot out the therapists and counselors who advise us on how to help our children feel secure—so that, I guess, even as children they may live a contented, bourgeois existence. Perhaps Christians need to say something different to their children. "My child, the world is always a dangerous and threatening place where death surrounds us. When I brought you for baptism I acknowledged that I could not possibly guarantee your future. I handed you over to the God who loves you and with whom you are safe in both life and death. There is no security to be found elsewhere, certainly not from me or those like me. Live with courage, therefore, and, if it must be, do not be afraid to die in service of what is good and just."