

Alternative responses: 9/11: Ten years later

by [Scott Bader-Saye](#)

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Many commentators said that the world changed for America on 9/11, that we "lost our innocence," that we needed to find a "new normal" to accommodate our heightened sense of vulnerability. Some said we had woken from a slumber and that this attack would give us a new sense of clarity, focus and unity. Ten years later, I think the most significant change that occurred on 9/11 was that America became a victim, and since that day we have faced the moral hazards of negotiating that status.

The situation is particularly complex because America is not a powerless, voiceless or marginalized victim. We were (and are) the most powerful military force in the world. Thus it is not surprising that we quickly gave in to the temptation to mix a lethal cocktail of righteous anger and unbending power.

The moral challenge for the victim comes in the temptation to use one's suffering as a shield to deflect moral questions, to say "never again" and to whisper under one's breath, "whatever it takes." Victimhood becomes a kind of moral currency that justifies one's actions in advance.

Vice President Dick Cheney gave voice to this logic a few days after the attacks, declaring that the U.S. had to "work the dark side," using "any means at our disposal" and "without any discussion." Ten years later, we continue to bear the bitter fruit of that decision: Muslims in the U.S. continue to face persecution, Shari'a has become a political football, mosques are viewed with suspicion, Guantánamo Bay continues to operate, torture remains a political tool, and we are no closer to peace in the Middle East.

I recently had the opportunity to speak at an Islamic center in Toronto. While there I met some family members of Omar Khadr. Khadr is a Canadian citizen who has spent the last nine years in Guantánamo Bay after being arrested in Afghanistan at age 15. Rather than being treated as the child soldier he was, Khadr was labeled an "enemy combatant," opening the way to nine years (and counting) of incarceration, humiliation and torture. One might think that Christians would, at a minimum, speak out against the torture of children. Yet our voices have been largely silent.

Jesus does not allow Christians to take refuge in the blank check of "whatever it takes." We are called to test our own actions and maintain our own faithfulness, to notice the log in our own eye even when we have been wronged. This is not to blame the victim but rather to understand that the victim remains a moral agent and that the logic of "there is no alternative" only provides cover for those unwilling or unable to imagine alternatives. Ten years later, the church must offer and embody the alternatives that our political leaders have refused.

The church's capacity to respond to an event like 9/11 is formed long before the event in all the small ways we learn to practice patience, love, kindness, compassion and forgiveness. It is these practices that we needed on 9/11 to give light in the dusty darkness, and it is these practices that we need ten years later to empower our witness for peace and reconciliation.