

September 11, 2001: Another Day of Infamy

The tender-hearted Robert Burns long ago grieved that “Man’s inhumanity to man / Makes countless thousands mourn!” Millions around the earth mourn this week.

We mourn for the thousands who were robbed of the gift of life.
We grieve with the thousands of families disrupted without warning.
We weep with the hundreds of children orphaned so mercilessly.
We are distressed because fear has overshadowed our earth.
We moan in consternation at the vicious deeds done in the name of God.
We sorrow that men can harbor such hatred of fellow humans.
We despair that brotherhood of man will ever bring love and peace.
We are humbled who individually were spared that murderous assault.
We are troubled knowing that destruction breeds further destruction.
We are sickened that depraved souls can applaud random murder.
We are apprehensive of further polarization of our fellowmen.
We deplore having to be suspicious of our neighbors.
We lament the further loss of personal freedom.

Why does God allow such devastating atrocities to happen? The wisest of men still ponder with no satisfactory answer. God is all-powerful but he does not force his will upon us. His permissive will allows us to act even to our own shame and destruction. He is no respecter of persons but sends the sun and rain on both the good and the evil. To claim that God arranged for each of these specific persons to be destroyed together would indict him as a co-conspirator in a wicked plot with evil men.

Some are shouting that God sent this tragedy on our nation as punishment for the millions of abortions sanctioned, for tolerance of homosexual practices, for blatant sexual immorality, for dishonoring marriage, and other such immoral behavior. Could this be true? None of us can explain all the will of God, but such assertions are subject to question. Were those victims in New York the worst of sinners? Who can be so bold as to make that claim? Did God destroy some good people in order to correct more sinful people? Hardly. To say that God took the life of a husband in order to chastise the wife implies that God is unjust. For me to say they were all destroyed because of their sins would be both self-righteous and arrogant, for I would imply that I am not a sinner.

Before the dust had settled, some were veiling the whole tragedy in conspiracy involving our own governmental officials. They see a sinister conspirator behind every imaginary bush. And some relate this to Scriptural prophecies, thus giving thinking persons another cause to scoff at Christianity.

No, Osama bin Laden is not “the man of sin” for that lawless man was taken care of at the coming of the Lord around AD 70.

Is September 11, 2001 a more defining date in history than December 7, 1941 when Pearl Harbor was attacked? We hope not, but who can see the future? The possibilities are frightening to contemplate. The terrorists have played their airline trump. Next could be biological attacks in metropolitan centers. Even worse, rabid people may destroy population centers by atomic weapons. There is possibility of the East and the West becoming entangled in a lengthy and deadly struggle for survival. With new awareness and the cooperation of many nations, however, there is prayerful hope that the terrorist mode of warfare will have reached its peak. We may even envision this struggle as implementing the liberating of millions from the despotic rule of religious fanatics. Surely, the women of the Arabic world must long for freedom from the oppressive system that robs them of identity and darkly veils their very personhood.

I well remember December 7, 1941. (I even remember Lindberg’s flight in 1927!) We young men had already been called to register for the draft, and many of those who were not in college were already in the military. My peers were at Pearl Harbor. Considering that the population of our country has almost doubled since then, the percentage of those killed might have been as high as those killed in the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. The monetary cost might have been as high also when we consider inflation. Pearl Harbor thrust us into World War II with the ultimate cost of over 400,000 American lives. We shudder to think this conflict could take that sort of toll.

WWII called young men from the farms, towns, and cities of an unsophisticated America struggling in the Great Depression and gave them a world vision -- a concern for the betterment of the way of life of all peoples. Generally conservative, freedom loving, and patriotic in philosophy, soldiers became missionaries, business leaders, political leaders, educators, and scientists leading our country into our new and modern way of life.

Whatever may be the outcome of our present distress, we trust that we may gain helpful lessons from experience. Already, we have seen a nation in prayer -- a nation so thoughtless as to use God’s name as a by-word and in cursing, falling on its knees in renewed recognition of God’s sovereignty over us. Officials who have ruled out prayers at school activities are seen praying together publicly. Priorities of life are being re-evaluated. Flags flying at every house in our sophisticated neighborhood speak of the renewed patriotism of our nation. God can work good out of catastrophe.

Religion loses face and brings disdain when it preaches one thing and practices another. Judaism, Islam, and Christianity declare their prime character and teaching to be love, peace, and unity. When a religious community is reminded of its historic violations of those principles, it becomes defensive,

declaring that those of their numbers who violated love, disturbed the peace, and brought divisions were fanatical fringe zealots who did not represent the whole religion. That is a generally acceptable explanation. The Catholic Church could disclaim Martin Luther and other “heretical” reformers, Protestants can disclaim Jim Jones and other cultists, and Islam can disclaim the Taliban. Both Catholics and Protestants deplore the violent conflict in Ireland; both Jew and Muslim deplore the violent conflict in Palestine.

There is another aspect, however, that must not be overlooked. So far as I can recall without research, there has been no religion that has had its own army led into conquests by its “holy men.” But it is common in history to see religion in power in specific countries so that the civil affairs and military operations of that country were under the influence and directed by their “holy men.” In them the civil throne becomes subservient to the religious throne. Thus the “religion” can deny bearing the sword. We should thank God that our founding fathers were strongly anti-establishmentarian, denying governmental sponsorship of any religion.

In my high school history textbooks nearly seventy years ago, the “Mohammedan” religion, as we called it then, was portrayed as a religion that advanced by the edge of the sword. It swept westward through Mediterranean Africa and crossed into Europe, conquering and “converting.” Spain came under control, and the conquest advanced into France. I was taught, along the way, that possibly the most important battle in history affecting us was the Battle of Tours in France in 732 A.D., only a hundred miles from Paris, when Charles Martel’s army defeated and turned back the invading Muslim armies. Thus, Europe retained Christianity, and eventually America was developed by Christians instead of Muslims. That defined a major difference in the East and the West. Through such religious-political empowerment, the factions of Islam have taken up the sword against each other in various conflicts in history as is exemplified by the Talibans in Afghanistan now.

Who can read the Old Testament history and not be impressed that Israel was a warring nation? The conquest of Canaan was by divine order. They even took the sacred Ark of the Covenant into battle as an icon of God’s presence to give them victory. Many of David’s psalms are praise to God for giving victory or prayers to God to help them destroy their enemies. In their religious-political system, prophets and priests were dominant in governmental affairs. There was a unity of “church” and state.

When Constantine gave approval of Christianity and began to promote it in the empire, an unholy union began to form so that by 380 the emperor Theodosius proclaimed Christianity the state religion. It developed in time so that popes and bishops could dictate to civil rulers and armies. Through its powers of excommunication, the hierarchy brought resisting kings and nations into subservience. Though the church had no army, this uniting of church and state allowed for the Crusades, the Inquisition, “holy wars”, and persecutions

suppressing the reformers. Martin Luther and his Reformation would have died in birth had he not had protection of the German princes. So the Lutheran movement became a state religion with increasing influence over the civil power.

Added to those dark pages of history is the intolerance and evil spirit between different sects within Judaism, Islam, and Christianity as they divided over internal issues. No marriage of state and church into a political-religious union can enforce love, peace, and unity. So the religion of love, peace, and unity has been more a fanciful claim than a reality. It is high time for people of different religions, breaking free from political and ecclesiastical powers, to promote their claims by sensible dialogue carried on in mutual respect. We are not optimistic that all the peoples of the earth will ever be united religiously, but we can work toward a lesser goal where each respects the convictions of others and demonstrates the love, peace, and unity that we preach.

I can become teary-eyed seeing people salute our flag or singing "God bless America" (I can still hear Kate Smith singing that prayer back in the days of radio), or when we sing "America, The Beautiful." But my patriotism must not lead me to believe that we are God's favored nation with him reigning through a political system. Our nationalism must not lead us to think God is a nationalist. It took a vivid object lesson to convince the apostle Peter enabling him to declare, "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right" (Acts 10:34-35). He accepts individuals, not nations -- not even Israel.

Thank you for reading my ramblings. Thinking that you have already heard enough comment from all sorts of qualified persons, I started preparing my usual doctrinal lesson. But I realized how insensitive that would appear and how remote I would seem from the happenings around me. So this is an effort to share feelings and thoughts without any claims of special insights of history, politics, sociology, theology, or trauma counseling.

I am doubly blessed in being an American --- and a Texan!
(Cecil Hook, September 2001) []