The First Petition
§1. Blasphemed among the Nations

The previous chapter addressed the question of whether God is really the bloodthirsty tyrant some of his fans (both Christian and non-Christian) make him out to be. Jesus answers by pointing to a Father, Son, and Holy Spirit of favor and mercy. But that raises a different problem: If this is really so, then what kind of God puts up with all the slander of those who claim otherwise?

Consider the western intellectual tradition’s last few centuries, which produced some of the most scathing attacks on God’s character since antiquity. For Sigmund Freud, God is an overbearing parent constructed by insecure human beings who want a father figure who will always be there in times of need. For Ludwig Feuerbach, God is the safe in which we lock away our human potential and impoverish ourselves. For Karl Marx, God is an Orwellian extension of the power of owners and kings into the consciences of the poor, anesthetizing workers with promises of paradise if they go along with the system and hell if they transgress the laws of private property. Among radical feminists, God is a projection of male power that gives metaphysical backing to the oppression of women. To hard secularists, God is a philosophical mistake that dulls the scientific curiosity and saps the personal ambition of the true masters of the universe, our own human race (Migliore 1991, 56-59, 72-74).

Many believers reject these arguments out of hand. I cannot. I know too many people for whom “faith” is each of these things. If God is truly the God of Jesus Christ, Father of the Son and sender of the Spirit on all flesh, then God is none of these skeptical caricatures. These are false gods whose images are worth breaking. To that extent, Christian faith can applaud them
and join in the celebration of Nietzsche’s “twilight of the idols.” Yet why would the living God permit westerners to judge his name guilty by association with them?

The problem is not restricted to the enemies the Father loves with his own perfection. It includes God’s friends, who rival Job’s in their ignorance. In the Church itself we invoke, pray to, and celebrate a god who sometimes is little more than a source of social reinforcement, personal empowerment, and self-esteem. For instance, a runaway Christian bestseller looks to a heretofore obscure passage, in 1 Chronicles of all places, as a paradigm for spiritual breakthrough: “Jabez called on the God of Israel, saying, ‘Oh that you would bless me and enlarge my border, and that your hand might be with me, and that you would keep me from hurt and harm!’ And God granted what he asked” (1 Chr. 4:10). It is not a coincidence that an attractive ten-dollar pocket-size hardback devotional centering on this single verse has sold millions of copies in the heartland of global democratic capitalism. Why does the Lord allow Jabez’s prayer to surpass his own in the evangelical marketplace? Does God care?

God is everywhere in our culture. In 2003 Jesus became a character in Dan Brown’s thriller The Da Vinci Code, and in 2004 God became a media sensation with the release of Mel Gibson’s The Passion of the Christ. According to a decade-worth of polls from the Barna Research Group, a steady proportion of around nine in ten American adults believe in “God” (www.barna.org). And we Americans use the word “God” as freely as we use it often. When offered a list of choices for describing God, 7% of these agreed with the definition of God as the total realization of human potential. Two percent chose to affirm God as “many gods, each with power and authority.” Ten percent called God “a higher state of human consciousness.” Two percent believed that “everyone is God.” Almost three-quarters (72%) called God “the all-powerful, all-knowing creator of the universe, who rules the world today.”
Even within that seven-in-ten majority of American adults who believe in an omnipotent and omniscient creator and ruler of the universe, one person’s God often barely resembles another’s. Other Barna polls have identified considerable shares of believers who think Jesus sinned and who deny the existence of the Holy Spirit. Even after exempting Jews and Muslims, American monotheism cannot be generalized as Trinitarian. When I have polled students on the character of God at either the evangelical Christian colleges or the churches at which I have taught, I have always received a startling spectrum of responses. Surely a group of randomly chosen American monotheists would produce an even wider range.

Many read this diversity as evidence of a fickle public with a modern penchant for theological revisionism, but these numbers actually reveal a rather conservative attitude. Since Barna began polling over fifteen years ago, these numbers have hardly budged. In the popular theology at the turn of the millennium one can see the persistent influence of America’s cultural and ethnic diversity. Our cultural variety draws from our long transcendentalist tradition, the sixties, the eighties’ and nineties’ new age movement, and the older and still dominant traditions of western monotheism. God is apparently content for generations to come and go without receiving much correction.

The preceding devotions, apologetics, and criticisms take their place in a whole world of theological ferment and disagreement: atheism and idolatry; fanaticism, discipleship, apathy, and opposition; splintering denominations and new alternative religions and shallow ecumenism; revival meetings and holy wars and catechisms in church basements; enormous ignorance and massive misunderstanding; deliberate reimagining and conspiracy theorizing. The more we talk about God, the more we seem to muddy the waters by perpetuating old mistakes and making new ones. How can God tolerate the blasphemies of all the bigots, crusaders, jihadis, terrorists,
triumphalists, skeptics, boosters, and consumerists who speak for him? If it is important that God be known truly – and the Bible’s story is that it is – then why would God stand back while his reputation is sullied by curses from those who oppose him, by insults from those who do not conceive of him, and by prayers – by prayers! – that run from idolatry to blood libel, repeated daily and weekly and spread throughout the world from those who trumpet their loyalty to him? When will the real God stand up? When will he shut us up? If God is more than a shifting construction of human hopes and fears, has he really cared or bothered to make himself widely known as such?

Perhaps that is the answer – that he hasn’t bothered! For whole stretches of Israel’s history God seems to fall silent. In fact, he promises to hide his face just when Israel is realizing the extent of the failure of their theological innovations (Deut. 31:17-18). Perhaps God is passive in the face of such misrepresentation for similar reasons. Deism, born in a Europe tired of theological division and burned out on theological speculation, took this estranged relationship as original and permanent. If the Deists are right, God has no further involvement with the world. God might be as burned out on theology as we are, and ready to leave us to our own opinions. America was founded by Deists who viewed God as a creator – a first cause – but nothing more, and one in seven American believers considers God to be aloof from their own lives today (www.barna.org). Yet in that case, why bother searching for the truth when this greatest truth of all no longer bothers to matter? Why should we not be passive in return?

Speculative spirituality and Deism react against each other in a vicious cycle that trains both speakers and hearers of the word “God” not to inquire further into God’s character. Urgent spiritual questing gives way to theological apathy when the answers fail to come. Secularism gives way to conjecture and wishful thinking when the aimlessness becomes unbearable. Even
many of my zealous students learn not to ask too much about the God to whom they pray. All these attitudes attain a degree of social respectability by hiding under the label of “mystery.” Yet by deferring the question they cede the debate to those with the most fashionable opinions.

I have not yet given up proclaiming the God of Christian faith. Yet all this theological noise brings fatigue to my confession. The thought of a God who puts up with a world of malignant theology makes it tougher than before to pray, to push ahead when others are apathetic, and to smile and agree when others are enthusiastic. In such times faith can feel like loyalty to a losing team or membership in a party always out of office. Hearing the Friday prayers of Islamic fascists, the pronouncements of the Know-Nothing Christian right, the watery platitudes of liberal western theists, and (worst of all) the silence and the fetishes of my fellow evangelicals sometimes makes me envy agnostics. Why should I bother to counter the flood of bigotry, indifference, and distortion when God does not? Why should anyone? And why call on him to vindicate us when lies and gossip crowd out the truth of our own lives? Can God care about our reputations when God does not care about his own? “God’s name is blasphemed among the nations” (Isa. 52:5 in Rom. 2:24). So what?

These troubles were enough to precipitate a crisis of belief in me last summer. My faith teetered over a precipice as I reflected upon the year September 11 had brought us all. What began to bring me back was merely the realization that neither Christianity nor I are strong enough to save God from blasphemy. In that conviction I took up a question that had dogged me, as well as some of my students, to the edge of unbelief.

§2. A Theological FAQ
“Why should I believe in the Christian faith when Christians do so many evil things in God’s name?”

Many people, most famously David Hume, have objected to God’s existence on the basis of the existence of evil. Yours is a different (and in some ways more powerful) objection: Since the Christian faith rests on the Church’s human testimonies, do not the many evil acts of Christians discredit those testimonies?

In a wider sense your objection applies too to the evil acts of Jews, Christians, and Muslims – and of all partisans, patriots, and ideologues. They claim to represent and even speak for what is right and good, yet they say and do things that seem to contradict what is right and good. Can they be trusted? Doesn’t their hypocrisy at least count as evidence against the truth of their testimony?

I teach a Church history course in which, with brutal honesty, our main text describes the Church’s many atrocities: forced conversions, anti-Judaism, the crusades, the Inquisition, endless money-grubbing, complicity with colonialism and slavery, oppression of women, witch hunts, ethnic warfare, capitulation to nationalism, silence during the Holocaust.... The accumulated picture is sickening. Can Jesus Christ really be leading these people? How can the Holy Spirit be taking up residence in them?

I also teach a course in which we examine the theology and history of the Muslim faith, a painful subject for Americans since September 11. Since then spokespeople for Muslims have been protesting that “real Islam” is a religion of peace that refuses to engage in forced conversions, that liberates rather than denigrates women, that dignifies humanity, and that tolerates religious differences better than Christianity historically has. The unvarnished history of the tradition suggests otherwise: “real Muslims” have indeed practiced forced conversion, though
more rarely than Christians; women have been increasingly marginalized, while Christians have increasingly liberated them; Muslims engaged in African slave trade both before and after the West (though not so brutally); and Muslims have persecuted and killed apostates, minority Muslims such as Ahmadis and Shia, and occasionally even Jews and Christians, who when subservient are explicitly protected in the Quran. (These latter need only be classified as infidels in order for the Quran’s rough justice to apply now to them.) Wahhabi influence continues to grow, and Osama bin Laden is still a hero throughout the Muslim world. Will the real Islam please stand up? And why should I accept as a prophet someone who denies the divinity of Jesus and the clear historicity of the crucifixion, and who condones the extermination of pagans and the domestication of Christians and Jews, many of whose followers seem to be agents not so much of enlightenment and peace as of intellectual dishonesty, cultural stagnation, and strife?

This year I have watched conservatives becoming Machiavellians, liberals becoming lunatics, Muslims apologizing for terrorism, Hindus preaching ethnic cleansing, and Christians scapegoating gays and secularists and covering up child sex abuse. Of course many in each of these groups are benevolent, peaceful people. But the worst ones rule the headlines, and something that belongs to each tradition is producing them. It has been a tough year to believe in anything.

Except myself, of course. And my self-trust goes beyond simple self-interest. For existential comfort in our world of ambiguity, we human beings seem inclined to weight information according to how well it supports the best in ourselves and the worst in our rivals. This works for a while – until too much contrary evidence accumulates. Then what?

One strategy just keeps piling on negatives about rivals and concentrates on positives about ourselves, and consciously ignores positives about rivals and negatives about ourselves. I
could try answering your question about the Church by frantically spinning Christian history towards the positive, and finding reasons to shrug off the failures. “Those aren’t really Christians,” I could say, and I could pull out 1 John 3:4-10 to give my claim a biblical veneer. (If I taught at a madrasa, I could spin Muslim history the same way: “Terrorists aren’t real Muslims.” If I taught economics, I could explain that Soviets weren’t really proper Marxists. And so on.) If you are already predisposed to believe, it won’t take much of this information to reassure you, at least for a while. Then again, if you are already predisposed not to believe, then it is not likely to work, as your psychology is already tending to filter out the data that doesn’t match your conclusion.

In graduate school I was taught a different approach: A proper scholar should strive to correct the imbalance by focusing on the worst in “us” and the best in “them.” The technique is plausible and even well intended, but lately I have been growing suspicious of it, because it seems to reflect and reinforce a tendency among Western intellectuals to become reflexive cultural contrarians. Too many academics look only at the worst in America and only the best abroad. On American campuses Christianity gets little respect, whereas Islam is treated with patronizing deference. This too is intellectually dishonest. Conservatives in particular have turned the tables on these cultural critics, deconstructing their approach to find a hermeneutic not of fairness but of nihilistic elitism. Ironically it is as self-serving as the thing it sets out to correct. Even relativists can maintain their sense of superiority over the riff-raff – by believing in nothing!

These two ways of making sense of our world – I will label them pride and shame – are both culturally powerful. The former dominates in society at large and especially on the right,
while the latter holds sway in the academy and on the left. Both are sinful. Neither will really
give you an honest answer to your question (if an honest answer is what you really want).

All knowledge is subjective. However, both pride and shame go beyond mere
subjectivity. They are self-centered. They judge all things with the subject as the ultimate
criterion. The way to an honest answer to your question, humility, is also the antidote to both.
Humility avoids the seductive biases of pride and shame without being seduced by the false
promise of neutrality. Humility contains its fear of discovering the unexpected and looks
honestly at whatever it sees.

By the way, for a full definition of humility Christians look not to Noah Webster but to
Jesus of Nazareth, “who humbled himself and became obedient unto death.” It is this mind, his
mind, we are called to share (Phil. 2:5-11). In obedience to God, Jesus put others first [see The
Third Petition]. He relied not only on his own faith but on the faithful challenges of others. For
instance, the challenging faith of the Roman centurion (Matt. 8:5-13) and the Canaanite woman
(Matt. 15:21-28) may have played a role in convincing Jesus that his mission ultimately included
all nations. Because Jesus was humble and obedient, he could change his mind without
relinquishing the mission he had already received from the Father.

Now back to your question about the Christian faith. Do the failures of the Church
contradict the gospel? Well, what counts as contradiction depends on the content of the gospel,
doesn’t it? So let’s look at it. We teach that the world has gone profoundly wrong, and is truly
remedied only through and in the kingdom in which Jesus reigns. True discipleship takes up its
cross and follows the king of the Jews in a life that suffers evil but does not commit it (Mark
8:34-36).
Of course – and when you think about it, this is not the contradiction it might seem to be – many who hear and seem to receive his good news still twist it to fit our own expectations. Peter did this when he took Jesus’ standing as messiah to imply freedom from persecution (Mark 8:27-33). Jesus has described these so-called disciples as being “ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation,” and he promised them that “the Son of Man will also be ashamed” of them at his coming (Mark 8:37-38). Peter was one of those. He was ashamed of Jesus, denying him when his cross was at hand (Mark 14:66-72). At the moment of truth, he sought refuge in a lie. And Peter kept failing even after the risen Jesus restored him (Gal. 2:11-14).

So is Peter “not really a Christian”? On the contrary, he is our ultimate representative. Christians have long admired pristine disciples such as Mary, but over the years I have repeatedly heard Christians identify with both tempted Peter and doubting Thomas. These sorry apostles are evangelicals’ favorites.

That’s not pride talking, and it’s not shame. It’s humility. In our hearts, we know that we are no better. In fact, we know that Peter and Thomas are better than we are. We probably would not have followed Jesus in the first place. Not many did, you know!

The Old Testament is full of stories of Israel’s repeated failures to obey God’s commandments or do his will, let alone live up to his grandest hopes and promises. Even its heroes – Noah, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, David, Elijah – have deep flaws. People who interpret Jewish talk of being “the chosen people” as snobbery haven’t read the story. Likewise, from beginning to end, the New Testament never shrinks back from remembering the apostles and their flocks as flawed, triumphalistic, weak, power-hungry, bigoted, petty, quarrelsome, immature, fickle, apathetic, greedy, idolatrous, hypocritical,
legalistic, libertine, ignorant, foolish, hardhearted, jealous, adulterous, torpid, cowardly, blind, elitist, unreliable…. The Bible’s cultural humility is staggering. (Incidentally, you won’t find it in the Quran.) Its standard of humility is the reason I could not avoid assigning that text in my Church history class. To sugarcoat my people’s story is to betray it.

Yet the Scriptures never sink into shame. The same two testaments portray the prophets, the apostles, and their followers as recipients of divine grace that lifts them up precisely in their weakness, granting them favor they do not deserve and standing before God himself. The story of Jesus is the story of unparalleled grace offered a depraved world, offered anew when the offer is first rejected at Calvary, and offered again and again through the very witnesses who sometimes betray it. In the meantime Jesus waits to return, in the hope that all should repent (2 Pet. 3:9). Alongside – no, among – the mass of hypocrites who contradict the very gospel they bear is a cloud of witnesses whose faith receives divine approval. In both their hypocrisy and their faithfulness these people point not to themselves or each other, but to another: to YHWH – and to Jesus, faith’s source and destination (Hebrews 11:1-12:2).

That is why churches full of total jerks can gather on Sunday morning and proclaim Jesus as Lord. We know the wickedness that surrounds and pervades us. And still we have hope, because Jesus died, and he is alive forevermore, and he has the keys to death and the grave (Rev. 1:18). The Christian faith has a built-in explanation for Christian failure. It is a result of the depth of human depravity, which is deep indeed. In conquering sin, he conquers us. Yet by sheer grace he makes us conquerors too.

Hypocrisy does not strengthen the faith; rather, “God's name is blasphemed among the nations because of you” (Isaiah 52:5 in Rom. 2:24). Depravity does not excuse sin (Rom. 6:1-4), for Christ’s forgiveness has freed us from its power (Rom. 7:1-6). Sinning utterly contradicts
who God has made us to be. When he returns, Jesus expects of us God’s perfection (Matt. 5:48),
perfect holiness (2 Cor. 7:1). (I am proud to belong to a Christian tradition, Pentecostalism,
which refuses to return this gift unopened.) Nevertheless, hypocrisy and sin do throw God’s
grace into a stark contrast that makes it that much more awesome. “Amazing grace! How sweet
the sound that saved a wretch like me!” Those of us who are not (yet?) holy can at least be
thankful that the gospel still shines through our brokenness.

Moreover, there are people whose lives are so full of the fruit of the Holy Spirit that the
Church literally cannot forget them. Catholics call them saints (“holy ones”) and seek their help.
Protestants just call them brothers and sisters and tell their stories. Under the scandalous
headlines, these faithful disciples are the real story of the Holy Spirit’s power. There are many of
them (1 Kings 19:20, Acts 2:39, Rev. 7:1-12), and if you know even a few, you know their lives
speak volumes. The cured ones are part of the content of the gospel too, and deserve attention
along with the ill ones.

Questioning the Christian faith because of the hypocrisy of God’s people – Jewish and
Muslim as well as Christian – is understandable. In fact, I’ve spent the last few weeks doing it.
But it results from a basic failure to understand that faith. Hypocrisy is already part of the story
we tell. That is one of the great strengths of the good news: It describes the real world. We hate
to contemplate our own failure, but we cannot let pride force it offstage. Nor can we let shame
give it center stage, for the spotlight belongs to the only worthy one, Jesus Christ (Rev. 5). Let
him be the one on whom your confidence in the Christian faith finally stands or falls.

Grace and peace, Telford
August 2002

§3. A Glimpse of Something Extraordinary

Adapted from my weblog entry of August 14, 2002.
I had an experience at Church Sunday that I want to get down in writing.

The worship band at my fabulous church released a new CD of its worship music. To celebrate we had the first string playing a set mainly of the new music this past weekend. It was at that service, and because of that set, that the ‘holiness’ and Pentecostal ways of being Christian finally made sense to me. (Specifically, it was the combination of the Doxology, Jacob Park’s song ‘For God So Loved the World,’” and Bob Wilson’s and Tommy Walker’s “Your Throne.”) This series of songs gave me a glimpse of something I had never seen before with such clarity.

Here is what I mean:

Most Christian traditions proclaim how different God is from his fallen world, then go on to celebrate Jesus’ becoming one of us as something that gives his disciples the gift of that holiness. All three of these claims were strong in the music Sunday. The Holy God, through Christ’s incarnation and the Holy Spirit’s outpouring, yields the Holy Church.

Christians take this common conviction in more than one way. The Orthodox and Catholic varieties of Augustinianism tend to take it as an unconditional assurance that the Church is free from sin and stain, even when its members and leaders do horrible things for centuries, and the pope or bishops or sacraments or Bible are signs of that assurance. The Lutheran and Calvinist varieties of Augustinianism stress God’s holiness as a basis for distinguishing God and his unholy world. In the present age the Church enjoys God’s holiness more as a promise and an abstract truth than as a present reality, as a thing that the Church almost has to fail to attain until Jesus returns. The “Anabaptist” churches read God’s holiness as creating communities who embody God’s difference from the world. The Wesleyan variety – my church’s variety – envisions the Church as enjoying God’s holiness as a mandate and a goal, as something given
and already demanded, as a thing that is meant to make his disciples as strange as God is, so that when Jesus returns they are not surprised and he is not disappointed. At my church we go crazy singing God’s holiness and striving to appropriate it as our own. This holiness is why and how we resolve to be different in this world.

Now all these varieties have good reasons for their teachings, though of course all of them cannot be right in the same way. Moreover, all of them produce characteristic abuses: Catholic superstition, Orthodox triumphalism, Lutheran license, Reformed resignation, Baptist isolationism, Wesleyan pettiness and legalism, Pentecostal elitism.

Though I have learned to appreciate the grammar and beauty of each school, the deep grammar of the Wesleyan holiness tradition has been slowest in coming to me – even though I earned my doctorate at a Methodist school and have attended Pentecostal or Wesleyan churches for five years! However, since Sunday I get its grammar and beauty in a way that textbooks have not taught me – cannot teach me.

And now that I get it, I want it a lot more than I did before.

§4. “Let Your Name Be Held Holy”

Shut out the cacophony of theologies (including mine) and step back from the world’s present weariness. Close your eyes, if that is your practice, and begin. As the Spirit guides you to the first petition, the Lord’s words will remind you that the whole story of creation culminates in the hallowing of God’s name.

The story begins in the paradox of a God who creates a heavens and earth that cannot help but be radically different from him. On top of this paradox is another: God finishes it all off by forming the dust of that earth into human beings and calling them, not as objects now but as
fellow subjects, to represent him as his own image. “Be like me,” God commands the soil, and it
is so.

How can this be? We are physical. We are temporal. We are descended from (or, at the
very least, related to) other species that image nothing but themselves. We carry their survival
instincts, their hunters’ eyes and carnivores’ teeth, their genes, their pheromones, and above all
their mortality. We are like the beasts whose images we are forbidden to make. How can we with
these qualities even know an all-powerful, all-knowing, transcendent and eternal Creator “who
alone has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no human being has ever seen
or can see” (1 Tim. 6:16), let alone image that Creator? How can beings made utterly different
from God be similar to him at the same time?

The apparent contradiction cries out for an answer, and people have lined up to supply
them. They fall into two basic groups. Both of these are immensely popular, and dead wrong.

The first draws any of a variety of dichotomies that either set God at odds with the world
or split the world and its human beings into two opposite things. A hasty (if a little tedious)
historical tour shows how pervasive they are. Greek Platonists considered human nature to be
eternal soul entombed in a material body. Gnostics such as Marcion taught that the world was an
inferior emanation of the evil creator god YHWH, himself an inferior emanation of true Being,
whose inhabitants needed to be rescued by angelic representatives of that originating Being of
light. Manichees taught that within the human soul was a spark of light trapped in the dark world
of created matter, struggling to escape and rejoin its source. In the two intellectual capitals of
ancient Christianity, Apollinarians and Eutychians who denied the full humanity of Jesus on
account of its incompatibility with his divinity battled Nestorians who denied that the two could
be united in one person. Islamic philosophy refuses to resolve the dilemma, instead speaking
paradoxically of *tanzih* and *tashbih*, God’s distance (dissimilarity) and God’s nearness (similarity). In the Middle Ages, Bogomilists in the east and Albigensians and Cathars in the west revived the basics of Manichaeism (Moynahan 2002, 280-285). In the Reformation, Spiritualists such as Caspar Schwenkfeld and Sebastian Franck turned away from the material world and even body and soul toward the inward Spirit for any sign of God’s presence (Lindberg 1996, 225-227). Even Ulrich Zwingli of Zurich, theological father of many evangelicals, stopped short of fully acknowledging the permanent unity of Christ’s flesh and spirit (Lindberg 1996, 189-197), and today many of my students mistakenly think the historic Christian faith teaches that in rising from the dead Jesus left his humanity behind.

In modernity the same tendency persists, even when it abandons language of God. Descartes divorced the human ghost from its organic machine, while Kant split the world into an inner noumenal realm and an outer phenomenal realm. As science has dissolved more and more of supernature into nature, the last refuges of human difference in the modern era have been ethics (now morphing into evolutionary psychology), the arts (now darkened by late modern anxiety) – and religion (now, thanks to psychology and sociology, becoming a sector of our brains devoted to so-called “mystical experience” and a dimension of social self-identification). Science has become one of faith’s most feared enemies, leading believers to surrender to its arguments, flee to anti-intellectualism, or bisect themselves into “heart” and “mind.” My beginning students indulge in modern dichotomizing when they insist that human nature is originally and unalterably sinful and needs to be defeated by “spirituality.” My denials of these religious axioms leave them genuinely shocked. Harold Bloom is right to claim that America, with its strong tradition of transcendentalism, its love of science and technology, and its firm confidence in God’s favor, has convictions that echo the Gnostics of antiquity. Such convictions
turn holiness into a term for implacable opposition to (or within) the material world as such. That leaves several unappealing options for a humanity at the crossroads: escape physicality, abolish transcendence, or cut ourselves in half. When I foreclose the Gnostic option in class, my students worry that I am forcing them into even worse options than that.

Yet the Church tells none of these dualistic stories. Neither God nor we humans are distinguished from the natural world by absolute incompatibility, distance, or opposition. After all, if we were, the word “God” itself would be nonsensical (for whatever souls may be, mouths and ears and books and brains are all physical) except as a designation for idols. Even agnosticism would be out of bounds, for there could be no true knowledge even of God’s possibility. Just to call God “mystery” would already be irresponsible!

Dualism’s intolerable tension has fueled the rise of alternative monistic accounts of the world. These emphasize commonality over transcendence. They too span the globe and pervade human history, from pagan traditions in the west to Hindu traditions in the east. Sufism has brought them into the cosmopolitan Muslim world, and the Hegelian dialectic of worldly self-realization of Spirit has brought them into the modern Christian world. Liberal and conservative progressives imagine the modern world to have its own internal dynamic of perfection, while Mormons and process theologians take God in their own ways to be a product of evolution. Folk religion everywhere mixes incompatibles into popular and surprisingly resilient syntheses, and New Agers radicalize old-school transcendentalism into hard pantheism. All of these movements find an underlying unity in all things that dispenses with absolute distinctions between creator and creature.

The Church refuses these stories too. We do not deny the incompatibility, distance, and opposition between God and the world. These two are not one; we are not siblings or partners;
we are not successive stages or generations; we are not all commoners. If we were, the word
“God” would be just as nonsensical on human lips except as a designation for a part of our own
world, and thus ultimately as a designation for ourselves. Professing agnosticism would be little
more than shame, and calling God “mystery” would be little more than false modesty.

What is there but dualism and monism? Followers of Thomas Aquinas might appeal to
“analogy” as the proper way to proceed: We are similar in the context of being different. God is
both like us and unlike us. Thomas’ tidy Aristotelian answer has proven persuasive to Catholic
philosophical theologians and many others ever since. Yet, however plausible the approach
might be, it does not resolve the dichotomy but only domesticates it. It lives with it as something
to take into account by thinking carefully and manage by living accordingly. However, Luther
(and the reformers who followed him) correctly perceived that something so radical cannot be
taken into account, let alone managed. Above all, analogy fails because analogy misses the
relationship between God and the world that God actually achieves. It is basically static rather
than narrative, and that puts it out of step with the faith of Israel and the Church. Whatever
analogies there may be between time and eternity, change and immutability, limitation and
infinity are beside the point.

Dualism, monism, and analogy of being might be elegant philosophical accounts of the
way things are. However, the Church is not authorized to construct elegant accounts of the way
things are. We are authorized only to witness to what was, is, and will be – and only as the God
of Israel has taught us. So the Church tells a different story: the story of holiness.

Holiness is not dualism. It is not what many take it to be: another word for transcendence
or mere contrast. Nor is holiness monism. It is not what many others take it to be: another word
for immanence or mere comparison. Holiness is not a philosophical abstraction, nor can it be
reduced to one, any more than Trinity can. The category of holiness does not attempt to solve a philosophical problem or hypothetically explain a set of phenomena. Instead – and these dry words are chosen carefully, so pay attention – holiness celebrates the otherness of the relationships that have bridged difference, incompatibility, distance, and opposition. The word arises out of these particular relationships. The meaning of the word is therefore the story of the relationships.

We began this exercise with the story of creation. Yet – and this came to me as a surprise – the word does not appear in the Old Testament’s creation narratives (Gen. 1-3, Ps. 8, Ps. 104, and so on). In fact, it does not appear in Genesis at all! That is a clue that holiness is not a synonym for the Creator’s transcendence over creation nor for the intrinsic sacredness of the universe. It belongs not to the lexicon of beginnings, but of endings.

The first mention of holiness in the Bible refers to the ground on which Moses stands as he turns toward the burning bush (Ex. 3:5). There, as throughout Israel’s story, the word is associated with God’s delivering presence. In the Torah God’s dwelling, his mountain, his tabernacle, its accouterments, its priest, its sacrifices, the people who meet there, their camp, their sabbaths, holidays, and other peculiar ways of life, and the instructions themselves that regulate that life are all holy. Above all the God who mightily saves his people is holy (Ex. 15:11), and the holiness of the people he saves is the logical conclusion of the salvation he brings. “I am the LORD who brought you up from the land of Egypt, to be your God; you shall be holy, for I am holy” (Lev. 11:45).

Here too we must be careful to avoid a common mistake. For Israel there are things “most holy” (literally, “holy of holies”) as well as “holy” (Lev. 21:22). Rabbinic Judaism
inferred a hierarchy of holiness in which the Temple’s Holy of Holies, then the sanctuary, then
the walls of Jerusalem, then walled cities, then the holy land itself enjoyed descending levels of
holiness. Likewise the high priest is holy, then the priests, then Levites, then Israelites, then
converts, then freed slaves, and so on, at ever lower levels of sanctity (*Mishnah*, Keleim 1:6-9).
To this day many Christians consider the distinctions in the same way. Thus the epithet “holier
than thou” and constant negotiations among my students and their youth pastors over where to
draw boundaries between permissible and impermissible types of language, music, dancing,
clothing, body-piercing, and the like. In my guild their debates take more sophisticated forms as
accounts of “progressive sanctification.” However, holiness is *not* a matter of degree, progress,
or even relative purity. There is not a “more holy” or “less holy” in the Torah. The things
devoted to destruction – idolatrous Canaanite towns, among other things – are “most holy” as
well (Lev. 27:28-29). There is clean and there is unclean; there is sanctification and there is
desecration. Paul calls the Corinthians to be not *more* holy, but *perfectly* holy (2 Cor. 7:1).
Classical music is not more or less holy than rock ’n’ roll.

    The significant distinctions are those constitutive of holiness itself. Holiness distinguishes
the holy from the different, the common, and the unclean (cf. Lev. 10:10). These are not
identical, and they are not arranged along a spectrum. Holiness does not emanate or derive from
greater holiness, nor cleanliness from cleanliness. Holiness and cleanliness follow from divine
election (Num. 16:5, Acts 10:9). And the holy God has chosen Israel to be thrice holy: a beloved
bride, a people set apart, and a light to the nations who walk in darkness. Israel is to be holy to
YHWH (Deut. 7:6), holy to itself (Lev. 11:44-45), and holy to the world (Ex. 15:11). These three
sets of relationships across the distances between God and humanity, between humanity and the
rest of creation, and between this people and the other peoples, are what constitute Israel as other – as Israel.

Nonetheless, chosen by the Holy One, Israel chooses idols in return. Israel ignores YHWH, worships the creation, and imitates the oppressive peoples on its every side. Its unholiness threatens to sully the good reputation God had begun to cultivate for himself in the exodus (Ex. 9:16, Rom. 9:17). The prophets chronicle the drama that follows.

Here we are at a turning point in the story of the relationships that comprise holiness. It is a good time to make another crucial distinction between what holiness really is and what we often think it is.

A fashionable recent movement among historians of religion has been to write biographically about a God they do not consider biographical. They construct a life out of a series of perceived developments in the notion of God over the course of Israel’s and the Church’s histories. Then they animate the figure by flipping through those developments like comic book illustrators. Jack Miles’ God: A Biography (New York: Vintage, 1995) is one such project. When he reaches the time of the prophets, Miles says the God of Isaiah is engaged in a life-or-death struggle to hold himself together in fusion that will still be dynamic or, changing the angle of vision, that the prophets are trying to put pressure on the elements of the original fusion so as to bring them once again to criticality. His character may need to explode again if it is to fuse again. Often unstable in person, the prophets are destabilizing in effect, but, without destabilization of some kind, the life of God threatens to come to a close (Miles 1995, 197).

This is a clever postmodern way to speak in critical and postcritical modes at once. In a way it is even brilliant. However, it turns God and his prophets into wholly different characters in another story: the cartoon story of Religionsgeschichte (“the history of religions”) that secular modern
Europeans fabricated to make sense of a living past they suddenly found lifeless, baffling, and embarrassing.

Miles’ rhetoric may be extreme, but his sensibilities are widely shared even by believers nowadays. Both modernists who rely on correspondence theories of truth and postmodernists like me who grant the social construction of reality live, by our own admission, in worlds of human words. Being lured into Miles’ way of illustrating God is the very thing that causes both liberals and conservatives to panic when the history of ideas seems to take revolting turns, as it did with such force after September 11. Miles may be a brilliant animator. He may even have the artistic skill to reassure us that the gods and prophecies of Osama bin Laden and Jerry Falwell are not of lasting significance – that things will return to normal in next month’s issue. But he still has things precisely backwards. On his own admission he is writing a story that makes just as much sense if God is dead or fictional; and that cannot be true to the story he is using as his material. His interpretation of the scriptures is just as forced as, say, Sigmund Freud’s far-fetched psychoanalysis of Moses, because he is pressing the biblical characters into new and foreign roles in a story not their own.

Isaiah and his followers are not a stage in the development of an idea. They are not crafting a persona that turns into “a difficult but dynamic secular ideal” (Miles 1995, 7). Rather, they are remembering a critical moment in a relationship that maintains a community of faith. The book of Isaiah is an epic narrative of an Israel who strays from holiness and a God who does not. Here holiness is not a concept of human plasticity and dramatic transformation that might evaporate under the acids of modernity. It is a firm love and powerful resolve that manifests itself in the sweep of cosmic history: “Holy, holy, holy is YHWH Almighty; the whole earth is filled with his glory” (Isa. 6:3).
Weaklings like me need to learn the lesson here: God’s good reputation follows from God’s holiness, not the other way around. It is not compelling theology but God’s own steady hand that carries Israel through disaster, exile, and return. It is God’s holiness, not the idea of it, that convicts Israel of its sin, renews its faith, and restores its own holiness. Holiness is the strength that sees Israel through its own failure.

In the middle of Isaiah comes a passage that points more than any other towards the first petition of the Lord’s Prayer:

No longer shall Jacob be ashamed, no longer shall his face grow pale. For when he sees his children, the work of my hands, in his midst,

they will sanctify my name;

they will sanctify the Holy One of Jacob, and will stand in awe of the God of Israel. And those who err in spirit will come to understanding, and those who grumble will accept instruction (Isa. 29:22-24).

Israel will see its own children in its midst and hallow God’s name.

When we pray the Lord’s Prayer, we beg to be the family of the Father who will cause God’s people to hold his name holy. The solution to blasphemy begins in these divine relationships. God’s people are held together not by imagination or successful public relations, but by the powerful gift of holiness – to the Lord, among ourselves, and for the world.

The cast of Isaiah’s prophecies includes mysterious figures – a boy called Emmanuel (Isa. 7), a blind servant-teacher (Isa. 42), a suffering servant (Isa. 53), and an anointed evangelist (Isa. 61) are among the best known to Christians – who play pivotal roles in bringing Israel back into good standing with God, back to its own senses, and back to the center of world history. Yet while they play key roles, they are not the central characters. In this drama there are only two stars: YHWH and Israel.
In Ezekiel’s version of the story, there is really only one:

It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name…. I will sanctify my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them; and the nations shall know that I am YHWH … when through you I display my holiness before their eyes. I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you (Ez. 36:17-25).

Ezekiel follows that great act with a return to the Torah’s language of sanctity. It now centers in an eschatological Temple in a new Jerusalem (Ez. 40-48). God cares about his reputation after all!

As products of an age of progressivism and its comic book religion, we come to the New Testament expecting a revolutionary plot twist. We don’t get one. While the story of Jesus of Nazareth adds crucial new detail to the story of holiness, it does not add further chapters or characters. [Cf. Work, “A Hard Act to Follow,” which does not contradict this claim.]

Since the first prophets, Israel has been reconstituted in exile as Judaism. First-century Judaism is much more diverse than casual exposure to either the New Testament’s Jews or rabbinic Judaism suggests. Its varieties spring in large part from different visions of what it means to be a holy nation. Essenes take holiness as a mandate to isolate themselves from the corrupt structures of Roman-occupied Israel, withdraw as a community, and await God’s deliverance. Zealots take holiness as a mandate to fight as the Maccabees had fought for the purification of the land and its holy institutions. Priests, Sadducees, and Herodians are willing to cooperate with their unclean rulers. John the Baptist and his circle are preparing an imminent and mysterious way forward. Pharisees – the most popular party in Jesus’ day, the party that survived the struggle and helped create rabbinic Judaism after Rome’s victory in and after the Jewish War
– appropriate Torah observance as the personal responsibility of every Jew and seek to realize Ezekiel’s eschatological vision of personal and communal purity even while they await the new Jerusalem.

All these camps might look back with some legitimacy to earlier characters and ages in Israel’s saga: Essenes to the wilderness wanderers and exiles, Zealots to the land’s original conquerors, the judges, and the Maccabees, Sadducees and Herodians to Daniel, Nehemiah, and Esther, John to Moses and Elijah, and Pharisees to the Levites and the children of Sinai. Moreover – and here lies another lesson for contemporary students of holiness – these visions also resemble the trajectories of holiness many Christians have taken to this day. These camps of Jews remind us of camps of present-day Christians: Essenes of monks and fundamentalists, Zealots of Crusaders and Puritans, Herodians of the Christian left, Sadducees of the Christian right, John of Adventists and Dispensationalists, and Pharisees of mystics, Pietists, and quiet American evangelicals who act as if holiness were living a lives that would be rated “G” if they were being filmed.

These parties have their roles in the New Testament, but its story swirls around another: Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus falls into none of these schools of first-century Judaism, not even John’s. That is a fact that should give today’s Christian sanctificationists pause! Yet Jesus does not introduce a new character of his own either. Instead he embodies all the old characters in a new and perfect way. He is the God of Israel and the Israel of God. His holiness is at once the holiness of both: holiness to the Father, holiness among his own, and holiness for his enemies.

1:35, cf. Isa. 4:3), conceived and raised in holiness, who sanctifies and is sanctified (John 6:69, cf. Judges 16:17; Acts 4:26-27, cf. Ps. 2:2), and who does not see corruption in the grave but is highly exalted (Ps. 16:10 in Acts 2:25-33 and 13:35). He bears the Name above all names (Acts 3:14-16, Phil. 2:9-11, cf. Isa. 45:23). He is Israel, faithful where his people had earlier been unfaithful (Deut. 6 and 8 in Luke 4:1-13). He is David’s heir, receiver of the Holy One’s divine blessings (Isa. 55:3-5 LXX in Acts 13:34). He is both the psalmist who acclaims the Lord as holy and the Lord whom the Psalms acclaim. His Spirit is at once Isaiah’s anointing spirit, Genesis’ creator spirit, and the new Torah he fulfills in the flesh and writes on the people’s hearts.

I suspect that this is why the first ones to identify Jesus’ holiness in the gospels are angels and demons. They live in the domain of powers and principalities. Angels pronounce Jesus holy to assure the oppressed (Luke 1:35), while demons do it in awful recognition of their conqueror the Lord of hosts (Mark 1:24). The battle for eternal life has now been decisively joined. The same dynamic is at work as people finally catch on. Jesus’ disciples name him holy out of hope (John 6:69), while his detractors acknowledge him in dread (Acts 2:22-37). We who associate holiness with moral superiority, clericalism, otherworldliness, exemplariness, aloofness, prudishness, and so on cannot help but miss what is going on in these stories.

Likewise, our similar misimpressions of the biblical holiness codes as overbearing, unrealistic, and picayunish – both the new holiness practices in Ezekiel and Matthew and the old ones in the Torah – lead us to imagine that it must take great strength to observe them. We then either strive to master them and fail, or we abandon them and fail again. This is because we either mistake strength as prior to holiness or holiness as prior to strength. But Israel’s weakness in the face of its enemies is neither the cause nor the effect of its unholliness. Its weakness is its unholliness. Holiness does not follow from strength or lead to it; holiness is strength. Holy, holy,
**holy is the Lord God Almighty; the whole earth is filled with his glory.** Likewise the Church in the west fails in the face of so many challenges because it is weak, because it is unholy and inglorious, because it has allowed itself to be seduced by gods that are no gods at all.

However – to repeat Mary’s response to the news that her son will be called holy – “the Mighty One has done great things … holy is his name…. He has shown strength with his arm” (Luke 1:49-51). The redemption of the christened Lamb of God is what finally achieves the sanctification of the Father’s name. Therefore, to the angelic chorus of “holy, holy, holy” to the eternal God (Rev. 4:8), angels and elders together add a new refrain – “worthy … worthy … worthy” (Rev. 4:11, 5:9, 5:12).

Like us, Jesus’ contemporaries misunderstand holiness – the true way of Torah, the point of the Temple, what really makes one clean and unclean – for the same reason they misread Jesus: because they do not understand the natures of his relationships with the Father, the Spirit, and his fellow Israelites. Yet in Jesus’ messianic career the relationships withstand our misunderstanding and work together to correct us.

God does not become holy! The divine persons are holy apart from the existence of unclean, common, or distant things in the creation. Instead, the life of the Christ displays and plays out the Triune God’s eternal holiness – the persons’ eternal mutual otherness – in the creation. In the Lord’s Prayer and on the cross the Son exalts the Father in the Spirit, calling him holy. At Jesus’ conception, resurrection, and ascension the Father exalts the Son with the Spirit, calling him holy. At Pentecost the Father exalts the Spirit in the Son, calling him Holy. In his warning against unforgiven sin and his high priestly prayer the Son exalts the Spirit from the Father, calling him Holy. YHWH’s holiness names the eternal mutual difference of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Nothing shall separate them from each other’s love.
God does become worthy, however – by virtue of creating and accomplishing the plan by which others can learn and share in his holiness. The story of the world’s creation and redemption is the sanctification of God’s name from the Triune core outward through God’s fellowship of holy ones to the ends of the waiting earth. When Christ allows himself to be born of woman, born under the law, and numbered with the transgressors, the rules of holiness change. The Son shares his holiness with other persons not divine – with those who are now fellow creatures, with those who are common, and even with those who are unclean. The ones far away are brought near (Acts 2:38-39, cf. Joel 2:32): the “total Christ” encloses all – God and human beings, Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female – into collective sonship of the Father and inheritance of the Name. If justification (see the Fifth Petition) is the outward aspect of these relationships’ righting, sanctification is the inward aspect. The incompatibilities, distances, and oppositions between the chosen people and other peoples, and even between the Righteous One and sinners, are hallowed into the distinctions proper to one, holy, catholic, apostolic Church.

The body of Christ is God’s chosen instrument to rescue his reputation in the world. When Israel sees its children in its midst, they will sanctify God’s name. Jesus promises that the Holy Spirit who dwells in God’s fellowship of saints will convict the world regarding sin and justice and judgment (John 16:7-8). To all who believe, the Son has made known the Father’s name, that the Father’s love for the Son may be in them, and the Son too (John 17:26).

A world enslaved to mistaken, idolatrous, and even murderous theological apprehensions seems to be too much for such a frail, divided, compromised community as this one. And it is! That is why the Lord’s Prayer is a prayer! We disciples do not accept the hallowing of God’s name as a mission we can make ourselves able to accomplish. We beg for it as a gift we can
receive in faith by grace. God’s reputation may be in tatters today among the nations and even among his own people, but God’s reputation is eternally secure among the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and that is what really counts. These three are God’s true biographers; we are merely their publicists.

So we ask joyfully, knowing that the Name is already holy and that the hard work of bridging the distances has already been done, the greatest gift already given, and the promises sealed. “There shall no more be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and his servants shall worship him; they shall see his face, and his name shall be on their foreheads” (Rev. 22:3-4). That arresting image should not surprise the psalmist who sings that

YHWH is king; let the peoples tremble!
He sits enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth quake!
YHWH is great in Zion;
he is exalted over all the peoples.
Let them praise your great and awesome name.
Holy is he!
Mighty King, lover of justice,
you have established equity;
you have executed justice
and righteousness in Jacob.
Extol YHWH our God;
worship at his footstool.
Holy is he!
Moses and Aaron were among his priests,
Samuel also was among those who called on his name.
They cried to YHWH, and he answered them.
He spoke to them in the pillar of cloud;
they kept his decrees,
and the statutes that he gave them.
O YHWH our God, you answered them;
you were a forgiving God to them,
but an avenger of their wrongdoings.
Extol YHWH our God,
and worship at his holy mountain;
for YHWH our God is holy (Ps. 99).
God’s reputation is safe among the witnesses who, having defeated every enemy, can never fail. The rest is just perseverance.

§5. How September 12 Destroyed My Faith

_Ekklesia Project Online, September 10, 2002. An article commemorating the first anniversary of September 11, 2001._

The world’s history is full of atrocities. Modernity sought to end them in the name of reason, but that only brought new justifications. We are all familiar with the near annihilation of native America, the Reign of Terror, slavery, the Soviet terror famines, the Holocaust and cognate genocides so numerous that we can no longer remember them offhand, the Cultural Revolution, the killing fields. These events are facts from history classes.

September 11 is different. Not because it was worse; in fact, a death toll of thousands is nothing compared to the millions in each of these. It is different because you and I witnessed it, along with just about everyone else in the world.

Instant worldwide exposure precipitated reactions even more shocking than the event itself. September 11 shattered my sensibilities, but September 12 scarred my conscience and destroyed my faith. Many today quite properly are remembering the anniversary of the event. I want to remember the aftermath.

Two reactions have predominated since the event, on all sides of the war it proclaimed. One is rough justice. The other is cheap grace.

Practitioners of rough justice have preferred retaliation to reconciliation. Practitioners of “cheap grace” have preferred forgetting to forgiving. Both camps of false prophets have gathered strength all over the world, and on both sides of the war now underway between militant Islamism and global democratic capitalism.
Muslim rough justice revels (privately or publicly) in the atrocity as a sign of God’s coming victory over enemies and infidels. Muslim cheap grace disowns Al Qaeda, indulges in exonerative conspiracy theories, and pretends that nothing is really wrong in Islam.

Western rough justice mocks pacifism and shrugs off just war theory for the more traditional American morality of cold utilitarian survivalism. Western cheap grace (out of naivete, corruption, or cynicism) appeases rather than confronts the sworn opponents of its own politics.

Christian discipleship refuses to condone these reactions, so it makes a lot of enemies. Well it should: It proclaims the reign of the King of all kings, caliphs, and presidents.

I wish I could honestly say that I have been faithful to my king in the last twelve months. But this year has been a journey of growing to appreciate the power of these temptations. As others surrendered to them, responding in kind became all the more appealing. By January 2002, my resolve against them already needed strengthening (http://www.westmont.edu/~work/material/prayer.html). Now that September has returned, today’s prayer is one of confession rather than mere petition.

**Muslim surrenders.** On September 14, I wrote to a student who was on a semester in the UK:

I’m sure it’s hard to be far from home in a time like this. But the UK is obviously going out of its way to console and support Americans — we heard about the Star Spangled Banner being played today at the changing of the guard. Please tell those you meet that we in the States appreciate their sympathy. And give a smile to London’s Muslims, whose American brothers and sisters are feeling mighty uncomfortable right now. Muslims everywhere have been in Westmont’s prayers this week. We so want to communicate Christ’s heart for them by our actions.

That was then, when my most vivid memories of Muslims were the people with whom I studied Muslim history and theology at Duke. They were and are fabulous people: brilliant, loving, faithful. After a year, I am still stunned by the thought of so-called Muslims hijacking
airplanes full of innocents to turn them on skyscrapers full of innocents. But I remain in even
greater disbelief that some others celebrated. And the reports of Muslim cheap grace and rough
justice had only begun to pour in. In the past year they have sent my opinion of contemporary
Islam in steep decline. Because I have formal exposure to early Muslim history, my opinion of
classical Islam suffered with it. I am not proud of this, but I refuse to be a hypocrite about it. I
want confessing it to encourage truthtelling in others, and to deliver me from the rage and
resignation that silence reinforces.

Muslim defensiveness is altogether understandable, but in the weeks and months after the
attacks I waited for signs that Muslims were moving beyond simply embracing or disowning Al
Qaeda. That wait seems to have been largely in vain. Official Middle Eastern newspapers,
sheikhs, imams and ulama, American Islamic councils, student associations, and popular
chatrooms and weblogs have all been alarming and saddening. In responding to an event that will
forever mar Islam’s image, they display insecurity, narrow partisanship, and deliberate silence
that remind me of the most craven Christian accounts of our own historical blasphemies. With
the exception of Adil Farooq (http://www.muslimpundit.com) and to a lesser extent Irfan Husain
(http://www.dawn.com/weekly/mazdak/arc-mazdak.html), I have seen hardly any serious soul-
searching about where “real Islam,” not just Muslim heresy, might shoulder some of the
responsibility. (If readers can point me to some, I would be very grateful.)

Far from making me smug about being a Christian, this just makes me more sensitive to
theological cowardice of all kinds and less patient with divine spin doctors. Worse, it makes me
wonder how a God of truth can put up with so much slander.

**Western surrenders.** Enough exposure to Islamist (and more broadly Muslim)
pathologies, resurgent European and leftist anti-Judaism, and unrepentant moral equivalence has
driven a lot of people to rage. The comments on Charles Johnson’s Little Green Footballs weblog (http://www.littlegreenfootballs.com/weblog/) can be even more chilling than the outrages to which they are responding. Ann Coulter’s stupid comment (http://www.nationalreview.com/coulter/coulter091301.shtml) that “we should invade their countries, kill their leaders and convert them to Christianity” nonetheless spoke for many (except that many historically savvy hawks do not think the move from Islam to Christianity would be all that much of an improvement). Reactions like these will not go away as long as Islam’s purported spokespeople in Saudi Arabia, Iran, Europe, and America are well-paid fascists. Lectures from prophets of cheap grace only aggravate them.

One way to handle rage is to redirect it toward one’s own people in cultural self-hatred. Even though as an academic my larger guild is a sea of sixties radicalism, I have found this pretty easy to resist. On September 16, I wrote to a student who had just authored a student newspaper article wondering whether the attacks were a sign of judgment against America:

I am not one of those who criticize America as the author of all kinds of evils in the world. I think we (Americans) try to do a lot of good, and often we succeed. I concur with the measured assessment of Andrew Sullivan in yesterday’s Sunday Times of London: America “is at its heart a peaceful [nation]. It has done more to help the world than any other actor in world history. It saved the world from the two greatest evils of the last century in Nazism and Soviet Communism. It responded to its victories in the last war by pouring aid into Europe and Japan. In the Middle East, America alone has ensured that the last hope of the Jewish people is not extinguished and has given more aid to Egypt than to any other country. It risked its own people to save the Middle East from the pseudo-Hitler in Baghdad. America need not have done any of this. Its world hegemony has been less violent and less imperial than any other comparable power in history.”

I think that last sentence says it all. In my opinion, America’s evil-to-power ratio is pretty small compared with other empires. America’s tragic flaw is the pride wrought by our own self-perception as the world’s brightest light. I think the world would be a much worse place without the USA. But the glory of America is still far dimmer than the glory of the Kingdom [of God]; and the (relative) brightness of America leads too many of us, at home and around the world, into idolatry. The end of bringing democratic capitalism to the world has led us to justify means that, well, aren’t justified even if the ends are relatively good.
That assessment is still entirely compatible with the prospect of the attacks being a divine judgment on America, so I think your argument (my argument?) applies even if America is not “the great Satan.” Maybe God is telling us that he, not she, is the world’s savior.

A year later, I have not changed my mind that runaway Americanism threatens Christian well-being, but anti-Americanism still leaves me cold. Moderate American conservatism has been on a well deserved roll. I am a rarity who still finds Christian pacifism and American patriotism compatible even as I broadly support the war.

The trick has been to keep my sympathy with America’s self-defense against Al Qaeda and admiration of its restraint and moral idealism from blinding me to America’s pride. I have to confess that often I have let my joy and relief at American successes in fighting this war fall into enthusiasm for American rough justice. Face it: Most of us would rather be strong in America than weak in Christ.

By the way, one response that continues to amaze me is the grace of the world’s Jews. They, who have such compelling cause for both rage and despair, have rarely surrendered to either. Augustine was right: Faith is a gift.

Christian surrenders. My first Christian instinct that Tuesday morning, like that of my students and fellow faculty, was repentance. This was not a manifestation of liberal guilt, but a turn from old ways back onto the narrow Way. It was a healthy instinct to follow, and an impromptu chapel service at our school directed it wonderfully. But repentance is much more than we evangelicals often make it to be. Since then I have grown to appreciate how difficult it is to maintain penitance. Forces everywhere tempt us to give in to either the despair of rage, or the
despair of apathy. At first I did not realize just how appealing these would become — not only to others, but to me.

In the week following the attacks, some of us Westmont faculty members suggested ways we could show love to Muslims. One faculty member suggested crescents in the dorm windows of our evangelical college. I suggested that as some Christians wore yellow stars to show solidarity with Jews in World War II, women might consider wearing headscarves in solidarity with women too terrified to go out in public. For days I wore a green necktie. (Scoff all you like. Muslim men need not dress distinctively, and they were not fearing for their lives as their wives were. And as tokenistic as it was, some around me knew what I was doing, and the little symbol constantly reminded me to check my fear and anger and turn the other cheek.) Our suggestions were not expressions of cheap grace, political correctness, or self-hatred. They are the kind of thing one does when following the crucified God of love.

A year later, it is much harder for me to raise such sympathy. Watching brothers and sisters killed, imprisoned, and forcibly converted in Sudan, Indonesia, Pakistan, Indonesia, and elsewhere has sapped my strength.

My fullest early response to 9/11 is an essay I wrote over the first week that followed, “Wars and Rumors of Wars.” (http://www.westmont.edu/~work/articles/rumorofwars.html). It drew its inspiration from the wisdom of one of Westmont’s English professors, John Sider. In my usual wordy and pretentious way, I contended there that the Church’s responsibility was simply to be the Church. Since often we have failed to do this, 9/11 is a wake-up call, not an excuse for business as usual.

A year later, I have not changed my mind about that (though I do better appreciate that Al Qaeda targets Christianity too, not just global democratic capitalism). Therefore the most
common Christian response to 9/11 has been demoralizing: business as usual, only longer hours. Jerry Falwell’s and Pat Robertson’s famous comments expressed with extraordinary foolishness an ordinary Christian reaction: September 11 vindicates our agenda of September 10. (“So can we count on you for a higher contribution this year?”)

Likewise, right after the attacks our generally conservative campus still rightly resisted the urge to wrap our worries in American flags. Today this too is harder. On the airport bus a few days ago a fellow passenger noted the Azusa Pacific University logo [where I then taught] on my carrying case. With its caption, “Excellence Honors God,” it stuck out like Peter’s Galilean accent in the high priest’s courtyard. The passenger asked me what subject I taught. When I told him “theology,” I expected the usual response: end the conversation as quickly as possible! Instead, he threw Falwell and Robertson in my face, then asked me whether I thought the real war was between secularism and all the world’s religious fundamentalisms. (He must have had a middle seat on his plane.) He was wearing an “Operation Enduring Freedom” baseball cap, and made it quite clear that he was on the side of secularism. I answered that the war is a desperate campaign by militant Islamists whose vision of the good life cannot survive in a context of global democratic capitalism, against all those (religious or not) whose visions can. But my heart wasn’t really in it. The man knows what needs to be done, and he has seen that Christians outside the American command structure will not be a lot of help. This is America’s war to win, and America will win it — with or without Europe, with or without me, with or without God. My kind is a distraction, an irritant, a parasite, perhaps even an enemy. As the man got off the bus, I could only mumble a “bless you.” What a pathetic echo of James 2:14-17:

What does it profit, my brothers and sisters, if a man says he has faith but has not works? Can his faith save him? If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food, and one of you says “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,” without giving the things needed for the body, what does it profit? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.
The irony is that this warrior was clothed, or thought he was. So the peace I offered was as unwelcome as the truer clothing I didn’t. It is times like that when a flag by my head or heart would promote more pleasant travel than a cross on my baggage.

**My surrenders.** Since 9/11 our world has been dying from its own hopelessness. Muslims are more insecure than ever, and more determined to prove their victory is certain. Americans are still terrified about the future, and still ready and able to do whatever is necessary to keep themselves safe. We will long grieve the three thousand murdered on September 11, even the many who were not Americans, and we have much to do to keep more innocent people from joining them. But our reactions to this horror threaten to consign the living to an end worse than that of the dead. “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matt. 10:28).

I’ve been dying too. I talk quite a bit about Jesus, but a big shift in the past year has actually been my growing sympathy for his enemies. Who am I to blame them? Judas Iscariot wanted a winner. Simon Peter, rebuking Jesus for the blasphemy of predicting his own suffering, anticipated the Christology of worldly success that predominates among Muslims. The Sanhedrin, Herod, Pilate, and the crowds wanted things not to change. At crunch time, the nameless man who ran away naked into the darkness wanted to save his own skin, and Peter wanted to forget that he had a part in any of it. The guards who beat and mocked the man of sorrows just wanted blood. Even after everything was joy again, Thomas wanted not to trust anyone but himself. These are my people. I too am a defeatist, a triumphalist, an adversary.

Sympathy for Jesus’ enemies means more sympathy for Jesus. Nowadays we tend to think of him as insufferably nice. He gently wakes the sleeping disciples at Gethsemane. He discusses philosophy with Pilate. He smiles back at his torturers. He smothers friendship on the
repentant thief. Like a good liberal Protestant, he vents only at God. But what makes us think Jesus liked the people he loved? What makes us think forgiving his killers and restoring his pathetic disciples was easy, or pleasant, or fulfilling? I have a newfound appreciation for the pain of Jesus’ life as well as the pain of his death. He had an impossible task.

You heard me right – an impossible task. After a year of struggle, I have finally surrendered to the conclusion that saving a world so bent on destruction and self-preservation is impossible. The last shreds of that fond dream dissipated for me over this past summer. As an agent of earthly holiness, peace, justice, dignity, sacrificial love, joy, and compassion, the Church of Jesus Christ stands on the edge of extinction. No disciple has the strength or self-control to resist the forces September 11 reflected and unleashed, let alone to overcome them. September 12 crucified my faith.

Yet Jesus did the impossible, finding the power to forgive and restore his enemies. The Father did the impossible, raising him from the dead and seating him above every enemy in eternal lordship. The Holy Spirit did the impossible, coming upon the disciples and giving them the strength to bring peace to the very Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and ends of the earth that had conspired against it. With God all things are possible.

So my confession ends in thanksgiving. God defeated his adversaries with friendship, set us free with his own blood, convicted us with his example, and deputized us with his Holy Spirit. He has made the impossible not only possible, but assured. Praise God for Jesus’ enemies. We are why he came.

There is strength to persevere and conquer evil with good after all. Not in human reason or human spirit or human brotherhood, not in the United States or European Union or United
Nations, not in global democratic capitalism or transnational progressivism or the glory days of Islam, not in the world’s strongest military or richest economy, not in the American dream of a free society or the sentimental fantasy of multiculturalism or the Islamist imposition of shariah, not in the nostalgia that remembers tragedies to cultivate national grudges, but only the dead and risen and anointed communion of saints whose head is Jesus Christ. “Worthy are you,” the saints sing before Jesus’ throne, “for you were slain and by your blood ransomed people for God from every tribe and tongue and people and nation, and have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on earth” (Rev. 5:9-10). He is the hope of the world.

The Church is constantly on the edge of extinction because we bear God’s peace. Times of stress tempt us to trade God’s peace for a separate peace with God’s adversaries: We will quit attacking hell’s gates if hell will quit attacking ours. But Jesus did not predict that hell would not prevail against the gates of the Church. He predicted that the Church would prevail over the gates of hell (Matt. 16:18). That can only happen if the Church is outside its own gates. He commanded us to play offense, not defense. He told us to go in pursuit of peace (Matt. 5:23-24, Matt. 18:15). The edge of total extinction is also the edge of eternal life.

September 12 slowly and subtly shifted me to defense, back behind the gates. Playing that way slowly and subtly killed me. I had abandoned the strategy that sent Jesus to the cross and so secured his victory for the strategy that scattered Jesus’ disciples and sent them scurrying away from him to the worst three days of their lives. I sought self-preservation, and discovered there the greatest vulnerability. “Whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” (Matt. 16:25-26).

As my doubts and objections festered, I realized I was refusing to give them the respect of a fair hearing. Finally I found a question that needed answering anyway — “How could a
good God let such evil be done in his name?” — and went looking for an answer. To my mild surprise, I found that it was there after all (http://www.westmont.edu/~work/faq/evil.html). In fact it arose quite naturally, like a gift rather than an achievement. After that small mercy, I decided just to start taking every one of my issues to the gospel of God, not trying to force answers old or new out of it, not trying to believe or not to believe, but just seeing if they were there. They were. After my faith died and was buried, his grace — this time in the form of renewed intellectual honesty — brought me out of hiding and raised my faith to new life. Let it never again appeal to any other power or wisdom (1 Cor. 1:18-30) but take up the cross and follow the one God alone defended (Matt. 16:24).

We have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the ultimate power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies (2 Cor. 4:7-10).

However September 11 or September 12 have traumatized you, whatever they have tempted or led you to do, if you take your eyes off the world’s sins and your own survival and set your eyes on him, he can raise you too. Then he will put you to work with him achieving the impossible.

By his great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and to an inheritance which is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God’s power are guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. Rejoice in this, though now for a little while you may have to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith, more precious than gold which though perishable is tested by fire, may redound to praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ (1 Peter 1:3-7).

Whoever you are, peace be with you this September 11.