# May God Continue to Bless America: Religion and Politics in Post-9/11 America through the Lens of Buddhist Philosophy

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## Abstract

This article provides an analysis of religio-political interaction in America after September 11, 2001 through the lens of Buddhist philosophy. The concepts of interdependence and co-dependent origination are adopted as a starting point from which to explore the "causes and conditions" of 9/11. From this perspective, the root causes of the attack have not been removed. A thorough understanding of these causal factors is crucial in order to prevent further violence. Venturing beyond a warning about the potentially dangerous interplay of religion and politics in post-9/11 America, the article proposes a less explosive view of the event, its precursors and aftermath. This view is based upon Abe's concepts of "kenotic God" and "dynamic *Sunyata*", as well as Taylor's "prophetic spirit". This perspective, however, is only one amongst a multiplicity of possibilities, which should all be heard in order to achieve an in-depth understanding of religio-political interaction.

## Introduction

At the time of writing, the tragic events of September 11, 2001 lie exactly six years behind us. During 2006/7, several big screen depictions of the catastrophe appeared. Hollywood producers apparently consider five years a respectable mourning period owed to the nation and especially to the families of the victims. The very fact that such a sensational human drama was left untouched—taboo—for half a decade attests to the unspeakable grief lodged in the collective consciousness of Americans.

The nation grieves not only for lost lives, but also for lost illusions. Isherwood (2005: 72) writes:

> People can no longer simply believe that they are safe and loved in a place called home. After September 11th they felt insecure, shaken to the core and they fled to churches where they worshipped icons of patriarchal power and felt better. What they actually did was take part in the problem and set the circle in motion again ... [dividing] the world between good/bad; us/them; the righteous/the infidel. Some security returned and many demons were projected and the root causes of the violence left untouched.

Nowhere is this "worshipping of icons of patriarchal power" better illustrated than in the recent movie *World Trade Centre*. In this dreadful film, religion is tacked onto the mediocre story like shiny tinsel onto a greasy brown paper bag. One of the heroes is a macho, fundamentalist, mentally unbalanced Marine who finds himself "called" by God while praying in church. He journeys to New York, where he rescues two policemen trapped beneath the rubble of the Towers. In another equally unconvincing pseudo-religious scene, one of these policemen undergoes a stereotypical near-death experience featuring the sacred heart of Jesus.

It is clear from the uneasy, unconvincing incorporation of religion into 9/11 movies that even Hollywood scriptwriters discern its shadow in the causes, events and aftermath of the attacks. Scholars of religion realise, though, that it has *not* merely been stapled onto these factors like in the movies. Religion lies at the very heart of 9/11; it is part and parcel of the tragedy and the bloody trail left in its wake. According to Juergensmeyer (2004: 226):

> [M]ost of us who study religion accept that September 11 and other recent acts of religious terrorism are, alas, religious events. They are not just pseudoreligious, as some of religion's more pious defenders would describe them, but, rather, are centrally related to the language, images, practices, and history of faith.

When surveying the literature on 9/11, one is struck by a recurring theme. In every single book I consulted, without exception, the author states that the media and public felt that September 11 had irrevocably changed the world. Interestingly enough, the consensus among these authors is that the world has, in fact, *not changed at all*. In the words of Ali (2002: 292):

> A rain of cliché fell, week after week: "the world had changed forever", "would never be the same again", "where were you

> when the first plane hit the first tower", etc. Did anything really change after September 11? I think not.

In my opinion, it is slightly naive to contend that September 11 did not change *anything*. Millions of people all over the world found their hearts wrenched by the misery portrayed on CNN. Certainly, the world had changed forever for those families listening over and over to a final message from a now-gone loved one on an answering machine. Without a doubt, the world subsequently changed for the Afghani and Iraqi citizens whose countries were bombed, as well as for the young men who did the bombing and their families. The suffering of all these individuals was—and still is—painfully real and must not be minimised.

Something else that has changed is the position of religion in public and academic consciousness. Juergensmeyer's questions (in Lubbe 2002: 239) were the first to enter the minds of individuals both inside and outside academic circles: "Why would anyone want to do such a thing? Why would anyone want to do such a thing in the name of God?" Such questions sparked an "enormous public interest in religion" (Juergensmeyer 2004: 222) as well as a subtle hardening of opinion towards it. Juergensmeyer (2004: 221) aptly writes:

> Though Islam was unfairly singled out as the proponent of violence ... after September 11 all religion began to be viewed with a more jaundiced eye, as something that could inspire vengeance and viciousness as well as comfort and peace.

Religion's public face was increasingly presented as "configured in a scowl rather than [in its] predictable beatific smile" (Juergensmeyer 2004: 224). After 9/11, a fascination with the "dark side" of religion surfaced worldwide, and it was towards its scholars that the public turned for answers. Today, six years later, troubling questions (about 9/11 as well as all the other recent instances of religious violence) continue to burn so brightly in the minds of scholars everywhere that we are examining the relationship between religion and politics with new eyes and fresh interest.

This article explores some of the intricacies of religio-political interaction by using September 11 as a case study. The topic is so complex, however, that I will only get my feet wet in a vast and bottomless ocean of swirling currents. I will argue that 9/11 was—and still is—an event permeated by religious meaning: not just in al-Qaeda and the Islamic world, but also in the USA. The article focuses on the "religionization of politics" (Juergensmeyer 2004: 226) in America after 9/11, and posits that the world is at a sensitive and explosive moment right now, due to the strong theocratic current running just under the surface in US domestic and international politics. In the words of Taylor (2005: 1):

> The relation between religion and politics is always complex in important matters of governance, and some interplay almost always goes on, even when commitments exist to maintain walls for a separation of church and state. Today, however, among many with high positions in US government, the militant version of Christian faith is vigorously infusing matters of national and international policy.

At the heart of this article, however, is more than just a warning about the potentially dangerous interplay between religion and politics in contemporary America. I want to go further than simply exposing the causes and conditions of the current situation. "To understand the past, through a process of mindful analysis, is to be delivered from its curse, and to open up new possibilities for the future" (Krüger 2003: 18). Such new post-9/11 possibilities will be sought through what Taylor terms "prophetic spirit" and especially through Zen Buddhist Masao Abe's concepts of "kenotic God" and "dynamic *Sunyata*", particularly as applied in his commentary on the Holocaust. Throughout the article, my main intellectual tool of analysis is Buddhist philosophy. Like Krüger (2003: 11), I utilise it not as a religious confession, "but as a theoretical perspective on socio-historical life", not as another religion, but as a "meta-religion, a meta-critique of all religion."

## The Relationship between Religion and Politics: Johnstone's Continuum Model

The problem with any model depicting the relationship between religion and politics is that it simply cannot do justice to the immense complexity of human societies and religions. Firstly, no religion, whether Christianity or Islam or any other, is a monolithic unity (Ali 2002: 281; Lincoln 2003: 16) since it is always made up of countless individuals holding vastly different opinions. Secondly, religion and politics influence each other in a plethora of different ways. It is often difficult to determine not only the direction of influence, but also the specific factor(s) responsible for an effect. In Buddhist philosophical terms, both religion and politics are enmeshed in a vast web of interconnectedness termed co-dependent arising (*paticca samuppada*).

Johnstone (2004: 137) depicts religio-political interaction as a pendulum that is continually swinging between two extremes: theocracy and totalitarianism. Its movement is not symmetric, as it often swings further to one side than to the other. As long as one remembers that both extremes are ideal types rather than literal realities, and that a whole range of categories lies between them, Johnstone's continuum is a useful way of categorising religio-political interaction. Of course, no religion or society is static—things are perpetually in flux and will differ according

to the specific individuals, groups, times and places studied—and naturally according to the person who is doing the studying.

At the one end of the continuum Johnstone (2004: 135) posits *pure theocracy.* In a pure theocracy, the state does not even exist as a separate entity. An example would be the rule of Israel by God's prophets in Old Testament times.

Next to the pure theocracy lies the *modified theocracy*. Johnstone (2004: 136) stresses the fact that the modified theocracy is not "simply a quaint, antiquarian phenomenon or legacy from pre-industrial times". One also finds it in almost all millenarian groups (like Jonestown). I will argue that the Christian Right in America is currently strongly in favour of such a modified theocracy. Televangelist Jerry Falwell illustrates this in the explanation he gives for 9/11: "For ... [to] all of them who have tried to secularise America, I point the finger in their face and say: 'You helped this happen'" (in Lincoln 2003: 36).

Right at the opposite end of the continuum is the type called *totalitarianism.* In its pure form, it is more theoretical than real, although it certainly was the goal the Bolshevik revolutionists had in mind (Johnstone 2004: 136). Two other possibilities remain on the continuum. The first is *total separation,* a dichotomy between the arenas of church and state, without any overlap whatsoever. Johnstone considers this category a purely theoretical possibility too, as it has never been achieved in any society.

Finally, there is *partial separation.* In this scenario, religion and politics remain distinct entities, but there are definite areas of overlap, because both institutions involve the same people living in the same society. Johnstone notes that this is the most sociologically sound option, but points out that "partial separation is itself a variable and *tends to fluctuate toward one extreme or the other*" (2004: 137; italics mine). My point in this article is that, although the US government is committed to a model of partial separation (termed a "secular state") at this point in history, *especially after 9/11*, it leans dangerously towards the theocracy-end of the spectrum. This is ironic if one keeps in mind the scathing criticism the West heaps on Islamism precisely because of its theocratic tendencies.

## "The Day the Angels Cried": The Place of Religion in September 11

> One could easily imagine that ... "religious implications" might apply more readily to the "Islamic fundamentalist" side of events than to the reaction of the West and the USA in particular. After all, apart from the small "evangelical/ Freudian" hiccup of President Bush when he called the US action a "crusade", all reference about the allied reaction of the West has been in the language of war and retribution,

> rather than in the language of religious fanaticism (Liebenberg & Abdurahman 2002: 91).

However, most scholars of religion believe that it certainly did not feature only on the Islamic side of 9/11. Right from the start, right from Bush's first speech following the attacks (which he ended with the words "God bless"), powerful religious metaphors have been employed to attribute meaning to the event and to US reaction to it.

Although I will focus in this article on politics and religion in post-9/11 America, I will briefly consider the religious motivations of the attackers. Our insight into these motivations stems from a document of extraordinary historical importance found in the luggage of one of the deceased hijackers, Mohamed Atta. He intended it to be found after his death, along with his last will and testament. Two other copies of the same set of instructions were found in the belongings of other hijackers (Lincoln 2003: 8). When reading this document, one cannot help but realise that their motivation was a *profoundly religious one*. The hijackers used their final night as a time for spiritual preparation (Lincoln 2003: 9). Every step of their "sacred duty" (Lincoln 2003: 16) was meant to be taken prayerfully. The finale of the document reads: "When the hour of reality approaches ... wholeheartedly welcome death for the sake of God ... Either end your life while praying, seconds before the target, or make your last words: 'There is no God but God [Allah], Muhammad is his messenger'" (in Lincoln 2003: 10).

After 9/11, US policymakers lost no time in creating a public rhetoric of dichotomy between good and evil. The USA was portrayed as the "good nation" being threatened by "bad terrorists". As President Bush put it: "This is a battle of good versus evil. *They* hate *our* freedom" (in Taylor 2005: 30). Statements abounded claiming that the attacks were an incomprehensible evil, perpetrated without any logical reason. Such claims were even made by scholars of religion. Elshtain, for example, labels the motivation behind 9/11 "an implacable hatred that ... mystifies us". She writes: "This depth of hatred does not grow out of any specific action or lack of action on the part of those who are its target" (in Taylor 2005: 23).

Of course, I am not placing any blame on the victims of 9/11. Instead, I am painfully aware of their suffering and of the tragedy of the event. However, I find the ease with which the attacks are called "incomprehensible" problematic. I truly believe that everyone involved (and we are all involved in our global village of interconnectedness) should take a good, hard look at the causes and conditions that created an event like 9/11, so that changes can be made in order to avoid recurrences. Lincoln (2003: 16) writes:

> It is tempting, in the face of such horror, to regard the authors of these deeds as evil incarnate: persons bereft of reason, decency

> or human compassion. Their motives, however—as revealed by the instructions that guided their final days—were intensely and profoundly religious. We need to take this fact seriously.

On October 7, 2001, after Bush had announced the invasion of Afghanistan, al-Jazeera aired a videotaped recording that Osama bin Laden had prepared in anticipation of such military action. His opening statement revealed the depth of his religious motivation (in Lincoln 2003: 102):

> Here is America struck by God Almighty in one of its vital organs, so that its greatest buildings are destroyed. Grace and gratitude to God. America has been filled with horror from north to south and east to west, and thanks be to God. What America is tasting now is only a copy of what we have tasted.

It is clear, then, that the meaning the hijackers, bin Laden and the rest of al-Qaeda ascribed to the events of 9/11 was deeply religious. But what about America? How did religion and politics interact in the USA's appraisal of 9/11?

Although America is a secular state with separation between church and state, it is certainly not "religiously neutral". In fact, America is "supersaturated with religion" (Ali 2002: 283). Ninety percent of Americans declare belief in God, and 60% believe in angels. "And religious passions run high, as we saw when American Christian fundamentalists greeted 11 September as God's punishment of a society that tolerated homosexuality and abortion" (Ali 2002: 283).

The religious significance of 9/11 in popular opinion is illustrated clearly on the website www.september11news.com. This website is an excellent archive of newspaper articles, political speeches, books and products related to 9/11. In a section titled "September 11th in history", the editor, A.D. Williams, speculates (on the basis of a book by historian Ernest L. Martin) that Christ was probably born on September 11, 3 B.C. He also reports on the strange "apparitions" seen and photographed on 9/11, many of which were reported in the newspapers. Some of these were visions of demonic beings in the billows of smoke. The editor calls them "mostly evil images from an evil act". However, some also saw angels and other "flying beings", and an article from the New York Post is included, reporting on the "miracle" in which a construction worker found several upright crosses in the rubble of the World Trade Centre. The area where the crosses were found is called "The House of God".

The section entitled "World Trade Centre Art" is replete with religious imagery. The title of one poster is "The Day the Angels Cried", and many others feature angelic beings. Quite a few are titled "God Bless America". A political event was thus imbued with religious meaning through Christian imagery and metaphors.

But apart from this public visibility of Christianity in America (Catherwood 2002: 144), some scholars argue that strong theocratic impulses were already at work within US government at the 9/11 moment, and that these were only amplified in its aftermath (Taylor 2005: 52). Let us consider the personal piety of the American president. In the video *George W. Bush: Faith in the White House*, Bush openly promotes his way of mixing Christianity with US imperial governance (Taylor 2005: 1). Taylor (2005: 54) writes: "Advocates for Bush's piety situate the Billy Graham-converted Bush within a line of god-fearing presidents who, as they emphasize, were not afraid to blur the lines between church and state." Bush opens his cabinet meetings with prayer (Taylor 2005: 52) and has weekly White House Bible Studies which are, "if not compulsory, not quite non-compulsory either" (according to David Frum, an Orthodox Jew and speechwriter for Bush, in Taylor 2005: 55).

Of special concern to our topic is the role religion plays in the way Bush allocates funding through his "faith-based initiatives" (Taylor 2005: 52). It seems that the president uses his religion as a criterion to decide "who gets what, when and how".[1] Bush admits that the Bible is his "regulatory guidebook" when selecting organisations for funding, and he encourages these organisations to look towards it for guidance, too (Taylor 2005: 52). This worldview of his is reflected in the hundreds of organisations that have received grants: Kaplan (in Taylor 2005: 57) notes that—with the exception of a few interfaith groups—every single religious organisation that had won a grant was Christian. Taylor (2005: 57) comments:

> When a presidential regime's Christian ritual ethos accompanies output that is skewed in this manner, a society diverse with many religious and secular vocations has a right and a duty to be suspicious that governance is not being exercised fairly, that it is failing to respect the diversity of religious expression that is expected in a democracy.

Bush claims a divine calling to presidency. This legitimisation could be dangerous, as "it is hard to be self-critical of one's faith and policies if one is believed to be in one's position as a result of divine election" (Taylor 2005: 31). It is probably this "divine sanction" that led Bush to make the following comment to author Bob Woodward (in Taylor 2005: 68):

> I'm the commander—see, I don't need to explain—I do not need to explain why I say things. That's the interesting thing about being president. Maybe someone needs to explain to me why they say something, but I don't feel like I owe anyone an explanation.

While this statement is still slightly comical, I agree with Isherwood (2005: 70) that

it is cause for grave concern when Bush "wonders publicly whether atheists can be called American citizens, as America is one nation under God".

Both Taylor (2005: 56) and Lincoln (2003: 31) refer to the fact that Bush is in the habit of making allusions to scripture in his speeches that are not readily apparent to those of a more secular bent. Taylor (2005: 56) writes: "Bush's speeches often embed terms and phrases that seem to broadcast only the usual American civil religion, but actually "narrowcast" more specific religious meanings to his evangelical faithful ..." An example of such an allusion is his referral to the nation's "wonder-working power", a phrase from a Christian hymn about the "precious blood of the lamb" (Taylor 2005: 56). Lincoln refers to quite a few such allusions in Bush's speech of October 7, 2001. He concludes: "For those who have ears to hear, these allusions effect a qualitative transformation ... The conversion of secular political speech into religious discourse invests otherwise merely human events with transcendent significance" (Lincoln 2003: 32). Through such allusions, Bush seems to tell his followers amongst the Christian Right (who acknowledge him as their leader), that he sympathises with their concerns, even though his public office does not allow him to voice this openly.

The title of my article, "May God Continue to Bless America", is George Bush's trademark line. Although it has long been customary for American presidents to end their more solemn speeches with the phrase "God Bless America", Bush "goes beyond the conventional formula" (Lincoln 2003: 30). This phrase points not only to his personal faith, but also to elements of American civil religion. When Bush announced the military action against Afghanistan, he ended his televised speech with this same expression. Lincoln (2003: 30) comments:

> It suggests Bush and his speechwriters gave serious thought to the phrase and decided to emphatically reaffirm the notion that the *US had enjoyed divine favour throughout its history;* moreover, that it *deserves said favour insofar as it remains firm in its faith* (emphasis added).

Much has been made in the media of the fact that Bush has the Christian Right to thank for his presidency. Taylor (2005: 58) argues that the numerical strength of the Christian Right should not be overestimated, but that they have a "power of influence well beyond [their] percentage of US population because of particular political alliances [they] have made". According to Taylor (2005: 58), the Christian right has been especially influential regarding the appointment of judges. They have also flexed their muscles in the arena of the "legislation of morality" (Johnstone 2004: 151), particularly in fighting abortion legislation. Until now, their success has been limited, but they gained a powerful ally when John Ashcroft became Attorney General. Immediately after his appointment, Ashcroft promised to

dismantle Janet Reno's task force which protects abortion providers from attacks (Taylor 2005: 58). In a speech at the Bob Jones University, Ashcroft proclaimed not only his commitment to the civil religion of American exceptionalism, but also to theocracy: "Unique among nations, America recognised the source of our character as being godly and eternal, not being civic and temporal ... We have no king but Jesus" (in Taylor 2005: 59).

The school system is another arena in which church and state have locked horns in recent years. In 1995, President Clinton hoped to settle the matter of school prayer once and for all by providing guidelines for prayer and other religious expressions (Johnstone 2004: 148). The fact that school officials can no longer authorise organised prayer has been a bitter pill for the Christian Right to swallow. On September 13, 2001, televangelist Pat Robertson claimed that 9/11 had happened because God had lifted his protection from America (in Lincoln 2003: 104). He lamented:

> We have a court that has essentially stuck its finger in God's eye and said we're going to legislate you out of the schools ... We're not going to let the Bible be read, no prayer in our schools. We have insulted God at the highest levels of our government. And, then we say: "why does this happen?"

America's religious right clearly feels that the pendulum has swung too far towards total separation between church and state (Catherwood 2002: 144). Their Christian values seem threatened by the political values of democracy and religious freedom. And it is often in the arena of values that the most heated conflict between church and state takes place. Ramet (1995: 11) writes: "Religio-political interaction, it is clear, involves values that may be in competition or complementary, but are rarely, if ever, irrelevant to one another. Values, one might say, provide the prism through which religio-political interaction is refracted."

## Religion, Politics and Values: Symmetric Dualisms between Bush and bin Laden

Lincoln (2003: 20) studies the speeches of Bush and bin Laden that were aired on the 7th of October, 2001 in tandem, for he argues that they show "unexpected similarities as well as instructive differences". Others have also noted the "symmetric dualisms" (Lincoln 2003: 20) that exist between both sides of the conflict. Taylor (2005: ix) writes: "The differences between al-Qaeda and US military forces are numerous, of course, but the ways significant leaders from both sides *fuse their religion with political visions* are often strikingly similar" (italics mine). Liebenberg and Abdulrahman (2002: 94) feel there are "important correlations between the

fundamentalism which underlies Islamic radicals and the fundamentalism which underlies contemporary American foreign policy".

When one studies the speeches of Bush and bin Laden, it is interesting to note that both use the same tidy dualistic schemas. Both employ the dichotomies of us/them, good/evil, hero/villain and threatened/threat to frame the events of 9/11. On the basis of these dichotomies, both leaders divide the world into two opposing camps. Bush warned: "Every nation has a choice to make. In this conflict, there is no neutral ground" (in Lincoln 2003: 100). As if bin Laden was responding to Bush's speech (which he was not, for his speech was recorded before 11 October), he in turn said: "[T]hese events have divided the world into two camps, the camp of the faithful and the camp of the infidels. May God shield us and you from them" (in Lincoln 2003: 103). Lincoln (2003: 20) states that "[b]oth men constructed a Manichaean struggle, where Sons of Light confront Sons of Darkness, and all must enlist on one side or another, without possibility of neutrality, hesitation or middle ground."

It is also fascinating to see how both Bush and bin Laden independently employed the image of themselves as "protectors of the children" against the "other side" (Lincoln 2003: 22). Bush referred to the "starving and suffering men and women and children of Afghanistan" (in Lincoln 2003: 22). He promised them airdrops of food, medicine and supplies, vowing that "the oppressed people of Afghanistan will know the generosity of America and our allies" (in Lincoln 2003: 99). He called his country "a friend of the Afghan people", notwithstanding the fact that he was bombing their homeland. Bin Laden, in turn, blamed America for the fact that Iraqi children were being deprived of food, medical supplies and sometimes their lives because of the American embargo lasting more than a decade (Lincoln 2003: 23).

Lubbe (2002: 251) identifies the following common features of religious nationalists. Once again, these features can be seen on the Islamic as well as the American side of the conflict:

> Both view politics from a religious point of view. For them, "political problems have a religious origin, and ... religious aims have a political solution" (Lubbe 2002: 251).
>
> Both demonise the enemy.
>
> Both advocate a "total war" in order to restore peace and order.

Liebenberg and Abdurahman (2002: 96) give an interesting explanation for these "symmetric dualisms". They explicate them in terms of the Strict Father Morality

found in both Islam and Christianity, and especially in terms of the patriarchal worldview underlying both faiths. These authors argue that both religions rest on a view of the family in which the father is responsible for the well-being and safety of the other family members as well as for formulating the rules (Liebenberg & Abdurahman 2002: 96). In America, we see the idea of the "Nation as Family" (Liebenberg & Abdurahman 2002: 96) with the President as the patriarchal figure. This worldview clarifies the statements Bush made about his authority as "commander". It also explains the course of action Bush resorted to after 9/11. In terms of Strict Father Morality it would be immoral not to seek retribution (Liebenberg & Abdurahman 2002: 97):

> When President Bush presents and defends the "War Against Terrorism", he presents his case with a logic that seems self-evident, creating the impression that this particular route was almost inevitable, that he had no choice, indeed that failing to act as decisively as he did would have bordered on a lack of integrity. And it is this last aspect which allowed him to divide the world into two camps ...

The values of Islamic fundamentalism are also rooted in a patriarchal worldview. In fact, "the father figure as protector of the family is even more prominent than ... in the Christian fundamentalist view, especially if one takes into account the strict hierarchical ordering of society and the marginalizing of women" (Liebenberg & Abdurahman, 2002: 99). Furthermore, there is no separation between religion and state, for Allah requires the state to be run not by human laws, but by the guidelines of the holy Qu'ran (Liebenberg & Abdurahman 2002: 99).

If we take the Strict Father Morality on both sides into account, "we have all the ingredients for an almost identical morality ... with its fairy tale elements: There is a hero figure (leader of the true believers). There is a villain, there are innocent victims, and there is a crime" (Liebenberg & Abdurahman 2002: 100). The symmetric dualisms between Bush and bin Laden then make perfect sense.

Liebenberg and Abdurahman suggest that Nurturing Parent Morality might be an alternative to both Christian and Islamic Strict Father Morality (2002: 102). They argue that a more caring depiction of God could be excavated from the scriptures of both traditions. For me, however, a Nurturing Parent Morality would not go far enough in solving the problem, as it is still far too patriarchal. I agree with Moltmann (1990: 117) and Isherwood (2005: 69) that the patriarchal, transcendent and other-worldly theology of Christianity has justified the West's exploitation of both other nations and of the earth.

This patriarchal domination had devastating ecological consequences[2] and contributed to the causes and conditions of the 9/11 event and its aftermath.

Because of its lack of interest in the motives of those responsible for 9/11 (Lincoln 2003: 17), the US government and citizens do not realise how American imperialist ideas like full-spectrum dominance and American exceptionalism have contributed to—and still contribute to—anti-American sentiment worldwide. Taylor (2005: 4) argues that US foreign policy, and especially the invasion of Iraq after 9/11, has led to a rise of global disrespect for the US government. He warns: "A government that is not respected leaves its people unprotected" (2005: 4). I will now look at American civil religion and the role it has played in politics.

## American Civil Religion

Johnstone (2004: 153) defines civil religion as:

> ... the view ... that the foundation of [a] society and the events that mark its progress through history are parts of a larger, divine scheme of things; the political structure and the political acts that flow out of that structure have a transcendental dimension—God is at work in our nation, and as such we have a destiny.

Although civil religion in America cannot be equated with Christianity, it incorporates many elements from this tradition. God is not seen as a *deus remotus*, but as actively involved in history, "with a special concern for America" (Johnstone 2004: 153). Central to US civil religion is the idea of America as the "promised land God has led people to—out of the land of bondage (Europe)" (Johnstone 2004: 153). For this reason, commitment to democracy has always been a key element in US civil religion (Johnstone 2004: 154).

For Taylor (2005: 14) 9/11 was a Rubicon in American civil religion and politics. He considers it less as a moment of historical importance that would change the world forever than as a "mythic moment" that temporarily ruptured the civil religious myths of American exceptionalism by which many citizens live:

> A surprise attack of sudden destruction shattered the illusions of many that the US homeland was an exceptional site, the protected home of a people pursuing their manifest destiny. Exceptionalist confidence was replaced with heightened fear and nostalgia. The hyperpatriotism surfacing since 9/11 marks the emergence of a new nationalism in which citizens seek desperately to recapture and restore the confidences of the exceptionalist myth.

Taylor argues that the fear and patriotism that resulted from the 9/11 moment

enabled the resurgence of two powerful currents that had long run deep beneath American politics: American romanticism and contractual liberalism. He feels that America and the world are at an especially dangerous and potentially destructive moment due to the revival of these currents and the ensuing political alliances they have fostered.

## American Political Romanticism and Contractual Liberalism

All humans are born with a need for belonging, a need which has traditionally been fulfilled by both politics and religion (Taylor 2005: 49). In fact, one of the main functions of religion is to provide a sense of identity by integrating people into a community. Taylor (2005: 49) argues that this need for belonging has been overinflated in America, leading to the phenomenon he terms American romanticism.

In times of crisis, people's need for roots, integration and identity is even more intense than in times of stability. And there can be no doubt that September 11 was a moment of intense crisis in the American mind. Almost 3 000 people died in the first attack on US soil since 1812 (Lincoln 2003: 105). This political crisis, broadcast on international television for the world to see, led to a crisis of identity and belonging, which reinforced and reshaped American romanticism, nationalism and patriotism.

American romanticism has been present in the nation since its founding. It gained momentum during the presidency of Reagan, who employed the myth of American exceptionalism in order to promote a "technological dream of military prowess" (Taylor 2005: 40).

As the planes crashed into the Twin Towers, they shattered not only office windows, but also the myth of American exceptionalism (Catherwood 2002: 164; Taylor 2005: 41). It was not completely destroyed, though, for it would rise like a phoenix out of the ashes of the World Trade Centre (just like the mysterious crosses did). A new superpatriotism—a hyperpatriotism—emerged and in the three months after 9/11, more American flags were sold than in years (Taylor 2005: 43).

This rising brand of romanticism is particularly aggressive and virulent because it unites two vastly dissimilar groups: the Christian Right and the secular neo-conservatives. Despite their differing values and goals, both hold American romanticism dear. Taylor (2005: 69) warns that this coalition poses a threat to democracy and that the deaths of thousands of Iraqi civilians should suffice as testimony to its lethality. Theocratic notions working in tandem with militarist impulses are a recipe for disaster (Taylor 2005: 67).

Another current underlying US politics is contractual liberalism. Taylor feels that liberalism is per definition contractual in the sense that it has always been restricted to certain groups of people (2005: 74). Since the founding of America,

liberalism has touted values like liberty and equality, while at the same time keeping them from groups like slaves, African Americans and women. According to Taylor (2005: 75), the contractual element of liberalism was—and still is—illustrated perfectly in colonialism and neo-colonialism.

In post-9/11 America, romanticism and contractual liberalism have been wed in a marriage of convenience. The progeny of this union was the antithesis of all that is held dear in democracy: war, torture, deception and a curbing of freedom. The ripple effect was felt in US foreign politics with the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq (for which the US did not have UN approval).

The US government legitimised their invasion of Iraq through claiming that Iraq possessed of weapons of mass destruction. These weapons, however, never materialised and many citizens feel they have been deceived. Perhaps it is the dualistic political mentality of us/them, friend/foe and good/evil that allows such deception. Taylor (2005: 93) states:

> When political opponents are demonised ... politicians are tempted to overstep the bounds of law. When ... politics are turned into a contest between the forces of good and the forces of evil, when political opponents are regarded as the enemies of civilisation, the results are dishonest political tactics, corruption and conflict.

It is clear, then, that, due to this interplay of religion and politics, of the Christian right and the neo-conservatives, and of American romanticism and contractual liberalism, America (and the world with it), is balanced precariously atop the edge of a dangerous cliff. September 11 may not have changed the course of American politics, but it has certainly amplified dangers already present therein. Kelsey (2002: 3) holds the following view:

> Enough time has elapsed since... September 11 to evaluate the claim that "the world changed forever" on that day. I want to suggest ... that those events and their aftermath have reinforced a geopolitical dynamic that was created during previous eras of imperialism and colonisation and is perpetuated by the current phase of economic globalisation.

What is the way forward? Is there any way in which religion—and religious individuals in particular—can contribute to a safer relationship between religion and politics in the USA and worldwide? The root causes of 9/11 have not been removed. Is there any way in which seemingly inevitable future acts of violence can be averted? Anyone who thinks that a solution for the world's political and religious conflict is probable

and foreseeable would have to be naïve in the extreme. However, I feel that Abe's kenotic God and dynamic *Sunyata*, and Taylor's prophetic spirit are valuable concepts that can make a contribution to the change of thought we so desperately need. Although I will focus only on the American side of the conflict, these ideas may also be fruitfully applied to the Muslim side.

### *Tikkun*: Masao Abe, the Holocaust and 9/11

Masao Abe is well known for his work as an advocate of Buddhist-Christian-Jewish dialogue. In *Kenotic God and Dynamic Sunyata* (Abe 1990) he tries to create common ground for dialogue by bringing the Christian God closer to the Buddhist notion of *Sunyata* (emptiness). He argues that the very nature of Christ (and by implication, of God) is one of incessant *kenosis* or self-emptying.[3] He rectifies the common (mis)understanding of *Sunyata* as something to be attained or grasped, by stating that "emptiness not only empties everything else but also empties itself" (Abe 1990: 27). *Sunyata* is nothing but life itself, in all its insubstantiality (*anatta*), ever-changing fluidity (*anicca*) and even its suffering and imperfection (*dukkha*).

Abe emphasises that religious dialogue and practice must be engaged in the wider socio-historical context in order to remain relevant in a world rife with anti-religious philosophies (Abe 1990: 3). To this end, he ventures a Buddhist view of the Holocaust. He considers Fackenheim's work on the historical uniqueness of the Holocaust, on the anguished rupture of the Jewish consciousness, and on *Tikkun*, a mending of what is ruptured or broken (Abe 1990: 54). And he comes to interesting conclusions. Abe's contribution provides the lens though which I will view September 11 and the rupture it has caused in American identity and mythology. In my opinion, for a *Tikkun* to be possible, what America (and the world, for we are all interdependent) needs is not "more of the same", but instead a *new way of thinking* inspired by kenotic God, dynamic Sunyata and prophetic spirit.

## The Causes of 9/11

Abe (1990: 59) notes that Buddhism has traditionally been weak in its view of history. This flows from the fact that time is not considered linear and chronological. Instead, each moment fully embraces the whole process of time. For this reason, although Buddhism has always maintained that each event is conditioned by its interdependent "causes and conditions", a close analysis of these was seldom attempted. Abe wants to overcome this weak view of history in order to actualise the compassionate aspect of *Sunyata* (instead of merely the wisdom aspect).

Central to Abe's understanding of causality is the idea of *karma*. Karma encompasses an act, the intention leading to it and its consequences. The Dhammapada (in Krüger et al. 1996: 97) teaches:

> All that we are is the result of what we have thought ... it is made up of our thoughts. If a man speaks or acts with an evil thought, pain follows him as the wheel follows the foot of the ox that draws the carriage ... For hatred does not cease by hatred at any time: hatred ceases by love ...

According to Abe (1990: 40), karma is rooted in *avidya*—ignorance. He writes:

> *Avidya* is the ignorance of the true nature of things—that is, of emptiness and suchness, resulting in not recognizing the impermanency of worldly things and tenaciously clinging to them as final realities. Thus *avidya*, as the root of karma, is identical with *bhava-tanha*, the will or thirst to be, to exist, to continue, to become more and more, to grow more and more, to accumulate more and more.

From this perspective it follows logically that the United States must have contributed in some way to the creation of 9/11. I state once more that I am *not* blaming the victims, just as Abe does not imply the joint responsibility of the victims of the Holocaust (1990: 50). Neither am I justifying the attacks of 9/11. I am rather stating in religious terms what historian Chalmers Johnson (in Ali 2002: 292) stated in secular terms a year before 9/11:

> Blowback is shorthand for saying that *a nation reaps what it sows, even if it does not fully understand what it has sown* [read *avidya*; italics mine]. Given its wealth and power, the United States will be a prime recipient in the foreseeable future of all the more expected forms of blowback, particularly terrorist attacks against Americans...

I have noted the danger for the US and the rest of the world if they fail to understand the causes of September 11 because they choose to see it as an "incomprehensible" evil. If these causes do not change, more blowback, and more human suffering, will follow. We all need to comprehend the Islamic nationalist point of view, for from this perspective the attacks were anything but unprovoked. Rather, they were a direct result of "both US foreign policy, especially as it relates to the Middle East, and the negative way in which the Middle East experiences globalisation" (Liebenberg & Abdurahman 2002: 99).

Buddhism holds that aggression usually arises from pain. Such pain and bitterness permeated bin Laden's speech when he reasoned: "Our Islamic nation has been tasting the same for more than 80 years of humiliation and disgrace, its

sons killed and their blood spilled, its sanctities desecrated" (in Lincoln 2003: 102). In this perspective the US is a villain who ignores the Muslim plight in Palestine and the rest of the Middle East, and "contribute[s] directly to their poverty and deprivation through globalisation" (Liebenberg & Abdurahman 2002: 100).

The press have labelled the invasion of Iraq an "oil war". It is interesting to note how politics and religion interact in the scramble for a piece of the proverbial pie. Lincoln (2003: 74) states:

> Like all others, communities and institutions that define themselves in terms of religion still wage their conflicts primarily around rival claims to scarce resources: people, territory, wealth, positions of power, and economic advantage... [This] permits would-be combatants to define themselves and their cause as not just moral, but holy: chosen people, sacred land, divinely ordained offices ...

In this way, the wheel of *karma* leading to the attacks of 9/11 was turned by *bhava-tanha*: the thirst to accumulate more and more wealth and scarce resources.

Taylor (2005: 41), Lincoln (2003: 16) and Ritzer (2002: 200) all mention the symbolic value of the 9/11 targets. The Pentagon symbolised US military hegemony and the World Trade Centre global economic power. Friedman (in Ali 2002: 260) establishes the interrelatedness of economic and military powers: "For globalisation to work, America can't be afraid to act like the almighty superpower that it is. The hidden hand of the market will never work without a hidden fist."

Islamic nationalists perceive the insidious US influence in the moral realm as well. It threatens the Muslim way of life, family values and all that is considered holy. In this worldview, America is "the antithesis of Islam and of religion in general..." It personifies " the Great Satan, a monstrous entity responsible for a global flood of impiety and profanation, as witnessed in the blatant sexuality and random violence of the popular culture it so happily (and profitably) exports" (Lincoln, 2003: 16).

Ritzer (2002: 208) argues that many foreigners have a love-hate relationship with the US. The omnipresent American products, movies and cultural icons create consumerist longing in those unable to afford them:

> Media images of American affluence—sparkling fast-food restaurants, people with credit cards in hand rushing about in the Mall of America ... gamblers betting more on one roll of dice than people in many nations in the world will earn in their lifetimes—anger some in impoverished nations who may not even know where their next meal will come from.

I agree that American movies create *bhava-tanha*, not just for consumer goods, but also for the unrealistic lives and lifestyles which we cannot have (because they do not exist outside the movies). Life is not all "happy endings", it is often *dukkha*, and not being realistic about this sets one up for inevitable disappointment.

These are some factors that contributed to the tragedy of 9/11. Abe's analysis of the Holocaust adds another interesting facet: we are all shareholders of the causes and conditions of September 11. For karma operates on an individual *as well as* a collective level. Just as all American citizens share a "national collective karma", we all participate in the collective karma of humankind. Abe (1990: 41) explains: "In our collective karma nothing happens in the universe entirely unrelated to us ... [for] everything human is ultimately rooted in the fundamental ignorance, *avidya*, innate in human nature." This collective responsibility is "bad news", for it means we all share in the blame for the sad state of our planet. Yet, the other side of the coin is that it is wonderful news, for if we want to change things, we can start by changing ourselves. Let us now consider the uniqueness of September 11 from a historical and religious point of view.

## The Uniqueness of September 11

> The assault on the World Trade Centre was unpardonable, but it is important not to lose perspective, especially a historical one ... The scale and consequence of the September 11 attack are massive indeed, but this is not the worst act of mass terrorism in US history, as some US media are wont to claim. The over 3,000 lives lost are irreplaceable, but one must not forget that the atomic raids on Hiroshima and Nagasaki killed 210, 000 people, most of them civilians, most perishing instantaneously (Bello, in Taylor 2005: 5).

In the American consciousness, 9/11 was a unique and unprecedented "evil" that changed the world forever. Yet many scholars agree with Islamic leaders that the historical uniqueness of the event should not be blown out of proportion, and that the US is not blameless when it comes to violent acts. Like Bello, in the paragraph above, bin Laden also referred to the "spectre of Hiroshima and Nagasaki" in his speech of October 2001 (in Lincoln 2003: 23). He charged the US with war crimes and crimes against humanity, not just in Japan, but in the Middle East as well.

Abe would downplay the uniqueness of 9/11 likewise, but for different reasons. He warns (1990: 52) that one should not reify and substantialise any event—should not detach it from its causational network—for this always leads to an *emotional attachment to the event and to the people involved in terms of either hatred or love*. This only creates further karma (Abe 1990: 52):

> The Buddhist doctrine of karma teaches us that however extraordinary and unique an event the Holocaust may be, it is not an isolated, independent event unrelated to the vast and boundless network of human history. In an immeasurable way, even the uttermost evil of the Holocaust is related to the innumerable events in the past and present of human history, in which all of us, assailants and victims alike, are involved.

In the spirit of kenotic God and dynamic *Sunyata*, the events of 9/11 should be emptied out. If we want to break the cycle of violence, we need to realise that they are relational and non-substantial (Abe 1990: 52)—impermanent and without fixed meaning. "Emptying out" 9/11 is a tall order as it is such an emotionally loaded event. However, it is an essential task in order to prevent the forming of further karma and suffering. Abe (1990: 51) cautions:

> The standpoint of justice, humanistic or divine, cannot be a proper basis for our coming to terms with the Holocaust [or 9/11], because ... justice is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it sharply judges which is right and which is wrong. On the other hand, the judgement based on justice will naturally cause a counter-judgement ... Accordingly, we may fall into endless conflict and struggle between the judge and the judged. All judgement, "just" or otherwise, may perpetrate further karma.

We certainly saw this dynamic at work in the post-9/11 events. The US targeted first Afghanistan and then Iraq. One can only wonder where it will all end. According to Liebenberg and Abdurahman (2002: 101), the factors that gave rise to September 11 have not vanished. They warn: "Retribution, especially if fuelled by religious fundamentalism, has a nasty habit of continually reinventing itself". They also add a creative spin on the uniqueness of 9/11 (2002: 106):

> [W]hat happened on September 11 to cause people, mostly Westerners, to think that it somehow changed the world? Perhaps the answer is that the world did not change. Perhaps September 11 has only provided the US/West with a unique opportunity to wake up to the consequences of their "common sense" approach to the Middle East and the Palestinian issue. Perhaps that opportunity has now also passed, because it seems that retribution/vengeance remains the preferred way of interaction with the "villains".

Abe advocates the kenosis of "justice" to create space for wisdom and compassion.

From such a standpoint, Strict Father Morality should be emptied out, not to be replaced with Nurturing Parent Morality, but rather with dynamic *Sunyata* that ceaselessly turns itself into "vow and act" (Abe 1990: 58). This *Sunyata* can be described as "boundless openness without a centre". It leaves no space for any kind of centrism: Eurocentrism, Americocentrism, or even anthropocentrism, but unites all existence in a pulsating web of interdependence, interpenetration and mutual reversibility.

Buddhist philosophy encourages a healthy suspicion of dualism. As all things share in identity and interdependence; they cannot be dichotomised. This notion has important implications for the relationship between religion and politics, especially in our Western societies. It means that "religion" and "politics" can no longer be substantialised as separate entities and divorced from each other in dualistic fashion. Instead, they are inextricably woven into the seamless fabric of society as an indivisible organic whole. I am *not* advocating theocracy here. Rather, I am suggesting a balancing act which steers clear of three dangers (Krüger 2003: 10). Firstly, if the metaphysical-mystical dimension (religion) is separated from historical, conventional life (politics), the danger would be *dualism*. Secondly, if the metaphysical-mystical dimension (religion) disallows conventional life (politics), there is a danger of *absolutism.* Thirdly, if historical conventional life (politics) thwarts the metaphysical-mystical dimension (religion), it amounts to *secularism.* On Johnstone's continuum, the first scenario is called "total separation", the second "theocracy" and the third "totalitarianism". As usual, Buddhist philosophy would advocate seeking a dynamic "middle way" somewhere between these extremes.

## Taylor's Prophetic Spirit

Although I have employed Abe's kenotic God and dynamic *Sunyata* for an analysis of 9/11 that I consider more conducive to peace, we may use a term more organic to conventional Christianity to achieve the same goal. Taylor suggests the term "prophetic spirit". According to him, this approach is most often found in Christianity, but it is certainly not the exclusive property of religion, and often surfaces in secular contexts as well. I believe that the characteristics of prophetic spirit are present in all religions, at least in the germ. Taylor (2005: 97) defines the aim of prophetic spirit "to shatter deliberate ignorance [read *avidya*] and wilful blindness to the suffering of others and to expose the clever forms of evasion and escape we devise in order to hide and conceal injustice".

Prophetic spirit continually broadens and deepens our horizons and understanding (Taylor 2005: 97). It is probably found most often found amongst the marginalised people at the edges of society (Taylor 2005: 99). This resonates with Knitter's (1995: 87) insistence that the voices of the oppressed be given priority in interreligious dialogue.

Taylor (2005: 102) believes that it is "in the wake of 9/11 that prophetic spirit's way of being can make a significant contribution, orienting public life and values in new ways". He argues that voices of dissent resounding with prophetic spirit are not absent in post-9/11 America. Immediately after the attack, citizens took to the streets (even in New York City) to protest against vengeful counter-attacks upon Afghanistan and Iraq. "Not in our Name", they pleaded. This phrase became their rallying cry (Taylor 2005: 104).

The concepts of kenotic God, dynamic *Sunyata* and prophetic being do not forbid the human need for belonging and identity. I think that a feeling of belonging to *humankind as a whole*, instead of an us-them mentality of belonging to a certain race, group, nation or religion, should be cultivated. In America, such a "revolutionary belonging being" would surpass the fixation on founding fathers, and rather revere the fluctuating and pulsating worlds of everyday people (Taylor 2005: 108). "Belonging being," Taylor writes (2005: 115), "does not romance soil, nation or polity, but celebrates the mobility and movement of diverse peoples struggling to orient soil, nation and polity towards full and just inclusion in a common life." "Mobility" in this sense connotes "the dynamic, insurgent, ever moving and never static qualities that mark a group of people who ... are 'on the move', bent on change ..." (Taylor 2005: 110). Doesn't this prophetic spirit sound much like dynamic *Sunyata*?

## Conclusion

At the beginning of this article, I referred to an unanswered question: did the world change forever after September 11? The scholarly consensus seems to be that it did not, while in the American public consciousness, it most certainly did. The answer does not really matter. What *does* matter, though, is that the world *should* change after 9/11, just as it should have changed after all the other previous instances of religious and political violence. Elie Wiesel (1999: 50), survivor of the Holocaust, wrote:

> What is missing in today's society, [at] the end of a century of unprecedented violence, is a message that it is not too late. That the train is not running to the abyss. That catastrophe can be averted. That hope is possible. That it has a future.

How we should go about averting future catastrophes and keeping hope alive is not clear, and I would suggest that scholars of religion—as well as religious people from all traditions—devote attention to this question as a matter of urgency. In this article, I have employed the perspective of Buddhist philosophy, but I would like to

stress the fact that this is only *one* perspective , and that we need a *multitude of perspectives* in order to theorise about a matter as complex as religio-political interaction and peace. Only when *all* the differing voices—not just the loud, overbearing, assertive ones, but also the small, hesitant, marginalised whispers—have been heard will we truly be able to say: May God/*Sunyata*/prophetic spirit continue to bless not only America but all of humanity.

"One thing can perhaps be said for certain: religion will be a major player in international affairs. The religious dimension of questions cannot now be safely ignored" (Catherwood 2002: 165). Unlike scholarly predictions of the previous century, religion is a tenacious and powerful force, and it is here to stay: in all spheres of human society, including the political one. Perhaps the only thing each of us can do to channel the power of religion into more peaceful ends, is to start with ourselves. If we are all interdependent and interconnected, as Buddhist philosophy has it, even a "vow and act" to live more compassionately and tolerantly in a single individual cannot but change the collective karma of humankind. Mother Teresa used to say that we cannot do great things, but we can do small things with great love. In this sense, the personal is not only the political, but the political is also the personal. "Yes, religion can be used as either a tool for oppression or a power for transformation, but the former is an abuse of the nature of religion, while the latter is its fulfilment" (Knitter 1995: 162).

## Notes

1 Lasswell's classic definition of politics (in Johnstone 2004: 134).

2 The patriarchal worldview of Bush and the US government has led to their manipulation of scientific information in order to justify their ecological decisions. In the statement *Restoring Scientific Integrity,* dozens of American scientists, with more than 20 Nobel Laureates among them, have urged that the government's "distortion of scientific knowledge for partisan political ends must cease" (in Taylor 2005: 1). The document cites examples of such scientific distortion that would contribute to the further destruction of the environment. The full statement can be found at http://www.ucsusa.org/scientific_integrity/interference/scientists-signon-statement-html.

3 This idea of kenosis is based on Philippians 2: 5-8, in which it is stated that Christ "emptied himself" to take the form of a servant and a human being.

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