

Comments to the Law Women's Caucus, Panel on America after 9-11

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Americans wanted the events of September 11th to be a transformative experience. We wanted things to be *different* after the attacks. Almost immediately, the public discourse was flooded with questions of whether America lost its innocence, and of how we would live as a people, with this new consciousness of the fragility of our existence. At the same time, we live in a culture of voyeurism and exhibitionism, a talk show culture in which confessions of pain are regarded as the first step to betterment. Nietzsche famously asserted that that which does not kill us makes us stronger. Americans seem to assert that that which does not kill us makes us more moral.

How would the events of September 11th make us more moral? Three ways come to mind. First, we would become more sensitive to victims of tragedy. We had been through it ourselves and could sympathize and not just empathize. Now, for example, we would understand the pain of the Israelis better than before and call upon the Palestinians to cease and desist their terrorism. Second, we would become more free. We would cherish freedom as we had never before, no longer taking it for granted. We would redouble our efforts to help those around the world become free themselves. We would, for example, better understand the plight of the Palestinians and demand an immediate two-state solution and the cessation of all Israeli military activity. Third, we would become more aware of our international connections. We would see ourselves as intimately part of the larger communities within which we exist. We would, for example, understand that there is no turning back on our responsibilities towards others, and we would take an active interest in the United Nations, cultivating and cherishing international law. In summary, the three would make us better people and a better country by acknowledging our shared fate and purifying, at least to a certain extent, our motives.

There is a fourth kind of moral advancement that does not fit into the other three. I separate it for contrast since I myself do not hold it as a superior moral position, although many do. After the terrorist attack, many thought, Americans would finally see the evil of Islam. They would shy away from this hateful religion and move closer towards one religion, a true religion, a religion of love and divine inspiration. After seeing what evil religion can do, Americans would become more committed to its own religion, Christianity, and there would be a resurgence of morality though observance. Americans would move closer – the world would move closer – to one unifying religion.

In retrospect, the first three did not happen. We did not gain any more sympathy for the suffering of others. Americans still question our role of support for Israel, and the Bush administration has pulled America even further away from our supposed friend and ally. We did not become more free. In the name of security, our most cherished civil rights are under attack, social critics are condemned as traitors, and, of course, America's calls for a two-state solution are half-

hearted and uninspired. Third, we have not embraced our international role. We have all but severed our commitment to the UN, believing in it only if it agrees with us and can be used as our tool, and we have become increasingly isolationist and more and more xenophobic. Immigration is harder, even for exchange students, and Arab looking people are assaulted in streets and bars – even here in Grand Forks.

Sadly, though, we have moved closer to the fourth kind of moral superiority – a position which I believe is neither moral nor superior and which, I would argue, runs counter to everything America is alleged to stand for. A commitment to one religion and one moral system makes us closer to the evil caricature of Islam than we portray: a description that most of Islam just does not fit.

America purports to be a pluralist society. It is, according to its ideology, a “liberal” state, where liberal is defined as a state in which individual rights are regarded as prior to community needs and one in which the government must remain “neutral” on conceptions of the good life. Yet, in response to the September 11th, Bush called for a war against terrorism, labeling it a new “crusade”, referring of course, to the Christian wars against Muslim political powers fought to “liberate” Jerusalem from Islam. Bush's use of the word inaugurated his attack against the Islamic moral system, and he followed up on this call with epithets such as “evil doers” and the axis of evil. Evil is a religious, not a secular term. Bush's calls for war are religious as well.

Now, it might be argued that Bush's references spoke to the terrorists and their organizations, and not the religion. But for honesty's sake, we must highlight its rhetorical import. Most Americans see the war against terrorism as a holy war, a war against Islam. If they didn't, they wouldn't see a war in Iraq as justified by the events of 9-11.

Those who see a world-religion as an advancement will often assert that America was built on Christian principles. They will argue that America's Christian posturing, its call for prayer in schools, and its defense of the Ten Commandments on government property is justified by its religious tradition. Yet the word Jesus never appears in the Federalist Papers. Neither do the words Christ or Messiah. The word Christianity appears only in Federalist 19, amidst a discussion of the history of Germany. The word religion itself appears only four times, in Federalist 10, 51, 52, and 57. In each, the authors refer only to the limiting of religious power and the separation of government from religious beliefs.

In examining the events of September 11th, we see that our natural prejudices have been intensified; they have not been eradicated. This past week the senate passed the Homeland Security Bill. Supporters of the bill claim it will make Americans safer but hidden within the bill are provisions containing partisan benefits to corporations and big business. Independent of whether the Homeland Security Bill would accomplish what it claims, the Republican addition of riders points to the fact that 9-11 has just become another tool of our

political culture and, in our civil religion, another form of baptism. There is nothing pure about using fear for political gain. Americans are afraid, and in response have acted on our worst tendencies, not on our best. In doing so, we have given our leaders license to do the same.

The question that Americans have asked for over a year now is “how have we changed?” The answer at its best is that we have not changed at all. The answer at its worst is that we have become one step closer to becoming a fundamentalist state ourselves. I fear that there may in fact be a holy war, but that our enemies did not start it.