

# ***Anti-Terror Legislation*** *a response from within the church*

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Speaking here today as a Christian Minister and theologian I am speaking from within the Christian faith and church community – one of a number of communities that speaks of belief, spirit and the nature of ‘reality’. I am also acutely aware that others who take the name ‘Christian’ use biblical words to speak of faith, spirituality, detention, torture and God, and then launch missiles against the named enemy and pass laws that name others ‘terrorist’.

Considering the laws designed to restrict ‘terror’ demands a response that is neither superficial, nor caught within the web of propaganda. We are pressed, each in our own community and discipline, to go to fundamentals.

That is, I am inviting you to step back to examine what is driving the fear and actions in this climate of ‘terror’, noting that – apart from some details – both the Australian government and opposition are united in their response.

I will try to do three things in my talk today.

First I will explore the nature of ‘terror’.

Secondly, I will explore the Christian take on the ‘human’.

And then, thirdly, I will offer some thoughts about actions we might take.

## **I. Terror**

First a comment from Noam Chomsky:

I understand the term ‘terrorism’ exactly in the sense defined in official U.S. documents: “the calculated use of violence or threat of violence to attain goals that are political, religious, or ideological in nature. This is done through intimidation, coercion, or instilling fear.” ...But alongside the literal meaning of the term, as just quoted from U.S. official documents, there is also the propagandist usage, which unfortunately is the standard one: the term “terrorism” is used to refer to terrorist acts committed by enemies against us or our allies. This propagandist use is virtually universal. Everyone “condemns terrorism” in this sense of the term. Even Nazis harshly condemned terrorism and carried out what they called “counter terrorism” against terrorist partisans. (September 11, Allen & Unwin, 2001)

*Terrorism.* While difficult to define, terrorism in practice is often a smear word applied indiscriminately to military opponents, especially non-government ones. But three useful definitions of the word are possible. (1) Indiscriminate military violence... (2) indiscriminate military violence by non-state organizations such as resistance or revolutionary movements.... (3) The use of terror as a military / political instrument... In common parlance “terrorism” is such a lazily deployed pejorative that one needs to ask for a clear explanation of what is meant whenever the word is used. (Barrie Paskins, in *A New Dictionary of Christian Ethics*, ed. John Macquarrie & James Childress, SCM, London, 1986)

It follows from these comments that the term ‘war on terrorism’ belongs to that diffuse and inexact category, in both terms ‘war’ and ‘terror’.

‘Terror’ is a theological category – as evidenced by Western history. Christian imagery in art has been accustomed to depicting terror. Consider the Medieval Western artists and Hieronymous Bosch who drew on apocalyptic images of hell to depict a future judgement. Such vicious agonies were to be visited upon humans by a judging and avenging God. Would they have imagined the avenging human missiles visiting ‘shock and awe’, and producing an answering suicide

bombing? How could they have imagined the threat of nuclear conflagration, or the ecological death that accompanies the nuclear radiation of Maralinga, Pacific atolls and Chernobyl?

Where has this 'terror' come from?

The word terror is well known in biblical texts. The scripture of Israel speaks of the *terror of God*. (Lee Griffith, *The War on Terrorism and the Terror of God*, William B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan / Cambridge, UK, 2002) Those humans who see God die. The Holy is unapproachable, dangerous and life-threatening. Human beings do not have the capacity to enter here. Yet, in the biblical account, the Unapproachable comes near, chooses a people, sides with them and engages in combat for them against other deities and spirits.

Terror is a thus biblical word associated with God. Humans, faced with the mystery and awe of the holy God experience terror. The disciples of Jesus of Nazareth are terrified when he encounters them as one risen from the dead. Terror, then, is a profoundly theological word. Is it surprising, then, that the revolutionaries in France, seeking to rid themselves of the politics and dogma of the church use just that term: 'The Terror'.

It is often said by politicians dealing with the acts of suicide bombings and other attacks that these attacks are not for what we do but for what we are in the West. Granting that the separation of 'doing' from 'being' is poor philosophy, we must also observe that such an assertion depends upon a certain amnesia. A crucial task here is to resist the forgetting that such political slogans invite. We cannot ignore the long history of conflict and oppression produced by so-called Christian nations in other parts of the world – notably in the medieval crusades themselves.

Closer to our time, we may remember that there has been trenchant criticism of the church and Christian claims about reality from within the West. Yet, in spite of that critique the nineteenth century could well be called 'the Christian century'. Allied to

notions of progress, politically and intellectually Christianity dominated in major world centres: Britain had a global spread; in Europe Germany with its national church dominated; 'Christianity was active in the Americas, India, Russia, Asia and the Pacific. Through a mix of spiritual mission with political, economic and intellectual colonising, at least from the perspective of 'the West', that century belonged to Christianity, to the extent that at the end of the nineteenth century the next century was welcomed with predictions of further progress toward universal peace. (Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God*, SCM, London, 1994)

That is a broad-brush claim. Even if it is only partly accurate, that situation was completely altered in the twentieth century. The War of 1914-1918 in which so-called Christian nations tore each other apart, then the rise of secular ideologies in Communism and Fascism, demolished that 'Christian world' decisively. At the mid-point of the century there was a mild re-flowering of the church in places, particularly the United States – which still claims the description 'Christian' - but the undeniable fact remains that the very nations which, with a foundation of Christian faith, claimed progress, have now not only produced the means for the annihilation of the planet but have been more than ready to use these means against other human beings. That is the story of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: the great catastrophe, which engulfed the globe at the beginning of the century, was played out until the century's end.

In this twenty-first century we are faced with another new situation. If the twentieth century witnessed the secularist attempt to remove faith, it is a surprise that the language of God and belief has become audible again, along with very specific acts of violence. It is a surprise to be hearing the language of martyrdom. And it is also true that a critique of this cultural Christianity also comes from within the West, from within the church, to speak of one humanity under God.

There is a clear task here. We must overcome the amnesia which ignores the re-emergence here of ancient feuds – and the blindness

which refuses to recognise what the West has produced through colonisation, economic oppression, changing attitudes toward sexuality and warfare. I intend no easy solution here. But as a Christian theologian I understand that our words and thoughts and ideas are always embodied in personal, social and cultural forms. We cannot ignore what the complex fabric of the West has produced for good or ill in our global village. We cannot ignore the great global inequity which favours the minority populations of the wealthy West and leaves the vast majority of the world's population poor, even starving, threatened by disease. (Le Carré's *The Constant Gardener*, and the film of the same name, puts the case well.)

Most serious is the situation where the one superpower that claims the name Christian is engaging in war in the name of Christ against terror, and our country is allied with it. The church, which began with a message of world peace, must now find resources from within to challenge this colonising of the Christian imagination. There will at least be a re-orientation, if we start with the statements from Christian scripture: 'Vengeance is mine – says the Lord (Deuteronomy 32: 35; Hebrews 10:20); and 'It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God' and we may add - but a much more fearful thing to fall out of them. (Hebrews 10:31)

## 2. The Human

The act of humans killing other humans, and even suiciding as they do so, demands an answer to the question, 'What is it to be human?' The Twentieth century has attempted to articulate and implement a charter of universal human rights. Lawyers and others will test Australian laws against these. Behind this universal charter lie the traditions of the West, one strand of which comes from Christian faith.

It is also true that the relationship of the church and Christian theology to law and government takes different forms, some seeking an integration of the two, others attempting complete separation.

Whatever form this takes it remains that they are to be tested by their faithfulness to God.

Where does Christian faith begin to speak of being human? It begins with a victim who through betrayal, torture and brutal State murder was stripped of humanity. In order to discover our humanity, Christian faith begins at the place of the inhuman – the one rendered inhuman by calculated violence and public spectacle. Beginning here it arrives at the understanding that being human means being different from one another, and not killing one another.

In other words, beginning here takes us along the path of love for the enemy, forgiveness of those who do violence against us, doing good to those who hurt and abuse you, and speak lies against you.

(We are recovering, too, the understanding that the cosmos is involved here; that means we are not simply speaking about humanity – but being human is connected to the care and preservation of all life on the planet. This is something many forgot in modernity. It is all too clear that when humans engage in destruction of one another, voiceless nature also suffers.)

Christian understanding of the human, then, starts at the Roman execution of a Palestinian Jewish man by the public torture of crucifixion. Starting here, with one who chose to become the Victim places us at an intersection.

- It is the intersection/meeting place of the Jewish people with peoples of other goyim/Gentile nations. This has always been a history of suffering. Here Jesus of Nazareth joins himself to that suffering, and to the suffering of every victim. (Dietrich Bonhoeffer) Contemporary theology has been faced with his presence in the Nazi death camps in the mass murder of Jews (with communists, trade unionists, homosexuals, people with disabilities and Christians), as in concentration camps beginning in the Boer War, through the Soviet camps, to Abu Graib,

Guantanamo Bay and – in our own form – the detention centres at Woomera, Port Hedland, Baxter, Maribyrnong, Villawood and camps of the ‘Pacific Solution’. It has pressed for a Christian response to the reality of military and economic oppression.

- It is the meeting place of the God of the Jews with the divinities and authorities of other nations. The remarkable new element here is that it is God who suffers. This is a choice to take on weakness and woundedness as a form of love that gives life. Here is a rebellion against all those powers and authorities which, by the force of fear, conscript humanity into oppression and warfare. When this led Jesus’ earliest followers to refuse to give an oath of allegiance to the Roman Emperor they were regarded as seditious. It has led to a discipleship which refuses to do violence and is willing to accept martyrdom as an act of resistance.

At this cross Christian faith begins to learn what it is to be human. Christian tradition says of him – precisely in the light of his death - that he is *truly human*. To make this clear the earliest church recalled his Jewish family tree, told stories of his human birth to a poor Palestinian family, of his human emotions, hunger, tiredness and grief. And then it is said that from his human face shines the glory of God. Human as he is, he ‘images’ the invisible God.

Equally the earliest church memories recall that he continually warned his disciples that on going to Jerusalem he would come into conflict with the authorities and then be put to death. That is, he would be regarded as a ‘person of interest’, and he would be detained at night, tortured and murdered on false evidence. Immediately before his death he cried out in utter despair to the God he had hoped in, ‘My God, why have you abandoned me?’

It is not surprising that ever since the church has tried to soften the sheer shocking hopelessness of that cry. One theologian has admitted that such a God-abandoned death is either the end of all talk of God, or the beginning of a radically different way of

experiencing and speaking about God. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, SCM, London, 1974)

To speak of being human here begins with someone who is emptied of any sign of humanity or beauty. He is the ‘other’, the ‘alien’ who is present in his inhumanity.

This is the strangest place to begin to speak of what it is to be human: with a victim. And what is more startling, he is described as the *image of God*.

### 3. Implications and proposals

We may recall that the church has specific experience and learning from the twentieth century in a variety of contexts:

- The Confessing Church struggle in Germany;
- opposition and resistance to South African Apartheid;
- solidarity with movements for civil liberty in the eastern bloc;
- participation in the US civil rights movement;
- the church struggle in Latin America with a discovery of ‘God’s option for the poor’;
- opposition to and condemnation of nuclear weapons;
- Australian support of the Aboriginal Land Rights movement, resistance against the Bjelke Peterson Queensland Government.

The following are suggestions for possible responses to our own situation.

#### ***Detention, torture execution***

Christian language and practice, with this inhuman victim at its centre, must be sensitive to every form of abuse, torture and injustice, and must therefore resist it. Laws, which claim to be

serving wider freedoms but repeat the act of creating another victim, stripping that person of their humanity, are to be exposed and resisted. The public death of this crucified man is the last execution.

The church community may and must form alliances with others in the community who seek to resist these withdrawals of liberty and life. .

### **Government and law**

If this executed Victim is also the 'image of God' then the practice of government and the exercise of law take on the remarkable character of seeking to prevent such victimisation, brutalisation and unjust treatment.

The earliest Christian traditions also understood that all political power and authority derives from God; if this victim is the *image of God*, then there is to be a revolution in the way such authority is claimed and exercised. [It is true that this is a Christian claim; living in a pluralist society requires a recognition that others will see these things differently. There is also discussion going on in Christian social ethics about the doctrine of the two kingdoms, which seeks to work with this dual situation of the church as a distinct community among many other communities. This is an ongoing debate.]

Church representatives have lobbied on 'shoot to kill' and 'sedition' and have affected the State Government response. However, it is also clear (based on a briefing session for Multi-faith Leaders held by the Premier in November, that the Victorian State Government has undergone a 'paradigm shift' and accepts the description of our time as one of 'terror' and therefore seeks an equivalent response.

The church community, in alliance with others of like mind (in 'interfaith' and ecumenical forums), will remind the government of its role to foster and enhance life.

### **Meals**

The heart of Christian celebration is a shared meal. In its origins this was the activity of the early church that cut across all social classes, cultures and religious beliefs. Feasting as a means of celebration is a shared human activity, and is clearly a vital part of each religious or sacred tradition. I am aware of a project in Victoria called *Building Bridges*: a program in which a number of Jewish and Muslim families share with each other their festivals and meals, as a means of learning of each other. As the point of the Christian meal (Eucharist, the Lord's Supper) is reconciliation of those who are enemies, and the unity of those who differ, here is a basis for a similar program of discovery.

### **Prayer**

In his abandoned cry from the cross, Jesus the Victim cries out to God and is one with every human sufferer. That question is also joined to prayer as a means of interceding – that is, calling on God to experience this world and to bring fundamental change towards a final peace and justice. Such prayer also sensitises human action.

Far from being an act of resignation or the last option (perhaps this might have been first on the list of options) prayer is an essential part of the church's life. Prayer is based in an understanding that the Spirit of God is acting with our human spirit to take up our longings for peace and justice, binding us in solidarity with the crucified Jesus whose whole life is an act of prayer (intercession for the world), and with those whose oppression causes them to cry out in agony.

While different religious traditions address different Ultimate Realities, there are already 'interfaith' gatherings where people of

different traditions join in solidarity with the suffering – after the Bali bombings, after the tsunami, facing unjust laws – and produce shared action to assist victims.

### ***Martyrdom***

Different traditions call for sacrifice. Nations and the military do this regularly. Based upon the death of the first martyr Jesus, Christian tradition has the means to explore the meaning of a non-violent martyrdom now. That will bring conversation with other traditions where the language of martyrdom seeks revolutionary social and political change.

The reformed church tradition holds that it is a Christian duty to resist tyrants. The received tradition has often taken this as a primary permission to engage in violent resistance. We are pressed to learn from the earliest centuries of the church when Christians adopted the way of non-violent discipleship.

### ***Symbolic and prophetic action***

It is necessary to break the silence which prevents both speech and action about the changes taking place now. One way we may do that is by reclaiming the prophetic heritage shared by the three traditions – Jewish, Christian and Islamic – whose ancestor is Abraham, and whose first prophet is Moses. Their shared Scriptures also record the words and deeds of prophets. Other traditions also appreciate the power of symbolic action. In our times when there seems to be a silence that is dampening public debate, these communities have a powerful resource in symbolic action and in outspokenness. We need to build on the careful conversations that have been developed over past decades, not only in order to increase our mutual understanding, but also in order to speak up for the victims and those who suffer. This will take us into a political critique of Australia's international actions, including our participation in the war on Iraq. I will open up the link with the

politics of inequity represented by other legislation designed to weaken protection for workers and to make them more vulnerable to the demands of 'capital'. It will also require us to speak and act to resist unjust laws. The danger here is that it may require suffering.

In movements which have taken this path, imprisonment is a consequence – either as a surprise or as a planned tactic: Gandhi is one of many.

### ***Confession of sin/admission of historic guilt***

The executed victim Jesus uncovers the inhuman situation where people are afraid and divided from one another. He also makes it possible for an admission of our own part in this. One necessary and powerful act required of the Christian church is such an admission. It is necessary for us to uncover the ways in which Christians have and still do contribute to the oppression of others, to admit it, and then work to change it. Then, and only then, will it be permissible to ask forgiveness of those who are wronged.

Once again, perhaps the location of this category is unhelpful: it belongs early in the list, as a fundamental engine of Christian life and response. The chief means of achieving such a response is a recognition that the initiative lies first with Another; the figure of crucified Jesus is a declaration that forgiveness is given, guilt is seen and dealt with. In poetic language, the sin, failure and guilt are nailed to the cross. The effect of this is to uncover human fear (of both God and other humans) and to remove it. By that action, courage is given for new understanding of our situation and for new action.

### **4. Close**

I fear this presentation will not provide the immediate legal and political action required by the impending legislative changes concerning terrorism.

I hope, however, that they have provided an account of the way this Christian theologian is learning to speak of what it is to be human in these times of 'terror, and I hope the tentative proposals might suggest ways of finding a solidarity with those who differ from us, and yet seek also to live together in peace, therefore together resisting unjust laws. That hope springs from the heart of Christian faith's expectation that God seeks just such a peace. That is the meaning of this particular Sunday, Advent Sunday, the first in the church calendar.

Advent Sunday  
27 November 2005