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## The Theological Challenge of 9/11

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September 11 is a day of the greatest horror most of us can imagine. But underlying that horror is a host of metaphors, associations and narratives that are commonly used to characterize the shocking events, to make them somehow comprehensible. I want to talk briefly about three of the most commonly-used words in the conversations surrounding this day, and I want to comment on each one from a theological point of view.

The first word is sacrifice. September 11 brings us face to face with two notions of sacrifice. The first is sacrifice as a transitive verb – something one does to others. This is what a suicide bomber means by sacrifice. Obscuring from his or her imagination any personal details that would make mass murder grotesque and unimaginable, the suicide bomber coldly and deliberately sacrifices dozens or thousands of strangers in some kind of offering to a ghastly deity. It is a sacrifice that is prepared to lay down its life that others may die. The fireball, the trembling, and the overwhelming dust of Ground Zero are all part of this notion of sacrifice.

The other kind of sacrifice is an intransitive verb. It is an offering one makes, not of others, but of oneself. It is the sacrifice of the firefighter, the honest bystander, the selfless colleague. It is a sacrifice that is prepared to lay down its life that others may live. It is a gesture that takes us back to the root meaning of the word sacrifice – to make holy. That most hideous day in contemporary history was in part made holy by those saints who laid down their lives that others might live.

If we wish to retain the word sacrifice in our language, this is what we must learn from 9/11. Sacrifice is not something one can make another person do. It cannot be imposed. Sacrifice is something only you can do yourself. We have a name for those who are determined to take others with them to an early violent death. We call those people murderers. We have a name for those who are prepared to risk their own death in order to free others from an early violent death. We call them martyrs. We call them martyrs because a martyr is a witness, and holding onto a person or a principle up to one's last breath is the greatest witness a person can make. And those who offered their lives in this way held on to both a person and a principle. That's what makes them so special.

The second word is tragedy. We loosely use the word tragedy when we want to refer to a sad event, but don't want to get into the details of blame or perspective. More precisely we refer to the heritage of Greek tragedy, a genre of theatre that concentrated on exposing the deep workings of fate and the folly of human presumption in supposing to stand above or beyond such workings. I don't believe it is right to call September a tragedy. I do suggest there are two other words we should use instead. The first, secular, word is crime. September 11 was mass murder on a colossal scale. I don't think it is helpful to talk about it as an act of war. Terrorism is not a place, or even a person or a group of persons. Terror itself is

an abstract noun. Flying planes into buildings is a crime. Calling it evil doesn't help. It is simply wrong. Evil is simply saying 'wrong' with a loud voice. It raises the rhetorical temperature, but it correspondingly makes clarity more difficult. September 11 was a crime. Those who planned it, executed it, and plan to do similar things again must be arrested, tried, and kept out of harm's way. To call this process a war simply allows the perpetrators of the crime a moral credibility they don't deserve.

The other word, besides crime, we should use in place of tragedy, is a theological one. It is heresy, or, to use a more emotive word, blasphemy. The one who kills for the sake of faith is a blasphemer, because he or she desecrates the one thing on which God has set his image, human life itself. September 11 destroyed that which does not belong to us – the myriad detail of the lives of strangers. It claimed to do so in service of God, but a god who would delight in such service is nothing but a monster. So September 11 is not a tragedy. It is a crime and a blasphemy.

And the final word is suffering. It would be wrong to dwell too long today on the perpetrators and their ghastly parody of martyrdom, faith and glory. Today is centrally about those who woke up one morning to a sky of azure blue, and whose lives a short while later had been turned to dust and ashes by horror, death, or loss. And people of faith are bound to ask where God is in all this. For Christians, God is never a far away deity twiddling his thumbs while we suffer. God is centrally revealed in a suffering man dying in agony. On September 11, the God of Jesus Christ is at Ground Zero. But while Jesus is the heart of God, he is not the whole of God. God the Holy Spirit was present on September 11 in those very gestures of self-sacrificial love of which we have already spoken. And God the Father's heart is broken by a mixture of unending love for his creation and hatred against the sin that defiles it. Hence the Christian belief in a day of judgement when those who suffer are vindicated, evil is buried, and all tears are dried.

In the face of suffering I have only one piece of pastoral advice, and it is this. If it can't be happy, make it beautiful. There are many things that we can never be happy, and September 11 is one of them. But we can still make this day beautiful. And that is what we are doing together at this present moment. I believe that is the best way to express our sadness and honor the lost.

September 11 is a witness to the untold damage perverted religion can do. But the answer is not to renounce one's faith. Even those who seek secular answers find themselves using religious language much of the time. The only answer is to seek a truer faith, one that does not involve the sacrifice of others, one that does not become powerless in the face of apparent fate, and one that transcends suffering with the promise of final reconciliation and peace with God.