City on a Hill…Still?

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Introduction

William Deresiewicz recently argued in The New Republic that no one should send their child to an Ivy League school. The education is monstrously expensive and substandard, reputations aside. His solution? Go to a religious college. They’re the only places that understand what education is for, beyond preparing you to succeed in the market. In the 18th and 19th centuries, circuit riding preachers founded little schools to be outposts of the kingdom of God, places devoted to the then-radical idea that women and minorities should be educated too, places where the life of the mind was honored to the glory of God. It still happens, astonishingly.  

It remains an important task to continue to remember the events of 9/11. I fear that my title may be a little too grand. Blame my background in journalism. “City on a hill still” echoes Jesus’ observation in Matthew that a “city on a hill cannot be hidden” (Mt. 5:14). Jesus is referring to the kingdom he brings in his cross and resurrection. Early American settlers, like the Puritans in New England, thought of themselves as building “a city on a hill” in the new world, one free from the Church of England’s ossified, faithless presence, one where a society can be built on Scripture in a commonwealth of God. In our lifetime, President Ronald Reagan used “city on a hill” language to describe America’s role in the world; he added an adjective, that America is a “shining” city on a hill. Note the shift—Jesus speaks of his kingdom, brought with his cross and resurrection, but we Americans, from the Puritans to current day, think that refers to the U.S.A., brought with our ideals and arms. A famous book on American civil religion calls the U.S. a “nation with the soul of a church.” How does a nation with the soul of a church respond to a terror attack? With two wars, nearly $4.5 trillion dollars, 140,000 dead Iraqi civilians, 20,000 Afghan ones, and 8,000 western coalition soldiers. Whatever all of that means, it sounds quite different than what Jesus was talking about. I don’t know very much about any of that because I serve a congregation in the college town of Boone, North Carolina. I spend my time neither debating whether America is or ever was a city on a hill, nor what wars we should fight or not; I spend my time baptizing and burying and preaching and organizing our life together. I am going to argue in this paper that Christians should be so busied with life in the church that they have to stop and think hard about a question like how we can remember 9/11 and how we should remember it well.

We ought to worry about anyone who has a soundbite ready for that. There is enough work to do for Jesus’ kingdom that Christians should find themselves perplexed by the way other

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Americans think of life and faith. So my title may be too ambitious, which I do recognize. The calendar my congregation abides by looks more American than Christian. We plan our summer between Memorial Day and Labor Day; Jesus is necessary to neither of these “holidays.” Veterans need recognizing at the 4th of July and Veterans Day, but again no Jesus required. America’s commercial holidays jump from Valentines Day to Easter to Mother’s and Father’s Day to Christmas. I find myself noticing dates of significant American battles as much as any other—June 6 for D-Day, December 7 for Pearl Harbor. Our calendar is pockmarked by memorials to warfare. 9/11 is just the latest of those. The thing is, for Christians, Jesus dominates the calendar. He splits history into BC and AD. Preparation for his birth is called Advent. Lent anticipates his death and resurrection. Ordinary time is where we live most of the time. Do we understand how these are a competing set of holy days, those around America’s military history on the one hand, and those around Jesus’ history—as God with us—on the other?

When the anniversary of 9/11 first came around after I arrived at my church, I preached on Christ’s command to forgive. His words in the Gospel of Matthew:

You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.” But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax-collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? (5.42-47)

I told the congregation that I have no idea what that means in the context of a terror act that kills 3,000 people, or in the context of a global war on terror that has killed many times that many since then. I also told them some stories of forgiveness: of Christians whose families had been tortured and killed who forgave their murderers in imitation of Jesus. And I was frank with them, that I don’t know what that means for us. I had war veterans out there from WWII to Afghanistan, whose service I honor. I said that Islam is a beautiful faith that was hijacked that day as well. I assumed that that was a pretty harmless, boilerplate sort of thing to say, but the next day I had someone red in the face in my office with stacks of books proclaiming that Islam is dangerous, evil, and barbaric. One of those authors turned out to be a charlatan. While others are not frauds, they are plainly wrong. I told him that Christians need to pray for our Muslim neighbors and friends, and we need to ask their prayers for us. The kingdom Jesus brings is one where we love enemies. We share Jesus with Muslims; they have a place for Issa in their faith. We are commanded to listen to them in their differences and honor them. This has to happen over food, with our kids playing with one another. I am not recommending a kumbayah, “let’s all just get along” kind of Christianity. This is how to be a neighbor in a world without borders where, if we are not careful, we will assume the other is a threat rather than someone beloved by God and by us.

The rabbis tell a story about a student asking a teacher when it is dawn. Is it when you can see well enough to tell a sheep from a dog? No, the rabbi said. Is it when it is light enough to tell one kind of tree from another? No. It is when you can see the face of a stranger and
recognize in it the face of a brother or sister. Until then, no matter how light it is, it is still very dark.

There are three parts to my paper. First, I want to talk about neo-liberal politics, especially as it is presented in Thomas Frank’s screed about this his home state, *What’s the Matter with Kansas?*, and how it has flipped from a blue to red state in the electoral scheme, even as that hurts most Kansans’ economic interests. His is a confident neo-liberalism which thinks that if we just inform people of the issues, they will vote better. Christianity thinks all people are a good deal more wicked than that, so I will assess Frank’s neo-liberal attempt at solving our political problems. Second, I want to talk about Joseph Bottum’s *An Anxious Age*, which argues that the collapse of the mainline church is the biggest political change in our country over the course of the last 50 years. Without mainline Protestant support, Bottum is not sure America can survive as a democratic and capitalistic country. Bottum also thinks abortion is the original sin in America, and it explains all of the other political problems. Third, I will talk about my own teacher Stanley Hauerwas and will describe him as a neo-orthodox figure (everybody gets a “neo-“). While Hauerwas would not like that description of him, he is a Christian pacifist for whom following Jesus in a world of war must become a non-violent practice. If abortion is the original sin for Bottum, war plays that role for Hauerwas. I will argue that the neo-liberal and neo-conservative are two sides of the same coin, and I will show how Hauerwas “wins” as a Christian agitator for non-violence. Throughout the paper, I will revisit stories of my church and of encounters with Muslims, which I hope honor Islam as a great religion from which we all can stand to learn. The way to do that, of course, is to be a confident enough Christian to say how you disagree with them. The answer to the question, “city on a hill… still?” is yes. Of course the church is still the city on the hill; America thinks of itself as that, but it is not. Theologically speaking, and only when viewed in light of the genuine city of God, can we see America for what it is: our home, a good place like other good places, but not exceptional with regard to God’s election.

I will start with a story about a friend on a plane, who is on her way to a “mission trip” and happens to sit by a Muslim interlocutor. After talking for some time, he asks her politely, “Why isn’t God enough for you? Why do you need Jesus also? Surely Allah, the all-compassionate, the all-merciful, is enough. With him you lack for nothing, without him you must lack everything.” My friend, then a youth group member and now a pastor, did not have an answer. She went back home devoted herself to finding one, pursuing an expensive divinity school degree, and we can only hope that she has an answer now. It represents a basic airplane conversation we might expect a Muslim neighbor to begin, and it could happen at a park or in the classroom hallway or over the vegetables in the grocery store just as well. Why is Jesus such a big deal? Shouldn’t God be enough? I found the question haunting. Would I know how to answer it? It is asked in good faith. This is not about an election campaign or a debate; it is an innocent conversation with genuine interest after which the two would never see one another again. Could most Christians respond? Is there a response? I will return to these questions at the end of this paper.

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When I teach writing, as I often do, I encourage students to read about the places to which they travel. When in Morocco, read about Morocco; when in China, read about China, and when in Kansas, read about Kansas. The United Methodist Bishop of Kansas and Nebraska, Rev. Scott Jones, has an intriguing thesis on “what’s the matter with Kansas.” That is the 2004 book title on the Sunflower State that drew headlines and responses all over the world. The premise of Thomas Frank’s book is that voters in the newly red state Kansas vote against their own economic interests. This is a deeply conservative place, but it votes for neo-liberal economic policies that hamper unions, lower taxes on the wealthy, hurt workplace and food protection, and, in short, make it better to be wealthy and worse to be poor. Why do poor people vote to make these things happen? He hopes Kansas will prove as a test case on the question of why America is so bitterly divided.

Bishop Jones thinks the bitter division in this country is due to the decline of main street Methodism in county seat towns. Churches in little towns like Winfield, Kansas were places where folks of all political stripes met together, worked on problems together, argued over budgets, and learned to respect one another. But those Methodist churches are either closed or struggling now, just like many businesses on main streets in Kansas and county seat towns all over America. The churches to which those folks have fled, if they still go to church, are Pentecostal and Roman Catholic, which often do not care as much about folks meeting together across their differences and honoring one another. Jones’s thesis is a thesis that cannot be proved, of course, and it is oddly self-congratulatory for us Methodist ministers to claim our decline has caused decline elsewhere. The oddity, however, does not make it a false claim.

Frank describes a remarkable switch in Kansas history. This is a place where progressives were once not latte-drinking, Ivy League-educated, pointy-headed intellectuals. Progressives were John Brown: fiery anti-slavery zealots who moved to Kansas to keep slavery from expanding beyond slave-holding Missouri. The mural of John Brown in the state capital of Topeka has him leading his fellow free soilers into a tornado-strewn countryside with his arms outstretched, a Bible in one and a rifle in another. Lawrence was founded as the “Boston of the Prairies,” its main street even named Massachusetts as a sign of its New England anti-slavery inspiration. When William Quantrill destroyed Lawrence on behalf of the Confederacy in 1863, Kansas’ fiery allegiance to freedom for all people was sealed eternally. There was a reason that the landmark Supreme Court legislation against segregation happened in Topeka in 1954. Brown vs. Board of Education originated in Kansas as a hat tip to a state that had always stood on the side of the underdog.

What’s the Matter with Kansas?

According to Thomas Frank, Kansas was hoodwinked. The conservative Right in this country always resented the New Deal, labor unions, the Great Society, and any government aid for the poor. The conservative Right resented the university-trained experts who handed down these dubious gifts. Sometime around when Ronald Reagan added “shining” to Jesus’ “city on a hill,” the conservative Right got what they wanted. They managed to link Kansas’ populism and...
anger with conservative causes. There may have been a time when siding with the Democratic party meant taking the side of the working family, making access to education and health care universal, making the workplace and the food supply safe, against millionaires and bosses and elites. But that changed. Perhaps it was the advent of 24 hour cable that changed it, or hate radio, or maybe it was the Democrats’ own fault. But now the Left is identified mostly by its consumer tastes: latte sipping Volvo or Subaru driving know-it-alls who look down their noses at the plains as flyover country, who vote democratic, who strive to include gays and lesbians, who degrade differences between genders, who are for free love and abortion and against NASCAR and patriotism. I put it in a way that I hope sounds ridiculous or even funny, but it is exactly what we are told on cable television’s endless loop. Conservatives are now ordinary, authentic, workaday patriotic Americans. Liberals are now effete Europe-loving sellouts.

So what’s a Kansan to do? Vote conservative. Very conservative. This is part of what Frank calls the great backlash. Ordinary Christian conservatives in Kansas are sick and tired of being looked down on by the Liberal east and west coast elites. The real fight in this state, as of ten years ago, was between moderate Republicans and conservative Republicans. They claim to care about values, to be against homosexuality and Hollywood, but as soon as they are elected, all they work to do is cut taxes. Wichita, Kansas was one of the hardest hit cities economically in the wake of 9/11, with Boeing using the opportunity to circumvent unions and shed jobs that would never come back; places like Garden City, Kansas out west of Dodge City are the only places of growth, where animals are farmed by immigrant workers for low wages and in dangerous conditions. Meanwhile, Mission Hills, the Kansas City suburb, has a median income of $190,000, making it one of the wealthiest counties in America. The appeal of the backlash is that somebody in the US Senate will stand up and holler “Stop!” to smut and porn in our entertainment industry and the collapse of small town American values. But the only result has been a reduction in taxes for the wealthy and a decrease in benefits for the poor. Once upon a time, Kansas mobs took pitchforks and torches and took to the streets against slavery and for oppressed African-Americans. Now, these mobs approach the mansions in Kansas City’s suburbs and shout “We are here to cut your taxes!” Frank describes the backlash in this way:

This is a rebellion against ‘the establishment’ that has wound up cutting taxes on inherited estates. Here is a movement whose response to the power structure is to make the rich even richer; whose answer to the inexorable degradation of working-class life is to lash out angrily at labor unions and liberal workplace-safety programs; whose solution to the rise of ignorance in America is to pull the rug out from under public education.4

The last line refers to the 2005 state legislature decision to let public schools teach without reference to macro-evolution, which Frank calls a “barking idiocy.” I remember an NPR story on evolution in Kansas where a proponent expressed hope that what was born there would take root everywhere, and people would remember it all started in Kansas. Those standard changes were reversed in 2007.

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Frank’s book became an object of derision in many quarters. Surely Kansans are smart enough to tell what is good for them and to vote accordingly. Frank was playing into his own argument by playing the expert from elsewhere, telling poor benighted Kansans what to do. But the book is better than that. He praises conservatives for building a movement in this country, which liberals have failed to do. He criticizes Democrats for dropping any opposition to free market economics, leaving abortion and cultural disdain as the only arena in which they differ from Republicans. He observes that people do not spontaneously understand their place in the grand sweep of things. Conservatives tell a story: Christians are looked down upon and need to stand up for themselves. They vote accordingly. Then, their elected representatives vote to cut taxes again. The pattern is as true today as ever, with much of red America deeply angry over “Obamacare” and Democrats as out of touch as ever.

In the spirit of Frank’s book, allow me to make an observation about Christianity and Islam. A major Christian leader in this country, trying to be sympathetic with Islam, asked a Muslim woman friend why Sharia law is so popular in Muslim countries. It appears even to sympathetic outsiders to be harsh and oppressive to women, and not only to them. She responded that with so many despotic leaders, many propped up by the US, Sharia grants power to something else besides the state—namely to the Qur’ān. It might not be ideal, but it is a lot better than dictatorship. Frank’s book and that story show the need for something more than politics and economics to determine our lives, and in the next section, Jody Bottum makes that more apparent still.

Frank’s book is not much fun to read. Its moral zeal feels like you are eating broken glass, jolly only if you find yourself on his side but miserable otherwise. In relation to the claim made in the first paragraph of this paper, that parents should send their children to small Christian colleges, let me remind my readers that small Christian colleges were once an argument in this debate. Not that these places made an argument; they were an argument because they offered education to all people—especially to the poor. Small Christian colleges offer disciplines for a renewal of the mind in the image of Christ, who loves and forgives his enemies. Women and minorities taught just as much as white men. In Kansas, for instance, the flowering of little institutions of grace on the prairie was a sign of the outbreaking of the kingdom of God. In Winfield, Kansas, the United Methodist Southwestern College sits on a hill—of which there are not very many in Kansas—and shines not as a training ground for Democrats or Republicans but for Christian disciples. These are not places where Christians think of themselves as persecuted, looked down on, or resented. No, Christians see these institutions as the places where they studied, learned, and became servants of others, where they learned how to stand up for their convictions without being violent. Perhaps Main Street Methodism has a chance to be a source of grace, rather than resentment, once more.

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Neo-Conservative

Joseph Bottum was editor of *First Things*, a Catholically-informed journal about faith, politics, and American culture. He has also long written for the *National Review*, a conservative political journal. Both journals actively shape political opinion in this country. A disclaimer: as an orthodox Christian thinker myself, I too have written for *First Things*. For me, however, Christian orthodoxy is not married to political conservatism in the U.S., but for those publications and for Bottum, they very much are married. His book *An Anxious Age* argues that the most important fact in American culture in the last 50 years is the collapse of mainline Protestantism. For him, the mainline churches—our own Methodists, the Presbyterians, Lutherans, Disciples, and northern Baptists (not Southern)—functioned like a state church did in Europe. They provided the moral language necessary for the country’s support. They gave a vocabulary both for patriotism and for appropriate critique. As membership in those churches has dropped from some 50% of Americans in the 1960s to less than 10% now, there is a vacuum in that cultural space in this country. Bottum says those churches are corpses, all the while not knowing that they are. (Those numbers are disputed, and so is their meaning. You won’t be surprised to learn that Bottum is responding to that dispute.) Without a central church in our culture, all we have to identify ourselves by is the market or our political allegiances. The stool has no third leg on which to stand. Catholicism provided it for a while, from about 1995 to about 2002 in Bottum’s reckoning. Presidents and politicians used Catholic language for politics, like just war, natural law, and the dignity of human life. We have six Catholics on the Supreme Court now, three Jews, and no Protestants at all, but when the Catholic priest sex abuse crises broke out in about 2002, that moral authority vanished. This book’s tone is as grim as Frank’s. You would think Bottum would be confident enough in God and God’s coming kingdom not to fear as greatly as he seems to do.

Bottum is a commentator for whom abortion explains everything. What hope there is in the Catholic Church for recovery from the loony 1960s comes from the pro-life movement, since every diocese, however liberal, has a pro-life office. Catholic converts among the young, among Protestant intellectuals, and among celebrities, suggest a rebirth of the Catholic Church and its 67 million people in America. Catholics no longer vote as a bloc as they once did from their ethnic immigrant enclaves, voting mostly for Democratic machine politicians and union supporters in eastern cities. They now vote no differently than anyone else, a fact Bottum laments. But there is hope. Younger people poll more anti-abortion than their elders, perhaps because of the influence of 3D ultrasounds and research on DNA that suggests our identity is set as soon as we are conceived. But Bottum’s view is a declensionist one: *things are bad and getting worse*. He closes by imagining a day when post-Protestant liberals ban Roman Catholicism from the social sphere altogether.

The most interesting portion of the book is what Bottum calls the Erie Canal Thesis—the claim that you cannot understand American culture without seeing the ferment of faith in upstate New York in the 19th and 20th centuries. This is the part of New York that feels more southern than northern, and it looks more like Kansas than Manhattan. The Second Great Awakening ripped through that area in New York, converting folks by the thousands, populating churches that became the mainline. Mormonism was born there, too. So was spiritualism, the effort to
communicate with the dead with Ouija boards and table knocking that yielded us countless bad movies and youth group lock-in crises. The descendants of those mainline converts are mostly politically liberal now. They have left the church. They remain Protestant even if they do not know it. They express this with their looking down on the unenlightened and their sneer at the religiously vulgar. Bottum calls these elites the “poster children.” They are elect still, but simply not Christian. Those who do not share their views, namely the conservatives, deserve the ire that revivalist preachers once poured on the damned.

It is a whale of a thing to accuse someone of being religious when they do not know they are, and I assume folks have always thought they were right and their opponents wrong whether they are religious or not. Bottum writes as if this country does not have a South. In my part of the world, Protestant faith is very much alive and well; it provides plenty of patriotism and plenty of criticism of America. Bottum also ignores Evangelicalism. His dismissal is because Evangelicals have never had enough structure of belief to support a country’s culture, while Roman Catholics have had too much of one. How a book can talk about the last fifty years of faith in America without talking about Evangelicalism (there is no mention Billy Graham) is beyond me.

In the spirit of Bottum’s book, and its blasé confidence in the superiority of Christianity, let me tell you about a Christian leader in South Sudan, a friend named Joseph Taban Lasuba, now of blessed memory. He describes the way that both Muslims and Christians suffered under Bashar Al Asad when Sudan was one country. The difference between them is that Christians have the language and apparatus of forgiveness. His Muslim friends had no such language, so all they could do was get angry and then become destructive of themselves or of others. So Taban styled himself as an apostle of forgiveness to his Muslim neighbors. He has the scars they have, and he has a savior who has scars too.

Frank and Bottum share misery, though from different sources. What is especially remarkable is that both authors work hard to avoid any mention of Jesus. It is striking that the new Left and new Right are so similar in this country. They both tell people how to vote but not who to worship. Places like Southwestern College and vocations like mine do not exist or make sense if Jesus is not Lord. Both authors also omit any mention of 9/11 or the “war on terror.” This country has been at war now for over 13 years, and yet, in most of our lives, we ignore it. This is because war is the normal American condition. We cannot understand America without it fighting. Frank does mention that Wichita was hit harder by 9/11 than any city other than New York, and Bottum is right to say that mainline churches’ denominational leaders only bring up America to criticize it. (Our parishioners, my parishioners, southern and evangelical as they are, only bring up America to bless it, but never mind.) Here, Stanley Hauerwas can fill in the gap.

**Neo-Orthodoxy**

Stanley Hauerwas does not fit your stereotype of a theologian, whatever that may be. He has a Texan accent with a twang, which everybody tries to imitate but no one can. He cusses as often as possible. He is a pacifist, which becomes difficult to tell from the violent way he talks. He loves Jesus and the church, and he wants the church to live more faithfully to the gospel. If abortion explains everything for Bottum, war explains everything for Hauerwas. America likes war a lot. Hauerwas argues in his recent book, *War and the American Difference*, that war is the
central act of worship for Americans. War constitutes us as a people. It is unclear whether there could be an America without war. He does not mean that we, as a people, are particularly bloodthirsty or any worse than anybody else. What he means is that, for many, serving in the military is the most morally determinative event in their lives. I see this as a pastor. Folks want their military service spoken of at their funerals. They are buried shrouded in flags, whereas we used to shroud coffins in baptismal palls. Their fellow veterans fire salutes for them graveside. You can be pretty sure what someone worships by what they want their dead body wrapped in, to save them from the grave. We, in the church, have relegated funerals to the nation-state. Veterans in my church are buried shrouded in flags, with 21-gun salutes, as though these military rituals are what will actually resurrect them. I have no quarrel with naming their “service,” as it is beautifully called, as important in their lives, but should we so blithely give away graveside mourning to these alternative liturgies? Those who hear those stories, see those burials, and talk to those men learn how morally serious that sacrifice was. Then, they feel the need to have to sacrifice themselves to be worthy of such sacrifices. War, for America, is a sacrificial system. It is its own religion. This is why Hauerwas is so much against it, because the only true sacrifice made is by Jesus on his cross. After his death, there are no more sacrifices necessary. War in America competes for the space that Jesus claims as Lord. Because of this, Hauerwas would accuse both Frank and Bottum of simply being “liberals.” They both want the project of America to turn out right, that is to say, in their respective ways. Hauerwas argues, quite simply, that religious people on both the right and the left share the presumption that America is the church. America is the shining city on a hill. While liberals and conservatives have their disagreements over how that should look in actual practice, they agree that America is the “last best hope of humanity on earth,” in the words of Abraham Lincoln’s second inaugural address. The church has to say that this is false. The church has to confess that it is the church of Jesus Christ.

We should notice that Hauerwas is willing to say the word “Jesus” as part of his arguments. That is what makes him a Christian theologian. Frank makes no such claim. Bottum is a conservative Catholic who claims to write from that vantage point. He has quite a lot to say that illuminates contemporary Catholicism, some illuminating things to say about Protestantism, but very few things to say about God. If you grant that there is a God, you might also grant that those who believe in him and order their lives around him may talk about him. Hauerwas argues that, after the ascension of Jesus, everything bears witness to the rule of Christ, even if it does not mean to or know it does. Many who study war speak as though it is the natural condition of humanity, that we are war-making creatures by nature. Christians know that cannot be true. Though we sin terribly, and history is a pile of bones, we are created for peace. Furthermore, Christ is our peace, as Ephesians says. We offer one another the peace of Christ in worship. We try to embody that peace in our lives. All forms of sin, including war-making, have been crucified and defeated in the cross of Christ. These powers and principalities still pop up in such forms of violence, from time to time: in Iraq and Afghanistan, in Baltimore and Ferguson, in our hearts and communities. The peace of Christ’s resurrection will fill the world one day, and the church is a signpost of that peace in the meantime.

As you may guess, Hauerwas has his critics, Bottum included, who call him a typical “liberal,” but whatever else Stanley Hauerwas is, a liberal he is not. If you ask Hauerwas what would be better than liberal democracy, he would reject the question. It is not for Christians to
rule or take power or say how to do so. We are not nonviolent as a strategy to rid the world of war. We are nonviolent because, in a world at war, we cannot imagine any other way to act and to live. The best argument against violence is this—Christians are commanded to turn the other cheek, not to return evil for evil, true enough for us. But what about for our weaker neighbor? It is one thing to say that I should sacrifice my life instead of participating in violence. It is yet another thing to say that a weaker neighbor should be sacrificed for my convictions. In the just war tradition, Christians rely on violence to keep a neighbor from being harmed, not for their own sake. Hauerwas’s question back would be, how do drone attacks keep a weaker neighbor from being harmed?

What does all of this have to do with 9/11 and its liturgical anniversary? When I preached on that secular feast day a few years ago, I told a few stories. I told about Maximilian Kolbe, who went to his death in place of a Jewish father in a concentration camp. I told of dissidents in communist countries who died forgiving their murderers. These stories work because they are so like the story of Jesus, who dies forgiving his crucifiers and empowers us by his Spirit to do the same. My stories made people angry because it is so different than the rhetoric for war we hear from our civil religion, but I hope they were angry because they heard the gospel. Perhaps I heard it too. When 9/11 hit, Peter Storey, a Methodist bishop of South Africa and great leader against apartheid, said that America’s response of wanting to know who did it and with whom to go to war was typical. South Africans would want to know who hurt them in order to know who to forgive, and this means that South Africans are more Christian than we are. Hauerwas points out that by calling it a “war” on terror we honored Osama bin Ladin. We speak of him as a warrior, a soldier. He was a mass murderer. Soldiers are more honorable than that.

So What?

Where to go from here? The simplest answer is that Christians have to talk to Muslims. We have to learn from one another, as modern liberalism insists, but we have to go further still. We have to disagree with one another, which is much harder. John Courtney Murray, the great mid-century Catholic social thinker, used to say a genuine disagreement is a great moral act. It is hard to figure out what you think, what I think, where we differ. And how much harder here? How many of us have Muslim neighbors we talk to about ultimate things, let alone religion? This is what the world needs us to do. If we fail to do so, the only people left making meaning are (a) governments, (b) insurgent groups with their weapons, and (c) the clueless media. It may seem uncomfortable talking about religious difference, but it remains much better than violence.

I have been involved in a practice called Scriptural Reasoning (SR), which was born out of the thought of Peter Ochs, a rabbinc Jew at the University of Virginia, and David Ford, a Christian theologian at Cambridge University. In SR, you argue as Christians, Muslims, and Jews over each other’s scriptures. You are not using the interreligious-politeness part of your brain, but you use the most deeply faithful part—the part with which we read Scripture and love God. And you can see disagreements most clearly. The groups started with only Christians and Jews. Then Muslims became involved, and the Jews all relaxed while the Christians got nervous. Muslims and Jews share similar dietary customs; Muslims and Jews know that they do not fit in with modernity. Christians say, “Hey, I thought we were reading Scripture, what’s with this Qur’ān
stuff?” The Jews respond, “well, what were we doing when we were reading the New Testament? That’s not scripture for us Jews.” Conversations need three partners. This is why marriages need marriage counselors and why Christians believe in the Trinity.

I was struck in those groups by how much I learned simply from talking to flesh-and-blood Muslims, which is embarrassingly difficult for me to say. We were speaking about the Qur’ān’s story of Noah. In that story, unlike the Jewish Torah and the Christian Bible, Noah has a son who will not get on the ark. The boy says that he will run up the mountain and be fine, but he drowns. In the Jewish and Christian version, Noah and his family of survivors might be tempted to think that they are morally special. God judged everyone else, after all, but in the Qur’ānic version, Noah is on the ark with a broken heart. His own boy is now gone. Far from superior, he must feel broken, which is how all sinners should feel. Modernity has its pretensions about interreligious dialogue. It should be polite, and it should dwell on similarities rather than differences. But we all know that the interesting stuff is in the differences, and here the Qur’ān says something of which I find myself jealous. Peter Ochs, the Jewish philosopher behind SR, says that he does not want to talk to a Christian who does not want to convert him. These differences matter for life and death and salvation. We should argue as if they do, because they do.

Miroslav Volf’s book on Islam is another example. He argues that the version of the doctrine of the trinity that the Qur’ān rejects is one the church has never held. We have never believed that God is divided in three or works as three people on a committee. We believe the three persons of the Trinity are more one than anything in creation. When he describes the trinity as a three-fold pattern of action by the one God, Muslim listeners get interested. It turns out that the incarnation is a bridge too far: that God can be born of a creature and nurse at her knee is what makes Christianity Christian, and it is an unbearable loss of majesty for Islam. But now we find ourselves in a lovers’ quarrel rather than a clash of civilizations.

So what of the Muslim airline passenger’s question to my friend? Why is God not enough? Why do we also need Jesus? And, in a Muslim’s mind, why do we also need the Holy Spirit, the angels, the saints, the eucharist and baptism, and why all these physical things that we venerate and worship? I sometimes wonder if Islam is a tidied up version of Christianity: none of this Trinity nonsense; none of this pacifism or just war business. One God with a full stop, no incarnation and no sacramental system. I, instead, like the messiness of our Christian mysteries. Why is God not enough? He is. God has poured himself out totally in Jesus, and Jesus and God together have poured themselves out totally in the Holy Spirit. The three together pour themselves out in our lives as Jesus, who dies for us and rises to save. God does not have to keep himself safe from the world. It is no loss of grandeur for God to become flesh, and it shows God’s grandeur to be more grand than we thought: that with no loss to himself, God could bend lower than us to save us.

In the 5th century in north Africa (then Christian, now Muslim), Augustine argued that all of human history sees two cities: a city of God and a city of humanity, over against one another. In due time, God will establish his city in full; for now, however, the church is the earnest, the

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down payment on the city of God. We should not be surprised when the city of God breaks out in the midst of this world, as God broke out in the flesh of Mary. We should not be surprised when the city of humanity in which we all live is violent, its life brutish, nasty, and short. The two cities share different ends: love of God and neighbor in one case, domination of neighbor and disdain of God in the other. I want to be clear here that no earthly city, no country, no people, are the city of God full stop. Even the church is only on the way to being God’s city. God will bring that city in full in his own time. In the meantime, all earthly approximations of the city of God are just that—approximations. The church, in Paul’s language, is the down payment on the city, or in mine the acorn that will flower forth into the tree of life. We are on the way, but we are not there yet.