

MARK GIBSON

challenges to
secularism in the
new world disorder

STANLEY HAUERWAS AND
FRANK LENTRICCHIA (EDS)

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I was brought up a militant secularist. One of my strongest childhood memories is of a dispute with some kids down the street on matters religious. There was an image of Jesus on the cross over the mantelpiece in their house, something my brother and I had never seen before. On having it explained to us, we entered into a childish dispute over whether God was real: 'He is', 'No he isn't' ... Being utterly convinced that we were right, we suggested calling on adult authority and their dad was more than happy to oblige. We couldn't believe it when their position was confirmed, and we ran home crying, our faith shattered, before it was all explained: 'Well, yes, there are some people who still believe those things'.

Secularism for me was always connected to an intellectual conscience. It started, in my family, with my grandparents, who were student communists at Melbourne University in the 1930s. They left the Communist Party during the war, but retained a fiercely critical disposition in which rejection of religion was central. Even the singing of Christmas carols was not approved.

So I found this issue of *South Atlantic Quarterly* sharply, and at times confrontingly, addressed to me. Among the critical responses from the humanities academy to September 11, one of its major points of distinction is to emphasise the necessity of engaging sympathetically with religious contexts and motivations. As Stanley Hauerwas and Frank Lentricchia put it in their editorial introduction:

It is no secret that many secular intellectuals have no time for serious theological

work. Many assume that if everyone is well enough educated and has more money than they need, no one will need God. Accordingly the modern university has largely failed to help students appreciate the determinative religious convictions that shape the lives of the majority of the world's peoples. (249–50)

Ouch. On reading the collected essays—including a piece by the Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams; Catholic priests Michael Baxter and Daniel Berrigan; professors of theology Frank Hauerwas and John Milbank; Islamicist and Muslim Vincent Cornell and Professor of Judaic Studies Peter Ochs—I had to admit that they had a point. It is clear that the cultural significance of September 11 has been profoundly inflected by religious influences and that we don't begin to comprehend the event if they are not taken into account.

It is probably also true that those actively engaged with religion are better equipped than secularists to hold the line against fundamentalism, the struggle today, let's face it, that matters most. All the contributions adopt a critical stance on the simplifications and jingoism of George W. Bush's 'war on terror' and also on dogmatic tendencies in other quarters. *The South Atlantic Quarterly* is an august journal, intensely conscious of its own distinguished history. In a publisher's forward, independent of the editorial introduction, Steve Cohn draws comparison between the September 11 volume and the first issues, which came out in the early 1900s. Founding editor John Spencer Bassett

used the journal to cast light on the history of race relations in the South of the USA, knowing the controversy it might stir. A particularly provocative editorial in 1903 sparked a virulent campaign to have Bassett run out of his post at Trinity College. It is Cohn's hope that 'the views expressed here on such matters as the virtues of pacifism, the vices of false patriotism, and the dangers of American exceptionalism will seem to most readers as commonplace and natural as a once outrageous call for racial equality seems today'. (247)

In a way that is perhaps easier for one of religious conviction, Rowan Williams unpicks the symbolic logic of America's response to the terrorist attacks. And the logic, for Williams, *has been* symbolic. It has not been a matter simply of mending a breach in security, or even of consolidating power, as more secular critics have alleged; it has been a matter of finding a *language* in which to respond:

We weren't completely sure at first, most of us, but it was, of course, violence we turned to. Not surprisingly, because we felt, most of us, that there really was nothing else we could do. A long programme of diplomatic pressure, the reworking of regional alliances and a severe review of intelligence and security didn't feel like doing anything. There needed to be a discharge of the tension. (272)

I am led to admire this line of analysis in the same way as I admire the work of that great Australian of ecclesiastical background Greg

Dening in writing of the symbolic economy of violence in colonial encounters in the Pacific. There is a depth of understanding of ritual and sacrifice that one doesn't often find elsewhere.

But what is equally important for the aims of the issue is that Williams is able to engage, himself, in this symbolic economy, wresting it from its impulse towards simple solutions and moral certainties. Jesus's message, he reminds us, was one of humility: 'turn the other cheek and walk the extra mile'. This is not to be confused with weakness or passivity: 'It requires courage and imagination: it is essentially the decision *not* to be passive, not to be a victim, but equally not to avoid passivity by simply reproducing what's been done to you'. (271) At certain points, I have to admit, my eyes began to glaze at the appeal to Biblical authority, but there is a payoff in Williams's conclusions:

So can we stop talking so much about 'war', and reconcile ourselves to the fact that the punishment of terrorist crime and the gradual reduction of its threat cannot be translated into the satisfying language of decisive and dramatic conquest? Can we try thinking more about the place of risk and even loss in ordinary civil society: and about the moral resources needed to grapple with the continuing problems of shaping a lawful international order? (277)

There is a persuasive force in this, which may achieve more in countering militaristic fundamentalism than a hard line secular opposition could hope to do.

The volume assumes an American readership and we have to accept that the major religious tradition for most of that readership will be Christian. It is a little disappointing, even so, that there is not more representation from other faiths—particularly, in the circumstances, from Islam. Vincent J. Cornell makes an excellent contribution, tracing the complexity of Muslim responses to September 11. He is unforgiving of the refusal by some to confront the implication of their faith in the attacks: 'If an American Muslim tells you that she did not suspect that the perpetrators of September 11 were Muslims, she is not telling you the truth'. (328) But he is equally determined to counter demonising and stereotyping from outside. The balancing act is an excruciating one:

How are we to address the extremism that exists within parts of our community without becoming apologists for the current administration? How are we to critique ourselves without playing into the hands of right-wing ideologues who seek to dismiss Islam as a form of religious fascism? (334)

Given the crucial importance today that this balancing act be sustained, it is perhaps a pity that Cornell is left to carry the burden of doing so alone.

Not all the contributors speak from a religious background. The volume is balanced by a simple but powerful essay by Robert N. Bellah establishing the moral ambiguity of America through an overview of the history of

its involvement over the last seventy-five years in conflicts around the world; an environmentalist perspective from farmer–scholar Wendell Berry; a cultural geography of armed forces communities in the United States by Catherine Lutz; an essay on the semiotics of ‘ground zero’ by Frank Lentricchia and Jody McAuliffe and of the American flag by Susan Willis; and an essay on the ‘American Taliban’ John Walker Lindh by Anne Slifkin.

There are also contributions from three big names much more recognisable within the cultural studies firmament: Fredric Jameson, Slavoj Žižek and Jean Baudrillard. Against the background of the other pieces, I found these a little disappointing. Jameson develops a provocative opening in asking whether we should accept as ‘natural’ that masses of people were devastated by the events of September 11, but dissipates his focus with rants on the side about the minority electoral mandate of George W. Bush and the baleful influence in media studies of John Fiske. Žižek turns a beautifully crafted but rather too fluid and predictable essay on the theme of a breach, on September 11, in the illusion of a perfect American ‘irreality’. Baudrillard’s piece would be familiar to some as one that was widely circulated on the Internet shortly after the terrorist attacks. It does seem to me to contain one insight that may be quite profound: that September 11 only ‘played’ as an event so dramatically because there is something in all of us, even those in the most privileged enclaves of the West, that rejoiced that a chink was found in the armour of the world’s only superpower. The effectiveness of the Al-

Qaida action and the character of the response from the West can only be explained if we recognise the enormous ideological effort required to suppress resistance to the idea of a unipolar world.

How should we translate Hauerwas and Lentricchia’s American framing of September 11 to an Australian context? I am tempted to play here with the opposition between George W. Bush and John Howard—one unabashed in righteously smiting the ‘evil doer’, the other deeply uncomfortable with any sustained departure from ordinariness; one readily conjured up with hand on heart singing ‘God Bless America’, the other coming closest to glory poolside at the triumph of Australian swimmers at the Sydney Olympics. The political alliance between the two leaders sometimes leads us to overlook their differences. There is something, of course, of the contrast between a superpower and a middle-rank power at the periphery of world affairs, but there is also something of the difference between national styles. Australia is not as constitutionally secular as some European nations but, as has often been noted, Australian everyday life is as resistant as any to religious references and modes of thought. Hauerwas presents shopping in America as an obvious ‘other’ to religious reverence, but it may be beaten by the Australian quotidian. If so, the resurgence of religion as a major force in global politics, and as a subject of scholarly interest, may require from us a particular effort of imagination.

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