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Religions and Terrors

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Boardman Lecture XXXIX. Editor and Foreword by Adam Graves.

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Religions and Terrors

Abstract
Prof. Dyson explores the ambiguous relationship between "Religion and Terrors", arguing that religion has resources for helping us address and overcome various forms of terror, but also the potential for creating or contributing to conditions of terror. He reflects at length on the conditions of terror both within the United States and abroad. Prof. Dyson also discusses the events of September 11th. However, he maintains that "we have made a critical conceptual error by making 9/11 the referent for other forms of terror". It is true, he argued, that on 9/11 many Americans understood for the first time what it means to be subject to arbitrary acts of violence. But, he insists, we must come to recognize that this experience of terror has been and continues to be the "condition under which most people live every day of their lives". The majority of Prof. Dyson's lecture deals with the ways in which certain groups within our society—-such as racial minorities, women, gays and lesbians—-have been continually subject to acts of terror and how certain religious beliefs, practices and institutions within America have been complicit in, and sometimes responsible for, these acts. He insists that although it is important to reflect on the events of 9/11, we must also face up to the long history of other forms of terror within America. Unlike 9/11, these forms of terror have become so institutionalized and so "routinized" within American society that they are often rendered invisible. By demonstrating how patterns of mobility, the distribution of power, and the use of punishment have created conditions of terror within the United States, Prof. Dyson offered us a more complex definition of 'terror'.

Comments
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The Boardman Lectureship in Christian Ethics
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XXXIX

Religions and Terrors

Delivered Before the University of Pennsylvania
November 11, 2003

By
Michael Eric Dyson

Editor and Foreword
by
Adam Graves

Foreword

Adam Graves

This year's Dana Boardman Lecture, was unique in that it was delivered by a member of the University of Pennsylvania's faculty, Michael Eric Dyson, Avalon Foundation Professor in the Humanities and Professor of Religious Studies and Africana Studies. Prof. Dyson, who the Department of Religious Studies last year, is the first holder of the Avalon Chair. This year's Boardman Lecture was a particularly exciting event as it was also intended to serve as Prof. Dyson's inaugural lecture.

Prof. Dyson is a prolific author and frequent media commentator. He is well-known for his series of biographies that reflect on the myth and meaning of black malehood in America, which includes *Holler If You Hear Me: Searching For Tupac Shakur* (2002), *I May Not Get There With You: The True Martin Luther King, Jr.* (2001), and *Making Malcolm: The Myth and Meaning of Malcolm X, Between God and Gangsta Rap* (1995).

In his Boardman Lecture, Prof. Dyson explores the ambiguous relationship between "Religion and Terrors," arguing that religion has resources for helping us address and overcome various forms of terror, but also the potential for creating or contributing to conditions of terror. He reflects at length on the conditions of terror both within the United States and abroad. Prof. Dyson also discusses the events of September 11th. However, he maintains that "we have made a critical conceptual error by making 9/11 the referent for other forms of terror." It is true, he argued, that on 9/11 many Americans understood for the first time what it means to be subject to arbitrary acts of violence. But, he insists, we must come to recognize that this experience of terror has been and continues to be the "condition under which most people live every day of their lives." The majority of Prof. Dyson's lecture deals with the ways in which certain groups within our society—such as racial minorities, women, gays and lesbians—have been continually subject to acts of terror and how certain religious beliefs, practices and institutions within America have been complicit in, and sometimes responsible for, these acts. He insists that although it is important to reflect on the events of 9/11, we must also face up to the long history of other forms of terror within America. Unlike 9/11, these forms of terror have become so institutionalized and so "routinized" within American society that they are often rendered invisible. By demonstrating how patterns of mobility, the distribution of power, and the use of punishment have created conditions of terror within the United States, Prof. Dyson offered us a more complex definition of 'terror.'

The lecture published below is a transcription of the lecture Prof. Dyson delivered on November 11, 2003. Prof. Dyson is a lively and engaging public speaker. Although a few minor editorial changes have been made, we have done our best to preserve the dynamism of Prof. Dyson's original lecture.

I would like to thank Professor Ann Matter for her assistance in preparing this publication.

Religions and Terrors
Michael Eric Dyson

Tonight I want to talk about religions and terrors, and to do that I do not want to posit some big and deep definition of religion—I don't know that much about it to begin with! I am going to posit one of course—when people say they don't want to posit that means they are about to posit! But I want to talk about terror.

I didn't call my lecture "Religion and Terrorisms" because I didn't want to get involved in a long digression about 9/11, even though I'm going there too; but I want to talk about the fact that religion is intimately linked to, yoked to, and bound to issues of terror. I want to talk about the old fashioned sense of terror first, the dictionary definition of religions and terrors; and then segue into discussions of not only individual terrors that religion is meant both to address and unavoidably at some points to extend, but also the collective sense of vulnerability to which we have been subjecting American society as a result of the recent terrorist attacks. I want to give some historical backdrop and background to my own understanding of what terror is about because I think that we have made a critical conceptual error by making 9/11 the referent for other forms of terror, by explaining through the prism of 9/11 other forms of oppression that have been mobilized against people in the name of various and sundry religions and ideologies, and political expressions. I think we gain more by understanding how 9/11 fits into a broader network of political and ideological expressions that have useful insight to yield if we view it that way.

So when I think about religions and terror, you know you go to the dictionary (an old trick), you go there, look up what terror means. "A state of intense fear; something that inspires fear or scourge; a frightening aspect; a case of anxiety or worry; an appalling person or thing," (it was interesting to me that under terror the dictionary had 'brat'), "a reign of terror; violence like a bombing, or bombs thrown by a groups in order to intimidate a government or population into granting their demands."

When I began to think about that notion of terror I began to see that religion is basically about the business of terror—religions across the board. Of course, I am going to speak primarily about what I know best and the traditions in which I've been reared. Therefore, I deliberately did not want to say "Christianity and terrors" because the debate in America right now is especially about the particular status of Islamic belief and Muslim practice and a whole host of other religious orthodoxies and expressions that have not been subjected to critical scrutiny to the profound degree that they should have been. Our knowledge of them is woefully lacking in regard to our ostensible commitment to multiculturalism—and of course one of the banes of a so-called PC era, the anti-PC era, in which we believe that true engagement with complex realities across the globe, across the global landscape, means that we are somehow engaging in PC by learning about people whose names end differently than ours, people whose cultures engage in vastly different world views than ours, whose cosmologies cannot be explained by references exclusively to western epistemologies (that is, ways of knowing the world) or western

ways of ordering the world, but they are ordered by distinctly different, sometimes clashing, some could argue incommensurable (just can't be reconciled) views of the world. And it is to our chagrin, to our extraordinary distaste and, I believe, to our great disadvantage that we are lacking in, and don't even understand or know so much about so many other parts of the world. Even in terms of governmental services, our government cannot even recruit enough people to try to spy for them and break into some of these so-called terrorist organizations because so few Americans speak the necessary languages. Just in terms of self-interest, the generation of linguistic facilities with a broad variety of cultures and countries would mandate that we do so. But even more profoundly than that, the ethical interest in other cultures and the appreciation for the relationship between an imperial presence like America and others that have been found in its shadow, who now light the path toward their victory and redemption at the direct expense of American culture means that we have to come to grips with these realities.

That having been said, the business of religion is terror in many ways. One thinks of, for instance, the terrors that are generated in our own lives by a host of realities. When I went and looked at references to terror in the Hebrew Bible (there are not a whole lot of references to terror in the so-called New Testament, but there are many in the Hebrew Bible) what was interesting to me in looking at some of these references is to see the degree to which terror is spoken about in quite interesting ways. Some of them, I'm sure, will be familiar to us. In Genesis it speaks of the "terror of God upon the cities," this is in regard to Jacob and his tribe in trying to avoid the scourges of surrounding tribes that don't worship God in the correct fashion (Genesis 35:5). Here, the presence of God is spoken of in reference to terror. In Deuteronomy, the warning against worshipping false gods speaks of "the scourge from without and the terror from within shall destroy both the young man and the virgin" (Deuteronomy 32:25).

And, of course, if we're going to speak about terror we've got to come to Job in a very serious way: "for destruction from God was a terror to me." This, of course, is the passage of scripture in Job 3:1 where Job is trying to make an argument for his own fundamental integrity against the incriminating evidence of ethical lapse, somehow, that indicts him, as to why he is now receiving such extraordinary punishment from the powers that be. And this text is trying to work out, one could argue, an evolutionary form of *theodicy*—a term, of course, in religious studies and in many theological circles for trying to figure out how we can justify God's ways to human beings. As Milton put it in his poem: how is it that we can square up the assertion of God's goodness with contradictory evidence? Or, as "Bishop" Harold Kushner puts it, "when bad things happen to good people?"[1] And then in Isaiah 54:14 , "thou shalt not fear, and from terror, for it shall not come near thee." Again, the terror of feeling cut off from and lost from God's grasp is fundamental. In the fourth verse of the twentieth chapter of Jeremiah: "For thus sayeth the Lord, 'Behold, I will make thee a terror to thee self and to all thy friends.'" If I were preaching as opposed to trying to explicate that, that passage would make for a deep sermon about when you are a terror to yourself (I will return to this theme latter on). And in Psalm 55:4: "My heart is sore, pained within me and the terrors of death are fallen upon me." And, finally, the singular and single reference in Second Corinthians 5:11: "Knowing therefore the terror of the Lord, we persuade men." In that

passage of scripture, the whole point is that we are going to appear one day before God, we are going to be judged, and the terror of the Lord will be revealed to those for whom judgment will be meted out.

Now, I use these very few examples from my own religious tradition and religious texts that are central to understanding that tradition to suggest that the business of religion for me is critically about terror because it is about several forms of terror that are spoken about in these texts.

First of all, there is the terror of divine recognition, that is, the terror of God. It seems to me that whatever religious tradition one follows, the recognition of God's divinity is itself cause for a kind of reactive terror precisely because one recognizes in one's human identity that one is not God, that I am human, that the finitude and finality and the limitation of the human identity in contradistinction to the recognition of the divine plentitude and fullness means that there is a terror of self-recognition in the embrace of the divine reality, divine identity.

Second, there is the terror of human self-recognition. That is when we recognize fundamentally in religious belief that our human identity itself is the product of not only the birthing of consciousness in us by transcendent realities, by realities that go beyond who we are as human beings; but ultimately that the human identity itself is dependant upon the God from which it draws its own recognition. And the terror, of course, is that one might get that wrong. One is trying to figure it out. And all through these scriptures which are important to my religious tradition it is a central proposition that terror is the result of and the concomitant of the inability to figure out that identity in ways that are productive, helpful and edifying. To fail to figure out that identity is the terror that one experiences.

Third, there is the terror of transgression—the sense that a sin occurs, that a separation from the divine identity and reality occurs, and in the separation, in that transgression, is all of the primordial passion of anxiety separation. One is somehow severed from the source of one's identity. One is cut off from the very roots of one's own reality. The divine recognition in one's own human destiny is marred by the transgressive potential of human behavior. So in that sense transgression causes a kind of terrifying presence in the religious believer.

Fourth, there is the terror of suffering and evil (and I'm going to speak a bit more about this when I talk about the collective enterprise of the nation and what terror means especially after 9/11). Job could be regarded as a kind of paradigmatic expression of the terror of suffering—why is it that human beings who claim to be in contact with the divine source of revelation are subject to almost apparently arbitrary forms of violence or of even apparent retribution. If one were to be honest about it, even within the context of one's strong assertion of religious faith, the evidence appears to be against whatever God one holds on to. That the evidence is against the assertion that one's God is good, all powerful and all knowing. And we know throughout many religions and theological traditions that there have been arguments about this very thing. How can one assert that

God is good and then, at the same time, hold on to that faith in the midst of tremendous counter evidence—evidence that subverts the very principle by which the faith can be asserted? There is an inability to reconcile the two—and that is the perennial sense of terror one feels in the acknowledgement in both personal suffering, but also in terms of how that works out in group behavior. Is it that God is against your group? This is why the theologian William R. Jones more than twenty years ago wrote a book called *Is God a White Racist?*.[2] You have to consider this: that one explanation of why blacks suffer could be "God don't dig you." It could be that God is a white racist—I mean that is terrible. That is terror making, terror causing! Of course, some people thought that his resolution to the problem was equally terroristic for their own kind of orthodox religious faith. Jones began to promote a human-centric theism that says, "you must take control of your own destiny by asserting the primacy, the essential reality of your own behavior. That is the only response, in the face of incredible horror, for you to have an intelligent conception of the godhead embodied in your own human practice." But the problem that is at the heart of that book is one that is fundamentally fought within the confines of many theological traditions, and in this case it happens to be within black Christian churches. They are trying to figure out what is the status of our identity in relationship to a God who is claimed to be good and all powerful. God is believed to be leading the destiny of these people, and yet so much suffering attends their path.

And, finally, we come to the terror of death. It seems to me that all religious traditions fundamentally and finally end up addressing the issue of why human beings are aware of their imminent collapse into dust, their return to the very ground that produced them. "Life is real, life is earnest and the grave is not its goal"—this is an assertion of faith, poetically speaking. The fundamental reality of all human existence for all human beings who are conscious is the fact that we live and die. Death is the reminder of our final human condition, and for this reason it is the subject of a great deal of religious passion, theological reflection, and personal investment in religious narratives which ward off the possibility of absurdity or meaninglessness in the face of that death.

So this is what I have in mind when I say that the business of religion is indeed terror—but terror in the forms about which I have spoken.

Now, those are individual terrors; but it also seems to me that the collective terrors to which human communities are subject is the rightful province of religious belief and thought.

(1) Power: Here I am thinking of many forms of terror, one of which results from the existence of power or the lack thereof; powerlessness or coping with power—especially power as it is articulated in the nation-state. Human beings exist in communities. Communities exist within the context of the relationship to a state, to a nation, to a prevailing political power that the individual person and group have to negotiate their relationship with. It seems to me that one of the real terrors of modern existence at least is mediated through the state, the nation-state, and the degree to which individual autonomy and independence from the incursions of the state on individual existence is a measure of the experience, the personal experience of terror that people have long felt.

Now, one of the things I'm going to argue later is that in one sense America has been exempt from some of the most vicious forms of political terror, precisely because of the way in which our own existence is contingent upon a denial, a kind of collective willful amnesia of the conditions of empire upon which the nation rests. And, secondly, that imposes certain forms of suffering and brutality on other parts of the world that then come back at us. I am not trying to argue a one-to-one correlation between, for instance, what happened to us on 9/11 and American practice. I am, however, suggesting that there is a strong relationship between American political practice and the conditions of suffering in the world, to which we have both directly and indirectly contributed and as a result of that the consequences of our own presence in ways that many citizens are unaware of certainly redounds to us in acts of vicious and heinous terror.

So, power is a critical means by which terror is imposed on human beings. Power of the state may end up leveraged against individual citizens and collective groups within that state. And as a result of that the hierarchy of social relationships is determined in regard to how one has access to that particular power within the state, either through direct political representation or from somehow feeling alienated from the conditions of success in the state.

(2) Mobility: Number two, it seems to me, is the question of mobility. Here I am thinking of patterns of migration—people moving from one state to the next, people moving from one country to the next, people moving through borders across the globe. What does that mean? Why is that important? Why does that bring terror? Because in one sense, that there is a collective terror wrought by patterns of mobility means that there are nations whose borders are relatively more open or permeable than others that are relatively less open and closed. This means that assertions of collective identity are being fought over by who gets in and who gets locked out, who is recognized and prized, who is let in the border, who is encouraged to come to the borders, and who is systematically excluded. We can see this, for instance, in the argument under the Clinton administration about whether we should spend billions of dollars to encourage people to come here because of the demands of the super-information-highway. It was quite interesting to me to note the kinds of people (and the kinds of work that they did) who were being encouraged to come to America to fulfill what Norbert Wiener has called the "cybernetic destiny" of American society,[3] to open up the super-information-highway so that we could maintain a kind of technical supremacy. We were looking for a technocracy that in one sense left us in the dust in comparison to countries like Japan, we were trying to reassert our primacy, so that we were looking for people from particular European nations who were perceived to have the kind of critical expertise that we sought. And yet at the same time there was a hugely detrimental anti-emigrant fervor being expressed. So, if you were Joseph you might get in, if you were José you were getting road-blocked (this is a way of putting it in hyperbole, but you understand my point). These patterns of mobility and migration are not only global. They exist even within the nation itself, even within the city itself, even within the culture itself. These are patterns of migration—who gets the chance to stay in the center city, who gets a chance to go to the suburbs, who gets forced out to suburban life, who remains behind.

Then we must consider what happens if the geography of political destiny is linked to who owns political stakes and power in the city—who controls City Hall.

The mayor's race was a very complex thing here in Philadelphia, and it was quite remarkable to me. It was not just simply about race. It was certainly in part about race, but not race in the regular old ways. It was also about who would control the fiscal integrity and the financial future of the fifth or sixth largest city in the country. Will business interests and business elites have a fundamental stake in the perpetuation of the legacy of the city or will they be marginalized as a result of the tax base that was generated within the context of this city? Furthermore, who gets left out and who gets access to city services? Where are the train-lines moving, where are the subway lines connecting to, what kind of suburban communities are transected by some of these transportation issues? When jobs go out to the suburbs in many ways, and people can't get out there to get a job, then that reinforces already existing social hierarchies in which class status makes a hugely important difference, and sometimes even more important than race—although we know how the two are coupled together. Therefore, issues of mobility and migration leave people terrorized because they don't have access to transportation infrastructures that allow them to reinforce their status as working citizens and as a result of that they experience economic and social misery. This is, to be sure, a form of terror.

(3) Punishment: Thirdly, there is the issue of punishment in terms of collective dialogue. We are living in a nation where the punishment industry is just out of control. We have 2.1 million people locked up, more than any other industrialized western nation. Here we are in all these posts—post-modern, post-industrial—and yet we are really pre-modern when it comes to punishment. We are rather anachronistic when it comes to patterns of imprisonment and just outright savaging others (I hate to use that *ad hominem* phrase, but it is sometimes called for). This becomes evident when you think about who's getting imprisoned— it is not just the luck of the draw, so to speak, but rather it becomes very specific, it becomes very targeted. The punishment industry in America rests upon a kind of racial hierarchy that is gendered at a specific point (black men and women, Latino men and women). And its not just starting there, but it is starting in secondary education where some schools become holding centers for detention centers through which these people are recycled, and then reproducing the economic wherewithal of the prison industrial complex. Thus, punishment is tied in a very serious way to a form of terror that people experience—the vulnerability of a collective people which realizes that if they get caught and stopped they will get twice the kind of punishment that somebody else might get – or not get. Amnesty International did a report about four or five years ago that said that young white kids sometimes get hit on the back of their hands ("Now Johnny stop doing that," "Jenny stop doing that") whereas black and brown men and women were sent deliberately to detention homes and centers. Secondly, the study found that they were stigmatized in terms of their future within the system because they are already marked as more likely to do criminal things. Thirdly, it was found that the schools in which they existed deliberately downgraded them in terms of their own curriculum so that they were not being challenged or invited to the higher echelons of the

curriculum, so that it was quite utilitarian. Maybe they got trade-school stuff, but they did not get college preparation. And, fourthly, they were being stigmatized as slow learners, without taking into account the economic infrastructure from which they came, the social misery to which they were subject, and the incredibly powerful social pathologies that they and their parents fought on a daily basis. I am saying that forms of terror are mediated in terms of the punishment industry precisely because it targets with vicious specificity and particularity some populations and not others.

(4) Collective Oppressions: And, finally, it seems to me, that the kind of collective notion of terror is associated with forms of social oppression. Especially when it comes to religion it seems that these forms of terror, known as racial, and sexual, and gender, and economic oppression, have been particularly virulent, not only in our nation, but across the board (I'm going to speak more about that in a minute).

What, then, does religion have to say to these particular forms of terror—issues of power, issues of mobility, issues of punishment, issues of collective oppression? On the one hand, the point of religion is to provide the ability to make sense and meaning of conflicted social contexts. How do you make sense of your life in the midst of any particular predicament? Kolakowski, in his book on religion, suggests that sanity making is derived from God's inability to commit suicide.[4] God can not kill God's self by nature of self-definition, and as a result of that, human behavior that attends to God through faith is able to derive some kind of benefit from association with that notion of God. So, if God cannot commit suicide, maybe I can get up and not commit suicide myself. The potential is certainly there—the desire may sometimes be there much more than we want to say. But what is interesting, it seems to me, is that the purpose of religion then is to divert the possibility of suicide and to make sanity a critical register within one's personal life, and to make the possible achievement of sanity something that is closer and closer as a result of intimate connection in religious community. It is not just an individual assertion of self, it is a communal engagement with forms of meaning that happen when people of like minds come together and assert the primacy of their experience.

It seems to me that sometimes religion becomes the handmaiden for the reproduction of the very oppressions, of the very powers, of the very mobilizations, and of the very punishment industry that are so deeply problematic. We see this happening all the time. Folk are all the time trying to justify our religious beliefs on either side of debate, say, on abortion or women's reproductive choices, the punishment industry and capital punishment. Whether we are for it or against it, we mobilize these religious narratives to justify and, indeed, we might say sanctify our particular outlook in terms of our religious belief as a result of our own understanding of who God is. Thus, it seems to me that religion in this sense is conceptually agnostic. It all depends upon what you are doing with it in terms of the consequences of having religion and what it means to human beings across the board. So, for some people religion becomes a way of warding off the forms of oppression that some people seek to impose on human beings and for other people religion becomes the very means by which those oppressions are imposed—in the name, to be sure, of an understanding of God in terms of justice, in terms of fairness, in terms of retribution and sometimes even in terms of vengeance.

I say all of that to lead up to this discussion about 9/11. All of this held true long before 9/11 occurred. That is to say, the very notion that religion could be linked to collective forms of terror that impose brutality upon vulnerable populations was not invented on 9/11! And that is critical for me to understand. Without that kind conceptual history and abbreviated genealogy which I have given in regard to terrors and the relationship between religion and terror, we cannot understand how some people think that America is part of the problem, and that American religious belief may reinforce, even if unconsciously and sometimes certainly invisibly, the very forms of oppression to which other people respond so viscerally, so violently, and who have perceived terror as a direct result of the presence of our international tentacles so to speak. For me, then, these forms of terror are real, their relationship with religion well established.

First, when we come to 9/11 and the USA it seems to me a few things are in order. First of all, we have to ask the question: Have our religious beliefs prepared us to understand that America has only joined the 'modern world' to the degree to which we are like other nations vulnerable at home—not vulnerable a thousand miles away, or five thousand miles away, or fifteen thousand miles away, but at the crib? Are we vulnerable right were we live? Domestic vulnerability is a measure of your existence that you are somehow vulnerable. Do religions help us understand that we joined the modern world on 9/11? On nine-one-one America joined the modern world because we shed a kind of innocence and a kind of willful ignorance about the conditions under which most people live every day of their lives. Most people have to live on a daily basis with what we felt on 9/11 and afterward. Arbitrary violence could be asserted; vulnerability to violence would forever be part of our existence; the terrors of not understanding or knowing the full extent of the enemies of our nation, what was in their mind, the religious narratives that motivated them. We began to try to figure out then where Islam fits in with modernity. We have books coming out trying to explain why Islamic folk just plain hate western culture, precisely because the notion of progress was antithetical to a conception of Islamic stability and orthodoxy and tradition. The fundamental truth is that it is, as Tariq Ali says in his book, a clash of fundamentalism*s*.[5] It is not just the fundamentalisms that we see coming from outside. We must also consider the fundamentalisms that exist within the context of the cultures in which we exist, and that have been perpetuated by the very religious traditions to which we appeal. This is very crucial to me, because without understanding that we will never understand how it is that our own variety of fundamentalism contributes to the problem. This is what Tariq Ali is saying in his book: George Bush, Al Qaida, they are just two competing fundamentalisms in terms of religious ideologies and idolatries. I am not going to jump on George Bush here. I will not Bush-wack him here tonight or anything like that—even though I state clearly my opposition to so many of his administrations principles and practices. But we do not have to dehumanize our opponents. At the same time we can speak of the dehumanizing impulses and consequences that flow from the ideological beliefs that they maintain.

Therefore, it seems to me that with respect to 9/11 we have to ask ourselves the question: "Have our religious beliefs helped us understand the degree to which vulnerability to

violence is a condition not only of the modern world in which we live but a symptom of and symbol of the condition of standing before God, shorn of all external trappings, human being to God, human community to God, vulnerable before the forces of the universe?"

Second, I think that at 9/11 what we need to understand is the failure of our religious experiences and religious beliefs, and sometimes of our communities, to explain the crisis in collective self-identity and self-understanding. Because, in one sense, we in America are trying to figure out who we are in the aftermath of this colossal event. We are trying to pick up the pieces, to figure them out and to put the whole puzzle together. Who are we in the aftermath of 9/11? What did it reveal about us? September 11th didn't create a new consciousness, it revealed the collective self-identity of America at that point. The degree to which the nation failed to understand that before is a measure of our willful ignorance and our failure to understand that afterwards is a measure of our refusal to confront the 'truth.' That is to say, our collective self-identity in terms of being perceived by other parts of the world is that America was to deal with empire, America was imperialistic, America had been dominant, America had exercised unfair hegemony over the world's resources, and as a result of that folk were just plain mad. Of course, in knee-jerk fashion that kind of assertion of American causality of the world's problems was just as egregious as those who denied any responsibility of America for anything that went wrong. This is why we kept saying, "I don't understand why they hate us." We heard that phrase so often in the aftermath of 9/11. "Why the hell are they mad?" We didn't understand who 'they' were but we knew they didn't like us. We didn't even know who they were. We were mistaking Sikhs and Muslims, we don't know the difference—they wore turbans on their heads and beards on their faces. Who are you? What do you want? Let's card them at the collective club of our identity. Let's just try to check them out. And so we wanted to know them. Not only did we not know who they were, but we wanted to figure out why they hated us so bad.

This is an index of the willful ignorance about the conditions of vulnerability to which other people are subject, and the unimaginable leisure not to have to know. That is the critical point. Not only do you not know, but you do not even have to care because it does not make any difference to you. That is even more revealing, I think, of the kind of insular politics that our religious beliefs across the board didn't help us negotiate. Now we had some of these subaltern and subcultural murmurings within these religious traditions, to be sure. But by and large mainstream religious belief was not trying to help us negotiate the degree to which we were committed to empire and empire building in America and legitimating the expansion of the American empire through religious discourse and narrative across the board.

Third, it seems to me that there was a crisis in civil religion after 9/11. The relationship between religion and terror was mediated through our failure to understand the religious rituals that sanction our existence in the secular state. It is a civil religion to be sure, but religion none the less. So we had a crisis in self-understanding in terms of civil religion and those documents that found civil religion to a certain degree, namely, the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence—they couldn't help us. We appealed

to them, but what does it mean? "Well, we're a free nation." We kept repeating this stuff almost endlessly and myopically: "We're a free nation," "God bless America," "We're a free nation," "God bless America"… George Bush was telling us that we are not trying to make this a religious war, while at the same time begging God to bless America! Now, fine, if you say "God bless America" as Stanley Hauerwas, the religious ethicist says, because you recognize in "God bless America" that there's a burden connected to that blessing.[6] And, furthermore, in asking God to bless America we must not ask God to bless America exclusively. God bless America to come to the self recognition that we have engaged in transgressive behavior that needs to be articulated, dealt with and repented of 'God bless America.' That is a different kind of register. That is a different kind of reality. It seems to me that many of our religious conventions and traditions and self-understandings have failed—especially in the secular realm, where we are reinforcing the status quo in relationship to our own self-identity. Now there were cracks in that edifice to be sure—prophetic articulations of religion across the board—that try to help us to understand that we may not be on the right path, and that the path we are on may be destructive, and that all religions at their best have to weep before power and to confess their complicity in the reproduction of that power even as they seek to resist that power. There should at least be some tension involved in this self-identity for your own integrity. That goes for any religious tradition.

Henry James (as appropriated by Fredric Jameson) had this wonderful phrase: "We are dealing now with a reality that we cannot not know."[7] It is a reality that we cannot not know. Now we can't avoid it. Now we cannot not know it. Nobody can feign indifference or ignorance. The Catholic Church had this wonderful phrase, "culpable ignorance." Say, for example, that you got stopped by the police while driving through a neighborhood and the police tell you, "Don't you know you're going fifty miles an hour in a twenty-five mile an hour zone." You say, "Oh my god I didn't know…I didn't know policeman…I didn't know sir." Then the policeman says, "Well, you know, when you took your drivers license exam, you were supposed to know that when you see these kind of signs, etc." That is culpable ignorance: you're ignorant about it but you are responsible for your ignorance! (We could apply that to some things that go on with the students in classrooms here at Penn too but that's for another occasion.) So you are responsible for the stuff you know and you do not know and you are supposed to know it. These are reality that we cannot not know. Henry James—as appropriated by Fredric Jameson, the foremost Marxist critic in America—is trying to get at these realities that are thrust in our faces that we can no longer ignore. And yet the truth is that America has been addicted to forgetfulness. We live in the United States of Amnesia when it comes to the historical forms that we have to confront.

This reminds me of the theme song sung by Barbra Streisand: "Too painful to Remember." We simply chose to forget. Ok, well, I know Barbara isn't in because they took the Reagan movie off CBS. You know, the right-wing always claims that the left-wing is running things. They say CBS is liberal…James Broland married Barbra Streisand…must be a conspiracy… Don't tell me about these black folk in the city…don't tell me about brothers on the street…Yeh, the man, conspiracy…understand what I'm saying. What about that?! That you can't even… Free speech is a bio-

documentary on Ronald Reagan, and we can't even get it. My god if we can't have symbolic representation and artistic and aesthetic expression of a particular political reality, what more can we fear in regard to our political lives in the real world. We would have no ability to have dissent.

And another terror that we must speak about concerns the articulation of dissent against the power of a state that has the possibility of reducing your life in so many different and vicious ways. This is why, you know, when we speak of Mayor John Street visà- vis the FBI bug, we don't know what time it is. "Could be, if it is, you know, get it out of there, root it out and lets make the people pay who did the wrong thing." But I wrote a little piece in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* about the history of the FBI assault on black leadership, and I got so much email I can't tell you. Many of my good well-intending white brothers and sisters just didn't want to acknowledge my point. They wrote, "well, that was way back then, they aren't going to do it now," or that "there is not continuity between traditions of surveillance that intend to subvert black leadership and that John Street himself is a corrupt criminal and a machine politician and as a result of that there could be no possible consistency between assaults on past black leadership and present ones." I was reminded by a friend of assaults on black leadership not only a long time ago but within the eighties and the early nineties within America, where sitting black mayors and other politicians were subject to intense scrutiny by the FBI as a form of political punishment and as a form of political retribution against the political assertion of autonomous, independent or somehow critically important leadership.

My point then, my brothers and sisters, is that when it comes to notions of religion and terror after 9/11 America has done a terrible job in trying to figure out the kinds of terror that have already been unleashed on the world as a result of our presence—but even more particularly and for my purposes right here more interestingly the forms of terror that occur within our own borders. For me this is equally important because in one sense America is addicted to this form of amnesia—and not just amnesia in the abstract. I will sketch out here a few forms of amnesia that I think are operating.

First of all there is reverential amnesia. Now that is the kind of forgetting that seeks to avoid harm in the present to those who are the grieved victims by repressing the memory of that pain. So those who caused the harm put themselves in the shoes of the people who are harmed and say "you know, I understand how that might be." It is a kind of reverential amnesia. Then they go on to tell them that "it is certainly not the case as you remember it."

Second, there is repentant amnesia. Now this is when you forget the pain of the past as a gesture of reconciliation for the harm inflicted by individuals or groups. The emphasis is on the individual or group that inflicted the harm: "We must forget in order to avoid embarrassment. For you to make me remember embarrasses me."

Third, there is revisionist amnesia. This is manipulated memory, or a selective retrieval of the past that changes the tint and tone of what actually happened: "Sure it happened, but it's not as bad as you said it was."

Then there is recalcitrant amnesia. This is effort by groups to forget the pain of the past or the hurt of those who are indeed aggrieved by flatly denying that they are guilty. That is, the people who helped cause the pain refuse responsibility for that pain in any fashion. We see this going on in debates about so-called reparation right now.

Finally, there is resistant amnesia. This occurs when members of the aggrieved group themselves refuse to remember as a condition of their survival: "I just don't want to remember." "I can't stand the pain, against my window [singing]." (OK…maybe not like that. It might cause you pain to listen to that!) "I don't want to remember, don't want to recall, don't want to revisit, don't want to go there." Black person, female, gender, racial, sexuality, homophobia—whatever vicious ideology is operating or form of oppression. "I don't want to recall." That is resistant amnesia: refusing to remember as a measure of survival of the organism.

Let me end here by relating religion to forms of terror. But I do not want to do so by making 9/11 the critical reference, rather, I would like to do so by talking about other forms of internal oppression within the culture that religion has both spoken to and reinforced at the same time. Thus, we have to ask, what is it that can adjudicate between these competing claims, these rival claims about what religion should do and where it should stand. We must think about the relationship between religious belief and terrorist activity. And this dialogue has been going on through the media and the classrooms and media across the nation, in sanctuaries and synagogues alike, in temples and mosques as well. We must remember three things. First of all, the political environment in which religious belief springs forth shapes its social expression. Secondly, the extremes of religious faith are what we should be concerned about in any real sense (the fundamentalist expressions). And, finally, we have to keep in mind that terror must be spelled in the plural, as I have tried to demonstrate here today.

There is no doubt then, it seems to me, that when many Americans looked at 9/11 for the first time they saw the link between religion and terror. When that book of instructions was left behind for those murderous figures who assaulted the World Trade Center, the Pentagon and the airplane that went down in Pennsylvania many people saw for the first time the naked underbelly of the relation between religion and terror—the religious justification for terroristic acts that were rightfully rejected not only from outside of the religious trajectory of Islamic belief but also from within. There were people who reasserted immediately that Islam is a religion of peace and love and the bestowal of blessing. Of course, many people did not feel the need to argue that Christianity is itself a religion of peace as well. Rather, the burden was placed on the backs of those who were being victimized in the press as exclusively evil in a unique fashion.

What we were missing is what Hannah Arendt talked about in speaking about Adolf Eichmann as the banalization of evil.[8] It is so routine and everyday that you miss how funky it really is (those are not Hannah Arendt's words to be sure—she was much more edifying in her discussions with Karl Jaspers and others—that's just a Dysonization). The reality is that the banalization of evil, the routine practices and rituals that sustain the

absurdity of evil were an index of how it had settled into the creeks and crevasses of our society and, as a result of that, accepted as common sense and eventually rendered invisible. We did not see the degree to which religion was related to terror when we spoke about Timothy McVeigh, when we spoke about Oklahoma, when we spoke about terrorist bombings of abortion clinics, when we spoke about the reality that in our own nation issues of race, gender and class have made other human beings vulnerable to the terror of our own society.

bell hooks, the critic, says that every black person in America, regardless of class or race, understands what it means to be vulnerable to the fundamental terror of white supremacy.[9] And white supremacy is not individual beliefs mobilized by white brothers and sisters. White supremacy is the institutional or individual belief that one group is inherently inferior and another group is inherently superior. The mobilization of that passion through the institutions of American society marks the ingenuity of white supremacy. It does not take an individual in place to perpetuate its legacy—it is not just the driver of the car, it is the highway upon which it glides. Thus, it seems that we have not been attuned to the critical ways in which terror was already the condition and plight of so many people and that religious beliefs were being mobilized. People have religious justification for all of the injustices I have just mentioned. Why Negroes are dumb and stupid and should stay in their place; why women are crazy and hysterical and should be marginalized in American political culture; why gay and lesbian people are a scourge upon the earth; and even right now the acceptable religious bigotry in regard to homophobia is stunning. And the interesting thing of course is that it plays not simply among groups and between groups, but also within them, so that historically subordinated groups themselves begin to mobilize the passions appropriated from dominant culture to justify and sanctify their own relative position of authority within their own groups. There are folks down in Florida, for example, who are trying to use Martin Luther King Jr. to justify their homophobia (they are using 'Martha Luther King' as they used to say to justify their own bigotry).

Secondly, it seems to me that it is indeed the extremes of religion that get all the play. That is to say, the fundamentalisms are the most visible. But the incredible progressive character and prophetic nature of much of these religious viewpoints are marginalized. We don't here much on television about them, we don't see them much in the press, we don't understand the liberal and progressive dimensions of many of these religions which are much more open to discussing issues of same sexuality and racial progress and what happens to feminist beliefs when they interact with religious identities. Therefore, it seems to me that the fundamentalist variety is the one to be watched and the most visible expression of the extremist inclinations of the states, if you will, complicity with some of those religious beliefs. But it is incumbent upon us to embrace a more liberal understanding of religion, one that is more progressive, more open, more in dialogue with forces of modernity and less threatened by liberal society. We must not retreat into what Ernest T. Campbell[10] called "the womb of an ahistorical piety," in which we begin to segregate ourselves away in sections of society, and to begin to build up tents dedicated to and enshrining our God without paying attention to the way in which we must have commerce intellectually and racially, and in terms of gender, and in terms of sexual

orientation, with the broader society in ways that do not subvert fundamental religious identity.

And finally, it seems to me, we have to spell terror in the plural. And that means that understanding how racial terror works may help us understand what went on in 9/11 and not vice-versa. I was talking about 9/11 on the Phil Donahue Show a while back and said something about slavery. A young white lady was very indignant. She said, "How dare you compare what happened on 9/11 with slavery." I said, "You're right: a hundred million black people dying on that vicious triangulation where notions of migration were subordinated to the design of capital. In trying to illumine for you how deeply hurtful and vulnerable black people have been and in trying to understand then why we might have a different perspective collectively (that 'we' is very dangerous, but nonetheless real) I did make a mistake." Now, I do not believe in what the late and great Barbara Christian, the black literary critic/feminist, called "the oppression derby":[11] "My group is afraid more than yours." "No it's mine." "No it's mine." That is useless. Because if you are hurting, pain is pain. It hurts you. We do not have a calculus of the subjective experience of pain—which would prove that I'm able to endure this much pain and you're able to endure that much pain—because I don't know how the pain feels to you. A little pain might feel to you like what a lot of pain feels to me and vice-a-versa, but I have no way of knowing that because I'm not you. I'll take your word for it. "It hurts." "OK…cool." No, that doesn't mean that we should not make objective examinations of the relationship between your assertion of pain and the objective conditions of oppression you suffer. That's a different story. In other words, you might say we are all hurting at the same time and that all hurt is the same. Well, there is certainly the fact that all people are victimized, but there may not be equal victimization. We can argue that. But we do not have to have an oppression derby, whereby we say "my group has outdone your group and your group has outdone my group" and so on. That is useless and futile, and it only reinforces the hierarchy that prevails. What I am arguing (and what I tried to communicate to this young lady) is that what you do not understand is that before 9/11 you had no basis for even beginning to comprehend some of the vulnerability that other groups may feel on a regular basis—the banalization of evil, the routinization of suffering, the degree to which people take it for granted that a group that has been terrorized. And, make no mistake, white supremacy at the level of the Ku Klux Klan and the White Citizens Council was about the assertion of domestic terrorism in America. On that day (on 9/11), in one sense, if we take the racial paradigm (and not that exclusively, but I'm speaking about it now) America became black for the fist time. America became the degraded denied nigger, collectively speaking. For the first time many Americans could understand what it meant to be subject to arbitrary forms of violence, to be subject to that violence without just recompense, and to be forced into a silence that not only covers the ability to speak about the pain, but makes one feel insane for having the desire to do so.

In this sense, I have been trying to argue that well before 9/11 forms of domestic terror had already been operating within the context of the United States, reproduced by forms of religious identity that sanctify that terror—there are many religious tracts that try to justify why black people should be subordinated. This is why Orlando Patterson, in his

book *Slavery and Social Death*,[12] talks about that fact that these black people were subjected to terror because they became, in his brilliant term, "genealogical isolates." That is to say, they became free floating things, cogs in the machinery of southern agrarian capital, so that they were cut off from their matrilineal decent—they didn't know who their mothers were. They would bring one family member here and another there, separating the mothers from the fathers, and the child from the mother, etc. This created forces of domestic terror that we continue to deal with today. But if anybody dare now say that there is some consequence to that brutality, then we are said to be, "Oh my God you people can never imagine how to get ahead like the Poles, or the Italians, or the Lithuanians and the other European ethnics who come here and by dint of their sheer work ethic have lifted themselves up by their bootstraps." This is a form of revisionist amnesia, when it comes to the conditions and the plight and predicament of a particular group. And to ask people then to imagine what it might feel like… I used to joke and say, hey I was getting checked by the airport scanner way before 9/11: "Sir, could you step aside please." "Who, me?" "Yes, could you come over here please?" And this was long before 9/11, but it was after Timothy McVeigh. I see Tim McVeigh going right ahead of me, because they were not checking white guys with buzz-cuts who look like they were from the Marines. I was not mad at them, I started to become one of them. But, you know, I couldn't make that change (Michael Jackson, Michael Dyson…hee hee hee!) But what I'm saying is that that was a reality long before 9/11. So I'm saying join the crowd. People are saying "Why are you stopping me? What the hell do I look like? I'm not doing anything." "Hey bro I understand…I feel ya!"

So these are the conditions of terror that have been routinized, banalized, accepted as normal, regularized in ways that become rendered invisible, except for those people who bear the dangerous memory of those insults and injuries, who when they speak take the risk of decent against the narrative that is dominant. And to imagine what it is to have my son down in Atlanta, Georgia (and I tell people long before 9/11) for him to get stopped by the wrong policeman on the wrong side of the road; or to be an immigrant from New Guinea and to reach for your wallet and some police person, god bless his or her heart, thinking their doing their job, shoots are you forty-one times and hits you nineteen times—that's terror. Or to live with gender oppression and sexual subordination in America. Most people can't even imagine on a daily basis what it is to be walking from her house to her car is an odyssey through post-industrial decay and the moral dilapidation of a state that refuses to own up to its complicity with gender oppression. Just from your crib to your car! To be subject to that form of tyrannical assertion of masculine prerogative, to be subject to violence in America… Man!

It is a particularly virulent insult on the part of the Bush administration when they claim they wanted to go to war in Iraq partly because they want to protect the women! Dang bro, protect the ones at home! This is all we say. You sign the Mexico convention and think you can't even tell a women about the possibility that the choices she has made or have been thrust upon her…and makes no discrimination there…that these things are open to negotiation…a women has control of her reproductive rights, and those choices must not be subject to state punishment or political penalty—as soon as he got into office. And now the other day with his decision in terms of late-term abortion and so on. Just

wresting the prerogative of self-definition from women while at the same time claiming to be defending their interests and rights, and not understanding how patriarchy operates. Patriarchy, misogyny, sexism—patriarchy is the assumption that men's ways will determine women's lives, sexism or sentiments expressed against women because they're women. Misogyny is the cruel hatred of women because they are women. And I call this term 'femiphobia.' Just scared of women. Just fear when you see women coming—it just does something to you. Now we see this in hip-hop culture, but it is easier to jump on them: "Oh my God, they're calling the women the bitches and the hoes and the skeezers and the sluts and chicken-heads." And it is terrible. That is terrible stuff. But then we live in the same culture that refuses to concede the legitimacy of women working for equal pay, for equal jobs, of getting any kind of substantive engagement in the state through welfare laws that are virtually criminal, and stigmatize and punish women in ways that are draconian. And yet we are outraged by the explicit expression of that misogyny when its routinization and banalization on the everyday level. It is like when folk go to the black church and stand up to speak against those damn rappers and what they're doing—Snoop Doggy Dogg and Fo' Shizzle My Nizzle, and these bad influences.

And seventy-five percent of the black church is black women—they can cook, they can clean, they can sow, they can take the garbage out, they can be head of Sunday school, but they cannot pastor the churches they numerically dominate. So you haven't been called a bitch, but you dangum been treated like one! In fact, it is an ecclesiastical apartheid. That is basically what it is. You are granted no say and ultimately no position of power over the church where you give the most cash, most money, or tithes, excuse me, into the store house, that there be meat in my fathers house. Right. Man, Antonio Gramsci doesn't have a clear expression in terms of hegemony. He said Marx had it right in terms of domination,[13] but hegemony means that I dress it up so deep that I just dominate you and have you standing in line coming back for more. The cultural expressions of seduction through which complicity with power are secured. This is Hegemony 101. That form of terror is not interrogated, expressed, dialoged about and opened up as a form of solidarity between black women and black men against their children in the hip-hop culture who are conveniently stigmatized. In fact, I would suggest that many older black people are committing rhetorical and ideological terror against their children in terms of the disparate generational divide that is being exacerbated by forms of nostalgia and amnesia—'negronesia,' 'aframnesia,' the virulent black variety of that self-defeating forgetfulness.

Finally, it seems to me, the form of terror around brothers and sisters who are gay and lesbian. This is one that is agreed upon by so many people. In one sense, it is the acceptable bigotry, even though it has been shouted down. We have seen what happened in the Episcopal Church, which they say is now threatened to be split (though I don't think so) over the issue of bringing to the Bishopric an explicitly out and open gay brother to serve. The viciousness and terror of homophobia was brought home to me when I was in a small church in Dallas, Texas. I was there to lead a workshop for men, black men, and there was a white brother who wanted to participate. (You know how a black church will do it: whosoever will—you think you're a brother, come on in!) He was happy. The brothers and the white guy. It was cool. Then we got to the issue of

homophobia. So I was trying to hit it hard—I don't want to live a schizophrenic life, saying one thing in the classroom and another in the church. So I am trying to have integrity and keep my job at the same time. I'm down there, and I'm hitting this homophobia thing. And it is going over like a brick cloud. The brothers are saying: "Wait a minute now, remember what the Bible said." I said, "Oh, that same Bible man is just beating you down." The white guy stood up and said, "Dr. Dyson this is wrong, this is not what the Word says" and the brothers were agreeing with him. I said, "Isn't this interesting." I said, "Brother (let's call him George), now tell the truth George, could we have held this meeting in your church?" George said, "No Sir." (I love the southern gentlemanliness, "No sir".) I said, "Why couldn't we have held this meeting in your church, George?" (This is three years ago.) "Well, tell you the truth Dr. Dyson, because my church is still, to be honest, wearing that sin of racial division." I turned to my brothers and said "Brothers, isn't it interesting that you have created solidarity around the reading of a biblical text that allows you to form communion and community at the expense of some of your black brothers who happen to be gay. You're allowing an accidental feature of their identity to be elevated to a level of almost theological terror, treating it as the basis of expunging a person or unofficially excommunicating them. And you would allow that to occur at the expense of this brother who would stand by you to support your right to exist as a human being regardless of your race and whatever communion you found acceptance in. And yet you stand in solidarity with the guy who acknowledges that his own church couldn't even recognize you as worthy member of the community." Therefore, homophobia mobilizes irrational passions of bigotry as a way of forming destructive forms of communion at the expense of the most virtuous forms of our religious identity. In that sense, gay and lesbian and transgender and bisexual brothers and sisters have been subject to forms of terror as a result of religious ideology, practice, theology and behavior in ways that we fundamentally refuse to confront.

Therefore, religions and terrors have to do with the fundamental obligation of human beings in religious community—communities established by discourse, communities established by institutions, communities established by common needs, and communities established by the goal of forming community that refers to transcendent beliefs and identities that are manifest on the local and in the human realm. That means, ultimately, that it is an ongoing negotiation, and that 9/11, in one sense, was not a unique form of evil but the perpetuation of and the making visible of the often hidden and invisible forms of terror to which to many of our brothers and sisters are subject. Thank you.

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