

God's Terrible Springtime: Lessons after 9/11, Lessons for Today

By Antonios Kireopoulos

The specific focus of this roundtable on ecumenical relations is how the constructs that were designed and built in a different time and with a different motivation might now need to adapt. As Dale Irvin has reminded us, the Christian community writ large has shifted its attention from Eurocentric preoccupations to global concerns, and thus ecumenical relations among partner churches require reorientation and renewal. And as Mary Doak has pointed out, this renewal is most necessary, and more important than ever, as we seek to address the crises facing the world community and the social divisions they have fostered, which undermine the hope we share as Christians. Indeed, the question before us is this: how does our search for Christian unity today, in the midst of upheaval, foster hope, which is inherently tied to the proclamation of the Gospel? In contemplating this question and where it might lead us, I am grateful for Graymoor Ecumenical & Interreligious Institute's example of always striving to live out the imperative toward unity in a long history of changing contexts.

Anticipating my own conclusion, I would answer this question with a quote that gets to the crux of the matter. Given that this is an ecumenical conversation, and I am an Orthodox theologian, I want to use a quote... from the Methodist tradition, indeed one by none other than John Wesley himself, from his sermon, "A Catholic Spirit": "Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? Without all doubt, we may. Herein all the children of God may unite, notwithstanding these smaller differences."

In thinking about this question, prior to the webinar that gave rise to these reflections, I confess that I had never before heard John Mackay's term, "God's terrible springtime." But upon hearing it, I was more than intrigued; my mind started to roll immediately with thoughts and images prompted by this phrase. These thoughts and images, however, went beyond the crises of the last couple of years – the pandemic, racial strife, economic uncertainty, climate change – and took me back to another starting point, namely the attacks of September 11, 2001. If we are to consider ourselves as living through one of "God's terrible springtimes," for me this distinct time-period began with 9/11.

The horror of 9/11 was a moment in time that impacted everyone. Its overwhelming horror was unique in recent memory, yet the horrors of our time are not confined to that one day. The first casualty after 9/11 was a Sikh man, mistaken for a Muslim, who was shot and killed in an act of Islamophobic rage and retribution; the killing of Sikhs has

continued, with shootings in Oak Creek several years ago and Indianapolis only recently. Add to this the killing of Black Christians at Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, and the killing of Jews at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, among other attacks motivated by religious, ethnic, and racial hatred. (And these attacks – all motivated or coded in terms of religious identity – do not even include the seemingly countless school shootings that have taken place over the last two decades.)

These horrors are to be lamented and resisted. Yet, if we are able to acknowledge that something "good" has also arisen from the experience of them, we can say that it is the relationships that have been built across community lines. Certainly, since 9/11 these relationships have become much more intentional. At the National Council of Churches, we have long had national Jewish-Christian and national Muslim-Christian dialogues, but both of these dialogues became more intentional following 9/11 – taking concrete steps to address, collaboratively, the ongoing Islamophobia and anti-Semitism in our country, in addition to, even more fundamentally, embracing one another more robustly. In the last few years, we have also begun our national Buddhist-Christian, national Hindu-Christian, and national Sikh-Christian dialogues. In these dialogues, we have learned, and continue to learn, about our theologies, traditions, and communities. But even as we have sought to learn, and to engage our differences meaningfully, we have also sought to build relationship, indeed friendship, which has blossomed into solidarity. It is the kind of solidarity that enables us to speak up *for* one another in times of trouble, and to speak

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But even as we have sought to learn, and to engage our differences meaningfully, we have also sought to build relationship, indeed friendship, which has blossomed into solidarity. It is the kind of solidarity that enables us to speak up for one another in times of trouble, and to speak genuinely with each other at all times.

genuinely *with* each other at all times. This, as Dr. Doak was calling us to appreciate, is something that fosters hope in the midst of crisis and social division. And it is in keeping with John Wesley's instruction to "love alike."

This imperative to love alike drives not only interfaith relations but also ecumenical relations. Sure enough, the search for Christian unity is still at the heart of ecumenism. But the concept of Christian unity is dynamic and changing, and in particular, the purpose of this quest for unity has been honed to center on justice. While it does not comprise the whole of the ecumenical task, which also entails striving for unity around the eucharistic table, nevertheless, justice is no longer considered just something we "do" as Christians, something that may be advantageous if it helps us to work together and achieve greater unity. Rather, justice – good news to the poor, release for the captives, liberation of the oppressed; Christ's own commission as anointed one of God (Luke 4:18-19; cf. Isaiah 61) – is something that is increasingly seen as central to who we "are" as Christians. In terms of the ecumenical task, then: as we see, experience, and address injustice, in response can we love alike despite our differences?

Some eight or nine years ago, the NCC went through a complete, top-to-bottom restructure. Part of the restructure was to re-think the common work of the churches, and to name specific priorities around which to focus that work. At the time, the two named priorities were mass incarceration and interfaith peacemaking. A couple of years ago, a third priority was added as the overriding one: anti-racism. A new initiative was begun: ACT Now to End Racism, the A meaning Awaken, the C meaning Confront, and the T meaning Transform. Looking back on this development today, we

can see that it coincided with the extension of God's terrible springtime, from 9/11 twenty years ago, through years of violence and division, to the crises we face today. I suppose we could say that in springtime, and especially in this extended and particularly turbulent springtime, thunderstorms persist, even as we hope for the calmness to follow. Still, there are indeed thunderstorms.

While racism has been baked into the history of this country from its beginning, the killing of George Floyd revealed its deep roots and continuing legacy of bigotry and violence, and intensified our ongoing struggle to come to terms with it. Relatedly, we are only now beginning to awaken to the horrors committed against Indigenous communities in residential schools, not incidentally run by churches, across this continent in the last two centuries. There is, simultaneously, the immigration fiasco playing out today at the Southern US border, the most horrific moment of which in recent years was when children were separated from their parents and incarcerated alone. One could add to this anti-immigration ferment the violence against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders that has occurred largely as a result of anger over the pandemic pouring forth from other reservoirs of hate.


Of course, we must also name the pandemic itself, which is threatening human life to an extent rarely seen before in history. Attached to this is the economic uncertainty, and resulting hardship, it has caused. And, as we know, climate change is an existential threat.

All these situations require leadership from the faith communities, alongside governmental leadership, both to address past injustice and to prevent future catastrophe. Regarding the pandemic, the interfaith community mounted Faiths for Vaccines, an effort to discourage vaccine hesitancy, and the ecumenical community, through the NCC, offered member church parishes as vaccination sites and other resources to encourage vaccine acceptance. Regarding ecumenical anti-racism work, whether it has to do with voting rights or other related issues of equity and equality, such work is central to the overall work of the NCC. In our interfaith relations dialogues, we have addressed anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, anti-Asian American and Pacific Islander bigotry, anti-Sikh violence, and indeed anti-Christian persecution in other global contexts. Our interfaith table also produced an NCC policy statement, subsequently adopted by the governing board, on "The Dangers of Christian Nationalism in the United States," a document that now provides a theological and programmatic foundation for all our work pertaining to this heretical basis for so much violence in our country.

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In our Faith and Order dialogue, we have changed our methodology to address, not only important (but perhaps seemingly abstract) church-dividing and church-uniting theological questions as traditionally understood, but also the social and political issues that bear upon theology and call forth theological examination, which are themselves church-dividing and church-uniting *within* the Council's named justice priorities, and which, if left unexamined, may

limit their redress and diminish the churches' witness on them. Accordingly, for the current period, we have formed three study groups to focus on "Awakening to Racism as the Original Sin of the United States," "Confronting White Supremacy as the Defining Myth of the United States," and "Transforming the Church and Humanizing the Public Square." We are currently working on foundational material to be used by the Council writ large, as well as to inform society's discussion of these matters in general, which will be published online, through social media, and in print. To be sure, ecclesial Christian unity is still at the heart of ecumenism. But now the imperative is providing a united voice for justice, peace, and reconciliation, which are central commitments of our faith as Christians. Certainly, doctrinal issues will continue to be important to this vocation – as in the well-established framework of baptism, eucharist and ministry – but living out our faith, *loving alike*, is the primary task. This seemingly simple imperative, and this all-important task, offer a crucial opportunity for ecumenical collaboration and Christian witness in our time. 

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