

THE VIRUS OF GOD

World leaders promise to cleanse and purge the world of terrorists. But didn't Christ call us to get our hands dirty? Kester Brewin expounds a theology of cross contamination.

THE Russian prime president, Vladimir Putin, had an irritable response for western journalists who suggested he should enter negotiations with the Chechens in the wake of last year's Beslan school massacre: "Would you talk with Osama Bin Laden?"

He had a point. He was simply adopting, *par excellence*, the same "tough" response to terrorism which seems to win approval and elections within western nations. His country had to be cleansed of any potential threat, sterilized, hermetically sealed, and all negotiations closed like the borders. "We have to admit that we failed to recognize the complexity and danger of the processes going on in our own country and the world as a whole," he said. "We demonstrated weakness, and the weak are beaten."

Oddly for a man who had admitted he had failed to recognize complexity of the problem, his solutions were simplex, unilateral. As if the contaminating acts of terror could be hygienically expunged with military might.

In his book on 9/11, *Writing in the Dust*, Rowan Williams used the story of the woman caught in adultery to suggest that Christ's response to the morally filthy might have been a little more complicated:

When the accusation is made, Jesus at first makes no reply, but writes with his finger on the ground. What on earth is he doing? There is one meaning that seems obvious to me in the light of what I think we learned that morning. He hesitates. He does not draw a line, fix an interpretation. He allows a moment, a longish moment, in which people are given time to see themselves differently.¹

More recently, in an unusually persistent grilling from John Humphrys on the Today programme following the Beslan school massacre, the Archbishop of Canterbury urged the same caution in leaping to judgement. 'In a world in which human decisions are free,' he said at one point, 'even free for the most appalling evil like this, God does not dictate, does not intervene for outcomes.'

If humanity could sink to such horrific depths with premeditated acts of violence on children, he seemed to be saying, then we all, as co-members of this troubled race, needed to pause together to understand how this evil had taken root and borne such fetid fruit.

DIRT AND TERRORISM

It is no coincidence that in an increasingly fluid world, with instant global communication and cheap flights to everywhere, terrorism has recently found itself a new potency. Terrorism is all about violating your enemy's boundaries, performing violent acts where your enemy feels safest. The problem of tackling terrorism thus boils down to the problem of how we manage our boundaries and how we deal with 'the other', that which is outside my boundary, that which disagrees with me and battles with me.

Bush's first response to the 9/11 tragedy was to secure America's boundaries and close all airspace (a sensible impulse that makes his decision to allow the Saudis to be the only ones to permeate them a little odd to say the least), and Putin's speech declared that fortified borders were the answer to the Chechen problem. But I want to suggest, as Williams did, that in the longer term to fix such lines may be a policy that simply exacerbates the distinction between us and our 'others', and thus leaves us all in greater danger of people wanting to pick up stones and violate us.

The question of boundaries is one which challenges us to decide how we want our society run. All societies have to make boundaries, decisions about what and who is in or out, is clean or dirty. If one keeps within the boundaries – acts in the right way, speaks the correct language, behaves in an appropriate manner – then one is accepted as part of society. But the inescapable

consequence of that demarcation is that those who transgress, who step over the boundaries, are in danger of being rejected and labeled as 'other', as 'dirt'.

Dirt is thus an inescapable by-product of creating order in a society. It is what is left over when we have decided what is clean, what is acceptable, what is orderly. But dirt has no fixed definition. It is relative to place. A tin can lying in a ploughed field is litter, is dirt. But when the same can is displayed on a supermarket's shelves, it not only becomes clean, but the very ploughed field that it was sullyng becomes the dirt to be got rid of. As Mary Douglas put it in her seminal work *Purity and Danger*, dirt is simply 'matter out of place.' The coalition forces in Iraq see the insurgents as filth to be cleansed, and the insurgents view the coalition forces in exactly the same way. The question of how we deal with our 'dirt' then, perhaps has some bearing on how we ought to try to deal with terrorism.

CROSS CONTAMINATION

The society Christ inhabited had its dirt boundaries just like any other. The religious authorities had defined very carefully exactly who and what was clean. Not only that, they also controlled the mechanisms by which those who had been defined as unclean could find cleansing. They thus exerted a huge amount of social control, and in this light we can therefore see Christ's agitation of these boundaries as being perceived as hugely threatening (just as those who appear to want to move boundaries today appear to us as threatening the very construct of the Church.)

By touching lepers and speaking freely with women he is stating that he simply does not recognize that a boundary exists. Other boundaries he supports, but even when he does so, he makes it clear that his association with those on the other side of that boundary does not make him 'dirty'. Jesus accepts a drink from the Samaritan woman (boundary erased), but, while not endorsing her behaviour (boundary supported) he cares for her, loves her and is prepared to 'be' with her. A timely lesson: while there may be continued debate about dirt boundaries within the Church, what is clear is that the call to love one another never comes with caveats about who is deserving of our love.

Most importantly, however, where dirt boundaries do still exist, Christ forces us to radically re-evaluate the mechanisms of cleansing. The story of the 'cleansing of the Temple' has always been explained to me in a way that made it seem that Christ was attempting to make the Temple pure again. Re-reading it in the light of the above, I would like to offer an alternate view: Christ is not cleansing the Temple, rather he is clearing the way for the dirty to come and find cleansing. The money-changers and traders blocked the path for the repentant, demanding pure money was used to purchase pure sacrifices. But Christ will have none of this. The way must be cleared: the Temple is the very place that 'the other', the dirty, must be welcomed in, in order that they can be made clean, made one with God.

The story of the 'cleansing of the Temple' thus becomes a powerful symbol of how God deals with 'the other', and accordingly, an example for us to follow in our dealings with our 'others.' Rather than excluding and vetting, hosing them down before they are allowed to cross the threshold, they are to be welcomed in, in order that we might participate in their re-unification with us.

HOLY ORDURE

The psychiatrist Carl Jung writes in his memoirs about a powerful dream he had when he was a young boy. He saw the cathedral in his home town gleaming in the sunshine, a wonderful vision of glass and stone. But something troubled him and, looking up, he saw God sitting on his 'throne', and an enormous turd falling from heaven, which smashed the cathedral to dust. Jung was surprised at his reaction to this dream: he found it enormously releasing. Reflecting on it later, he wrote of his father's 'faithful but powerless' position ministering in a church which he thought of as 'purified to the point of sterility.'ⁱⁱ

Sterile places are those where nothing can live or grow, and Jung was concerned that the church of his day was so concerned about pushing 'dirt' out, that it left no place for people to

do their 'dirt work'. This resulted in real psychological damage that he and his fellow psychiatrists ended up having to tackle.

Putin's attempt to exclude the dirt of terror behind 'modern and truly protected borders' is the same one that the Israeli government has chosen with its wall around the West Bank. Yet Jung and Christ would appear to agree that fortification against terror, dirt exclusion, the solidifying of boundaries, does little but kill off any life that remains inside the boundary. Certainly, it does nothing to stop the build up of pressure from those who are excluded, thus feeding their desire to commit more acts of terror by violently breaching the boundaries.

If Christ's ministry suggests that dirt exclusion, and the setting up of solid boundaries does nothing to solve the terror problem, I also believe his death presents a boundary-crossing archetype that may offer a road map to a more sustained peace.

The American essayist Lewis Hyde explores the concept of dirt in art by looking at 'Trickster' legends from different cultures. He proposes that in all cultures there are tales of Tricksters – slippery figures who tend to throw dirt around and cross boundaries at will. One of the many stories he recounts is an Alaskan myth about the trickster Raven, who went to stay with the god Petrel. Petrel was a mean god, keeping all water to himself, leaving the earth parched. While Petrel sleeps, Raven wipes dung on his buttocks and wakes him up, ridiculing him for having soiled himself. Running off to wash, Petrel leaves the spring un-guarded, and Raven swoops down to drink. As he flies off, drops fall from his beak to earth, thus creating all the streams and lakes in Alaska. Analyzing many such stories, Hyde concludes that 'as a rule, Trickster takes a god who lives on high and debases him or her with earthly dirt – or appears to debase, for in fact the usual consequence of this dirtying is [a gift from heaven and] the god's eventual renewal.'ⁱⁱⁱ By Trickster's actions, heaven and earth are brought closer.

A TRICKSTER CHRIST

Thinking about Christ's passion in this light, we see how he 'played Trickster' in a unique way – taking the role of both the Trickster playing with dirt, and the God being debased. And debased is exactly what Christ was, for if dirt is 'matter out of place', what could be more out of place, more filthy, than God nailed to a cross? God became dirt for us, but through this sullying of God, a gift from heaven is brought to us and God is 'renewed.'

It is no sterile church in which this invigorating mystery is allowed to be released. Seeing how the Temple system, with its rigid laws and boundaries, had done nothing to solve the problem of our 'dirt', God in Christ took the radical step of crossing the boundary between pure heaven and dirty earth, becoming incarnate as one of us. Thus identifying completely with 'the other' – that which was on the other side of the boundary – and playing Trickster by offering a radical re-evaluation of the boundary, he brought a gift from heaven and a route to cleansing.

Refusing to reciprocate our terrible violence against him, the futility of our battling against God was exposed, for God was not now 'other', but one of us.

Thus reconciled to the 'divine Other' through this Godly trickster cycle, as the 'body of Christ' we must now work in a similar way with those from whom we experience alienation. The dominant world-view, of course, proffered by the neo-conservative administration of the world's only remaining super-power, is precisely the opposite. 'The other' is to be feared, to be excluded, to be filtered by tough screening at the boundary. The other is un-American; an axis of evil. Bush sees his mission as a crusade, an attempt to impose a revolution by might and cleanse the world of terrorists by hunting them down, rogue state by rogue state.

By insisting on speaking about his war on terror as a war of 'good versus evil', Bush appears to have co-opted Christ in support of this policy of boundary enforcement. Indeed, he has gone even further, and suggested that the way of 'good' is not simply to fortify the US, but to send troops over boundaries to cleanse the dirty in far off lands.

UNLEASH THE VIRUS

By contrast, Christ's willingness to enter into our dirt released a new kind of gift from heaven. Abused by those who held him, taunted and mocked, he was publicly executed; as Putin might put it, 'he demonstrated weakness, and the weak are beaten.' The authorities thought they had

neutralized a hazardous threat, while in fact they detonated Christ's body on the cross like a dirty bomb. In bidding good riddance to a dangerous agitator, a boundary violator, their nails smashed the fragile phial of his body and the God-virus was irreversibly unleashed. His boundary-crossing Spirit began infecting. First in small numbers, but then growing exponentially, Jews, Greeks, men, women, slaves and free began to see that in him there was no 'other'.

This is what we celebrate in communion: physical symbols in bread and wine are broken as we are gathered together, and become decentralized, internalized, distributed, invisible. Scattering into our different lives, cultures, relationships and workplaces, we become a network that, like the proto-internet the US military designed, would be impossible to destroy, taking with us this boundary-crossing God who became 'other' in order to reunite us.

It would be wrong to offer glib answers about such a complex issue as international terrorism, and a policy of attempting to meet the other is a brave and perilous one, as Terry Waite could testify. But most of us are not in positions to make decisions on this level. Politics is, as they say, 'the art of the possible', so we must stick to our own *realpolitik*, and do what we can, where we are; as Gandhi put it, we need to 'be the change we want to see in the world.' This is no tired cop-out: the new science of complexity and emergent networks assures us that working for change in this way, from the 'bottom up' rather than the 'top down' is hugely effective, and, in the long run, far more genuinely transformative. We may not be high-level policy makers, but what we can do on the ground is be the network of the infected, and rather than force a revolution, breed an evolution of grace and acceptance. In our churches, communities, towns and cities, we can be people who are prepared to step over boundaries and meet 'the other' - often the divine Other in disguise - by listening to his grievances and working for justice. For, as Christ explained in Matthew 25, we will be judged on such acts. Whether in the PCC, the synod, the West Bank or Guantanamo, it is at our peril that we sterilize our communities, secure our borders and exclude those we call dirty.

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ⁱ Williams, R., *Writing in the Dust*, Hodder & Stoughton, London, 2002, p.80

ⁱⁱ Jung, C., *Memories, Dreams and Reflections*, Jaffé, A. (ed), Fontana, London, 1995, pp. 52, 56

ⁱⁱⁱ Hyde, L., *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth and Art*, North Point Press, New York, 1999, p. 177