9/11 Exhibition of American Sentiment:
Reactions: A Global Response to the 9/11 Attacks

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Abstract

This paper examines the religious tenor of American photography and other art forms that focus on the tragic events of 11 September 2001 in New York, some of which seem to couch the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in terms of an attack by a generalised Islam implicitly on an equally generalised Christianity (or perhaps Christendom?). I will consider the issue by regarding – in both senses – a selection of artworks gathered together in a New York exhibition, Reactions: A Global Response to the 9/11 Attacks *(2002), with a brief parallel to Julia Loktev's film* Day Night Day Night *(2006).*

It is the task of this paper to scratch, at least, at the entangled issue of individual expression / socially framed views and attitudes as regards American artists' early responses to 9/11. However, I am aware both that no definitive and irrefutable answer could ever be provided to it and that, to a large extent, this may be the outcome of our socialisation and acculturation, with their implicit religious and political dimensions, which make it impossible to think and feel in fully personal terms.

***Key Words**: 9/11 2011;* Reactions: A Global Response to the 9/11 Attacks *(2002 exhibition: Exit Art, New York City);* Day Night Day Night *(film: dir. Julia Loktev); religion; theodicy (sociology)*

When one looks at Jem Cohen's digital print *Both Want War. Both Unelected* (2001), s/he sees the black-and-white, side-by-side portraits of Osama bin Laden and President George W. Bush, with their faces cut across by a black-and-white ribbon reading: "BOTH WANT WAR" – in giant white uppercase letters against black background; and beneath: "BOTH UNELECTED" – with reversed colours (Fig. 1).

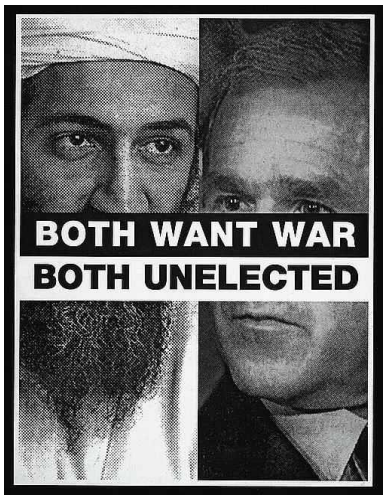


Fig. 1 **Jem Cohen, *Both Want War. Both Unelected* (2001)**. Digital print. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division

Everything, from minimalist colour scheme to caption ribbon to apparent grainy texture, evokes the newspaper style of photography; the very photos used by Cohen (b. 1962), a film-maker and media artist, are culled from news agencies. The letters flash their message ominously clearly in the upper line. Yet the lower line begs to differ: Why use "unelected" of the then US President? He had been voted into office, after all. It certainly does not take an academic to sense the religious register – as opposed to the civil one – which subtends the epithet.

It is precisely the religious tenor of much American photography, art and news about the tragic events of 11 September 2001 in New York which makes the topic of this paper, and in particular the readiness with which ensuing explanatory discourses have (mis)interpreted the attacks on the World Trade Center (and the Pentagon) as ultimately an attack by a generalised Islam *implicitly* on an equally generalised Christianity (or perhaps Christendom?). I will consider the issue by regarding – in both senses – a selection of

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artworks[1] gathered together in a New York exhibition, *Reactions: A Global Response to the 9/11 Attacks* (2002), with a brief parallel to Julia Loktev's film *Day Night Day Night* (2006).

On 11 September 2001,

> [N]ineteen members of al-Qa'ida hijacked and crashed large passenger planes into both towers of New York's World Trade Center and into the Pentagon. A fourth hijacked jet, apparently bound for Washington, D.C., crashed in Pennsylvania. In total, approximately 3,000 human beings were murdered that day. Usama bin Ladin [*sic*], the leader of al-Qa'ida, considered the attacks to be religiously sanctioned retribution for the suffering caused by U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East. Before and after the attacks, al-Qa'ida members cited several reasons for their violent acts, including U.S.-based support of Israel, the U.S.-led war against Iraq in 1991, the presence of U.S. military bases in the Persian Gulf, and U.S. support for corrupt regimes in the Middle East.
>
> (Curtis 97)

This is the description of the 9/11 attacks and their apparent motivation as provided by Edward Curtis in his introductory *Muslims in America*. On the face of it, there is a glaring discrepancy between the political/military US deeds which seemingly triggered the 9/11 attacks, in the al-Qaeda members' rationalisation of the events, and the "religiously sanctioned retribution", in bin Laden's terms, visited by the organisation onto the US. However, Islamists regard present-day violence both at home and abroad as simultaneously their moral and political struggle (Juergensmeyer 82), or rather they legitimise political/military struggle in religious/moral terms. Still, such "retribution" targets the political heads only symbolically, while causing massive loss and grievance to the civil population, its actual victim physically, emotionally and symbolically.

In the wake of 9/11, Muslim Americans showed their solidarity with the bereft families, including by donations to the relief funds; they proclaimed their loyalty to the US and abhorrence of terrorism; uppermost, they sought to instruct their non-Muslim fellows in the basics of Islam so as to reassure the American public that Islam is essentially a peaceful faith (Curtis 97–8; Smith 173–5).[2] For space reasons, I will address in a subsequent paper the assumptions behind the need for such attempts to affirm the Muslim Americans' religious credentials in a positive light. Here I will only examine the affective responses to the attacks as articulated in the public sphere through the medium of exhibitions.

In January 2002, Exit Art, an alternative gallery space in New York City, mounted *Reactions: A Global Response to the 9/11 Attacks*, one of the several exhibitions to be opened in New York alone shortly after the September events. Others that caught critical attention were: *New York September 11 by Magnum Photographers* (The New York Historical Society, 20 Nov. 2001 – 25 Feb. 2002); *Here Is New York: A Democracy of Photographs* (116 Prince Street, New York, Oct. 2001 – Jan. 2002); *September 11 Photo Project* (26 Wooster Street, New York, Oct. 2001 – Jan. 2002);[3] and Joel Meyerowitz's 27-photograph *After September 11: Images from Ground Zero* (Feb. 2002), scheduled to travel to more than 60 countries by the end of 2004 (Kennedy 315).[4] Culling a staggering number of exhibits for

[1] Admittedly, the selection criterion is highly idiosyncratic: I am primarily interested in visual works, but not texts, which make a fairly explicit religious statement; however, for space reasons I have not included all the relevant artefacts.

[2] Shortly after the 9/11 attacks, the Muslim world also largely *condemned* them as terrorist acts (Pintak x).

[3] Subsequently shown at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, DC, *Here Is New York* has gone on tour to Chicago, San Diego, Houston, Berlin, Zurich, London, Paris and Tokyo (Wosk 771). See Wosk's analysis of the three exhibitions.

[4] The exhibition by Meyerowitz – the only photographer with unimpeded access to Ground Zero due to his task to create, under the auspices of the Museum of the City of New York, "an archive of rescue and recovery work at Ground Zero" (Kennedy 318; 318) – was "backed by the U.S. State Department and regionally promoted by American embassies and consulates throughout the world," intended as it was "to shape and maintain a public memory of the attacks on the World Trade Center and their aftermath" (315). Meyerowitz's exhibition was

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the Exit Art *Reactions* became possible through the gallery staff's "worldwide appeal by letter and e-mail for individuals to send in creative responses" to 9/11, with the sole artistic criterion concerning the work's size: 8½ x 11 inches; subsequently, all 2,443 exhibits – drawings, paintings, photographs, collages, letters, digital prints, poems, and graphic designs, "with sophisticated work by internationally recognized artists hung side-by-side with drawings by children" – were acquired by the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division (<www.loc.gov/exhibits/911/911-exitart.html>).[5]

Two aspects of the LOC introduction to the Exit Art *Reactions* are worth considering: the underpinnings of the staff's "[r]ecogni[tion] that people everywhere had an urgent need to freely communicate their feelings publicly"; and the likely effects of the size criterion, which introduced a constraining yardstick for "express[ing] strong feelings – grief, fear, anger, hope, patriotism, even strong antiwar sentiment" (<www.loc.gov/exhibits/911/911-exitart.html>). As regards the latter, Julie Wosk's personal response to another New York same-size-works exhibition about 9/11 might jolt us against any blithe assessment of size equality as enabling *ipso facto* the artefacts to impress viewers with *equal* emotional force:

> The Prince Street exhibit [*Here Is New York: A Democracy of Photographs*] seemed the most sterile of the three. With all of the images so regularized, lined up side by side, equidistant, and same sized, it was often difficult to respond to the emotional content of the photos, however forceful they might be.
>
> (Wosk 775)

As to the former issue, one might wonder to what extent such freely and publicly communicated feelings were an *individual* expression, if potentially shared by other people, and to what extent they articulated *socially framed* views and attitudes.

Christina Simko's reconsideration of the sociological usefulness of theodicy is worth adducing to bear on my subsequent analysis. If, as Max Weber argued, "human suffering creates the demand for *theodicies*: cultural vocabularies, religious or secular, that explain perceived injustices," evil and suffering (Simko 880), then failure to provide such convincing rationalisation of collective disaster can be socially, not just individually, devastating, since "[t]he problem of suffering threatens collective narratives that ordinarily provide the unquestioned background sustaining social, cultural, and political order" (Simko 884). Simply stated, any such failure can result in anomie, viz. the blockage of successful meaning-making of the world, with grave psycho-social ramifications, considering the importance of collective narratives for developing and maintaining a sense of community, i.e. the very grounds for making an "imagined community" (in Benedict Anderson's phrase), as well as the more general human need for meaning beyond simple instrumentality (Simko 885). Could individual expressions of feeling in the aftermath of 9/11, as captured in the Exit Art *Reactions*, be (re)conceived rather as cogs within an individual or collective theodicy qua meaning-making mechanism, if, in the latter sense, itself "central in shoring up the legitimacy of government institution" (Simko 883), not just in buttressing a homogeneous view of nation? It is the task of this paper to scratch, at least, at the entangled issue of *individual* / *socially framed* early artistic response to 9/11, even as I am aware both that no definitive and

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launched by US Secretary of State Colin Powell thus: "We send these chilling photographs out to the world as a remembrance and as a reminder: a remembrance of those who perished, and a reminder of our commitment to pursuing terrorists wherever they may try to hide" (qtd. in Kennedy 315). Kennedy, who is interested in "the role of photography in the shadow war of representation that still ensues over the meanings of 9/11" (315), analyses the US State Department's support of Meyerowitz's exhibition as "a fascinating initiative in cultural diplomacy that both echoes structures of Cold War propagandizing and raises fresh questions about the role of visual culture in American foreign policy" (315).

[5] Images of a selection of the works are still on view on the LOC website: see the exhibit catalogue at <www.loc.gov/exhibits/911/911-object.html> and a thumbnail catalogue with links to individual exhibits at <www.loc.gov/exhibits/911/911-exitart.html>.

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irrefutable answer could ever be provided to it and that, to a large extent, this may be the outcome of our socialisation and acculturation, with their implicit religious and political dimensions, which make it impossible to think and feel in fully personal terms.

Helen Zughaib's *Prayer Rug for America* (2001), a giclée print of the original gouache drawing,[6] "combines American patriotic imagery with traditional motifs related to Islamic prayer and architecture" (<www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2002713130>). Specifically, the artefact unmistakeably re-colours the geometrically rendered mosque-shaped figure as, and frames it with, the US flag,[7] even as the outmost margin may be less obviously American in pattern. Zughaib's rug is complete with an *invisible* praying individual, but for the tiny feet, almost a child's, rendered in the lower right corner of the mosque to substantiate the praying dimension indicated by the title. It is hardly inconceivable that the Lebanese American artist (b. 1959) "believes that the arts are one of the most important ways to help shape and foster dialogue and positive ideas about the Middle East," as she professes (<http://hzughaib.com/about.html>).[8] Then why is the praying Muslim merely evoked in an artwork whose title and central image inscribe Islam at the heart of the US (flag), and whose compositional symmetry s/he discreetly shatters? Considerations of artistic expression notwithstanding, should we also see here an allusion, unconscious or not, to the (in)visibility of Muslims in American public life prior to 9/11, as opposed to their radical "un-covering" afterwards?

Here are some demographic statistics about American Muslims around 2001, if culled, in the absence of any government census figures, by various organisations and researchers. According to the Pew Forum, the *average* percentage in the various states does not exceed 1 (<http://religions.pewforum.org/maps>).[9] Barry Kosmin and Seymour Lachman's 1990 and 2001 surveys of religious identification in the US show an estimated number of 1,104,000 adult Muslims in 2001, as compared to 527,000 in 1990, which represents a 109% increase, even if the average percentage in 2000 was 0.5 (Moore 140). The Center for American Muslim Research and Information reported 7 million Muslims in 1998 (Uddin 11). Likewise, the number of mosques was visibly on the increase between 1986 and 2001, the top three states being California, New York and New Jersey (*Muslim Life in America*, 35).[10] As to the

[6] Zughaib's work provides the front cover image of Curtis's *Muslims in America*.

[7] A somewhat similar case occurs in Kevin Bubriski's *Flag Seller*, a print of the photograph taken on 27 September 2001: the man of the title, with a US flag-scarf wrapped around his head in Arab-fashion, displays US flags for selling alongside Arab scarves.

In the wake of 9/11, the US flag was instrumental in calling for American patriotic/nationalistic sentiment and unity, as "the most visible symbol of this spirit of national togetherness. Wal-Mart reportedly sold 116,000 flags on 9/11 and 250,000 the following day..., and the flag appeared as television logos, on tie pins worn by news presenters, and flew over public buildings, private businesses and private homes: the flag's ubiquity signalled the widespread activation of a deep-seated patriotism" (Westwell 5). Such "united-we-stand" patriotic rhetoric which "flags the nation" silently belies the fact that especially in NYC the attacks' victims were also *foreigners* (Simko 893–4, 896).

[8] Helen Zughaib's 2008 invitation "as U.S. Cultural Envoy through the State Department, to Palestine, where she led a workshop with Palestinian women artists in Ramallah" (<http://hzughaib.com/about.html>) seems to indicate the success of the artist's self-professed creed. However, see Winegar's astute critique of western universalist assumptions about art, i.e. that "art is a uniquely valuable and uncompromised agent of cross-cultural understanding; and that art constitutes the supreme evidence of a people's humanity, thereby bringing us all together" (652). Winegar frames her critique within an examination of the connections between art and politics in Middle East arts events in the US since 9/11, which "demonstrates how American secular elite discourse on Middle Eastern art corresponds to that of the 'War on Terror'" (651).

[9] The Pew Forum does not mention the census data used. The percentage has remained constant from 2008, when I first accessed this online source, to the present. Of course, this kind of demographic report cannot show significant alteration over such a short span, even as, according to various sources, the estimated number of American Muslims is growing fast.

[10] *Muslim Life in America* draws its demographic information from the "Mosque in America: A National Portrait" survey released in 2001, which is a part of a larger study of American congregations, "Faith

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opinions of US Muslims about their participation in institutions and politics, 70% of the informants for the 2001 "Mosque in America: A National Portrait" survey agreed that it should increase (*Muslim Life in America*, 35). This response came in the aftermath of Muslim organisations' active participation in mainstream politics by the 1990s and Arab-American organisations' advocacy for Muslim concerns about civil liberties (Moore 147).

Let us have a look at another Exit Art exhibit, Linda Hesh's *Safe/Suspect* (2001). There is a lot of bitter irony in the double photograph (Fig. 2) whose striking brightness manipulation, compounded by facial hair manipulation,[11] evokes the readiness with which people (any and all? or rather members of the "default" white race?) may ordinarily grow suspicious of their fellows, should the latter be "coloured" enough to evoke the stereotypical portrait of the *other* – here the axiomatically terrorist Arab.



Fig. 2 **Linda Hesh, *Safe*/*Suspect* (2001)**. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division

Centuries before the age of image-editing software, another "picture" was manipulated in terms of brightness, if in reverse and capable to elicit positive sentiments in beholders: that of Jesus of Nazareth. A Jew by birth, Jesus must have had a darker hue than the fair complexion with which traditional western iconography has familiarised us.

Such manipulation of image brightness to suggest the "inherent" psycho-social profile of an individual – framed within the (in)famous dichotomy between light/white/good/*us* and dark/black/evil/*them* – also becomes apparent in a Hollywood film written and directed by Julia Loktev, *Day Night Day Night* (2006), about a failed bomb attack on the Times Square in New York City by a very young woman. As the Russian American director confesses, she derived her idea of the Times Square threat from a Russian newspaper article about a young female Chechen suicide bomber walking down a main street in Moscow; Loktev, however, was interested "to make a film that ... isn't about how something looks from the outside but feels from the inside" (qtd. in <www.mediasanctuary.org/event/day-night-day-night-w-filmmaker-julia-loktev>). Indeed, *DNDN* focuses not on the technical lineaments of the bombing plot and failed implementation, but on the young protagonist's resolution *and* anguish in the process of carrying out her mission.

Conflictual psychological processes apart, another aspect in the creation of the *DNDN* protagonist is also worth addressing here. The end credits identify the character, played by Luisa Williams (born Luisa Colon), simply as "She," as opposed to both her associates and casually encountered passers-by, identified by their *role* in the film economy: "Commander," "Organizer," "Bombmaker," "Bombmaker's assistant,"[12] "Driver," "Flirt" or "Bathroom girls." For all the anonymity and universality of the protagonist, "She" is not any nineteen-year-old woman with a suicidal inclination, enlisted in the service of a terrorist group. Rather,

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Communities Today," coordinated by Hartford Seminary's Hartford Institute for Religious Research in Connecticut (*Muslim Life in America*, 35).

[11] The "Safe" portrait shows the man with a goatee, while the "Suspect" version depicts him with a full beard and darker skin (<www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2002716320>).

[12] To secure her anonymity as an accessory in the terrorist plot, the "Bombmaker's assistant" (Annemarie Lawless) is a female with the face covered with a veil – in true Muslim fashion!

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the film features as the would-be suicide bomber a female whose non-descript ethnic identity, from facial features to accent, nevertheless echoes the typical western stereotype of the Muslim "Oriental" (woman).[13] The earliest scene deftly creates this ambiguous anonymity through recourse both to spare phone conversation – with a high degree of secrecy and emphasising the protagonist's utter meekness, as throughout the early half of the film – and to low brightness and manipulation of camera angle aimed to obscure the ethnic identity of the woman. Nonetheless, both her concealing apparel, especially the ankle-long denim skirt worn initially, and her compulsive washing habits – which, in retrospect, mimic an ablution ritual – gesture towards her Muslim affiliation. Loktev may have wished to make a film that is about how something "feels from the inside," yet, apart from character psychology, her phrase (and film too) also evoke *society's inside*, from collective mentality to the actual "inside others" it ostracises. I submit that the vague, though recognisably "Oriental," identity of *DNDN*'s protagonist, alongside her terrorist engagement, articulates aesthetically the American apprehensions of the "enemy within"/"enemy alien"[14] which ran amok in the wake of 9/11. Simply stated, *DNDN* participates ideologically in a wide range of negative stereotypes of "the Muslim"/"the Arab" as religious fanatic and/or terrorist, as produced and disseminated by the American media and the Hollywood film industry[15] alike, and whose "dangerous and cumulative effect," according to Jack Shaheen (qtd. in Moore 144), could only be offset by positive media challenge.

Beyond individual response, if any such should exist untainted by social representation and collective values, how did collective bodies respond to 9/11? Arguably, Hesh's *Safe*/*Suspect* and Loktev's *Day Night Day Night* already suggest the socially primed dimension of individual response. At the other end of the "collective" continuum, the media provides a fair barometer of socio-political views, attitudes and biases, as well as being the major disseminator of prejudice and negative stereotypes. Ervand Abrahamian notes that unlike in Europe, in the US the *mainstream quality media*[16] "framed September 11 within the context of Islam, culture and civilisations," endeavouring to "explain the crisis by resorting to

[13] According to Edward Said, Orientalism posits dogmatically an absolute difference between a superior West and a backward East (amassing reductively the Arab, Indian, Chinese and Japanese civilisations), the latter deemed incapable of self-definition and self-government, yet also frightening and having therefore to be controlled. The force of the respective positive and negative stereotypes depends on the West's *hegemonically* self-appointed speech (and thinking) entitlement, or "sovereign Western consciousness" (Said 8), since, for Said, Orientalism as a "corporate institution for dealing with the Orient – dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it"– provides a discourse (in Foucault's sense) which articulates "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (3). Briefly, Orientalism has legitimised the West's imperialist and colonialist project via a "systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage – and even produce – the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period" (Said 3).

[14] To the usual sense of the phrase(s), we should add a more recent one as examined by D'Souza, whose phrase "enemy at home" identifies the *US cultural left*, especially the left wing of the Democratic Party, as ideologically responsible for having fuelled the anti-American rage within the Islamist ranks which led to 9/11, e.g. by having fostered a decadent lifestyle abhorrent to conservative societies and through attempts at globalising secular values (including allegedly anti-family ones) in non-western societies.

[15] On post-9/11 American cinema see Markert and Westwell. Nevertheless, while examining a wide range of cinema and TV productions, neither broaches a non-explicitly 9/11-related film such as *DNDN*. Westwell sets out to describe the "nationalist energies" – the driving force behind any "imagined community," in Anderson's sense, as cited by Westwell – which in his view shape post-9/11 American films. His is a timely critique of the "presumption of a straightforward top-down relationship where conventional forms of US national identity are reproduced and reinforced in popular culture," when in fact the processes at work there entail "constant making, unmaking ad remaking" (11).

[16] By mainstream media, Abrahamian names "quality newspapers and journals read by the American literati and intelligentsia, whom political scientists would describe as the 'attentive public'" (530). See his selection of quotations from various US newspaper and magazine commentaries on 9/11 (531–4).

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Samuel Huntington's 'Clash of civilizations'" (529)[17] – a very orientalising bias indeed, which I will address in another paper.

Toby Miller makes a valuable point when he examines religion, or rather people's embracing religion as an overarching explanatory discourse, for its capacity to alleviate individual angst, in the wake of 9/11, by powering "a search for meaning" (Miller 121) within the chaos of destruction, as well as to boost belief in American society's spiritual call – sociology's theodicy. Yet he also fears that the American "claims to spirituality" are of ill omen, since they seek to reach "stability through revenge" (121).

A view of the larger socio-political context may be useful here. Miller contends, from an acknowledged leftist position, that in the wake of 9/11, and fuelled by it, certain conservative tendencies pre-existing it for decades have come into full swing in American society: the alliance between right-wing politics, Republicanism, (New) Evangelicanism and capitalism, working together in a "cultural war" strategy which draws on the early civil rights and second-wave feminist fight against oppression (Miller 121) to stake out its neoconservative politics. Central to Miller's account is rampant *religiosity* as a discursive practice often fallen back onto for its explanatory force regarding the alleged evil ravishing a secularised world where various minorities are struggling for empowerment.[18] Political biases notwithstanding, this is the context in which the 9/11 attacks struck *symbolically*, not only physically, at the US economic/financial and military core: the WTC and the Pentagon, respectively (Alan Roth, qtd. in Westwell 22; Juergensmeyer 121–31; Harlow, Dundes 439, Curtis 97; Simko 893).

The classic *us*/*them* dualism is couched fairly explicitly in religious terms in a colour inkjet print by photographer Marc Yankus (b. 1957), *After the screaming I ran to the roof with my camera and started shooting. I felt nothing. It was like watching a movie* (Fig. 3). Yankus took the picture of the 9/11 WTC attacks from roof height, with a church dome in the foreground left. There is an uncanny compositional symmetry, in fact, between the spire-and-cross of the dome – a staple of western Christian architecture – and the antenna spire of the north tower (1 WTC) situated centrally in the background, with smoke billowing from the upper floors (and the blast of 2 WTC), just as there is an uncanny ambiguity lodged at the heart of the verb *to shoot* used in the title-caption, which here denotes the benign activity of picture-taking.

Apart from *shooting*, several issues beg attention in the headline-long title. In "After the screaming, I ran to the roof with my camera and started shooting," *whose* is the screaming? Strictly speaking, it references the subject of the main clause: *I*. Yet, how many speakers heed the grammatical rule stipulating the co-referentiality of the implicit subject in the subjectless clause and the explicit subject in the main clause? More likely, especially given the emotionally charged historical context, most beholders ascribe the screaming to (here) invisible, angst-ridden throngs of people scurrying for a haven away from the towers. On the other hand, why does the shooting (admittedly, with the camera) generate an almost serene sense in the photographer, a film-spectator's composed detachment? "I felt nothing. It was like watching a movie." May the surreal scene – and the surreal idea of the WTC collapse through terrorist attacks – appear as contrived as the special effects of films so that they

[17] See Edward Said's and Jonathan Freedland's critique (qtd. in Abrahamian 534) of the sweeping American belief that 9/11 was fuelled by religious anger, i.e. the appeal to Huntington's reductive "clash of civilizations." Likewise, David Harvey compares the 9/11 BBC report of the terrorist attacks on "the main symbols of global US financial and military power" with the US media reports of an attack on "America," "freedom," "American values" and the "American way of life" (qtd. in Westwell 36), which echo President Bush's views as articulated from the Oval Room on 11 September 2001 (qtd. in Simko 886).

[18] It is no coincidence that President G. W. Bush used the word *evil* – with all its religious overtones – in his theodical speeches about the attacks, starting with his 9/11, 8:30 pm address (qtd. in Simko 886). His dualistic theodicy was endorsed by President Obama in, for instance, a 2010 address (qtd. in Simko 888).

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merely elicit *insensate* (almost Kantian, disinterested) *aesthetic or documentary interest*? Conversely, could the magnitude of the event have benumbed the witness, but for a faint self-awareness of having turned insensate? If so, is such *desensitisation* idiosyncratic or rather nurtured socially, e.g. through systematic exposure to violence in films, docudramas or news bulletins? Furthermore, does Yankus's camerawork as applied to this scene of horror and trauma, in conjunction with the caption, indeed "bring to the fore some of the dilemmas surrounding aesthetic and ethical dimensions of 'photographic seeing'" (Kennedy 321) with an avowed *testimonial* value?[19]

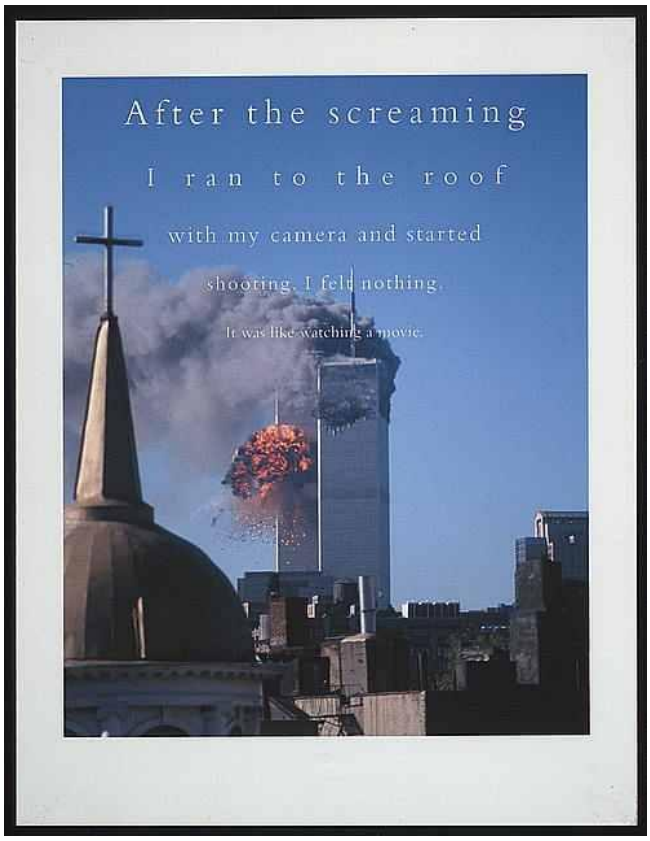


Fig. 3 **Marc Yankus, *After the screaming...* (11 Sept. 2001)**. Inkjet print.
Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division

Why, to begin with, does Yankus *frame* the attacks on the WTC as virtually a *religious* attack? To put it otherwise: Why does the church dome rise between the photographer and his actual focus, the WTC towers, and moreover from an angle calculated to create the above-mentioned symmetry? Apart from this *compositional* structure, which frames the attacks unavoidably in religious terms, there is yet another, *metacognitive*, *frame*[20] we need to address: that of the very exhibition hosting the work, with its curators' desire to enable an aggrieved nation to give vent to its feelings. What is the place of religion here? Does it reference a theodical instinct of meaning-making by recourse to a handy epistemic frame?

Unsurprisingly, Yankus's is hardly a singular approach to 9/11. A host of artists, media people, politicians, alongside ordinary citizens, have succumbed to the theodical lure of (mis)interpreting the attacks by a handful of extremist Muslims – not only on 11 September 2001 – as virtually Islam's attack on *Christianity*'s bastion of democracy.[21] Suffice to mention, in the visual realm, James Nachtwey's photo of the south WTC tower collapse (*One Nation* 81). Like Yankus, Nachtwey (b. 1948) shot his (earliest) 9/11 pictures from rooftop

[19] Kennedy refers to Meyerowitz's photography of Ground Zero, which "acknowledg[es] beauty in the scenes" (321) of destruction and terror, as well as of rescue work.

[20] I am taking my cue from Kennedy's examination of the frame used to present Meyerowitz's solo exhibition of Ground Zero photographs, *After September 11*, as "the real": here "the key frame is propagandistic, the political mandate of American cultural diplomacy to 'tell America's story to the world'" (322).

[21] Conversely, yet still in a religious vein, Tony Auth's cartoon *Another victim of Bin Laden's terror* (2001) depicts an overtly phallic minaret (captioned "Islam" vertically, like NASA rockets) being blasted. Why this ominous suggestion that the 9/11 attacks will backfire on the entire Islamic world, or at least religion, and destroy it? Such intimation of Islam's self-destruction through the murderous deeds of some of its extremist followers tallies with the opinion proffered by Karima Diane Alavi, the founding director of Islamic World Educational Services, in the magazine *America* in March 2002: "We American Muslims [are] still reeling from the fact that our faith has also been hijacked on Sept. 11 by people who twisted their version of Islam into a blackened form" (qtd. in Egendorf 7).

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(*One Nation* 80). And like the former, he framed this composition pictorially and ideologically by choosing to feature the debris of the tower's implosion as the apocalyptic background to a cross atop an otherwise invisible church, but for the cornice. In his own words, in this photograph Nachtwey "was making a frame with the church in the foreground – it was about the church, and the injured building behind it – when the first tower just exploded and collapsed" (qtd. in *One Nation* 81).

Similarly, African American writer, musician, film director and photographer Gordon Parks (d. 2006) "was moved to remember the day [9/11] in word and imagery" (*One Nation* 90). In his "Bottomless Tuesday" (published in *One Nation*), "Death clouds hover in blood-spattered skies" (line 7) – a haunting image indeed. Yet Parks's poem opens in a compellingly different tenor:

> America – a wounded eagle,
> *shrieks revenge for a murderous attack*.
> Terror and anger race our shores together.
> (Gordon Parks, "Bottomless Tuesday," ll. 1–3, *One Nation* 90; emphasis added)

To this inflammatory incipit the poem opposes a moving view of spiritually bred love:

> Let us develop a preference for love
> over that of missiles and poisoned air....
> If, with their grieving ones left behind,
> we could discuss the depth of their sorrow,
> we should ask them to have a talk with faith – and hold on to it ...
> No one should desert it [our planet] until they have found
> what GOD put us here to find – LOVE!
> Even death should not keep it from growing!
> (Gordon Parks, "Bottomless Tuesday," ll. 26–7, 42–4, 48–50, *One Nation* 90)

In such a view of universal love, or rather of love as a God-given gift to be sought for by each and every individual, seemingly irrespective of their faith ("Ours is a planet with a multitude / of beliefs, languages and worshippers," ll. 46–7), the indictment comes nevertheless in fairly straightforward fashion: "*With fanatical design*, the attackers / found chinks in this nation's armour" (ll. 28–9, emphasis added). The attacks are framed symbolically as a faith matter: fanaticism is opposed to (traditionally, Christian-inspired) love, and Islam, if implicitly, to true, God-given faith, viz. Christianity.[22] Furthermore, in its spread *One Nation* pairs "Bottomless Tuesday" with Parks's photo, on the odd page (91), of a *cross of twigs* against an orange/ochre horizon. Dangerous *naturalisation* of the cross and thus of Christianity, depicted as jeopardised!

Why has there been comparably little, if any, public clamour for the *religious* affiliation of the white evangelical fundamentalists who have attacked the Christian bastion, if not of democracy, at least of secular "misrule" and alleged misgovernment?[23] Couch as such

[22] The dichotomy, albeit in terms of virtue rather than faith proper, re-emerges in the words of Demetrios, Archbishop of America, Greek Orthodox Church:

> In the terrorist attacks we have seen the abyss, the ugliness and darkness of evil. In what followed, we have seen the immensity, beauty and brilliance of good. St. Nicholas [Greek Orthodox church] will be rebuilt on the exact same location, but it will be much more than a small parish church. It will be a shrine, a monument of remembrance, a consecration of the sacredness of life, a place of reflection and peace for anyone of any faith or no faith. (qtd. in *One Nation*, 150)

Does the traditional religious language of good and evil (in a dualist theodicy) also cut *across* faith lines? The brief quote is silent on this issue.

[23] E.g. the 1990s abortion clinic and personnel attacks and the 1995 bombing of Oklahoma City federal building (Juergensmeyer 20–36). See Juergensmeyer's analysis, in religious terms, of both Christian and Muslim or Jewish attacks to express anger with certain societal practices.

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individuals may their violence in respectable terms as divinely sanctioned Christian activism against the evil(s) nurtured by secular society, will their self-appointed *Christian mission* be regarded by society at large and by the media in particular as *Christianity's religious attack* – and on what, *Christendom's religiousness*?

The (religious) *other's* violence/terrorism against the self/nation is the usual suspect in sweeping theodical generalisations about society's evils. Such generalisations deftly conceal, through what I would call the *scapegoat trick*, the historical dialectic of *self*-constitution through suppression and outward repelling (projection) of what will subsequently be reviled as *the other*. We may consider the process as well through the lens of Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection (starting at individual level, yet inherently applicable at collective level too) as through Jacques Derrida's critique of western thought's dichotomous inclination.

Kitty Caparella's *The Message* (2002), a three-inch square multimedia book with a white silk cover tied by a muslin sash, is designed to be opened *slowly* to reveal its inside contents.[24] When fully unfolded, the volume takes a swastika shape (Fig. 4) and shows the printed faces of the 9/11 terrorists, red-smeared with watercolor and acrylics, against "a red background on one side of small squares that fold up into an inconspicuous cube" (Farrington). Here and there "a Middle Eastern design is stamped on the back of the mug shots" (<www.loc.gov/exhibits/911/911-rare.html>).



Fig. 4 **Kitty Caparella, *The Message* (2002)**. White silk cover with muslin sash, watercolor and acrylic on paper. Library of Congress, Rare Book and Special Collections Division. Courtesy of the artist

The central image from which the swastika unfurls depicts in unsaturated colours the bombed WTC towers, whose collapse is analysed almost with a nod to Marcel Duchamps's *Nude Descending the Staircase No. 2* (1912).

On the face of it, the work squarely incriminates the perpetrators of the 9/11 New York devastation. Setting the attackers' blood-smeared heads alongside the blood-red swastika arms issues, in a fairly simple rhetoric, the warning: what the terrorists did to the innocent people in the WTC compares to the Nazi genocide of the Jews. How many beholders remember, nevertheless, that the Nazis "poached" (in de Certeau's sense)[25] the swastika, a universal cross-type solar and polar symbol of cyclic self-regeneration, if reversing its

[24] *The Message* won the Rose and Ben Wolf Printmaking Department Prize at the 101st Annual Student Exhibition of the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts (<www.loc.gov/exhibits/911/911-rare.html>).

[25] Michel de Certeau (169–72) famously construes reading as *poaching*: the reader – by extension any consumer of cultural goods – should be regarded not as someone who passively takes in the author's intended meaning, but as one who actively re-constructs the meaning to fit his/her own agenda.

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orientation (Cirlot 70, 131, 302, 322–3; Chevalier, Gheerbrant 912–13; Hall 6)?[26] The work of the reporter-artist enshrines (I use the word advisedly) the subtlest form of symbol ambiguity, a reminder that "the message" is never firmly lodged within the artefact, but emerges with each new interaction between beholder and artwork. The Nazi-ranking terrorists displayed here against the red swastika are actually "hidden" within the cross-shaped book – perhaps to suggest that often the enemy may be lurking within: when closed, the swastika folds up into a cross centred on the collapsing WTC towers (Fig. 5). How many know that the Christian cross itself is an ancient solar symbol (Hall 110)? Perhaps a few duly remember, in this connection, the (Mithraic) *Sol invictus* metaphor "poached" by Christian symbolism to connote Jesus (Callahan *passim*) as the Saviour unravished by death,[27] in a faith replete with Christ/sun metaphors (Peirce 408).

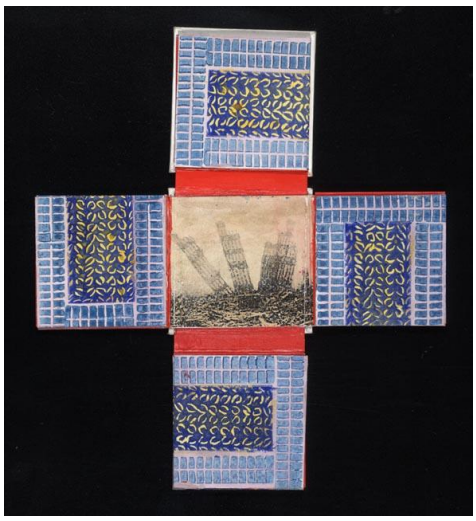


Fig. 5 **Kitty Caparella, *The Message* (2002)**
Library of Congress, Rare Book and Special Collections Division
Courtesy of the artist

Opening Caparella's book recalls the experience of children's pop-up books, whose collapsible cut-outs erect and demolish in turn scenes and characters, and it is not far-fetched to regard *The Message* thus. Yet such analogy does not rule out a more potent one, in my opinion, if only due to its long-standing tradition and visual impact, at least in the West: the religious diptych (more generally, polyptych). The iconographic programme of the open and closed religious artefact so typical of Catholicism since the Middle Ages draws on the dialectic of inner and outer – revealed and concealed – to convey its complex message by enshrining it in pictorial (and wood panel) folds as if to dramatise the very typological interpretation of the Bible.[28] Such typological reading, however, was the early Christian theologians' ploy to appropriate the Hebrew Bible, suitably christened the Old Testament, and make it prefigure, through prophecy, what the Christian Bible proper, the New Testament, would show to have been fulfilled through the Incarnation.

To recapitulate. In Caparella's *The Message*, the cross/swastika doubling and open/closed "folding" create an instability of reference, and perhaps of interpretation too, *beyond* the mere warning: look at the serpent we have nourished in our bosom, who would never forgo its evil stock, but turn up to bite us! Can the outward cross shape, alongside the book's *reliquary* condition (through opening, to reveal its actual content), be regarded as a transparent symbol, considering the history of the religious discourse which enshrines and grounds it, especially with respect to the us/them dichotomy? The answer is not easy to contemplate to its full length, for it might shatter some of the most cherished beliefs and stories which ground Christianity in the West.

[26] In Farrington's terms, the Nazis' change of the ancient religious symbol into a political one "show[s] how easily religion can be exploited for political purposes."
[27] See Peirce (207–9) and Marlowe (225–37) on the Roman imperial cult of *Sol invictus* in Constantine the Great's imperial propaganda; Friedheim on the *Sol invictus* motif in a late 3rd–early 4th century synagogue; and van den Heever ("Redescribing"; "Making Mysteries") on religious loans and the Christianisation of pagan gods and motifs.
[28] See Auerbach on the hermeneutic significance of figural or typological interpretation: to establish a connection between two separate poles located within historical time.

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Just as ambiguous strikes me to be the religious implication of Scip Barnhart's black-and-white lithograph [Fear, Fate and Faith] (Fig. 6), which is part of the Corcoran School of Art and Design's memorial portfolio *9/11 Fear, Fate, Faith* (2002). Barnhart's very technique harks back to an 18th-century procedure of mechanical reproduction of images, here in striking contrast to other artists' media in the Exit Art exhibition.



Fig. 6 **Scip Barnhart, [*Fear, Fate and Faith*] (2002)**. Lithograph. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division

Nevertheless, it is the composition proper, with its pictorial motifs, which should give us pause. The lithograph depicts a view from within one of the WTC towers as an airplane (featured horizontally across the centre line from the left) is flying into the window; behind it towers (in the right-hand half of the picture space) "the specter of death." The LOC's (<www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2002712426>) is an apt description indeed, especially as the beholder is forced to assume the standpoint of the would-be victim staring death in the face. What the LOC description overlooks is the *female* representation of Death, quite unusual in the Germanic tradition (as opposed to the Romance one). Or is it, literally and symbolically, a *veiled* death, one concealed under not-so-traditional appearance, as well as wearing a (Muslim) veil?

To the thematisation of the terrified beholder facing (up to) death, albeit devoid of any *memento mori* allusion, Barnhart adds the thematisation of the rescuer/mourner through - dramatic recourse to the Christian Deposition-from-the-Cross iconography. While the LOC description (<www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2002712426>) mentions Barnhart's inclusion of a detail from Jacopo Pontormo's *The Deposition* (*c*. 1528; Cappella Capponi, Santa Felicità, Florence), it never hints at the wealth of European paintings featuring the Christian motif, e.g. Rogier van der Weyden's *Descent from the Cross* (*c*. 1435; Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid) and Peter Paul Rubens's (1616–17; Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lille), or the 13th-century mosaic in the Basilica of San Marco. Tellingly, Barnhart's very window pane evokes, through its bars, the cross, in utter artistic disregard of the plain WTC windows. The victim (in the singular, hence paradigmatic!) of the attacks thus assumes a Christic aura. He (why not she?) may be the innocent one put to an undeserved death to atone for the others' guilt, yet is there any promise of redemption in this tragic event, and, if so, for whom, how, and from what? Redemption (or lack thereof) notwithstanding, rendering the victim Christ-like

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insists on the process of victimisation and implicitly incriminates the executioner. Who is the latter? Precisely the Arabs with blood-stained faces in Kitty Caparella's *The Message*, ultimately the quintessential Muslim/Arab – a western orientalising stereotype[29] which overlooks both differences among Arabs (not everyone being Muslim) and between fundamentalist and non-fundamentalist Muslims (where even within the former category conceivably not everyone has embraced the ideology of bomb-suicide aimed at mass-killing).[30] A stereotype which, in the wake of 9/11, may legitimise xenophobic fears and attitudes, and moreover boost nationalist WASP sentiment.

Yet there is more to Barnhart's recourse to Christic iconography. Even on American soil, the motif used by the artist has a certain pedigree. In African-American artist Bob Thompson's *Descent from the Cross* (oil painting, 1963), the intense colours (red, yellow and pink for the three foreground figures),[31] vibrating visual rhythm, and fantastic blue, red and dark bat-shaped angels flying about, move *beyond* the traditional Christian iconography, even "artistic fantasy" (Everett 98) which invites the viewer's "mysterious venture" (Henkes 101), to intimate arguably the overarching scope of the racial and animal realms fallen prey to unwarranted violence towards a designated *other*.[32] By far more modest in its racial representation and certainly committed to a more realistic pictorial technique than Thompson's, Steve Hawley's *Descent from the Cross* (1988–90), based on Rogier van der Weyden's 1435 painting of that title (Lucie-Smith 214–15), transforms the traditional mourners into despondent-looking individuals in contemporary apparel. They seem to have lost all sense of purpose and direction, also intimated through redirecting the gaze of some of them away from the central event. Hawley's characters' may be a modernist angst-ridden condition, but it is no match to Thompson's cosmic, if virtually timeless,[33] anguish. Nor is it a match to Barnhart's [*Fear, Fate and Faith*], whose implication *within the Christic frame* which it thematises, I submit, is less the human tragedy of the events, however terrifying its scope through the presence of Death, as the subtle indictment of an entire faith, through the unseen suicidal executioner flying the Boeing 767 hijacked for mass destruction. What an ironic twist, in Barnhart's composition, to the title of the Corcoran School of Art and Design's memorial portfolio which includes this lithograph: *9/11 Fear, Fate, Faith*!

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[29] See also Winegar's critique of the Orientalist misrepresentations of Middle Eastern art and Islamic art as synonymous in the curatorial practices of the US in arts events intended to present the non-violent side of Islam, in a "representational exercise [which] reproduces ... a one-to-one homogenizing correlation between region, culture, history, and religion" (655).

[30] See more on this in Pintak (xvi–xviii).

[31] The title, *Descent from the Cross*, suggests that the three individuals in the foreground are the two men, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus (here depicted as a yellow figure and his pink-faced, cobalt blue-hooded companion), who took the dead Christ (here a red, somewhat shrunk figure) down the cross for burial. Art critics insist, however, that Thompson placed in foreground the three Marys; Christ is featured as the shrunk, blue-bodied, green-winged, falling creature in the foreground being supported by the yellow hag-like woman to the right of the naked, red-bodied Magdalene in the centre, and at one remove from the blue-attired Virgin leaning towards him (Golden 20–1; Momin in Golden 185; Henkes 101). Such collapse of gospel events may arguably point towards more than just Thompson's "personal and conflicted" relationship with women or the artist's "perception of the relationship between physicality and emotion" and "the complex nature of sexuality and love" (Momin in Golden 185).

[32] Golden (21–2) seems to point into a similar direction when she writes that Thompson's "multicoloured people ... are often read, perhaps misguidedly, as a purely nonracial statement" (21), though they were painted in an age of civil rights fight and advocacy for the (linguistic) visibility of the black people.

[33] But for the 20th-century derby hat of one angel (Henkes 101).

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"I have been a witness, and these pictures are my testimony. The events I have recorded should not be forgotten and must not be repeated," photographer James Nachtwey writes on his homepage (<www.jamesnachtwey.com>) in the best tradition of humanism. His moving epigraph could well articulate the spirit of all the photographs, as well as other art forms, I have examined in this paper. Nonetheless, the self-same humanist tradition typically implies that no political views and allegiances should taint the artist's lens – not such a far cry from Kant's pronouncement that delight derived from the aesthetic contemplation of beauty should be disinterested (Kant §2), viz. not premised on any material/sensuous gratification, since the pure judgement of taste is independent of charm and emotion (§13). Willy-nilly, though, ideology (broadly conceived) not just permeates any judgement, but underpins our very subjective formation, as especially feminist critics have argued (de Lauretis; Haraway; Keller).

Ideology as set of ideas is arguably also the motor force of the *anthropological necessity* (Simko 882) to find meaning in human suffering, even explain the latter dualistically as the clash between good and evil, as sociologists have shown through their adaptation of Leibnitz's notion of theodicy. Yet while the drive to theodicy may offer a cogent sociological explication of the human search for meaning, for a coherent interpretation of the chaos of life, the paradigm is relatively unable to address cases such as the *religious framing* of 9/11, viz. Islam vs. Christianity, in many artworks responding to, as well as media reports of and scholarly approaches to, the 2001 attacks. Certainly, the religious affiliation of the perpetrators may account, if only in part, for the first term within the dualist theodicy[34] which ostensibly underpins the artworks I have considered, although such generalisation to an entire, monolithically conceived, faith is arguably unwarranted. What about the second term, however? The US may be still predominantly Christian, yet especially for non-Americans, the pioneers' "city-upon-the-hill" rhetoric, later distilled in the trope of American exceptionalism, offers but a poor rationalisation of the *implicit* American self-styling as Christianity in the above-mentioned dualist theodicy. Should we ascribe the generalisation to many of the artists' religious priming, if not persuasion, or rather to a more general ideological-cultural bias in a society where traditionally religious acculturation centres on the hegemonic faith? These are questions to be pondered more than answered, let alone definitively.

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[34] Dualist theodicies explaining 9/11 are typically advanced by state representatives (the president and generally federals); contrariwise, in Ground Zero commemorations prevails a tragic theodicy (Simko 886–98).

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