



In the aftermath . . .

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In the autumn of 1984, Peter Gzowski interviewed Ft. Hans Kung, the eminent German Roman Catholic theologian on CBC's *Morningside*. Their conversation was wide-ranging, touching on religious and cultural issues of the past, present and even the future. As the interview was drawing to a close, Peter asked Dr. Kung how he imagined the future would see this troubled century of ours.

After a pause, Kung replied that he believed historians of future generations, when reflecting on the turbulent twentieth century, would remark not so much on our wars, the *Shoa* or the *gulags*, but rather note that the twentieth century was that moment in human history when the world's great faiths first began to talk to one another . . .

Excerpts from a Traveler's Journal, September, 2001. . .

Wednesday, September 5th, Formia, Italy, ". . . storms over the eastern Mediterranean delayed our sailing; spent the evening with a Hindu friend from Calcutta.

Friday, September 7th, Ventotene, Italy, ". . . meetings drawing successfully to a close; had dinner with Christian friends from Sri Lanka . . ."

Saturday, September 8th, Rome, "How good to see Khawar and Lise. They are a great example of a Christian-Muslim couple; very happy for them . . ."

Sunday, September 9th Geneva, ". . . far too long since I last saw these good Jewish friends in Tel Aviv. . ."

Tuesday, September 11th. The day the earth stood still.

The Day the Earth Stood Still was a bad science fiction film from the fifties. It was also the banner headline of the *Guardian's* European edition the morning after the horrific destruction of the World Trade Centre in New York, and the devastation at the Pentagon. The images of the terrorist attacks are seared on our retinas, and burned into our very souls.

The weather in Geneva was lovely; early autumn, mild and sunny. All Geneva, it seemed, sat outside to take morning coffee and read the papers in silence. Geneva, too,

was in mourning. Already it was clear that a significant number of Swiss were missing in the ruin of the Twin Towers, including four Genevans. But there was another grief touching hearts that morning. Placid, jewel-like, a little Swiss peninsula nestled among the French alps, Geneva is the home of most of the embryonic United Nations institutions in which men and women of good will from virtually every nation labour for a "just and equal sharing of the things the earth affords." In spite of, or perhaps because of legendary Swiss neutrality, here is where a new world order seemed gradually to be emerging.

I know something of what they felt. I had come to Europe to chair meetings of the Council of the World Federalist Movement, the senior non-governmental agency at the United Nations in New York, headquartered at the Church Centre in UN Plaza. The World Federalist Movement has been, since the beginning of the process, the coordinating NGO of the Coalition for an International Criminal Court, the treaty for which was formulated in Rome in the summer of 1998. And now . . .

On the other side of the Atlantic, events seemed to mock everything that so many had given their lives to.

It was, indeed, as though the earth had stood still. Those of my generation and our parents' generation will remember until our last breath where they were on the 22nd of November, 1963 when John Kennedy was assassinated and Camelot dissolved into mist and myth once more. Now two new generations know the disillusion, the loss of innocence wrought by terrible tragedy.

I was at the Ecumenical Centre of the World Council of Churches when I heard the news. As Acting General Secretary for Ecumenism of the United Church, I was a guest and an observer at the Executive Committee of the Council. The afternoon session was running behind schedule following reports on the UN Racism Conference just concluded in Durban, South Africa. I took a moment to call my Israeli friend to confirm arrangements to meet for a reception at the *Palais des Nations* that night. He told me the unthinkable.

In the midst of confusion and uncertainty as to what was still in store, he suggested I join him at the Israeli Permanent Mission at the United Nations. It seemed wise to be together.

In something like a state of shock, I walked the few kilometers down the winding road from the summit of the United Nations complex. Past the World Health Organization, past the International Labour Office, past the International Education Organization, past the World Meteorological Organization, ever downward, it seemed to me, towards the depths from which the Psalmist cries.

Diplomatic staff milled about in the office of the Israeli Ambassador, attending to the most urgent of duties, while remaining attentive to CNN on the TV monitors in each office.

Nervous laughter greeted a moment of grim humour when the CNN commentator advised the world that Israeli diplomatic missions world-wide had been evacuated. Not in Geneva . . .

Another seventy-two hours would pass before, with some difficulty, I would be able to make my way home through the chaos of Heathrow Airport in London. Plenty of time to think; more than I wanted, really.

We will worry at the events of September 11th, terrier-like, for the foreseeable future. Many of us will worry over the responses and reactions, domestic and international, which will proceed from that terrible day.

Real wisdom may not emerge for months, weeks, perhaps even years, but some points are emerging which seem almost to be self-evident.

This was not God's will. It had nothing to do with Nostradamus nor with the Book of Revelation. Delete well-meaning e-mails that suggest they do. When Christian friends suggest that this is God's judgment against Western decadence, smile politely and think about something fruitful like your grocery list. Jeremiah tells us how God receives such tragedy, indeed, all human tragedy and suffering: *"How can I bear my sorrow? I am sick at heart . . . I am wounded at the sight of my people's wound; I go like a mourner, overcome with horror. Is there no balm in Gilead? Would that my head were a fountain, my eyes streams of tears, that I might weep day and night for my people's dead . . ."* (from Jeremiah 8)

Remember, too, that while the numbers of dead are staggering, even one life lost, any time, anywhere is a life precious to God, who *"sees the little sparrow fall."*

Let us not give in to the temptation to refer to this act as an act of madness. This was an evil act, and should be named as such for we are called to resist evil. We are also called to seek justice, and must address the questions of how the talents of some of the best and the brightest could be turned to such evil purposes.

Let us remember, too, that this event does not embody Islam. Islam is a great faith, child of Judaism, sibling to Christianity. Islam has its own God-given vocation. The events of September 11th, 2001 no more typify Islam than the Crusades, the Inquisition or the *Shoa* typify Christianity. Osama Bin Laden, if he is the perpetrator of this deed, is no more representative of Muslims than Jim Jones of Guyana or David Koresh of Waco are representative of Christians.

The terrible price of the human freedom which God has granted us, is that great evil must be as possible as great good.

Let us be cautious about the easy application of draconian security measures. There is much that may be accomplished to provide greater security for all people without demanding that we relinquish faith in our neighbours.

We might also be cautious about the use of the term "war." We seldom sing *Onward Christian Soldiers* anymore. Granted it's a great and very singable old hymn, but the experience of this century argues against the casual and emotional employment of so terrible a word.

And we in the churches would do well to remember the "religious and spiritual" deficit in our culture. For several generations it has been fashionable to mock the beliefs of others and to neglect our own. The Psalmist reminds us that *"the fool has said in his heart, there is no God . . ."*

Above all we must hope; as Paul says in Romans, we must *"hope against hope."* In the Latin that reads, *"spero contra spem."*

In 1990, Hans Kung wrote a Latin essay with that title.

He closed it with his vision of hope:

*"Spero unitatem ecclesiarum; I hope for unity among the Churches.
Spero pacem religionam; I hope for peace among the churches;
Spero communitatem nationam; I hope for community among the nations."*

May the God of all Creation make it so.
And let the people of God say, "Amen."