

ON TERRORISM, GRACE, AND MERCY

Laurence Michalak

On June 26, 2015, along with millions of other Americans, I watched President Obama's moving eulogy of the Reverend Pinckney and eight Black parishoners of the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, who had been killed a week earlier by a young racist with a handgun. Earlier that day there had been news of another terrorist attack—this one in North Africa—in which a Muslim extremist had killed 38 tourists on a Tunisian beach, using an assault rifle. These massacres remind us that no region of the world has a monopoly on misguided people who do evil deeds in the name of a higher justice.¹

I was especially struck by what President Obama had to say in his eulogy about grace. He said, "According to the Christian tradition, grace is not earned. Grace is not merited. It's not something we deserve. Rather, grace is the free and benevolent favor of God." And at the end of his eulogy he again emphasized this point by leading the congregation in singing the hymn, "Amazing Grace."

Christianity and Islam (and other religious traditions as well) have both positive and negative manifestations. Many Americans nowadays are very negative toward Islam (Islamophobia), and yet Islam has much in common with Christianity. For example, the concept of God's grace in Christianity, which President Obama cited, is parallel with the concept of mercy in Islam.

The opening of the Quran—*Bi ism Allah rahman wa Rahim*—is often translated as "In the name of God, most merciful, most compassionate." Muslims everywhere constantly use this expression in daily life—before eating, when beginning a journey, when beginning a speech, *et cetera*. For a long time when I would hear that expression from the Quran, it seemed redundant. "Mercy" and "compassion" are the same thing, I thought, so it seemed to me that the Quran in its opening line was repetitive to no apparent purpose.

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Then some years ago I got a copy of the A. Yusuf Ali's 1938 translation of the Quran. Yusuf Ali was an Indian Muslim before the partition of the Indian subcontinent into India and Pakistan. The footnotes to his translation make the Quran—which in places is a difficult text to follow—much more comprehensible. Yusuf Ali explains in his footnote to the opening line of the Quran that *rahim* means “compassionate” in a way that can be attributed to both man and God. You can say that such and such a person is *rahim*. However, *rahman* is a profound form of compassion of which only God is capable. Yusuf Ali explained that God's compassion is the ultimate in compassion. It is that compassion that is given before it is even requested. Thus the adjective *rahim* can be applied to both man and God, but *rahman* can only be applied to God.

This is the same as the Christian concept of grace of which President Obama spoke—the gift that God gives us before we ask for it, whether we deserve it or not. President Obama shares the same Christian concept of grace that was taught to me by the nuns in my Catholic elementary school and by the priests when I was an altar boy.

Unfortunately, not all Christians and not all Muslims share the concept of a benevolent God—a God of grace, a loving God, a forgiving God, a universal God, a God of mercy who grants mercy even when it is not deserved, even when it is not requested. There are misguided Christians and Muslims to whom God is an angry god, a jealous god, a vengeful god, a capricious and unpredictable god. These people, both Muslim and Christian, pervert religion. They twist religious texts, reinterpreting them in terms of exclusivity, so that only certain people are human and deserving of compassion, and everyone else is fair game. They twist sacred texts to make it seem as if God condones violence. How odd that the terrorists in Tunisia and elsewhere are making a point of attacking and killing innocent people during Ramadan. Yet the Quran teaches that civilians and non-combatants should be protected at all times, that prisoners of war should be treated with compassion, and that Ramadan is a month of peace, a lunar month during which there should be a truce between enemies.

I see in President Obama's words about the young misguided racist who killed innocent people in Charleston a parallel to what happened near Sousse. I hope that both the United States and Tunisia will learn from our respective experiences of terror and find the right policies, so that violence against innocent people may diminish over time and some day become a phenomenon of the distant past.

But are there indeed policies that might be enacted to lessen the likelihood that such terrible deeds will happen again? Or are we condemned to experience violence over and over, a repetitive cycle without end? I think that there are lessons to be learned and things that can be done.

One lesson of Charleston and Sousse is that the weapons with which violence is perpetrated must be controlled. Tunisia had and still has one of the lowest murder rates in the world, because until recently guns were forbidden to anyone except the police and the army. There are fewer murders in all of Tunisia, a country of over eleven million people, than there are in my home city of Oakland, with a population of 400,000. However, the chaos in neighboring Libya has resulted in a flood of weapons across the border into Tunisia. Tunisia must restore control of its borders and prevent weapons smuggling. As for the United States, we must confront the gun lobby and restrict the possession of firearms.

A second thing that can be done to prevent violence is to confront hate speech. The two young men who perpetrated violence in Charleston and near Sousse, on different sides of the world, had in common that they were “misguided” in the truest sense. The Tunisian’s misguidance was a distorted version of Islam that he received from a Salafist Jihadist imam preaching in an unofficial mosque in Kairouan. As a result, the Tunisian government has now accelerated its program to close illegal mosques that promulgate perverted versions of Islam. The young man in Charleston received his misguidance from white supremacist websites. He was so deluded that he thought his actions would start a race war. Fortunately, as President Obama said, his actions had the opposite effect in the weeks following the tragedy. Unfortunately, racial tensions and gun violence have returned to the fore, and even “normal” political discourse grows less civil and conciliatory by the day. We cannot put off a more serious response to the roots of hate and its manifestations.

NOTES

¹ This commentary was originally published online by APPSI and its affiliate, the Japan Policy Research Institute, as *JPRI Critique* Vol. 21 No. 6 (July 2015). The mainstream media in the West tend toward Islamophobia and emphasize instances of “Islamic Terrorism.” However, no region or religion of the world has a monopoly on misguided people who do evil deeds in the name of a higher justice. Consider, for example, Buddhists butchering Muslims in Myanmar, Han Chinese murdering Tibetan Buddhists at the top of the world, Sinhalese Buddhists killing Tamil Hindus in Sri Lanka, Israeli settler gangs hiding behind Judaism to terrorize Palestinians, and so forth.