

A SECULAR HUMANISTIC RESPONSE TO CRISIS

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In the face of the horrors of Nice – and not long ago, Dhaka, Baghdad and Istanbul, and domestically, Orlando, Baton Rouge, Minneapolis and Dallas – I do not turn to a caring deity to find solace and comfort.

I sometimes envy my religious colleagues who have that resource, but I think they must jump through theological hoops to come up with an acceptable explanation that preserves their faith in a just deity. Their ultimate answer – “Who are we to understand the ways of God?” – is not a good enough answer for me. It is avoiding a difficult subject by hiding in mystery and a plea of ignorance.

But we aren't ignorant. We know that the universe is amoral. It doesn't care about us. It throws earthquakes our way, and volcanoes, floods and droughts, without any concern for our well-being. And, over and over again, bad people do very bad things to good people. Everyday slights are one thing. Acts of terror and genocide are totally different. What kind of humans are we that even some of us can act this way to one another? What kind of deity can sit idly by and witness our abominable inhumane behavior and do nothing to stop it?

So I cannot respond with faith. Instead, I, and other secular humanists like us, vacillate between a slew of other universal responses – of numbness and fatigue, heartbreak and anguish, fear and vulnerability, anger and outrage, despair and impotence, blame and revenge. And we turn to each other for comfort and support.

It brings to mind Elizabeth Kübler-Ross's five stages grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. As we have learned, these stages do not neatly follow each other in a succession, but overlap, backtrack, and wrestle for attention.

Consider the multi-faceted reaction of French Prime Minister Manuel Valls who, in one breath, voiced defiance: “We will not give in to the terrorist threat” – and in the next, surrender and acceptance: “The times have changed, and France is going to have to live with terrorism.”

Contemporary scholars like Stephen Pinker advise us that humankind is becoming less violent and that the “better angels of human nature” are winning out. But at times like these, it's hard to be hopeful and put trust in this newfound optimism. The barbaric acts of terror and torture that we are witnessing show no promise of soon becoming footnotes of the past. We do not say, “if another attack occurs” but “when another attack occurs.”

With each new crisis, we find ourselves at a crossroads. Will we get hardened, irreversibly traumatized, and disengaged from our empathy? Or will we preserve our humanity, our sanity, and our kindnesses? Will we resume our lives as if this latest atrocity did not happen? Or is a state of emergency our new normal? Or, like the French Prime Minister, do we need to negotiate both sentiments at the same time?

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