

Candles in the Gale

by Theofore Dalrymple

As soon as I heard of the massacre in the club in Orlando and of the murder of Jo Cox, I knew that within a few hours the candles would be out. And sure enough I was right. Like the ants that appear on my kitchen surface when there is something sweet left about, lit candles in little glasses appeared as if from nowhere.

Where do they come from, these candles, and where are they hiding before a massacre, an assassination or a disaster? Do people keep them at the ready, just in case? Above all, what do they mean or signify?

I think it likely that all those people who light the candles and stand or sit looking sad but beatific and virtuous behind or beside them after a terrible event are not religious, at least not in the sense of observing any religious rituals or observing any religious discipline. They would not be seen dead lighting a candle in a church, for example; but they are probably the kind of people who say they are 'spiritual but not religious,' that is to say who indulge in or consume all kinds of spiritual kitsch, from wind chimes to strategically-placed crystals. A higher proportion of them than average probably believe in the healing chakras of the earth or in reiki therapy.

What is the message of these candles? What are the people who light them trying to say or express? That they are opposed to massacre or assassination and regret disaster? But does this really have to be expressed? Perhaps they are trying desperately to recapture a belief in the transcendent whose very existence they doubt or, in other circumstances, vehemently deny.

Candles are a couple of rungs up the spiritual ladder, no

doubt, from teddy bears, the intermediate rung on that ladder being occupied by bouquets of flowers in cellophane wrapping piled high at or near the site of death. The black armband and the mourning dress have been replaced by the teddy bear, the unwrapped bouquet and the candle in its little glass. Public dignity has given way to informality. Candles, by the way, are not just couple of rungs up the spiritual, but also up the social, ladder; the lighters of candles would probably regard teddy bears as completely *infra dig*.

The candles and teddy bears must be very comforting for Islamists. Whenever they see them, they must think, 'These are weak and feeble people, easily intimidated and eminently destructible.'

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