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EYE ON THE NEWS

Like a Candle In Berlin

On the curious habits of the spiritual-but-not-religious

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A moment used to be defined as the amount of time between a Mexico City traffic light turning green and the sound of the first car horn, but now it might be defined as the period between a terrorist attack in a Western city and the first public appearance of a candle. Every terrorist attack, including the latest one in Berlin, is immediately followed by the public exhibition of lighted candles. It is almost as if the population keeps a store of them ready to hand for this very purpose.

What do they dignify, these candles? We are all accustomed to the lighting of candles in Catholic churches, but Berlin is not a Catholic city and, like most Western capitals, is not notably observant of any religion. Its Christmas markets belong more to folkloric tradition than to a living faith. It is likely, indeed, that most of the people whose first impulse was to light candles were proud of their lack of religious belief. On the other hand, quite a few of them might say that they were not religious, but *spiritual*.

The reason (I surmise) that so many people claim to be spiritual rather than religious is that being spiritual imposes no discipline upon them, at least none that they do not choose themselves. Being religious, on the other hand, implies an obligation to observe rules and rituals that may interfere awkwardly with daily life. Being spiritual-but-not-religious gives you that warm, inner feeling, a bit like whiskey on a cold day, and reassures you that there is more to life—or, at least, to *your* life—than meets the eye, without actually having to interrupt the flux of everyday existence. It is the gratification of religion without the inconvenience of religion. Unfortunately, like many highly diluted solutions, it has no taste.

The candles, then, are a manifestation of modern paganism, a striving for transcendence without any real belief in it. They are also a somewhat self-

congratulatory symbol of our own peaceable temperament: the violent are not great candle-lighters. We cannot, for example, imagine Genghis Khan lighting many candles for the souls of the departed (not that we really believe in souls).

But is there any harm in lighting candles in the immediate aftermath of a massacre? It adds very little to global warming, and so Gaia is not much harmed. We express ourselves thereby, and self-expression is an unmitigated good, as failure to express ourselves is an unmitigated harm.

It would be difficult to prove it, but I imagine that all those candles are an encouragement to the very kind of people who commit the massacres that are the occasion for the exhibition. We cut their throats, or drive trucks into them; they light candles. They are not morally superior, as they like to think they are; on the contrary, they are feeble, weak, soft, enervated, vulnerable, defenseless, cowardly, whimpering, decadent. Against such people, we are bound to win; and it won't even take long.

They are mistaken, the terrorists; but they are not clever or deep thinkers. So if you want more terrorist attacks, light a candle.

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