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Amish Forgiveness on the Scales of Justice

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The remarkable story of Amish forgiveness that followed the schoolhouse shooting on October 2, 2006, evoked many responses. Some pundits lauded the Amish for having the courage to forgive the killer, Charles Carl Roberts IV, within hours of the massacre. Others raised questions. Would the Amish have showered the shooter with forgiveness had he lived and shown no remorse? Moreover did forgiving a killer who brazenly shot ten girls in a one-room school, killing five and seriously wounding the rest, mock the magnitude of the crime? Might such hasty forgiveness actually condone evil and encourage more of it?

The Amish subscribe to a two-kingdom theology, shaped by their history of religious persecution in Europe. As they see it, their church, as an expression of God's kingdom, operates under a different ethical standard than worldly kingdoms. The Amish church embraces a pacifist ethic that avoids the use of force to achieve results. The ethics of Jesus—love for enemy, non-retaliation, nonviolence, and forgiveness—guide their spiritual kingdom.

In contrast, the worldly kingdoms—the governments of the world—rely on force, or at least the threat of it, to achieve their goals. The Amish believe the state is ordained by God to maintain order in society. They affirm the state's prerogative to organize a police force, imprison lawbreakers, and defend the country.

As citizens of the churchly kingdom, the Amish flatly refuse to participate in state-sponsored activities that may require the use or threat of force: joining the armed forces, pressing charges in court, suing those who wrong them, and holding political office.

The Amish extended forgiveness to the killer's widow and members of his family before dusk on that awful October day. But despite the terror that the gunman inflicted on their community, they were remarkably nonjudgmental. In fact in dozens of interviews after the shooting, I heard no expressions of vengeance about his eternal destiny.

One outsider hoped that the killer's ashes would be tossed into a dumpster. But never once did I hear Amish calls for vengeance—not even God's vengeance—against him. Even if some Amish people privately thought the gunman was condemned to hell, they never said so.

In typical Amish humility, the mother of one of the slain girls said, “I am overcome with sadness that Roberts’s life ended without the opportunity for repentance.” An Amish craftsman voiced similar empathy: “I can’t say anything about Roberts in eternity. Only God knows. I wish him [Roberts] the same as I wish for myself.” When an Amish minister was asked by an English acquaintance, “Do you think the killer is burning in hell?” the minister was similarly noncommittal. “I don’t know,” he replied. “Only God can judge....But how God has judged him, I can’t say.”

Where was the outrage, the anger that usually flares up when innocent children are slaughtered? Does empathy in the face of evil mean that Amish forgiveness could even enable wrongdoing? Amish people are quick to say that it is not their duty to judge or punish offenders. That difficult task, in their mind, belongs to the state and to God.

The martyr ancestors of the Amish could die unjustly in the sixteenth-century without anyone avenging their deaths precisely because they believed ultimate justice rested on God’s desk. This long-term view of justice is, in part, what frees the Amish to forgive on earth. They cite the Apostle Paul’s admonitions to reject revenge, to leave it in God’s hands, to feed enemies, and to overcome evil with good. The Amish accent on non-retaliation passes the responsibility for justice over to God.

Their view that God will eventually balance the scales of justice is accompanied by expectations of earthly justice now—meted out by the state. Amish people understand that evil deeds carry consequences. Forgiveness, for them, does not mean condoning bad behavior, pretending it didn’t happen, or erasing the consequences when a killer shoots ten young girls execution style. “If Roberts had lived, we would have forgiven him, but there would have been consequences,” explained a minister. Yet the Amish do not believe it’s the church’s responsibility to execute worldly justice.

“We fully expect a killer to go to jail,” said an Amish elder. “We’re not naïve,” added a deacon, “we would never want a killer turned loose. It’s the government’s job to punish evildoers.” As the tragedy unfolded in Nickel Mines, the Amish welcomed the intervention of the state police and thanked them profusely for their help. They saw the events of that cloudless October morning as an intrusion of worldly violence into their community and they expected worldly authorities to counteract it.

Living on the fringes of society, the Amish are able to forgive and hand the hard work of punishment and justice off to God and the state. Those of us living in the social mainstream however, are less fortunate, especially those public officials who struggle to balance the scales of justice every day across our land.

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