

## **I'm OK, blacks are not OK, life could be OK except for blacks**

One needs a strong stomach to read Dylann Roof's manifesto, posted to his website *The Last Rhodesian* shortly before he murdered nine people praying at a historic black church in Charleston, South Carolina. I have appended it at the end of this brief essay. It is invaluable for understanding him and for understanding the anthropology of evil. If we can suppress feelings of nausea and outrage over his overt racism, we will find an account of *an intellectual journey*, told from the time when, as a high school student, he had stray thoughts and intuitions but "no real understanding," through "the event that truly awakened" him (George Zimmerman's shooting of Trayvon Martin), followed by his subsequent study of the problem ("I researched deeper"). Well into this research, he "found out about the Jewish problem"; finally he became "completely racially aware."

Psychologists quickly pass over any evidence of such an intellectual trajectory in Roof or in other similar mass murderers and prefer to focus instead upon the paradigm of the white male loser who wants attention and importance – someone who is not the classic criminal sociopath but whose antisocial tendencies and lack of empathy predispose him to commit a heinous act. I do not discount some elements of this easy diagnosis, which today constitutes a widely accepted but highly reductive psychology of evil. I prefer, however, to focus on the phenomenology of evil – what did it feel like to

be Dylann Roof on the day of the murders? What does it feel like to be Dylann Roof today? Even very careful analysts mix up their own phenomenology with that of the person they are analyzing – they ask what would be going on in themselves if *they* did what he did. (Phenomenology weighs in at six syllables but is a simple concept and means only what I have already said – What does it feel like *to me* to be me?)

Phenomenology ignores both how you see me – which of course may be much more accurate than how I see myself – and what the observations of a "depth psychologist" about my unconscious motivations might be – which may also be correct. I can't be aware of my unconscious, by definition; and I often have no idea how I appear to others; so my phenomenology is restricted to my conscious awareness of myself. Again: What do *I* think I am doing?)

Early in his investigations, Roof came across the website of the Council of Conservative Citizens. This innocuous-sounding organization is actually the continuation of the old segregationist White Citizens Councils of the 1950s and 1960s. It is a white supremacist organization that opposes "all efforts to mix the races of mankind." It is affiliated with American Renaissance, whose presiding eminence is Jared Taylor. This suave and courtly gentleman denies that he is a racist; he merely celebrates white culture, he says, the way blacks and liberals celebrate black culture. I wish to stress the role of such educated and articulate public figures in misleading the dimmer bulbs among the hoi polloi: without all the "facts" that he gathered at these plausible-sounding websites ("I have never been the same since that day"), Roof never would have committed a mass murder. He was, as commentators say, "self-radicalized" on the Internet, meaning that he did not join a racist organization; but that

term ignores the significant role played by these mentors who proselytize on social media.

To students of the anthropology of evil, there is even mordant amusement in the manifesto. He was radicalized by websites selling white virtue and black perfidy – so how did classical anti-Semitism come to infect him? Undoubtedly because he kept clicking on hyperlinks, and inevitably found those right-wing sites that combine white nationalism with the oldest and most venerable apocalyptic Theory of Everything currently extant – the International Jewish Conspiracy. He could not question the reliability of this additional information, which dovetailed with his racist world-view; but it did not fit perfectly either – "I don't pretend to understand why Jews do what they do," he writes. "They are enigma." An unusual profession of ignorance for someone who elsewhere in his manifesto speaks as an oracle.

It interests me that many family members of the victims who attended Roof's first legal hearing said that they forgave him, but changed their minds after reading the manifesto – by the time of his trial, they wanted him to be executed. This is understandable at a gut level, as he spews racial hatred in the most vulgar terms. In a journal written a few weeks after the murders, he was obdurate:

I remember how I felt when I did these things and how I knew I had to do something and then I realize it was worth it. I would like to make it crystal clear I do not regret what I did. I am not sorry. I have not shed a tear for the innocent people I killed.

But why would it be forgivable for a white man to sit for an hour with nine welcoming members of a black church and then shoot them repeatedly while they are praying –

almost certainly a racially motivated crime – but unforgivable if he were acting on a racist *theory*? Wouldn't his sincere belief in a mistaken ideology make him *more* sympathetic than if he were characterized solely by a nihilistic desire to kill people for essentially *no* reason as long as they were black? Doesn't his having been totally indoctrinated in an evil dogma by sophisticated racists posing as historians and journalists, to such a degree that he believed that he was striking the necessary first blow for the moral renovation of society, make him *less* horrifying than if he were simply a one-man zone of irrational hatred who wanted to be famous for committing an infamous act? Shouldn't the guiding lights of the Council of Conservative Citizens and of American Renaissance be in the dock with him?

How much of the world's evil has been done by deluded young men who have been cynically manipulated by selfish old men? The aristocrats and plutocrats of Europe sent 20 million of their sons and grandsons to death in the First World War. Should we not have tried the real perpetrators instead of pinning medals on them? Osama bin Laden did not fly a plane into the World Trade Center – he gulled young men into doing the deed. Today, jihadist leaders, drinking their tea together, prey upon gullible teenaged girls to carry out suicide bombings. "The best and the brightest" adults sent a generation of young Americans to fight and ultimately lose a war in Vietnam – a country comprising a mostly peasant agrarian society without any advanced weaponry that was 8,000 miles away. There is a memorial to the American dead in the Vietnam War, but no memorial to the anti-war protesters who cared most about our troops and, if heeded, would have saved the lives of 58,000 of them.

Dylann Roof's manifesto is disturbing not only because of its unapologetic old-fashioned white Southern segregationist racism: Roof's uninhibited statements also sometimes stick a thumb in the open wound that Midge Decter identified in 1977 as liberal racism. "Even today," Roof writes, "blacks are subconsciously viewed by White people [as] lower beings. They are held to a lower standard in general." A white supremacist does not do this "subconsciously" – only a liberal. Surely without ever having heard of Decter, Roof has channeled her idea that when liberals bend over backwards to "explain" every social pathology that afflicts the black community – invoking, over and over, the legacy of slavery, Jim Crow, and racism as excuses for children born out of wedlock, fatherless homes, and gang-related epidemics of murder. Ultimately the implication of this defense, intended or unintended, is that black people, in Decter's words, "are not fully enough human to be held morally responsible for their own behavior." This belief is itself racist, needless to say – insidiously so.

There is enough truth in this general observation to make us uncomfortable. If white musicians had created rap music, with its rotgut misogyny and celebration of violence, would white college professors have glorified its innovative and authentic expression of a culture? Liberals have continued to invoke the burden of history as an excuse for the continuing underachievement of blacks in American society 50 years after the end of legal discrimination. They are not altogether wrong to do so – they may not be wrong at all – but they are too eager to make the argument. At some point, a double standard implies both a belief in the superiority of the group that holds itself to the higher standard and a patronizing attitude toward the group that is perpetually exonerated for its failure to live up to it. However, remaining within the narrow confines

of my topic, I wish only to emphasize how this liberal syndrome appears to a feckless Southern white male like Dylann Roof. "Only a fourth to a third of people in the South owned even one slave," he writes, accurately. "Yet every White person is treated as if they had a slave owning ancestor." Certainly this is how liberals talk – that the guilt for the historical crimes is shared by every white person who enjoys "white privilege," which is to say, every white person without exception. The panacea seems to be sensitivity training for whites who are unaware of their privilege and unconscious racism ("the worst kind, no?" writes one liberal commentator, who must be benignly ignorant of the violent history of conscious racism in this country). The putative privilege that he enjoys as a white male must sound like a bad joke to a loser like Roof. Amid much talk about "disparate impact" of public policies on groups "based on race, national origin, color, religion, sex, familial status, or disability," both political parties ignored the disparate economic impact of globalization and religious capitalism on tens of millions of lower-class white families.

Why should we have to flee the cities we created for the security of the suburbs? Why are the suburbs secure in the first place? Because they are White. The pathetic part is that these White people don't even admit to themselves why they are moving. They tell themselves it is for better schools or simply to live in a nicer neighborhood. But it is honestly just a way to escape niggers and other minorities.

This jab at hypocrisy hits home. Who can deny the phenomenon of "white flight," or the effect on property values when neighborhoods "change"? How many liberals live in suburban housing enclaves and drive past the black ghetto every day on the way to high-paying jobs in central city business enclaves?

It also breaks the brain of a liberal to even imagine the possibility of black racism toward whites:

What about the White children who, because of school zoning laws, are forced to go to a school that is 90 percent black? Do we really think that that White kid will be able to go one day without being picked on for being White, or called a "white boy"?

Roof has a lot of company on the political right in imagining that whites (and Christians) are persecuted. Most of this is just a self-pity party, and especially off-putting in people who score off liberals and multiculturalists and practitioners of identity politics for creating a culture of grievance – no one is more aggrieved than Roof. But incidents of black hatred toward whites are too upsetting for liberals to even think about, in spite of the testimony of their own children about the racial cauldron of middle and secondary schools. Hate crimes legislation – a liberal crusade – is almost always deliberately fashioned to apply only to minorities – it tends to exclude the very thought of a white victim. (Women, too, tend to be overlooked as a category of victim, in spite of the staggering amount of violence fueled by pure misogyny. Liberal hair-splitting is not confined to racial issues.)

Whites are also forbidden (by liberals) to practice identity politics and are pointedly excluded from the concept of multiculturalism, which stresses inclusion and diversity excepting only one culture – the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant culture that was synonymous with American culture for almost four centuries. There is a reason for this: when the lone white student in my high school class of black girls asked why there was a black history month but no white history month – the question was sincere and

her classmates took no umbrage at it – I nodded to the class to provide the answer.

"Because all the other months are white history months," said one of the black students. The white girl nodded her head and we continued without any rancor.

However, in the context of my examination of the thought-world of Dylann Roof, it should be obvious why the liberal espousal of identity politics rubs him the wrong way.

"If a scientist publishes a paper on the differences between the races in Western Europe or Americans, he can expect to lose his job." Or at least to be shouted down on elite liberal campuses. Now this does not happen for no reason. But Roof's manifesto is not an elegant conspectus setting forth how one liberal academic might judge another in this matter, arguing either for the harm to minorities when repugnant ideas about them are given free expression, or countering with the importance of free speech in a university setting, adding the assurance that good scholarship eventually drives out bad, and reaffirming the imperative that the academy be unafraid of the "debate." Roof's manifesto is the view from the bottom.

A correspondent asked me this interesting question: If Roof feels no remorse for the people he killed, does he at least feel any for himself? In one of his more offensive journal entries, he wrote:

I do feel sorry for the innocent white children forced to live in this sick country and I do feel sorry for the innocent white people that are killed daily at the hands of the lower race. I have shed a tear of self-pity for myself. I feel pity that I had to do what I did in the first place. I feel pity that I had to give up my life because of a situation that should never have existed.

It should hardly be surprising that he would have written this a few weeks after he committed the crime. "Lack of remorse" is the red herring that every prosecutor uses to rile up the jury. The person capable of remorse would be incapable of committing the crime. Any profession of remorse so soon after the deed would be opportunistic and feigned. Only after a long process of spiritual realization can any individual like Roof come to repugn his own action; and then the remorse, if it exists, is likely to be more intellectualized than directly felt, because in the process of reconstitution the miscreant has become another person, one who *is* incapable of the act, and therefore cut off from what motivated him when he was essentially someone else in a past life. But insofar as he remembered his motivation, he would, in addition to ruing the destructiveness of his deed, probably have some degree of compassion for that disturbed young man who he was at that time, who was so deluded that he considered such an act to be exemplary. This is not anything that the parole board wants to hear.

By the time of his trial, more than 18 months after the crime, Roof's closing statement at the sentencing hearing indicated that my correspondent's question could be answered in the affirmative – he did wish to be spared the death penalty. But in his opening argument, he said only that "I have the right to ask you to give me a life sentence, but I'm not sure what good it would do anyway." His main concern was to convince the jurors that he is mentally competent regardless of any impressions to the contrary that they may have received from his defense attorney:

My opening statement is going to seem a little bit out of place after the prosecution's. But it's not because I have a mental illness that I don't want you to know about. It isn't because I'm trying to keep a secret from you. My lawyers forced me to go through two competency hearings.

Eventually those will become part of the public record. So, in that respect, my self-representation accomplishes nothing, so you can say, what's the point? And the point is, I'm not going to lie to you, either by myself or through anyone else. Other than the fact that I trust people that I shouldn't and I'm probably better at constantly embarrassing myself than anyone who's ever existed, there's nothing wrong with me psychologically.

However, at the end of the hearing, he offered an explanation of sorts, and implied that he would prefer to be spared the death penalty.

I think it's safe to say nobody in their mind wants to go into a church and kill people. In my [FBI confession], I told them I had to do it. But obviously that's not really true. I didn't *have* to do it. I didn't *have* to do anything. Nobody made me do it. What I meant when I said that was I felt like I had to do it, and I still do feel like I had to do it.

*I felt like I had to do it* is a sentiment that is very commonly expressed by mass murderers and serial killers. When Roof adds that "I still do feel like I had to do it," I see a desire to evince his idea of integrity – he hopes for clemency but will "man up" and take full responsibility for his actions and refuse to grovel. (This distinction between a genuine necessity and a *feeling* of necessity should strike a depth psychologist as unexceptionable.)

Next, Roof referred to his answer when the FBI interrogator had asked him if he hated black people. He had said, "I don't like what black people do." He told the jury, "If I was really filled with as much hate as I allegedly am, wouldn't I just say, 'Yes, I hate black people'?"

Wouldn't it be fair to say that the prosecution hates me because they're trying to give me the death penalty?

. . .

Anyone, including the prosecution, who thinks that I'm filled with hatred has no idea what real hate is. They don't know anything about me. They don't know what real hatred looks like. They think they do, but they don't really.

Many commentators have pointed out the incoherence and ineffectiveness of Roof's presentation to the jury. It was certainly ineffective, inasmuch as the jury quickly returned a sentence of death, but again, we have to ask why *he* thought it might be persuasive. If *I* had made the statement, everyone who knows me would say that I was, for whatever reason, oddly incoherent and making very little sense; but a phenomenologist tries to understand why the statement seemed coherent to *Roof*. Part of what is going on is his bravado and his notion of his own integrity: he knows that on the day he did it he *felt* like he had to do it; he also knows that, viewed in retrospect, he did *not* have to do it. That seems like a rational distinction to me: At the time, I *felt* compelled; now, I look back and see that nothing *real* compelled me. This would strike anyone who suffers from narcissistic impairment as *obviously* true – and all such murderers are narcissistically impaired. Nothing (so they believe) can *really* compel them, as they are self-willed and totally in control of themselves. As Roof states in yet another journal found in his car:

I am morally opposed to psychology. It is a Jewish invention, and does nothing but invent diseases and tell people they have problems when they don't.

Narcissists do not believe in the realm of psychology at all, feeling insulted by the notion of unconscious "depths" to which they are denied access. They believe that

they have full access to all the contents of their minds, and full awareness of all relevant factors affecting their emotions. They discount the influence of both heredity *and* environment as causative factors: they are self-causing agents, totally in conscious command of what they do. Rebecca Solnit writes about encountering a similar narcissistic blindness in men whom she has confronted with the evidence of the misogyny of their "subjective assessments." They exhibit a "deep belief in their own special monopoly on objectivity," she notes; they insist that "no subjectivity and no emotion" can contaminate their pronouncements. Furthermore, "there are no grounds for other opinions since theirs is not an opinion." This startling conclusion captures the narcissist's confidence that he does not deal in hypotheses or interpretations: he sees reality and speaks only facts; and therefore he can be acquitted of misogyny or racism solely on his own say-so, as he knows his own mind perfectly and you know nothing about it.

Roof's fumbling attempt to explain hatred is, I think, his way of saying that his motivation was not "personal" – it was principled and historical, a response to a societal problem. He did not hate any of his victims personally; he only hates the direction his nation has taken; and his effort to set it on the right course necessitated collateral damage. His statement about people not knowing "what real hatred looks like" is opaque because he does not develop it, but it continues the theme that he did a salutary deed without any animus toward his actual victims, whereas many crimes are committed purely out of revenge and sadism. For someone who has been traduced as intellectually challenged, he rather adroitly turns the tables when he points out the prosecutorial mania for obtaining a death penalty: Would this not be more indicative of

hatred than his own disinterested act of politically motivated murder?

Mass murderers are often articulate about their grievances, buttressing them, as Dylann Roof does, with lengthy ideological justifications. Some of the men who have targeted women have indicted feminism; some right-wing killers have targeted liberal churches or think tanks; the black assassins of white police officers have clearly been motivated by stories about police shootings of unarmed black men. But when it comes to the question that confounds every attempt to find a *rational* explanation for mass murder – of why, exactly, it makes sense to kill individuals selected at random – the perpetrators can tell us nothing to the purpose. The Green River killer, confronted directly at the end of weeks of interrogation, could produce only this stammer: "Yes I did need to kill. I needed to kill her – because of that." When we have to decide how to adjudicate the ultimate fate of such murderers, this question recommends itself: Should we be swayed by the defendant's inability to articulate an understandable motive or to show remorse? Are we not rather called upon to remember that while morally healthy persons understand both themselves and other people, morally sick persons understand neither, and have no concept of what the health that they are lacking would even feel like?