

Dear Provost,

Thank you for your kind note. I do not have the power to issue a kind note on behalf of the University -- nor any institution, nor any state, nor indeed any group defined by a positive essence. Even though you and I are “fellows” in our συμπάθεια (*fellow-suffering*), our voices do not have equal weight: I can only speak for myself and nobody else. Perhaps I have wept for my fellows in quiet, but there is no proof of this weeping that I can offer to the world. I wish I could send prayers to Paris as you have requested in the imperative mood (if without imperative intent). But I do not believe in a God that can hear words, so I cannot pray. Indeed, the very act of prayer has been viewed by some as a violation of ethics as we remember the victims of the massacre at Paris. After all, they have been murdered by an ideology which sacrifices human lives to a transcendent signified: God. A prominent British atheist, for example, has critiqued the very phrase -- “sending prayers.” But this is not the critique I wish to address. I feel that Jacques Derrida (a better authority in ethics, in my imperfect opinion) would consider such an ironic prayer perfectly acceptable – were he alive today. May his soul rest in peace eternal.

Sympathy, for all its generosity, cannot seem to escape particularity or hierarchy. The Greek word suggests a bond that is collective, but the bond itself seems to require a particular experience or sufferance that is common to *some people only*. If I feel a sharp and urgent sense of sympathy for what happened in Paris, it is perhaps only because my entire political consciousness has come into being by way of an existential struggle against Islamic fundamentalism. When I was given the option to paint my own image in French tricolour as a sign of solidarity, I chose to do so almost reflexively. It was a symbol without any meaningful act to follow, but it is a symbol I now wish to defend. For I have heard voices denouncing the symbol.

Disclaimers must necessarily follow. Not all Middle Easterners are born into Islam. Not all individuals born into the Islamic faith choose to remain so. Not all Muslims belong to orthodoxy: sects deemed “heterodox” by the orthodox majority have been consistently persecuted. Among Muslims who follow the orthodoxy in name or in practice, there exists a political continuum ranging from secular progressives to authoritarian conservatives. I see no qualitative difference between conservative Islam and Islamic fundamentalism. And yet even I would concur that there is something nihilistic about the ideology of ISIS, and I doubt their call for a renewed Caliphate will ever find mainstream appeal (even among Jihadists who believe that violence in the name of God is acceptable). The Caliphate they pursue as a mirage is dead as of 1924 – though, the secular republic that followed in its wake is also dead. But I am merely clarifying categories: let others defend the name and practice of Islam, should they wish so. Their freedom is theirs, and my freedom is mine: if I may be bold enough to quote and misquote the Quran.

Now, there are many voices which rose in the aftermath of Paris that fall beyond the scope of *my* sympathy. To paraphrase, the voices of conservative Muslims or the French *extrême droite* or the BNP or right-wing Israeli settlers or Turkish ultranationalists or the Golden Dawn or any American who believes in a modern kind of “Manifest Destiny” – they are beyond my concern. Since they do not desire a world without borders, I am banishing them: pushing them outside the borders of this text. The critique I wish to critique is very particular: why should we raise the French flag in particular or, better put, is there something particular about the Parisian victims? Why did Facebook offer this option for the French flag only? Shall we ever see the spire of the New World Centre lit up in a different combination of colours? Is “white” the only colour that matters to the West? Not all the victims of the massacre were “white,” of course – but the privilege that is being questioned proceeds from the very assumption that they would or *should* be so. Even I cannot see complete colour-blindness in the primacy given to the victims of the Parisian massacre – though I seem to be defending the adoption of blue, red, and white in this text.

Perhaps we can hope to dismiss this claim by simply saying, “sympathy cannot be infinite” – or that if it were infinite, it would be politically and ethically useless. Natural disasters do not leave us with a sense of burning outrage, for example. The elements are dumb and deaf: their violence can only be metaphorical. Certainly we cannot gaze back and evoke, in this very moment, the memory of every human being who has fallen victim to totalitarian violence: doing so would take away the particularity of the trauma that happened in Paris, 2015. We cannot even evoke the memory of all the victims of Islamic fundamentalism – doing so would create too vague a category. Our sympathy for Paris is strong because it is fresh, because it is concentrated in symbolism and space: treasonous Time dulls all memory. But what about Beirut and Ankara – two sister cities that have very recently witnessed massacres perpetrated by Jihadists? Ankara is the city I grew up in: it is the city where the Caliphate was abolished. I have never set foot in Beirut, the “Paris of the Middle East” – but I have always loved the image from afar. To me, it seemed to be the last bastion of Levantine coexistence in an increasingly green and black landscape. Indeed, I am not claiming that we should raise *no flag but the French* in the spirit of sympathy. I feel nothing but admiration for the protesters who chanted “Solidarité: Paris, Beyrouth, Ankara” in Lousanne. (Their symbol seems more complete than mine). I have seen one French and one American friend decorate their profiles with the Lebanese flag, which filled me with cosmopolitan pride. Perhaps every flag is legitimate as a symbol of solidarity in at least one moment in history – but in our particular moment, it seems to me that not all flags can be raised in solidarity for Paris.

Let us look at what is happening in Syria. Why should the Syrian president, Bashar al-Assad, utter this proclamation: “the savage terror France suffered yesterday is what the Syrian people have been enduring for over five years.” How did ISIS come into being, and why are they on a murderous rampage? The official story is that they are

an uncontrollably radical offshoot of “legitimate” rebels in Syria. The American press keeps telling me that these “moderate rebels” (two sacral words at once, both sacred to liberalism) shall supplant the evil Asad regime *soon enough* and implement “democracy” on Syrian soil. But I have seen the rise of “moderate Islam” as a political force in the country of my birth, and I have witnessed the destruction and corruption (in all senses of the word) that follows. Tolerance towards the intolerant is a paradox: a more specific form of the paradox arises when the members of an ideology that would abolish democracy (when given the chance) agitate for greater representation and *power* in a representative democracy. They were given the chance in Ankara, 2002 – only to appropriate every apparatus of power within reach and begin crushing every dissident voice.

But to return to Syria. One can always object by saying that Assad’s words are not innocent: and indeed he is a despot, even when he is speaking the truth. Perhaps the greatest tragedy of the Syrian Civil War is that there is no longer a secular, liberal alternative to his regime. But you shall find innocence *and* truth in the people who support the current government in Syria. For the people who support him, people who refuse an American-style “democracy” raining from above, are exactly the same people who shall suffer or die if the “moderate rebels” implement their Islamist state: the Druze, Alawites, Christians, secular Sunni. Incidentally, the pseudo-democratic illusion that was staged on 2002 when the Islamists came into power in Ankara was far stronger, and they were able to forge a broad consensus (ranging from EU administrators to various “liberal” intellectuals) that they were “moderate rebels.” But the “moderate rebels” in Syria have no qualms about decapitating dissidents in the name of moderation and rebellion. The illusion is too flimsy, I am afraid. The same al-Qaeda that has carried out 9/11 is an active ally to the “moderate rebels” that now enjoy American support in Syria.

These rebels, it occurs to me, enjoy the support of four major governments at present: Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the United States, France. Four countries that have suffered from acts of terror and violence: four countries that are not innocent themselves. I have already claimed that perhaps every flag can be a legitimate symbol of solidarity, but now I must qualify this statement. I can never raise the Saudi Arabian flag in solidarity for Paris, for it would be a plain contradiction in terms – though I fully understand that there is a liberal opposition within Saudi Arabia. I also fully understand that the victims of state ideology are also the most likely groups to be targeted by quasi-official terrorism. Nor can I raise the Turkish flag, despite citing Ankara, because I am committed to cosmopolitanism in very strict terms. I believe it is an ethical obligation upon every cosmopolitan person to commit treason against all nations. Moreover, I believe that the first and most meaningful treason is the one you commit against the country of your birth. (I am advocating no particular action: nothing but a treason of the heart). I therefore cannot raise the Turkish flag as a symbol of solidarity: those who were born French and would not raise the French flag for the same reason will have my great sympathy as “fellow-sufferers.” They would

have every legitimate reason, too. I cannot raise the American flag, either, though the explanation cannot be offered in plain and transparent language. Perhaps the reader will be kind enough to imagine what it may be like.

Why an unconditional “tolerance” towards the French flag, then? Is it not even more outrageous to raise the tricolour in spite of all this? If I can still do it, it is perhaps not because European capitalism is less unpleasant than its American counterpart, not because France is innocent of colonialism in general and of supporting “moderate rebels” in particular, not because the French flag can ever fully transcend French nationalism, not because white bodies matter more (or less) than bodies of colour, and certainly not because the Parisian tragedy is of a nobler nature than the tragedies in Beyrouth and Ankara. I realise by now that I have no good answer to my own question, that I cannot fully justify painting my own image in tricolour. My answer shall be no more than an appeal to imperfection, an *argumentum ad imperfectum*. Perhaps there shall indeed come a world —a World to Come [עוֹלָם הַבָּא]— without temples, without banners, without victims. Perhaps there shall be no hierarchy of sympathy in that world, and justice shall be instantaneous. But I see no such blinding dawn unless I am already blind. Until then, I am happy to use the French tricolour in this moment and *in this world*: not as a national symbol but an internationalist one, though in temporary capacity. And who knows, perhaps this is just personal bias. I see now that the three ideologies that I have believed in (liberalism, Kemalism, socialism: always in imperfect and mixed devotion) throughout my life have all seen in 1789 a moment of fundamental liberation and indeed the moment of their own birth.

This is my humble response, *in imitatio Derridae*. “Solidarité: Paris, Beyrouth, Ankara.” And let me invoke the memory of just one more tragedy: the Sivas massacre (1993). Let there be no more victims immolated unto God. “Peace, peace, peace to those far and near.”

Your “fellow,”
Kursat K. Pekgoz
Provost Fellow
Department of English