

Amish Murders & the Price of Survival

The Times – October 2ND 2006

'Survivor guilt' is a normal human response to situations where we escape death by luck or by a miracle. For those male students 'spared' by the Pennsylvania killer for reasons that we may never understand in some appalling parody of a concentration camp 'selection', strong survivor guilt is likely to be their inevitable emotional legacy

Such guilt is widely felt among death camp populations, during warfare, after terrorist outrages and, more domestically, by those who are rescued by someone else who dies in the process. Hungerford or Columbine-style killings present their own special version of this syndrome. The intensity of the feelings will increase with the degree of affiliation between the personnel involved.

In yesterday's Amish case, there was not only a collegiate classroom identity binding the children together but also a shared religious faith set against a broad expectation that society is locally peaceful and order-loving. The sudden intrusion of a violent Day of Judgement separating those who live from those who shall die for arbitrary reasons of gender could be cushioned by no sense of expectation.

The case is also made more traumatic because the victims are pre-adult. As we know, one of the depressing consequences of growing older is to become hardened to the world's iniquities. It is alas likely that the recovery for these pre-teenagers will prove more problematic precisely because the damage will not be limited to mental 'software' but may also affect their mental 'hardware'. The brain is a resilient network but possibly some of these children will find it far more difficult to make rational connections in future than would otherwise be the case, especially when assessing risk.

But at this stage it is difficult to say. What could make a huge difference is the effectiveness of the Amish faith in offering these survivors a healing social envelope and also a means towards understanding and explaining the reason for this atrocity. In secular terms, we usually speak of sociopathy. Here, for once, it may be more healing to discuss the notion of evil, or even to consider the doctrines of salvation. On the other hand, I do not envy any theologian the task of justifying the apparently vengeful ways of God to children if challenged to do so.