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St. Francis at Ground Zero

Paul Rabinow

University of California, Berkeley

During the first few days after the attack on the WorldTrade Center, each of us was caught, fixated on and by, one or many things—at times in a kind of Medusa’s gaze. I was struck by a combination of tropes that at first seemed contradictory or utterly disparate but eventually seemed to have a certain mutual coherence. These turned on the repeated insistence by the television anchors (and other commentators) about how “mysterious” it was that these “terrorists” hated the United States so much. For the anchors and experts, of course, there was a dimension of cynical disingenuousness involved as they knew perfectly well many of the reasons United States foreign policy was detested in many places. Among the most sanctimonious was Dan Rather, crying about the Stars and Stripes, apparently having forgotten what he had covered as a young reporter in Vietnam and in Chicago. But after eight years of President Bill Clinton we have learned that the “new Democrats” are men of emotion who can combine a performance of affect with a calculus of interest that makes the term “staged” seem profoundly old-fashioned.

Upon reflection, more intriguing were several sub-assumptions within these figures that have received less attention from the critics. They are: (1) that “hate” must be the motivation driving the actors; (2) that for many Americans it was indeed a total mystery that anyone would die for a cause. That these sub-

assumptions stand in contrast to the content of much of the patriotic narratives that flowed in the days after the attacks warrants investigation.

First, it seems dubious to me that “hate” is the affect at work. The surveillance videos taken at fast food restaurants of the high-jackers that have been shown in subsequent weeks do not seem to show men driven by “hate.” Their affect—whatever it is—is not a simple passion. This work was years in the making. Need I add that these high-jackers were all men? Although representing gender relations in ‘Islam’ is a key activity of experts, exploring the homo-sociality of self-styled martyrs is perhaps too taboo a subject to be raised. Let us just note that the “Muslim brotherhoods” are the characteristic form that Islamic reform movements have taken in places such as Egypt. Although the gender relations imposed by the Taliban have been remarked on, their warrior bonding and betrayals have not been marked for praise or blame.

The “hate/mystery” figure alternated in the media with—and was always contrasted to—the “heroic firefighter” figure. I have not talked with anyone who was not moved by the stoic dedication displayed by these men. I was. Although once the trope was stabilized, its Disney-fication set in rather rapidly: tee shirts and posters, screen savers and the rest. Although heroism was restricted to the few in the early days at ground zero, the United States is a consumer democracy and before too many weeks had passed consumption had been sanctioned officially as a patriotic act. Nonetheless, during the first days after the attack we were moved by actions that were simultaneous epic and simple in their exemplification of selflessness and devotion to a common task. These actions were memorable in the old Greek sense.

However, the figure was thrown into a slightly different light for me by an account of the heroics of a certain “Father Michael.”* What I describe here is from memory; I have not verified his name or the details because it is the memory that has stayed with me and it is that memory to which I seek to provide a form. Father Michael was a Franciscan monk. He and his brothers lived on Manhattan’s East Side across the street from a firehouse. Father Michael ministered to these firefighters. When the emergency came, he went with them downtown. He died at the World Trade Center. A part of the funeral ceremony for Father Michael was telecast. The brother delivering the eulogy was a certain Father Duffy (again this is memory). He certainly was Irish-American. The ceremony’s mood was in strong contrast to the grief and sanctimoniousness that characterized the impoverished contemporary discourse on death and life. The mood was joyful. The ceremony was a celebration of a way of life and a man who exemplified it. Father Duffy clearly had a deep affection, even love, for his Franciscan brother. He spoke of Father Michael’s dedication to his mis-

sion, his lack of hesitation in joining the firemen (pausing only to comb his hair, since Father Michael, Father Duffy observed to the chuckles of the audience, was just a little vain).

Father Michael, Father Duffy calmly asserted, had died 'a perfect death.' It was a perfect death because he died ministering the holy rites to those he cared for: his friends, his flock. Apparently he was killed when he took off his hard hat and a body fell on him from somewhere above. Father Michael did not die the currently modish "dignified death" but the older "perfect death." This man had something to die for and he knew how to die.

However, one aspect of the death that was not perfect. When he died, Father Michael was ministering to a fallen firefighter but it would have been impossible for him to have administered the last rites to all those who died. And Father Michael would have wished to have done so, thereby assuring their entry into heaven. His death, Father Duffy joyously recounted, was, he was sure, now perfect because there was no doubt that Father Michael was ministering to each and everyone of the victims as they came to the pearly gates. Perfect joy.

The theological fine points are beyond my scope. Were these victims guaranteed entry into heaven by dint of their being victims? This was the financial district and not everyone killed had been living a life of Christian virtue. Many were not Christians. As to virtue... Or were the dead guaranteed entry into



heaven because they were martyrs? Let us leave that dangerous thought to others to explore or explicate.

Two connections in lieu of conclusions

(1) No one on American television seemed to have found it mysterious that the firefighters and police had been willing to die. They were doing their job and they were heroic. They had chosen danger as a means of affirming life and community. The social dimensions of that base line appears to have been religious for many of these men came from various Catholic enclaves in New York. Father Michael had a flock.

(2) The figure that crowns the current hit book of the post-colonial left, Tony Negri and Michael Hardt's *Empire*, is St. Francis. Negri and Hardt call upon the multitude to follow St. Francis. The core ambiguity is whether the call and the figure lead to heaven or the World Trade Center? On foot or by plane.

*The "Father Michael" referred to in this text is, in fact, Father Mykal Judge, who was a chaplain in the New York City Fire Department and a well known advocate for gay and lesbian rights. Although I now know his true identity, my memories of that day and my impressions of Father Mykal remain unaltered here in order to preserve the moment and spirit of my reflections on that day.