

## Soul Death and the Death of Soul in Critical Theory: A Polemic

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The tensions between religion and politics in the United States have been part of this country's national identity from the beginning. The framers of the Constitution, while trying to accommodate the religious fervor of Puritan culture, at the same time did not wish to relinquish their Enlightenment beliefs in the rational basis of self-governance, so they walked a conceptual tightrope in trying to satisfy both the Thomas Paines and the Cotton Mathers of early American culture. The irony is that while this separation of Church and State was upheld precisely to prevent the rampant religious warfare so recently scourging Europe, the tensions between secularists and religious peoples remained in the United States long after it waned on the Continent. The tensions are, in fact, very much with us today.

But even though these tensions remain, the precise alignments of religion and politics in the course of United States history have fluctuated. While in large part upholding the values of Puritanism, religion in American history has also at times taken the side of progressive thought, especially in the mid-twentieth century, when the interplay between Liberation Theology and the Civil Rights Movement defined "traditional values" not in terms of sexual repression and nationalism, but rather as a duty to the poor, the oppressed, and the powerless.

The origins of what has come to be called Liberation Theology began in the 1950s and 1960s, as a reaction against somewhat earlier populist, but repressive, regimes that were more or less the norm in the southern Americas, such as the Brazilian dictatorship of Getúlio Dornelles Vargas<sup>1</sup> or the government of Mexican populist leader Lázaro Cárdenas.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps the most well-known and typical example of this type of regime appeared in Argentina, in the form of the Perón government, which consolidated power and economic influence through similar populist and nationalist political policy. These regimes, while in various ways promising to raise the living standards of the poor by taxing the rich, often ended up doing

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neither. Overall, Perónism benefited neither the rich nor the poor, but rather its own power base—the middle and upper classes—which threw increasing numbers of peasants into deepening poverty, while returning much of the tax revenue collected from the rich back to the rich. The growing marginalization of huge sectors of the populations in these countries, a marginalization that ideologies like Perónism were supposed to stop, led to the rise of popular resistance movements, which were, in turn, crushed by the rise of military dictatorships throughout the region. Against this background of struggle and (usually) defeat, the Cuban revolution became the iconic victory of the poor against the power of Capital, and the revolutionary spirit of the age was born.<sup>3</sup>

At roughly the same time that these economic and political struggles were being solidified in developing countries, the Christian churches in Europe, and then America—exemplified by the extraordinarily social and political proclamations crystallized in a somewhat later Vatican II—were undergoing political realignments of their own. In Europe, the philosopher and Catholic convert Jacques Maritain, the Jesuit paleontologist Teilhard de Chardin, and the philosopher-theologian Yves Congar, whose works inspired and even provoked the social, political, and moral vision of Vatican II, emerged as principal influences in the evolution of modern social thought within Christian traditions. Similarly, in the United States, the protestant theologians Paul Tillich (in his later work) and his colleague Reinhold Niebuhr applied enlightened Christian thinking to the social and political issues of the day, while numerous others were trying to refocus the aims of traditional Christianity toward more worldly goals—fighting poverty and calling attention to oppression and the violation of human rights. At the same time, figures like reformer and Catholic relief-worker Dorothy Day, and somewhat later, the contemplative Trappist monk Thomas Merton<sup>4</sup> were working to reform their own traditions along deeply humanist and spiritual lines. The socio-economic struggles in South America and the rise of numerous socially conscious Christian groups, inspired by the succession of Christian thinker and reformers, laid the groundwork for what became, in the 1960s, Liberation Theology—a theology whose interests were increasingly more aligned with the welfare of the poor in this world than with the concerns of the soul in the world to come.

While all this was happening within the more mainstream Christian denominations, something even more remarkable was happening in more marginalized churches in the United States: the birth of the Civil Rights Movement, grounded in the Black Baptist communities that organized themselves over the course of a decade, eventually converging in Selma, Alabama, in 1965, in one of the most agonizing and exhilarating struggles for political, social, and spiritual liberation in the contemporary age.<sup>5</sup> This Movement, which became the model for nearly all subsequent liberation movements in the United States, was born of the work of the NAACP and crystallized through the genius of Martin Luther King

and the Southern Christian Leadership Council of the 1950s and 1960s. From the heroic struggles and martyrdom of those in the Civil Rights movement—like those sacrificed in Liberation movements throughout the Third World<sup>6</sup>—to the anti-war work of Christian and Jewish ecumenical groups like Clergy and Laity Concerned, again and again the front-line shock troops of the progressive political struggles of mid-twentieth century and beyond have come from the ranks of men and women of faith, of soul. Where, then, has faith gone in the progressive politics of today? Where has the soul retreated to within the realms of academic political thought? Why is the subject of spirituality met with almost universal disdain among those whose current political visions were born in the churches and synagogues, temples and mosques of the 1950s and 1960s? On the surface, at least, the soul-death of these movements came in large part from two distinct sources: the first was the U.S intelligence community, specifically the FBI's COINTELPRO program, which targeted political and religious groups that were opposed to United States policy in the Third World, and the second was the militant anti-Marxist papacy of John-Paul II, who, in forbidding the political grass-roots struggles against poverty in South America and the United States, ceded control of "political Christianity" to the religious right.

The "neutralization" (J. Edgar Hoover's word) of political/religious movements by COINTELPRO (the cold war's version of the Patriot Act) begun in the 1950s and intensifying in the 1960s, ended, finally, in 1971 with the publication of the so-called Church Report, but not before destroying unnumbered political movements and individuals by threat, coercion, and admitted lies effected through the use of illegal wiretaps, unauthorized searches and seizures, disinformation campaigns, and possibly even political assassinations. According to the findings of the Church Commission, assembled to investigate the excesses of COINTELPRO during this period, the FBI, while claiming "to protect the national security and to prevent violence," targeted citizens who "were concededly nonviolent, were not controlled by a foreign power, and posed no threat to the national security."<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the FBI routinely engaged in activities that preempted the First Amendment rights of United States citizens, including the right to free speech, and the right to assemble peaceably. The results of these actions were widespread and devastating, and deserve a direct quote from the Church Commission's findings:

The tactics used against Americans often risked and sometimes caused serious emotional, economic, or physical damage. Actions were taken which were designed to break up marriages, terminate funding or employment, and encourage gang warfare between violent rival groups. Due process of law forbids the use of such covert tactics, whether the victims are innocent law-abiding

citizens or members of groups suspected of involvement in violence.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, and perhaps most egregiously, the FBI targeted Martin Luther King in order to “destroy” him, a tactic, the Commission acknowledged, that “violated the law and fundamental human decency.” Arguably, the single difference between the excesses of Hoover’s COINTELPRO and the excesses of the current Patriot Act is that John Ashcroft’s bill legitimizes what the Church Committee saw as fundamentally unconstitutional and immoral—a lethal difference, I would suggest, that speaks more to soul than it does to intellect, more to fundamental decency than to theory. In destroying the religious, political movements of the 1960s and 1970s, Hoover instituted his own brand of soul-death, and to the degree that we, as theorists, share in it through our unconsidered dismissal of the religious thought of earlier leftist intellectuals, he and the American intelligence community have won.

Seven years after the demise of COINTELPRO, Cardinal Karol Wojtyła was elevated to the papacy as John Paul II, driving the final nails into the coffin of Liberation Theology movements everywhere. Although not nearly as vicious, and rising nowhere near the level of Hoover’s tactics, the anti-Marxist proclamations of John Paul II, arrived at through the counsel of his papal successor, Joseph Ratzinger, had a no less chilling effect on “political” Catholicisms—both the Liberation Theology movements, as well as the day-to-day community work of Catholic Relief agencies worldwide. The irony, of course, is that while Karol Wojtyła—as priest, bishop, cardinal, and finally pope—was deeply involved in the anti-communist, anti-Semitic, anti-totalitarian movements in Poland from his ordination in the 1940s through to the fall of communism in the 1980s—even giving succor to the anti-communist Solidarity movement in Poland after he became pope<sup>9</sup>—he failed to see that the evil that Eastern European Stalinism represented was also present in totalitarian movements in other countries. His own political activism seems to have blinded him to the larger goals of political resistance.

By now, however, many of the church-born leftist movements of the 1960s had already infected the European intelligentsia and youth culture with its antiwar and antiracism zeal. The American politics of the 1960s and 1970s, which had been influenced earlier by European philosophers and theologians (the earlier mentioned Maritain, Chardin, and Congar, but also Juergen Moltmann, Johannes Baptist Metz, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer), in turn influenced a number of major French intellectuals such as Gilles Deleuze, Jean Baudrillard, and, to a lesser extent, Michel Foucault, during the Paris upheavals of May 1968, which encouraged the cross-pollination of ideas between an emergent structuralism/post-structuralism and the intense political/social consciousness brought about, in part, by rage at political and economic oppression epitomized by the United States’s involvement in Viet Nam and all of the economic and social evil that that war has come to represent. Thus,

when post-structural theories eventually “returned” to the American academy, they had been pretty thoroughly “materialized” in a Marxist sense and were, as the result of a by now thoroughly secular European Marxism, stripped of the very spiritual impulses that gave nurturance to the protest culture of the 1950s and 1960s.

But the “return” of theory in the United States during the 1970s and 1980s brought with it its own ironies: newly acquired Marxist materialisms trying to situate themselves in a historically non-Marxist American culture, a culture that has traditionally eschewed the very notion of class conflict. As a result, the attacks on Capitalist ideology by Marxian ideologues often did more to distance theoreticians from mainstream culture than to allow them to critique it in ways that might actually influence or change it. The growing insularity of academic enclaves from “mainstream” American cultures changed its relations to the political in fundamental ways, no longer championing the rights of the downtrodden, but now cordoning off intellectual and political turf within the academy: who is the edgiest, the hippest, or more recently, who is the most historical, the most radical in the worst sense, losing sight of the broader happenings within an American political culture that was and is becoming more and more influenced by reactionary thinking. In this process we ourselves—that is, political and critical theorists within the academy—became, among others, objects of resistance by an increasingly right-wing administration, in part because as a community we, in many cases, ceased thinking and working toward the common good (the “progressive” vision of the democratic ideal), while encouraging the processes of intellectual and theoretical balkanization—staking out claims, working to establish political identities for increasingly subdivided communities. And while this process was and is both understandable, and perhaps necessary, it has often blinded us to the larger issues of community and sacrifice, issues that, in the milieu of 1960s spirituality, were correctives to this process of “turning inward” in a kind of oxymoronic political solipsism, losing sight of the real goal of political action—what is important is not “my” liberation, or even the liberation of “my” community, but the liberation of whole peoples through sacrifice and the building of communities across differences, in spite of difference.

The final irony is that while “theory” has become thoroughly secularized in its passage through European structuralism and Marxism, in France, Italy, and Canada, the issue of religion and spirituality has been ascendant—influenced, perhaps, by the late work of Jacques Lacan from the 1950s, Emmanuel Levinas’s work from the 1960s, and Jean-Paul Sartre’s from the 1980s. More recently, Jacques Derrida and Jean-François Lyotard in France, Gianni Vattimo in Italy, and Harold Coward and David Loy in Canada,<sup>10</sup> have begun, in very different ways, to resituate the discussions of religion and spirituality in their own analyses of the Real and its relation to the political and social, to identity, and to identity politics. The thrust in many of these more recent writers centers on what Lacan might call the lack, or what I might call bereavement—an emptiness that, in this paper, represents

the very loss of the spiritual, of soul, in much current theory, a loss that reflects, in a fundamental sense, the very source of spirituality itself: born of the lack that is doubt, inadequacy, grief, and loss, the ego supplies that which is missing as certainty, belief, ideology, repetition. While it may be easy for us to see how this works in a facile way for right-wing religious groups, we refuse to see this same lack operating in progressive politics, the praxis that fills the space of doubt with either the (let's face it) seeming certainties of political analyses or, in the final movement, with the uncertainties themselves—the endless play of critique, *différance*, and contingency.<sup>11</sup> This certainty-in-uncertainty is what conservative politics, in its most discerning moments, sees in us—we are no different in our certainties from “true believers,” but we see our analytic moves as “authentic” and theirs as figments of imagination (which may very well be true). But this progressive gambit in turn conceals the very lack that calls into play the Marxist “materialist” stance, a materialist lack that is increasingly embattled on all sides—from religion on the right, to science on the left.<sup>12</sup>

Unfortunately, the “retooling” of spiritual liberation discourses of the 1960s toward the secularization of social action has led inevitably to contradictory impulses—while we may abhor the desecularizing agendas of the religious right, we no longer have the perceived moral authority to speak as progressive and engaged thinkers.<sup>13</sup> The right has usurped the moral high ground that gave birth to much of American leftist politics in mid-century. The right now wields scripture like an AK-47, while we elaborate on theory, and, as the etymological histories of these two terms—scripture and theory—would suggest, scripture trumps theory every time.

In the simplistic mindset of American popular culture, simple truths are the preferred truths. Complexity breeds disdain. We need, it seems to me, to question the more banal superficialities of postmodern culture, the New Ageism of multivalent and multifarious spiritual “traditions,” many of them bogus, that serve in the end the interests of Wall Street—more book sales, music sales, etc. We might perhaps instead embrace intellectually, if not personally, the traditions from which we have emerged: we should perhaps re-read religious scripture with, in the words of liberation theology, “a bias toward the poor” and oppressed. Or perhaps we should understand not so much the political impulses of the gospels that “traditional” liberation theologies jumped at, but rather the predisposition of the gospels toward women, the poor, the oppressed: this is certainly not a new idea—what is new, however, is also to see religious texts like the gospel parables as what my colleague Bryan Reynolds would call “transversal” discourses: the use of parable, for example, as moral examples that resist easy interpretation—that are, after all “parabolic.”<sup>14</sup> We should also reconsider the incomprehensibility and immorality of violent death in the crucifixion over and against the death-cult iconization of torture in movies like *The Passion of the Christ*, whose images

stand in discomfiting juxtaposition to images from Abu Ghraib (the prisoner, in black KKK-type hood, yet with arms outstretched in crucifixion pose). We might consider exchanging the cults-of-death instead with the overwhelming and abiding *humanity* of the person of Jesus. Reading and understanding these texts from a moral and ethical standpoint—even if that standpoint is purely secular—may provide a much weightier challenge to the powers of right wing, neo-conservative religious movements than the current anti-religious political discourses of the academic left. For one thing seems certain to me at this point in history: the left’s continuing negative critique of religion has done more to disempower the left than it has to diminish the power of the right.

## Notes

1. Brazil’s dictator during the 1930s and 1940s who centralized and consolidated power in an attempt to reform the economic disparities between rich and poor. Using brute force, Vargas managed to create jobs and generally improve the living conditions of the middle classes, while largely ignoring the plight of Brazil’s poor. See <<http://campus.northpark.edu/history/WebChron/Americas/VargasBrazil.CP.html>>.

2. Lázaro Cárdenas (1895-1970), revolutionary and later president of Mexico, attempted to institute land reforms, taking over foreign-owned properties and nationalizing the oil industry. He, like Vargas, largely failed in his attempt at reform. See <<http://www.bookrags.com/biography-lazaro-cardenas>>.

3. The information on Liberation Theology contained in this article comes from articles on two web sites. The article “Christian Revolution in Latin America: The Changing Face of Liberation Theology,” by Ron Rhodes can be found at <<http://home.earthlink.net/~ronrhodes/Liberation.html>>. “A Concise History of Liberation Theology” by Leonardo and Clodovis Boff, from the book *Introducing Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1987) can be found at <<http://www.landreform.org/boff2.htm>>. A broad range of information on the Civil Rights Movement can be found at <<http://www.crmvet.org>>.

4. For an interesting account of Day and Merton’s less well-known personal and political lives, respectively, see Paul Elie’s *The Life You Save May be Your Own* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2004).

5. And the struggles throughout the Black Civil Rights Movements moved far beyond the most immediate needs of Black politics. It was in these same churches, out of the gospel choirs and singing congregations, married to the longer traditions of the soulful Blues, that Soul itself was born in American culture: Soul that perhaps manifested itself at a cultural level most powerfully in the music of spirit and celebration of emotion, a music that, over time, was transformed through the disillusionment and cynicism of the 1980s and 1990s into Gangsta Rap, a genre that, for all of its brilliance, stands as the epitaph to the idealism and hope of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, an epitaph to the death of Soul itself.

6. In South America, the most notable was Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero, whose assassination came to represent the deaths of unnumbered Salvadorans, including Salvadoran Catholic

nuns and priests, assassinated by John Negroponte's death squads in El Salvador, Honduras, and elsewhere.

7. See the Church Report, specifically titled "Intelligence Activities and the Rights of Americans, Book II, Final Report of the Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities, United States Senate, together with Additional, Supplemental, and Separate Views, April 26, (Legislative Day, April 14), 1976," at <<http://www.icdc.com/~paulwolf/cointelpro/churchfinalreport1Icd.htm>>. All quotes are taken from the opening page, entitled "Major Findings."

8. The Church Report, "Major Findings."

9. For a favorable account of John Paul II's life and activities before and during his papacy, see *The "UNOFFICIAL" Pope John Paul II* at <<http://www.zpub.com/un/pope>>.

10. See, for example, Harold Coward and Toby Foshay, *Derrida and Negative Theology* (New York: State U of New York P, 1992); Harold Coward, *Derrida and Indian Philosophy* (New York: State U of New York P, 1990); and Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo, *Religion* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998). For more psychoanalytic takes on current theory and religion, see Alexandre Leupin, *Lacan Today: Psychoanalysis, Science, Religion* (New York: Other Press, 2004), and the work of Michael Eigen in general.

11. Such critique plays a role in recent drama and performance theories. The interplay of theatre and religion goes far deeper and is far more complex than any mere cultural studies diatribe or position paper might suggest. The issues here, including the playing out of politics as faith, and faith as politics, the roles of legitimate religious leaders in the scripted ontologies of performative politics, the play between appearances and truth on the social stage, require a much longer and subtler study than this—a study that, I hope, will be forthcoming. Until such work appears, however, we must all of us take the issues of religion, spirituality, and performance very seriously, indeed, for they define the substance (or insubstance) of American life and politics.

12. As a single, brief example, I would note one of the arguments against scientific knowledge on the right—creationism—and, on the left, the arguable biological bases for gender identity, an idea that is still anathema to many doing political and critical theory. In either case, science is the enemy, and science, in the so-called "science wars" of the 1990s has rightly, if somewhat naively, fought back.

13. In response to some reader's discomfort at the term "moral": it is interesting how the vocabulary of humanism, much reviled in recent decades, keeps making inroads back into critical theoretical discussions. Discussion of ethics was, in the 1980s and 1990s, scoffed at and rejected. Now the discussion of ethics is *de rigueur*. And so it is with the term "humanism" itself, as well as "democratic" and even "transcendental." Moreover, suffice it to say that, in my own mind, there is no other way to describe the actions of Hoover in the 1960s and 1970s as anything less than immoral, even evil.

14. Bryan Reynolds, *Becoming Criminal: Transversal Performance and Cultural Dissidence in Early Modern England* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2002); and *Performing Transversally: Reimagined Shakespeare and the Critical Future* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003). Reynolds more or less invented the notion of transversality, which is much discussed today in Early Modern studies.