

The Ambivalence of Catholic Compassion

Janelle Reinelt

We have to build a society in which it is easier for people to be good.
—Dorothy Day

This citation to Dorothy Day, the Catholic lay advocate of poor people and founder of *The Catholic Worker* newspaper and movement, appears in Sister Helen Prejean's new book, *The Death of Innocents*.¹ Sister Helen, as most people know, is the Catholic nun who mounts a full-time campaign against the death penalty and has served as spiritual advisor to several men who were executed on death row. She is known through performances—Susan Sarandan's, who played her in the Hollywood film *Dead Man Walking*, mezzo-soprano Susan Graham's, who sang the role in the recent opera version, and, arguably, her own performance of self. While the secular public most easily knows Sister Helen through her surrogates, Catholics and other religious folks on the left know her more directly through her ministry and good works, and many people of all persuasions encounter her during massive speaking tours at colleges, universities, and other institutions. This essay is about Sister Helen, or rather the performance of Sister Helen and, through her, the performance of an alternative to right-wing Christianity in America today—and the importance of that counter-performance.

There is perhaps only a tenuous thread to theatre and performance studies here, and I am not going to work overly hard to sustain it. The connection between performance and religion is ancient, but often under-appreciated in a contemporary context. The changing character of American religious life makes it imperative for intellectuals and artists to struggle for the hearts and minds of ordinary citizens through more sustained engagement with questions of religion than has been the custom in the last few decades. Christian fundamentalism seems to have an increasing stranglehold on our country, partially because an adequate analysis and response to the value of spirituality in everyday life has not come from secular scholars and artists. Spiritual and ethical exemplars, such as Sister Helen and Dorothy Day, remind us of another face of religious action. Insisting on the value of personal piety, prayer, and formal ritual observances, these women have also

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committed their lives to struggles for social justice. It is becoming increasingly important to remember and celebrate alternative forms of religious activism instead of allowing all representational space to be dominated by a conservative evangelical revival that thwarts progressive political activism.

The swing to conservative religious hegemony in this country has been underway at least since the Reagan years. Recently, news commentators and print journalists have pointed out the voting edge that President George W. Bush enjoyed because of support from evangelical Christians and have proclaimed that the United States is both religiously engaged and conservatively minded. The Christian right is well organized, committed to grass roots activism, able to control a significant portion of the airways and other media, and is not likely to go away any time soon. Rather than lamenting this state of affairs, or contrasting it to the weak disarray that marks the secular left, I would like to turn to the religious left, both to remember some of its strengths and to suggest that it gives us a way to re-engage with American's spiritual desires.

In her Introduction to *Voices of the Religious left*, Rebecca Alpert writes that, although there is indeed a religious left in this country, it is eclipsed in part by the conceptual hegemony of the idea of the culture wars. Scholars have cast the culture wars as if there were just two sides, religious right and secular left. She writes,

The culture war theory leaves no room for those who are liberal on economic and political issues but conservative on social issues, or for those who are conservative on economic and political issues but liberal on social issues. And it does not provide a complex view of the relationship between people's political attitudes and religious behavior or affiliation.²

This tendency to overlook the religious values that underpin significant left-wing positions makes religion appear to be an overwhelmingly negative force in contemporary society.

In fact, the situation is demonstrably more complex. Consider interdenominational groups such as the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, the National Interfaith Committee for Worker Justice, or the United States Interreligious Committee for Peace in the Middle East.³ Furthermore, within religious affiliations, members do not always follow the positions of their faiths; thus Catholics founded Dignity, an association of gay and lesbian Catholics, and some Protestant evangelicals have been involved in the sanctuary movement. Alpert continues, "Many groups that could not work together on some issues find themselves united on others. While Catholics and Unitarians could not agree about abortion, they have formed coalitions to fight against welfare reform. While there has been significant cooperation across denominational and religious lines in regard to individual issues,

there has not been a breakdown of those denominational lines to form one unified, multi-issue religious left.”⁴

Unfortunately, nuanced considerations of religious complexity seldom make their way into performance. Theatre scholars and artists tend to be overwhelmingly secular, and to perceive the historical antitheatrical prejudices of many religious traditions to be uniform in their damage. The most familiar theatrical narratives about religion, therefore, highlight narrow-mindedness, hypocrisy, or self-righteousness, from *Inherit the Wind* or *St. Mary Ignatius Tell It All to You* to a more recent Pulitzer Prize winner such as *Doubt*. One of the many things I admire about *Angels in America* is that it takes Mormonism seriously and tries to portray it with some complexity, paying attention to its historical role in America. But while the religious right was organizing and growing, often theatre folks and other artists and intellectuals rolled their collective eyes at the seeming extremism of positions against evolution or reproductive rights. This dismissal amounted to complacency.

Performance scholar Linda Kintz, in her ground-breaking 1997 book *Between Jesus and the Market*, warned us of the short-sidedness of this attitude: “The fact [is] that politics are not only about abstract reasoning or economic interests but also about belief, which combines the rational and the irrational, the conscious and the unconscious, thought and feelings, the abstract and the physical . . . Traditionalist conservatives have understood this fact far better than many of their critics.”⁵ If politics are about beliefs, then it is important to be able to consider and debate beliefs. This puts religious questions and values squarely in the public sphere. Sometimes, it seems like the Christian right can be excoriated for dragging their narrow viewpoints into the domain of the secular State, but this view misses the fact that everything that takes place in the public domain is deeply invested in values. The problem is not that religious beliefs are brought to the public arena, but that a full acceptance of airing and arguing beliefs is not comfortable for the secular majority. An intellectual’s tendency to avoid strong passions and to prefer detached objectivity may come from the same impulse to separate out and keep private strong feelings about religious issues. But society, government, civil arrangements need to engage with ethico-political questions, and, as Kintz points out, these questions almost always include a measure of emotional, even irrational affect. Feelings matter, and it is important to count them as valid, objective experiences worthy of analysis and critique.

Ann Pellegrini has made a strong argument for just this view in her book with Janet Jakobson, *Love the Sin: Sexual Regulation and the Limits of Tolerance*. These authors realize that “when public discourse is structured so that it feels impossible to make a values claim that is not religious in some general sense, the only alternative appears to be enforcing strict secularism and rejecting religion. But this leaves little or no room for progressives—religious or otherwise—to make

clear what they value and why.”⁶ In fact, history is full of large-scale social and political movements that appeal to religious values, to emotion and affect, as well as to rational arguments. Civil rights is of course the most obvious one that comes to mind, but when Sister Helen Prejean wants to win over an American citizenry that supports the death penalty and retribution for the victims, she does not hesitate to invoke both the theology she understands to forbid what she calls torture and murder, and also to narrate the tortuous and heart-breaking stories of her ministry to condemned men. Her key tools are theological and affective. We need to take back some of the ground we have lost to the Christian right by finding ways to articulate persuasively a progressive ethics. One way to do that is to acknowledge and celebrate the alternative to the religious right—not the secular left, but the religious left.

Roman Catholicism is not the dominant religion in America, but it is still a powerful one, enlisting 60 million members. Because of the reliance of the Church on ritual, spectacle, and highly codified doctrine, it is also one of the most theatrical religions practiced. Its politics are highly charged and fundamentally ambivalent. Considered conservative in terms of its stand on abortion, reproductive rights, and the ordination of women, a recent CBS news poll has shown that 67 percent of United States Catholics are in favor of letting Catholic priests get married, 60 percent favor ordination of women, and 76 percent favor artificial methods of birth control.⁷ This church has recently been plunged into an immense scandal of sexual misconduct among its clergy, variously interpreted by some of those favoring allowing priests to marry as evidence of the unreasonableness and failure of a doctrine of celibacy, while Catholic conservatives, on the other hand, have been shaken and grieved by what they perceive as the seepage of secular laxity and corruption into sacred vocations. This same church has a questionable history with regard to its positions during the Nazi era, particularly with regard to the papacy under Pius XI and XII, but it also has its share of exemplary heroic figures such as Archbishop Oscar Romero, the Salvadoran religious leader committed to a ministry of the poor, killed by right-wing death squads who also killed three nuns and a lay worker in famous cases during the 1980s. The discussions of moral issues in the case of Terry Schiavo recently revealed once again how Catholic claims could be made for opposing views. While Schiavo’s Catholic parents and many right-to-life Catholics called for her life-supports to be continued, other Catholic voices argued that Church doctrine did not require extraordinary means to prolong life—this debate occurred almost simultaneously with the protracted death of John Paul II. The massive and theatrical coverage of his death and funeral, followed by the selection of the new Pope, Benedict XVI, illustrated many aspects of this ambivalence. The Church was repeatedly characterized as “riven with dissent,” and described in terms of declining memberships, rising competition from Protestant denominations, especially evangelicals, and contradictory positions among clergy

on a number of key positions.⁸ Rather than finding this situation a source of dismay, I would argue that in the volatile and shifting disunification of the Catholic Church, it is important to look for progressive action, exemplary behaviors, and effective strategies for change. The very volatility implied in a lack of consensus prepares a ground for meaningful struggle.

In 1997, Sister Helen Prejean wrote an extended letter to Pope John Paul II urging him to make Catholic opposition to government executions unequivocal. Within the week, a major change was made in the Catechism. While she may not have been wholly responsible, Sister Helen had achieved a kind of weight, or *gravitas*, that even the Pope respected. While this pope was responsible for quashing liberation theology and cracking down on much of the social justice agenda of his bishops, he was nevertheless capable of being convinced of the need to take definitive action against the death penalty. This change “was effected by removing just a few words from the 1992 version [of the Catholic Catechism]—but the deletion of these words created the most substantive change in church teaching about the death penalty in 1,600 years.”⁹

This story of the persistent, passionate nun persuading the recalcitrant, arch-conservative pope to take a major step toward social justice is obviously theatrical. In her public and authoritative role, Sister Helen Prejean has become a kind of celebrity. Type her name into Google, and you’ll find her website with pictures, the calendar of her current book tour and speaking engagements, links to her order, the Sisters of St. Joseph, a prayer that she wrote, even a link to direct contact (“write to Sister Helen,” it exhorts).¹⁰

I am not proposing this celebrity lightly; I am taking it very seriously. What does it mean that Sister Helen Prejean is a celebrity? It means she is a kind of performer, and it means she has committed to it for the long haul: she is willing to continue to be in the public eye in order to do good. It means she is willing to perform, to be concerned with her performance. This is what being a public figure surely entails. Dwight Conquergood wrote, “Executions are awesome rituals of human sacrifice through which the state dramatizes its absolute power and monopoly on violence.”¹¹ To combat that dramatization, Sister Helen draws upon the mystique of celebrity, the stereotype of female piety in the figure of the nun, and the committed behaviors of one for whom religious commitment to social justice is a life-project. The symbols and signs of the passion of Christ overlap with the action of state executions (something *Dead Man Walking* certainly exploited visually in the crucifixion iconography of both the film and the opera). Because, from the last supper to the witnessed death, these powerful rituals evoke and interact with each other, the Catholic religion is a privileged theatrical vehicle for opposition and resistance to such state ordered death. Sister Helen marshals her faith to form a resistant performance that undercuts the legitimacy of the state.

Michael Quinn, in his classic article, “Celebrity and the Semiotics of Acting,” noted the paradox of the celebrity phenomenon. Quinn argues that the power of celebrity comes from the way it stabilizes the presence of the actor:

The audience’s attitude shifts from an awareness of the presence of fictional illusion to the acceptance of an illusion, however false, of the celebrity’s absolute presence. The actor becomes, in synchronization or in contrastive relation to the role, a paradoxical representative of *Dasein*—of the pureness of being-in-itself: rather than a mere chameleon, a celebrity stands for the irreducibility of the individual being, becomes a stable signifier, apparently impervious to the gaps that might deconstruct presence because the role he or she inhabits is an acknowledged fiction.¹²

While some of the power of celebrity thus comes from a mystification of the actor through this claim of pure presence, it also comes from historically earned markers of identity and experience as well. Freddie Rokem, citing two older German film actors, writes: “Like all actors, through their individual biographies as actors and human beings, they are also historians who represent certain aspects of the past. Their biographical and professional pasts have in a sense become inscribed in their bodies, as something which exists as an extension of their direct presence on the screen.”¹³ To the extent that audiences recognize these figures as celebrated, they can read the signs of this history, and the actors become powerful through their celebrity as signs beyond their immediate selves of a personal and historical itinerary of choices and experiences. Celebrity performance produces a split subject, not just between role and actor, but within the actor herself, by displaying the historicity of the body as a sign of continuity and accumulated identity simultaneously with a present, immediate labor of role-playing, the work of creating something else, something different—the performance.

Sister Helen’s mystique of presence is only partially based on celebrity’s sleight of hand. It is also produced by the historical markers of her actual life-through-time, something lots of people have come to know through her writing and actions. It is hard to doubt her authenticity, and once established, it is hard to discredit. She seems to “get away with” a kind of transparency that, in this media world of sound bites and photo ops, few celebrities manage to do. Some clues to how this works are visible in her memoirs. First, she is candid about her own limitations. When she is asked to be spiritual advisor to her first death-row inmate, she is not sure she has the moral strength to follow through on it. When she thinks about confronting the victims’ parents, she wishes she could avoid them, and, in fact, she tries. She describes certain failures and, then, also her decisions to go on. Her first-person

confessional style is matched by the objective facts we know about her—that she worked with ghetto children; that she did in fact serve as spiritual advisor to the two inmates—including witnessing their deaths; that she did eventually go to see the victims’ parents and tried to offer them what comfort she could even when they rebuffed her with anger and derision; that she organized politically around this issue as the result of her experiences, converting personal conviction into social responsibility. She founded an organization called “Survive,” a victim’s advocacy group, and she continues to counsel victims’ families as well as families of the condemned perpetrators.¹⁴

An anecdote from her recent book captures something of the quality of her self-representation. While Bush was Texas governor, she worked hard to prevent the execution of Karla Faye Tucker, who turned into a model prisoner and claimed to be born again. Because no woman had been executed in Texas in more than a hundred years, this was a particularly controversial case. The night Tucker was put to death, Sister Helen was on *Larry King Live*. Here’s how she describes what happened:

When I heard Bush say, “God bless Karla Faye Tucker,” I had to struggle mightily to keep a vow I made to reverence every person, even those with whom I disagree most vehemently. Inside my soul I raged at Bush’s hypocrisy, but the broadcast was live and global. Not much time to rein myself in. I took a quick breath, said a fierce prayer, looked into the camera, and said, “It’s interesting to see that Governor Bush is now invoking God, asking God to bless Karla Faye Tucker, when he certainly didn’t use the power in his own hands to bless her. He just had her killed.”¹⁵

This self-description shows Prejean deliberately making a performance; yet her way of telling it, perhaps in the taking for granted of her own moral convictions and habits of prayer, reveals the artifice and yet becomes an index of a kind of innocence.

The real Sister Prejean ghosts her fictional representations and strengthens the appeal of the film and opera of *Dead Man Walking*. Perhaps because committed religious persons, such as Sister Helen, are such an anomaly in contemporary society, her very strangeness also becomes exemplary and appealing. The conservative gender politics embedded in *Dead Man Walking* repeat a familiar narrative of macho American boy gone wrong, saved by the love of a good woman; yet, simultaneously, Prejean is a profeminist. The book was on the best sellers’ list for thirty-one weeks, and the film has been seen all over the world. Because she seems familiar and strange at the same time, Prejean manages to evoke both identification and admiration. Sister Helen’s website calendar lists two dramatized

versions of *Dead Man Walking* in spring 2005 at Fordham University and Jesuit College in Dallas, with Sister Helen in attendance. British playwright David Edgar describes “adjacency” as a relationship that occurs when audiences use their knowledge of people or current affairs to complete and/or verify representation. The actual, dare I say “real,” Sister Helen completes the fictional representation through such adjacency.¹⁶

In spring 2005, the Supreme Court finally decided it is wrong to execute young people under eighteen at the time of their crime. A strong revision of a brutal practice, the best part may be the language the court used, citing “evolving standards of decency” and “global norms.” This reference to international opinion and changing social mores at home in Justice Anthony Kennedy’s decision strikes a blow against hardliners like Justice Antonin Scalia, who has been a sharp critic of the evolving-standards thesis. This is a great victory for Sister Helen and all the lawyers and activists and religious people who fight against the death penalty. In this story, her religious values triumph: charity toward all (even one’s enemies), steadfast examination of the conscience, belief in God’s love for even the worst sinner, and perseverance in the face of great adversity. These values proved compatible with the position favored by the majority of the court and are appropriately associated with her religious calling as a nun and her particular theology as a Catholic. “On this path,” she writes, “I have learned that love, far from being passive in the face of injustice, is a vibrant force that resists and takes bold action to ‘build a new society within the shell of the old,’ as Dorothy Day used to say.” It cannot hurt America to have the examples of Day and Prejean before us.

The linkage of these two women seems no coincidence. I opened with the winter 2005 *Catholic Worker*, the paper Dorothy Day started in the 1930s that still sells for twenty-five cents for an annual subscription. It contains an article on war resisters and taxes—some people still refuse to pay taxes because taxes support military action. Another article describes the trial of a Catholic worker and four Catholic activists who breached security at Ireland’s Shannon Airport and did extensive damage to a United States Navy transport plane en route to the Persian Gulf in 2003. The back page has a nuanced and seriously reflective essay on the abortion debate that does not match my views, but does not offend them either. In these pages, sacred and secular are mixed together in a manner appropriate to public sphere deliberations from a religious viewpoint in a pluralistic society. Dorothy Day, like Sister Helen, made her life an example of combining piety and struggle for social justice. Starting out as a young journalist in Chicago and New York, Day was moved by extreme poverty to combine deeply held religious faith with social activism. By 1933, she had started the paper and, a short time later, opened the first of a national chain of “Hospitality Houses,” living spaces for the poor and homeless. On her seventy-fifth birthday, the Jesuit magazine *America* devoted a special issue to her, finding in her the individual who best exemplified

“the aspiration and action of the American Catholic community during the past forty years.”¹⁷ Since 1998, New Jersey-based actress Sarah Melici has been performing a one-woman show she devised about Day, called *Fool for Christ: The Story of Dorothy Day*.¹⁸ Speaking of herself, Day said, “If I have achieved anything in my life, it is because I have not been embarrassed to talk about God.”¹⁹

I think the next time we think about the Christian right, we need to remember the performances of the Christian left. Theatre scholars and artists need to develop more nuanced analyses or representations of the variety of religious experiences and commitments that make up both the “red and blue” states. Religious activism can be a powerful progressive tool, and, even from outside a faith-based viewpoint, secular activists can make common cause with performers such as Sister Helen Prejean.

Notes

1. Sister Helen Prejean, *The Death of Innocents: An Eyewitness Account of Wrongful Executions* (New York: Random House, 2005) 81.

2. Rebecca T. Alpert, Introduction to *Voices of the Religious Left: A Contemporary Sourcebook*, ed. Rebecca T. Alpert (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2000) 5.

3. The Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice is a coalition of more than 40 denominations and faith groups that educates and promotes around issues of reproductive choice <www.rcrc.org>; the National Interfaith Committee for Worker Justice is a “network of people of faith that calls upon our religious values in order to educate, organize and mobilize the religious community in the United States on issues and campaigns that will improve wages, benefits and working conditions for workers, especially low-wage workers” <www.nicwj.org>; the United States Interreligious Committee for Peace in the Middle East is a national organization of Jews, Christians, and Muslims dedicated to dialogue, education, and advocacy for peace based on the teachings of the three religious traditions <www.usicpme.org>.

4. Alpert 4-5.

5. Linda Kintz, *Between Jesus and the Market: The Emotions that Matter in Right-Wing America* (Durham: Duke UP, 1997) 5.

6. Janet R. Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, *Love the Sin: Sexual Regulation and the Limits of Religious Tolerance* (New York: New York UP, 2003) 12.

7. Cited in Josh Getlin, “Far from Rome,” *Los Angeles Times*, 24 April 2005, S5.

8. Pew Charitable Trusts is sponsoring a three-year research project called “American Catholics in the Public Square,” which is designed to identify “distinctive elements in a Catholic approach to civic life.” See <www.catholicsinpublicsquare.org>.

9. Prejean, *Death of Innocents* 129. The 1992 version of the Catholic Catechism read, “Preserving the common good of society requires rendering the aggressor unable to inflict harm. For this reason the traditional teaching of the church has acknowledged as well-founded the right and duty of legitimate public authority to punish malefactors by means of penalties commensurate with the gravity of the

crime, **not excluding, in cases of extreme gravity, the death penalty.**” Section 2266 of the revised Catechism now reads: “Legitimate public authority has the right and the duty to inflict punishment proportionate to the gravity of the offense.” The words in bold print have been removed. See *Death of Innocents* 129-130.

10. <www.prejean.org>. Currently on the site is the announcement that Sister Helen has won the 2005 Peace Prize from the city of Ypres in Belgium.

11. Dwight Conquergood, “Lethal Theatre: Performance, Punishment, and the Death Penalty,” *Theatre Journal* 54.3 (October 2002): 342

12. Michael Quinn, “Celebrity and the Semiotics of Acting,” *New Theatre Quarterly* 6.22 (1990): 156.

13. Freddie Rokem, *Performing History: Theatrical Representations of the Past in Contemporary Theatre* (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 2000) 212.

14. See Sister Helen Prejean, *Dead Man Walking: An Eyewitness Account of the Death Penalty in the United States* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994).

15. Prejean, *Death of Innocents* 50.

16. Personal Interview with David Edgar, Irvine, Calif., 5 June, 2004.

17. See Jim Forest, “A Biography of Dorothy Day,” at <<http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/ddbiographytext>>.

18. See <<http://www.foolforchrist.com/>>.

19. Quoted in Forest.