

Southern Comfort

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I am a social historian by training. I received my Ph. D. in British social history from the University of Michigan in 1990. While greatly influenced by recent and not so recent revisionist currents (feminism, postmodernism, postcolonialism, among others), I continue to experience my professional calling in terms of what E. P. Thompson famously referred to as the task of rescuing subaltern pasts from “the enormous condescension of posterity.” I am also a recent convert to Catholicism. I entered into the discussions from which this dossier originated intent on rescuing popular religious subjectivities and especially this religious subject from the condescension of a predominantly secular academy.

I have succumbed to this condescension myself. Reviewers of my book legitimately complained that while I argue that religion can not be reduced to the social interests of the faithful, my analysis of British support for foreign missions basically does just that. If a historian who self identifies as a Christian finds it difficult to leave space for faith’s operation in historical narratives, the difficulty may have more to do with epistemology than prejudice. What if the academic analyst and the religious subject in question, however, are the same? Therein lays our collective instinct regarding autobiography’s potential for bridging what is in historical fact the original disciplinary divide between theological and critical (i.e. secular) modes of academic inquiry. At the very least, I hope that this essay, our essays, will constitute an archive of primary sources, spiritual autobiographies available for secular analysts and theologians alike to make use of, as they will. I hope more ambitiously that my struggle to articulate the history that matters most to me, will inspire my greatest effort to view piety and power as somehow both mutually constitutive and relatively autonomous at one and the same time. I want to have my faith and eat too.

It will come as no surprise that a historian might search for the meaning of her faith in the process of its formation. Process may not be the right word to anticipate the narrative that follows. While my faith has changed a great deal over the course of my life, it is not something I grew in to from some faith free a priori. It would be more accurate to say that faith was the lens through which I learned to see the world, as much if not more than my race, class, or gender. Moreover, the world I grew up in was faithful through and through. My mother’s complete and total dedication to her church might be incomprehensible to readers reared outside the American South, where church and community are virtually synonymous. To be outside the church in the small NC towns in which my parents and I grew up would mean to be alone, at

least so far as respectable fellowship is concerned. My mother's social networks were and are not only comprised of religious people. Her friendships, rather, originate inside her own church, and most of her interactions with her friends take place in the course of church related service. In this, my mother (her name is Pat) is not unusual. Nor is its origins, which are the same as mine. Pat imbibed her all encompassing faith from her own mother, whose recollection still brings my mother to orphaned tears.

My grandmother, Beulah Joy Davis Selph (1899-1990) lived for, in, and through her church, the First Methodist Church in Hamlet, North Carolina (a town made infamous by the terrible 1991 fire in a chicken processing factory whose employees were locked in to prevent cigarette breaks and theft). When her husband, my grandfather, Carl, died, Grandma Beulah moved into an apartment across the street from her church, where she taught Sunday school and served as president of the Ladies Missionary Society. Beulah also sang in the choir. She lived for funerals, occasions to dress up, I guess, as well as to minister in those triumphant celebrations that ushered fellow travelers into the kingdom in style. Visits by the minister (with whom she flirted outrageously) brought her girlish delight right up to her departure in her late 80s to a nursing home in Wilmington, where her oldest daughter Joan still lives.

Grandma Beulah told me that her husband, Carl Sr., an alcoholic who refused to attend church in this most church-going of local worlds, used to force her to have sex on Sunday afternoons, to put her pious self in her place I suppose. He did not succeed; she called him Satan to his face, as in 'Get thee behind me Satan.' In many ways, her life began when he died, the year my life began, in 1958. I never met my grandfather. However, he looms large in my family's memory. He was from Jacksonville. Carl's father, my great-grandfather, Beauregard Selph, had run to Florida after shooting my great grandmother's fiancée in Virginia in what sounds like a duel. When the law caught up with him, family lore has it that a black man testified on his behalf, resulting in Beauregard's acquittal on grounds of self-defense. This fact was invariably recounted in amazed incredulity; it had little apparent affect on Carl's own apparent investment in race. I know that Carl's sister (my great aunt) was involved with the Ku Klux Klan. Grandma Beulah told me once that she attended a Klan parade while visiting her husband's family in Florida. Her son, my uncle, Carl (Junior), who was about 4 at the time, said "Look Mama, there's Aunt Ethel", recognizing her boots under the sheets of her regalia. Grandma Beulah told this story to underscore just how mean her husband's people were (my grandfather's family didn't like my grandmother; they had been dependent on Carl's income after Beauregard deserted them when Carl Senior was just thirteen years old). Grandma Beulah also liked to tell another story about the Klan which resonated very differently. During the Depression, a group of robed Klansmen interrupted a service at her church; several of their number walked down the center aisle, stopping in front of the altar to deposit the bag of money that rescued the church from bankruptcy. The imaginative ideological labor to which Gramsci attributed hegemony can be bought and complicity paid for I guess. Certainly the First Methodist Church was as central to the production and reproduc-

tion of white supremacy in my family's little Hamlet as it was to the production of almost everything else.

My parents got married in that church in June of 1957. My grandfather Carl did not approve of the match. He thought my father (a part-time jazz musician from the neighboring town of Laurinburg) was "wild." This was odd coming from the town drunk, unless you realize that race trumped everything else in this ugly little world's measures of respectability. My father is white but he consorted with African American people (as whites like my grandfather did not then call them). Buddy my daddy (as he now calls himself) remembers picking my mother up for a date and finding Carl listening to the Wednesday night fights on the radio. Trying to curry favor, Buddy sat down and said he was really looking forward to the next fight. Carl looked at him with disgust and left the room because the next fight pitted a black man against a white man. Carl relented in the end, agreeing at the last minute to walk my mother down the aisle.

The faith that is my family heritage is covered in blood, and I am not talking about the blood of Christ. Or am I? It is a faith that succored the perpetrators of Klan terrorism (how else did these men in white sheets know the church was in trouble?). It was a faith, then, a faith complicit in the myriad forms of violence and exploitation that scream from the very barrenness of the landscape that is the Sand hills, a landscape that I love and loathe in about equal measure. It was also a faith that comforted this world's victims. It sustained my grandmother through Carl's alcoholic rages and sexual assaults. It helped my mother hold her head up above the shame of trying to track her father down on payday before he could drink up all his wages. And it gave her the courage to seek out a reasonably normal life, arranging for her dates to pick her up on the corner just in case Carl's drunkenness took an ugly turn. "On Christ's solid rock I stand, all other ground is shifting sand," one of her favorite hymns, says a lot about the reality of spiritual solace to those who live less than manageable lives.

I don't remember a time before faith—it was in the food I ate and the air I breathed. I read the Bible through by the time I was in the fourth grade. I made long lists of the sins I committed every day. We never missed church, Sunday school, or MYF (Methodist Youth Fellowship). Ours was also a faith whose implication in this-worldly relations of power and privilege was taken for granted. Faith was meant, in other words, to govern actions in this world. My parents were founding members of North Raleigh United Methodist Church, which seceded from St. Mark's when the latter's minister (J Malloy Owen, he used to have a TV show) started preaching anti-Catholic sermons, not so veiled attacks on JFK. My parents were race liberals, Kennedy Democrats, no doubt, at least in part, because of my father's passion for music. Buddy began sneaking out of his parent's house in Laurinburg, North Carolina at the age of thirteen to listen to jazz musicians like Dizzy Gillespie at nearby Laurinburg Institute, where he would often be the only white person in attendance. Occasionally someone would let him sit in on a session (he played the drums), which he, now in his seventies, still recalls with enormous pride. I remember going to bed one night (I

must have been about six or seven) to the sound of a guest's voice screaming at my father—they'll be sleeping with your daughters—over a discussion of always impending school desegregation. This specter did in fact come to pass. Our schools finally desegregated with all deliberate speed in 1972. My first real boyfriend was black. And when we started dating I went overnight it seemed from being my teachers' pet to the student deemed least likely to succeed—well, we had a graduating class of about 100, I had the best grades in the school but was not included in the teachers' twenty nominations for that honor. I was ruined, a liberating experience for a very sheltered girl of my petit bourgeois background. Sex, drugs, and rock and roll followed rather than precipitating my disgrace. More important, however, was the profoundly politicizing impact of what my generation witnessed. For one brief but extraordinary period, we saw power at work in the very human agency of our own teachers and local law enforcement officials. Kids started getting arrested for the company they were keeping. They weren't jailed or charged; they had not committed any crime. But they were returned in police cars to their parents' care, who were left to carry out their society's sentence. I was very very lucky to have the parents I did. Some girls came to school with black eyes and worse, courtesy of the fathers; others were kicked out of their homes. Policing racial boundaries in this temporarily fluid time was a job that most white adults, including our teachers, willingly performed.

My boyfriend reluctantly agreed to my request that we attend each other's church. He was a jock, the star player on a high school basketball team that won the state championship seven out of ten years in the 1970s. I was a painfully shy cheerleader. I think my flight from faith began on the Sunday when my supposedly "liberal" North Raleigh congregation stiffened in dumbfounded disapproval at Willie's entrance. I was the opposite of complimented when my Sunday school teacher told my father that I sure was brave. What kind of "church" were we? This was 1975 for god's sake! Unfortunately, I was more upset by my reception at my boyfriend's church. I don't know whether my presence inspired the pastor's reference to 'blue-eyed devils' in his sermon, but I do remember how surprised and hurt I felt. Knowing white people as I did even then makes it impossible now to justify my self-absorbed pain: How could "they" hate "us" so much? Naiveté, like racism, is not an explanation—they are both complex ideological projects whose understanding requires sustained and historical analysis. And in this case they are profoundly interpolated; naiveté is the respectable flip side of an explicit racism from which liberals like me recoiled. It allows us to distance ourselves from the unsavory enforcement of privileges we intend to continue enjoying. After the service ended, my best friend's sister (they were my boyfriend's cousins and attended the same church) laughed in my upset face. She asked me if I knew what it felt like to be called a nigger—because they all did. She bitterly described what it felt like to have to run down the street to escape gangs of white teenagers hurling rocks and expletives at her retreating back. It would be many years before I absorbed the force of Pinky's narrative; my primary reaction at the time was a feeling of victimized outrage at my friends for not feeling my pain, for making me feel uncomfortable.

My boyfriend and I parted ways my first year in college. He died of lung cancer about fifteen years ago (I can still see him dragging on those Kools). I did not even hear about it for a couple of years. I don't go back to Wake Forest very often. My parents moved to Charlotte after I left for college and my last memories of Wake Forest were not good ones. My parents received threatening phone calls about my choice of friends. My boyfriend and I used to joke about getting beaten up by the police (it happened to mixed race couples at our school) or shot by a sniper if we were ever caught out alone. We laughed at our fears, but we always kept an eye on the rearview mirror on those country roads where we partied. I could not wait to leave.

I went all the way to Chapel Hill, a cultural world away. However, I went home every weekend that first semester, and on one visit, I witnessed an intra-racial dispute at my parent's church that would have a formative influence on my understanding of how "race" (by which I mean white racism) works and on the subject of my dissertation and eventual book. Our church was a beneficiary of the rapid development of the Research Triangle Park. The new "Yankee" members who came down from up North to work for IBM were better educated, wealthier, more articulate, and more self-confident than the church's native old-timers were. They were also, as we liked to put it behind their backs, "pushy." Whenever the preacher asked for volunteers to chair committees and the like the Southerners would be "polite." Everyone knew not to put one's self forward until a personal invitation was extended. Our Northern counterparts were just trying to do their lonely newcomers' duty when they volunteered for everything that moved. And for that they were rewarded with their co-parishioners' deep and abiding resentment. (A family from our church would later buy my parents' house in the country outside Wake Forest so that they would not have to speak to a Yankee every time they went outside to get the mail. I feel compelled to remind us again that this was 1975.)

Anyway, one Sunday a missionary serving in what was then Rhodesia came to speak at our church. He showed a clip from the film "Last Grave at Dimbaze," a really powerful documentary indictment of South African apartheid. Our Northern members were visibly shaken by the film's references to IBM's close ties to the South African government. This somewhat surprisingly prompted many of our Southern members to take more than the usual interest. They seemed delighted to be able for once to take the high road, and they made a great show of shaking their heads in outraged disbelief at how badly THOSE white people treated THEIR blacks. I went back to Chapel Hill with just that serenely smug self-righteousness, determined to find out what I could about a country I'd never heard of before (North Carolina's public education left something to be desired), and to offer my assistance to these poor people. I looked up the office addresses of all the Africanists on campus and I made the rounds. The only door that opened that afternoon (I actually expected to find faculty in their offices waiting for students to call!) belonged to a historian. He listened to me (and no doubt to my accent which was at that time very strong) with an increasingly bemused amazement, and then said that surely my grandfather had taken me to visit slave auction blocks, and what about his collection of whips back home.

Tears came to my shocked eyes—I had expected a different response! He asked me what exactly I wanted to “do” to help; and went through a geographical analysis of the impossibility of an armed assault on the South African state. He then made a crack about my church going (I must have told him where I saw the film), saying that he guessed I could pray for an end to apartheid; the only people who prayed in South Africa, he claimed, were the Afrikaaners, with whom I had more in common than any one else. He eventually lightened up and invited me to a lecture; I ended up taking his courses and majoring in history, moving between African and African American history and then to the history of European and especially British imperialism. When I left the South ‘for good’, (at least that is what I thought at the time) to go to graduate school, I would write my dissertation on the influence of foreign missionaries on their British supporters’ attitudes towards their government’s foreign policy. I argued that metropolitan social relations, between men and women, rich and poor, within chapels in Britain structured the British public’s reception of the missionary message, leading some people to draw more, some to draw less racist conclusions from missionary propaganda than field missionaries ever intended. Their racism in other words wasn’t only ABOUT what it claimed to be, namely colonized people, although it had horrible effects on the latter’s lives; in terms of its origins and motives, I think it found its force in its utility as a weapon that could be wielded in struggles over gender and especially class in Britain itself. I am still not sure whether this tells us more about the banality of evil or the tragedy of a history in which the workers of the world are still divided.

I also met my first atheist during my freshman year of college. “Palestine in the time of Jesus” was the course; it identified Christianity as one among many millenarian movements that swept the region in the period of Christ’s life. I began to suspect that our very Jewish professor not only did not believe in Jesus (being from a liberal Southern family, I had been taught to forgive if not respect mistaken faiths—other people can’t help how they were raised, my mother would say). I was sure I must be wrong, but this smart and gentle man did not seem even to believe in God himself. How could that be? I went up to him after class and asked him straight out. He very kindly responded that he had never given it much thought, but that he knew people of faith for whom he had great respect. I could barely speak to thank him for his time. Can indifference shake a paradigm? In my case it did. The possibility of NOT BELIEVING had never occurred to me; and once framed as a question, I found it impossible to believe. Just like that. The emperor has no clothes. Why believe? I shared my new un-faith with my sister the next weekend. The next time we spoke she told me she went to gymnastics practice that night and couldn’t keep her balance on the beam; the earth was spinning, the ground shaking underneath her feet. I smiled condescendingly; I knew it all.

A not uncommon affliction among twenty-some things; probably why I dislike teaching college aged students. Give me babies or grownups any day. Throughout my twenties, I ran in circles where faith was as rare and at least as despised as doubt or denial had been before. Religion, like a Southern accent, seemed to lower estimations of your IQ by at least 50 points. I could not afford both. And I no doubt wrote my

dissertation in part to distance myself from the past that formed me; by exposing the history of Christian sin, I somehow exonerated myself from my former complicity.

So how did I get back to the faith of my foremothers? It was surely overdetermined. My mother would say, does say, that if you bring up a child in the ways of the Lord, they will never depart. She always knew I would be back (so she now claims). She prayed faithfully for her children's recovery from secular humanism, or heathenism as my grandmother put it on those Sunday mornings when we refused to get out of bed. Looking back I'd flag the following events as well:

1. 1991 Desert Storm. Bush the first attacked Iraq my first year on my first job in Worcester, Massachusetts. Worcester Polytechnic Institute is an engineering school, whose student body is about 80% male, 50% ROTC, working-class ethnics who were usually the first generation in their family to go to college. It was scary when kids began wearing their uniforms to class and sad when they started shipping out. We in the Humanities Department organized a teach-in that the students attended in large numbers, to which they listened with their usual deference to authority. Nevertheless, their very virtues precluded much more than sitting there politely, hoping we were wrong. They had made a commitment, and they were honor bound to go. I will never forget the dignity of one young man who stood up to respond to our various indictments of US foreign policy, saying that he was leaving for Saudi Arabia that week and that he just had to believe in his country, that it was trying to do the right thing. These kids were the opposite of the draft-dodging old men who foam at the mouth while profiting from wars they orchestrate. My students were very brave and very disciplined young men, who placed their faith in hope that their virtue would not be sacrificed to vicious ends. They deserved better from their Right as well as our Left.

I don't think I have ever felt so isolated as that terrible spring. Worcester is not a college town, and the weekly anti-war picket we attended attracted considerable drive-by scorn. If it had not been for church people's presence on the picket, I think I would have been too afraid to go (I am such a chicken shit when push comes to shove—do not ever count on me in a fight, I'll be the one sniveling under my desk). I found it disconcerting to say the least to find academics outnumbered by Quakers and Presbyterians and Catholic Workers. I found these church people's prayerful style of protest more to my liking than the contemptuous cheers chanted by the secular Left. These were not the churches in which I had grown up, that much was for sure. It is a shame, I found myself thinking, that I have been educated beyond belief.

2. 1994 Sex and Death. I left Massachusetts after only one year to take a position at Duke University, a job I owe more to my mother's prayers than to my negligible publications. I very quickly succumbed to the pressure of the tenure clock. However, I was even more desperate to become a parent in those years than I was to finish my book. After years of infertility treatment, my partner and I contacted the Children's Home Society in Greensboro and began to prepare ourselves for the home study. Just to be on the safe side, I had started attending a local church, Good Shepherd United Methodist Church, to be more precise (about which we'll all learn a lot

more when Mary's book comes out). I was afraid that my divorce while in graduate school would hurt our prospects for adopting and I knew that church going translates into decent human being in these parts, or at least it used to. Knowing how this story ends in the present, I have to think I was kidding myself if no one else. I missed church a lot; I sometimes cried when I heard hymns sung. Moreover, I felt increasingly dissatisfied with the amoral economy of the professional subculture in which I seemed to live as well as worked. Not unlike my mother's social relationship to church, all my networks seemed to begin and end in academe. This in itself was problematic to me; the academy is not a place in which I feel at "home." However, it became increasingly inadequate to my needs. A feminism that discounted my deep desire for a child as succumbing to patriarchy's propaganda was downright offensive to me then. And I was also uncomfortable with an academic socialism that had no discernible interest in much less contact with actually existing people, or at least not on the North Carolina ground. I missed being around people who did more than wonder what made other people tick—as if their own hearts didn't beat and brood like everybody else's.

I knew I couldn't go back to a segregated church like the one I'd left in Raleigh; I visited a Unitarian church, which seemed well-meaning but too coldly cerebral for my still evangelical taste, and an Episcopalian church, whose obvious wealth was hard to square with the liberal theology on offer. I despaired at ever finding a church in which I would feel at home. Then I saw a homemade poster in the lobby of a local cinema advertising Good Shepherd. The congregation pictured in it appeared to be racially integrated, though whites were in a majority and the preacher was white. Their clothes and mode of advertising also suggested a more plebian sociology than the middle-class churches I'd been visiting. Good Shepherd then met in one of the many strip malls on Highway 98 (the road to Wake Forest; it seemed fateful). I went alone; and I loved it. The congregation consisted of mostly African blacks and mostly Southern whites. It had a real mission feel to it, in the sense that everybody was a refugee from some failed past or another. There was also an outreach program to the mentally handicapped. I rightly suspected that this would be a congregation able to support a special needs adoption. These were not people who saw in their religion one more measure of their perfection. I met with the preacher, Mark, to ask how he would feel about my coming; I needed to be open about the fact that I did not really believe. He said that would be fine, that many people hung out with Jesus because they loved him; they didn't have to know why.

I may not have believed in God yet, but I was definitely beginning to lose faith in the alternative I had construed the progressive academy to be. Most of my colleagues seemed to find their personal fulfillment in their work; for me it remains a job, albeit preferable to any other I can imagine. Then a new friend of mine committed suicide. She had followed an economist from California to Duke in the fall of '93. I met her in the bathroom of the humanities center in October or November; she was crying. When I asked if I could help, she poured out her life story—a man for whom she had left a partner of ten years had dumped her and she did not know what she was

going to do. I helped her move out of his place a couple of weekends later, and we became friends. However, within a few months it became clear to me—if that murky terror I was beginning to feel can be deemed clarity—she was in trouble. She told me she had always dreamed about committing suicide; she adored Virginia Woolf; she and her former boy friend both “believed” in suicide as a legitimate response to ... what, I wondered, life?! I responded to this strange worldview with judgmental disapproval, big time; how could she think of such a thing? Suicide was and remains repulsive to me. I did not think it was fair for her to hold this threat over her boyfriend’s head. She was so beautiful (Kate Moss to a t) and brilliant. None of this made sense to me. She had an obligation to play out her hand, I thought, to think of others. Such was my understanding of mental illness at that time.

She was clearly disappointed with my (grossly inadequate) reaction. Next thing I hear, her now ex- new boyfriend had her committed to the psych ward at UNC (after she showed up at his house threatening imminent self-destruction). Her old boyfriend called me from California to ask if I would try to get her released. I said that I too was afraid she would kill herself, that I thought she was mentally ill and that she needed professional treatment. He replied that there was nothing wrong with Jill, that contemplating suicide was a perfectly rational response to a classist and racist world. I felt nauseous; I remember thinking, ‘these people are crazy, my Grandma Beulah is a hundred times wiser than they are.’ He must have felt something similar because he hung up on me when I made it clear I was not on our mutual friend’s “side” in this. Sadly, I wasn’t. I was struggling with life on other fronts. I was in the middle of a second miscarriage, and as I stood there talking on the phone, I was very conscious of the longed for life bleeding out of me. But I didn’t tell him--or more importantly Jill herself-- which is one of my many regrets about my conduct. Jill was such a generous and caring person; if she had known that I withdrew from our friendship for reasons of my own, she might have found it less painful. Jill eventually succeeded in convincing a young doctor she had been wrongly confined and she was released within a few days. She stopped calling me and I didn’t reach out. I was so caught up in my childless grief I just wasn’t able or willing to cope with her demons too. And so I dropped her. Maybe I was just afraid of getting splattered. I received one more phone call from Jill, now back in California. She said she was calling to say good by and to thank me for being her friend. I remember saying very slowly: this is such bullshit; please get help. (Some bedside manner, huh?) She hung up on me; the same old boyfriend, with whom she was apparently staying, called me back and yelled at me for upsetting her. About a month later, her mother called to ask for help cleaning out Jill’s apartment in Chapel Hill. She thought I knew; Jill had returned to North Carolina a couple of weeks earlier. She committed suicide in her apartment a few days before. Her mother kindly reassured me that I was not to blame for her daughter’s death when I self-indulgently confessed to her that I had abandoned Jill when she had needed a friend the most.

Good Shepherd’s mission atmosphere was an extraordinary comfort to me after Jill’s death. I still think that I could have prevented or at least delayed Jill’s death

had we stayed in touch. The one thing I know is that I chose not to try. (I saw her one last time in a wonderful dream a few years ago. She wore a nice shift instead of the baggy sweaters and jeans under which she concealed her figure and her long hair was cut short, revealing her beautiful face. We had coffee in a sun-lit cafe; she seemed ... all right. Who was reassuring whom?) My terrible guilt was slowly assuaged by Good Shepherd's pentecostal emphasis on redemption, the humble congregation's prostrate humility in the face of the undeserved gift of God's grace, the grateful outpouring of love for the least—which included selfish sinners like myself as well as the developmentally disabled adults who shouted through our services. It all touched me deeply. I found myself slowly beginning to “believe” again, but it was still a one-way conversation, an act of faith. I wanted to be like my comrades at Good Shepherd; loving God seemed like a way to love with them, a lesson in how to love like them.

5. 1998 letting go. My next step towards my present faith followed a large step back. My husband informed me in the spring of 1998 that he had fallen in love with somebody else. I spent the next year trying to become someone to whom he might want to stay married. He complained about my conventionalism, my cultural conservatism; I had changed. The main change I had made was my return to church. His new girlfriend was way new age—so I fought fire with fire. I saw an astrologist, took yoga, and generally tried to be more like the woman he found so fascinating. That included not going to church. The apostle Peter has got nothing on me; I was willing to deny God if that's what it took to keep my marriage together. Luckily for me, I failed.

A year later, Tim moved out. It all seems so melodramatic now, but at the time I felt like I was going to die, that I did die. However, I came to realize that what was really killing me was my all-consuming anger at Tim and his girlfriend, who had been a friend of the family for years. I hardly left the house (not least, because I was desperately afraid of seeing Tim's beloved, who lived nearby). I went into a cleaning rampage, determined to get rid of any and every thing his body had touched, excluding pets and children. My yoga teacher gave me a book of spells called “Spiritual Cleansing”. I decided to work the spell against the evil eye (convinced that Tim's girlfriend wouldn't stop at taking my husband, that she was really out to do ME harm, a transparent projection of my own intentions). The spell called for adding a bottle of beer and sea salt to a bath, stirring it counterclockwise (or was it clockwise—be SURE to check the book before trying this at home) and immersing yourself in it. I was sobbing the whole time, babbling god help me, god help me, in the way that atheists do in fox holes, never expecting a response. The next thing I knew I was saying to my own amazed edification, god help me forgive them! (Miracle No. 1: God, the universe, the beer, something, revealed to me the only thing that would really help me, the very thing I couldn't imagine wanting much less doing.) The spell then calls for you to wrap yourself in a towel without drying off, go to your bedroom, and close the door.

You are then instructed to open your Bible (imagine my surprise when my new age journey into sorcery took me right back to where I started) to Matthew 5:17 and read to the end of the chapter. I started reading aloud about the Law we must obey to

be admitted into the kingdom, thinking smugly through my tears that my poor ex-husband and his girlfriend were DOOMED. Then I got to that first verse of law: “you have heard that it was said ... “do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment. But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgement.... And anyone who says “you fool!” will be in danger of the fire of hell”. I raced through the rest looking urgently for adultery, but it was far down the list of damnable sins. I was literally struck down to my knees and then prostrate on the floor by what I read that afternoon (Miracle No. 2). No one on earth has a sharper tongue than I do when I am riled; and Tim had endured my venom for years. He did me wrong, for sure; but the verbal abuse of which I am capable was even more horrible, according to Jesus himself. Judge not—you do not have time if you are really working on your own shit. I thank what I call God for showing me that it was my judgmental rage, and not Tim’s rejection, that was killing me. I really think it would have killed me too if God had not intervened; I think it was responsible for the pre-cancerous condition in my breast (a rotten heart) that was diagnosed—and removed—a few months later.

I had no choice other than to let Tim go—but thanks to this afternoon’s miracles and lots of good therapy, I was able to do so with a love that accepted my own responsibility for what happened and that forgave Tim his. Our children are the real beneficiaries. They were watching me like hawks. And I believe that my journey through rage to sad acceptance helped them come out of our divorce in far better shape than I had feared would be the case.

One more miracle before I return to church. I moved out of the marital residence a year later. I desperately needed to get out. Tim had remodeled it; his presence was everywhere. I moved all the little stuff on the evenings the girls were with Tim. But I needed help with the big stuff. I asked Tim. (Weird, I know, but I was afraid I would break down and I did not want anybody else to see me. It was also no doubt a desire to complete this one last ritual with Tim). I was walking up the steps to the front porch; Tim was inside packing boxes. It felt like he was packing me up and throwing me away. I had a real panic attack; my heart was pounding, my breathing got shallow; I was really afraid I would fall apart. Again without thinking, I muttered another foxhole prayer: God give me the strength to do this. And again an answer that stopped me in my tracks flashed across my consciousness: “I already have”. I felt a confident calm surge through my body, and I actually smiled before heading up the stairs.

I suppose it is only faith that has me “hear” my thoughts as God’s voice. However, I also think the certainty of God’s non-existence is equally an act of faith. I experience healing insights, thoughts of which I was not then capable, as revelations when they came. At those moments and more than occasionally since, I have experienced feelings of peace (humility, acceptance, love) which I find best approximated by the language of divinity. Sometimes, most of the time, I cannot hear God. But as someone at RCIA once put it, faith lies in the desire to hear God’s voice. That is all

we can or have to “do.” That is more than enough for me. But I am equally delighted by one of our number’s insistence that he has no desire ever to hear the voice of god!

RCIA stands for the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults, a yearlong class required for non-Catholics seeking full communion in the church. I was a long time going back to church after Tim and I broke up, ashamed of the divorce, my second, and even more ashamed of leaving Good Shepherd, which was by this time in its death throes. I visited Resurrection United Methodist Church, a slightly integrated church, and saw some Good Shepherd friends. It was not offensive, but the Spirit did not speak to me there as it had at Good Shepherd. Larry Goodwyn, one of my colleagues in the History Department, suggested I check out Immaculate Conception. I said I can’t, I’m not Catholic. He said that would not matter once you hear Father David, or words to that effect. I was lucky to hear Father David McBriar on my first visit. I was simply stunned by the political sophistication and moral depth of his translation of the gospel. I had never attended a church where the theology matched my own understanding of social justice. Or where activist practice exceeded anything going on in the academic circles I inhabited. If only I were Catholic, this would be the church for me. I continued to search for a church in which I could belong but kept coming back to Immaculate Conception to eavesdrop. Then I talked to Teresa, who reassured me that it was more than all right to attend, that I could be a permanent visitor if I wanted, even though I was divorced. Kathy Rudy invited my daughters and I to go to Mass with her, and she helped us follow the unfamiliar liturgy. My friend John eventually suggested that I begin attending Inquiry, that if I loved the church so much I should think about joining. And so I did, finally entering the Church at the Easter vigil of 2003.

This was a long journey for me; I started Inquiry in the spring of 2001. It took me a long while to work my way around if not through many of the church’s teachings. But my timing was impeccable. The Church was a beacon of decency in the darkness that descended on American political culture in the aftermath of September 11th. Like many Americans, I too went to church that terrible Tuesday. Father John broke down in tears in the middle of the service when he announced the death of his fellow Franciscan and friend, Father Michael Judge, who was killed while ministering to firefighters as the Towers collapsed. Father David calmly took over, guiding his sobbing community to a grief that seeks peace, to a compassion that abhors revenge as an abomination to the memory of all victims of violence. I will never forget the stilled silence in that packed sanctuary after Father David finished reading the gospel. He must have chosen it himself:

“You have heard that it was said ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth. But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.... You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you: Love your enemies ... If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Matthew 5: 38

Pausing for a long minute's reflection, Father David closed his Bible, looked up and stated in the kind of blunt way that brooks no bullshit: "This is the word of the Lord." And that has been the word preached and practiced at Immaculate Conception throughout the years of pseudo-Christian war-mongering that would follow.

The personal and the political continue to converge in my spiritual life and in my religious practice. The faith I have today is a product of continuity as well as change. But it in no way originated in the virtues of my Church. It was rekindled after I left Good Shepherd and before I attended Immaculate Conception. However, both those communities have played a crucial role, in walking the walk I had originally heard talked in pews where I sat next to my mother and subsequently in socialist leaning academic circles. The friars at Immaculate Conception speak the truth to power from their pulpit to the outrage of many of their privileged parishioners. Their days are devoted to the mundane tasks of counseling and caring for its victims in Durham and beyond. They unsettle the condescending and they serve the subaltern. They are for me a face of God. I judge their tree by its fruit and find it nourishing (Mathew 7:12-29).

A few parting provisos about the nature of my faith. I have no desire to spread it! The god of my understanding that I worship at Immaculate Conception is neither jealous nor imperious. Good fruit comes from many different kinds of trees, atheist included. Conversely, religion can no more predict the kind or quality of social, political, or cultural fruit than any other subject location. The influence of religion, in other words, may be profound but it is never predictable, contingent as it is on its all too human carriers.

I want also to say that the journey I have just narrated has no intrinsic importance except as an example of a kind of subjectivity that animates the lives of more people on this planet than the research produced in the American academy might lead us to expect. I do think those of us on the academic left need to hone our categories of religious analysis, for political as well as intellectual reasons, beyond the dismissive neglect that currently reigns. I write in the despairing aftermath of the presidential election of 2004. The pundits have had a field day with the story of how popular religion caught the liberal intelligentsia and the academic left off guard in this election. We do have a problem when large sections of the humanities, including my own discipline, can offer little more in the way of analysis of the electoral behavior of half of the American voters than incredulous dismay. To the extent that we effectively require the masses to check their superstition at the rational door we erect in front of democratic political practice, we have handed hostages to fortune. This is one indulgence on our part that the rest of the world can no longer afford.

NOTES

1. E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Penguin, 1963).

2. My argument put most crudely represents the missionary agenda of evangelical Victorians as a self-aggrandizing ideology of an emergent middle class struggling to assert its hegemony over Britain's landed elite as well as the plebian masses at 'home' and in the colonies. *Congregational Missions and the Making of an Imperial Culture in Nineteenth Century England* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).
3. Mary McClintock Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption: Theology for a Worldly Church*, in progress.