

*Politics and Religion of Cruelty*  
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I write here as a kind of native informant on American right-wing Christian religion and politics – or at the least a source of anecdotes from a native American. What I seek is to draw the attention of my Russian colleagues to a disturbing attitude that they too might find in their own religious politics. This is the conspicuous place played by *cruelty* in the attitudes of right-wing religious politicians or politically religious people. If my Russian colleagues recognize something analogous in the Russian religio-political world, perhaps we would I have got our hands on something of a much wider importance than might first seem to be the case. What I suspect, as I shall argue, is that the prominence of a religio-political rhetoric of cruelty among ‘right-wing’ believers in the United States reflects double resentment: first, for their belief that they have been effectively *excluded from modernity*, and second, envy at the joy of those who live with easy conscience in modernity. That this exclusion might actually be the result of the choices made by right-wing believers themselves is besides the point. They may choose to squat outside the charmed circle of modernity. But, forgetting have made this decision, they cannot help but look on with a mixture of hatred and envy at the joy of those within. In their view, modernity should not make people as happy as it often does. Only adherence to what they imagine to be the will of God, as often conceived by a cramped theology, should confer true happiness. Thus, it becomes natural to rejoice in the pain of modern folk because they have lived a false happiness; they deserve the sufferings that eventually come to them for their faithlessness.

Consider this scenario. The wicked offend God. They sin. But their sin does not go unnoticed. They pay a price, because God punishes sinners for their trespasses. Either in this life or thereafter, sinners reap the reward of their wickedness in the form of punishment. This punishment often takes the form of cruelty – inflicting suffering and wretched torments upon the wicked. For their part, the just have been faithful to the lord’s commands. As the wicked are punished, they stand by in the calm reassurance of the rewards of their blessedness. One of the odd delights of blessedness is to know that the wicked suffer for their lack of faith. Their impieties do not go unnoticed – certainly not by God, but also not by the just. Further, for some reason it is also not enough for the blessed simply to *know* that the cosmic order of divine justice has been re-affirmed by punishing the sinner and blessing the faithful. The blessed also *feel* delight at the pain and anguish of the damned. The good naturally enough derive deep pleasure from seeing evil vanquished and good triumph. But, not so naturally, they also take pleasure in knowing that evildoers suffer excruciating deaths in this life or eternal agonies in the hereafter for their transgressions against the divine will. This describes the scenario I want to call the “religion of cruelty.”

Consider some instances of this scenario as it is realized in real life. Let me recall, for example, that after the attacks of 9-11, how the Reverend Jerry Falwell confidently proclaimed how the hand of a punishing God had come down hard to smite New Yorkers for their various

and sundry iniquities. Of the wrenching suffering of those caught in the collapse of the flaming twin towers, Falwell offered no words of compassion. Of the desperate souls who had flung themselves madly from out of the windows and off the rooftops of the doomed towers only to splatter on the streets below, Falwell voiced no sympathy. Instead, Falwell was pleased to scold the anguished dead and their devastated kin in proud vindication of his theology of divine punishment. They deserved what they got, and Falwell was cheered that they got it.

Likewise, Falwell's theological kin, Pat Robertson, assured us that the pathos of death and destruction of Hurricane Katrina was God's way of punishing the hapless inhabitants of New Orleans for the moral laxity of city, known far and wide for its endless 'carnival' ethos. Again, Robertson delighted that his vision of the world was proven true in the crucible of hopeless death and despair that New Orleans became. Too bad that thousands of helpless folk drowned in a matter of days – the old, the very young, infants, the infirm and so on. God's will be done. And, that is something about which to rejoice, no matter the 'collateral damage.'

And, let us not forget the "God Hates Fags" campaign of Reverend Fred Phelps' Topeka, Kansas Westboro Baptist Church. Church members demonstrate at the funerals and burials of homosexual American soldiers, who have given their lives for our country in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Brandishing "God Hates Fags" signs and loudly proclaiming divine hatred for the homosexual war dead, the demonstrators perversely inflict further wounds on the gathered mourners by tarnishing the memory of the fallen at a time when they are most vulnerable. More to the point, their demonstrations are raucous, even joyous, events, occasions for the blessed of Westboro Baptist to regale the survivors of the gay war dead that God surely hates those they have laid to rest. Compassion for the loss of a loved one? Fellow feeling for the pain of another's grief? Common decency or decorum on a site as sacred as a cemetery? None of these mark the street fiestas of hatred mounted by Reverend Phelps and his saints.

Or, consider the brooding tone behind the wildly successful "Left Behind" series of novels by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins. Yes, testimonials show that the novels of the gradual approach of the Rapture have inspired many Christians to rededicate themselves in positive ways to a pious life. But, the darker side to the 'raptured' salvation of the blessed tells the story of merciless, unending and massive human suffering. To be caught up from and saved from such a pit of sorrow is indeed a cause for joy. But so also the blessed count as their pleasure the sure knowledge of the sufferings of those who mocked them in disbelief. The Falwells, Robertsons, Phelps, LaHayes and their ilk all give clear voice to what I want to call a "religion of cruelty."

What strikes me about such attitudes is not just the cosmology of evil at work here. It is one thing to theologize about God's punishment of transgressors from on high by death, disease and destruction. It is another thing altogether to relish a religion of cruelty. To *delight* in the suffering of the wicked at the hands of God, even to enjoy heaping contempt on the dead as they are laid to rest, takes things to another level. What strikes me – and puzzles me – is how much joy at the suffering of sinners in eternal hell fires seems intrinsically part of the worldview of the Falwells, Robertson, Phelps and others. And, if references to eternal torture in the fires of hell fails to express the proper sentiments, groups like the "God Hates Fags" crowd seem to feel that submitting grave side mourners of homosexual soldiers to mockery and scorn strikes just the right

chord.

Such explicit expressions of a politics and religion of cruelty are now sadly common enough. Less well appreciated are views that *entail* this sort of mean politics and religion. These subdued expressions of the politics and religion of cruelty may suggest that there are greater, more troubling, depths to this phenomenon than we might imagine. For example, in a recent opinion piece in the New York Times, “Red Family, Blue Family,” (10 May 2010) nationally known columnist, Ross Douthat explored some paradoxes issuing from a recent book, *Red Families v. Blue Families*, authored by Naomi Cahn and June Carbone (Oxford University Press, 2010). Douthat noted that in the so-called ‘blue’ – more politically and religiously liberal – states and the red – religiously and politically conservative – states the same rates of teen and unmarried pregnancies were to be found. But, surprisingly, when it came to rates of divorce and births to teen and unmarried mothers rates were *lower* in the ‘blue’ states than in the ‘red’ states. Rates of abortion were, however, correspondingly higher in the blue states. By contrast, in the red states, more unmarried or teen women brought their pregnancies to term, often by margins two and three times that of selected blue states. Douthat observes that the reason then for the greater stability of families in the blue states was precisely because of the availability of abortion. While blue state liberals have often argued that their liberal policies regarding family life reduce the need for abortion, in fact, abortion seems to make their more stable families possible. As for the red states, Douthat says in conclusion that: “the ‘red family’ model can look dysfunctional – an uneasy mix of rigor and permissiveness, whose ideals don’t always match up with the facts of contemporary life. But it reflects something else as well: an attempt, however, compromised, to navigate post-sexual revolution America without relying on abortion.”

Now, Douthat is a generally thoughtful and decent sort of conservative, far from the hateful, fire-breathing Falwells or Robertsons. Yet, he tellingly leaves the matter of the unremarkable disparities and notable similarities between red and blue state families pretty much at that – an “attempt to navigate post-sexual revolution America without relying on abortion.” Whether folks live in red or blue states, people misbehave equally whatever the prevailing ‘sort’ of religious and political climate of a place may be. Teen and unmarried women get pregnant at the same rates no matter how liberal or conservative the religious and political climate may be. Women may be happier in blue states, and find that their marriages are more durable, but aside from that, neither liberal nor conservative community values can overcome the power of the hormonal imperative. But while Douthat believes *that* is the real story behind the statistical data, I think another, more troubling, story waits to be told. It is a story of deeply embedded streak of cruelty.

Now, I certainly do not believe that Douthat consciously plays a politics and religion of cruelty, nor do I think Ross Douthat a sadist or primitive hater like the pious Christians of the “God Hates Fags” crowd. I find his writing hate-free across the board. Yet, I want to point to what I see as Douthat’s inattention to the underlying politics and religion of cruelty here hiding beneath the red/blue statistics. To wit, while the logic of Douthat’s argument is flawless as far as it goes, he stops short of drawing out a disturbing conclusion about the final conditions of the women of his statistics about pregnancy and child birth outside wedlock and so on in the red states. Namely, in the red states, because of restrictions on abortion, typically the product of

right-wing religious agitation, women are being forced to term. Further, we can conclude that they were also being forced into 'shot gun' marriages, for the same religious reasons. Given the higher divorce rates in the red states over the blue, we must conclude that such forced marriages thus tended to fail. Among other consequences of red state domestic crisis, comes the inevitable plague of social ills – single mothers, often reduced to poverty, broken families, the spousal abuse frequently involved in cases of divorce.

If I am correct in identifying the consequences of red states religion and politics, Douthat should have gone one further step with his data. Had Douthat followed his logic to encompass what became of the women forced into wedlock and childbirth, he would have had to admit that the red states were, in effect, systematically deploying what I have called a 'politics of cruelty.' Because red states laws and mores insisted upon marriage to the biological father of an unmarried woman got pregnant, these women married men with whom they could not form durable domestic relationships. They divorced frequently. That, I consider cruel. And, since the avenues for terminating the pregnancy of an unmarried or teen mother were effectively closed off, these red state women were carrying pregnancies to term of children they might not or could not love or want. That, as well, I find cruel. When I think about these poor creatures, what I see are the effects of a politics of cruelty, nurtured by a corresponding and enabling religion of cruelty. It should stop.

Now, my critics might reply that terminating a pregnancy is also cruel. How to choose between two cruelties? How to choose when a foetus is totally innocent of responsibility, while the woman getting pregnant at least had some choices in the matter? I am no enthusiast for abortion. I know very, very few women who are either. The so-called 'pro-choice' position in the abortion debate is one I have never confused with a pro-abortion stance. The pro-choice position is just that: it recognizes that within certain limits – short of viability, for example – whether or not a woman can choose to terminate her pregnancy is a matter of her private conscience. Later than that, whether or not to terminate a pregnancy becomes public, and thus political, matter, subject to the laws of the realm. That is basically what the famous US Supreme Court decision, *Roe versus Wade*, decided.

But, critics might retort that while that may be very well and good by the law, it avoids the issue of cruelty. Legal or not, is not abortion cruelty incarnate? Here, it is not the mother's mental anguish or inconvenience that are at play, but the actual death of a potential human being. As the 'pro-life' proponents tell us, they stand for 'life.' There is surely no doubt about abortion being the termination of a living thing. Now, in reply to this fair point, I must plead some ignorance – not about the obvious fact that abortions kill, but about something I argue is more important even than death, in some sense. I do not know how much suffering an abortion causes a foetus. And, thus I do not know how much cruelty an abortion produces. That would be good to know. As anyone who has ever been faced with the terminal suffering of even a beloved pet, much less a fellow human, will attest, there is nothing that sears the soul as watching a fellow sentient creature suffer, writhe in pain and agony.

My Russian readers will think immediately of Tolstoy's *Death of Ivan Illich* as the classic rendition of the irrational tragedy of human pain. In a memorable passage from the beginning of

Chapter 12, Tolstoy takes into the despairing mind of Illich, now racked with the most excruciating agony:

From that moment the screaming began that continued for three days, and was so terrible that one could not hear it through two closed doors without horror. At the moment he answered his wife realized that he was lost, that there was no return, that the end had come, the very end, and his doubts were still unsolved and remained doubts.

“Oh! Oh! Oh!” he cried in various intonations. he had begun by screaming “I won’t!” and continued screaming on the letter “O”.

For three whole days, during which time did not exist for him, he struggled in that black sack into which he was being thrust by an invisible, resistless force. He struggled as a man condemned to death struggles in the hands of the executioner, knowing that he cannot save himself. And every moment he felt that despite all his efforts he was drawing nearer and nearer to what terrified him. he felt that his agony was due to his being thrust into that black hole and still more to his not being able to get right into it.

Again, I am no enthusiast for so called ‘mercy killing.’ But, I am at least humbled enough by my experiences of inexorable pain in others to doubt I would be able to know what to do in the face of it. But, I get ahead of myself. To return to abortion and suffering, if pain is indeed caused by certain methods of abortion, modern medical science surely has within its abilities painless methods of terminating pregnancies. So, I conclude that abortion and the death entailed ought to be distinguished from pain, suffering and cruelty. Abortion need not impose pain, suffering and cruelty upon the foetus. But, from what we learn from the statistics of red state/blue state America , it is clear that forcing a woman to term, coercing her to marry the father of the child she carries, regardless of her feelings in the matter, and so on, does indeed condemn (statically) many of these women to pain and suffering over, potentially, long periods of time. Doing so, as I have been arguing, is to practice a politics and religion of cruelty.

So, what puzzles me is how and why – assuming all this is known (and there is little reason to doubt that it is) – people who call themselves followers of Jesus can embrace a religion and politics of cruelty? What accounts for the heartlessness and sheer meanness meted out to these unfortunates? How is it possible to wish pain and suffering upon persons who in no way directly threaten one? How can Christians like a Falwell or Robertson find delight and joy in the death of innocent folk, whether consumed by fire in the World Trade Center or drowned in the hurricane Katrina flood waters of the Louisiana coast?

Now, I shall be the first to admit that my argument rests on anecdotal evidence, and not a solid ground of social research. Yet, I must plead privileged access to the cruel and resentful world of right-wing Christian delight in the sufferings of the wicked. I have witnessed these attitudes from close range in my own relatives. I have been stunned by the gleeful anticipation of the excruciating torments of those not saved in the Rapture by otherwise gentle folk. I have been startled by the heartless expressions of vengeful joy when they meditate on the eternal tortures promised the unfaithful. Anecdotal or not, I suspect enough readers will confirm my impressions in their own experience to persuade some real social scientists to design a research project to test

my ideas. I would be most interested in their results.

But, while my puzzlement persists, I have begun to formulate some explanations. Granted, they are little better than guesses about why a substantial segment of American Christianity has taken this bitter and sadistic turn of heart. Actually, when one reflects upon the beleaguered primitive Christian community's delight in the suffering and pain of Christ's enemies in the Book of Revelation, the recrudescence of the same structures among some right-wing American Christians today is not so remarkable. Gloating over the suffering of others, first of all, suggests that our red state Christian right-wingers actually do see themselves as having been wounded, attacked and put up for mockery and humiliation. Their righteous wrath and glee at the sufferings of those perceived as enemies is a natural response to the feeling of having first been wounded, humiliated, made the object of contempt. Rightly or wrongly, some right-wing Christian folk see themselves this way. In part, they may be justified given the common jokes and jibes fashionable liberals routinely heap onto right-wing Christians. No matter how much I admire much of his work, comedian Bill Maher's recent film, "Religulous," would serve as an object-lesson in such a rhetoric of sneering contempt both for religious people as well as right-wing politics. Small wonder the religious right feel wounded. They get no respect from powerful opinion-makers in America. That they, perhaps, don't deserve respect is another matter. The point is how they perceive things. And, rightly or wrongly, they seem to feel wounded. In return, they lash out in revenge, in an assertion of their righteous triumph over their smug tormentors. They gloat over the reversals of fortune of their imagined tormentors by tormenting them with great gusto in return. Perhaps that is the key to today's politics and religion of cruelty?