

In Nomine Dei? Saramago, Religion, and "The God Factor"

Keith Anthis

The newcomer to José Saramago may be perplexed by the fact that the theme of religion plays such an important role in a number of the Portuguese Nobel laureate's works (most prominently in *O Evangelho segundo Jesus Cristo*) since Saramago has long maintained that he is an atheist. It is important to keep in mind that Saramago is a man of ideas and that his preoccupations concerning religion focus more specifically on how its most fundamental tenets are often considerably altered in the transition between the written word and its realization. It is through his literature that Saramago seeks to communicate his ideas and, when it comes to religion, Saramago attacks the sometimes gross misinterpretations of the writings of the various religions practiced all over the world, as well as the blatant exploitation of religion by people who merely want to take advantage of other people's insecurities, but who in doing so claim that they are doing "God's work." One of his more outstanding critiques is his highly controversial essay, "The God Factor," originally published in Portuguese and Spanish periodicals just one week after the terrorist attacks of September 11 and presently appearing in English translation. Of course, Saramago has never been one to avoid polemics and has proven time and time again that his goal in criticizing various institutions—religious, governmental, educational, among others—is to provoke people to make changes that Saramago believes will improve society.

Saramago discusses various atrocities committed during the later twentieth century in places like India, Angola and Israel, with short descriptions of scenes that seem better suited to a horror movie than to real life, before finally settling on his main discussion involving the September 11 attacks. He makes more references to some of the most horrible moments of the past half century, citing Rwanda, Vietnam, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and, finally, the concentration camps of Nazi Germany, explaining that one of the things that ties them all together is what he refers to as the "God factor," stating that "it is precisely because of God and in God's name that everything has been permitted and justified, principally the worst things, principally the most cruel and horrendous." At times it seems difficult to identify exactly how the "God factor" figures into some of the examples given by Saramago—because some of the scenarios he chooses to include were definitely more racially motivated than religiously—but the final one, the Inquisition, works perfectly. Especially noteworthy is the manner in which Saramago refers to the Inquisition: a "terrorist organization," similar in form and function to the Taliban, and "dedicated to a perverse interpretation of sacred texts that should merit the respect of those who say they believe in them."

Another scenario that would work perfectly within the framework of "The God Factor" might be the response made by the United States to the September 11 attacks, and I think it would be interesting to hear what Saramago has to say about this. Saramago once said: "We invent a sort of reality for our own sake. We think that this so-called reality we invent is not only the only reality that exists, but the only reality that we *want*. And we react in a very negative way when someone tells us that the reality of the world is not exactly the way that we think it is."¹ This statement could certainly be applied to the religious right in the United States: this group has become increasingly powerful in recent years, to the point that it exerts an alarming amount of influence on the President, as can be evidenced in his decisions on such controversial subjects as cloning, stem cell research, gay marriage, etc. The problem is that the religious right, and the President as well, actually seem to believe that what they are doing is morally correct according to the tenets of their faith; yet in doing so, they exclude all other possibilities by assuming that their way is the only "right" way—and therefore do not seem to understand why others should want to question their methods of reasoning or the logic behind the choices they make. The actions taken by the President of the United States following September 11 could make for an

interesting extension to “The God Factor,” as it seems that their mentality is not too different than those of the people Saramago discusses in this essay. The commonality between terrorists and counterterrorists—which is, at the same time, the main theme of Saramago’s essay—is the claim these groups make that their acts of aggression/violence are justified and, more specifically, that such actions, no matter how terrible they might seem under otherwise normal circumstances, are tolerated and even supported by those groups’ religions. As Saramago indicates in the essay, these people believe that such acts should be admissible because the ends justify the means. However, Saramago wants to deconstruct their argument by means of a rational analysis of the situation, which he bases on his humanistic point of view, underlining the importance of all human life and the fact that it is not up to a minority of people to decide what is good for the majority, whether it be for religious reasons or otherwise.

It is precisely this God factor of which Saramago speaks that compelled George Bush to proclaim the War on Terror, whose primary goal was to locate Osama bin Laden but which soon extended itself to the invasion of Iraq and search for weapons of mass destruction. Again, the similarities between these actions and the terrorist actions that inspired them is this: the people who made the decision to take action believed that what they were doing was necessary for the preservation of their society’s way of life. There was technically no reason for the United States to enter Iraq at that time they did since there were no weapons of mass destruction to be found, and, although Saddam Hussein has been removed from power, little progress seems to have been made towards establishing a more democratic society there. As a matter of fact, some might say that the only progress being made is the ever-increasing number of soldiers—and civilians—killed by people who are simply tired of these people who have invaded their country and who continue to force a foreign ideology onto them. None of the activities in Iraq have anything to do, really, with the terrorist attacks of September 11, nor have they yielded any results in bringing Osama bin Laden and other key figures responsible for the aforementioned attacks to justice. This brings us to yet another important question: if bin Laden were to be found, of what, exactly, would “bringing him to justice” consist?

Saramago’s response to the September 11 attacks was fitting of the way in which he responds to such acts of terrorism or violence: he uses humanism to denounce the rationale of those who committed what he can only consider

to be atrocities. Saramago has always used his writing as a means to criticize what he considers to be wrong with society, and "The God Factor" is no exception. The Portuguese Nobel wants to bring to our attention the fact that there are people who will take up religion as their shield to wage wars and to wreak havoc on the lives of innocent people in the name of someone Saramago says does not exist. Now that he has told us what is wrong with society, all he has to do is give us a possible solution for the problems he has so deftly signaled. The author, however, would probably respond that it is not his place to make such far-reaching decisions for the whole of society but rather only to point out its defects so that the greater majority can decide how to remedy the situation. He does, of course, remind us to avoid becoming victims of the God factor by suggesting that we rely instead on the same human spirit that has the power to make the *Passarola* fly in *Memorial do Convento*. Most importantly, Saramago would rather try to examine the situation with the intent of discovering the best way to ameliorate it: his only war-waging has occurred with the publication of his literature, including "The God Factor." Now if only the right people would stop making war and pay more attention to this literature.

Note

¹ This interview, given on the occasion of the publication of the English translation of *A Caverna*, was originally published under the title "Prophet of Doom" in the November/December 2002 issue of *Book* magazine.

Keith Anthis holds BA and MA degrees from Texas A&M University and is currently pursuing the PhD at Texas Tech University. His dissertation involves a comparative analysis of themes of historiography and (mis)representations of history in the works of José Saramago and the Galician author Gonzalo Torrente Ballester. E-mail: keith.anthis@ttu.edu