

The God Factor

José Saramago

Translated by

George Monteiro

Somewhere in India. A row of artillery pieces in place. Attached to the mouth of each one of them there is a man. In the first frame of the photograph a British officer raises his sword and is about to give the order to fire. We are not exposed to images showing the effects of those discharges, but even the most obtuse imagination can “see” heads and torsos scattered over the killing field, bloody remains, viscera, amputated members. The men were rebels. Somewhere in Angola. Two Portuguese soldiers lift up by his arms a negro who quite possibly is not dead; another soldier grasps a machete and gets ready to separate his head from his body. That’s the first photograph. In the second one—this time there is a second photograph—the head has already been cut off and spiked on a stick; the soldiers are laughing. The negro was a guerrilla. Somewhere in Israel. While some Israeli soldiers immobilize a Palestinian, another soldier hammers into the bones in his right hand. The Palestinian had thrown stones. The United States of North-America, New York City. Two North-American commercial planes, hijacked by terrorists connected to Islamic righteousness, smash into the towers of the World Trade Center and bring them down. Following the same procedure a third plane causes enormous damage to the Pentagon, the seat of United States war power. The dead—buried in the rubble, reduced to crumbs, vaporized—are counted by the thousands.

The photographs of India, Angola and Israel hurl their horror in our

faces; victims are shown to us at the very moment of their torturing, of their agonizing expectation, of their ignoble death. In New York everything seemed unreal at first, an episode, repeated without novelty, of still another cinematic catastrophe, really striking in the degree of illusion achieved by special-effects engineering, but devoid of death rattles, blood-bursts, crushed flesh, shattered bones, or feces. Horror, crouching like an obscene animal, waited until we got over our stupefaction to leap at our throats. Horror said "here I am" for the first time when those persons leapt into space as if they had just selected a form of death of their choosing. Now horror will appear whenever a stone is removed, part of a wall, a sheet of twisted aluminum, to reveal an unrecognizable head, an arm, a leg, an unraveled abdomen, a flattened thorax. But even this will be repetitive and monotonous, already familiar, in a certain sense, from those images that came to us from that Rwanda-of-a-million-dead, that Vietnam scorched by napalm, those executions in crowded stadiums, those lynchings and beatings of Iraqi soldiers buried alive under tons of sand, those atomic bombs that leveled and pulverized Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Nazi crematorium vomiting ash, those trucks dumping cadavers as if they were trash. We all must die of something or other, but we have lost count of the human beings dead in the worst ways possible that humankind has been able to invent. One of those, the most criminal, the most absurd, the one that most offends simple reason, is that one that, since the beginnings of time and of civilizations, has called for the dealing of death in God's name. It has been said that all religions, without exception, have never served to reconcile or to bring human beings together; that, on the contrary, they have been and continue to be the cause of indescribable sufferings and massacres, of the monstrous physical and spiritual violence that constitutes one of the darkest chapters in mankind's miserable history. As a sign of our respect for life, at least, we should have the courage to proclaim under all circumstances this evident and demonstrable truth, but the majority of the faithful of all religions not only pretend not to know it, but rise up, enraged and intolerant, against those for whom God is nothing more but a name, nothing more than the name that, fearing death, we gave him one day and that would come to block our steps to a real humanization. In exchange they promised us paradises and threatened us with infernos, one as much a fake as the other—shameless insults to the intelligence and common sense that cost us so much effort to bring about. Nietzsche said that all was permissible if God did not

exist, and I reply that it is precisely because of God and in God's name that everything has been permitted and justified, principally the worst of things, principally the most cruel and horrendous. For centuries the Inquisition—it, too, a terrorist organization, like today's Taliban, one dedicated to a perverse interpretation of sacred texts that should merit the respect of those who say they believe in them—was a monstrous union between Religion and State against liberty of conscience and against the most human of rights: the right to say no, the right to heresy, the right to chose something else, which is what the word heresy signifies.

And yet, God is innocent. Innocent as something that does not exist, that has never existed or will ever exist. Innocent of having created an entire universe to house beings capable of committing the grossest crimes only to justify themselves by saying that they are celebrations of his power and of his glory, even as the dead mount up, these of the twin towers in New York, and all the others who, in the name of a God turned assassin through the will and actions of men, have covered and insist on covering the pages of History with blood and terror. Gods, I find, exist only in the human brain, prosper or languish in the same universe that invented them, but the "God factor"—that is present in life as if it were effectively life's lord and master. It is not a god, but the "God factor" that is exhibited on the dollar bill and that expresses itself on billboards that ask for a divine blessing for America (the America of the United States, not the other one). And it was the "God factor" the god of Islam transformed itself into that was hurled against the World Trade Center towers in planes revolting against contempt and in vengeance for humiliation. It might be said that one god went around sowing winds and that another god now responds with storms. It is possible; it's even right. But it was not they, those poor, blameless gods, but it was the "God factor," which is terrifyingly equal in all human beings no matter where they come from or whatever religion they profess, which has intoxicated thought and opened the doors to the most sordid forms of intolerance, which respects only its own beliefs, and which having supposedly made the beast into man ended by turning man into a beast.

Of the reader who is a believer (of whatever belief) who has managed to take the repugnance that these words have probably aroused in him, I do not ask that he go over to the atheism of the one who has written them. I simply ask that he understand, through feeling if not reason, that if God exists, there exists only one God, and that, in his relations with him, what

matters least is the name by which he has been taught to call him. And that he watch out for the “God factor.” The human spirit does not lack for enemies, but “God factor” is among the most obstinate and corrosive of them—as has been demonstrated and shall continue to be so disgracefully demonstrated.

José Saramago is the 1998 Nobel Prize for Literature.

George Monteiro's most recent books are *The Presence of Camões* (1996), *The Presence of Pessoa* (1998), *Stephen Crane's Blue Badge of Courage* (2000), and *Fernando Pessoa and Nineteenth-Century Anglo-American Literature* (2000). Forthcoming are bilingual editions of Miguel Torga's *Poemas Ibéricos*, Pedro da Silveira's *Poemas Ausentes*, and *Selected Poems* by Jorge de Sena. He is currently at work on two other books, *The English Face of Fernando Pessoa* and *Elizabeth Bishop's Brazilian Beat*. “The Bureaucratic Tale of the Harbor-Master and the Collector of Customs,” his translation of a story by José Saramago, appeared in *PLCS* 6. Email: georgemonteiro@prodigy.net