

The Circle of the Blessed: Thoughts on Suffering the Witch
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A very long time ago—I was in high school—I read an item in the back of our local newspaper. It wasn't much, a scrap of melodrama from that part of the country that those of us who live on the coasts tend to think of as "out there" and certain politicians refer to as "the real America." (I had to adjust to learning I didn't grow up in the real America, since the American revolution began in my home state, a fact we took some pride in. But I also grew up in a state that, so certain politicians liked to say, was full of "card-carrying members of the American Civil Liberties Union." It was another adjustment to learn that a concern for civil liberties is not the sign of a real American.)

The story was a simple one; it could be told in a single sentence if I wanted to give away the ending of my play. But it seemed to hit on something unsettling about the nature of belief: that point at which belief turns on itself, the point at which the contradictions inherent in any belief system—held in a tensely vibrating equilibrium as if by physical laws—suddenly collide.

Inevitably the story attached itself to religious currents that have become only more powerful since I first read that item in the back of the local paper. America is a famously religious country. It's not immediately clear why this should be. It's true that among the first Europeans to arrive here were those fleeing religious persecution and looking to institute some of their own. America as the New Eden or the Promised Land has always been one of the country's governing tropes. But also among those first arrivals were adventurers and venture capitalists and, given our massive wealth and feverish consumerism, you would think that the latter strain would long since have swamped the former. What use God when all our material wants are so lavishly satisfied? How can you serve God in a country where Mammon enjoys such unrivaled eminence? You could say that the two strains represent a consistent divide in the American spirit, but it might be more accurate to say that they have fed off each other and reinforced each other in powerful and peculiar ways. The plenty of America and its blessedness have often been regarded as synonymous, righteousness and prosperity as following hard upon each other.

I come to the discussion of religion in America from a personal angle. I was raised Catholic, Irish-American variety, but even when I was young, that foundation was cracked and sinking, and now no one in my immediate family is a practicing Catholic. Those who practice any religion at all are Pentecostal.

It began with my eldest brother who was born again at a rock concert in the early seventies. A wave of youth revivalism was sweeping the country at the time, a second cresting almost of the Flower Child tide and partaking of the same sense of liberation and optimism. They were called Jesus Freaks and, in those early days, with their long-hair and tie-dye, they were hard to distinguish from the hippies unless you happened to notice a hand-carved cross dangling among the peace signs.

But the Jesus Freaks, like the Flower Children, grew up. My brother moved to Arizona and became a pastor, preaching in a suit and tie a gospel less of liberation than of salvation, salvation always implying perils from which to be saved. In time he brought another brother and my mother into the fold, and since both brothers acquired wives and children, there is now a substantial Pentecostal contingent in my family.

Pentecost, of course, refers to the moment when the fire of the Holy Spirit came down on the apostles and they spoke in many tongues. Pentecostalism, as a religion, is an American invention

of the late 19th century. Its central experience is baptism in the Holy Spirit, a baptism whose signature effect is speaking in tongues. People like my brother, who has preached in Europe, Africa, and the Philippines, have helped spread Pentecostalism all over the globe; but like many other things that have spread and are now spreading across the globe, it remains essentially American. It is in spirit democratic. There are no bars of race, nationality, or religion. A Jew or a Muslim is as welcome as a Catholic, given a willingness to renounce Judaism, Islam or, for that matter, Catholicism. Like America, it's pragmatic, in the William Jamesian sense: what's true is what works. Its foundations may lie in scriptural truth, but it claims its justification from the order and happiness it brings to the lives of those who believe. Addiction, adultery, homosexuality, moral confusion, despair: there is no tangle of modernity that Pentecostalism can't slice swiftly through. As such, of course, it's anti-intellectual, and why shouldn't it be? Intellectualism breeds doubt which breeds confusion which breeds chaos and disorder. What can intellectuals be shown to have added to the sum of human happiness?

Like those other American beliefs, democracy and free markets, Pentecostalism does not just promise but frequently provides order and happiness for its adherents; and like democracy and free markets, Pentecostalism requires at times a ruthless attitude towards those left outside its beneficial circle.

It took me a while to understand this. Like other evangelical religions, Pentecostalism preaches a gospel of love. All are welcome, all can be saved. There is no sin so heinous it cannot be washed away by the saving Blood. All you need do is accept Jesus as your personal savior. But if you don't, you burn in hell. Nothing personal. Just the Word of God. No Pentecostal would recognize this belief for what it is: deeply and personally hostile. The idea that those who disagree with you are condemned to eternal torment expresses an anxious, annihilative hostility towards difference, towards disagreement, towards the other. To remove the personal element from this—to put it down to received dogma or scriptural diktat—is to beg the question, because in the end we choose what we believe.

Any belief system requires sacrifices. Like the alcoholic who ends by placing the next drink above his family and friends, the true believer sacrifices many a human tie to maintain his ordered and sustaining world. Sacrifices strengthen belief, strengthen the community of belief. Which is fine unless you're the sacrifice.

I've expended a lot of words without really addressing my play at all. At this historical moment, it feels a little queasy for an American to write about the dark side of the American character for a European audience. The dark side of the American character is already sufficiently on display these days without my chiming in. But there's no getting around the fact that *Suffering the Witch*, more than any play I've ever written, is fueled by anger. Anger specifically at those communities of the blessed and the believers who maintain their blessedness and their belief only at great cost to those outside their circle. This pride in ignorance, this willful impenetrability to information, this hostility to difference, this fear of anything that might undermine or alter the purity of belief, continues to exact a high political cost in the United States and a high personal cost in families and communities around the nation. And at this moment in history, the cost is mounting higher beyond the blessed shores of the New Eden.

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